The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

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Laureate

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Digital Access

ORGANIZATION:
Ministry of Communications and Information Society, The Project Management Unit

ORGANIZATION URL:
http://www.ecomunitate.ro

PROJECT NAME:
Knowledge Based Economy Project

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Knowledge Based Economy Project (KEP) was implemented by the Government of Romania, through the Ministry of Communications and Information Society (MCIS). Since its beginnings in 2006, the Project aimed to support a better use of knowledge by reducing the digital information gap that exists in villages and small towns in Romania. The benefits that are being achieved through the implementation of knowledge technologies come to meet challenging environments and people with great potential, but outdated mentality who are trapped in a slow evolving society. By its primary objective – ensuring social development of these communities by supporting digital access to information for creating knowledge capital with the help of IT&C, the Knowledge Based Economy Project selected 255 Romanian communities with a population less than 30.000 inhabitants, from 1500 participants. Targeting 1.8 million inhabitants and approximately 20% of rural Romanian population with low and very low access to knowledge and IT&C skills, KEP is determined to sustain the Digital Revolution and become a part of the strategy of the European Digital Agenda 2020 by implementing knowledge, competitive local development and digital inclusion. The primary step was reducing the digital divide between urban and rural society by developing a Communication Infrastructure. The Project financed the establishment of 255 Local Communities e-Networks (LCeNs) in order to provide support for the social and economical development of the community, the implementation of the ITC tools for digital literacy, introducing IT&C in the process of education in schools, promoting and providing local e-government services, stimulating entrepreneurial initiatives and local businesses. Launched in January 2009 as the main communication tool for the project, the eComunitate portal (www.ecomunitate.ro) is a unique initiative in our country, being the most complex content site founded by the Government. The site offers digital access to all 255 communities, a social network where users transfer knowledge and generate content using Web 2.0 technologies, more than 800 success stories, thousands of blog type articles, 2 online work-shops, 15.000 users and more than 2.000 materials posted – all of

these generates the most powerful web 2.0 learning instrument. The Project aims at developing digital access by IT&C infrastructure and fostering the limited resources of the targeted communities and also training its human resources to access and use the new technology. Every LCeN center has a manager and an IT administrator, employees from the local administrations, that are trained in local development, project writing, step-by-step use of the computer, writing articles, developing websites and consultancy of any kind, activities which became their daily routine. The most important professional training program that KEP developed was "Basic Literacy ITC Training services for local communities". It was completed in the summer of 2009 and granted 5225 CNFPA certificates (1940 teachers, 187 librarians, 1207 civil servants, 662 entrepreneurs, 530 potential entrepreneurs, 178 graduates, 521 other local people). To this results contributed the 60 accreditations as IT&C Professional Training Centers that had been given to 60 LCeN centers, making another step towards sustainability, self-financing and development of their communities.

SOCIETAL BENEFITS

• Ensuring access to information for reducing the digital gap; • Digital Literacy and skills for an inclusive society; • Technical Assistance for supporting community development issues and self-sustainability projects for obtaining European and Governmental grants; • Stimulating entrepreneurial initiatives for a sustainable local development.

PLEASE DESCRIBE THE PROJECT'S PHASES AND WHICH PHASE THE PROJECT IS IN

Thanks to successful implementation of all the objectives and goals that the Knowledge Based Economy Project (KEP) has carried out since its beginning in 2006 and up until December, 1010 and having tangible proofs during the knowledge development process by digital access, the Project has extended its journey with two more years. The Project is still under running by updating digital access to local communities through the 255 LCeNs and is currently working together with the local LCeNS and investing in building of skills that can transform community centers in self-sustainable economically and socially competitive societies - culture, education, local government and the business environment. We are currently under the process of identifying the opportunities and resources needed for continuing the Program in the way that every Local Community e-Networks would be able to both increase its role in community development and sustain itself financially. The optimal strategy is for every LCeN to develop value added services focusing on the business and institutional environment and on the school. From 255 communities who benefit from this Project, 229 have already completed a sustainability plan. Based on the evaluation and on sustainability indicators, 25 communities were nominated as champions, 62 are very good communities, 95 are stable with low sustainability risk, 47 are less stable and 26 of them have major sustainability risk. Another important opportunity for program continuation and attracting added value services into the community is the continuous demand for LCeN services in the KEP communities and the existence of a segment of potential clients who are willing to pay for the services. These opportunities can be found in local businesses development (obtaining financing and European funds, promoting the business), jobs and professional training (training courses for computer usage, finding jobs for unemployed, vocational courses in various fields in partnership with established training organizations), IT hardware and software support (there has been expressed a distinctive need for IT support in schools, business firms, public institutions and also in private citizens), communication enabling (via Internet, with people inside and outside Romania, particularly assisting the elderly to communicate with their relatives abroad), practical information delivery (about legislation, prices, health, sales and purchase channels),

