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COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION AND BEST PRACTICE DIFFUSION IN EUROPEAN LIBRARIES:

Adapting for Local Impact

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/Introduction



Libraries are highly innovative organisations; they have evolved constantly over the past decades to serve their communities in ever more ways. From the core services around books and lending, today they offer much broader services and place their services and strategies in the context of the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs), as manifest in the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto and in the Council of Europe recommendation on library legislation and policy in Europe.^{1 2}

To increase democratic participation, the Toronto Public Library launched a dedicated website with questions and answers to the candidates on the occasion of the municipal elections in 2018. The aim was to help voters make an informed decision. Equally involved in democratic participation were Bulgarian librarians thanks to the Global Libraries Foundation (GLF) and United States Embassy in Sofia. GLF engaged civil society experts in training librarians to lead democracy education classes on theoretical themes such as how to vote and why citizens should take part in the electoral process.

The Bulgarian experience is certainly inspired by the Canadian good practice. Nevertheless, there are important differences, the most important one being that in Bulgaria, political debates are organised without politicians - a paradox. The Canadian good practice is a quality experience, exportable and conform to standards; nevertheless, for it to be sustainable, it must be adapted to contexts with varying levels of democratic quality. Bulgaria is ranking 62nd in the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the reputation of political parties is low in comparison to Canada, number 13 on the ranking.³ Therefore, the Canadian experience must be scaled down.

¹ LIBER joins libraries manifesto ahead of EU elections. Retrieved from <https://libereurope.eu/article/liber-joins-libraries-manifesto-ahead-of-eu-elections/>

² Council of Europe. (2023). Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on library legislation and policy in Europe. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680aac6d6>

³ <https://d1qqtien6gyso7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report-11-15.pdf>

When placing this example in the current library policy debate, we can see that conform the Recommendation of the Council of Europe on Libraries within the framework of the European Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Toronto Public Library experience would correspond to the SDG 16.10 Ensure Public Access to Information and Protect Fundamental Freedoms.⁴ ⁵ While the Bulgarian experience in its turn corresponds to the **SDG 4.7 Quality Education. Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Freedom of expression and the SDG 16.6 Transparent and accountable institutions.**

This policy brief discusses whether the spread of practice examples from other libraries is a way forward for innovative efforts of European libraries. We explore the types of novel ideas and opportunities in the diffusion of library good practice examples, as well as the caveats and misconceptions. The brief is a joint effort between the Horizon Europe funded project LibrarIN for value co-creation and social innovation for a new generation of European libraries and the Erasmus+ TELL project for transparent European learning libraries.⁶ ⁷

⁴ Council of Europe. (2023). Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on library legislation and policy in Europe.

Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680aaced6>

⁵ https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16#targets_and_indicators

⁶ <https://librarin.eu>

⁷ <https://eblida.org/en/project/tell-transparent-european-learning-libraries/>



/Best Practice Sharing in Libraries



2.1 *Best Practices, Good Practices or What Works in Libraries*

The LibrarIN project has performed extensive empirical research among public, national and public libraries on the topic of value co-creation for a new generation of libraries on the topics of living labs, Artificial Intelligence and Digital transformation and social entrepreneurship. Drawing on the evidence gathered, the LibrarIN project differentiates best practices, good practices and what works as sources of inspiration for library innovation.

Best practices: this term refers mostly to projects with high investments and high visibility. They can also be initiatives of high prestige and a political statement. The label "best" is mostly not based on a broad evaluation of similar initiatives. However, best practice examples are often "front edge" cases of novelty ("new to the world"), they may be singular efforts where it is not entirely clear if the whole field is likely to move in a similar direction or if it is an outlier.

Good practices can on the one hand share many elements with best practices. However, the term "good" acknowledges that there is no single best way, furthermore that there has been no systematic evaluation to justify the superlative. However, the term good practices also conveys the idea that the practice is not extreme and hence not an outlier. Despite some novelty, it is already more diffused and more likely to become a new standard in the field.

