

# Facing global challenges: libraries as community hubs for the empowerment of the most vulnerable populations

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## Abstract

*More than 68.5 million people are displaced due to conflicts or natural disasters in the world today. 4 million refugee children are out of school. And beyond the refugee scope, 203 million above the age of 15 are illiterate in Sub-Saharan Africa. One may wonder how and even whether libraries can tackle such challenges.*

*Access to information is, more than ever, at the root of profound inequalities in today's world. Nobel Prize Amartya Sen theorized a model of development that privileges freedom and the capacity to act as the conditions to be in position to make decisions that correspond to individuals' aspirations. Access to information, and therefore libraries, are central in this approach to empower populations to face today's challenges.*

*While some question the relevance of libraries in industrialised countries, libraries are often perceived in the most challenging as a key community asset: a safe and trusted space that belong to the community and where one can find the resources to build their own solution. In this paper, we offer to explore the role of libraries in community dialogue and the collaborative design of tools, resources, and methodologies to solve the community's challenges. We will study two examples of such libraries.*

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*In Bangladesh, Libraries Without Borders (LWB) has set up library spaces in the refugee camp set up in Cox's Bazar, which hosts more than 900.000 people. These spaces have become a rallying point for the Rohingya community, where they can find reliable information, discuss key issues of the community and create content to share their stories, as well essential information for others.*

*In Nepal, the Australian National University has set up a library - both physical and digital - in Batase, a small village whose community suffers from intense human trafficking. LWB supported the installation of this library through the curation of digital content disseminated through offline internet. Launched in December 2018, this library not only serves the local community, but also surrounding villages. It has become where children, youth and adults can learn, access information and discuss even sensitive issues and experiences such as human trafficking.*

*These spaces are recognized by the community as hubs for community participation, dialogue, and first and foremost, safe and trusted spaces. The feedbacks from the facilitators of these spaces, the testimonies of the users and the data collected throughout the project highlight key components for the success of such an approach: the participation of the local community in the design of the space and its activities, the involvement of members of*

*the community in the management of the space, the ability to adjust the programming to a changing environment, etc. Our research investigated these components, assessed the impacts of such spaces on the empowerment of the local community and tried to identify key lessons to replicate such initiatives.*

**Keywords:** Community; Citizenship; Empowerment; Global challenges; Refugees

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## **Introduction**

More than 68.5 million people are displaced due to conflicts or natural disasters in the world today. 4 million refugee children are out of school. And beyond the refugee scope, 203 million individuals above the age of 15 are illiterate in Sub-Saharan Africa alone. One may wonder how and even whether libraries can tackle such daunting challenges.

Access to information is, more than ever, at the root of profound inequalities in today's world. Nobel Prize Amartya Sen theorised a model of development that privileges freedom and individuals' capacity to act as the conditions required to be in a position to make decisions that correspond to individuals' aspirations. Access to information, and therefore libraries, are central in this approach to empower populations to face the current global challenges.

While some question the relevance of libraries in industrialised countries, libraries are often perceived in the most challenging contexts as a key community asset: a safe and trusted space that belong to the community and where one can find the resources to build one's own solution. In this paper, we offer to explore the role of libraries in community dialogue and the collaborative design of tools, resources and methodologies to solve the community's challenges. We will study two examples of such libraries and highlight the characteristics that contributed to their perception by the local population as community hubs.

In Bangladesh, Libraries Without Borders (LWB) has set up library spaces in the refugee camp of Cox's Bazar, which hosts more than 900.000 people. In Nepal, the Australian National University has deployed a library – both physical and digital – in Batase, a small village whose community suffers from intense human trafficking.

These spaces are recognised by the community as hubs for community participation, dialogue and, first and foremost, safe and trusted environments. The feedback from the facilitators of these libraries, the testimonies of the users and the data collected throughout the project highlight key components for the success of such an approach. We have tried to investigate such elements and to identify key lessons for the replications of such initiatives.

## **From not knowing what a library is to re-inventing the concept**

For more than 30 years, Bangladesh has been the second stage of the Rohingya crisis. Muslim minorities have faced years of repression and discrimination in their own country, Myanmar, in particular in the North of the State of Rakhine, causing their exile to Bangladesh, most notably in Cox's Bazar. Since the event of August 2017, more than 671.000 Rohingyas have crossed the border from Myanmar to Bangladesh, in the context of one of the quickest and most massive humanitarian crises. In March 2018, there was more than 880.000 refugee in the country. Traditional NGOs and the humanitarian support system have struggled to respond to the needs of the Rohingya refugees, who have been hosted in existing refugee camps, but also

in hastily rearranged spaces such as schools, religious buildings, etc. New camps have since then been built, but they are fast becoming overcrowded as well.

