**Fighting Back with Democracy**

# Fighting back with Democracy

Enhancing World's Social and Civic Infrastructure for Promoting Democracy Concepts and Practices

**HOW LIBRARIES CAN ENHANCE DEMOCRACY IN SMALL COMMUNITIES / INSIGHTS INTO THE EDUCAB METHODOLOGY AND INTERVENTIONS**

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Photo credit: © Ioana Moldovan

# Preamble

The picture is taken in front of the Romanian Government Building in Victory Square in Bucharest. The protester is Claudiu, and he is a good friend. He is one of the hundreds of thousands of Romanians that took the streets of the main cities in Romania for the last two years. The citizens protested against various measures taken by the current Governmental majority that try to interfere and weaken the judicial independence. This is of course a good and useful movement and attitude, but one need to face the fact that protests are one of the last actions to consider when democracy is under siege. So, one of the questions worth asking is, what can one do to avoid such critical situations?

One needs to work on building complementary narratives and tools for defending and protecting democracy, on a recurrent basis. We, as a civilization, need to fight against potential abuses and our claim is that small corrections within the democratic dynamic, and how we approach it, are needed for this. We should aim to have the right to protest anytime, but build such contexts that will not require reaching such boiling points, or at least not too frequently.

The present research is intended to explore what needs to be done before societies reach such critical phases.

# Context

Yes, democracy is under a siege all over the planet, this we know. From Brazil to the U.S., from the UK to France and Italy, to Poland, Hungary, or Romania, to Taiwan or Hong-Kong, and dozens of other countries, populism, traditionalism, bigotry, authoritarianism, and extremist movements are not merely fighting for their right to express their way of being, but they are also trying to enforce the hegemony of their narratives.

This sounds like a scary perspective and a grotesque painting from the universe of Hieronymus Bosch. Nevertheless, this is not actually the whole image of how our world looks like now. Yes, we are seeing few faces that are forcing the means of power in the name of the many, moving their countries and territories in more dictatorial dynamics. Yes, we are hearing this news all over the media. But let's look around more carefully, in our communities, let's look at our neighbors and their neighbors. Or let's look inside the communities we've visited around our countries and around continents. We very seldom see people in fight mode, people not talking to each other, people attacking each other. And this, because the majority of world's population lives in peace and wants peace. What is missing is for these voices to be heard; this majority of people is not vocal nor is engaged in the decision-making process of the dynamic of their streets, of their communities, of their countries. Those few wanting and doing bad things are only able to do so because the overwhelming many who want the *good* to flourish are actually not vocal. They are silent. This silent majority is more likely to remain in survival mode, in its comfort zone, until it reaches the boiling point and that's when usually people get into the streets, but not necessarily as a democratic exercise but as a last resort. These people might not trust democracy anymore, as democracy would be an organism in itself and disconnected from those that is provoking it, which is the people, i.e. us, all of us. They might not trust it also because they might not understand what is it, how can they translate it in their daily life, apart from the narratives of the politicians and academic discourse (something that I will discuss more into details it in the next chapters).

We seem to not trust ourselves anymore as the primary architects and engineers of democracy. And this is good. Instead of mourning and getting prepared for the funeral of this democratic version of civilization in the last 2500 years, we might as well take it as a challenge, as a "good" crisis.

This is where things need to and will change. We need to reinvent, rediscover, and continue to question the concepts and practices of democracy, because it is the only tool which proved to successfully unleash the astonishing potential of human creativity for making the world a better place.

We owe this to the ancient Athenians that took to the streets in 508 BC, fighting for their rights, and to Cleisthenes that invented this imperfect but fascinating mechanism that praises the coexistence of diversity. We owe it to *democracy*. We owe it to all the extraordinary achievements of modern civilization during thousands of years of existence (before and after Cleisthenes), and we owe it to those that will come after us. We owe them a functional world so they can uncover and develop new layers of humbleness and beauty, building on what we will leave to them as a legacy. And yet we will continue to make mistakes, just as we did since the riot of those brave Athenians. But we will make fewer mistakes if more people participate in this journey of democracy.

## Why libraries?

We need more spaces that will facilitate the right dynamic for civic and citizenship initiatives to occur. And for that, we should rely more on the power of networks and network of networks. Ones that exist or others that we need to invent.

As for what can be build right away, one should consider looking at what can be activated within the existing social and civic infrastructure, both because it is already there and also because it did not reach its full potential yet.

Take, for instance, the library system. Here we have a space easily recognizable anywhere on the planet, usually perceived as neutral if not positive, open to the general public and tremendously versatile when related to the type of informational content it can mediate with the communities it serves.

Libraries, especially those in smaller communities, have great advantages, such as: a) not having a curriculum, therefore having the time and space to diversify their actions with no major constraints; and b) since the librarians already know the members of the community (especially in the small ones), therefore, through the library it is facile to target various audiences, depending on the needs at the local level.

But among all the advantages of libraries one is so obvious that we easily forget about it: the libraries are one of the first and very few remaining truly democratic spaces in the world[1]. Or, as Tony Marx, president of the New York Public Library, once put it, *the library is quietly one of the places that are saving democracy*[2]. Libraries are repositories of staggeringly diverse content, through the books and other informational material they deliver to the public, access to the internet (in those libraries where it is active), accessibility of the physical space as a social and learning space, not to mention that libraries are open to anyone, and also they are tremendous enter gates to communities. They can be *Agoras* in the ways they are functioning, as also significant contributors to the life of the larger *Agoras,* of the communities themselves.

Continuing this line of thought, the focus in this study is to grasp the potential of the existing social and civic infrastructure as a whole, and specifically the one of public libraries, to enhance the civic participation and community engagement in local (mainly small, rural) communities.

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[1] With the condition for the libraries to do their job well, and to be inside countries where there is some sort of democratic regime and system, in place. In dictatorships, people and institutions are subject to perversion, including, or especially libraries. Or, as Erik Klinenberg puts it, *recently, authoritarian political leaders who understand the power of popular gathering places in their own nations have targeted them for attack. A recent article by the social scientists Brent Eng and José Ciro Martínez showed that in Syria, Bashar al-Assad "has consistently targeted public infrastructures in opposition-held areas, including bakeries, hospitals, markets and schools." His goal, they explained, is not merely causing physical damage, "but also interrupting and undermining everyday practices" of rebel forces and the communities they're attempting to organize. Destroying these vital places atomizes and depresses those who want to rebuild a better, more open society. It helps despotism reign. President Trump obviously hasn't bombed his domestic enemies, but through proposed funding cuts his administration has indeed attacked the places where Americans of all stripes gather—our libraries, our schools, our parks, our arts and culture organizations. These moves can only deepen our divisions and degrade our public life. [...] The question before us is what we will do tomorrow. Before we lift the next shovel, we should recognize that what we really need to protect, what we really need to repair, is society itself.* In Worry Less About Crumbling Roads, More About Crumbling Libraries, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/worry-less-about-crumbling-roads-more-about-crumbling-libraries/570721/ (accessed February 22, 2019).

[2] Jenny Anderson. *'American democracy is fracturing. Libraries say they know how to help'*, October 5, 2018, https://qz.com/1401665/can-libraries-save-america/ (accessed January 23, 2019).

# Goal of the study

The main goal of the study is to grasp the potential of libraries to initiate, curate, and foster critical thinking-based knowledge, democratic practices, and also exposure to diversity focused contexts that will contribute to enhancing community-oriented and civic engagement practices around the world (especially in small communities).

