

## The Ideas Box: Connecting and Empowering Communities in the Asia-Pacific Region

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### Abstract:

*Since 2012, Libraries without Borders has been working with UNHCR and designer Philippe Stark on the conception of an innovative device to enable access to information, education and culture for people emerging from humanitarian crises. Refugees have immediate pressing needs for food, shelter, health care and clothing. But once these priorities have been met, they need a way to re-establish social links, rebuild an informed civil society and develop resilience for the inevitable struggles that lay ahead.*

*The Ideas Box aspires to fill this void, to provide a way for people whose lives have been thrown into chaos a way to read, write, create and communicate. Through access to the Internet, computers, books, education resources, theatre and films, the Ideas Box empowers individuals and provides important tools to begin to reconstruct what has been lost.*

*This paper presents the genesis of this innovative portable library, its first implementations for Congolese and Syrian refugees and the potential developments in the Asia-Pacific region.*

More information on: [www.ideas-box.org](http://www.ideas-box.org)

**Keywords:** Humanitarian Innovation; Education; Information; Culture; Empowerment and self-reliance

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The devastating Typhoon Haiyan – a tropical cyclone that hit the Philippines in November 2013, one month after a 7.1-magnitude earthquake – left a path of destruction and death across this 100 million-strong nation, which at the time boasted the fastest-growing economy in Asia after China. 7,300 people were killed or reported missing, while millions were displaced. The high human toll was accompanied by widespread destruction of housing, and other vital infrastructures and services, such as schools and hospitals.

The most immediate response by the international community to humanitarian crises of this magnitude tends to address, the most urgent survival needs of the affected populations, such as food, clean water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, and medical services and disease control (Aguilar and Retamal, 2009: 3). Such interventions are undoubtedly of primary importance.

Increasingly, there is also recognition that addressing the cultural and educational needs of displaced people is equally crucial to preserving their mental and emotional well-being and to preventing the onset of long-term problems such as depression, anxiety and other psychosomatic ailments associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. (Thabet and Vostanis, 1999: 385; Sinclair 2002:33).

In the Philippines, for instance, Save the Children, provided assistance also by establishing 48 Child Friendly Spaces where children could play with toys and do art projects. – More than 32,000 children have attended these Child Friendly Spaces since Haiyan struck.

Save the Children also distributed over 7,000 school bags to children, along with thousands of teacher kits and recreational materials for educators.

Finally, they trained and supported teachers to help them work with children and enable them to deal with their traumatic experiences (Save the Children, 2014)

Access to educational resources, books, computers, training programmes, legal assistance and other information tools can vastly improve the outcomes for displaced people, by sustaining intellectual stimulation and diminishing the feeling of isolation and despair, while promoting a sense of self-worth and contributing to develop the inner strength and resilience needed to start rebuilding their shattered lives and an informed civil society.

Creating a safe environment where people can gather and collaborate also protects both children and adults from the risks of abuse and exploitation, while providing security to marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, the disabled, girls and women. (Sinclair, 2007: 53).

Ultimately, education is not just a basic human right (CRC article 28; UDHR article 26); it also helps to give value and structure to people's lives and to inspire respect for justice, tolerance and stability. (Aguilar and Retamal, 2009, 5).

Such dynamics have been observed for instance in the aftermath of the powerful earthquake that hit Chile in 2010. A study conducted by The Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington Information School examined post-disaster information and communication needs, services provided by libraries and telecentres,

and how emergency management might be improved. Researchers found that libraries and telecentres, both as public Internet access points and as physical and social community hubs, play an important role in restoration and development after disasters.

## **2. FROM HAITI TO INTERNATIONAL ACTION**

### *2.1 LWB's INTERVENTION IN HAITI*

Libraries Without Borders, a French NGO founded in 2007 to promote access to information, education and culture throughout the world, had the opportunity to witness first-hand the positive impact of culture and education on populations affected by humanitarian crises in Haiti, following the massive earthquake that virtually destroyed most of the country in 2010.

On that occasion, LWB set up twenty temporary libraries inside the refugee camps, in collaboration with its Haitian partners. In France, the initiative was received with some skepticism; but in the field, the reaction was quite different and the libraries became an instant and unexpected success.

