

Ideas Box

Learning and creativity in any place!

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As free resources with few entry barriers, public libraries are invaluable institutions for people of all backgrounds who seek both formal and informal instruction. The library has long been an indispensable resource for education, information access, cultural literacy, and vocational training. In a constantly changing world, libraries have been assigned a historic responsibility. Social bonds are weakening, leading people in a search for meaning, for points of reference and for places where they can link-up and reconnect with others. Libraries are precisely the ideal place to create both individual and collective narratives, and serve as toolboxes allowing communities to empower themselves for development and to embark on a pursuit of freedom.

Digitization has allowed libraries to reach more users than ever before. In its 2014-15 annual report, the British Library alone hosted 35,000 people for on-site learning programs. An additional 3.5 million people benefited from the Library's online learning resources. In the United States, public libraries had over 1.59 billion visitors in 2009, and over half of impoverished young adults and seniors nationwide used public libraries to access the Internet. The accessibility of libraries means they are uniquely positioned to combat misinformation and socioeconomic inequality.

Even as libraries continue to break down usage barriers, there remain large populations who do not have access to libraries or to the tremendous benefits which they provide. In many isolated and under-resourced areas worldwide, many populations cannot benefit from the transformative resources of libraries. We created the international nonprofit Libraries Without Borders (LWB) to empower and increase the agency of vulnerable people around the world by expanding access to reliable information and high-quality education. The main objective of the organization is to eliminate learning and information-access inequality by expanding traditional definitions of libraries and broadening the areas where libraries intervene and innovate.

LWB works today in more than 20 countries in Europe, North America, Africa and Latin America. We develop a broad variety of programs from training and capacity building for librarians, to creating new libraries and advocating for improved policies. We focus on the development of innovative ways to

transform libraries, reimagining how libraries respond to the needs of users in the information era and breaking down the physical, social and symbolic barriers that limit their accessibility.

The Ideas Box story: great ideas come in small packages.

To accomplish our goals, in 2014 LWB created the Ideas Box, an extremely compact virtual and physical library, that fits on two pallets and can be easily transported and installed even in the most difficult and challenging situations. When open, the Ideas Box creates a 100m² space packed with many features: internet connection via satellite, 4 laptops, over 15 touch-screen tablets and 50 electronic readers, 300 hard-copy books, and numerous pedagogical tools. It also contains a cinema module with equipment to produce documentaries and community news; various games and video games; toys, puppets and a theatre workshop. Light furniture, including tables for computer consultation and mats for reading or watching films, is also integrated in the module. Designed to fit on 2 standard transportation pallets, The Ideas Box is easily transportable, sturdy, and simple to set up. When packed, the box itself protects its contents from rain, heat, and dust. Unpacked, within minutes, the box becomes a space where people can connect, learn, play and create. All the manufacturing materials have been selected in accordance with sustainable development principles. The box also includes a generator and a battery system so that it is 100% self-powered. The contents of the Ideas Box are always customized according to languages, needs and cultures of community partners. While the Ideas Box infrastructure is standardized in its forms, each project is unique, depending on the context and objectives.

The Ideas Box introduces a major innovation in providing access to informational and cultural tools in isolated and under-resourced areas. A single Ideas Box provides the service and content equivalent of a small town library, serving approximately 5,000 users. It can equally effectively serve communities on a smaller scale, for example, to supplement under-resourced schools.

Implemented for the first time in 2014, the Ideas Box was initially created to transform the lives of refugee and displaced persons. The idea of creating such a portable media center came from lessons learned during our interventions in Haiti, after the terrible earthquake that hit Port-au-Prince in 2010 and left more than 1.5M people in the streets and temporary camps. We were working in the country before the catastrophe and when it happened, our partners asked us to come and create libraries in camps set up for the displaced. At the time, we asked ourselves if this was really the right time to create libraries. Should financial resources not first be spent on food, water, and shelter? Our partners insisted. With them, we created 20 libraries under tents in IDP camps. These places became hubs for community re-building and information sharing, spaces where parents could safely leave their children during the day. It was through this project that we first grasped the importance of access to information in crisis situations.