# Democracy and libraries in small communities

**I.    Democracy in small communities**

    **A.    Democracy and its forgotten and neglected *institutions* and *practices* in small communities**

*It's a nice day in the foothills of the Romanian Carpathians, a family is working on its plot of land, picking the hay. They've already had their lunch, on the freshly cut grass. In around one hour they should finish the work and they can get back to the village, and take care of feeding their horse, the two cows, and the poultry. The two dogs they have, they are with them, wandering around in the nearby forest. Two more hayricks and they are ready for the day. What happens next is that clouds are forming quickly and is very likely it will start to rain. That's the moment when all the family is rushing away, grabbing their tools, and, without prior talking to each other, they get to their neighbors' plot of land; they have a lot of unpicked hay and they will not be able to finish the work before the rain will start, which will be happening in a matter of minutes. Now, there are ten people working intensely, and each of the newcomers is going to places not covered by the neighbors yet. No one is organizing the work, they just know who needs to go where and what to do. They manage to finish the hayricks seconds before the rain starts. They all gather and start laughing, "that was a close one." They exchange a few more words, salute each other, and then the two families separate, each going on different paths to their homes. This picture is still a normality in many rural communities in Romania and in other parts of the world, and no one will*

*ever say they should give a name to what they were just doing. It's such an inbuilt custom that is not even talked about too much with others. Of course, they were helping the others, when needed; they could have been easily in the same situation.*[3]

The picture drawn above is one of countless examples of situations one can witness anywhere on the planet, from the remote communities in the Eastern part of Flores island, in Lamalera, Indonesia, where once a year the most skilled men go to catch large fish for the benefit of the whole community, to the incredibly beautiful Lugarawa area, in SW Tanzania, where the entire community puts its energies together to dig two-kilometer trenches to get the water to the local school in Ugera village. There were no discussions on how much each member should get involved, they just did it. Is there a need for two more classes for the school in the village? Then, the natural response of Ugera citizens is to start making bricks and get the sand and other materials needed during the construction phase.

Do the peasants from the rural foothills of the Romanian Carpathians call their practices of helping others when in need civic? Are they making any connections with the democratic practices which are discussed in the media and in academia? Do Lamalera and Ugera people have any clue that what they are doing is a tremendous example of democracy in action? Do the Maasai herders from Kenya and Tanzania know that their *osotua* network is an example of citizenship and community bond, which are prerequisites for functional community dynamics and, by extension, for a functional democracy?[4]

For sure, they do not use the same words, and is very likely they do not even make any connection between their style of living, the way they are relating to the issues they are facing

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[3] There is an initiative worth mentioning here, namely, The Human Generosity Project, aiming to *'examine why and how human cooperation, in the form of generosity, threads its way through different cultures'*, see more in Leah Shaffer, *Is a more generous society possible?* https://www.sapiens.org/culture/ik-people-generosity/, (accessed, February 21, 2019). In this article, the author is giving various examples of communities helping each other as an inbuilt mechanism, *'of cooperation and risk-pooling strategies',* or as the author put it: '*Looking across communities, Townsend and other Human Generosity Project researchers have concluded that the world is not divided into generous versus selfish societies. Rather, charity and reciprocity are baked into human civilization. It's the mix of cooperation and risk-pooling strategies (such as account keeping, need-based transfer, or market-based insurance) that varies—and it's probable that societies benefit from combining them.'*
[4] See more on Maasai's *osotua* network in Leah Shaffer, idem.

on a daily basis, or how they solve problems as a community, and the usually abstract, *far away from them, democracy* concepts and practices, which they mainly experience when they are asked to give their vote to some politicians, or when they are interacting with rather rigid governmental agencies. The risks of dismissing and disregarding *democracy* as a useful set of practices and vital system of governance is higher also when such communities are disconnected from the larger communities around them, and from the decision-making processes from regional and national levels, which affect their daily and mid-term life dynamic.

It is something I would call *democracy distance* that I would define as a space between what one knows and proactively uses from established democracy narrative and practices, but also the degree in which citizens are able to understand and consequently frame their local heritage of customs and practices within their communities as essentially *democratic* instances[5].

It is paramount to look under the magnifying glass at the democratic communities that do not know they are democratic, who live democratically but don't give a definition to their ways of living; it is about looking at the way bridges are being built between their way of living and those that confiscated democracy meaning within a rather prolix academic narrative or often empty political talk. It is also about those not-democratic communities which are nevertheless showing evidence of disconnected but *civic-like* practices which can be used for building democratic experiences and even small civic ecosystems in small

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[5] A larger discussion here would need to also encompass a reference to the power distance index, as developed by Geert Hofstede, by considering *democracy distance* and *power distance* like multifocal lenses, not overlapping in meaning and utility/function, but giving important insights one to the other (this will make the subject of a different article). Specifically, since is more likely for democracies to function and flourish in low power distance societies, the need is to foster contexts for people to make bridges between their democratic actions, but not framed as being *democratic* (i.e. their actual power and the actual day to day evidence of influencing the environment around them and of the communities they are part of), and the established narratives of democracy. It might be a case of intervening by operating small changes with potentially high impact, such as reinterpreting the semantics of *democracy*.

communities[6]. The reason for such an approach is to have a more realistic and fair view of the state of democracy in the world, encompassing also the local flavors, within small communities[7]. Because, especially there, there are constant overlaps in between strong customs and traditions, but also reminiscence of traditional and localized ways of relating among community members[8], and the dominant, established culture and knowledge of governance and democracy.

In our work and research[9] within EduCaB team, we have very often travelled to small, remote places where people do not know who is the president of their country, who is the prime minister, or cannot name at least one member of their Parliament. We have been to communities where citizens did not visit governmental institutions (regional or national), in years. Nevertheless, in many instances, there are communities with a high level of

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[6] Or *everyday routines*, as they are named within the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, namely, *citizens can turn everyday routines into democratic practices that give them more control over their future.* Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research, started in 1927 by the American inventor Charles F. Kettering. The primary research question of the organization is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. More on https://www.kettering.org/about (accessed January 13, 2019).

[7] For reports and the methodology used in measuring the state of democracy in the world, one should consider studies from institutions like Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019, accessed April 12), or V-Dem Institute (https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf, accessed April 14).

[8] One can consider here decision-making processes in Cameroon (Baka people), the artisan democratic societies of Colombia in the 19th century, the ancient forms of deliberation, as found in the oldest codes of Albania, the *Pacific ways of talk' in New Zealand,* the Romanian *sfat,* the *Landsgemeinde*, or cantonal assembly, in the Swiss public space, the *Thing* and *Althing* assemblies in Iceland and many other forms of informal and sometimes formalized institutions and practices. More in Ileana Marin (ed.), *Collective Decision Making Around the World* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 2006

[9] Via the EduCaB institutional framework, methodology and program. EduCaB is an institutional capacity building mechanism aiming to catalyze the educational and local development opportunities within communities, through maximizing the organizational & educational potential of public libraries, as part of the larger social and civic infrastructure. See more on http://educab.org/, (accessed on June 14).

community bonds, genuine civic interactions, and habits and customs that look *democratic.* But since we, those from outside of those places, are not exchanging any or very little information with such communities, we might end up disregarding such people as equal contributors to our democratic societies. And we might remain exposed and using mainly our dominant knowledge and experience (including when interacting with them) that will function both from the big national cultures towards the small national cultures, and from urban cultures (geographical centers) to small urban and rural cultures (geographical peripheries). And this is why there will be higher chances to disregard their knowledge on construction, farming, crafts, the way they resolve disputes, the way they relate to their environment, to their (mental and physical) health, and to one another. Or, in most of the cases that we know, these practices are not captured and, once lost, we cannot get back to them. And, once lost, they will also affect the actual DNA of that community, alienating it, and making it more vulnerable to the negative influences, both internal and external, which, without a proper filtering and accommodation, will raise the chances of losing its identity and eventually fail as a community[10].

Take the example of the beautiful and self-sustainable Soalia village in SW Bangladesh where we, from the EduCaB team, were the first non-Bangladeshi people ever to be seen by the local population, back in 2016, when we visited the place. We went there for the launching of the Masud Parves Library, the first privately financed library in the region, supported also by EduCaB, project initiated and led by our friend and partner, Sayed, Assistant Town Planner, in Khulna. There, among many others things, we learned about their complex system of recycling and using the water from the Monsoon both for domestic use but also for agricultural purposes. What happens if the knowledge of the local architects that built the intricate matrix of reservoirs will not be passed on to the new generations, and is not captured anywhere else? How can those *smaller-scale democracies* can survive if they are

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[10] And, of course, here is where institutions such as local libraries, museums and other organizations from the social and civic infrastructure can play an important role to first capture and second to assure the exposure of the citizens (youth or adults) to their own heritage, identity, and local wisdom.

