Towards a Library Citizen Laboratory

How can Libraries and Community Centres become spaces of democratic participation?

CITIZEN FORUM FRAMEWORK



Funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

bad associação portuguesa de bibliotecários, arquivistas, profissionais da informação e documentação

GOETHE INSTITUT

Bratislava - Staré Mesto

Contents

Introduction 2

Democratic Participation and Libraries as Citizens Laboratories 3

What is intended? 4

How to do that? 4

- Infographic 5
- Develop librarians' professional skills 6
- Develop Libraries and Community Centers involvement 7
- Framing practices 8
- Include wider community 10

Further expectations 11

Key aspects 11

- Wider dissemination 11
- Further adaptation 11
- The link to policy-makers and decision-makers 11
- The role of libraries 11

References 12

Technical data

Authorship

Texts by Tatiana Sanches, Project Manager, BAD (The Portuguese Association of Librarians, Archivists, Information and Documentation Professionals - BAD, Portugal), ORCID 0000-0002-4902-2628
Based on the EU Grants: Application form, for Project Citizens' engagement and participation [CERV-2023-CITIZENS-CIV], Coordination by Jakob Marcks, Goethe-Institut e.V.

Title

Towards a Library Citizen Laboratory: How can Libraries and Community Centres become spaces of democratic participation?: Citizen Forum Framework

Edition

Associação Portuguesa de Bibliotecários, Arquivistas, Profissionais da Informação e Documentação,
Praça Dr. Nuno Pinheiro Torres, 10A
1500-246 Lisboa PORTUGAL
editorial@bad.pt

Project Link: https://www.goethe.de/prj/cld/en/ueb.html

December, 2024

CC BY

Introduction

The CLAD project - Citizens and Libraries Against Disinformation is anchored in transnational cooperation. The two countries – Portugal and Slovakia – have specific needs in relation to countering fake news and dis/mis-information, combined with a commonality of experiences and needs from which to establish common ground. The problems we are seeking to solve in CLAD are not restricted to the individual countries, but are European, as well as global, concerns. They therefore need tackling at a European level. This project will combine the expertise of the partners to build scalable solutions which can have an impact beyond their individual borders. In addition, the project is coordinated by Goethe Institut, an international organisation with representation across the EU as well as globally, and which is experienced in engaging with, and disseminating to, networks and partners across Europe.

There are a great many initiatives taking place across Europe which are redefining the role of libraries, and there is a need to ensure that libraries are adequately supported to have the capacity, resources and human skills to become new, real and relevant spaces for supporting democratic participation. This is a new approach in the library sector, and this needs nurturing and protecting. Public Libraries 2030 have supported a number of relevant initiatives in line with the aims of the CLAD project, including transitions of traditional libraries into community spaces which facilitates neighbourhood access to education, training, IT equipment and the development of digital-native skills, and with this transnational community librarianship project, it will be possible to provide an opportunity for cross-border exchange and networking between library staff working with adult learners; to develop the competencies of library staff working with adult learners based on exchanges with project partners contributing with their experience and expertise; and to empower library staff to deliver more effective support to their adult learners, thereby promoting social inclusion and uptake of educational opportunities in libraries by adult learners within their communities.

This **Citizen Forum framework** is built upon the good practices established in these and other initiatives, and aims to develop a guideline for the proposed activities that will take place in the following work packages. The guiding question for this is: *How can libraries and community centres become spaces of democratic participation?*

Although the activities are the core of the project, this **Citizen Forum framework** will be one of the two main tools (together with Training and Multiplier activities, at the end) which will support collaboration between wider partnerships of EU Member States, as these will constitute resources and toolkits which can readily be used and adapted in other countries.

Even though within the direct responsibility from the partner BAD (the Portuguese Association of Librarians, Archivists and Information Professionals), this framework was inspired by the involved librarians, community workers, disinformation specialists and educational experts, and it is designed for future work with communities. The document intends to standardise and harmonise the events that can be developed across the different topics and countries. Finally, at the end of the Project, the framework will be used for support librarians and community workers training' and will be promoted to target groups beyond the partnership.