The most immediate response by the international community to humanitarian crises of this magnitude tend to focus exclusively on addressing the most urgent survival needs of the affected populations, such as food, clean water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, medical services and disease control. We agree that such interventions are undoubtedly of primary importance.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that addressing the cultural and educational needs of displaced persons is equally crucial to preserving their mental and emotional well-being and to preventing the onset of long-term problems stemming from stress, depression and other psychosomatic ailments associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Access to educational resources, books, computers, training programs, legal assistance and other information tools can vastly improve the futures of displaced and refugee communities, through sustained intellectual stimulation and by diminishing feelings of isolation and despair. Ideas Box programs promote a sense of self-worth and contribute to the development of the inner strength and resilience that individuals need to rebuild shattered lives and that communities need to build an informed civil society. Creating a safe public third space where people can gather and collaborate also protects both children and adults from the risks of abuse and exploitation, while providing security to marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, the disabled, girls and women.

Such dynamics have been observed for instance in the aftermath of the powerful earthquake that hit Chile in 2010. A study conducted by The Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington Information School examined post-disaster information and communication needs, services provided by libraries and telecentres, and how emergency management might be improved. Researchers found that libraries and telecentres, both as public Internet access points and as physical and social community hubs, play an important role in restoration and development after disasters. Similar experiences and learning came after the earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan in 2011.

Today, there are over 65 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide and, according to UNICEF, approximately 28 million of them are children. UNHCR estimates that the average number of years an individual spends in displacement is 17. Yet according to UNESCO, only 2% of global humanitarian appeals are dedicated to education. There is an urgent need to work towards crosscutting strategies that integrate psychosocial, educational and informational issues in order to empower refugee and host populations during the reconstruction period. It is with these tools, programs, and spaces that the displaced will then be able to design tailor-made solutions to improve the quality of education for all, customized for their own environments and needs.

We created the Ideas Box to address this challenge and to give the most vulnerable populations tools to build solutions to the challenge they face. We implemented the first projects in Congolese refugees camps in Burundi, quickly followed by new Ideas Box programs in refugee camps for the Syrian Crisis – Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey – and on the routes of refugees in Europe – Greece, Italy, Germany, France. Now,

more than 50 Ideas Box programs are implemented in the most challenging contexts, reconnecting isolated individuals to the world and improving their lives through better education, child protection, community building and empowerment.

It is particularly interesting to underline how the Ideas Box offer a new place to learn in these contexts. A randomized control trial performed in Burundi outlined, for example, that students who attend French and Math classes within the Ideas Box show 23% more academic improvement than students taking the same subjects in a classic school setting. The Ideas Box not only provides new educational, cultural and informational content, it also creates a new space in which activities can be held. Qualitative feedback from the teachers suggest that both aspects of the Ideas Box are relevant in their students' attitudes when they met in the Ideas Box. Indeed, they reported a change of attitude in their students when the lesson is held in the Ideas Box: they were "more alive, more motivated and engaged". Such results join data collected in other studies which have highlighted the importance of not only providing high quality educational material, but also of improving learning environments in order to improve the quality of education, especially in emergency situations

Another study conducted on the field in 2015 highlights the role of the Ideas Box in reinforcing resilience and fighting against trauma for children and their families. Every day in some of the world's most devastating and isolated contexts, thousands of refugees and displaced persons gather at the Ideas Box to reconnect with the world and to rebuild their lives.