Soon, in collaboration with UNICEF, three hundred library kits were deployed. Very quickly these libraries became focal points for the people in the camps: places to gather and interact, where it was possible to establish a measure of security and recreate a sense of community and normalcy. They became spaces where people can forge new relationships, collaborate and access information; where children can play, express their imagination, and in this way, briefly evade the brutal reality of life in the camps and overcome trauma. (Aguilar and Retamal, 2009: 4).

### *2.2 The Urgency of Reading call to action*

Encouraged by this initial positive experience in Haiti, Libraries without Borders, launched an international campaign, "The Urgency of Reading", in November 2012. The aim of this campaign was to raise awareness of the importance of the intellectual and cultural dimensions in humanitarian crises, and to make access to books, information and educational material high priorities for international organizations dealing with humanitarian emergencies. This call to action was supported by many well-known writers and intellectuals around the world, including the Nobel Laureates in Literature J.M. Coetze, Toni Morrison and Doris Lessing; novelists Isabelle Allende, Stephen King and Salman Rushdie, and academics Antony Appiah, Natalie Davies, Owen Fiss and Sasskia Sassen.

The campaign culminated in a well-attended international conference held in Paris at la Maison de l'Amérique Latine, in October 2013 (AA.VV. 2013). The conference's main aim was to bring together major stakeholders, such as culture and information specialists, humanitarian professionals, as well as financial benefactors and sponsors, to interact and exchange ideas.

Among the key issues addressed by the numerous speakers and panelists were the roles that libraries can play in the prevention of and response to humanitarian crises; how new information and communication technologies can be progressively employed as aid devices; and how to develop effective evaluation strategies to accurately measure the impact of various socio-cultural projects in emergency situations.

### **3. BUILDING NEW RESPONSES: THE IDEAS BOX PROJECT**

#### *3.1 Introducing the Ideas Box*

Taking the insights from this research, LWB developed a portable multi-media centre that could be deployed in any type of geomorphological context. Starting in 2012, Libraries Without Borders partnered with UNHCR and Philippe Starck to create an innovative device that could provide access to information, education and culture for people emerging from a humanitarian crisis.

The Ideas Box is effectively an extremely compact virtual and physical library, which can be easily transported and installed even in the most difficult and challenging situations and geographical contexts. It is nevertheless packed with features: internet connection via satellite, 4 laptops, over 15 touch-screen tablets and 50 electronic readers, over 300 hard-copy books, and numerous pedagogical tools. It also contains a cinema module with equipment to produce documentaries and reportages; various games and video games; toys, puppets and a theatre workshop. The integration of ludic and educational activities is purposefully designed to offer children the opportunity to better understand their world and make sense of their traumatic experiences. Light furniture, including tables for computer consultation and mats for reading or watching films, is also integrated in the module. The box itself unfolds into additional tables, shelves, and chairs. The Ideas Box's provisions and configurations are specifically designed to address the needs of both children and adults.

All the manufacturing materials have been selected in accord with sustainable development principles. The box also includes a generator and a battery system so that it is 100% self-powered.

The Ideas Box represents a major innovation in terms of access to information and culture in humanitarian crisis intervention. A single Ideas Box provides the service and content equivalent of a small town library, serving approximately 5,000 users, but it can equally be employed on a smaller scale (for example, to supplement schools).

The Ideas Box can give people whose lives have been thrown into chaos the means to read, write, create and communicate. By providing access to the Internet, books, educational resources, theatre, and films, the Ideas Box empowers individuals and communities to begin to reconstruct what has been lost.

After implementation, the Ideas Box is always transferred to a local partner that can ensure its long-term operation. A transition period allows the partners to gradually acquire ownership of the box, as they develop the technical and financial resources needed to operate the box independently.