Democratic Participation and Libraries as Citizens Laboratories

To encourage democratic experience, it is vital to promote citizen participation by directly involving library audiences in public affairs. Citizenship can be achieved with more information and actions that strengthen and are change promoters in communities. To this end, it is essential to communicate factual information while exposing citizens to misinformation and explaining their differences, disseminate strategies to recognize false information, train these skills, and give visibility to the results achieved.

Citizen participation is crucial to stimulate social impact within and outside organizations and communities, promoting an active and intentional dialogue between citizens and decision-makers. It is important to facilitate dialogue and search for solutions, among all stakeholders, using different participatory approaches. In one sentence, informed citizens can have an active role in democratic life. Building participatory communities means opening public institutions to the community, so that it can think and change together.

In recent years, the proliferation of fake news, misinformation and disinformation has posed a significant challenge despite global awareness-raising efforts. These issues have permeated various domains, ranging from newspapers and social networks to academia, commercial enterprises, and even warfare strategies. The impact is far-reaching, affecting politics, the economy, society at large, and most importantly, the lives of individuals who become victims of falsehoods and lies. The consequences extend well beyond initial predictions, causing irreparable harm by destroying careers, reputations, savings, businesses, families, and companies. However, despite this challenging informational landscape, dedicated individuals and organisations remain undeterred in their efforts to combat these challenges. They persist in their actions to promote information education, aiming to protect the most vulnerable and devise effective strategies for each specific context.

One crucial aspect is the development of information literacy across different environments and ecosystems. Society as a whole is mobilizing to address this issue. Media outlets are making notable efforts to safeguard journalistic truth, increasingly providing tools for regulation and fact-checking. Likewise, the academic community has displayed particular sensitivity to the phenomenon. It takes proactive measures in student education, especially through libraries, by supporting researchers with codes of ethics and guiding educators towards the adoption of good practices in teaching accurate and appropriate content. These combined efforts aim to mitigate the spread of false information and empower individuals with the skills to navigate the complex information landscape successfully. By fostering information literacy, society strives to protect the integrity of truth, maintain ethical standards, and ensure that individuals are equipped to critically evaluate information in an ever-evolving media landscape.

Efforts to address the problems faced by Europe and its citizens are hampered by misinformation and disinformation, two separate but interlinked phenomena which are becoming more prevalent in the EU.

To address these challenges, a set of strategies can be established that involve community centres and libraries to work with citizens. This document intends to explain in the following pages, answering the following questions: What do you want? How to do it? How to work on specific themes that interest European citizens? Over the next few pages, we seek to answer these questions.

What is intended?

Empower Europe's citizens, especially those who are not digital natives, with the skills and confidence needed to navigate the complexities of the information age. To that end, spin-off citizen engagement activities will be organised in libraries. The format will be developed over the course of the project, adhering always to the standards developed in these guidelines. This implies:



Know how to participate in the main democratic processes of the European Union

Harnessing the power of libraries

Develop librarians' professional skills to reach citizens in their local areas

How to do that?

This methodological framework will explain, in a four steps approach, the several actions for the Citizen Fora implementation. First it will be necessary to **develop librarian's skills**. Than to assure **libraries involvement**. Then, it will be necessary to **include a wider community**. Finally, it will be wise to prepare the **framing practices**, with specific tips that can be applied to the local context, based on previous experiences and good practices. Relevant toolboxes to help on the "how to do", can include:

Methods to be applied in outreach and engagement with local citizens; instruments for marketing and promotion of the events

