

The Challenge

There are 740 million illiterate people in this world and 250 million children of primary school age who lack basic reading and writing skills. Apart from poor quality teaching in schools, this can be attributed to the lack of books. More than 50% of schools in Africa have few or no books. In contrast, access to digital technology is increasing and costs are decreasing.

Worldreader puts the above two phenomena together by providing digital e-readers and mobile readers preloaded with books to underserved communities. Its most intensive offering is the e-reader programme that distributes Kindles and other tablets to individuals and communities for shared use. This programme is currently being implemented in schools and libraries in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. While Worldreader has offices in San Francisco, Barcelona, Accra and Nairobi, the rollout of its programmes is done by implementation partners such as local governments, school systems, non-profits and related businesses.

Another offering is Worldreader Mobile that is available on internet-enabled mobile phones, including simplest feature phones. This programme allows users to search for thousands of titles and read them online. Worldreader provides books in Indian and African languages, including translated versions, in addition to those by Western authors. It also allows offline reading and personalised cataloguing. In 2016, Worldreader Mobile won the Global Mobile Award for the Best Mobile Innovation for Education.

The Impact

Worldreader's products and services are present in 69 countries across 245 schools and libraries. It reports a monthly readership of 401,550 and over 3 million readers since 2010. It has delivered more than 13,000 e-readers loaded with more than 2 million books. The Worldreader Mobile programme has a catalogue of 32,000 books in 43 languages. Data collected from Worldreader shows that female readers spend three times as much time on the app as male readers. Nearly two thirds of users said they read more now than before, and a third reported that they read out stories to younger ones from their mobile phones.

Apart from its programmes, Worldreader plays a leadership role in advocating for reading and access to books as a solution to the problem of literacy and reading fluency. It hosts the annual Digital Reading Summit in Africa that brings together donors, partners, governments and other stakeholders and encourages conversation on the way forward.

Education technology case study WORLDREADER

Website: www.worldreader.org



Research

Worldreader has conducted studies that have shown encouraging results. A randomised control trial, funded by USAID, DFAT and World Vision, run in Ghana in 2013-14,¹ measured the impact of e-readers on learning outcomes. Four under-resourced schools served as treatment (574 students), and another four schools as control (around 140 students). The treatment group was given e-readers, including the teachers and parents of the students. The e-readers were loaded with 240 titles in English and the native language, Akuapem-Tiwi. Baseline and endline performances were recorded using Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). Results showed that almost 90% of students in the treatment group could read at least one word in both languages, compared to 35-45% of the control group. It also reported an improvement in reading fluency, comprehension and reading habits.

Another study in 2014² funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation distributed 200 e-readers loaded with more than 40,000 titles across 8 public libraries in Kenya. Patrons were allowed to keep the e-readers overnight. A pre-post analysis showed that the number of patrons had trebled in the one-year period and 84% patrons reported to have been reading more. This also prompted community reading activities and e-reader trainings.

Stakeholders

Worldreader has a diverse range of stakeholders that include governments, funding organisations, corporations such as Microsoft and Opera, local and international non-profits, multilateral organisations, implementation partners such as Camfed and ESSPIN, as well as publishing houses such as Penguin Random House. Its website also lists several individual and family donors.

About

This is a series of case studies produced by HEART for the UK Department for International Development. Programme experts were consulted in the process. Any views and opinions do not necessarily reflect those of DFID or HEART.

¹ http://cdn.worldreader.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/IREAD-final_web2.pdf

² http://cdn.worldreader.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/PROJECT_LEAP.pdf