



# A European library agenda for the post-Covid 19 age



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## Foreword

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On 26 March 2020, the EBLIDA Executive Committee met in an extraordinary online meeting and asked the EBLIDA Secretariat to undertake a survey aimed at reviewing the state of libraries in the face of the Covid-19 crisis on the basis of a checklist including 19 items. This checklist aimed to describe measures, practices and services provided by library associations and library institutions which were initiated during the crisis and continued in one way or another in the post-Covid-19 age.

The content of the EBLIDA report *A European library agenda for the post-Covid 19 age* (May 2020), together with the [Sustainable Development Goals and Libraries - First European Report](#), also released in May 2020, and the Paper on [The European Structural and Investment Funds 2021-2027: Funding Opportunities for Libraries](#) (June 2020) were aggregated into the EBLIDA flagship report “[Think The Unthinkable: A post Covid-19 European Library Agenda meeting Sustainable Development Goals and funded through the European Structural and Investment Funds \(2021-2027\)](#)”.

One year later, with the pandemic apparently slowing down and, in some countries, on the way of being eradicated, EBLIDA decided to relaunch an investigation with a view to validating the new normals having been detected in the first post-Covid agenda report and to identifying the legacy left by library policies and trends set in place during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis. In May 2020 we were somehow optimistic and we thought that the Covid crisis would come to the end after Summer 2020. That has unfortunately not been the case. Now that Europe is seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, it is time to take stock of what took place in libraries during this terrible year and make an assessment of the state of the art of libraries in Europe.

We strongly believe that the lessons learned during the Covid crisis will not be lost and that libraries will have to re-prioritise their agendas and revise their public policies. As an organisation working in the European field, EBLIDA is closely monitoring these developments and exploring how libraries may align with new priorities in a proactive way.

I would like to thank all respondents, mainly EBLIDA Members, for the prompt and savvy responses they sent us on the occasion of both Surveys, in 2020 and 2021, and the EBLIDA Secretariat for the extensive review work that was carried out on the input received from EBLIDA Members.

Ton van Vlimmeren  
President, EBLIDA

## 0. Executive summary

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In response to the Call for Solidarity launched by the UN Secretary general, Mr António Guterres, on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020, EBLIDA created a “Checklist for Library Associations and Libraries in the Face of Covid-19 Crisis”. EBLIDA members responded to a survey based on the checklist and responses were provided by library associations from 17 European countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. The survey aimed to showcase not only the effort made by libraries in Europe to mitigate the harmful effects of the Covid-19 outbreak on human beings, but also to point the way forward for libraries now entering the post-Covid-19 age. What will be the library activities based on contingent factors – which hopefully will not replicate – and library activities and trends that will become permanent in the post-Covid 19 age?

One year later, a different survey was sent out to the same respondents. EBLIDA asked them whether new library services will be discontinued, once the pandemic is over, which new normal will be in place in a perspective which, beyond library operations, also includes finances, partnership and sustainable development goals.

At the end of the double survey, EBLIDA identifies five new normals being promoted within a European Library Agenda in the post-Covid-19 age:

1. A socially inclusive library;
2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways;
3. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition;
4. Library governance at central and local levels;
5. Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

### 1. A socially inclusive library

During the Covid-19 crisis, there were strong derogations to the otherwise indivisible principle of universal access to library collections and services. When libraries deliver public information about their reduced or limited services, a reminder should clearly state that these derogations are limited in time and scope.

The new normal in library practices concerns access policies, personnel security, social distancing and sanitation of collections. Rules and regulations were driven by three factors: a) national health regulations; b) risk perception, which varies from one country to another; c) the size and the arrangement of library spaces.

Library spaces and offices were re-designed in order to reduce the risk of creating crowds. This trend may have a long-term effect also on library architecture. Re-designing library premises also leads to the re-organisation of library services. Libraries as a “third” place, where citizens meet and exchange ideas and opinions, may be turned into, or co-exist with, a “library beyond walls” concept.

The lessons learned during the crisis will not be forgotten and may have a long-term effect on library architecture and the re-design of library services. The main lesson is that a socially inclusive library is developing beyond the library premises; libraries as a “third” place, where citizens meet and exchange ideas and opinions, may be turned into, or co-exist with, a “library beyond walls” concept. Within a contactless-oriented society, there is a possibility that the concept of a “complete self-service”, unstaffed library may progress.

During the Covid 19 crisis, several European states ranked library services as “essential”, worthy of attention and promotion. New services strictly related to the Covid emergence included:

- centralised access to Covid-19 related health information produced by governmental authorities,
- Covid-19 support service - 'Community Call' delivered via phone, text, email and through platforms;
- Use of social media to offer story time, through Facebook groups and YouTube profiles, or also for library exchange and (re-)use of digital products;
- advanced social services for the elderly and vulnerable on lockdown, such as phone calls, storytelling, also food delivery where necessary,
- the provision of face masks for healthcare workers through 3D printers.

Some of these services, like the provision of face masks, are now fortunately redundant. In a contact-less society, automatic door opening, voice commands in elevators, homeworking, tele-libraries and online help desks will very likely be the new normal for libraries. The effects of social distancing can be offset by a transformative and adaptive library, able to fill social differences and bridge digital gaps. In order to do that, however, libraries need to monitor the movements taking place in their functional domains and exert full control over the data produced within their space and concerning their operations.

## **2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways**

Libraries promoted access to online resources via their websites pointing to platforms of e-books, and e-media. Statistics concerning the use of digital platforms in March-April 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year show that the use of platforms - such as Onleihe and Overdrive in Germany, MLOL in Italy, etc. - increased exponentially during the Covid-19 crisis, with an avalanche effect of library websites pointing to national digital platforms and a dense interchange between collections and connectedness.

It can be said that, in the majority of countries, access to digital content in the library increased twice or three times compared with pre-Covid figures. This boost should be measured not only in quantity, but also in the quality of the variety of digital resources including self-learning, content on demand, music, press, e-books. Some libraries closed to the public also tried to perform workshops, talk shows and lectures through live streaming. In academic and research libraries, access to digital resources increased in a more moderate way for the very reason that university members – students, researchers, professors - have been using e-resources for years.

In order to overcome the contingent nature of the shift in demand for digital resources, a critical factor is the quality of the relationship between publishers and libraries and how prices for digital publications will level off in spite of the library's increasing demand. In several countries there was an attempt to adopt new forms of copyright contracts. The National Library of Latvia managed to come to an agreement with the Latvian Copyright and Communication Agency and the Latvian Authors' Association in relation to the offer of e-periodicals and e-books.

Reading habits and reading figures improved. Another key determinant of the spectacular increase in access to digital platforms has been distance-learning in schools and universities. Distance-learning has generated positive externalities in libraries during the Covid-19 crisis but their effects may not be long-lasting; after all, it is not taken for granted that school children will continue to use distance-learning in school intensively and that universities will drop taught classes in the post-Covid 19 age.

The consolidation of digital trends in libraries in the post-Covid-19 age can be seen in two complementary frames of reference: a strictly cultural perspective and a broader societal vision. The strictly cultural perspective concerns music, performing arts and live performance. The Covid-19 has dealt a fatal blow to the organisations and enterprises operating in these fields. The ecosystem built around a concert or a theatre production may be amplified through the creation of post-production events which can be distributed in libraries at local level and help capture and retain the attention of the public.

In a broader sense, and much closer to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, a society pivoting around social distancing may end up creating negative requirements

leading to social exclusion. European libraries will have to look at the scale, the scope, the learning objectives and the virtual dimension of their activities. The implementation of high tech and AI tools in libraries may be a strong incentive to re-modulate the European library agenda towards sustainable development. A critical factor for libraries aimed to shape technologies is also the control of the data produced within the library ecosphere. Access to data concerning movement of people, resources and equipment need to be transparent for policy-making and data-sharing purposes.

### **3. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition**

Expected financial hardship did not take place in libraries and budgets did not suffer. Libraries' economic vulnerability, however, remains the same, for two reasons. The first is that public libraries' income is almost solely generated at local level by city or regional authorities – the same can be said for research libraries sourced almost exclusively by universities. The second is that many items in library budgets have an inelastic nature: building maintenance, personnel and resources allocated to operations, in particular to the purchase of digital resources, cannot easily be re-adjusted to meet new financial requirements.

Downsizing library operations may therefore end up with substantial budgetary cuts to the “social” library sector - the “third place” library as meeting place. The response may be found in the diversification of funding for libraries and the promotion of current library activities within a different framework: the European 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The best financial instrument to fund SDG projects in libraries are the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027 and it is a matter of relief and hope that many respondents to the EBLIDA survey were well aware of the EBLIDA programme “Think The Unthinkable (TTU). A post-Covid 19 library agenda meeting Sustainable Development Goals to be funded through European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027”. Some of them are keen on presenting proposals within ESIF and expect to diversify their sources of income.

### **4. Library governance at central and local levels**

During the Covid-19 crisis library governance has been implemented through traditional activities on site, centralised activities promoted by library institutions, and a grassroots movement of professionals driven by passion and personal dedication.

During the Covid-19 crisis, institutional settings were reinforced through the implementation of web portals or centralised facilities with information distributed at national or regional level. Conversely, the informal setting – exchange of information and best practices in informal gatherings - has suffered from the cancellation or postponement of national library conferences.