In this context, LWB has partnered with the International Office for Migration, the Danish Refugee Council, Première Urgence International and Humanity Inclusion, to set up libraries as access to information centres within the refugee camp of Cox’s Bazar. In 2013, along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the designer Philippe Starck, LWB created the Ideas Box: a portable pop-up media center. Standardized, easy to transport and set up, the Ideas Box is a robust device with minimal energy needs and its power source. Its content is customized to the needs of the local populations, to their languages and to their cultures. The Ideas Box was born from this challenge of access to information, cultures and education for refugee populations in emergency situations. But once created, it demonstrated its modularity and flexibility. LWB’s partners have reimaged its use and its potential for impact for various contexts, both in industrialised and in developing countries. Exactly as a library, it aims at creating a space where users can feel empowered to build their own solutions to solve their problems.



Figure 1: Presentation of the Ideas Box and its multiple uses

The selection of content constitutes one of the main challenges that we face when implementing an Ideas Box. While the container is standardized to optimize transportation and deployment, the content of the Ideas Box is unique. Each Ideas Box serves a specific population and has specific objectives. Therefore the content of each Ideas Box is unique and needs to be tailored to fit the needs of the local community. This entails adaptation to the languages spoken by the local community, to the levels of literacy and education of its future users, the interest areas of these users and the objectives of the Ideas Box program. Indeed more than a tool the Ideas Box has to be considered as a project, in the same manner that a library is more than a building hosting a collection of resources. Alongside its partners LWB has built over the years a database of content and activities in 25 languages, and that attempt to cover its users’

needs in education, technical and vocational training, access to information, access to cultures and promotion of creativity. However, without guiding processes that take into account users' perspectives, such an intervention can easily replicate cultural and social biases, and therefore inhibit empowerment instead of encouraging it.

In Bangladesh, in order to capture the needs of the Rohingya population prior to the preparation and the implementation of the library spaces within the camp, our team organised consultations within the Rohingya community. Focus groups and interviews were organised with formal and informal leaders of the community, as well as with representative groups of the local populations: men, women, adolescents (male and female), children, elderly population. These discussions were designed to put the participants at ease and to promote engagement: each session started with an ice-breaking game so that participants got to know each other and the facilitators – at least one of the facilitators spoke the language of the community members. The participants were then invited to participate in an activity that constituted a representative sample of the activities that an Ideas Box can offer: story collection, music recording, initiation to IT tools, etc. A round of feedback collection followed the activity and led to an open discussion about the content and the activities that the community would like to find within the Ideas Box: type, format, subject, target audiences, languages, etc. We conducted in Cox's Bazar a series of 20 consultation workshops involving future end users, as well as community leaders, in particular teachers and imams, who represent two of the most influential groups within the Rohingya community.

While the approach raised interest within the community and participated to building a strong sense of trust between the community and the members of our team, the consultations also presented challenges:

- **Representativity:** as it was impossible to involve the entire community in the definition of the needs – the camp host more than 900.000 individuals – we had to resort to building a sample of users, selected in order to provide an adequate representation of the entire population. Most of the times the participants are therefore not the most vulnerable individuals of the community, but the ones who feel the most at ease in such situations, or the ones with whom local partners and international NGOs have interacted in previous occasions. Women are often underrepresented for instance, though here we ensured that there were as many groups with women than groups with men.
- **Bias and influence of the facilitator:** most of the times the facilitator of such focus groups is a staff member of the organisation implementing the program in the field, or a staff member of an affiliated organisation. He is thus in a position of power than may inhibit or bias the participants. We try as much as possible to hire facilitators that are members themselves of the local community.
- **Language/social and cultural codes:** the lack of a common spoken language and therefore the need to rely upon a translator, as well the fact that the facilitator may not share the same cultural and social background may hinder the correct gathering of feedback from the community. One way to overcome this challenge consists in using techniques based on imagery, drawing, craft and proto-language. These methods promote self-expression and creativity and encourage participants to reach beyond standardised and expected answers, sometimes unconsciously suggested by the facilitator, in the way questions are asked or answers prompted.

In Bangladesh, the facilitator in charge of gathering this information ran workshops where participants were asked to design their dream library using pencils and existing photos cut out

from magazines. In Burundi, current users of the Ideas Box prototyped new services to be implemented in the Ideas Box using logo and figurines to act their ideas. Then remains the challenge of ordering and structuring the collected feedbacks, and reinjecting those into the learning and implementation process.