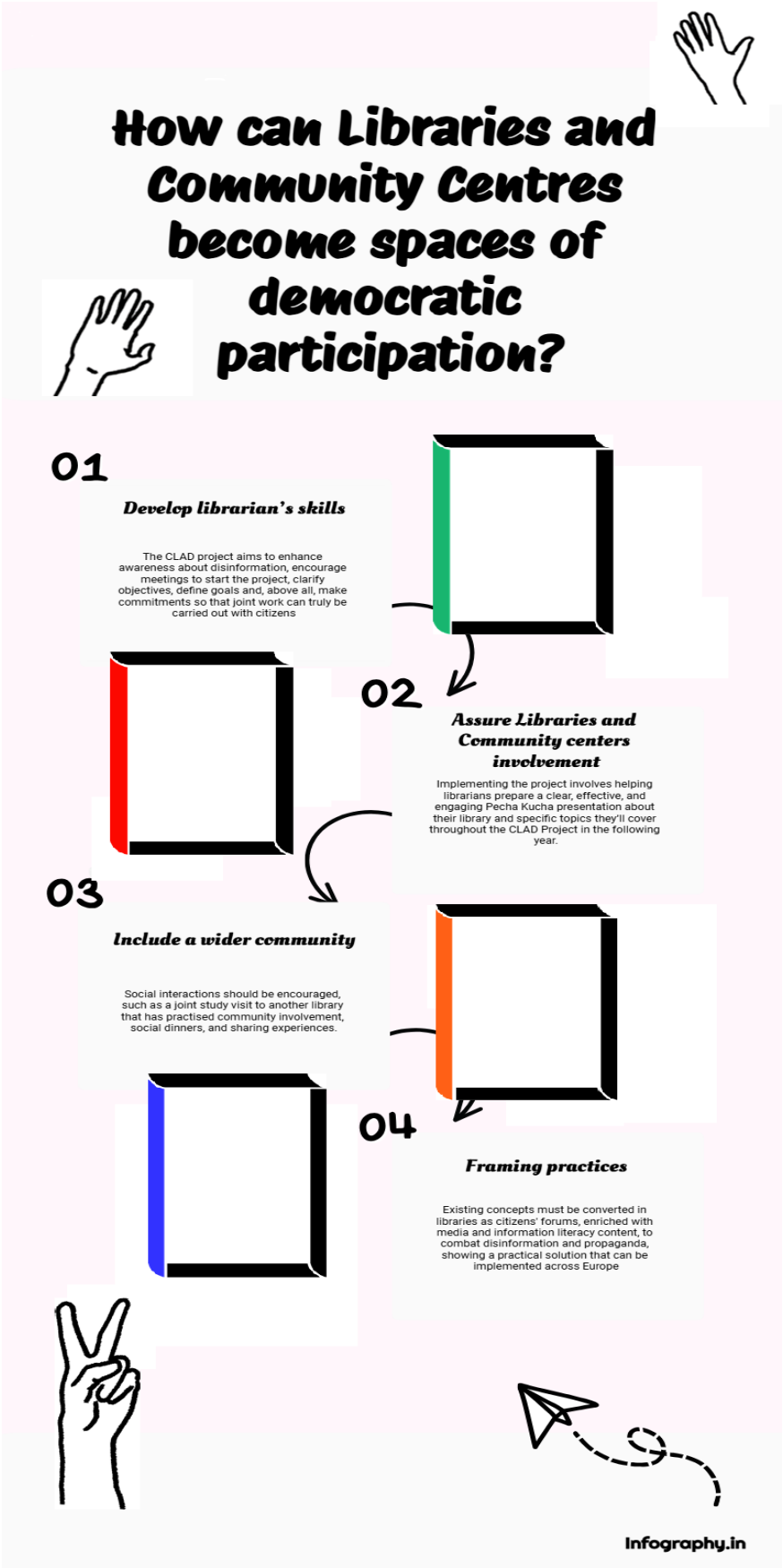
Minimum requirements and standards in terms of diversity, inclusion, access and communications

Strategies to reach diverse groups of citizens beyond the "usual suspects"

Good practice from other countries



Infographic



Develop librarians' professional skills

The first step is to ensure that everyone involved - institutional partners and libraries or community centres - knows what is expected of each person. To this end, it is important to encourage meetings to start the project, clarify objectives, define goals and, above all, make commitments so that joint work can truly be carried out with citizens. It will be for them that we will make every effort.