From restoring dignity for refugees to empowering the world's information-poor

We are on track to accomplish our goal to set up more than 1,000 Ideas Box by 2022, but our ambitions do not end there. We are working to build a future where, in addition to one toilet for 100 people in each refugee camp, there will also be internet connection, laboratories of learning and creative problem-solving, windows onto the broader world. At stake is not only a technological, but also a philosophical revolution that redefines humanitarianism, hitherto restricted to providing food, water, healthcare, and shelter for refugees, the bare necessities of life. Here we propose that access to education and culture are also fundamental human rights. For refugee children who will grow up in the camps, access to information and knowledge, to books, schools, and media, is vital. We must share our experiences with international policy makers to improve the guidelines that structure humanitarian response.

But this fight for human dignity is not limited to the sole refugee and displaced populations alone. We believe that culture and education can serve all communities around the world as levers for human development and emancipation. Many librarians came to us in 2014 and told us that this extraordinary

tool should not be limited for refugee crisis response. Responding to their requests, in 2015 we launched new Ideas Box programs in low-income neighborhoods in France and in the US.

An interesting example of these programs is the one we set up in the Bronx in New York during the summer 2015. With the New York Public Library and a local arts education organization, we created a program in the Morris Heights Neighborhood which is part of the congressional district declared to be the poorest in the United States with 40% of the population living with an income below the poverty line and an unemployment rate reaching 25%. Consequences of poverty include an elevated high-school drop out rate, a high proportion of single mother headed households and only a third of the adult population with some college education or more. Recognizing how more than half of the achievement gap between lower and higher income youth can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities, we aimed at closing the achievement gap over the summer. First, we worked with local partners to identify the particular needs of the community and implementation locations through focus groups and field visits, and at customizing the Ideas Box according to languages of the targeted populations and objectives of the programs.

After two months of implementation, the impact report suggests that the Ideas Box created a safe and accessible space for children to learn in the South Bronx. Frank, a thirteen years old, took tools from the Ideas Box to create a documentary about the neighbourhood. His thoughtful questions and active participation in the group supported younger participants, which also raised Frank's own self-confidence. On the last day, he said to the Ideas Box team: *"[The Ideas Box] will affect how I do in school. Well, in school I don't really raise my hand...I'm kind of shy. But at the Ideas Box you get experience talking sharing your ideas. So now in school I might be more comfortable talking"*. The Ideas Box also created a comfortable and convenient space for adults to access professional development tools. LWB's needs assessment found that many unemployed adults in the neighbourhood did not have access to computer or to the Internet, did not know how to use a word processor, and did not have professional mentors to provide feedback on how to present their experiences in a professional way. Ken, an unemployed parent, updated his resume and applied online for jobs as a truck driver from the Ideas Box. Marco, who the Ideas Box team got to know when setting up the Ideas Box at a laundromat, designed and printed fliers to promote his fledgling headlight restoration business in between wash and dry cycles.

The Ideas Box created a flexible and dynamic space for discussion and collaboration. Games such as chess, checkers, dominoes, connect four, and play-doh, provided a good entry point to discuss and create a safe public space for encounters across age, race, and gender lines. These results have been specifically documented through extensive qualitative interviews in the Bronx pilot, but is also visible in other places where Ideas Box programs are being implemented. For example, in 2015, Libraries Without Borders started an ambitious program with Australian State Libraries to reach remote aboriginal communities that did not previously have access to library programs. The arrival of the Ideas Box has provided

opportunities for these communities to connect to the world, promote their cultural heritage and give their children better educational opportunities. Today, around 30 Ideas Box programs are implemented in suburban and rural areas in industrialized countries, including in low-income neighbourhoods of Paris, Marseilles and Calais in France, and in Detroit in the US. The Ideas Box has also proven its great potential for transformational impact in developing countries, such as in Senegal where Libraries Without Borders conducts a street children educational program with the Ideas Box and local partners.

Bringing the library everywhere!

