Libraries as empowerment levers: defining the collections and the contents with the users - The example of the Ideas Box

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Abstract:

In a context where inequalities are increasing and where digitization can contribute to the marginalization of those who are already the most vulnerable individuals, libraries can and should play a key role in fighting social inequalities and in empowering the most fragile populations. As David Lankes, the recipient of the American Library Association's 2016 Ken Haycock Award for Promoting Librarianship, formulated it: 〝*The Mission of Librarians is to Improve Society through Facilitating Knowledge Creation in their Communities*〞. *At the core of this statement lies the importance of contextualization and the essential role that librarians can play towards the involvement of library users in the definition of the libraries' collection.*

Contextualization and user-centered approaches are central elements of the Ideas Box program that Libraries Without Borders (LWB) launched in 2014. In order to bring the services of the library to those who need it, LWB created the Ideas Box: a mobile pop-up media center that can be deployed anywhere in 20 minutes. Initially designed for emergency situations, it has now been tested in numerous contexts: in crisis and emergency situations, in developing countries, as well as in low-income neighborhoods in Europe and the US. Each Ideas Box is different: the modules remain the same, but the contents of the Ideas Box (books, games, videos, websites, apps, equipment and material for creative activities) are tailored to the users' needs. And this process has been created to involve the users of the Ideas Box in the definition of its contents and its activities, throughout the project.

Our presentation will focus on the lessons learnt from our field experience with the Ideas Box, in Burundi - where the first Ideas Box have been deployed in 2014 –, in the Middle East – in response to the Syrian crisis –, in Colombia - where LWB has worked alongside the Colombian National Library to implement libraries in remote areas where the FARCs have been demobilized – as well as in Europe and in the US – where Ideas Box

are building bridges between underserved communities and local libraries. We will present the principles of our approach, the resulting impacts on empowerment and democratic participation, as well as the challenges that we encountered, in particular trying to ensure representation of the most isolated and underrepresented populations.

Introduction

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The complexity of empowerment through access to information and education

Empowerment is a difficult concept to grasp and there are many definitions and uses of the term. But most definitions emphasize agency and the ability for an individual to make meaningful life choices. This vision fundamentally draws from Amartya Sen's concept of an agent, that is to say "someone who acts and brings about chance and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives". Therefore when working on empowering individuals to make informed choices, especially when the action targets vulnerable populations, empowerment represents the series of events through which one reaches a stage where their actions and choices stem from their own set of values and goals. In this way, the economist Naila Kabeer's definition of empowerment is closest to the vision that we will discuss in this paper. She defines empowerment as the "process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability".

At Libraries Without Borders (LWB), we aim at strengthening the agency of the most vulnerable populations through access to education and access to information. Our mission focuses on providing everyone – and in particular the most fragile individuals – with the means and the resources to make enlightened decisions, to understand the world and be able to transform it. We are convinced that

access to information and education are amazing levers for the development of people and societies. LWB strives to build bridges between the society of information and those who are excluded from it.

However, while working with vulnerable populations, well meaning empowerment initiatives can sometimes turn out to be disempowering. For instance, in a refugee camp, the choice of the curriculum according to which education will be delivered is a highly political decision, in which refugees have little say. Choosing to teach in the home country curriculum is often a sign that the host country sees the settlement of refugees within its borders as temporary. Children are taught in their language of origin, following the curriculum of their country of origin so that they can transition towards their country of origin's educational system, once they return there. Whereas choosing to teach the host country curriculum is often a sign of a political will for integration. In Greece, where refugees started arriving in 2015, some parents refused to have their children learn Greek and schooled following the Greek curriculum, because they had no intention of staying in Greece, which they only saw as a country of passage. However no other option was made available and their opinion was never asked.

Therefore as actors of access to information and education, we often face the difficult challenge of navigating the concrete contours of the humanitarian principle "Do no harm". This rule states the necessity for field actors to prevent and mitigate any potential negative impacts of their actions on affected populations. This is especially true in areas of intervention as socially ingrained as access to information and education.