editing and printing services supply, relationship with authorities facilitation (in supporting the client in drafting and sending document online, sending CVs and other filled-in forms, helping ethnic minorities, persons with low education and older people to draft documents in Romanian addressed to Governmental authorities). E-Government services represents a future perspective of KEP, aimed to provide access to national and county e-government services in order to reduce the need to travel to administrative centers and to create greater knowledge of what services are available. One important step for this matter was taken by the KEP team and launched the acquisition of an integrated software for issuing civil documents for citizens. Objectives: • Enable collaboration between central government and 3200 local communities; • Offer sophisticated e-Government services for all Romanian citizens when managing birth certificates, marriage and divorce certificates, death certificates. Up until now, KEP team has followed a few steps regarding this implementation: - a „Collaboration Protocol" has been signed for developing the integrated software for issuing civil documents between the Ministry of Administration and Interior and the Ministry of Communications and Information Society; - legislation has been amended and the procurement process for the integrated system in now undergoing.

PROJECT BENEFIT EXAMPLE

The below depicted showcases are included in the more 1000 articles found on ecomunitate.ro. "House on the Hill" represents a local brand from Saschiz, one of the 255 KEP communities. Anca Dalmasso, the owner of this business started from the promotion of "slow food" – based on traditional dishes, cooked from local, natural resources. "We offer a wide array of jams and true natural traditional products like syrups, spicy pickles, jams or traditional vegetable spread." Since she understood the advantages of IT in business, Dalmasso now has her own online store (www.casadepedeal.com) and she sells true traditional products. These products were appreciated by Prince Charles of Great Britain himself during his visit to Saschiz in May, 2008 (Appendix 1). Anca Dalmasso reached so far due to the support from KEP: "Thanks to digital access at LCeN, I went through a basic training regarding computers and an entrepreneurial course on rural areas. This is how I received the first information for developing my business". The LCeN centre in Păsăreni, Mureș county, showed it had the power to bring positive change in the community regarding consultancy for unemployed local people : a graduate of an IT training organised by LCeN personnel went on to leave unemployment behind and find a very good job. Ecaterina Szoverfi is now a secretary for a large pharmaceutical company in Târgu Mureş. The qualification in digital access from LCeN played a decisive part in getting her the job. "When I heard there will be several coursed offered at LCeN, I decided to take them all. I was successful because of the training at LCeN. Computers really did change my life.", Ecaterina Szoverfi says. KEP has another success story regarding e-Government services. Locals in Iara, Cluj County, can now use online payments thanks to a project developed by the local LCeN and City Hall. The LCeN Centre has become a "virtual counter" for paying bills (Appendix 2). It's a "financial revolution" for Iara residents; "they discovered online payments with the help of LCeN", Mayor Dorin Popa says. "So far, paying electricity or phone bills was complicated for people living in small villages. People needed to go to Turda to pay directly or to one of the few banks in Iara, where they would queue at a counter and waste time", Sorin Cirebea, villager. LCeN is the main instrument for farmers in Cristineşti, Botoşani County to get European funds through Measure 141 - "Support for semi-subsistence farms" in the National Rural Development Program. 85 farmers won projects that will ensure 1,500 euro a year, for a span of five years, for supporting their own farming activities. Florin Nichifor is one of the farmers that received the first installment of European money and admits that help from LCeN was essential. "I got registered with the Trade Register Office and the Public Finance Direction and now I have a new

stable, I have more cattle and I sell milk to the centre in Ibăneşti. The business is working and I want to use the next installment for a special place to deposit hay."

IS THIS PROJECT AN INNOVATION, BEST PRACTICE?

Yes. The Knowledge Economy Project (KEP) represents a happy alliance between the strength of the knowledge based economy vision and the results already achieved by this project, which put Romania on the list of best practices in Europe. In order to achieve that recognized best practices, KEP formed a strong coalition within each of the 255 communities who benefit from the Project, between 4 important nodes (Appendix 3): school, library, Town Hall and Public Point of Access to Information (PPAI). Within every local network, KEP introduced and developed over the years services addressed to each disadvantaged community to reduce the digital information and knowledge gap that exist for so many years in Romania. Having the full support of local authorities, we managed to engage innovative programs with a significant role in ensuring the success of project's activities. Working with a system that had obsolete values and mentalities, knowledge-disadvantaged communities and small population with relatively high incidents of poverty and unemployment, we managed to bring a change to these matters through innovation. The innovation journey to digital access turnover was demanding, but never the less very rewarding and included many steps for its implementation: - Access to Knowledge: access to digital information and services through 255 Public Points of Access to Information; - Knowledge application, in order to have a meaningful digital access: e-Learning applications (in all six editions of e-Holidays competition, there are over 8.000 pupils involved and 1.000 teachers from 200 schools; a virtual holiday took place in the summer of 2008, engaging 1.300 pupils from 22 counties; aprox. 35% of teachers use IT&C in the education process in schools), e-Government applications (until 2013, 50% of Romania's population will benefit from a integrated software for editing, modifying or completing civil documents online), e-Business applications (counseling services to access funding or implement external funding projects, IT&C services to stakeholders / organizations / entrepreneurs, producing websites for local businesses – more than 1 mil Euros of grants were attracted into communities, 102 websites created for local businesses and Town Halls, 328 public-private partnerships concluded with NGOs, associations and private companies); - Knowledge enhancing for making digital access useful for different target groups: trainings for LCeNS for building Institutional Capacity and a Long Life Education (510 LCeN specialists, 5225 people with CNFPA certificate in IT training, 60 accreditations as IT&C Professional Training Centers, 50 LCeN managers went on international experience exchange visits), digital literacy programs (″Digital Literacy in Business" 2009 training program had 700 local entrepreneurs engaged in business opportunity and intelligence, web 2.0, e-commerce, e-payments, e-marketing; 8 regional workshops held, 480 small business owners and representatives); - Knowledge sharing for enhancing the 255 incubators to digital access points through partnerships with other communities: from e-Projects, to e-Networking in schools, in order to create competences and a "culture" of collaboration among the schools through internet-based resources and establish communities of pedagogical practices (500 KEP schools entered in different partnership projects like "Virtual Schools", "My school is your school – is e-School", " The Internet – an open window to world", "Let's know each other"; other schools have made into international twinning projects with school all around Europe; 900 school projects based on IT&C infrastructure; 2009 training program ″Digital Literacy in School" determining 1940 teachers conversant with web 2.0 secrets and IT&C related educational systems; IT&C Innovation and Creativity in Extracurricular Activities like e-Holidays voluntary competition which includes activities like e-stories, e-school of parents, my