losing their fiber? We will use this term, i.e. *smaller scale democracies*, to refer to small communities acting *democratically,* or showing genuine inherited practices that are in themselves civic, without necessarily knowing they are like that, since they use different names, and sometimes no names--as we have detailed above--for the way in which they behave and work together as a group, as a community. And we are not saying that Soalia is a democracy; we are saying that it is showing signs of *small-scale democracies* that might teach us better lessons of democracies from this traditional Bangladeshi community than from some village in an EU country. Take for instance the way Sayed managed to involve the entire community and actually giving the ownership of Masud Parves Library to the villagers, to the citizens of Soalia. Namely, in building the organizational and governance mechanism for the library, Sayed established a board of directors, with a president (the most respected person in the village, the chief of the community), in which he invited the wise people and the professors of the village to be members. He then advertised in the region that the library is going to be opened soon, and it has one librarian position available. In this very remote and conservative area in Bangladesh, everybody knew about the big event, and some wanted to work within the new organization, applying for the vacancy. Not to mention that many of them were already directly participating in transforming Sayed's idea into reality. One of them donated the land, others participated with funds, others with materials, others with labor, or food for the workers. And this is not all: on the launching day, Sayed announced and invited the whole community to come. So here we are, around 80 to 100 people gathered in front of the building, with Sayed telling them that it is not his project but it's their project, and it's their duty to protect this new institution they have in Soalia, which should be a neutral one, that will give access to general knowledge to both children and adults. And, then, he invited them to all raise their arms and say that they will defend Masud Parves Library. And all, at once, raised their hands and in one voice they repeated the words. One time, two times, three times. After that, the recruiting process started: we had a few candidates and, after seeing them, we had an evaluation talk; all the wise men were there, the local leaders, and the professors. And it was them who did not accept one of the candidates because they said she was centered on the religious education, which was not what they were envisioning

for the library. These things are happening all around the world, maybe in all communities. We just need to have the eyes and ears to see and hear them, and to nurture them.

Losing these practices and customs can lead to smaller or larger scale demographic, social, relational, and economic disasters, both for those communities and for the surrounding, bigger ones.

In a discussion we had in May 2019 with the community leaders of the Somali clans in Dadaab area, in NE Kenya, one of them told us that 80% of the local heritage in the area is completely lost. This was a remark after we presented our initiative of starting, with their involvement, a smart library for the host communities in Dadaab, initially centered on collecting local knowledge and wisdom from the region. Now, let's imagine what does it mean to rebuild the social fiber in that area using 20% of what is left? What does it mean to have 80% burns on our bodies? Are we even talking about making ourselves healthy in such cases, or merely struggling to remain alive? It might be the same case with communities, since communities are also living organisms. They need healthy parts to survive, and then to strive.

Including the inbuilt democratic customs from small communities into the larger established narrative and picture of the local, national, and continental democracies is not an exercise of humbleness and political correctness. It is rather a proof that we understand the complexities of the ecosystems that we have framed under the national dominant narratives, starting with the 19th Century. It is also an opportunity to learn valuable lessons from such communities and to highlight them as best practices within the dynamic and complex organism that democracy is. It is also a hint and responsibility to not leave these communities and their citizens behind, not necessarily because we morally owe it to them, but mainly because the state of health of these communities (of their citizens and their informal and formal institutions and practices) is an indicator of the state of health of big communities also, of us all, of our countries, and the world as a whole. Especially because small communities (the peripheries) used to and will continue to feed the larger communities (the centers) for the next hundreds of years. We owe it to us as a civilization.

### B. Democracy, its main indicators, and how we connect them with libraries in small communities

In the chapter above, I have briefly showed how in small communities one needs to use complementary narratives to grasp the different nuances of available democratic practices. Some of them are coming from the type of regime that the country has[11], some from the local customs and habits within the communities, while others are borrowed and adapted from other communities or countries[12]. And they all create a mix that shapes the local social dynamic and, consequently, the economic, political, and sometimes the cultural landscape of that particular place.

Therefore, our approach in EduCaB, towards democracy in small communities is rather centered on *breaking* the concept of democracy into operational indicators, to which citizens can easily relate, in their recurrent practices. We then can see what resources are available to be used that we can build on; also, we can more easily see what is of higher importance to the inhabitants of that particular place. Take, for instance, voting: yes, it is a universal right and should be always defended. But how critical it actually is for a remote community in Western Nepal? How is this small group of maybe 30-40 persons, living rather isolated in the highlands of Himalaya, benefit from their vote once every now and then? What about if we talk to them first about their rights to cultural expression, access to education, to health services? What about the right to their land for indigenous groups in the Amazon basin, or in Papua New Guinea? What about if we open the subject of freedom of expression in their native language, to the Ixil community in Chajul area, in Guatemala? In all cases, we are

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[11] And we will use the taxonomy of the V-Dem Institute, the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, namely: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, closed autocracy. We also relate to all principles of democracy, i.e. liberal, consensual, deliberative, majoritarian, egalitarian, and participatory. More here, https://www.v-dem.net/en/news-publications/democracy-reports/ (accessed April 24, 2019).

[12] By citizens going to work in other regions/countries and returning to their families and adapting certain practices and models to their villages or towns.

talking about democracy; in all cases, people will be able to easily relate to *democracy* because it is something they are affected by and willing to stand for.

We are therefore more interested in the ecosystem of how democracy is translated in the daily routines[13], since our approach is mainly practical. We do not want to study what is the state of democracy in the rural areas where we are going, but rather identify those areas related to various indicators of democracy, where neutral, therefore more probably accepted, recurrent interventions will enhance the context for people to be able to gain or further develop those habits that will make them act as citizens, *coming together to address common problems and produce public goods[14]*.

We have looked at 47 indices, and over 350 specific indicators, as captured in the research work on democracy of V-Dem Institute, the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden[15]. We got to the following short list of indices that we will use with priority, when discussing the potential of the social and civic infrastructure to nurture democratic practices and habits in small communities:

**Indices:**

- Freedom of expression (to what extent does government respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression?),

- Freedom of association (to what extent are parties, including opposition parties, allowed to form and to participate in elections, and to what extent are civil society organizations able to form and to operate freely?),

- Clean elections (to what extent are elections free and fair?),

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[13] Or *ordinary routines*, as used by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in the playbill, under 'work of citizens in communities', '*recognize possibilities for ordinary routines to become the democratic practices used to do the work of citizens and to create community-learning environments.* More on the institute's website, https://www.kettering.org/ (accessed January 14, 2019).

[14] As framed by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in the playbill, under 'work of citizens in communities'.

[15] See their Codebook, at https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/e6/d2/e6d27595-9d69-4312-b09f-63d2a0a65df2/v-dem_codebook_v9.pdf (accessed May 16, 2019)

- Equality before the law and individual liberty (to what extent are laws transparent and rigorously enforced and public administration impartial, and to what extent do citizens enjoy access to justice, secure property rights, freedom from forced labor, freedom of movement, physical integrity rights, and freedom of religion?),

- Civil Society participation (are major CSOs routinely consulted by policymakers; how large is the involvement of people in CSOs; are women prevented from participating; and is legislative candidate nomination within party organization highly decentralized or made through party primaries?),

- Equal protection (how equal is the protection of rights and freedoms across social groups by the state?),

- Equal access (how equal is access to power?),

- Equal distribution of resources (how equal is the distribution of resources?).[16]

When **indicators** are considered, the following were chosen:

- under deliberation: reasoned justification, common good, respect counterarguments, range of consultation, engaged society, particularistic or public goods;
- Under civil liberty: freedom of academic and cultural expression, freedom of religion, transparent laws with predictable enforcement, freedom of foreign movement, freedom of domestic movement for both men and women, freedom of discussion, freedom from forced labor, property rights, access to justice, social class and group equality in respect for civil liberties;
- Under sovereignty/State: domestic autonomy, international autonomy;
- Under civil society: CSO entry and exit, repression, consultation, women's participation, anti-system movement character, religious organization repression;

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[16] For the full list of indices, see https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/e6/d2/e6d27595-9d69-4312-b09f-63d2a0a65df2/v-dem_codebook_v9.pdf (accessed May 16, 2019)

- Under media: government censorship effort, internet censorship effort, print/broadcast media critical, print/broadcast media perspectives, female journalists, media self-censorship, media bias, media corrupt;
- Under political equality: power distributed by socio-economic position, power distribution by social group, power distribution by gender and sexual orientation, educational equality, health equality;
- Under exclusion: power distributed by urban-rural location, gender equality in respect for civil liberties, access to public services distributed by social groups, gender, socio-economic position, urban-rural location, access to jobs;
- Under women's empowerment: women political empowerment and participation, women civil liberties, women civil society participation;
- Under rule of law: access to justice, property rights;
- Under others: freedom of discussion, alternative sources of information, addressing natural disasters[17].