The Ideas Box, creating an environment for empowerment

Because access to information and education play a crucial role in providing individuals with the resources towards empowerment, libraries can be a key element in strengthening the most fragile individuals' sense of agency. However, libraries are not always where the most vulnerable populations are: in emergency situations, in remote areas where there is no connectivity, in rural areas in industrialized countries. Or they may be there, but struggling to reach the most fragile communities. Logistical barriers – working hours conflicting with the opening hours of the library – or psychological and social barriers are at play – someone can feel like they do not belong in a library because they have not been to school and have not learned how to read. Libraries need to extend their reach both in the physical space and in the symbolic space.

This is why 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 own 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 reimagined its use and its potential for impact for various contexts, both in industrialized 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 process of content selection: balancing reactivity and customization to the local needs

The content selection constitutes one of the main challenges 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 23 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.

Applying design thinking to the curation of content

Design thinking was first theorized in the 1980s by Rolf Faste, at Stanford University. Aiming at producing practical and creative solutions, it is based on 2 principles:

- Iteration: design thinking describes a series of actions focused on the resolution of problems that can be repeated as many times as is necessary to identify a solution that optimally answers the need. Each solution can be qualified as being intermediate and can be the starting point for alternative paths. The problem and the solution can be redefined as many times as the group deems necessary.

- Collaboration: design thinking relies on collective intelligence. Because there are different perspectives to each problem, design thinking is based on the idea that discussion and collaboration between individuals with different training, experience and point of view can spark more creative ideas.

At LWB, we apply design thinking to the process of needs assessment and content selection. At the start of each Ideas Box project, once the audience of the project is defined, we aim at involving said audience in the definition of their needs. Depending on the context, we organize focus groups or hands-on workshops where users are invited to discuss their perception of the local needs and their representation of what a library is and what it could bring to their community. This information is then treated, analyzed and summarized to feed the content curation process. At this stage, collaboration and partnerships are a requirement: all types of expertise are indeed required to identify the most relevant content for a specific context. Design thinking is all about thinking out the box and prototyping solutions that will fit the original needs of a given community.
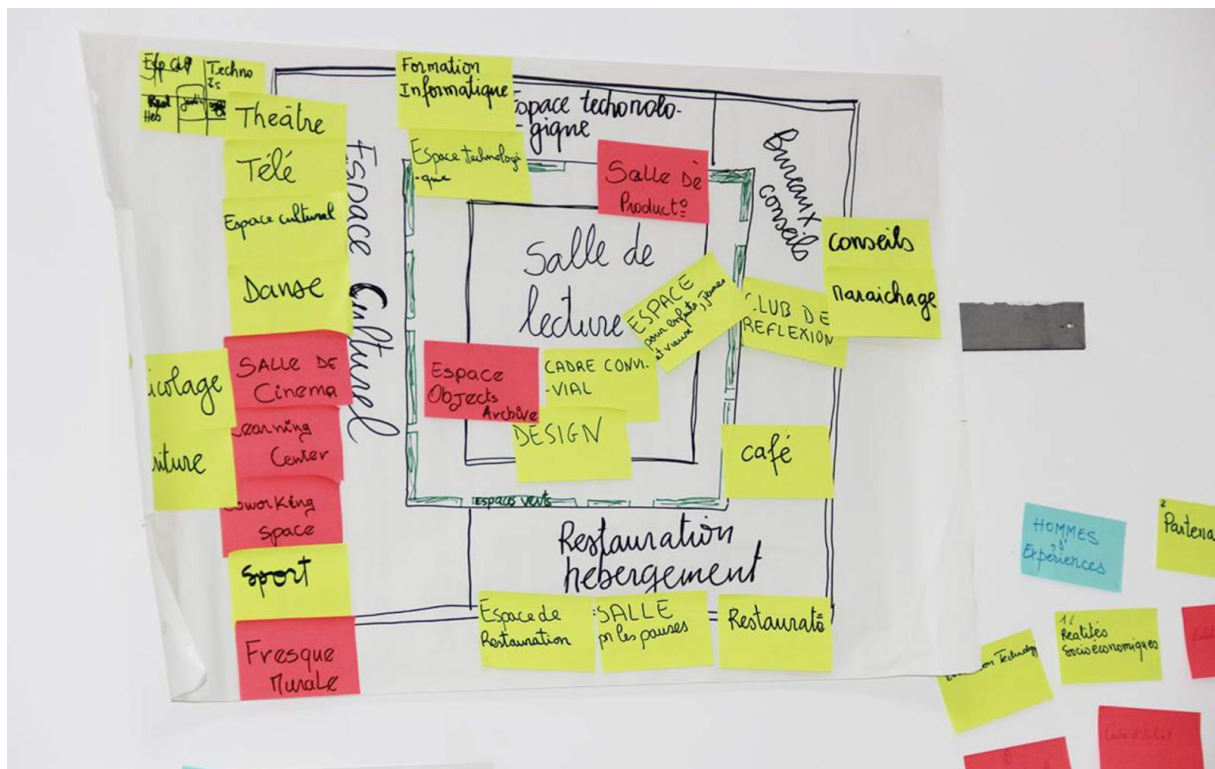