Next, it is important to train partner libraries on two fundamental topics: instruments for citizen participation; and concepts and manifestations of disinformation. This can be achieved with the support of best practice contained in the *Rough Guide to Citizen Engagement in Public Libraries*, and with an awareness of the topic of disinformation.

It must be understood that both involvement in the community and understanding the fight against disinformation can only be achieved in a certain context, that is, through discussion and thematic deepening of a disciplinary area, since both one strategy and another are instrumentals.

So, some issues must be addressed to concretize the previous strategies - community involvement, and counteracting disinformation. Recommendations for citizen engagement through public libraries, resulting in the staged approach of (1) delineating the local need, (2) developing counter-strategies and (3) opening up libraries and community spaces to easy-access public engagement activities to strengthen citizens' ability to identify, challenge and ultimately reject disinformation on key topics. Specifically, we will adapt the structures of focus groups, world cafés, living labs, and discussions, screenings, debates and workshops, respectively.

These workshops will prepare librarians to be able to promoting practical events on: (a) understanding the mechanisms of disinformation, how to detect it and how political decision-making processes work, (b) provide impartial information through debates, cultural events and workshops and engage citizens in transnational exchanges to understand multiple perspectives on these topics, (c) promote participation in the democratic process through local and European Union decision-makers' involvement in citizens' laboratories.

Activity: *Building upon the needs analysis to first outline what the target group requires from such a framework. Run 2 to 4 in-situ workshops with 5 to 10 participants each (representatives of libraries and community centres, disinformation and educational experts)*



Outcome: *Each workshop will result in a list of the target group's expectations towards the framework*

Participants: *At least 20 for all workshops together*

Then, librarians can be able to teach how to distinguish genuine facts from the proliferation of fake news, disinformation/misinformation and propaganda that threatens society, and understand the EU's main democratic processes. Additionally, they will leverage the use of tools and knowledge to build your awareness of key topics important at local, national, European and global levels.

Develop Libraries and Community Centers involvement

In addition to training librarians, it is important to understand that they must be prepared to promote consultation and research events and interventions involving citizens, policymakers and information specialists that function as Citizens' Forums. Fostering gatherings where the knowledge and insights of local citizens can be used to devise solutions to local problems, specifically, focus groups, world cafes, living labs and discussions, exhibitions, debates and workshops.

In this second stage, it is important to help librarians prepare a clear, effective, and engaging Pecha Kucha presentation about their library and specific topics they'll cover throughout the CLAD Project in the following year. For that, each library must choose a Topic: Select the topic(s) that each library will cover (e.g., minorities, environment, housing & urban culture, health & well-being, European identity). Steps to attend: Introduce the library and its role; Explain the chosen topic and why it matters to your community; Show practical examples of how this topic will be applied in the library.

It is important to be able to present the objectives and themes, demonstrating involvement and commitment to the project. At this stage, social interactions should be encouraged, such as a joint study visit to another library that has practiced community involvement, social dinner, and the sharing of experiences, among others.



Activity: *Choose a theme upon the needs of the community and think why this will be important. Prepare a Pecha Kucha presentation to run in-situ with all the other representatives of libraries and community centres. Exchange ideas and activities purposes*

Outcome: *Each Pecha Kucha will result in a compromise shared within all the participant libraries*

Participants: *At least 2 of each library*

For libraries to become truly involved in the entire process, they must follow some recommendations:

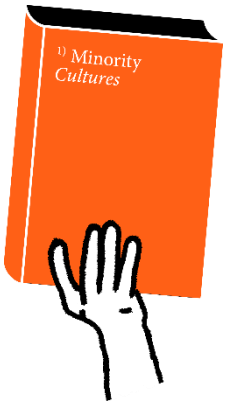
Understanding the process: What are the mechanisms of disinformation? How to detect them? What are the political decision-making processes underlying the respective topic?

