After the Mine Closes

ICT training brings new jobs and a new life to Romanian miners

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

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Doru hadn't expected that his new profession as a postal worker would be so challenging. He had spent two decades laboring several hundred feet beneath the Earth's surface, alongside hundreds of other Romanian miners, working a seam of gold – as his father and grandfather had done. It was a tradition of "brutal work," Doru says, work that should prepare a man for anything. But his old work did not prepare him for his current job, where bags of letters arrive each morning, and Doru Milosav enters their origins and destinations with speed and precision into the post office computer. His mind is engaged in new and complicated ways thanks to an intensive series of ICT courses offered by a community telecenter in the mining town of Brad.

"I didn't think that the work at the post office would also be difficult," Doru admitted, standing in front of his new workplace a few blocks from the telecenter on a rainy February afternoon. "It requires a lot of thinking." He uses the computerized Track and Trace system to catalogue all incoming and outgoing mail. A diminutive man with dark hair and a bushy mustache, Doru explains his daily tasks. "When the letters come in the morning I take over the bag with external letters and recommended express letters. I introduce the bar code into the system. I scan all the letters, I click with the mouse where I have to, there are certain documents based on which I have to give away the letters and the express post." Reflecting on the recent hard times in the economically depressed region, Doru concludes: "In this town it's a great job."

The Tebea mine just outside the town of Brad was both a source of income and identity for the 800 Romanian coal miners who worked there. When the mine closed in 2006, Vasile Tas was able to develop new ICT skills – and now works full-time for the Romanian Parliament..

Closing Mines, Adapting Workers

When the Brad gold mine closed around 2006, 8,500 miners were laid off. These closures were part of a wider economic restructuring that hit the communities in the Jiu Valley of southwest Romania hard, where over 200,000 miners have been laid off in recent years. The gold mine in this region has been operating for 2,000 years, since the times of the early Romanians – the Dacia people. Mining is deeply woven into life, and identity. For most of the first week after the lay-offs Doru couldn't sleep. "It was like my world collapsed," Doru remembered. "It was very hard to abandon this field, it had a social impact on us."

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> *Doru, on the mines closing and the shifting employment landscape*

The state provided some unemployment benefits for a year or more, but after state assistance ended, psychological depression associated with unemployment was sharpened by the realities of making ends meet. "I was worried because I had a family that needed to be

supported… I was nervous and worried because I didn't have a job," Doru explained. Other miners shared similar experiences. Rado Sabau, who worked for thirteen years as an underground electrical mechanics manager in the coal mine, put it simply: "I have to feed my family."

The Community Responds with ICT Education

At the time of the closures many miners were deep into their working lives, with specialized labor skills that would not easily transfer to new lines of work. Re-skilling would be a daunting challenge.

A Difficult Transition

Inside the now-closed Tebea coal mine complex, Vasile points at the elevators that brought the men down into the bowels of the Earth every day, and then back up into the light. With six men on each side, the two narrow cages would enter the four-meters-in-diameter mine shaft and descend "two hundred meters, exactly two hundred meters." Standing a few meters from the shaft, Vasile compared the work now with his former occupation. At fifty-two, and the son of a miner, Vasile has spent his whole life in the mining culture, and he underscores how the mine is woven deeply into their lives. "Yes, in this mine we got used to the very hard work…Even now, when we [mining veterans] meet in the town we tell stories about the mine, we talk about new challenges underground."

When asked about the challenges at his new work, he says that the cultural and economic loss of the mine closures is most significant. Vasile gestures at the surrounding hills: rough land, dotted with the small villages of the Brad region. "Nostalgia gets you from time to time. I am sorry, but I am not the only one…the people living in this area, it was their only income, they regretted deeply, they don't have another income."

The local Brad community telecenter – Association Maria – developed a two-pronged approach to respond to this need: intensive re-training in computer courses that would introduce a comprehensive new skill set, and also a careful training method to rebuild self-esteem and trust. The e-skills program offers eight modules of the Microsoft Unlimited Potential (UP) curriculum. For some students, only a few modules are needed. For others, like Doru, all eight courses are required.

The Association Maria, led by Mariana Pavel (center), set out to re-skill the unemployed of Brad after two mine closures laid off 9,500 residents. Graduates, like postal worker Doru Milosav (right), have found new jobs and a new life after mastering the e-skills much-needed in the growing Romanian economy.

Speaking with a smile about her former student, telecentre director Mariana Pavel remembered Doru really struggling in the beginning: "he didn't have self-confidence." Sitting near Mariana during a joint interview in his old training room at the Association Maria, Doru admitted his teacher was right, adding "I didn't have the necessary skills at the beginning." Doru explained the experience of returning to the classroom: "I hadn't learned for such a long time, I didn't have any contact with the computer, I

didn't have time...I was part of the first graduating class of Mathematics and Physics here in Brad. In the 80s there were no computers. I had some idea about it because my nephew had a computer and he was playing on it. But it seemed difficult for me at the beginning."