In the extraordinary context of the Covid-19 crisis, however, library governance also sprouted from an uncoordinated and spontaneous movement of professionals willing to offer solutions to unfulfilled needs and to cooperate with external agencies. In this context, library associations took the lead. Access to digital services, too, requires a more centralised library governance in terms of copyright clearance, standardisation of technical requirements and coordination of management tasks, including statistics. At the same time, local and professional governance has also been a key determinant for the setting up of innovative services or the adaptation of existing ones.

Worth noting is also that, during the pandemic, libraries closely cooperated with governmental agencies and ministries other than education/culture, with NGOs and the private sector. These new forms of governance and the extension of library missions may prove to be useful if European libraries identify themselves as structural components of a cohesion policy and wish to access EU Structural and Investment Funds. If libraries wish not to disperse the experiences matured during the Covid-19 crisis, if they wish to shape technologies in new ways and re-adjust the library budget composition, they may also need to review existing models of library governance.

## **5. Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development**

In 2020 many factories and service companies stopped production and delivery, car usage was reduced and carbon emission was reduced almost everywhere. However, this has not stopped the decline of the planet in so far as the attainment of sustainable development goals is concerned. Libraries themselves felt that their effort in this direction were diminished during the crisis. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development is an urgent task which needs to be carried out at great speed has to go on, despite and perhaps because of the Covid-19 crisis.

## **6. EBLIDA Recommendations**

### *Introduction*

During the Covid-19 crisis libraries were locked down in practically all European countries, but their services were re-designed and re-oriented in ways that still persist in a post-Covid age. New policies, working methods, revised budgets, and different postures in library governance are expected to be pursued. The new library normals entail both risks and opportunities. A new start may be expected, which reverses practices no longer justified under different circumstances and allows for better and more satisfactory services to the communities served by libraries.

On the basis of the conclusions of the report, the following five new normals for a post-Covid 19 European library agenda may be made, together with related recommendations, namely:

1. A socially inclusive library;
2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways;
3. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition;
4. Library governance at central and local levels;
5. Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

### **1. A socially inclusive library**

- 1) Take stock of the activities undertaken in the health (information) field in order to reinforce health-oriented library policies (for instance, in personal well-being);
- 2) Assess the importance of library services performed during the Covid-19 crisis based on voice (community calls and audiobooks) and making (3D printers), and see to what extent they can successfully complement visual-based-only services (consultation of websites, and visual tools);
- 3) Revise and, if possible, enhance library development plans on the basis of the flow-in/flow-out experience that matured during the Covid-19 crisis and link this experience to movements of people, resources, ideas, and equipment;
- 4) Place combatting fake news at the centre stage of the library's mission, as has been the case during the Covid-19 crisis.

### **2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways**

- 5) Reinforce focus on e-copies and use data and experiences matured up during the Covid-19 crisis to design new models of e-copy distribution in libraries, taking into account the economies and policies pursued both by information service providers (free and universal access to content based on advertisement revenues) and aggregators (massive distribution of content at low subscription costs);
- 6) Reinforce digital literacy activities for targeted categories of people in close link with general policies aimed to fill the digital divide, foster digital intelligence in libraries and stimulate multiple use of technologies (for instance, 3D printers used for cultural, educational and health policies);

- 7) Be active partners in national digitalisation and artificial intelligence plans through cutting edge experiences which may scale up library practices from the analogue to the digital and from the digital to the analogue, and combining the two in order to meet library traditional objectives;
- 8) Pursue distance-learning objectives in alliance with educational establishments, stretching out as far as possible the virtual dimension, and capitalise on the library digital offer in order to become hotspots for young people;
- 9) In compliance with privacy regulations, exert control over data and metadata affecting library operations and re-use them for policy-making and decision-making processes, in particular when they concern movements of people and resources and related library outcomes.

### **3. *Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget baseline***

- 10) Be ready to review the composition of library budgets and to find alternative sources of funding (with ministries/departments other than culture, private sources, European funding), in order to compensate for shortcomings in the library's future budgets;
- 11) Think of libraries as "structurally" essential to the development of a country and, in this way, manage possible financial resources generated from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027, in order to minimize the possible impact of the Covid-19 crisis in library activities.

### **4. *Library governance at central and local levels;***

- 12) Request local governments to find additional budget for library services at national and European level on the basis of the experience matured by libraries during the Covid-19 crisis;
- 13) Link the development of the public library to sustainable development activities at local and national level;
- 14) Adopt flexible forms of governance in order to manage European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027 in an appropriate way.

### **5. *Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development***

- 15) Encourage libraries to be champions of sustainable development policies in all their action.

# 1. The impact of Covid-19 on libraries: the five new normals

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The world is starting to recover from a plague that has had a devastating impact on populations all over the world. With more than 250 million cases and over 5 million deaths, Covid has had a heavy toll on the planet, and all states are struggling to control the pandemic and to develop effective responses that are able to minimise the virus's effects.

Covid-19 has caused an unprecedented world recession, the seriousness of which we haven't seen since the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. The economic risks and consequences of all kinds of epidemics are clear and tangible: the cost for healthcare systems, disruption and reduction in labour productivity, decreased trade and decline in travel and tourism, to name just a few. The aftermath of the economic crisis will be visible in a few years, depending on how successful the recovery plans of the most resilient regions of the planet. In addition to the economic effects, COVID-19 has widened the gap of inequality in many countries, further entrenching economic and social inequalities and fostering intense political polarisation, popular disaffection with democracy and the embrace of authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of a common invisible enemy, the response to the Covid crisis has been fragmented and unequal, varying from state to state. Some countries just failed in managing the pandemic; in other authoritarian states policies have been adopted which curtailed the virus's spread while suppressing or at least reducing individual freedoms. Only in some states, a truly democratic response has produced effectual public health responses as well as measures that have partially mitigated the pandemic's effect on inequality. A study assessing the effects of the pandemic in five countries with a high amount of covid cases and high mortality rate - United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines – showed that case numbers and mortality rates were highest among racial, ethnic, and sometimes religious minorities and on the poor.<sup>2</sup>

On 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the UN Secretary-General, Mr António Guterres, launched a Call for Solidarity in “a moment that demands coordinated, decisive, and innovative policy action from the world's leading economies [in the recognition] that the poorest and most vulnerable — especially women — will be the hardest hit.”<sup>3</sup> He urged States to act quickly to contain the economic fallout and to “focus on people – women, youth, low-wage workers, small and medium enterprises, the informal sector and on vulnerable groups who are already at risk.”<sup>4</sup> He also designated the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development as a common framework for action.

In response to this appeal, EBLIDA created a “Checklist for Library Associations and Libraries in the Face of Covid-19 Crisis”. The checklist aimed to showcase the effort made by libraries in Europe to compensate for the harmful effects of the Covid-19 outbreak on human beings. It also aimed to indicate a way forward for libraries now entering the post-Covid-19 Phase. In 2020, the European Union set up a panoply of financial and operational instruments, of which the most visionary is Next Generation EU. All professions and sectors, and in particular the cultural sector, has to complement EU action through a common and cohesive endeavour.

During the early and most difficult days of the pandemic, libraries were locked down practically in all European countries although in different ways and with different means of implementation. Closing down did not stop libraries from operating in different ways and library services were constantly re-designed during the Covid-19 phase. They may continue to be re-oriented in the future with new ways of working being experimented with. To mention a few: will homeworking become a new normal? Will the spectacular

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick. *COVID-19 and Its Effect on Inequality and Democracy A Study of Five Large Democracies*. Discussion paper, Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary-General Remarks on Covid-19: A Call for Solidarity 19 March 2020, [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg\\_remarks\\_on\\_covid-19\\_english\\_19\\_march\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_remarks_on_covid-19_english_19_march_2020.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf>.

rise in access to digital resources be consolidated? Will these new services, which were set up in response to short-term requirements dictated by the crisis, continue in the long term?

The EBLIDA checklist was sent out to EBLIDA Full Members and responses were provided by library associations in 17 European countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.<sup>5</sup> The resulting report, published in May 2020, was entitled “A European Library Agenda in the post-Covid 19 age”, in the optimistic belief that the pandemic would terminate after Summer 2020 – unfortunately, that was not the case. This report was integrated into the EBLIDA flagship programme “Think The Unthinkable (TTU). A post-Covid 19 library agenda meeting Sustainable Development Goals to be funded through European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027”.

The current Update is based on the responses provided by 15 members. The aim was not to rewrite the report but to detect the legacy left by library policies and trends during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis by keeping separate library activities based on contingent factors – which hopefully will not replicate – from library activities and trends that will become permanent in the post-Covid 19 age. We asked our respondents to confirm the normals identified in the 2020 report and to provide indications on whether these new normals will become permanent in the years to come.

**In its conclusions, EBLIDA identifies five new normals in a European library agenda for the post-Covid-19 age:**

1. A socially inclusive library;
2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways;
3. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition;
4. Library governance at central and local levels;
5. Do not forget the climate change opportunity and threat.

This Update will also consolidate TTU activities and provide food for thoughts for library applicants within ESIF. Therefore, we are very grateful to EBLIDA Members for their reaction and their extremely useful suggestions and deep insights. As for the first report, we hope that this Update will facilitate solutions and exchange of best practices with a view to further developing European libraries.

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<sup>5</sup> Responses were published in four special issues of the *EBLIDA Newsletter*, on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> April and 7 May, <http://www.eblida.org/news/eblida-april-newsletter-special-issue.html>. To be mentioned also NAPLE, *Public libraries in Europe and COVID-19: findings from NAPLE members*, April 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yeftxxh5>; e *Id.*, *Public libraries in Europe and COVID-19: re-opening strategies. Findings from NAPLE members*, May-July 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/533ecjh9>.