The strength of the Ideas Box is its extreme mobility, versatility and customizability. It can be adapted to most contexts, from the alleys of a commercial mall in the North of France to a refugee camp in the Ethiopian desert. It gives the opportunity to bring the library everywhere, particularly where it is usually not. For example, LWB recently signed an agreement with the Colombian Ministry of Culture in the summer 2016 to implement Ideas Box programs within the frameworks of the ongoing peacebuilding processes. Last autumn, after 52 years of civil war, the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla signed an historical peace agreement. While the ex-combatants will return to civil life within some months, the peacebuilding process is expected to require many more years. State institutions have been absent from almost all the areas affected by the conflict for the past half century and they work on a plan to quickly and sustainably reinvest in these regions. The Ideas Box is a great tool to quickly reinstall informational, educational and cultural services in these remote areas. At least 20 Ideas Boxes will be deployed in the coming months by the Colombian National Library with the support of Libraries Without Borders field experts. The simplicity and speed of production and implementation of Ideas Box projects will allow libraries to be the first state institutions to be reinstalled in these isolated regions. It is a beautiful symbol and a powerful statement of the role of culture, information and libraries in the rebuilding of democracy, social ties and trust among communities.

At Libraries Without Borders, we believe that libraries are no longer a simple collection of books. Whether it is physical or virtual, fixed or mobile, local or global, fablab, makerspace or learning centers, libraries of the 21st century are first and foremost places for access to quality information and education and spaces for literacy, community building and social innovation. They are places where people meet to invent their futures and create solutions to the challenges they face. Chris Bourg, director of MIT Libraries stated in a recent interview that « *providing access to credible information and the tools to assess, use, understand and exploit it is what libraries, librarians and archivists have always done. It's more important than ever now* » and continue by explaining his vision of MIT Library as an « *open global platform that gives*

people access to information that can help them solve global challenges such as increasing access to clean water or discovering new clean energy sources¹ ».

Libraries cannot stay in their walls, and they must reinvent themselves to be everywhere where the society needs them: in the streets and the parks, in schools and jails, in hospitals, universities and factories, on the internet and offline for people without connection. To accomplish this, they have to improve outreach, but they also have to change their mindset and reconsider their roles and missions. At Libraries Without Borders, we call librarians “social entrepreneurs” because we want to highlight the dramatic role of social transformation and innovation embodied by librarians. To promote this vision, we developed a program called *BSF Campus*² with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. BSF Campus is at the same time a virtual learning web platform accessible online and offline for French-speaking librarians and a young leaders programs that incubates and accelerates innovative projects of young librarians and information specialists in western Africa. There are today 230,000 libraries in the global south. Our challenge is to create the tools for these libraries to transform themselves into social innovation laboratories, mixing project incubation, maker space, co-working and educational programs. Places owned by local communities where they can shape their future. And at the same time, we are innovating social entrepreneurial models of funding these spaces because we know that in many places around the world, public funding is reducing or is already too tight to allow the libraries to reach their full potential for transforming human development. To tackle this issue, we are working on a program called “Ideas Box By Entrepreneurs” in which the box will be leased to local social entrepreneurs who will be able to set up a small business with it.

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At Libraries Without Borders, we often hear people saying that libraries are not useful anymore, as the Internet and technology is available everywhere. We disagree, and we believe that libraries have never been as essential as today. Libraries are great levers to combat inequalities and to give people the tools to prevent risk, to create social and collective knowledge and to invent solutions to the problems they face. Their role is obviously changing in a changing world. They are no longer a unique collection of books, but now offer multiple services that contribute to human development and social innovation.

With the Ideas Box, we wanted to design a unique solution to respond to humanitarian crisis. It turned out to become a universal toolbox that can be shaped and customized to any needs and settings around the world. We hope that tomorrow more boxes will flourish and continue to participate in the reinvention of the 21st century libraries; for the people and by the people.

¹ « *Future of Libraries* », report, MIT Task Force, <https://news.mit.edu/2016/mit-task-force-releases-preliminary-future-libraries-report-1024>

² www.bsfcampus.org