The list above is shown only with title of example, since it should change depending on the progress of the civic and development work anyone would take in a small community, both including other indicators, and taking existing ones out. And this, since we are not talking about democracy but *about making democracy work as it should*, that is, instead of conceptualizing democracy, what if we create those organizational and community related contexts where residents in villages, small towns and neglected neighborhoods of large cities will have the opportunity to start acting as citizens, contributing to democracy by producing public goods (tangible and intangible)[18]?

Take the instance the case of a local theater play, organized in Titești, a village with around 400 inhabitants, in the central part of Romania. The event was organized via the public library, the librarian keeping in touch with the team from Cultură'n *Șură*[19], a team of

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[17] For the full list of indicators, see https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/e6/d2/e6d27595-9d69-4312-b09f-63d2a0a65df2/v-dem_codebook_v9.pdf (accessed May 16, 2019)

[18] Something that is at the core of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation mission, one of the very few research institutes in the world studying democracy and its practices.

[19] See more at http://culturansura.ro/ (accessed February 19, 2019).

professional actors promoting theater within rural households around Romania. Once the date for the event was chosen, the librarian, with the direct involvement of the mayor and his office, started the preparations, there were discussions in the village to find the most suitable household that would host the theater event, benches were brought from the village owned hall[20] where various events are taking place (mostly connected to religious occasions, such as Christening[21], funerals, remembrance events, or Christmas carols singing), the stage was made with wood given by the community, the electricity was possible from the Mayor's office, the accommodation and meals were assured by the local citizens in their houses. The event was announced during the Sunday church service and in no time, everybody knew about the big evening. This was the first time in 50 years a theater play was played in the area, with professional actors, professional stage and equipment. There were old women that we have talked to, which had memories from the last time they have seen a theater play in their village, in the 1960's. One woman, over 80 years old, got to the venue, 20 minutes after the beginning of the play, she was on the road not knowing where to come, we helped her find the place, and while she was excusing herself that she just then finished the work, feeding her animals (a cow and a few goats), and had to change with the *church clothes* (that is, the clothes used for special occasions), and also find money, we have asked why would she need money, since the access to the play was free of charge. She looked at us and she said, *"I thought we need to pay, at the theater you need to pay the ticket"*. This is a woman that never had the chance to go to a theater hall, in her life, never experienced watching a theater play in other venues, in her community or other places. Now, let's zoom in, within the venue where the actors were already starting to play *A marriage proposal*, by Anton Chekhov, the show for that night. There were more than 200+ people in the audience, and constant spontaneous outbursts of cheers and applause from an audience that was never exposed to such cultural experience, they have never stood all together as a community, in one place (apart from religious events during, maybe Easter and Christmas time). But somehow, they

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[20] It's worth mentioning the institution of *obște de moșneni*, an ancient formal entity in the Romanian Sub Carpathians area, each *obște* being formed from by the totality of residents from that village, which own legal rights of the foothills and alpine pastures and forests around them.
[21] All population in that village is formed by Christian, the majority being Orthodox Christians.

had similar reaction as an experienced audience in, for instance, London, Bucharest, Nairobi, or New York. One could see in the same place people of all ages, with different education and various jobs, all laughing at the same time while hearing the hilarious dialogue between Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov, Natalia Stepanova, and Stepan Stepanovitch Chubukov. The play was over and people were talking about the event months after it happened. Now, it is already a tradition, and the same team of actors is coming every year, with different show for the community. And if in the first year, the funds for paying the actors were covered from external sources, last year were covered by the community, and this year the funds were secured in the Mayor's office budget.

Now, this is one of the many examples (from various places in Romania and other countries) where the right context was created for the residents of a community to act as citizens, and get together for being not only consumers, but also the co-creators of an event that is now part of their annual calendar of celebrating the diversity of ideas, access to good quality culture and smart opportunities for interaction. The event is already a reason for pride in the area, and if you go there, any resident will tell you that is something they do, being already part of the village normality and story. And if we look at the list of indices and indicators discussed above, there were many of them which were tackled via this EduCaB generated initiative, via the library, and subsequently, the local community and institutions, i.e. freedom of expression, freedom of association, equal access, equal distribution of resources (as *indices*), and common goods, engaged society, freedom of cultural expression, freedom of discussion, women participation, freedom of discussion, alternative sources of information (as *indicators*). In Kettering Foundation's terms, such an event *passed the litmus test for a strong democracy* behavior, since the citizens acted *also as producers, working together to make public goods*, instead of being *just consumers or clients who are objects of the actions of others rather than agents themselves*.[22]

There are of course other benefits for the community, such as fighting loneliness and social isolation, the latter being an *objective lack of social relationships, networks, or contacts and*

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[22] As per Charles F. Kettering Foundation's playbill, under 'work of citizens in communities'

*access to information and resources[23], and both being threats to individuals, communities, and the nation. These two conditions kill people and cripple a democratic society - a society that depends on civic engagement in public matters. With this increasing lack of connectedness, civic - and civil - engagement are threatened.[24]* The approach for promoting democracy in Titești was by intervening in areas, such as loneliness and social isolation, where people are most vulnerable and affected by depopulation and lack of socializing opportunities in that village, as in numerous EU rural areas[25].

Or these might not be straight forward links to democracy and citizenship, if one argues that a theater play was hosted by a rural community in Romania, and now happens regularly. But within our approach, these are the actual main tools to tackle *democracy* in such places, by operationalizing and breaking it into pieces, ones that are making sense to those communities, ones they can easily relate to, and which are rooted in their *modus operandi,* their customs and traditions, while addressing common problems for which the citizens have available resources to overcome them. And they might need just a trigger, a context, which in return will activate the tremendous energy and potential that we see in these rather small, most of the time neglected communities.

What is the stake in such actions we are proposing to local communities, via the public library network? If not all the things enumerated above (*indices* and *indicators),* at least contributing to a better social cohesion in that village, which we define as: *the ongoing process of developing wellbeing, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and*

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[23] Wilson & Moulton, 2010, in Sue E. Williams, Bonnie Brain, *Loneliness and social isolation - a private problem*, p. 7, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331677412_Loneliness_and_Social_Isolation-A_Private_Problem_A_Public_Issue, (accessed June 3, 2019).

[24] Sue E. Williams, Bonnie Brain, *Loneliness and social isolation - a private problem, a public issue*, p. 8, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331677412_Loneliness_and_Social_Isolation-A_Private_Problem_A_Public_Issue, (accessed June 3, 2019).

[25] See the report, *Shrinking rural regions in Europe* by ESPON, European Union, https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/ESPON%20Policy%20Brief%20on%20Shrinking%20Rural%20Regions.pdf *(accessed June 1, 2019)*

*granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society[26].* Having a higher level of social cohesion, means more local *resources* for other more sophisticated interventions to be possible, with the involved of the citizens. It is like building a house, and one first builds the foundation, and then the walls and the roof. For us, in growing the EduCaB methodology, we are looking to follow these steps in all places where we are promoting democratic practices, but especially in the (usually) neglected small rural communities of the planet.

In the next chapter, I am going to zoom out from looking *within* communities, seen through their territorial attribute, to looking *at* the communities, seen through other lenses, ones which we are using when developing projects via EduCaB.

## II.     From communities as territories to communities as connections of values, and practices

### A.   How big are communities?

In January 2018, we were as EduCaB team, in an exploratory travel in Lugarawa area, near Malawi (Nyasa) lake, and one of the places we visited was Ugera, a village of around 500 people, in a rather isolated area in the hills of Ludewa district. We were brought there by Vitalis, a legend in itself, in his mid 60s, a tremendously energetic community mobilizer, former professor, later starting Lugarawa Teachers Resource Center, through which he initiated and helped fundraising for building new schools, rehabilitating a dozen of others,

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[26] Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2018), in E. Williams, Bonnie Brain, *Loneliness and social isolation - a private problem, a public issue*, p. 8, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331677412_Loneliness_and_Social_Isolation-A_Private_Problem_A_Public_Issue, (accessed June 3, 2019).

and many other activities developed for the benefit of the villages around. In the first seconds of talking to him, our brains activated all the childhood stories with the good wise men, and here he was, in flesh and bones, right in front of us.