## 2. A socially inclusive library

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### 2.1 Access policies, personnel security, social distancing and sanitation of collections

During the peak of the Covid crisis, national health guidelines limited the movement of people at international, national and sometimes also at city level, thus curtailing access to libraries. These guidelines have currently been lifted, but the memory that measures concerning registered library users may be subject to limitations, albeit of health nature, will not be lost. It may be worth reminding that derogation to human rights in time of public emergency are envisaged under Article 15 of the European Convention of Human Rights only “to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation” and with measures that should not be “disproportionate to the strict requirements of the situation”.<sup>6</sup> It is also worth reminding that access limitations in time and scope cannot violate the otherwise indivisible principle of universal access to library collections and services inscribed in the 1994 IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto and the 2000 Council of Europe/EBLIDA Guidelines on Library Legislation and Policy in Europe.

Setting uniform rules concerning access policies, personnel security, social distancing and sanitation of collections was not an easy task. During and after the Covid-19 crisis, library practices were driven by three factors: a) national health regulations, which vary from one country to another within the general framework provided by the World Health Organisation; b) risk perception, which is different according to different layers of population and the quality and the intensity of the message communicated by mass media; c) the size and the arrangement of library spaces, which differ from one library premise to another.

In orienting library re-opening after the lockdown, all countries produced recommendations and guidelines for handling physical material in libraries; some of these guidelines – in Estonia, Germany (Public Library of Cologne), Ireland, Italy, Netherlands – have been published in a special issue of the EBLIDA Newsletter.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, while these recommendations were all in line on basic points - for instance, procedures for book quarantine -, they differed on other points in relation to the perspective they applied. In the Netherlands, detailed instructions concerned procedural rules for the different categories of people who access libraries. In Ireland and Italy more emphasis was put on the handling of physical collections. Procedural rules established in Germany by the Public Library of Cologne addressed instead organisational aspects.

An important issue concerned items returning to the library after lending. The suggested quarantine for books was normally set at 72 hours, but rules differed in Europe from state to state. In Germany, some library services left book stock for 48 hours before sanitising and returning to the shelf. No definitive guidance was given in Scotland on book quarantine, even if some library services left book stock for 24 or 72 hours. In Sweden, all the municipalities decided locally how to handle returned books and there were no national guidelines about book quarantine.<sup>8</sup>

In Estonia, where library lockdown was belated and the special category of state libraries stayed open with limitations, book circulation took place with the following procedure: users chose books from catalogues, sent their wishes to the library, librarians prepared book packages and left them in special library rooms close to the library main entrance; in some cases, library used official postal services to deliver items. When books were returned, they were kept untouched for 72 hours and only afterwards re-shelved.

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<sup>6</sup> European Court of Human Rights. Derogation in time of emergency (April 2020).

[https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS\\_Derogation\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Derogation_ENG.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.eblida.org/news/april-newsletter-special-issue3.html>.

<sup>8</sup> An extended and useful review is included in NAPLE Forum. The Public Libraries in Europe and COVID-19: Findings from NAPLE Members (April 2020), <https://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/dam/jcr:fce29ea1-1b83-479b-b674-a592b255f7e4/naple-narrative-report---european-library-services-during-covid19.pdf>.

With the exceptions of several Nordic and Baltic countries, libraries were locked down for weeks almost everywhere in Europe and librarians worked from home or intermittently came over to visit offices. It will be interesting to explore in the future whether this work arrangement is going to change professional working operations.

Library spaces and offices were redesigned. In order to reduce the risk of creating crowds, the flow of people was redistributed through separate corridors. Library rooms were full of separations and well-spaced desks instead of crowded open spaces. Common areas like canteens and meeting rooms had fewer chairs and log information about the last time they were cleaned with cleaning policies frequently updated.

Even at a time when the Covid-19 crisis was raging and other cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, cinemas had shut their doors, libraries were never completely closed and their services were constantly re-designed. In many countries libraries managed to strike a balance between measures restricting access to collections and the provision of primary services. According to the Update survey, in Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands there was no need to legislate or regulate: when libraries were not closed down, they organised themselves in an autonomous way to fulfil the needs of their primary users'. The initiative and the imagination of librarians were sufficient to devise services that would best fit their users in stringent and difficult circumstances.

In some other countries, library services were kept open only after the Parliament included them, through ad hoc legislative provisions, in the list of "essential services" for the everyday life of population. This happened, for instance, in Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Switzerland, where libraries had to advocate to be included in the list. This rank or change in library status also depended on how the pandemic was locally perceived, since total lockdown was limited in time in several countries, among which Denmark and Sweden.

## **2.2 Tailored and well-advanced library services**

Since services could not be performed onsite, a home delivery service was often activated in many libraries, with book packages to be picked up at the door. Operations were fine-tuned to meet customers' needs under extreme circumstances and new and creative services were designed and implemented.

With a view to combating fake news on Covid-19 and to providing a one-stop access to information, the most common service in European libraries has been the creation of platforms ensuring centralised access to Covid-19 related health information produced by governmental authorities, health institutes and the World Health Organisation. The Cyprus Association of Librarians and Information Specialists created its own webpage and so did all other library associations engaged in health information. The French Library Association released a padlet to gather Covid-related information and in Portugal, the library association channelled Covid-related information through a flipboard-based platform, which included official or newspaper sources and exposed fake news related to the subject. Specific information on COVID 19 and hygiene measures to be observed were released in Romanian libraries.<sup>9</sup> In Sweden the platform was created by the National Library. In Ireland, librarians were heavily involved in a national Covid-19 support service - 'Community Call' delivered via phone, text and email which provided support ranging from a friendly voice to talk to, organising food, transport and medicine and signposting information together with online classes and other wellbeing supports. In the Bibliothèques Municipales de Genève it was possible to "borrow" a librarian online.

Social media was used to facilitate story time (in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain) through Facebook groups and YouTube, or also for library exchange and (re-)use of digital products (Bulgaria).

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<sup>9</sup> Agnes Terezia Erich. "Libraries Reaction of Romania to the Crisis Caused by COVID 19", *Postmodern Openings*, 2020, Volume 11, Issue 3.

Sometimes, stories were broadcast live through library websites, for instance in Switzerland, Germany and in many other countries; digital storytelling as a new library services has become rather popular in Germany.

More advanced services concerned elderly people in lockdown, who were kept connected by telephone calls and storytelling. In some cases, for instance in Finland, libraries also delivered food when necessary. In the Netherlands, the library association negotiated with the association of local councils a set of guidelines aimed to support education for those kids who could not access online teaching from home with librarians engaged in all kinds of different roles and tasks: home delivery of books to the elderly, the organisation of foodbanks in towns, collaboration with schools taking care of the children of people working in vital services and chats with elderly patrons to check whether they needed reading materials.

### **2.3 Full integration into health policies: face-mask production and other initiatives**

Practically all libraries and/or library associations created pages providing links to official public health information of relevance for libraries (e.g. lifespan of the virus on paper and plastic, quarantining books and other media). In some European libraries, activities were even further integrated into national health policies.

Social distancing is not only a practice; it is also a symbolic concept and a good metaphor to assess the relationship between libraries and their users: the more people are distant from each other, the more a library is distant from its users. This did not happen at the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania. An impressive and well-targeted library service was triggered during the Covid-19 crisis in cooperation with over 50 public libraries of Lithuania and the involvement of the Robotics School. The National Library of Lithuania helped produce 3D printed face masks for healthcare workers in response to the growing demand for protective equipment. 3D printed face masks were supplied to healthcare workers, but also to volunteers and representatives of other professions working in high-risk areas. Fifty-eight 3D devices were purchased for the major public libraries of Lithuania in 2019, but no one at that time had a clue that they would be used in the fight against Covid-19.<sup>10</sup> The National Library of Lithuania also offered new library computers to school children and teachers during the quarantine. Some 35,000 tablets and portable computers allocated to libraries were transferred temporarily to children of socially sensitive families and then returned to libraries at the end of the quarantine.<sup>11</sup>

To a lesser extent, the same initiative was developed in Portugal, where two libraries were involved in the production of face masks through 3D printers, and in France. In Ireland, libraries were tightly integrated into national health policies during the Covid-19 crisis. Some of the many initiatives developed by Irish libraries consisted of donating equipment to hospitals, producing 3-D printed face shields for Irish public health colleagues, providing online lectures and interactive workshops in collaboration with mental health services, delivering care boxes with reading material to vulnerable members of the community, producing oral history and online projects archiving the present. In Ireland, librarians were taking on new roles to support the national response which included contact tracing of confirmed Covid cases. Community support helplines were set up across Ireland to meet the needs of vulnerable and isolated persons. All these services were staffed and, in many cases, managed by librarians. The Irish government recognised the increasing demands on librarians and libraries; in a state of the nation address on St Patrick's Day, the then Irish Prime minister, Leo Varadkar, specifically mentioned librarians together with the news that additional funding for e-books would be allocated due to unprecedented demand.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.lnb.lt/en/news/5242-lithuanian-libraries-offer-support-to-healthcare-professionals>. The purchase had been implemented within the framework of the project "Promoting Smart Use of Refurbished Public Internet Access Infrastructure Among Residents" (VIPT), financed within The EU Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020.