The account of such an approach in Bangladesh highlighted an interesting situation: when asked in the discussion what they would like to see within their library spaces, participants appeared puzzled. They did not know what a library was, never having experienced one in the past, prior to their arrival in the refugee camp. The facilitator quickly overcame this difficulty orienting the discussion towards content and activity. However, this anecdote demonstrates some of the biases that come from expectations of shared concepts, even in situations where design thinking is at the core of the approach.

A major request from the Rohingya community was the collection of traditional Rohingya stories with a double objective:

1. To preserve the history and the heritage of the Rohingya population,
2. And to share this culture with the uprooted younger generation.

Most of the participants of the focus groups, as well the community leaders, spontaneously told us that they hoped to use the IT tools of the Ideas Box – cameras, tablets, audio recorders, computers – to record, publish and share traditional stories, within the Rohingya community, but also with the Bangladeshi population. Their feedback led to a three-month pilot project during which more than 25 stories were collected in audio and written forms. The project was so successful that the community and the facilitators decided to formalise a methodology for story collection. The initiative has been extended and is still ongoing. Story collection is a powerful tool in the Rohingya context. Most of the traditional manuscripts have been destroyed, and the Rohingya language itself is at strains against extinction, with fewer people able to speak Rohingya in its original form and the Rohingya traditional script having just been recognised by the UNICODE consortium<sup>1</sup>. Preserving Rohingya stories in a digital form, sharing them and involving both the refugee community and the host community in this process can therefore play a key role in the promotion of a struggling culture, as well as the psychosocial wellbeing of a vulnerable population and social cohesion between the refugee community and the Bengali community.

If the members of the Rohingya community who were asked what they wanted to see in the library responded that they did not know what a library is, through their aspiration for recognition and the preservation of their heritage, they reinvented the concept of a library, touching at one of its core function: the library as a living archive that belongs to the community.

### **Libraries are first and foremost safe and trusted community spaces**

In the example of the Ideas Box as library spaces in Bangladesh, we have observed how trust is a key element of success for a thriving library. By trust, we mean of course the trust between the librarians and the users, but also among the users. This is particularly true in challenging contexts, where the local population has been affected by conflicts, violence,

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<sup>1</sup> The Unicode consortium is responsible for the maintenance and the publication of the Unicode standard, which aims at unifying the character sets used in computing in any language. Before the Rohingya character set (*Hanifi Rohingya*) was adopted by the Unicode consortium, no computing standard allowed the publication of texts in traditional Rohingya writing for websites, texts messages, etc.

displacement or natural disasters. In emergency situations, the community needs more than ever a space that is safe, where they can trust the other users and the facilitators with their safety but also with the information that is shared, as well as space where one can find a sense of normalcy in a situation that is far from normal. Our team, as well as other field actors (local civil society organisations, international NGOs, UN agencies) have witness this in Bangladesh, as well as in other humanitarian contexts, but this is also true for vulnerable groups in developing or industrialised countries: ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, women in certain contexts, underprivileged individuals in industrialised countries, etc.

In Nepal, LWB partnered with the Australian National University, and in particular a group of 14 students, to set up a library in Batase, a small and remote village in Nepal, to fight human trafficking. In 2017, the International Labour Organisation estimated that 24.9 million people are victims of human trafficking today, through forced labour, domestic labour and sexual exploitation. 79% of them are young girls and women. In Nepal, the lack of access to information and education, illiteracy and poverty are the major causes of human trafficking because of people's vulnerability to misinformation and manipulation. The project of establishing a library in Batase was born from an encounter between Christina Lee, the student from the Australian National University who led the project, and the community of Batase. The library aimed at providing the local community with sensitization content about human trafficking, but also with the resources and tools to gain literacy and the ability to search for and verify information.

The group of 14 students fundraised 12.000€ by mobilising more than 500 people in 14 countries, which enabled the implementation of a library providing access to textbooks, books in Nepali and in English, games, tablets and computers. There is currently no internet connection at Batase. The village is too remote to allow the distribution of newspaper. And the closest library is located in Kathmandu which is about a 2-day hike. We therefore deployed a Koombook, an open-source nanoserver, created by LWB, that creates a local wifi hotspot, onto which users can connect using the library's tablets and browse thousands of digital content, without an internet connection.

The testimonies of the local community highlight the relevance of such a space in terms of access to reliable information and educational resources – students coming back from school will spend time at the library where they can learn together and receive tutoring from older students. But the example of Batase also shows how valuable a secure and trusted community space is in such a remote context. The library is now the true centre of the village. Every week, it hosts a cinema sessions and offers several workshops for the community led by inhabitants of the village: workshops on hygiene, sports, journalism and writing. The library has also been used to host movie making sessions, and games to encourage group activities amongst young children who struggle at school.