school-my community, junior web-journalists); - Knowledge transfer, using virtual highways of digital access: Inter –Institutional public partnerships development, Public-Private partnerships development; - Knowledge validation: several KEP initiatives has been confirmed at national level as good practices and amplified their magnitude with the support of partner institutions (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Administration and Internal Affairs); - Knowledge storage: www.ecomunitate.ro portal – national repository of the most relevant contributions of the new knowledge-enhanced-workers; more than 800 success stories, hundreds of blog type articles generate the most powerful web 2.0 learning instrument used by civil servants, teachers, entrepreneurs, local leaders; - Knowledge generation: for innovative use and creation of new digital sustainability. Over the years, KEP had many cases of good practice after different communities or organizations, outside the Project, tried to copy and to implement one or many of KEP's activities and programs. But one recent situation is the case of the Romanian Foundation for Children, Community and Family (FRCCF), one of the most important NGOs in Cluj area who offers social services. With its eyes wide open over the success stories from surroundings communities, FRCCF's latest program was buying 50 PCs fully equipped for different centers in the area (local libraries, orphanages, nursing homes). Before that, the organization implemented many programs and activities after the models from KEP communities in Satu Mare, Bihor and Cluj counties. In 2009, in Ţara Oaşului, Satu Mare county, a non-KEP community who replicated KEP's approaches, children were involved in several projects and programs about preventing human trafficking and illegal migration, considering that this specific area is dealing with a high rate of migration. In Măguri Răcătău, Cluj county, another non-KEP community assisted by the KEP family, the most extended community in Apuseni Mountains, the boarding school was renovated by the FRCCF foundation. Besides boarding and meals, all the children received math and Romanian tutoring, but also vocational counseling. Providing these activities, all the children's results improved consistently. In Domăneşti, Satu Mare county, a non-KEP community as well, children there took part in computer courses, dancing courses and traditional Romanian customs; the school's football court and the community's playground were rehabilitated. Other non-KEP communities in the area of Satu Mare, Bihor and Cluj are very interested in ways to take and to implement on their own these success stories. Ways to obtain funds and grants, but also the unique manner of how an NGO transferred KEP projects to other communities are just a small of ideas for improving poor life standards of every social category in each community.

ADDITIONAL PROJECT INFORMATION

• Knowledge Based Economy Project is considered to be an example of good practice in Romania's public administration due to its remarkable results, its proven efficiency and its disseminated practices. Based on these facts, KEP has won 1st Prize in "National Competition of Best Practices in Public Administration" organized by the National Agency of Public Servants in 2010, along with other awards; • eComunitate.ro (eCommunity), a bilingual platform for communication that gathers more than 1000 success stories originated from KEP's initiatives and programs, but also a national repository of the most relevant contributions to digital access of new knowledge-enhanced people; • Knowledge Based Economy Project received a visit from Azerbaidjan officials in 2008, after they have show interest for the Project and wanted to implement it in their home country. The official visit between the Azerbaidjan government officials and the Minister of Communications and Information Society was organized by the World Bank; • KEP is implemented by the Government of Romania and is financially supported by the World Bank, through a loan of 69.4 mil. Euros; • Over 500 materials about KEP appeared so far in national and local media (articles, press releases, interviews, news); • At the end of 2010, Ministry of Communications and

Information Society in collaboration with Evenimentul Zilei (a national newspaper) organized on eComunitate.ro platform "Ideas for Romania 255", a competition that aimed at promoting Knowledge based Economy through digital access for all the 255 communities in the Project. The first 20 winners were validated by more that 1900 visitors and received as awards 20 road plates that indicates that the community is Connected to Knowledge.

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