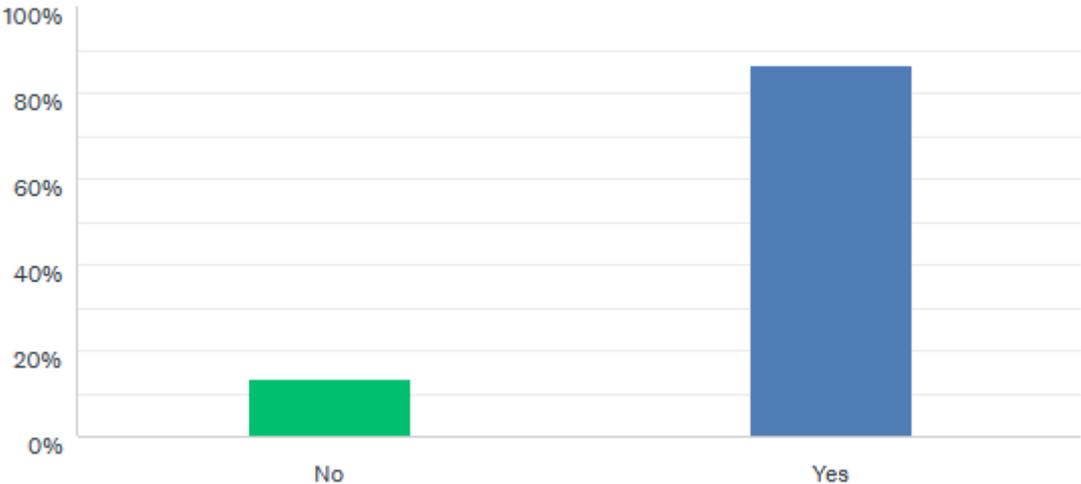
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.lnb.lt/en/news/5281-new-library-computers-in-aid-for-schoolchildren-and-teachers-during-the-quarantine>.

Mask production and some of the mentioned initiatives will stop soon – and this is good news. These initiatives will not be forgotten; they will be considered the historical legacy of the Covid-19 crisis for future library emergencies. They show library resilience and their ability to promptly meet an acute demand for empathy expressed by their communities in case of need.

**2.4 Were emergency services continued after May 2020?**

Interestingly enough, almost all services that started during the acute phase of Covid 19 were maintained when libraries began opening up, as the following table shows:

**Table 1: Were services implemented during the first pandemic outbreak (March- May 2020) also maintained in the months following May 2020?**



Most popular services replicated in the months following the end of the most acute phase of the Covid crisis were undertaken to support online teaching and online research. Other popular services consisted of setting up large reservoirs of open educational resources and storytelling through all kinds of media also using traditional media, such as the telephone. Click and collect arrangements for physical materials was also a constant practice together with the transformation of physical debates into virtual meetings and the organisation of online events, podcasts, home delivery of books, loans in newsstand, online courses of freely downloadable ebooks, teenchats and reading groups online.

**2.5 Elements for a post-Covid-19 Agenda**

In the longer term, in order to avoid touching handles and pressing buttons, all doors in libraries may open automatically and you might activate the lift by voice command. Moreover, the architecture of library buildings may be revised in light of the need to modulate open access spaces and re-design them in case of an outbreak.

Re-designing library premises also leads to the re-organisation of library services. Social distancing and the 2-meter society has a strong impact on the concept of a “complete self-service” or unstaffed library and on the responsibility of a facility being used by patrons without direct human surveillance. Restrictions in the number of people who can visit the library is possibly hampering library performances, thus narrowing the scope of their function. The development of libraries as a third place, a community centre and a meeting place delivering workshops, lectures, debates, performances, presentations and courses means a high amount of traffic in libraries; during the Covid-19 crisis, large crowds were not allowed and the library expanded beyond its walls. Restrictions of this kind, therefore, will also have long-term effects on library architecture.

Cities are hubs for ideas, commerce, culture, science, productivity, social development, and much more. And libraries are the hubs for city communities. Flexible libraries are able to monitor and stimulate the movement of people, resources, ideas, equipment; they are able to shift from services to production, from analogue/extensive to digital/ intensive use of technologies, matching the needs of the diverse community a library aims to serve.

Automated door opening, voice commands in elevators, homeworking, tele-libraries and online help desks may be the new normals for libraries. The same will apply for the library automation system: searching the catalogue will be done by voice command. Many of these adjustments, however, are just accelerations of already existing trends in real estate, industrial relations, and office automation. Similarly, the concept of the library as a community resource, and not a book reservoir, has been steadily growing for years. What matters, however, is the direction rather than the function. During the Covid-19 crisis there has been a strong acceleration of these trends with a considerable number of new digital services.

The effects of social distancing, in both physical and metaphorical sense, can be offset by a transformative and adaptive library able to fill social differences and bridge digital gaps. In order to do that, however, libraries need to monitor the movements taking place in their functional domains and exert full control on the data produced within their space and concerning their operations. In other words, libraries need to master data produced by technologies used in their operational arena or at least, when this is not possible because of privacy laws, this data should be shared with library policy-makers as much as possible. It is what we are going to see in the new normal.

### 3. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways

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#### 3.1 General overview

Since people were unable to access library buildings, instead, libraries tried to reach their users at home. This was done in two ways: partly by fine-tuning home delivery services, mostly through a library offer based on digital services. Libraries promoted access to online resources via their websites pointing to platforms of e-books, and e-media. Comparative statistics concerning the use of digital platforms in March-April 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year show that the use of platforms - such as Onleihe and Overdrive in Germany, MLOL in Italy, etc. - increased exponentially during the Covid-19 crisis with an avalanche effect of library websites pointing to national digital platforms and a dense interchange between collections and connectedness.

Access to digital resources varied across the different typologies of libraries. Universities and research institutes worked in a distance-learning mode during the Covid-19 crisis. As a consequence, digital access from research libraries increased but its growth was moderate since university members – students, researchers, professors - have been using e-resources for years. Many libraries promoted Covid 19-related content made available by STM publishers and arranged remote access. In Cyprus, for instance, the use of e-resources in academic libraries increased by 15% in the period 24/3/2020 – 20/4/2020.

**Access to digital resources rocketed instead in public libraries, as the following examples demonstrate:**

- In Estonia, where there is no national e-book lending system, the Tallinn Central Library opened its e-lending system to the public at large and scored a 1,400 % increase in e-lending in the period between 13 March – 19 April 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year, with the number of registered users going from 373 in 2019 (March-April 2019) to almost 10,000 (same period, 2020). In Estonian state libraries, increases were less consistent, but still significant: 45 % in comparison to the same period;
- In Ireland, digital services provided by the public library sector and freely accessible to everyone witnessed a considerable rise in the week commencing 29 March compared to the week commencing 1<sup>st</sup> of March. Figures broken down by area showed the following increases: an increase of 313% in new users of e-books and e-audiobooks service, of 467% and 227% in, respectively, e-learning courses and language courses being taken, 246% in usage of the online newspapers/e-magazines. As a result of this increase in demand, the Irish government purchased an additional €200,000 worth of e-books;
- In France, a flash-enquiry carried out by the Ministry of Culture on a significant sample of libraries showed that the demand for digital resources boomed in 68% of the libraries included in the sample, with reported increases of 200 and 300 % in the number of connections (and also 1,500 % increase in a library for a video on demand service targeted at young people). In 79% of departmental libraries (in small rural and municipality libraries) the growth of registered users was also reported to be significant;<sup>12</sup>
- In Italian libraries, e-book circulation increased by 104% from 24 February to 24 March (against an average annual increase of 20 %);<sup>13</sup>
- In Luxembourg, access to the collection of 620,000 e-books in German, English and French offered for free through a reader card by the National Library increased by 40 % in March and 78 % in April 2020;

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Sites-thematiques/Livre-et-Lecture/Actualites/Enquete-l-impact-de-la-crise-sanitaire-Covid-19-sur-l-offre-numerique-des-bibliotheques-des-bibliotheques-territoriales>.

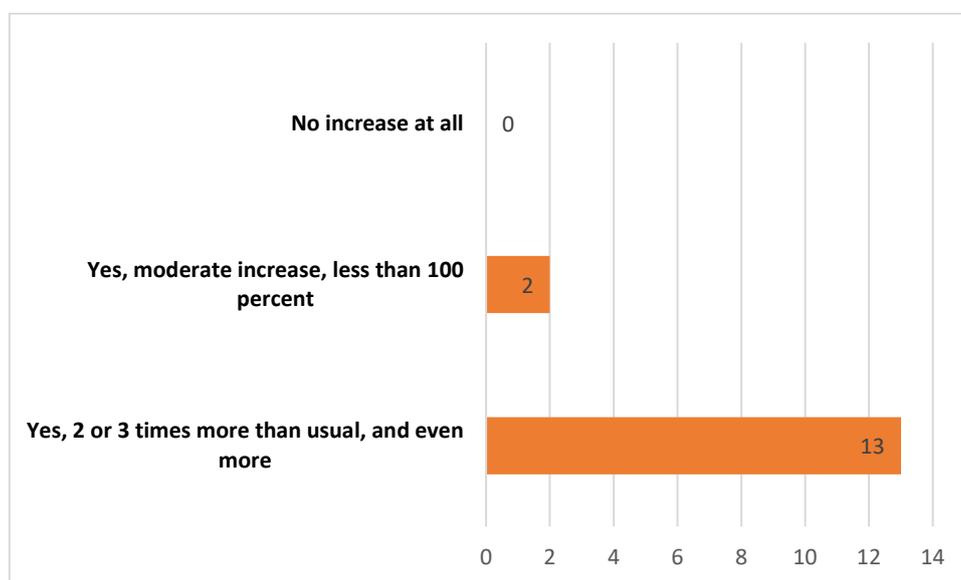
<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo Baldacchini. *Le biblioteche ai tempi del virus*, <http://aibnotizie.aib.it/le-biblioteche-ai-tempi-del-virus/>.