The users were trained to use the Koombook, as well as to look after the resources of the library, which promoted a sense of ownership and community belonging. And each day, a few residents of Batase will take turns to open the library and run the activities.

### **Community participation and agility are key for the success of a community hub**

This sense of belonging is a key component of the success of a library as a community space. At LWB, we strongly believe in the power of information and education for the

empowerment of the most vulnerable populations. However, the complexity of emergency interventions often results in infrastructures, bureaucracy and power dynamics that may tend in certain situation to disempower the most fragile individuals. In a refugee camp for instance, though international agencies and NGOs try as much as they can to preserve refugees' freedom to choose and to act, a refugee can feel as if they do not have much say in what happens in their everyday life: what they will eat, the clothes they receive, where they will live, the opportunities they will have, etc.

While members of the local community are the best positioned and informed to come up with solutions to their problems, they are also the ones that are the least consulted when decisions about their future are made by international agencies and national institutions. Creating the conditions required to promote local participation and engagement of the community is a first step towards empowerment. It also constitutes one of the most reliable and robust strategies for development: providing the resources and the tools to enable the local community to take over the library probably is the most solid strategy to ensure the survival and the development of the library as a community space.

This is why a significant part of LWB's intervention relies on training and transfer of skills to local communities and local field actors. While international intervention may be required in emergency situations or to catalyze change in challenging contexts, exit strategies leaning on local ecosystems must be well thought out as early as possible, to foster sustainable social transformation.

In Burundi, some of the initial Ideas Box programs launched by LWB were transferred to local organisations. This is the case of the Ideas Box program set up in Makamba for Burundese populations who had to flee to Tanzania during the conflict and recently settled back in Burundi. The local community is in charge of the implementation of the Ideas Box. They put together a business model in which entry tickets for projections of soccer games and movies pay for the running costs of the Ideas Box: connectivity, facilitator salary, thus enabling the deployment of educational and cultural activities free of charge.

This transition towards an exit strategy that relies upon local resources shapes LWB's programs. The empowerment of local communities cannot be uncorrelated from the empowerment of local organisations and institutions. Not only does this strategy prevent a state where local initiatives depend on external actors, but it also creates a dynamic where more and more local role models emerge, and contribute to shaping the hopes and dreams of the most vulnerable individuals. Ansou, a Senegalese refugee and a frequent user of the Ideas Box deployed in Palermo says: "In Senegal, libraries are so different. First of all, they don't have all this material, like computers. And if you borrow a book, you need to pay. Here, it's free. I would really love for my country to have this kind of libraries. So many people want to study but cannot afford it. There should be libraries everywhere. I dropped out of school at 12. Today, I would like to study to become a cultural facilitator, and why not work with you. I would like to make people's life easier, convince them to come to the library to learn, make them happy. Spark their curiosity, their interest. You helped in many ways. And when someone helps you, you want to thank them in return."

Community participation also represents a strategy to adapt the services of the library to the needs of the local population. Shaping the services to fit the needs of the community in an ever-changing environment is undeniably challenging. But in contexts such as the ones described above – a refugee camp where there are newcomers every day, in a welcome center where the languages

spoken by the residents change on a daily basis, or simply in a neighborhood where the needs of the community vary depending on the socio-cultural situation – being able to adapt the offer of the library in terms of content, activity and guidance to the local context is essential, for the library to remain relevant and to maintain this sense of community belonging. Involving the local ecosystem in the decision-making process can therefore facilitate this process.

## **Conclusion**

After months of trial and error, the libraries that we described in this paper in Bangladesh and in Nepal are spaces that are now recognized by the community as hubs for community participation, dialogue, and first and foremost, safe and trusted spaces. The feedback from the facilitators of these spaces, the testimonies of the users and the data collected throughout the project highlight key components for the success of such an approach: the participation of the local community in the design of the space and its activities, the involvement of members of the community in the management of the space, the ability to adjust the programming to a changing environment, etc.

Access to information is increasing, while accessibility is actually on the decline. To build a better future, public policies need to tackle both issues: improving access to information and promoting accessibility, especially for the most vulnerable populations. Libraries are ideally placed to fight these inequalities, they can be a core component of a global strategy for development. But efficiently fill this mission, they need to embrace their social mission. Librarians have a key role to play as information champions, democratizing access to information and actively accompanying the most fragile individuals in their search for the relevant information and in building users' capacity to source and verify information. Rather than being custodians of information, they should be facilitators, building bridges between the most underprivileged communities and public services.

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