Vitalis, got us in this village, exactly because it was more remote than others, with a school that could not accommodate the growing number of students in the community, with no access to running water, no proper cafeteria for the students to have lunch, no proper toilets, and many other issues the community was facing in terms of access and exposure to education. When we got there, after a 30 minutes ride on a curvy dirt road, we also learned details on how, during the school days, some kids are playing in front of the school until others are having classes, and then they switch, because of the lack of space. We also saw that all the residents were waiting for us, they all gathered at the school and they were looking forward to listening to what we have to say.

For us, this was not part of our kind request, i.e. looking more for rather informal and private discussions with the community leaders, with the professors and others that might be interested in talking about a joint project, in which together to enhance the contexts for exposing the local population to good quality recurrent information, knowledge, and expertise (via activating a public library).

But here we were, in front of everybody, with Vitalis explaining that it cannot and it should not be only the community leaders and chiefs, only the professors, and some other persons, it needs to be the whole community, because this was the *normality* in there, especially that the parents prepared a small dance for us, then the kids would perform a song or two, the elderly they also wanted to have a say, they will be gifts prepared for us and supported by everybody (fruits, rice, some bowls crafted locally, some chickens – which we have then donated to an orphanage, nearby Lugarawa).

And then, Vitalis, our friend and partner for the actions we have started in Tanzania, is asking us to address the citizens of Lugarawa. *They want*, he was telling us, *to hear some words from the dear guests they are so happy to greet and welcome in their village*. That was us. Below is

what we told them, not the exact words, but the perspective of how one can approach the notion and meaning of *community:*

> *How many people are in here? Five hundred? More? And how much land do you have in here? How many hectares? And how much air? And how much movement in the leaves, in the water, in the walking, in the hugging? And how many people left this place? There are those who left Ugera, they are in the villages around here. Some got married and others didn't. But they are all there, living their stories. There are those who left for the bigger cities to study, to work, to try something else. And there are those who left the country and left behind these lands; they are people of Ugera who are in the large world, in the countries we know or those we do not know. There are people who were not born here but now come here to share their goods with this community. There are those people that you invite to come and provide various amenities to this community. Others come here for various activities, there are people from other villages, from other cities, from other countries. There are people who did not come here but they gave something; they maybe gave a book or a chair for the school. Some of these people you do not know, but they invested their resources into something that was built for and in Ugera. And, of course, there are those who came and found their significant other here in Ugera, and are now living and building their lives here. Some people return, others don't.*

> *There are those you can call by their names, and those you only recognize when you see their faces. And there are the people you have already forgotten. There are people who wrote books or articles about this area and mentioned Ugera. Some are from institutions that inserted data on Ugera into official documents. There are those who drew maps of this place. There are the kids outside Ugera who mention this place while they are talking with other kids, or with their parents, and there are also adults who have memories from some time ago when they passed the area. Then there are friends of those who left, who got stories from here. And there are all the people who will hear about Ugera, from me.*

> *There are the politicians who asked for your votes, the teachers from other schools with whom you, the local teachers, are interacting. There are those to whom you are selling your*

*goods, what you produce here, vegetables, fruits, and all the rest. And please excuse me for being so straightforward but there are also the seeds that were taken by air from Ugera and got far away, or maybe only there, beyond that hill we see in the distance. And there are the animals that are wandering on your lands, the birds that we hear now, or those that are on their way, returning to these lands of yours, or just discovering it.*

*There are the bugs and the ants, the butterflies and the water molecules, the atoms from the soil, from your bones, the electrons that are now moving. And there are the dogs that greet you, always happy to see you back home. There are the babies in the womb, and right now those that are about to be conceived, or that are already embryos. There are the fathers, there are the mothers, the aunts, the nieces, the short ones and tall ones; the ones who are happy, those who go to sleep late, the ones who are good at what they do, and also those who never left Ugera, yet. There are those who speak other languages. There are those who wrote at least one poem in their lifetime.*

*Now let's imagine this. Let's recall all these beings, all this movement and energy in here, in the surrounding areas, in the cities, in the other countries, on all the continents. Let's think of all those being here, from here, or somehow connected to this place. And let's give it a moment for this image to work within us. While we start to breath their presence, closer or farther from us, light their movement in your imagination. Turn their lights on. The white, soft lights that are permanently moving. One person in that country is taking a plane to another place; that leaf is carried by the wind to some unknown place; those kids are having their noses glued to the candy shop window in that city; a boy is having his first kiss somewhere in the other village; a ladybug is watching us right now while flying her way to some place. Now turn off all the lights on the planet. All of them. Make it dark. And keep the button ready. Push it now and let the soft, white lights from those in Ugera or connected to Ugera, let those lights on. And look around the planet, look on the borders, with the constant movement of these lights. Look from the far east to your right, from the far north to the closest person to you.*

*Your eyes are now wandering around our hills here, our mountains and savannas, the far seas and high mountains, the glaciers and the forests, the tall buildings of the cities and the sand of the deserts. And all that you can see are the lights of Ugera, the fluid borders of Ugera, the meaning of this place, and stories that have happened or those yet to happen.*

*This is how big Ugera is. Not one millimeter smaller, not one millimeter larger than the constant movement of the lights, the soft lights, around this planet. This is Ugera. Our community[27].*

The translation and interpretation in Swahili were done by Longinus, our friend and partner, from the local team in Tanzania, a young visionary man from Lugarawa, which started while being a student within Dar Es Salaam University, LUSO-DSM (Ludewa Student's Organization), an organizational that gathered all the students from his native district, with the goal to serve their home communities through their joint forces, expertise and collective knowledge. During our stay, we had long talks with him, Vitalis and Ioana (from the EduCaB team), about how we need to rethink the way we relate to the very notion of *community*, and of those that we consider part of that community, because they all participate to the story of that community. And yes, we start from the territory, from the geography, but we end with the relational attribute of communities and their perpetual transformation and modelling, even in the most remote traditional villages. Take for instance the rural communities in Nepal, where (usually) men travel to the Gulf states or Malaysia in order to earn more money, and then return to their home villages. It is not here the space to discuss why are they even going there when considering all the risks involved[28], our attention is on what the communities are receiving from those left for work. Namely, some are bringing money that

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[27] Mihai Lupu, *How big is Ugera?*,  https://medium.com/@mihailupu_30158/how-big-is-Ugera-c1f98578065d?source=friends_link&sk=5a68aa5c4404ea8d6e02198c5890e9a1 (accessed may 19, 2019).

[28] For more info, see Binayak Malla, Mark S. Rosenbaum, *Understanding Nepalese Labor Migration to Gulf Countries*, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10875549.2016.1217578?scroll=top&needAccess=true (accessed June 4, 2019), or Pratik Adhikary, Steven Keen, Edwin van Teijlingen, *Health issues among nepalese migrant workers in the Middle East*, http://www.hsj.gr/medicine/health-issues-among-nepalese-migrant-workers-in-the-middle-east.php?aid=3394 (accessed June 8, 2019).

will cover various day-to-day expenses, or investments (in housing, land, livestock), others are also bringing new ideas, new recipes of food, are making adjustments in the households, in fashion style, some they start to reconsider the way they see their villages and the resources they have (e.g. scarcity of water in the Gulf states vs. the abundance of it in let's say Dandagaon village in Dhading district, in central Nepal. By the way, this place had available running water even during and right after the earthquake from April 2015).

When relating to one's own community in a more permissive way, including also *aliens* (those not born there) in the conversation, but which are directly contributing to the dynamic of that place but also to its meaning (and this is not a territorial reference anymore), one can include in the story of his/her community the whole universe and potential of networks, wiring and connecting to others via communities of practices, of interests, of values and souls. Now, we are not alone anymore, forgotten by the others, i.e. by authorities, or by theater bands, past visitors, by our sons and daughters, by our grandchildren which are not coming as often as we want to us, to our villages. Because our families and friends are continuing to be connected to the meaning of our community (initially considered as mainly physical space), through the eating preferences, through the various customs and traditions they are continuing to maintain, through the way they are still connected to those in the home (physical) community. Because the team from Cultură'n Șură is returning now every year in Titești, Romania, and because some of the villagers are now connected with the actors and the director on social media, they now see what new shows are prepared by the troupe, and sometimes they communicate on-line. Florentina and Victor, the initiators of this idea, they now talk directly with the community, with Cătălin, the mayor, and with Lenuța, the librarian, to decide when will be the next show. The crew from Cultură'n Șură is not just another provider of *services* in Titești, the team members are now friends with the community and vice-versa, they are now part of the story of this village from the foothills of the Romanian Carpathians.