- In Norway, all platforms providing access to digital services worked at full speed and new ones were being created for e-lending. In the biggest Norwegian county, Viken, from March, 12<sup>th</sup> to April, 15<sup>th</sup> e-lending increased by 139% also because a new platform was started;
- In Latvia, the total number of unique users of the periodicals portal doubled while concurrent users were 5 times greater on average than before. As a whole, the Latvian national digital library witnessed an increase of new users by 61 % (and 70 % in terms of sessions);
- In Romania, a number of libraries scanned a limited number of pages / requests to be sent via email;<sup>14</sup>
- And in Switzerland, the platform e-bibliomedia (run by Bibliomedia Switzerland), with literature in French and English, almost doubled its loans in April 2020.

All kinds of digital initiatives experienced a boost. In Bulgaria, traditional meetings with poets and writers went online through social media – Facebook and Instagram (e.g. Poetry without Quarantine initiative, Sofia City Library and the International Children’s Book Day – 2 April). Digital resources offered by French libraries included self-training, video on demand, music, press, e-books. In Sweden, many public libraries provided online services, such as free e-books and audiobooks in different languages. In the Netherlands, the Royal Library launched the “Library at Home” programme with 100 e-book titles for free to everyone. By law, the Dutch Online Library is only fully accessible for those who pay an annual membership fee of €42 or more, but many libraries reduced the fee. This improved the use of the Online Library; both local libraries and the Royal Library put in a lot of effort into helping everyone to access the service. Also in the Netherlands, some libraries held workshops, talk shows and lectures through live streaming even when closed to the public; they made the most out of technologies in order to maintain contact with, and find new ways of, reaching out to citizens.

Increased circulation of digital resources in public libraries did not lose momentum after May 2020 and in 2021, with visits to online resources doubled or tripled on the previous year – an extraordinary development, indeed, as the following table shows:

**Table 2: Digital services in public libraries increased...**



In many respects the rise in access to digital resources in libraries is a positive direction in the long-term. It is an unintended development of the Covid-19 crisis which may accelerate the realisation of a “smarter” Europe through digitisation - one of the objectives of the European Structural and Investment Funds 2021-2027. The (quasi) total absence of services linked to the physical circulation of printed matters accounts for

<sup>14</sup> Agnes Terezia Erich. “Libraries reaction to the crisis”, cit.

the shift in users' demand. It is not taken for granted, however, that digital growth will endure in an inertial way and even strengthen after the Covid-19 crisis. For the trend to continue, two factors have to be taken into account: a) the contingent nature of the shift in the demand of digital resources; b) the concurrent drive of positive externalities affecting libraries.

Apart from the persistence of the Covid-19 outbreak – a factor which is neither predictable nor desirable -, the key determinant of consolidated increased access to digital platforms is the quality of the relationship between publishers and libraries and how prices for digital publications will level off in spite of library's increasing demand. Some scientific publishers made available scientific literature dedicated to the analysis of Covid-19 free of charge, but there was no respite in the tense relations surrounding the management of STM digital resources in libraries. LIBER, the Association of European Research Libraries, and other organisations in Italy and France, called on publishers to facilitate access to works. In Poland, individual libraries were able to arrange agreements with individual publishers and distribute the digital copies of their books. E-copies is an issue which was deliberately taken out of the scope of the 2019 Copyright in the Digital Single Market (DSM) and therefore, no quick, ready-made solution is looming on the horizon.

During the Covid-19 crisis the National Library of Latvia managed to come to an agreement with AKKA/LAA (Copyright and Communication Consulting Agency/Latvian Authors' Association) – an unparalleled example in Europe. At the beginning, the agreement concerned the collection of e-periodicals (the digital versions of more than 1,400 newspapers and magazines published in Latvia from 1748 to date). AKKA/LAA agreed on a License Agreement providing public access to the periodicals portal at no cost for the National Library until the end of the state of emergency. The portal itself was upgraded in response to the AKKA/LAA's request to receive detailed statistics at the end of the emergency time.

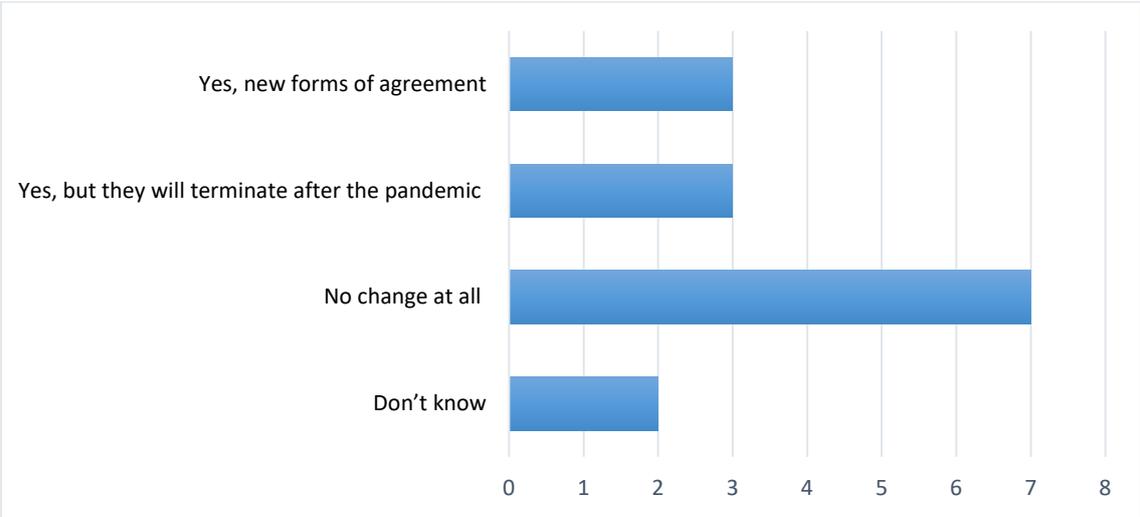
A collection of digitised books - more than 10,000 works from the 17th century to the end of the 20th century, including some 2,500 authors- were made available to users through a paid license until the end of the state of emergency. Without disclosing the details of the agreement, it can be said that additional expenses for accessing e-books are covered by the Ministry of Culture of Latvia and concern both the number of times the publications are accessed and the number of sessions. It is also important to mention that the e-books subject to the AKKA/LAA - National Library of Latvia agreement represent only a limited share of the portal and do not cover commercial works. After the agreement, the National Library of Latvia issued a statement in relation to works not included in the AKKA/LAA-NL Agreement and asked their authors whether they wished to be excluded from the portal. One month after they were notified, no author had asked to be removed from the portal.

Similarly, the National Library of Sweden and Bonus Copyright Access made a deal to open up Swedish newspapers as a free digital service during the Covid-19 emergence, until 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020.<sup>15</sup> Now that the end of the pandemic emergency is in sight, this is how the 15 respondents to the 2021 update answered the question whether they experienced new contractual arrangements during the Covid-19 crisis:

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.kb.se/samverkan-och-utveckling/nytt-fran-kb/nyheter-samverkan-och-utveckling/2020-04-08-svens-ka-dags-tid-ning-ar-till-gang-li-ga-for-alla-under-coro-nakrisen.html>

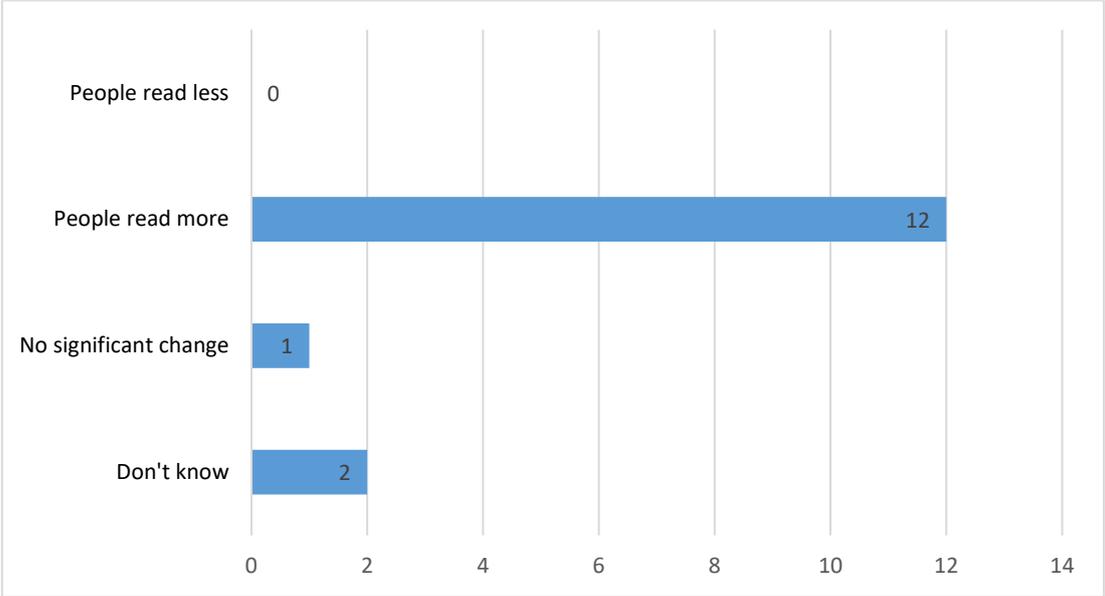
**Table 3: Were new forms of copyright contracts experienced during 2020?**



In addition to publisher-librarian relations, another key determinant of the spectacular rise in popularity of digital platforms has been distance-learning in schools and universities. Distance-learning generated positive externalities in libraries during the Covid-19 crisis but their effects may be hampered by two factors. The first is the digital divide and the distinction between the have and the have-nots, in terms of access to broadband, to equipment, to digital literacy skills, to quality technical support, to online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.<sup>12</sup> The second is the short-term effects of distance learning during the Covid-19 crisis; after all, it is not taken for granted that school children will use distance learning in school intensively or that universities will drop taught classes in the post-Covid 19 age.