Figure 2: Design thinking in libraries in Senegal: prototyping new services for the library's users

However, if design thinking prevents us from falling into the most obvious pitfalls and biases while selecting content, it does not spare us from challenges such as representation. Indeed, it is often impossible to involve an entire community in the definition of the needs. Therefore, we resort to a sample of users, selected in order to provide a good representation of the entire population. This is where the first flaw lies. Very often, the most vulnerable individuals are often not the ones volunteering to participate in focus groups. Women are often underrepresented in such settings. And community leaders may themselves have internalized biases that are not accounted for in the constitution of the sample. While balancing effectiveness and fairness in the representation of the community, iteration is key. Based on design thinking principles, no content selection is designed to be definitive. The Ideas Box's collection of content is dynamic and needs to evolve to take into account changes occurring within the community, but also changes in the demographics of the users. Combining iteration and outreach efforts towards the most underserved individuals should tend to diminish the gaps between the voices heard by the service providers and the actual diverse community.

Figure 3: Design thinking workshops aiming at defining content for the Ideas Box, with Rohingya women in Bangladesh

Ideally the focus groups facilitator needs to be neutral. They should not influence users' perspectives and contributions. This facilitator is, however, often a staff member of the organization implementing the program in the field or a staff member of an affiliated organization. They are therefore often in a position of power that may inhibit users' self-expression. Relying on community representatives to facilitate such exchanges helps alleviate this risk. In Colombia, where LWB and the National Library of Colombia deployed Ideas Box in indigenous reservations, hiring facilitators from the indigenous community to assist the librarians greatly improved community engagement in the definition of the content and the programming of the Ideas Box.

Gathering feedback and encouraging personal contributions can be challenging when one does not possess the same cultural and social codes and customs. This can be compounded by the lack of a common language. While translators and community representatives can fill in this gap, techniques relying on imagery, drawing, craft and proto-language are usually very successful in that they not only encourage creativity and self-expression, but they also compel participants to go beyond standardized and expected answers. By asking participants to use non-formal ways of communication, the facilitators can dissipate the fear of judgment that individuals who are not accustomed to sharing their opinions and perceptions may feel at the idea of speaking in public. In Bangladesh, where we conducted a needs assessment mission to prepare the implementation of Ideas Box programs serving the Rohingya and the Bangladeshi communities, 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.

Working in partnership with local actors

Libraries Without Borders was founded on the idea that international actors should not act "in place of" local actors, but alongside local actors. It started with books donations, which are too often made without consulting local actors on the constitution of the collections. LWB strongly advocated for reasoned donations, where local recipients can choose the books that they want to receive, and built an online catalogue listing all the available books. This not only enabled the design of collections that are better suited to the needs of the local users, it is also mindful of the impacts of book donations on the local publishing ecosystem. This vision stayed with us when we developed the Ideas Box program. LWB does not operate directly in the field at a large scale. While we do have operations running in most of our regions of intervention, they serve learning and best practices sharing purposes. Most of LWB's programs are implemented alongside local partners or international NGOs that have a strong experience and knowledge of the specific context.