What works: can be any of the above but additionally incorporates aspects of frugality and scarce resources. Many libraries operate under conditions of very scarce resources and have to find ways to accommodate innovation efforts accordingly. These efforts rest very often on employee motivation and initiatives, as well as on specific resource combinations available locally.

Use cases in LibrarIN show the full spectrum of the above types. This policy brief discusses which aspects of example practices are particularly useful and which are problematic.

2.2 *Best Practice Diffusion in Libraries*

Libraries often specialise according to functions and services. Some of them are good at providing services towards young people, some others at helping left behind people in exerting their rights, some others organise activities in hospitals or in prisons. Whatever the context, all successful libraries produce good practices.

Competitive advantage in the private sector may be gained through the implementation of good practices. This is evident in specialized technological districts or food-focused regions. Libraries work in the public sphere, their mission is people empowerment, individual development, information and culture for all. These functions cannot be specialised, neither can they be the object of trade. Innovation in the private sector is generated from healthy competition; innovation in the library field is the result of a sound practice of cooperation.

Cooperation consists of sharing a best practice, a process or behaviour that is considered excellent for the effects it generates. To be “best”, however, a “good” practice needs to be diffused, tested in different environments and transferred to other contexts. Excellence in new technologies, popular products, or smart services are not enough; a best practice is the one that other libraries adopt and make it the object of their ordinary practice.

In the diffusion of a best practice, libraries may run four possible typologies of risks:

1

The first risk is that a good practice experimented in an individual library may not work in a networked system; a possible result is that disparities between sets of libraries may increase and not be reduced.

2

The second risk is “nomothetic”, in other words assuming that any idea, or practice, may work in any context, geographic area, at any time.

3

The third is the absence of indicators against which a best practice can be assessed to measure its level of replicability in other situations.

4

The fourth risk is a mismatch between the best practice and what communities may perceive as their primary needs. The following requirements should facilitate wider implementations of best practices and their seamless transfer in the library world.



3 / Navigating the pitfalls of best practice sharing in Libraries



3.1

Best practice for whom, exactly?

The decade from 2011 to 2021 has been an exciting time for libraries in Europe.. New, iconic buildings came to light in Finland, Denmark and The Netherlands. In Finland, the Oodi Library in Helsinki (2018) is a gem and the winner of the IFLA Public Library of the Year award in 2019. DOKK 1 in Aarhus (2016 IFLA Public Library of the Year) is an inspiring premise easily identified as best practice. In the Netherlands, between 2010 and 2020, the library infrastructure went through radical change in Almere (Nieuwe Bibliotheek, 2010), Amersfoort (Het Eemhuis, 2013), Tilburg (LocHal, 2019), Utrecht, where the old Post Office was turned into a library (2020) and Rotterdam, where the renovation is still going on.

During the same years, however, library expenditure in Denmark, Netherlands, and Finland decreased both quantitatively (respectively, 33%, -19% and -19%) and qualitatively.

The following table shows variations in library expenditure in eight European countries from 2011 to 2021 (2021: base year) and compares to trends in per capita GDP and expenditure for cultural services.