The Ideas Box's connectivity allows for continuous updates (whether for technical, educational, information and/or psychosocial purposes), while its database size allows space for additional software and programmes to be added on over time. In this way, the device allows users to continue to expand their independent learning. The IB kit includes tools to complement formal education and supplement informal study

Naturally, the Ideas Box's language and contents must be adapted to the specific contexts of the deployment areas. Therefore, in collaboration with its field partners, LWB selects and compiles the relevant content and translates the interface and the Ideas Box user's guide to address local needs.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the ethnic, religious and political composition of both the refugee and host populations can be greatly heterogeneous, depending on the region. Therefore, it is crucial that the choice of the materials included is carefully and sensitively adapted to the particular situation; this can be achieved most effectively with the participation of both host organizations and the beneficiary populations themselves.

We expect the Ideas Box to have three fundamental positive impacts on the lives of the people for whom it was devised.

- **An educational impact** to accompany the **re-schooling of children** and **allow those without access to the school system to receive an informal education**, as a transition. Since the Ideas Box is in essence a toolbox of services for community-based organizations, it enables the creation of a number of workshops and programmes for formal and informal education for children and adults. Issues related to literacy and language proficiency will be prioritized in the context of educational programming implementation around the Box.
- **An informational impact** by giving beneficiaries access to information via the Internet, information and communication technologies and books. The Ideas Box is a place of access to information that will not only enable beneficiaries to **communicate with the outside world**, but also **facilitate the coordination of responses to the crisis** and **reduce the risks of misinformation**.
- **A psychosocial impact** to **repair the socio-cultural loss**, to **combat boredom**, and to **strengthen the resilience** of communities by **recreating spaces of normalcy and security** for refugee populations who have been traumatised by conflict and other natural or humanitarian catastrophes. The Ideas Box can promote social ties through cultural and educational activities. The Ideas Box provides tools and creates safe spaces for people to establish new connections and promote exchanges with the outside world through cultural and educational activities, in this way fostering the hope to build a new future. The subject of grief and resilience will also form a fundamental aspect to be addressed in the activities offered by the boxes.

Additionally, in a context of often heightened tensions between host and refugee populations, the Ideas Box can also **facilitate the dialogue and social relations between refugee and host communities and contribute to the consolidation of peace**.

The Ideas Box does not intend to replace schools (it could not!); it does introduce new resources and educational methods (digital learning, in particular) that can support learning process, improve the quality of education, and strengthen academic achievements of children.

For adults, the Ideas Box incorporates a variety of training resources and provides the tools needed for literacy workshop and professional development.

Equally, the Ideas Box was not conceived as an alternative for existing libraries, but to fill a void in situations where real libraries do not exist or have been destroyed.

### *3.2 Current implementations in the African Great Lakes and MENA*

So far two Ideas Box kits have been deployed in the refugee camps of Kavumu and Musasa in Burundi; the camps host Congolese communities, displaced from their home country by violent internal conflict. (A third box will be delivered within the next few weeks in Bwagiriza). In Burundi, LWB works in close collaboration with the UNHCR and local community leaders, in identifying the most appropriate educational and cultural needs of the refugee population. Initial regular reports sent by the camp representatives on the level of attendance at the Ideas Box sites and on the type of activities most often engaged in and enjoyed, have so far been extremely encouraging.

On average about 200 users come to the Ideas Box each day. The Ideas Box is open 5 days a week and thereby reaches around 1000 users per week, 4000 users per month, and 48000 users per year. At all open hours, every element of the Ideas Box is used, and the space becomes an energetic space for collaboration. Users are of all different ages, for example, and it is often the adults who are using the tools of the Ideas Box to teach the younger users how to read, write, and create. On a typical day, there are at minimum 100 users at a given time, with 15 people using tablets, 30 people watching films, 45 people reading books, 10 people playing games, and another 20 people using tools to create art, music, and video.

Programmes developed around the Ideas Box have also specifically targeted women and children. In Kavumu, for example, 60 women have registered to enroll in a trial literacy workshop. LWB is working to scale these sorts of female specific programmes, given the time constraints of women in UNHCR camps.

To complement and supplement the formal education, teachers have an opportunity to extend school hours and select 30 of their students to have access to the Ideas Box at any one time. During the school day, class sizes average 80 per teacher, with little to no resources, not even textbooks.

