ABSTRACT

Small-scale partnerships in adult education (KA210-ADU)
Sistema Bibliotecario della Lomellina
(Comune di Mortara)

PROJECT IDEA

The project responds to public libraries’ need for innovation and training, which stems from the process of transforming traditional libraries into community libraires. While traditional libraries focus heavenly on books (documents), community libraries gravitate towards the user and his needs. In its traditional form, a library offers a service, regardless of any analysis of the area in which it is located and the users it addresses; in its most modern form, a library finds its audience and only then works on creating the contents and services that will be offered to said audience. Contents that may differ from the book, since the historical function of the library as a "facilitator of knowledge" remains, albeit declined in a radically changed and much more fluid socio-cultural context.

This transformation, far from being an isolated phenomenon, has affected libraries all over the world, igniting an open dialogue about the future of libraries, and about the steps that will need to be taken during this process. One of the most obvious critical issues is related to the professional figure of the librarian, who is still trained for traditionalist concept of library. Since we are dealing with an extremely new reality - that of the community library - it is not surprising that there is not yet a shared and recognized profile of the so-called "community librarian", although there is a certain consensus on the merits of the basic skills that he should have, and on the need to promote an approach that envisages continuous training.

The project intends to identify and investigate the skills and knowledge necessary for the community librarian, within the framework of a specific target that cuts across different territories and countries: women, aged between 25 and 50, of foreign origins.

Women from immigrant background suffer a difficult situation all over Europe: equal rights and fair treatment for migrant and refugee women living in Europe aren't guaranteed. Many migrant women move to other countries either on their own or to join their husbands or other family members. The number of migrant women is also increasing in Europe. The mass migration of women from highly diverse cultural backgrounds to European countries draws particular attention to the problems of integrating these women in host countries. However, most European countries lack integration policies that take into account the real needs of migrant women.
Librarians will have to acquire the necessary skills to:

- Identify a target and recognize its characteristics and needs
- Build a service based on these characteristics and needs, together with the target itself
- Identify and acquire the specific skills necessary to engage the identified target and deliver the planned service.
- Build a "toolbox" that allows the skills and general knowledge acquired to be used, also in relation to other targets.

Through the project it will be possible to work on a problematic public, strongly present in the area, but markedly absent within libraries. Librarians will acquire specific skills that will allow them to identify and engage the target, to co-design a service (or more services) with the target, to identify and acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver this/these service(s), and to replicate the same model with other targets.

The problems that this project intends to address thanks to the proposed interventions are:

- Low turnout of the traditional public in Italian libraries. What is now a consolidated problem, the constant decline in users in Italian libraries, has reached an historic peak with the end of the pandemic: the post-Covid period has represented a moment of great difficulty for the entire cultural sector, including libraries. The transformation of Italian libraries into a more innovative format that is more capable of responding to the needs of the public is, to date, a matter of survival.
- Mismatch between the profile of the librarian and the needs of a community library. The concept of the community librarian is still new and requires research and in-depth study, as well as experimentation in the field.
- Difficulty in intercepting the specific target of migrant women, aged between 25 and 50 years. Libraries, as cultural agents located within territories and closely connected to local communities, are the cultural institution that more than any other can contribute to territorial cohesion and the vitality of a community. The integration of the most fragile categories, the fight against discrimination, the fight against inequality are all principles at the heart of libraries, as places of democracy and equality. Migrant women, aged between 25 and 50, are an important presence in the area and occupy a large portion of the workforce. They do not attend the library and are very often excluded from any opportunity to gain experience in the cultural sphere.

The strategy that has been identified for the achievement of the set objectives is based on the following principles:

- Independence of library staff in the identification, implementation and management of new services.
- The project is structured around the idea that the librarian, as a local cultural operator, must acquire skills and know-how to identify, plan and deliver services designed for citizens. For this to be possible, librarians need to acquire a basic tool kit to become community librarians and experience its effectiveness in their area and with their reference community. All with a view to long-term sustainability.
- International collaboration for the sharing of skills and the identification of a single and scalable model at European level.
- Libraries, more and more, are distinguished by the strength of the relations of cooperation and exchange that they intertwine at a European level, much more than
other cultural institutions. This derives in part from the shared desire for transformation and renewal and from the awareness that real growth is possible only through dialogue. Furthermore, libraries across Europe target (or attempt to target) the audiences most likely to be marginalized and discriminated against. Finding a common ground on which to progress, to create a model that can be exported and shared among the countries of the Union, is one of the objectives of this project.

- Co-planning and experimentation of the library service with the target
- Library, as we have said, struggles to identify its own identity in line with the needs and critical issues of our time. Although the concept of "community library" is strongly shared, it inevitably requires a preliminary work of discovery and comparison with the community: it is unthinkable to build a library centered on the community without first interacting with the community itself.

THE COORDINATOR

Sistema Bibliotecario della Lomellina is a library network located in the north of Italy. The Network includes 25 municipalities.