

The Public Library: A Factor of Social Inclusion in the Local Community

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I. Introduction

Of all the types of libraries in a country, public libraries best express the community, as they perform a number of functions and tasks that constitute a real support for community members in information, education, and building the identity of the local community as a whole.

Public libraries have, as their main specificity, the fact that they serve a very heterogeneous public as typology including informational, educational, and cultural needs. Users of public libraries are people of all age groups that have professional backgrounds, personal and professional concerns, and very different areas of interest. Public libraries fulfil their mission and social role to the extent that they succeed in harmonising the needs of all categories of users and in becoming an identity element of the community served.

Moreover, the public library is the partner of local authorities in all projects and activities that support disadvantaged groups in the community, thus contributing to the social inclusion of all members of the community, whether they are poor, elderly, with certain disabilities, minority, of other nationality, or with any other characteristic that might indicate a form of vulnerability of the individual in the community.

II. The modern public library in the community space

Unprecedented transformations in society in recent decades, due in particular to Information and Communication Technologies, have upset

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libraries by forcing them out of their comfort zone, by turning them into active institutions in the community space, and by redefining them institutionally so as to respond effectively to the social needs in the community they serve.

A. The mission of the contemporary public library

It is already widely accepted in scientific and professional communities, as well as throughout society, that the mission and role of contemporary libraries in society are no longer identical to those of 20th-century libraries. In the deadlock moments of libraries at the end of the last century, they asked questions such as: What does the library represent for a community? Does or does a community need a library?

National and international professional associations, international bodies, professional and scientific communities have supported the library, considered them fundamental institutions in the education and training of individuals, in defining and redefining their purpose in today's society, in the context where the educational process itself needs to be rethought and revitalized³. Thus, in 1994, UNESCO (which promoted and supported the Universal Access to Information Programme) and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) launched the *UNESCO Manifesto for Public Libraries* (UNESCO, 1994)⁴. The basic principle of this *Manifesto* is that the freedom, prosperity and development of society and individuals are fundamental values conditional on the level of education, unfettered access to information and knowledge, and that the public library is the institution that can become an active force in the processes of education, culture and access to information and knowledge for any member of the local community regardless of age, gender, race, religion, nationality, language, or social status. The public library is, thus, recognised as having an active and decisive role in the social inclusion of all individuals.

According to their updated mission, public libraries should be concerned with supporting reading and interest in reading at any age, supporting educational processes, both individually and collectively, and

³ EUROGUIDE LIS. *Competencies and aptitudes for European information professionals*. European Council of Information Associations, 2004.

⁴ IFLA/UNESCO. *Multicultural Library Manifesto*. <https://www.ifla.org/node/8976> (accessed October 30, 2019).

institutionally; ensure equal opportunities for information for all members of the community; take care of the preservation of cultural, artistic and scientific heritage; promote intercultural dialogue; support economic and social activities in the community environment. The *UNESCO Manifesto* is reaffirmed and strengthened by the *Manifesto for Digital Libraries*⁵ (IFLA, 2002) and the *Glasgow Declaration* (IFLA, 2002).

B. Educational function

When talking about the educational function of libraries, one first thinks of school and university libraries that have defined, in their mission, as main objective, their involvement in the educational activities of users⁶. However, the educational function is present and it is of very high significance for public libraries as well. While in the case of school and university libraries, the public concerned is very well defined and very heterogeneous, in the case of public libraries, educational activities may involve people of different ages with different areas of information interest. The public library can be involved in the non-formal or informal education of the school population, being the after-school school, but also in the education of adults contributing to continuous education or, as it is known, lifelong education.

The public library has an educational vocation supporting individuals and communities and being the partner of local authorities in the fight against illiteracy, social exclusion, and school drop-out, in support of disadvantaged communities in accessing information, in retraining the unemployed, in ensuring equal opportunities for education and social inclusion of the disabled, in support of individuals and local communities in their artistic and cultural manifestations, etc. The educational dimension of the library is manifested in programs to support reading, information training courses, workshops and practical courses on various topics, training conferences and popularization of science and knowledge, user-specific products and services, partnerships with

⁵ IFLA/UNESCO. *Manifesto for Digital Libraries*. <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/digital-libraries/documents/ifla-unesco-digital-libraries-manifesto.pdf> (accessed Oct. 30, 2019).