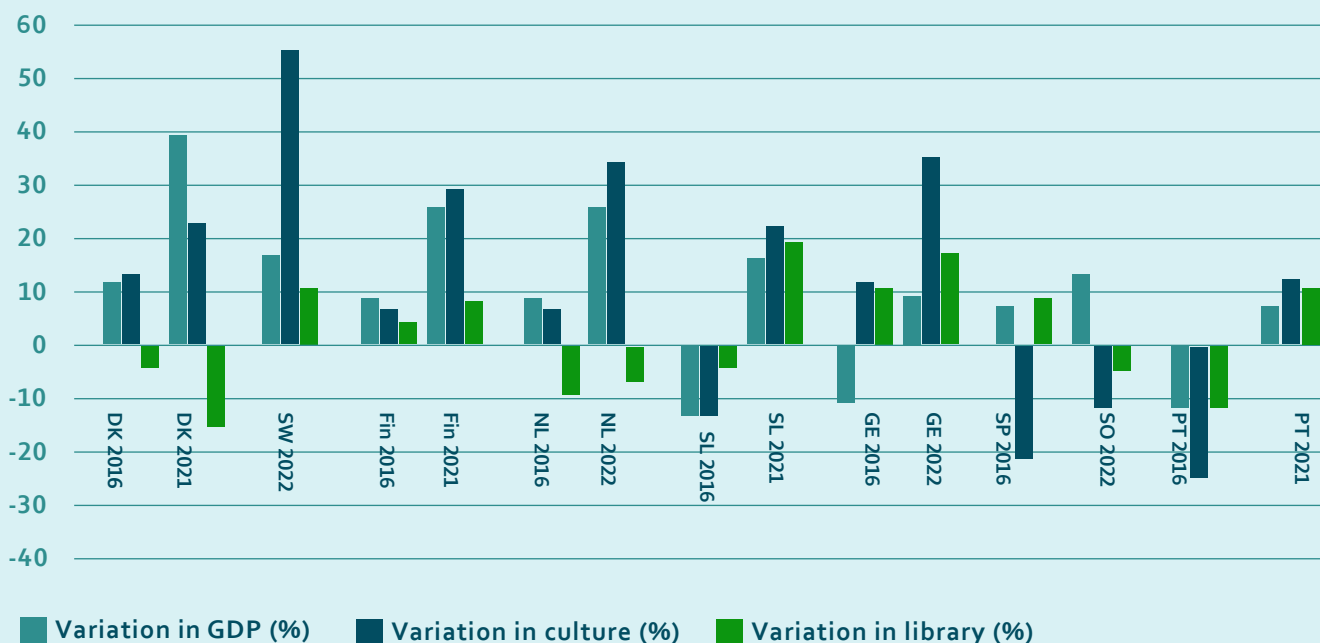


Figure 1: GDP, Cultural expenditure and Library expenditure (2011-2021) negative and positive variations in relation to Year 2011. Source: Vitiello 2025

We are facing two narratives: a narrative of expansion with the construction of new, and often stunning library buildings, and a narrative of contractions, to be seen in library statistics. Which one is true?

Both. The gap pertains to a model of library development - shared by politicians, administrators and professionals - which is urban and iconic, with little room left for smart practices in non-urban, underdeveloped areas. The “development trap” consists of creating “fractals” of demographic, social and economic nature and disparities among regions. Cleavages are set around areas where old people are concentrated and the economy is rural, and the more dynamic and affluent societies settled in metropolitan areas.

Be Inspired

Practice examples can and should inspire but they cannot be transferred without adaptation. To trigger reflections in a library about the kinds of adaptations to be made while implementing innovations inspired from other libraries, three kinds of analysis are needed.

Three kinds of analysis are needed to determine if the library best practice proposed is responding to the needs of the whole national library system

A **internal:** which publics visit the “model” library (regularly and not)? Where do they come from, through which means? What are they inclined to forego in order to visit a library (cost- opportunity analysis)?

B **context-oriented:** reference to the social background (cities / conglomerates?); regional analysis based, for instance, on the Partnership agreements between the European Commission and the Member States;

C **sectoral-oriented:** how are best practices applied in fields that are felt as similar to libraries (school system, other cultural institutions, etc.).

3.2

What Does "Best" Really Cost?

The cost of the Oodi Library in Helsinki (631,000 inhabitants) was €98 million in 2018; the cost of requalifying the Aarhus docks (Urban Mediaspace project – a new library, a citizen service centre, automatic parking for 1,000 cars and new harbour-side public squares) was € 280 million (Aarhus population: 336 000 inhabitants).

In Italy, three cities are going to develop an important library infrastructure thanks to the EU Next Generation Fund (National Plan for Recovery and Resilience). The city of Milan (1,3 million inhabitants) is building a new green library worth 101 million euro to remediate a brownfield site. The new library in Turin (836 000 inhabitants) consists of a new library with 18 branches and 2 buses (€95 million Euro). And finally, the whole library infrastructure in Rome is upgraded, with the renovation and redistribution of public spaces in its 21 branches (€ 50 million Euro) follow different concepts: systemic in Turin and Rome, iconic in Milan.