The use of libraries online resources increased, but use of the library as a physical meeting place decreased. Higher use of the digital library, use of databases, distance learning through e-lending. In general, all respondents felt that reading patterns evolved during the pandemic, with people reading more than in previous years:

**Table 4: Do you feel that reading patterns have evolved during the pandemic?**



### 3.2 Elements for a post-Covid-19 Agenda

The Covid-19 pandemic is reshaping the global business environment. The critical factors which will determine the consolidation of digital trends in libraries in the post-Covid-19 age, in terms of access to platforms and professional interchange, can be seen in two complementary frames of reference: a strictly cultural perspective and a broader societal vision.

The strictly cultural perspective concerns those organisations and enterprises in the music, performing arts and live performance which went through perilous times. This cultural domain seldom enjoys a high return on investments and the Covid-19 may deal a fatal blow to its life expectancy in a 2-meter based society. There are strong opinions that its survival will not be ensured without consistent injections of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), which should not be add-on elements to the performance, but rather their indispensable complement.<sup>16</sup> In other words, music, performing arts and live performance need to create post-production events in order to attract audiences and remain sustainable.

Libraries are natural non-commercial distribution channels for this new cultural content through their platforms. The ecosystem built around a concert or a theatre production may be amplified through post-production events, which can be distributed in libraries at local level in order to help capture and retain the attention of the public. When they get a grip on live performances, ministries of culture and/or local cultural agencies may contemplate including the capillary distribution of library networks as an integral part of the live performances ecosystem and re-design the system of local aids, fiscal incentives, policy measures and other form of culture subsidies in a holistic perspective.

In a broader sense, and much closer to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, a society pivoting around social distancing may end up creating negative requirements leading to social exclusion. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted a new digital divide in people's opportunities to access distance-learning and, in general, in the way conditions for digital inclusion may be realised. In order to fill digital gaps, and still fulfil the traditional role of furthering social inclusion, digital literacy, cultural integration, non-formal and informal learning, libraries will have to look at the scale, the scope, the learning objectives and the virtual dimension of their activities.

During and after the Covid-19 crisis, library practices scaled up from the analogue to the digital and from the digital to the analogue, very often combining the two in order to meet library traditional objectives. They also enlarged and diversified the scope of their action through health resources aggregated in portals, mask production, or call centres palliating anxieties and increasing people's self-confidence. Libraries will also have to deal with basic requirements concerning access to equipment and digital literacy skills.

Distance-learning objectives were pursued in alliance with educational establishments stretching as far as possible into the virtual dimension. The implementation of AI tools in libraries and the evolution of existing tools into AI solutions may be a strong incentive to re-modulate the European library agenda towards sustainable development. To give an example, one can imagine how impactful it might be for the elderly, the sick, the marginalised, under Covid-19 restrictions, to be able to search relevant information or the library catalogue by voice command and listening to or accessing the selected content through their smart device, or how helpful the use of robots in libraries might be in a contactless two-meter society.

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<sup>16</sup> Among the many articles on the crisis of the live performance sector: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/augmented-reality-covid-19-positive-use/>, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/apr/08/art-virtual-reality-coronavirus-vr> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact\\_of\\_the\\_2019%E2%80%9320\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_on\\_the\\_arts\\_and\\_cultural\\_heritage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_2019%E2%80%9320_coronavirus_pandemic_on_the_arts_and_cultural_heritage).

Within this broader societal perspective, a critical factor for libraries to shape technologies is the control of the data produced within the library ecosphere. Among the many challenges libraries will have to face in post-Covid-19 times – personnel security, space redistribution, sanitation of collections, financial hardship, new models of governance – data control is a tricky issue because it is unperceived and largely underestimated.

Plenty of data will be revolving around libraries often generated by non-library users through high tech / Artificial Intelligence tools. This data will affect libraries and orient their decision-making processes but libraries will have little or no possibility to exert control over them and re-use for policy-making. Within the general rules concerning privacy, a community-driven library - i.e. the library as an open space, where people move around, resources are exchanged and there is cross-fertilisation of ideas – there is a need to access data for policy-making purposes and to share this data with other entities.

Scaling up library activities by expanding their scope, enhancing learning objectives by emphasising the virtual dimension, data control – all this requires money. It would be a mistake to scale down R&D investments in the future library's agendas: the challenge is to integrate traditional "core" library activities with sustainable development and investment in digital resources and high tech / AI tools. That is why we should turn now to the financial aspects of the post-Covid-19 age.

# 4. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition

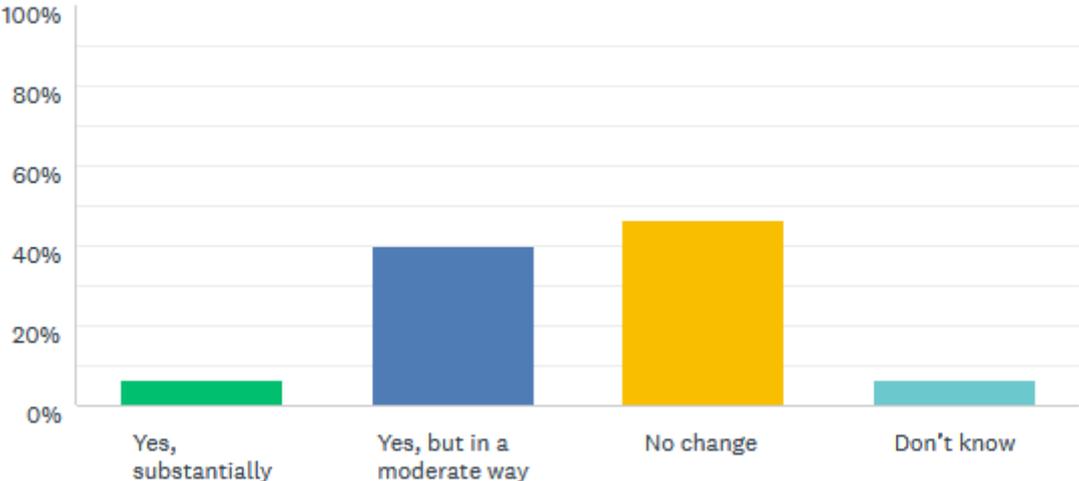
## 4.1 General overview

Following a 3.5 percent world contraction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (in Europe: - 6.6 percent), the global economy is projected to grow at 6 percent in 2021, moderating to 4.4 percent in 2022. Economic growth, therefore, is higher than expected and this is due to a variety of factors, including vaccination campaigns, recovery plans and economic boom after a crisis.

The 2020 EBLIDA post-Covid report predicted strained library budgets. These predictions have fortunately not come to pass. Library expenditure earmarked for the financial year 2020 was most of the time confirmed; therefore, no dramatic cuts in libraries took place, except for promotional activities – conferences, seminars and other events of national appeal – that were cancelled in France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, to mention a few countries.

One year after the crisis, it can be said that budgets allocated to European libraries were only minimally affected during the pandemic, or there was no change at all, as the following table describes:

**Table 5: Was the budget allocated to libraries affected during the pandemic?**



Downsizing library operations did not result in cuts to the “social” library sector – activities with a strong social mission and oriented at specialised groups of people. The “social”, “third place” library - the library operating with and within the communities it refers to – had stimulating and untraditional developments in the public library sector (and, to a certain extent, also in the realm of research libraries through the “third mission” chapter), in particular when cooperation was triggered with the non-library, non-cultural sector.