⁶ *Ghidul IFLA pentru biblioteci școlare* [IFLA Guide for School Libraries]. www.abr.org.ro/index.php/documente/miscelance/25-ghidul-ifla-pentru-biblioteci-scolare/file (accessed October 30, 2019).

educational and cultural institutions to train library users and the general public, etc. All this is subordinated to the fundamental mission of the library to ensure access to information and knowledge, to train individuals and the community, and to participate actively in community life.

In order to fulfil this function, it is necessary for the public library to know very well the community it serves in order to be able to identify real educational needs and, thus, to carry out information and educational programmes, services and products that meet these needs. But, equally, to stimulate their own employees to get involved in their own process of continuous training and improvement, being the link between the actors of this process: employees (as participants in training), employer, the tenderers of the best performing and adapted continuous training programs⁷.

C. Cultural function

The *UNESCO Manifesto*⁸ notes that public libraries are institutions that have an obligation, at the level of the community served, to protect and capitalize on the local cultural heritage, to be involved in supporting the cultural and artistic manifestations of the community. The public library should support cultural activities and community members who wish to express themselves in an artistic way. In small communities, the library is the main exhibition and cultural space of the community. The association of public libraries with cultural activities is particularly natural and corresponds to the waiting horizon of the public in the community area. Cultural activities are seen as a normal complement to information and documentation activities. The interference of the written text with the artistic expression in the form of visual and performing arts is achieved by libraries through collaborations, partnerships, associations of different types and sizes with other institutions such as performance institutions, museums, archives, school institutions, art and culture associations, as well as with artists and other cultural people in the local community.

⁷ IFLA. CPDWL. *Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development: Principles and Best Practices*. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11845?og=82> (accessed November 20, 2020).

⁸ IFLA/UNESCO. *Public Library Manifesto 1994*. www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994 (accessed October 30, 2020).

Particularly important for a public library is the local documentary heritage that represents the memory of the community, part of the local cultural heritage that is added to the national and universal cultural heritage⁹. Exhibitions on different themes and in different fields of human knowledge, book presentations, conferences, meetings with personalities of the cultural and scientific world, and various manifestations of the performing arts have become current activities of public libraries through which the local, national and universal cultural heritage is highlighted, all of which contribute to the cultural and artistic education of the general public.

D. Social function

The public library is the partner of local authorities in the necessary projects and social activities at community level. The social function of public libraries makes the role of social inclusion of this institution best known. By providing democratic, non-discriminatory access to its collections and services, the public library has, implicitly, a social dimension. The institution also supports economic agents in the local community in their specific information, documentation or even promotion; it supports disadvantaged communities or minority groups in their informational endeavours, contributing to greater equal opportunities in the social environment. The library is a social space facilitating meetings between people and groups of people and it is a space for public meetings, events, debates. The public library is also a workspace for individuals or groups providing working conditions and relative privacy to all those who come to the institution, thus also supporting poor populations to integrate and have equal opportunities in society¹⁰.

Involvement in social inclusion activities¹¹ can also be achieved through partnerships with local authorities and other public and private

⁹ Elena Tîrziman, "The Problematic of the Communication in the Modern Library", in *Globalization and intercultural dialogue: multidisciplinary perspectives*, ed. I. Boldea (Târgu Mureș: Arhipelag XXI Press, 2014), 352.

¹⁰ALA. <http://www.ala.org/tools/research/librariesmatter/category/social-role-library> (accessed October 30, 2020).

¹¹BIANDO EDWARDS, Rauseo & Rae Unger. *Community Centred: 23 Reasons Why Your Library Is the Most Important Place in Town*. <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2013/04/>

institutions from the community, but also through projects dedicated to certain categories of people (e.g., projects for the unemployed, for people with disabilities, for the poor and socially assisted, for the elderly, etc.).

III. The configuration and reconfiguration of public libraries

The library space should reflect and support the functioning of this institution. The evolution of library functions is also reflected in the evolution of architecture and interior layout of these specific buildings. The library space should be an ensemble that combines the real, human, functional, social, cultural, and even emotional needs of a diverse audience as typology and with different interests in the use of this institution. A library should create harmony and balance between the public space and the private space of each user.

The users' expectations for library services are also diversified. The modern library is used as a social space, as a cultural space, as a workspace for individual and collective projects. Particularly important are digital services, the technologies offered by the library. All these requirements (and needs) of the contemporary library audience are reflected in the architecture and interior layout. Modern library architecture expresses a functional concept of space use. It is no longer a segmented space, but a homogeneous, multifunctional space that ensures its use to its full potential, allowing the cohabitation of several types of individual users or groups, each with its specific concerns and interests.