Like Doru, many miners face high barriers to formal learning. Rado, forty-years-old, describes the social and intellectual shift required at a time in their lives where new learning is not intuitive. It takes practice. "Of course there had been a major change in my life, this is the truth. In the mining field we were used to working with people, but this was over. Suddenly we have reached an age at which I don't know how many people can change, not necessarily the job, but actually their life," he said.

Changing Lives

In order to find secure employment, Doru and other out-of-work miners pursued ICT training at Association Maria. Some, like Doru, have found secure positions that incorporate e-skills. Rado, for example, is an assistant manager at the Petrom gas station in Brad. Vasile Tas, a second generation coal miner with over 20 years experience, is now a deputy councilor working for the national parliament in the Brad region. The trainings that led to these new careers are provided by a network of ICT development programs supported by an NGO called Educating for an Open Society, or EOS. Based in Timisoara in western Romania, EOS supports eighteen telecentres across the country.

For unemployed miners attempting to re-enter the workforce, ICT skills training, provided in a supportive context may make a difference. Rado explains: "At every interview, at every company, the first thing they would ask was if I knew how to work on a computer." To face the reality, Rado enrolled in the ICT courses, and had to start from the basics. "It's very hard to just start learning about the computers, it was like learning ABCs." But he quickly added, "I wasn't scared because, whether I liked it or not, I had to learn."

For Rado, the learning paid off. When asked about the role of e-skills in managing the gas station, Rado laughed. "I use almost everything I have learned: Excel for tables, Internet, electronic post – email for everything that comes from Bucharest from the mother company, and I send them the answer. My job requires ten hours per day in front of the computer at the Petrom gas station, my job is all about that, daily, even on Saturday and Sunday."

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> *Rado, on the role of ICT-skills for working at the petrol station*

The competition for jobs is always tough, but with so many unemployed in the Jiu Valley, it is an especially difficult market. However, the trainings noticeably help job candidates. Doru, the gold miner, matter-of-factly recounts how he beat out eight other applicants. "I saw an offer here at the post office. We needed to draw up a file in order to be hired...certificates, police clearance, documents," Doru explained. As the oldest applicant, he was nervous during the application process. He submitted his file, gave an interview, took a series of exams, and then got the job.

What was the role of his ICT training? "They didn't tell me at the moment, but when I came here, at the post office in Brad, yes, they saw the diploma...I had this diploma in my file and they said that it was

very good that I had done this, that it would help me a lot in my work."

Vasile describes a similar experience. He saw the posting for the position with the parliament, and when he read that it required IT skills he signed up at Association Maria. The first two courses provided just what he needed: the ability to write documents, and to send them by email to parliament in the capital city of Bucharest. Vasile emphasizes that he is not unusual in this transformation, citing a couple of other coal miners from the courses who have now found positions: one is now a road engineer, the other does PR communications as secretary at a firm. Was the ICT training necessary? "Categorically," Vasile responds without hesitation. "It would be impossible without these skills."

Proud of their Roman heritage, cities and towns across Romania – like the mining town of Brad – boast their cultural roots through statues depicting the mythical Romulus and Remus.

Building Skills, Expanding Productivity

Two hundred thousand jobs are not easily replaced. However new work, industry, and production arrangements must be developed in the Jiu Valley. Slowly and methodically Association Maria is moving in this direction. In 2006, the first year the trainings began, the telecenter trained 360 students. In 2007, another 400. Programs have begun to support training for particular industries, such as local textiles.

Florin Oarisan, a local textile factory director, argues that productivity has increased since Association Maria began training some of its underskilled workers across the organization: in "the export departments, the salary department, the production department." One training graduate, Stefonia Tripa, credits her increased productivity as a salary technician to her training at Association Maria. "Now it's much easier. I work faster, I know more things now. Salary details, our girls are paid in terms of how much they produce. In Excel we keep a record of how much they produce daily and we even introduce the time keeping."

The widespread economic restructuring that is occurring, as reliance on natural resource extraction gives way to new forms of economic development, continues to drive dramatic change for the people of southwest Romania. However one key to managing this transition is education and training of knowledge workers, skilled for the information age. And thanks to organizations like EOS and Association Maria, new, successful models are emerging.

AUTHOR

Mark West is an ethnographer whose international research and work in the development field is based in South Asia and in Central and Eastern Europe. Mark's fieldwork has centered on the use of critical ethnography to bring a more participatory connection between local communities and international development projects.

In South Asia, Mark's research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or "untouchables," with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford LawSchool. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.