And let's consider now another example, i.e. the project of starting a Romanian library in Cassano d'Adda, near Milano, for the community of Romanians that are working there. That's not in itself something special, but the way of how the project is planned to be implemented,

is changing the logic relating to the relationship between the home communities and their diasporas. The project is developed through the Public Library from Mircea Vodă, a village in the eastern part of Romania, in the plains area called Bărăgan, through the involvement and passion of Cornelia, the amazing librarian of the community. As the case in many Romanian villages, a large proportion of adults in Mircea Vodă are working away from their physical community, in other EU countries, such as Italy, Spain, Germany, UK, because of higher salaries[29]. The idea behind the project was to provide a context for those Romanians to have more options of being exposed to knowledge in their language, while also having a neutral place to meet and socialize, i.e. the library. The books will be raised in the *home* community through private donations, and in Bucharest, through private companies that are joining the campaign. Or, this changes the narrative of how the Romanian diasporas are interacting with their home communities in Romania. The usual story goes unidirectional, that is, the diaspora sends money *home*. Nothing, or very little, from *home* to the diaspora. With our project, we use another approach, by having an institution from *home*, the library, interested and involved in offering support to diaspora. The project is in the planning phase, with the project team in place, the location for the library in Cassano d'Adda, identified, the teaser on social media channels started (with good response so far). We also organized a meeting with the adolescents from Mircea Vodă, for brainstorming ideas for the name of the campaign. The ideas with most of the votes will then be taken by a professional web designer and adapted for the visual of the campaign.

In this project there are over 50 people involved already, from Mircea Vodă, from Cassano d'Adda, Milano, Bucharest, and other cities in Romania (from companies, NGOs, informal groups, local authorities, freelancers). They all participate to a new story in the life of this village in the Romanian plains. They are all contributing to the meaning of Mircea Vodă, while being embarked into a democratic exercise of working together, through dialogue and sharing resources and expertise for producing a service that will strengthen the community bond. A community that ceased to be regarded only territorial, but also as an intricate web

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[29] Where the average wage is considerably higher than in Romania, see more info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_European_countries_by_average_wage (accessed June 3, 2019).

of relationships, availabilities, and caring for that particular place and the idea that got us together, as (project) team.

In the next chapter, I will look more into how, in small communities, libraries can act as *Agoras* in miniature, through the way they function as institutions, and then how they can, through their services and products, contribute to have the residents they serve rediscover the larger *Agora*, the community itself, and the sense of citizenship.

1. **The library as *Agora***

a) **What libraries in small communities can teach us about democracy**

In order to get to Maghileko village, to one of the libraries we have built in Flores island, in Indonesia, via EduCaB, I have to get to Kuala Lumpur, or Jakarta. From there, a plane gets me to Bali, and then another one to Labuan Bajo. Then, there are two options, one, by road, a long ride on the curvy roads of the island, another one is to take a plane to Bajawa, and then another few hours by car.

And not the distances are troubling me, but always, how few things are happening in such far and remote places. The further one goes from the downtown of a larger city (geographical center), towards smaller communities (geographical peripheries, such as neighborhoods, smaller towns, villages), the further away is he/she from recurrent opportunities for good quality social interactions, cultural events and other good quality knowledge related exposures. There are probably several dozens of events happening today, in any major city in the world, such as conferences, concerts, workshops, trainings, protests, various gatherings, sports events, theater and opera plays, gathering of various groups of interests (the bikers, the wall climbers, storytellers), to name only a few of them. And now let's look at a small community, let's go right now in the village of Maghileko, southern part of Flores, in

Indonesia, or in Newark, in Ohio, US. And let's count the events happening during one year. In Maghileko, as in so many other villages around the globe, there are probably no such events all year long, or only one or two, in many cases, religious driven. If it wouldn't be for those, there would be a long list of communities with almost nothing happening in terms of exposure to new knowledge, expertise and social interaction opportunities, others than the day-to-day routines and eventually media, those being important but not enough for a community to continue learning and grow.

And the effects of such situation are beyond the obvious neglection of small communities, through the disregard of at least two fundamental rights as per the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, i.e. *Everyone has the right to education [...], education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms* (art. 26), and *Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits* (art. 27)[30]. It is about how larger communities are also disregarded, since they (historically) receive people from smaller communities (the peripheries), and if these people are less educated, less exposed to quality information, quality culture, quality social interaction opportunities, is less likely they would easily consume these *products* and act on this *way of being,* once they get to the larger communities (the centers).

It is also a disregard of the very notion of democracy, of democratic practices and of contributing to the right conditions needed for democratic behavior to flourish in such places. Since *democracies need something more than written constitutions, multiple parties, free elections, and representative governments. They also depend on a strong public life, a rich depository of social capital, a sense of community, and a healthy civil society[31].*

Or in order to have all these, any communities need a strong social and civic infrastructure. And, of course, *social infrastructure is not "social capital"— the concept commonly used to*

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[30] See the full list here, https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/ (accessed June 4, 2019).
[31] Michael J. Sandel, 'America's Search for a New Public Philosophy', in David Mathews, *Can Public life be regenerated?*, p. 2 (Kettering Foundation Press, 2016).

*measure people's relationships and networks—but the physical places that allow bonds to develop. When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. People forge ties in places that have healthy social infrastructures—not necessarily because they set out to build community, but because when people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships—even across ethnic or political lines—inevitably grow[32].*

Now, what one calls *social infrastructure* in a larger community, is clear[33], but what about the social infrastructure in a very small community, in a village, like Maghileko, in Flores, Indonesia? What chances are there for the citizens of that place, to be exposed to good quality knowledge, to be exposed to the diversity of ideas, perspectives and opinions, on a recurrent basis? Not to mention that these citizens are from that category, widely found on the planet, which are rarely, or never, getting outside their villages. I am not aware of available statistics on this, but I would easily take this bet that very few of the almost 270 million citizens of Indonesia, living on more than 17,500 islands in the Indonesian archipelago, have ever travelled to Jakarta, or any other larger cities of the country. Same in India, same in Nepal or Kenya, and other places. And out of those that actually got to these big cities (the centers), how many went there to *consume* cultural events? How many got to various social events, courses, theater plays, debates or workshops? And of course, from

[32] Erik Klinenberg, *Worry Less About Crumbling Roads, More About Crumbling Libraries,* https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/worry-less-about-crumbling-roads-more-about-crumbling-libraries/570721/ *(accessed February 22, 2019)*

[33] *Public institutions, such as libraries, schools, playgrounds, and athletic fields, are vital parts of the social infrastructure. So too are community gardens and other green spaces that invite people into the public realm. Nonprofit organizations, including churches and civic associations, act as social infrastructure when they have an established physical space where people can assemble, as do regularly scheduled markets for food, clothing, and other consumer goods.*
*Commercial establishments, such as cafés, diners, barbershops, and bookstores, can also count as social infrastructure, particularly when they operate as what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg called "third spaces," where people are welcome to congregate regardless of what they've purchased,* in Erik Klinenberg, *Worry Less About Crumbling Roads, More About Crumbling Libraries,* https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/worry-less-about-crumbling-roads-more-about-crumbling-libraries/570721/ *(accessed February 22, 2019).*

cultural and social apathy, indifference and ignorance to political and civic apathy and ignorance, is just a small step. Because they are connected one to each other, they are part of the *wetlands of democracy[34], just as certain hard infrastructures, such as those for power and water, are "lifeline systems" that make modern societies possible, so too are certain social infrastructures especially crucial for democratic life[35].*

Here is where libraries are coming into the picture, again. Because in small communities, the libraries are the first, and sometimes, the only institutions that can, if done properly, connect citizens with fresh good quality knowledge, practices, and expertise (other than the existing one circulated through the traditions, customs and other local habits, and practices and mainstream media), that can then foster a *sense of social and civic engagement[36].* And this because *the library helps you to see, not only that you are not alone, but that you're not really any different from everyone else. There may be details that are different, but a human being is a human being[37].* Because the library can create the needed context for people to interact based on their interests, where they can learn new skills, where they can discover new talents.