The recommendations of the space layout specialists state that contemporary libraries should have four categories of spaces in the interior layout¹²:

- Social space for interaction, communication and exchange of knowledge and information, spaces for group activities – essentially, a social space;
- space for study and contemplation (reading rooms or other spaces where the peace and privacy of study and work for users is ensured) – essentially, a space for individual activities;

community-centered-23-reasons-why-your-library-is-the-most-important-place-in-town/ (accessed October 30, 2020).

¹² 4 *important spaces every modern library should have*. <https://princh.com/4-critical-spaces-every-modern-library-must-have/#.WvRSHaSFOM8> (accessed June 25, 2018).

- space for technologies or space for innovation that can enable the use of ICT and the development of skills in the use of specialized technologies and applications;
- neutral space for the public (cultural, exhibition, or social and artistic events).

Therefore, the library should be a stimulating place for study and learning that allows any individual to use time efficiently and pleasantly. The library is sought after for the quality of the space offered, for tranquillity, relaxation, and disconnection. Library space should be a space where no one feels alien or uncomfortable – essentially, a real factor of social inclusion.

IV. The public library – local authority relationship supporting social inclusion

Any public library in any community will only carry out its mission if it is supported by the local authority. That is why it is vital that decision-makers in the local community understand the library's mission and make the most of its potential through specific functions and activities so that the library is a real help in community development, in support of disadvantaged groups and individuals, as an active actor involved in social inclusion. The Public Library is an institution very involved in the community activity, partner of other institutions in the community, support of the most diverse activities and the central place of the community, or the space in which each individual or group in the community can find themselves¹³.

By supporting the public library, the local authority can make it a link of the community in the sense that the institution will be involved in the revitalization of disadvantaged areas, an important partner in the most diverse community projects, in sustainable projects in the long term. The library is also responsible for preserving the cultural heritage of the community, i.e., it is the institution responsible for archiving, preserving,

¹³ Kristin Twomey, *Libraries building communities. The need for local government to acknowledge the role of public libraries in community building and engagement*. www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/libraries-building-communities (accessed October 30, 2020).

conserving documents and even objects that reflect local history and the community, including minority groups¹⁴.

Also, in terms of social integration, public libraries promote democratic values and are an active part of the life of the local community, and they are social spaces where people meet, communicate and accept their diversity¹⁵.

The recognition of the library's role in the community is given by the extent to which local authorities and community members use the skills and resources provided by this type of public institution. A community makes its work very easy and solves a number of problems if it knows how to use the library efficiently¹⁶.

In particular, the relationship of the public library with the local authority, to which it is also subordinated, is reflected in the institutional policies carried out by mutual agreement, in the budgeting of the institution in accordance with its specific mission and objectives, in the promotion of educational, cultural, social programmes at the community level, in ensuring the preservation, conservation and exploitation of local cultural heritage.

VI. Conclusions

Of all the types of public institutions that exist in a local community, the public library best expresses the community profile; it can support each category of people with a specific need for information, educational, cultural, social or even personal interest and, thus, it is the public institution with a major role in social inclusion activities.

The effectiveness of public library activities is determined by the extent to which it is supported by local authorities and is their real partner in social projects and activities involving all the members of the community. The library is a community centre for different populations

¹⁴ IFLA, *Manifestul Bibliotecilor Multiculturale: Biblioteca multiculturală – poartă spre o societate culturală diversificată în dialog* [Multicultural Libraries Manifesto: Multicultural Library – towards a diverse cultural society in dialogue]. https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/library-services-to-multicultural-populations/publications/multicultural_library_manifesto-ro.pdf (accessed October 30, 2020).

¹⁵ Maria Micle, Simona Bursasiu, *Biblioteca multiculturală în context autohton* [Multicultural Library in Romanian Local Context]. *Biblioteca*, 2 (2012), 39.

¹⁶ Elena Țîrziman, "Biblioteca – spațiu comunitar" [Library – A Community Space] *Biblioteca* 4 (2014), 99.

(it reflects the peculiarities of the community) in that, by its aim of addressing all categories and social groups and all types of individuals, it also supports minority communities in any way and contributes to their integration into society. Public libraries develop and promote programmes and activities specific to each category of users, thus highlighting the problem of socially disadvantaged persons and supporting them in solving special information, educational, cultural or social needs.

The public library remains the only free, day-long information, educational, and cultural space for any citizen, a true *community space*.

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