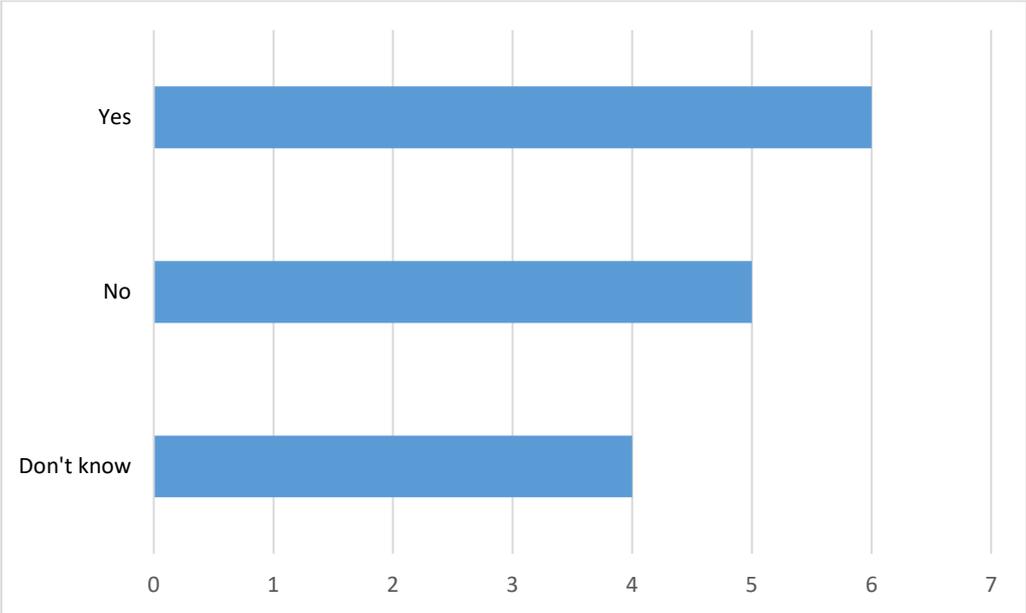
Partnerships with organisations may prove to be very important especially in the light of what should be a library priority: reviewing the composition of library budgets. According to a recent EBLIDA Survey on library legislation and policy, in 12 of 22 countries, 75% to 100% of the library’s income is generated at local level by city or regional authorities. Ministries of culture have a bigger importance only in small countries with a

share of 76% to 100% of library budgets.<sup>17</sup> It is widely known that library expenditure is flexible only to a certain extent. The budget allocated to building maintenance and personnel is largely inelastic and resources allocated to operations, in particular to the purchase of digital resources, cannot easily be re-adjusted to meet new financial requirements. The cost of e- copies in public libraries is very often made on the basis of long-term arrangements which are difficult to re-negotiate.

When confronted with inevitable dilemmas in the post-Covid-19 age, this narrow scope of library budgets not only makes libraries vulnerable, it also increases the library’s dependence on the imperatives of the authorities having earmarked the grants. Diversifying funding for libraries means to promote current activities within a different framework and to resort to financial support generated from other funders. The survey on library legislation and policy in Europe does not leave much room for hope: grants generated from ministries or departments other than cultural agencies very seldom exceed 25 % of library expenditure; grants from the private sector are practically non-existent; and the way European funding is distributed is largely unknown.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, investments on library innovation as well as research & development activities are often the result of alliances with external actors and partnerships. Half of the respondents to the post-Covid update maintain that libraries will file applications under the European Structural and Investment Funds 2021-2027, as the following table shows:

**Table 6: Are libraries in your country thinking of filing application(s) within the framework of European Structural and Investment Funds?**



EBLIDA has invested a lot of its time and resources in its programme Think The Unthinkable: a European post-Covid library agenda meeting sustainable development goals to be funded through European Structural and Investment Funds 2021-2027.<sup>19</sup> The first step of this strategy was the organisation

<sup>17</sup> EBLIDA. [Library Legislation and Policy in Europe: Results of a Questionnaire - Interim Report](http://www.eblida.org/publications/library-legislation-and-information-law.html), (March 2020), <http://www.eblida.org/publications/library-legislation-and-information-law.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> EBLIDA. ["Think the unthinkable - A post Covid-19 European Library Agenda meeting Sustainable Development Goals and funded through the European Structural and Investment Funds \(2021-2027\)"](http://www.eblida.org/publications/fundraising-general-structural-funds.html) (September 2020), <http://www.eblida.org/publications/fundraising-general-structural-funds.html>.

of nine workshops: three of them (October 2020) were Europe-oriented and created awareness about the “Think The Unthinkable” report; the others were organised by various organisations in seven different countries: France, Netherlands, Greece, Latvia, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain. All respondents to the Update 2021 claimed to be aware of the EBLIDA action.

#### **4.2 Elements for a post-Covid-19 Agenda**

For years, public and research library policies have solely nestled within the framework of cultural and educational/research policies. The re-orientation of library activities towards a more “social” function - cultural integration and social inclusion, technological innovation and sustainable development - means to understand how libraries matter to their diverse communities. In this respect, the optimal conceptual framework for reviewing the composition of library budgets in relation to an extended concept of library, is the European 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. And the best financial instrument to fund SDG projects in libraries are the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027 - more than an alternative, the catalyst for a European library agenda in the post-Covid-19 age.

The use of ESI Funds is not unknown in libraries. The National Library of Lithuania used ESI Funds 2014-2020 as a trigger for the two library projects mentioned in this report: 3D printers used for digital literacy purposes and then converted for face mask production, and the transfer of library computers to school children and teachers during the quarantine. The conceptual framework for ESIF investments in libraries should be scalable, serve regular as well as extraordinary purposes and work in ordinary as well as exceptional times (library computers used to equip libraries and, if the need arises, to engage individuals in distant-learning). In other words, it should be “structural”.

Resorting to ESI Funds may require a different posture in library governance. It is what we are going to explore in the next new normal.

## 5. Library governance at central and local levels

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### 5.1 General overview

During the Covid-19 crisis library governance was implemented in three ways:

- Traditional activities on site in a restricted way in countries where libraries were accessible with limitations;
- Centralised activities promoted by library institutions (ministries / departments of culture, library associations, local management agencies, national libraries) replacing or complementing traditional library undertakings;
- A grassroots movement of professionals driven by passion and personal dedication who aggregated information, adapted or tailored existing services, and promoted new initiatives.

Normally, library governance is implemented through institutional and informal settings. The first, in its different layers, gets sourced through formal financial acts, follows formal communication procedures and provides outcomes on the basis of the joint effort of traditional stakeholders operating in the library field. The second has a more informal nature and resorts to informal gatherings, serendipitous discoveries and the exchange of information and best practices. This informal library governance mainly, but not exclusively, culminates in the “liturgy” of library conferences at national level on a more or less regular basis.

During the Covid-19 crisis, we have seen the reinforcement of institutional settings, technically implemented under the form of web portals or centralised facilities with information distributed at national or regional level. Conversely, the informal setting has suffered from the cancellation or postponement of national library conferences. Resources and ideas left free were channelled into more spontaneous formations of new frames of reference and have been the cradle of new “liturgies” for exchanging experiences, pooling resources and encouraging best practices. In Sweden, the Facebook group “Libraries during Corona crises” included some 3,000 members. In order to engage in and establish contact with librarians in isolation, for instance, Bibliosuisse staged open Zoom video-hours to fulfil their needs. Other library associations, like in Finland, organised webinars to support libraries and to facilitate the re-opening of libraries or further information about e-books and other digital media services.

In Ireland, Libraries Development, the national advisor and development agency for public libraries provided a Covid-19 central portal providing useful online resources for staff seeking health information, inspiration to create content for online cultural activities, and practical operational information for libraries dealing Covid-19. Additional resources included links to videos and resources, continuing professional development opportunities, user guides, video tutorials, e-services provided by public libraries and e-training opportunities to over 500 courses and 200 languages.

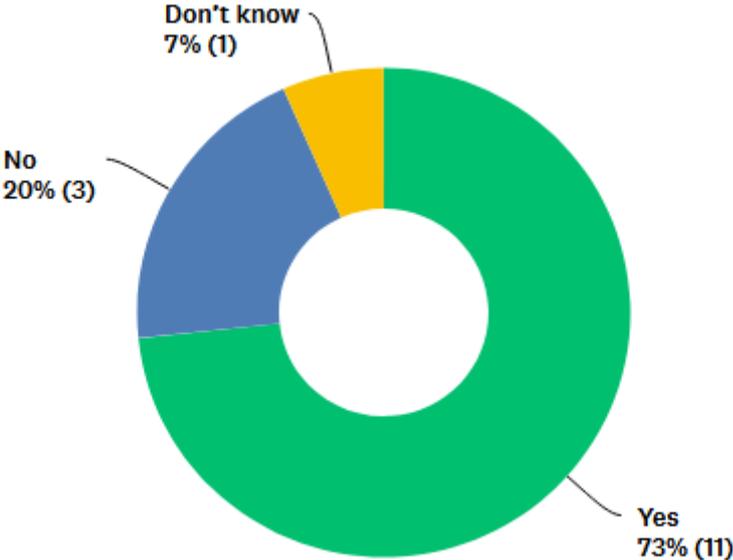
In less populated countries, like Latvia, the Ministry of Culture, in co-operation with the National Library of Latvia, prepared the “recommendations for public libraries to provide services in emergency situations to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus” consisting of several sections: dissemination of current information; information about remote library services; provision of on-site services; administrative issues. Academic, special and school libraries, too, were invited to use these recommendations in their work. The same Ministry of Culture launched the information campaign #Ēkultūra (#E-Culture), inviting the public to enjoy various cultural events online during the Covid-19 emergency situation, and to use available e-services in the field of culture without visiting the institutions on-site.

In the extraordinary context of the Covid-19 crisis, however, library governance also sprouted from an uncoordinated and spontaneous movement of professionals willing to offer solutions to unfulfilled needs and to cooperate with external agencies. In this context, library associations took the lead. In many

countries, among which Poland and Italy, professional associations arranged the distribution of online training material for free during the crisis. In all countries, they attempted to regulate the uncontrolled spread of news about the virus with all kinds of information, from health to legal, from financial to technical and educational, linked with access to professional resources. The concepts and practices set up by this spontaneous grassroots movement should be preserved and reinforced after the crisis and find a steady and sustained place in the post-Covid-19 agenda.

The most prominent factor for administrative change during the pandemic was library partnership. In order to reach their users, libraries had to match their efforts with other entities. First and foremost, they sought cooperation with governmental agencies working in the health and in the social fields. Partnerships also embraced NGOs, charities, voluntary and community associations, briefly all kinds of organisations broadly covered by the term “third sector”, which are different from the public sector (i.e., the state, local agencies) and from the private sector (profit-making private enterprise). In several cases, like in the copyright field, cooperation was also triggered with the private sector.