Take the example of a series of workshops we have organized, via EduCaB, in several small towns and villages in Dâmbovița county, in central part of Romania, on the history of the first civil aviators in Romania. The project is part of a bigger initiative, named *Introduction to Modernity*, a history of the country seen through the history of the communities of practice and interests (the first motor-bikers, first aviators, first car owners, first trains etc.). We have implemented the project via a memorial foundation, started and run by the family of Mircea

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[34] Named *the wetlands of politics* by David Mathews, *Shipping passing in the night?,* p. 5, (Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).
[35] Erik Klinenberg, *Worry Less About Crumbling Roads, More About Crumbling Libraries,* https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/worry-less-about-crumbling-roads-more-about-crumbling-libraries/570721/ *(accessed February 22, 2019).*
[36] In the article *Patrons and Citizens: Libraries Building Civic Engagement,* https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2018/10/31/patrons-and-citizens-libraries-building-civic-engagement/ (accessed May 18, 2019).
[37] Maya Angelou, *Interview: How Libraries Changed Maya Angelou's Life,* https://www.huffpost.com/entry/interview-how-libraries-c_b_775980*, (accessed March 11, 2019).*

Cantacuzino, the founder of the first civil aviation school in the country, in the late 1920s.[38] The scope was to propose a different approach towards history and historical events, while creating the context for the aviation enthusiasts from villages and small towns to have their own space where to circulate ideas and stories on their passion. We have ended having 5 librarians participating to a training of trainers' course, and then running the program themselves, while also teaching other librarians from the county on how to implement the activities of the project. In this way, we have created a community of a few dozens of kids and adolescents that regularly participated to the workshops. The most active of the participants, around 40 of them, were then invited to go to an aerodrome, near the Black Sea, in the eastern part of the country, interacting with aviators, seeing various types of planes, going into simulators, and some even being able to fly. For all of these kids and the librarians which accompanied the kids and adolescents, it was the first time they have been inside an aerodrome, first time to see the sea, and for the few who did it, first time to fly, and not as simple passengers, but as copilots. And the library did this, as Andreea, from one of the communities where the program is implemented, was telling us, the EduCaB team. Her dream, ever since she was very young, was to become an aviator. But in here little town, called Titu, at her school, among her friends, or in her family, no one was talking about this, she had no space and opportunities to explore more her passion. And one day, she saw this poster on the page of the library, that a workshop on the stories of the first civil aviators is going to be organized by the public library. She could not believe it and once the series of events started, she became one of the most active persons inside the groups, she now could also meet other adolescents like her, from the community, and when the journey to the aerodrome was organized, she interacted with young people from other four communities, all united by the same passion for planes. It was a magical moment for her.

How we connect this with the practice of democracy? It is not only connected but it is the very foundation of building healthy communities, around the world, i.e. to create the right contexts for unleashing the extraordinary complexity and diversity of interests and passions

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[38] The name of the foundation is Fundația Memoriala Română Mircea și Dan Cantacuzino, https://www.fundatiemdcantacuzino.ro/en/ (accessed March 7, 2019).

within communities, to foster an environment where both young people and adults to maximize their individual and group potential. How many potential great film directors as Steven Spielberg and Franco Zeffirelli are, are there in the world not having any chance to act on their genius, because there is no space for them to express apart from the school curriculum? And how many potential amazing musicians, aviators, actors, painters or dancers are there in small communities, which are missing the chance to act on their talents and then influence the world for the good? How much do we lose as communities, as a civilization, because of not creating the needed contexts to maximize their potential?

And yes, *the resources communities use to do their works are distinctive; they include assets found in even the poorest places. These resources are organic and often intangible, such as commitment and political will or civic energy. They are found in the experiences and talents of people.*[39] But these talents need to be nurtured, they need constant and proper context for expressing and growing. And the libraries are the exact spaces for such ecosystems to form and flourish. They can give the opportunity to both kids and adults to continue learning, and be exposed to the beautiful complexity of circulating ideas and knowledge, and integrating them into the daily routines, which will then be altered for the good. The kids can learn different things than the formal knowledge circulated through the school curriculums[40], and the adults can have a proper space where they can continue to accumulate and circulate knowledge on a recurrent basis, this, after exiting the formal education cycles, which, in the case of rural communities around the planet, is usually 4 to maximum 8-10 classes. Because, the reality is that for most of his/her life, a person living in a rural community has very limited chances, and less opportunities to be exposed to good quality, recurrent knowledge, after finishing school. And these are the adults that will have kids, and to which they will have to give education and life advice, these are the adults we expect to vote while being well informed

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[39] David Mathews, *Leaders or leaderfulness? Lessons from high-achieving communities* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2016)

[40] Which is usually disconnected from the needs and realities lived by those learning it. There are, of course, exceptions, with school systems that are more centered on fostering the human creativity, and practical day-to-day skills in kids, than to teach and then have them reproduce very theoretical information. One can look at the national education systems in the Nordic countries in Europe, like Finland, but also Denmark, Norway or Sweden.

about who they are giving the vote to, these are the adults that are supposed to circulate, preserve and enrich the local heritage in the local communities, these are the adults that we neglect on a constant basis, but we find many instances to blame them, to see them as almost second hand citizens, uneducated, too traditionalists, to conventional, narrow minded, easy to manipulate by populist politicians, and so many others.

What chances we, as a society, truly give to the kids which remain in such small communities, these kids that grow to become adults, and live in those places? The answer is very simple. Very few.

But this can change, and needs to change. And one of the answers is activating the social and civic infrastructure within such small places, one that will on the one hand, connect them to practices, organizations, knowledge, individuals from the exterior, while also to the extended, *more-than-territorial* nuances of the term community (as we have detailed in the previous chapter, asking *How big is Ugera?)*. On the other hand, will give a good space for expression to those existing, *inbuilt in the community's DNA*, habits which are already civic and democratic.[41]

The library can play such a role, like a lighthouse for democracy. And by fulfilling its mission and potential in the local communities, it will become more than a library, it will be a true *Agora*, nurturing the right ambience for the citizens to discover themselves as citizens, to unleash their appetite for acting within and for their community, for their passions, for

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[41] Activating the social infrastructure, like libraries, can also be a good playground for tackling the *leaderfulness* within communities, as discussed at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, *we don't need less from the people thought of as leaders; we need more leadership initiative from everyone else. [...] Communities can fail, not because there are no leaders or because the leaders have the wrong "style." They fail because people don't make good use of the initiatives that come from those who attempt some form of leadership. Initiators can't ensure the response they will get. Communities shut out people with unpopular ideas all the time. Still those with no initiatives at all are rare. There are usually some people who want to improve their circumstances in even the worst situations. The direction of a community's movement, forward or backward, is determined by its patterns of interaction, by the habitual way that people respond to one another. Everyone, whether he or she wants to be or not, is a player. Even choosing not to participate affects the game. Each of us has decisions to make about how we play, and we are responsible for those decisions. See David Mathews, Leaders or Leaderfulness? Lessons from high-achieving communities* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2016).

interacting with others based on those aspects that unite them not divide them, for never ceasing to learn and circulate ideas.

Especially in small places, where there is more likely to find traditional communities, there are higher chances for new ideas and perspectives to be accepted if one starts with exposing the residents to neutral content, in the form of arts and other cultural *products*, also, to skills that will then help them to express in other forms their own heritage, and local knowledge.

In small areas, like villages, democracy is mainly about the decency of having the tools and the voice for the people to first understand, then to express their identity as individuals and as a group, this before participating in the local and national politics. And in small communities, the function of the *Agora* can be prodigiously played by the public libraries, if done properly.