Not many cities in Europe can afford such ambitious buildings and library concepts.

Be Inspired

Scalability involves the capacity to adapt successful practices to different sizes, budgets, and contexts without compromising quality or impact. The key question is not whether a practice can be transferred, but how it can be scaled effectively. This leads to three strategic operations: disaggregation, contraction, and replacement.

- ☑ **Disaggregation.** Innovation often comes as a package of activities, some core and some supplementary. The question is: What components of a successful practice are indispensable, and which are context-dependent? Would a library project be as impactful without its integration with a metro line or its location in a commercial center? How much of the success is tied to continuous political support?

Recommendation: Isolate the core elements that drive success and assess their potential for transfer without relying on context-specific factors.

- ☑ **Contraction.** Projects with large budgets are often perceived as unscalable. The challenge is to determine to what extent the essence of a €100 million initiative can be captured in a €10 million or even a €1 million version.

Recommendation: Focus on distilling the core impact mechanisms and reframe them as smaller, modular actions that can be implemented incrementally.

- ☑ **Replacement.** Scalability is not just about reducing size but about rethinking key components. What core functions can be replicated through externalization, local partnerships, or internal training? Can costly infrastructure be substituted with digital solutions or community-driven initiatives?

Recommendation: Identify costly elements and explore alternative methods to achieve similar outcomes using local resources, digital platforms, or capacity-building.

Scalability is not a question of size but of structure, allowing impactful practices to be reshaped, resized, and redeployed across diverse settings.



Library Expenditure Calculator

Relevant for the calculation of library capacity, related to their context is the Library Expenditure Calculator. It is devised by Rete delle Reti and developed by SBNEM. It is a calculator and an indicator at the same time, since it adopts an algorithm based on indicators that are both endogenous and exogenous to the library world. Library expenditure per capita is adjusted to the number of inhabitants in a specific city, region or nation, and their related GDPs.

<https://retedellereti.org/calculators/>

3.3 *The Library Indicator Gap*

The library world lacks indicators that would help the transfer of best practice and facilitate their adoption in an adequate way. When they exist, statistics are endogenous (library visitors, circulated documents, etc.) and, in most cases, rarely take into account data related to the library environment (demographic, economic, social indicators). Reference to economic information (national or local GDP, government expenditure) is usually missing and the economic impact of libraries on their urban or rural environment is often underestimated or not provided at all. This gap does not only impact on library advocacy; it is also a major impediment to the optimal transfer of a best practice. Transfer processes should be well-informed and realistic.

On the other hand, the breadth of LibrarIN case studies performed and use cases of value-co-creation and social innovation made available in the what-works database to inspire libraries, shows that libraries offer broad and innovative services to serve their communities and tackle societal challenges.⁸ At the same time, they are neglected in terms of public budgets, or public budgets are unequally distributed across libraries in different municipal settings.

⁸ D3.2 Digital transformation and ICT v2.0 <https://librarin.eu/download/21791/?tmstv=1736857031>

D3.5 Social entrepreneurship, public-private networks & social innovation v2.0 <https://librarin.eu/download/21794/?tmstv=1736857055>

D3.8 Living labs for co-creation and co-innovation v2.0 <https://librarin.eu/download/21797/?tmstv=1736857084>



Be Inspired

A best practice should adopt exogenous indicators – indicators that, albeit relevant, are not part of the library sector. These indicators may be:

- **of general nature** (economic, demographic), and should be applied systematically to any endogenous indicator in order to facilitate comparison;
- **of specific nature** and linked to the implementation of EU programmes, for instance the European Social Pillar (highly relevant for libraries). Eurostat maintains some 20 indicators linked with the European Social Pillar (Social Score Board).