We rely on our partners' expertise of the local ecosystem and their knowledge of the local community's needs. For instance, in the humanitarian sector, the Ideas Box is targeted towards the humanitarian response stakeholders, particularly international NGOs, local NGOs with demonstrated expertise, and the associated humanitarian sponsors (UNHCR, UNICEF, EU, etc.). This choice is motivated by LWB's belief in supporting operational expertise. The Ideas Box is indeed set-up on a partnership project model where implementing organizations and agencies operate the box within the framework of their own programs, in a co-construction perspective in which LWB´s know-how allows them to develop further and transform their practices. The **value proposition** of LWB's Ideas Box approach is based on our proposition to strengthen the capacity of partners to deliver their objectives with a high quality, and lies in the convergence of high quality curated and packaged sets of tools, a tailored set of content, activity programming and new partners (content providers, IT, etc.), but most importantly a transformation and innovation in the practices of our partners. The Ideas Box brings value to operations in terms of **outreach increase, support community engagement, quality of programs improvement** and **partnerships and visibility potential increase.** Although this approach can benefit all sectors in humanitarian work, currently it is particularly prioritized in education (formal and non-formal), protection (PSS) and youth and community engagement.

As we have often seen in the field, the Ideas Box offers organizations the opportunity to integrate **new practices in which social and technological innovations** work hand in hand to achieve concrete results in a highly efficient and cost-effective manner. It also provides **an experimentation space where solutions and strategies to cope with humanitarian crises can be tested and developed**. As an example, questions regarding **livelihood** and **employability** of refugees and host communities can build on the use of the Ideas Box resources and space, to enhance empowerment. Multilateral donors in Burundi, where our longest running humanitarian programs are located, have pushed their implementing partners to build Ideas Box into their PSS programs, thus promoting user engagement in project design, creativity and community outreach.

Figure 4: The facilitators of the Ideas Box deployed in the Mahama refugee camp (Rwanda) with Handicap International and their trainers from Libraries Without Borders

Empowering local communities and building sustainable solutions

The human component of an empowerment program is probably the most decisive and the most challenging element. Part of the empowerment issue of vulnerable groups lies in the lack of representation in decision-making positions. While members of the local community are the best equipped 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. Stimulating local participation and engagement in the community is a first step towards empowerment. In Colombia, an external study highlighted the impacts of setting up an environment such as the Ideas Box on community engagement: following the deployment of the Ideas Box, global participation in collective activities increased by 26%. Youth leadership was bolstered by 31% and young people's perception of the future was positively impacted.

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 organizations. 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 screenings 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 organizations 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."

Conclusion

Around the world, libraries are looking for methodologies that can help them integrate users' perceptions and feedbacks into the design of their collection. In a context where libraries are more than ever necessary but struggle to reach those who are the most vulnerable, the initial challenge is doubled: those who come to the library are not representative of the population that makes up the neighborhood of the library. The most underprivileged populations are also the most underrepresented communities. These challenges cannot therefore be treated separately. By opening up the processes underlying the design of a collection, libraries will progressively adjust their offer to the needs of a wider and more diverse audience. Being conscious of the biases and fighting them actively will lead to more inclusiveness and active engagement of the community in the life of the library. The local ecosystem of actors can also play an essential role in shaping the library collections to fit the needs of the local population. Partnering up with local institutions to attract new audiences to the library, collaborating with other cultural and educational initiatives to enrich the library's offer will anchor the library at the heart of the city.

Libraries Without Borders strives to provide field actors with services that enable them to leverage the power of libraries to empower their audiences. By connecting implementing partners with local libraries, providing them with an adequate content selection in answer to the needs of their beneficiaries, or training them to provide to become mediators between the final users and the resources at their disposal, we hope to participate to a global movement towards the empowerment of the most vulnerable populations.

This strategy stems from the strong conviction that knowledge should be a common good. It should be freely accessible to all, for use and reuse, everywhere around the world. The spread of technology and digital means of communication should work in favor of accessibility and open access to knowledge, as technology enables the infinite and exact replication of content at a minimal cost. As a society, we are therefore equipped to build a community of common knowledge, promoting large scale creation and diffusion of content. This, however, calls for a strong political and economic stance. Technology can indeed also compartmentalize and restrain access to knowledge, making it even less accessible for the most underprivileged, and thus increasing existing socio-economic inequalities. Libraries have a key role to play in this fight for equality: by advocating for open access and an alternative to partitioned knowledge, they can contribute to the empowerment of the most vulnerable populations through access to information and education.