**Table 7: Did libraries cooperate with Non-cultural/educational agencies, NGOs and private sector**



**5.2 Elements for a post-Covid age**

Exceptional circumstances may require new models of library governance and, at the same time, a reinforcement of existing ones. State policies have not always been relevant for public libraries which usually pursue local policies and fall within the remit of local authorities. During the Covid-19 crisis, the movement towards the centralisation of library activities was compelling, in terms of health policies, the security of library personnel and other policies of general interest. Access to digital services, too, required a more centralised library governance in terms of copyright clearance, standardisation of technical requirements and coordination of management tasks, including statistics.

At the same time, local and professional governance was also a key determinant for the setting up of innovative services or the adaptation of the existing ones. These new forms of governance and the extension of the library missions may prove to be useful if European libraries identify themselves as structural components of a cohesion policy and wish to access EU Structural and Investment Funds.

The process of accessing ESI Funds has recently been made much simpler for potential beneficiaries of EU financial support. The Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 implies 80 simplification measures which result in a reduced number of verifications and simplified reporting. The management of significant financial allocations to cultural projects and the complexity of reporting procedures has suggested solutions which may prove to be useful in implementing ESI-funded SDG projects in libraries. These solutions largely depend on the kind of partnership agreements made by the European Commission with each member state. Interestingly enough, several options may be detected in the implementation of the EBLIDA “Think The Unthinkable” programme in the countries which accepted the challenge and are preparing proposals to be submitted within ESIF 2021-2027.<sup>20</sup>

In France – the first country that started the exercise in November 2020 – a case study implementation was preferred, with an individual project being dissected in all its components. The French experiment showed that European projects may sometimes be hard to apprehend, but that they are not hard to implement and are adaptable to all sizes of libraries. In Bulgaria, an extensive and savvy use of ESI Funds in 2014-2020 will very likely trigger an equally enthusiastic involvement in ESIF 2021-2027; nevertheless, it is important that the Bulgarian library world identifies the Agenda 2030 as its new library framework. Greece was the country that applied a rigorous approach to SDGs based on careful reading of ESIF-related documents. In order to facilitate planning in Greece, Greek librarians prepared a table where library activities are matched with relevant SDGs and ESIF specific objectives – it is a tool worth being applied in other countries.

In Italy, careful planning towards project development has resulted in a three-step approach for the national TTU strategy: awareness, training, and political advocacy action. Italy’s design challenge is focused on six distinctive action lines, at the end of which library project prototypes will be developed and presented within the framework of ESIF bids. Latvia’s main asset in library action is its excellent institutional approach based on synergies between individual libraries, the National Library of Latvia and the library association of Latvia on the one hand, and, on the other hand, ministries relevant both for SDG- and ESIF-related activities: the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Regional Policy. Netherlands offers a rare and smart case of public-private partnership with small libraries sub-contracting international cooperation and management to an external firm, while adopting SDG-oriented policies corresponding to their own needs.

In conclusion, an extraordinary, and largely spontaneous, amount of human capital was invested in the course of the Covid-19 crisis. If libraries wish not to disperse the largely spontaneous involvement of people, often on a voluntary basis, if they are keen to continue their effort in this unprecedented state of affairs in a well-connected two-meter society, in shaping technologies in new ways, and in re-adjusting the library budget composition, they may also need to review existing models of library governance.

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<sup>20</sup> These examples of library governance in relation to ESIF are extracted from EBLIDA. *European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027: a Guide for library applicants*. (June 2021), <http://www.eblida.org/publications/fundraising-general-structural-funds.html>.

# 6. Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development

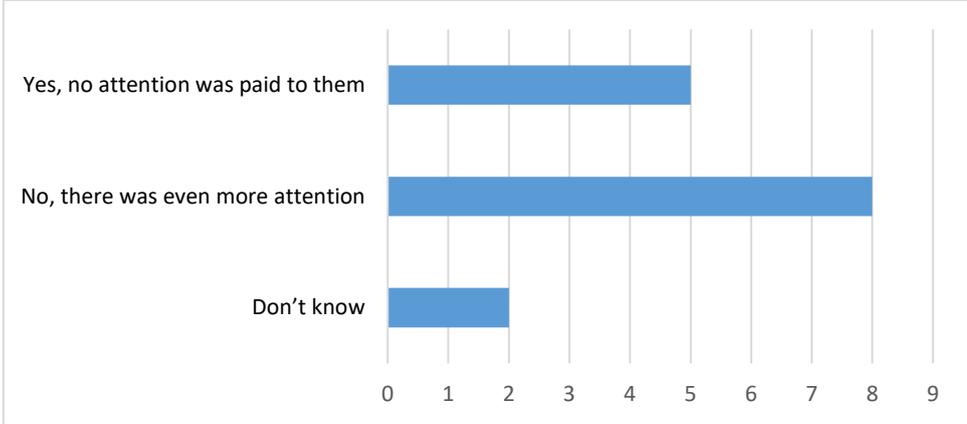
## 6.1 General overview

2020 will not be remembered as a good year for sustainable development. Due to the pandemic, progress towards the implementation of many SDGs was disrupted and, in some cases, decades of progress were reversed. The crisis has touched all segments of the population, all sectors of the economy, and all areas of the world. Not surprisingly, it is affecting the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people; according to the UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, forecasts indicate that the pandemic will push 71 million people back into extreme poverty and for the first time since 1998, there will be an increase in global poverty.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from inadequate housing, with limited or no access to basic infrastructure and services, the pandemic is taking its toll on the world’s women and children, on health care and also on access to food and nutrition services. About 70 countries reported moderate-to-severe disruptions or a total suspension of childhood vaccination services during March and April 2020. Many countries have seen a surge in reports of domestic violence against women and children and school closures kept 90 per cent of students out of school.<sup>22</sup>

Even if SDG-oriented library activities were not disrupted (in fact, all library operations mentioned in Chapter 2 can be considered in line with the Agenda 2030 on sustainable development), libraries are uncertain whether their efforts were diminished during the crisis, as the following table shows:

**Table 8: Do you consider that sustainable development policies and projects in libraries experienced a decline during the pandemic?**



## 6.2 Elements for a post-Covid age

There will be a huge amount of extraordinary decisions facing library policy makers in the post-Covid- 19 age. Time will be too short for thoughtful and thorough implementation; actions may have to be taken in a reckless and impulsive manner. Recovery has two options: either restoring the past state of affairs in libraries, or evolving into the future. It is all too human to dream of the good old times; keeping in mind what the future will or should look like is the best option – and there is always a case, and not much time left, for solutions in line with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations. *The Sustainable Development Goals 2020*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/overview/>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

## 7. Post-Covid-19 European Library Agenda: EBLIDA recommendations

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### *Introduction*

On the basis of the conclusions of the EBLIDA report, a post-Covid 19 European library agenda should work along the five new normals described in the report, namely:

#### **1. A socially inclusive library**

- 1) Take stock of the activities undertaken in the health (information) field in order to reinforce health-oriented library policies (for instance, in personal well-being);
- 2) Assess the importance of library services performed during the Covid-19 crisis based on voice (community calls and audiobooks) and making (3D printers), and see to what extent they can successfully complement visual-based-only services (consultation of websites, and visual tools);
- 3) Revise and, if possible, enhance library development plans on the basis of the flow-in/flow-out experience that matured during the Covid-19 crisis and link this experience to movements of people, resources, ideas, and equipment;
- 4) Place combatting fake news at the centre stage of the library's mission, as has been the case during the Covid-19 crisis.

#### **2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways**

- 5) Reinforce focus on e-copies and use data and experiences matured up during the Covid-19 crisis to design new models of e-copy distribution in libraries, taking into account the economies and policies pursued both by information service providers (free and universal access to content based on advertisement revenues) and aggregators (massive distribution of content at low subscription costs);
- 6) Reinforce digital literacy activities for targeted categories of people in close link with general policies aimed to fill the digital divide, foster *digital intelligence in libraries and stimulate multiple use of technologies (for instance, 3D printers used for cultural, educational and health policies)*;
- 7) *Be active partners in national digitalisation and artificial intelligence plans through cutting edge experiences which may scale up library practices from the analogue to the digital and from the digital to the analogue, and combining the two in order to meet library traditional objectives*;
- 8) Pursue distance-learning objectives in alliance with educational establishments, stretching out as far as possible the virtual dimension, and *capitalise on the library digital offer in order to become hotspots for young people*;
- 9) In compliance with privacy regulations, exert control over data and metadata affecting library operations and re-use them for policy-making and decision-making processes, in particular when they concern movements of people and resources and related library outcomes.

#### **3. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget baseline**

- 10) *Be ready to review the composition of library budgets and to find alternative sources of funding (with ministries/departments other than culture, private sources, European funding), in order to compensate for shortcomings in the library's future budgets*;
- 11) *Think of libraries as "structurally" essential to the development of a country and, in this way, manage possible financial resources generated from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027, in order to minimize the possible impact of the Covid-19 crisis in library activities.*

**4. Library governance at central and local levels;**

- 12) *Request local governments to find additional budget for library services at national and European level on the basis of the experience matured by libraries during the Covid-19 crisis;*
- 13) *Link the development of the public library to sustainable development activities reinforcing both the local and the national dimension;*
- 14) *Adopt flexible forms of governance in order to manage European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027 in an appropriate way.*

**5. Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development**

- 15) *Encourage libraries to be champions of sustainable development policies in all their action.*