Policy Recommendation

Budgets for public libraries should reflect demographic indicators e.g. x square meters of public library space per 10.000 inhabitants. Investments in libraries should not be infrequent and arbitrary, but there should be a high European standard of library equipment in relation to population and social indicators.

The LibrarIN policy tracker

A specific library tracker, connecting both European and National policies, is the LibrarIN Library Policy Tracker. It monitors the extent to which EU-level recommendations and policies are being applied by EU Member States in their national legislation, policies, and strategies. To achieve this, the tracker transforms the most recent policy documents into operational checklists with Yes/No indicators aligned with the LibrarIN research areas and the project's conceptual framework.

The following reference points guide the tracker:

- **Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec (2023) 3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on library legislation and policy in Europe,**⁹
- **IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022,**¹⁰
- **The New European Bauhaus initiative.**¹¹

⁹ <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680aac6d6>

¹⁰ IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022: <https://repository.ifla.org/handle/20.500.14598/2006>

¹¹ New European Bauhaus: https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en

The dashboard consists of a set of indicators grouped into five dimensions that are aligned with the LibrarIN research areas and the conceptual framework on social innovation for a new generation of European libraries.

Each indicator includes a short title, a statement with a binary Yes/No answer, a link to an evidence source (such as a plan, policy, strategy, or guideline) for positive answers, and a space for additional information. The indicators focus on the national level, allowing for comparisons between countries regardless of their size.

LIBRARY POLICY TRACKER	AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DE	DK	EE	EL	ES	FI	FR	HR	HU	IE	IT	LT	LU	LV	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SE	SI	SK	
Participatory management and sustainable growth																												
Integration of libraries into national SDG frameworks	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Libraries as guardians of freedom of expression	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Libraries as places for dialog	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Promoting lifelong learning in libraries	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Resources to ensure adequate training of staff and users	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Safe and inclusive places for all kinds of minorities	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Digital innovation and AI																												
Digital skill and literacy development	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Integration of libraries in national AI strategy with ethical framework	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Libraries included in the national digital transformation strategy	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Promotion of ethical use of AI in libraries	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Social innovation																												
Collaboration among libraries and archives	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Collaboration with artistic, cultural and educational institutions	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations - NGOs	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Coordination with community development plans	●						●		●	●	●	●																●
Living labs																												
Co-creation support	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Community engagement for democratic participation	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Inclusive library solutions	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Resources to ensure innovation experiments	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Metrics and monitoring																												
Guidelines for performance measurement	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Impact assessment studies	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●
Reuse of information for policy and decision making	●					●	●		●	●	●	●																●

Figure 2: LibrarIN policy tracker, accessible at <https://librarin.eu/toolkit/library-policy-tracker/>

3.4

Aligning Best Practices with Local Needs

“Libraries are community builders and providers of informal education; therefore, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure co-ordination with development plans and strategies of national and local communities, each with their respective responsibilities and functions.”

(Coe Recommendation on Library Legislation and Policy in Europe).¹²

Community building also means fulfilling the needs of the population and to ally with actors implementing cultural and social policies at local level. Linking library activities with the Agenda 2030 implies an approach that is, at the same time, professional, social and political.¹³

- are promoters of population well-being (SDGs 1 and 3),
- fight against educational poverty and inequality in education, thus ensuring continued economic growth (SDGs 4 and 8),
- are agents of social inclusion and cohesion (SDGs 8 and 10),
- contrast the digital divide between different strata of the population through their information literacy activities (SDG 9),
- are places of culture and resistance to urban decay (SDG 11),
- contribute to the growth of the democratic dimension through their information policies,
- encourage democratic participation (SDG 16. 7) and protect fundamental freedoms (16.10); finally,
- they contribute to territorial public policies and social partnership (SDG 17).

Does a European map of local needs exist? Which specific issues should be pursued when referring to “communities” in a local perspective?

¹² <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680aaced6>

¹³ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>



Be Inspired

European Commission Partnership Agreements

A series of key documents released by the European Commission, known as Partnership Agreements, serve as essential tools for libraries to map local needs and translate them into concrete library policies. These agreements, which are central to regional European policies, offer valuable guidance for libraries to ensure their strategies align with broader national and EU priorities. Libraries can leverage these documents to identify potential funding opportunities and tailor their services to meet local challenges effectively.