Inform and exchange information on the selected topic: By providing unbiased information through films, talks and workshops, we empower participants to make informed decisions. We promote transnational exchanges between EU citizens on these topics and the understanding of different perspectives, using short social media clips recorded during citizens' labs in the other participating countries.

Promote democratic participation: Building on the above-selected theme, we empower citizens to develop well-informed opinions. By involving local and EU decision-makers in events, we ensure a practical link to the policy-making process.

Framing practices

At this stage, existing concepts must be converted in libraries as citizens' forums, enriched with media and information literacy content, to combat disinformation and propaganda, showing a practical solution that can be implemented across Europe.



*The protection and celebration of **Minority Cultures** across Europe and the need to promote respect and mutual understanding at a local level concerning increasing hostile environments, culture wars and misinformation, including but not limited to immigrant communities, including the former colonies; LGBTQI+ communities and identities; refugees and asylum seekers; gypsy communities; Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and other prejudices based on religion; national minorities and indigenous communities.*



*Challenges related to the **environment** and the climate emergency are global but affect communities at the local level and depend on local action to protect the environment and combat climate change. Environmental issues are often the target of fake news and misinformation. We will examine, among others: the use of fossil and alternative fuels and energy; transport; global warming and climate change; recycling and waste; water use; pollution, its causes and effects; biodiversity and ecology; industrial, economic and political.*



*Many European countries face a housing shortage, especially in cities and large urban centres. Pressure on the housing stock can lead to tension in urban communities, isolation, segregation, defamation and scapegoating. In **Urban Culture and Housing** we will examine, among others: population growth and demographic changes; accessibility and cost of living; strategies for community cohesion; demands for local housing supply; availability, quality and adequacy of the local housing stock.*



*The European project is increasingly threatened by false media narratives and political scapegoats. How can Europe's citizens work together to combat disinformation and support European citizenship and heritage? This is a question to be addressed by the **European Identities** topic.*

*Good **health and well-being** are a key indicator and a precondition for a prosperous society, enabling people to enjoy fulfilling lives, receive education and be productive members of society. In contrast, the burden of physical or mental illness has high economic, social and individual costs. Therefore, achieving the highest level of health possible is in everyone's best interest. In the EU, measures focus on achieving more resilient, accessible and inclusive health systems; improving reproductive, maternal and child health; ending the main epidemics of communicable diseases; and reducing non-communicable and mental disorders. They also focus on reducing behavioral and environmental health risk factors. We must be committed advocates for stronger actions on health issues, seeking a comprehensive and integrated approach to achieving a high level of health and well-being.*

Subsequent Citizens Forums must conform to and uphold the requirements and standards of the framework developed in this project. As mentioned, these themes were chosen for the practical application of the two supporting concepts: disinformation and citizen participation. These are achieved through a three-step process:

Step 1: Outline the challenge from a local perspective

Step 2: Develop strategies to combat misinformation

Step 3: Engaging the Community with Easy Access



Librarians, particularly those in public libraries, must be prepared to provide guidance that enables them to search and discover meaningful and reliable information. So, it is important so assure some practical aspects, such as:



Design and plan activities according to the recommended steps

Outline strategies to work on each topic according to local needs

Develop strategies to combat misinformation

Engage the community in an accessible way

Record the results (attendance sheets, photographs, various records)

Control budget and expenses

Include wider community

In recent years, the proliferation of fake news and misinformation has represented a significant challenge, despite global efforts to raise awareness on the issue. These issues permeated different domains, such as newspapers or social networks, in academia, companies, political spaces or even war strategies. The impact is far-reaching, affecting society at large and, most importantly, the lives of individuals who become victims of falsehoods and lies. However, despite this challenging information landscape, numerous individuals and organizations across Europe remain dedicated to efforts to combat these challenges. The old continent is already seeing the promotion of media and information literacy, aiming to protect the most vulnerable and outline effective strategies for each specific context. Society as a whole is mobilizing to face this problem. Social media outlets are making notable efforts to safeguard journalistic truth by increasingly providing regulation and fact-checking tools. Likewise, the academic community has demonstrated particular sensitivity to the phenomenon, taking proactive measures in student training, supporting researchers with codes of ethics and guiding teachers to adopt good practices in teaching accurate and appropriate content. These combined efforts aim to mitigate the spread of false information and disinformation by empowering individuals with the skills needed to successfully navigate the complex information landscape.