Once more both qualitative and quantitative data had been gathered, most likely in a few months, Libraries Without Borders intends to perform more rigorous evaluations of the Ideas Box, on the basis of a Randomised Control Trial centered on educational attainments and psychosocial adjustments to assess the precise impact and effectiveness of the Ideas Box and its possible further implementations.

Following almost three years of insurgency and civil war in Syria, over 2.8 million people – of whom almost half are children -- have fled to neighbouring countries and have been officially registered as refugees by the UNHCR. The UN agency estimates that there will be over 4 million refugees by the end of 2014. Lebanon and Jordan are the two neighbouring countries with the highest concentrations of Syrian refugees, with 1 million and 600,000 refugees respectively (UNHCR, 16 June 2014). In total, among both the internally displaced and the refugee populations, more than 5 million Syrian children have been severely affected by the conflict. UNICEF, the UNHCR and several partner NGOs have launched the "No Lost Generation" initiative to relieve Syrian children of the insecurity, isolation and trauma and to work on a concerted strategy for education.

LWB is working on a two- step plan of action for the deployment of the Ideas Box in Lebanon and Jordan; an initial pilot trial will deliver three Ideas Box devices to each country, and scale up according to the results identified through our impact measurements and the demands we receive through local partners.

## **4. TRANSCENDING BORDERS IN ASIA & OCEANIA THROUGH THE IDEAS BOX**

### *4.1 From humanitarian aid to development*

LWB had originally conceived and designed the Ideas Box primarily in response to the particularly difficult and demanding conditions presented by humanitarian disasters. However, once this challenge was met, we came to realize how this device, which is highly scalable and flexible, could be useful in many other contexts where access to information, education and culture remains a challenge, both in the developing world and in wealthier countries.

### *4.2 Connecting communities in Asia and Oceania*

Ideas Box kits could be employed in virtually any region of the world, including Asia and the Pacific, in order to reach even the most remote populations, whether they have been affected by a humanitarian disaster, like in the recent case of the Philippines: or they may face systematic barriers to access information, education, culture, and connectivity, such as in the poor suburbs of Paris. For instance, we could easily imagine how in many countries around the Asia/Pacific regions, the Ideas Box could be deployed, in either fixed or mobile forms, in both rural and urban environments, where libraries are not established or functioning. They could also enrich the range of activities and services offered by existing libraries, particularly through extramural programmes that target communities alienated from reading and culture.

Libraries Without Borders is also working to create a unique Internet platform: a cloud system which could be deployed throughout the Asia and Oceania regions, that would allow each community with access to an Ideas Box to exchange and share locally-created contents (films, photographs ,writings, drawings, etc.) with each other, and with the rest of the world.

Considerations regarding the different potential uses offered by the Ideas Box fall in line with our overarching values: never lowering the quality of our services with the pretext that we are working for vulnerable populations. The same logic drives our thinking concerning the way that we forge partnerships: favouring solid and sustainable projects, with a strong social and human impact.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Libraries Without Borders' ultimate goal is to develop global partnerships that can combine, in a single network of exchange and sharing, libraries and Ideas Box devices worldwide. Providing access to new tools and new information channels, notably through the Internet, the Ideas Box connects refugee populations to the rest of the world. It breaks their isolation and allows the voices of the most vulnerable people to be heard. This openness and

connection to others stimulates creativity and allows people to see beyond the boundaries of the refugee camps; at the same time it allows the voices of refugees to be heard by the rest of the world: more than 43 million people today are internally displaced or refugees in other countries, (VV. AA. 2013, 18); unfortunately, their plight is all too often forgotten, once the situation of acute emergency has faded. The Ideas Box fills these gaps in needs.

Ultimately, our aim is to build a global network of physical and virtual libraries, which would be able to transcend national borders and ethnic divisions in uniting as many individuals and communities as possible. Such collaborations would help to educate and engage other people about humanitarian crises (beyond the problems of reconstruction and development) and to allow them to better understand the circumstances of refugees. This in turn could foster greater mutual respect and understanding among people, and in so doing, contribute to secure more stable societies and to establish stronger foundations for peace.

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