Towards demand driven innovation

While libraries are facing increasing demands to innovate to address societal challenges, the traditional top-down approach to public service design is becoming less effective. This shift highlights the need for demand-driven innovation in library services, where the focus moves from pre-determined solutions to actively engaging stakeholders throughout the entire innovation process.

The LibrarIN project empowers innovators in libraries, both policymakers and practitioners, providing them with a theoretical framework, new evidence and metrics, policy recommendations and tools. The LibrarIN framework offers a 4-phased approach to encourage effective collaboration for library innovation, throughout the entire innovation process: from planning and design to implementation and evaluation.¹⁴ Emphasizing the importance of engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including end- users, other libraries, and organizations in the public, private, and non-governmental sectors to meet the local needs.

¹⁴ LibrarIN Policy Brief "Boosting and evaluating collaborative innovations in libraries: managerial guidelines and policy implications." Publicly available in May 2025

The figure below offers a framework that describes the different phases that libraries should consider following to promote this type of activities, then describes the fundamental activities that libraries may follow in each phase.

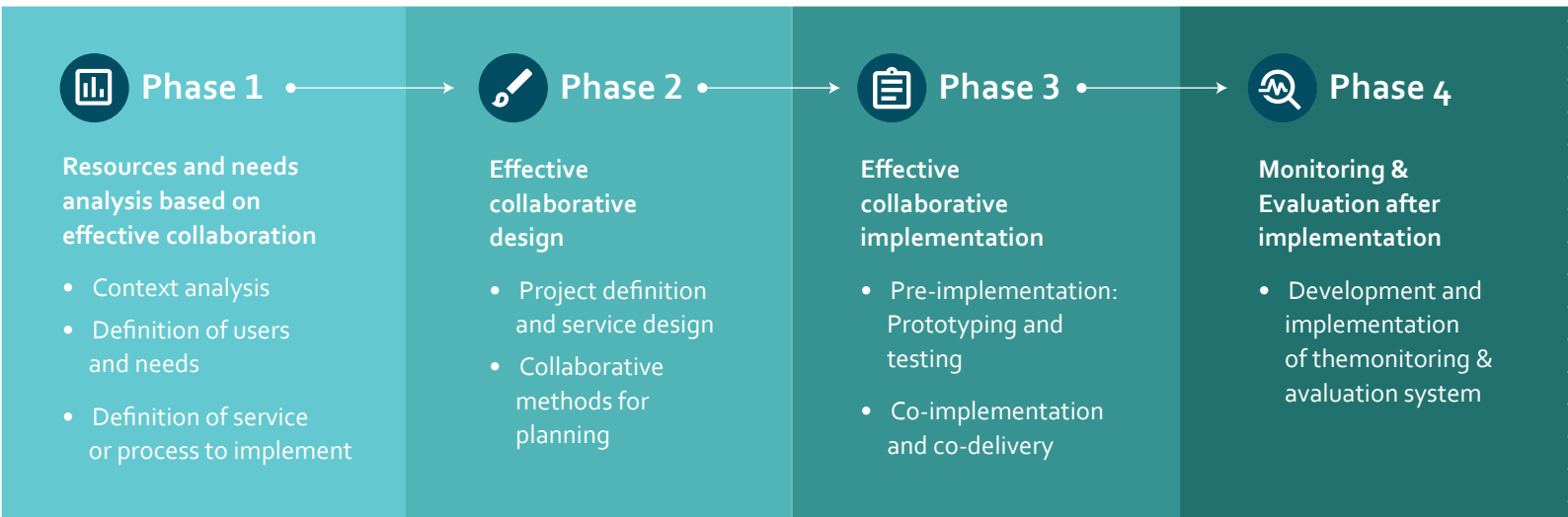


FIGURE 3: managerial recommendations for effective collaboration in libraries. Based on: Arnstein 1969 Atkinson 2019; Parson 2016; Pots et al 2021; Lavoie 2022

