EBLIDA

The new normals in a European Agenda for public libraries

In 2020, EBLIDA undertook a survey aimed at reviewing the state of libraries in the face of the Covid-19 crisis. This survey was updated in 2021. 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, library spaces and offices were re-designed in order to reduce the risk of creating crowds. In the future, hopefully near future, people will start entering libraries as in the pre-Covid time. 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 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. In a contactless-oriented society, however, there is also 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

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, as well as 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 several countries there was an attempt to adopt new forms of copyright contracts. The National Library of Latvia, for instance, 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.

Distance-learning has generated positive externalities in libraries during the Covid-19 crisis but their effects may not be long-lasting; it is not really desirable that school children will continue to use distance-learning in school intensively and that universities will drop frontal lessons in the post-Covid 19 age.

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.

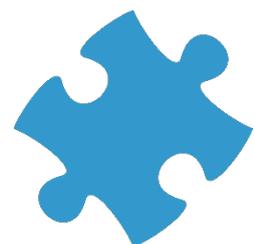## 3. Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition

In spite of most dismal expectations, financial hardship did not take place in libraries - budgets did not suffer from the pandemic. 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.

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; it is a matter of relief to see that almost all library associations are 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" and are keen on presenting proposals within ESIF – thus, diversifying 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.
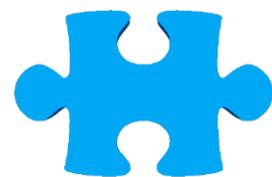
In the extraordinary context of the Covid-19 crisis, library g*overnance* can see a two-fold development going into opposite directions. On the one hand, access to digital services requires a more centralised library governance in terms of copyright clearance, standardisation of technical requirements and coordination of management tasks, including statistics. At the same time, reinforced governance at local level has been a key determinant for the setting up of innovative services or the adaptation of existing ones during the Covid crisis.
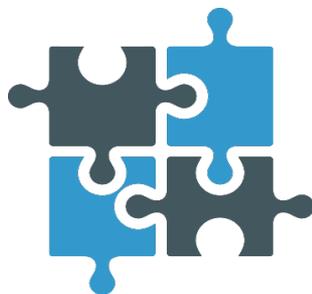
Worth noting is also that, during the pandemic, libraries closely cooperated with governmental agencies and ministries *other than* education/culture, as well as with NGOs and the private sector. These new forms of governance and the extension of library missions may prove to be useful if European libraries identify themselves as structural components of a cohesion policy. Therefore, 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 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 a urgent task which needs to go on at great speed, despite and perhaps because of the Covid-19 crisis.

6. EBLIDA Recommendations

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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

Do not forget the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development

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