What about public libraries? How can we, through democratic participation and social cohesion, promote strategies such as information and media literacy? How can we help protect the integrity of the truth, maintain ethical standards, and ensure that individuals are equipped to critically evaluate information in an ever-evolving media landscape?

In this international conference, we consider public libraries as places of meeting, debate and social learning, and we understand them as spaces of construction, creative places and social life, which provide community networking, access to education and unlimited self-training. Furthermore, they are trustworthy institutions specialized in information, which makes them a natural partner in the fight against disinformation. The program is organized to inspire librarians and civil society towards greater democratic participation in combating disinformation, and promoting the debate and discussion on these topics.



Activity: *The project team will streamline the results and develop an international conference that responds to the challenges.*

Outcome: *1 in-situ conference with international participation (librarians, community workers, citizens, disinformation and educational experts)*

Participants: *at least 31 conference participants from at least 4 countries*

By mobilizing citizens to identify disinformation, they have the tools to make informed decisions and, through a bottom-up approach to policy making, can contribute to positive change not only in their daily lives, but also in their local communities and, ultimately in their lives

Further expectations

This Citizen Forum framework is produced as a result of the CLAD project, and with the training programme for librarians, will be a key tool to support sustainability and continuation beyond both the CLAD partnership and the period of funding.

Key aspects

Wider dissemination

In addition to the spin-off events under WP7 in associate partner countries, we will disseminate both concepts to all EU Member States through the network of Goethe-Instituts We'll spread the training concept in all 27 Member States through the network of Goethe Institutes.

Further adaptation

The event series, including the staged approach to co-design can be freely adapted for use by the partnership as well as by others active in the field of library management and disinformation across EU27 as a blueprint to develop new activities to meet evolving topics and citizen needs which are not yet known, identified or even in existence. In this way, provide a future-proofed concept which can respond to the rapidly-changing and complex European and global contexts. Additionally,

The link to policy-makers and decision-makers

Through active engagement with and of policy-makers and decision-makers, we will aim to make sure that project results (results from the events in the partner countries) have an impact beyond the lifetime of the project. The events in Bratislava, for example, will be linked to a new development strategy for the district. Results of the event series will directly feed into the strategy process and thereby have an impact beyond the project duration.

The role of libraries

Public libraries also provide the opportunity for the kind of open discussion and dialogue that can ensure the sustainability of projects. Acting as effective intermediaries and active partners, they can provide bridges that can ensure sustainable partnerships between traditional decision-makers and citizens of communities. Therefore, the projects aim to train librarians from 2 countries to perform civic engagement projects on various subjects in the future.



References

European Commission (2018.05.12). *Action Plan against Disinformation.* Joint communication to the European Parliament, The European Council, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf and Factsheet: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/disinformation_factsheet_march_2019_0.pdf

European Commission (2022). *2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation.* https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2022-strengthened-code-practice-disinformation

European Commission (2022). EU Citizenship Report 2020: Empowering citizens and protecting their rights. https://op.europa.eu/pt/publication-detail/-/publication/d15166bf-abe7-11eb-927e-01aa75ed71a1

Barros, F., Kish, I., Moltmann, L. and Silvestre, S., Rough Guide to Citizen Engagement in Public Libraries, Quaglia, A. and Martinho Guimaraes Pires Pereira, A. editor(s), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023, ISBN 978-92-76-60599-7, doi:10.2760/957683, JRC132175 https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC132175