The LibrarIN What-works Database

A key output of this initiative is the "What-works database," a curated collection of successful use cases demonstrating value co-creation and social innovation within European libraries. This database serves as a dynamic resource, providing inspiration adaptable to local needs:

- **Inspiration for localized innovation:** Providing real-world examples that can be adapted and implemented in different library settings.
- **Evidence of effective collaboration:** Demonstrating the tangible benefits of co-creation and stakeholder engagement in driving meaningful change.
- **A platform for knowledge exchange:** Facilitating the sharing of successful strategies and lessons learned across the European library landscape.

By showcasing concrete examples of "what works," the database moves beyond theoretical discussions and provides actionable insights for fostering collaborative innovation. It underscores the importance of learning from successful implementations and adapting them to specific local contexts, aligning with the broader goals of the LibrarIN project to empower a new generation of European libraries.

The screenshot displays the LibrarIN What-works Database interface. On the left, a 'Filters' sidebar allows users to refine results by Theme (Metrics and monitoring (2), Living labs (5), Social Innovation (10), Participatory management ... (6), Digital innovation and AI (6), Other (4)), Country (Latvia (4), Germany (5), Denmark (1), Italy (1), Netherlands (2), Sweden (2)), Type of Library (Community or Special (1), Academic (4), Municipal (12), National (4), Other (1)), Year of Launch (1983 to 2025), and Stage of Initiative (Finished (8), Implementation (12)). The main content area features a map of Europe with data points, a search bar, and three featured case studies: 'Biographical storytelling cafes' (Reaching out to senior adults, Municipal, tags: Collaboration, inclusion, new user groups, senior users, social space), 'Bib Analytics' (A library dashboard with key metrics for monitoring and benchmarking Municipal with other libraries, tags: analytics, business intelligence, dashboards), and 'Döner Dialoge (=Kebab Dialogues)' (Outreaching and Community Engagement by the City Library Berlin-Pankow, Municipal, tags: Citizen Participation, Living Labs, Public Libraries).



Figure 4: Screenshot of the What-works database main page, accessible at <https://librarin.eu/toolkit/what-works-db/>

Policy recommendations

Drawing conclusions from the analysis of the challenges faced in library innovation best practices and their diffusion, TELL and LibrarIN propose the following policy recommendations, to foster a more collaborative, equitable, and impactful library ecosystem across Europe:

1 Promote and adopt the LibrarIN framework for demand-driven innovation in libraries.

Policymakers and library practitioners should adopt and implement the LibrarIN 4-phased approach to foster effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders throughout the library innovation process, from planning to evaluation, to better meet local needs.

2 Adopt, sustain and maintain the LibrarIN "What-works database" and Policy Tracker at a European level.

These tools, designed to share examples of value co-creation and social innovation and monitor the implementation of EU-level recommendations, should be supported and promoted as resources for library professionals and policymakers to inspire demand-driven innovation across Member States. Synergies should be sought with the European and National library initiatives and associations.

3 Promote the use of indicators in library evaluation and comparison.

To facilitate the adoption of good practices, libraries and policymakers should adopt general (economic, demographic) and specific (linked to EU programs like the European Social Pillar) exogenous indicators alongside traditional endogenous library statistics. This will enable a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding of library performance and replicability of successful initiatives.

4 Establish European standards for library infrastructure investment based on demographic and social indicators

Public library budgets and investments should be tied to demographic indicators, such as a minimum standard of public library space per capita and consider relevant social indicators. This would ensure a more equitable distribution of resources and a consistent baseline for library equipment and facilities across different regions.

5 Promote demand-driven innovation, to ensure local needs are met.

Policymakers should encourage and support local libraries in using European Commission Partnership Agreements as a resource to understand and address specific local needs and integrate them into their policies and service development. The TELL and LibrarIN initiatives provide valuable tools and collaboration guidelines for library practitioners and policymakers.

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