This is what we are undergoing, through EduCaB, in various places, like, for instance Garissa University, in North Eastern Kenya. In partnership with the Horn of Africa Aid and Rehabilitation Action Network (HAARAN), and the University, we are starting the process of reinventing its library, of transforming it from what it is right now, i.e. a place with books and some computers, to an alive mechanism and *key component* of the university's and *city's human capital*.[42] Apart from refurbishing the space and investing into the physical infrastructure, including in renewing its book and informational materials collection, the initiative is intended to push the library into becoming a cultural, social and innovation hub for the university, and for the whole community. A cinema will be hosted by the new library, a debate and deliberation club will also be started, as well as a documentary making lab, and many others that will be decided at later stages, when the team will grow. For this to happen,

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[42] As put in the context of New York public library network, by The Center for an Urban Future, which is a NYC-based policy institute dedicated to highlighting the critical opportunities and challenges facing New York and other cities, and providing fresh ideas and workable solutions to policymakers: *Although they are often thought of as cultural institutions, the reality is that the public libraries are a key component of the city's human capital system. With roots in nearly every community across the five boroughs, New York's public libraries play a critical role in helping adults upgrade their skills and find jobs, assisting immigrants assimilate, fostering reading skills in young people and providing technology access for those who don't have a computer or an Internet connection at home.* See the full report on libraries, here, https://nycfuture.org/pdf/Branches_of_Opportunity.pdf (accessed January 30, 2019).

an invitation will be sent to all the professors, staff and students, inviting them to join the project team. Once a larger team will be formed, we will have trainings on ABCD methodology, developed by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute[43], and run by a great local team of professionals from Kenya, which are part of the Coady Institute network[44]. With more people joining the team, it will be easier to start the activities described earlier, initiate others, and also assure the recurrence of the projects and various events envisioned for the library. One example of a product coming from the university, via its library, will be a series of short-movies, in the form of documentaries, made by students (after attending workshops and trainings via the documentary and short movies making lab, that will be started and hosted by the library), tackling the episode of the terrorist attack from April 2015, when 148 people were killed and 79 or more, were injured in the university campus, by the militant group and Al-Qaeda offshoot, Al-Shabaab[45]. The resulting movies/documentaries will then be screened both within the university cinema, which will be hosted by the library, in the larger community of Garissa, but also in the refugee camps area, in Dadaab, for both the host communities and the refugees. They will also be shown to other places around the world, in partnership with various organizations, like Short Film Breaks, an independent film festival, which is organizing screenings in private companies and small communities, via libraries, in 7 countries. One of the on-going projects of this team is to start 50 rural cinemas, through public libraries, in 17 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America[46]. This will assure the circulation of such messages, as the ones that will be produced at Garissa University, via the library, in many places, and that can be used in subsequent educational and awareness projects and campaigns. In making this idea possible, the library will work with two teams one Kenyan, that is *Brainstorms Creative*, and

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[43] More here: https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx (accessed March 22, 2019), and here, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asset-based_community_development (accessed March 22, 2019).

[44] See more on https://coady.stfx.ca/ (accessed February 23, 2019).

[45] More about the attack, here, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garissa_University_College_attack (accessed April 14, 2019).

[46] More on http://www.shortfilmbreaks.com/ (accessed March 14, 2019).

one Nepali, namely *Onion Films*. Onion Films, is the partner of EduCaB and Short Film Breaks in Nepal and other countries, being a young team of entrepreneurs and film producers from Kathmandu, Surath being a friend and one of the co-founders. One of their products is Young Cuts!, a short-movie making intensive training program for adolescent and young adults from Nepal. After completing the training, the participants are required to make a short movie, being encouraged to choose social related subjects from their communities. This is how several documentaries were made right after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, this is also how a series of short movies on women's rights were produced by women, participating to the Young Cuts! Program. One of these movies, the EduCaB team showed at Garissa University, in an event with both professors and students, in which I spoke about the potential of the libraries as laboratories that can nurture human creativity for contributing to making better communities. And this is how the idea of starting a similar program at the university, started.

The example above is just one, of many, where it is about understanding *the Agora* in more inclusive and diverse terms, than its original ancient Greek version. In order for citizens to act as citizens, they need to first have and then use those places that will make them face their own complexity and potential when interacting with others, and being exposed to good quality knowledge. And especially in small communities, such places can be, without a doubt, the libraries. They can be both *Agoras* in miniature, through the way they are run and the services provided to the communities, while also contributing to the larger scale *Agora,* by improving citizens' *well-being in ways that our arguments over politics never will*[47].

*As our political discourse generates derision and dissension, our time in the virtual world crowds out our time in the actual one, and trust in our institutions and each other has plummeted, local places such as markets, libraries, and coffee shops can help. A new study shows that living near community-oriented public and commercial spaces brings a host of social benefits such as*

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[47] See Daniel Cox, Ryna Streeter, *Having a Library or Cafe Down the Block Could Change Your Life,* https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/05/having-library-or-cafe-down-block-could-change-your-life/589813/?utm_content=edit-promo&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=citylab&utm_term=2019-05-20T15%3A19%3A02&utm_medium=social (accessed May 21, 2019).

*increased trust, decreased loneliness, and stronger sense of attachment to where we live[48]. Take* as an example, places like Chicago, where libraries are taken into account as solutions (*co-locations*), by urban planners and community designers, to improve public housing, since the *libraries are devised as outward-facing hubs for the surrounding neighborhoods, already attracting a mix of toddlers, retirees, after-school teens, job-seekers, not to mention the traditional readers, nappers and borrowers of DVDs[49].* This is *Agora* into making, as it should be, i.e. a continuous process, and not just a nice but rather prolix concept from the political science books. And while in large communities the offer of public amenities is richer, in small communities, libraries can save the day, providing *the setting and context for social participation[50].*

### b) Make competition to the local pub

One thing that I have not included in the picture drawn in the previous sub-chapter, when discussing the atmosphere within small, usually rural communities, is the institution of the local pub. I have deliberately not discussed about it, because it should have a special place in this book. Because the bar is without any doubt the most widespread *social institution* on the planet. It is a place where people meet, talk, spend time together. You find it literally everywhere, and it will probably continue to flourish in the years to come. In larger

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[48] See Daniel Cox, Ryna Streeter, *Having a Library or Cafe Down the Block Could Change Your Life,* https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/05/having-library-or-cafe-down-block-could-change-your-life/589813/?utm_content=edit-promo&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=citylab&utm_term=2019-05-20T15%3A19%3A02&utm_medium=social (accessed May 21, 2019). The article mentioned in the quote is *The importance of place: Neighborhood amenities as a source of social connection and trust,* by Daniel Cox, Ryna Streeter, http://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-place-neighborhood-amenities-as-a-source-of-social-connection-and-trust/ (accessed May 21, 2019).

[49] Michael Kimmelman, *Chicago Finds a Way to Improve Public Housing: Libraries,* https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/arts/design/chicago-public-housing.html (accessed May 15, 2019).

[50] Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the people: why libraries are more than just books,* https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/sep/24/palaces-for-the-people-at-the-library-everyone-is-welcome (accessed January 16, 2019).

communities its function is split in between regular pubs, wine-bars, coffee shops, tea houses or dining places (like brasseries, bistros, fast-foods). But in small communities, like rural ones, the diversity of such offer decreases to usually one option, that is, the local pub.

And the problem with this is not the existence and presence of the pub in the landscape of small communities, but more the dynamic within such *social institutions*. Namely, what I see in most of the places I travel to, is that there are mainly men going to the local pubs, and consuming cheap, low quality alcohol. Not to mention that the quality of the discussions in there is not expected to be useful neither to those having it, or the community at large, if people get drunk and will not be able to articulate coherent sentences, leave aside arguments and more complex intellectual constructions. And while having mainly men participating, it cannot lead to anything balanced in the content and perspective on the issues discussed.

Nevertheless, considering also the local pubs in contributing to the social dynamic of small communities, is giving more nuances and justice to the big picture, when trying to both understand and contribute to making rural communities better places.

One point to discuss here, concerns the alternatives people have in such places, namely, who is currently competing to the *social offer* of the local pub? What institutions are there that can offer an alternative, on a daily basis? In some cases, maybe the religious venues can offer this, those where regular services are held, like in the Muslim communities or other ones where daily practices are a habit, and if people are actually socializing after or before the actual service. The extended families are also offering such opportunities during informal visit and gatherings among the members, as also the local shops are offering, in some cases, but both on a less recurrent basis, than the local pub is doing it.

I remember an episode happening in Zanzibar, Eastern part of Tanzania, at the end of December, 2017. It was late evening, and along with two good friends and colleagues, Ioana from Romania, and Isabella, from Italy, we were exploring the area and communities inland. It was around 9 pm, and we after missing some turns, we got on a secondary road and after a few kilometers, we reached a village, with houses mainly on one side of the road. There

were no lights though, it seemed that everybody was asleep. A few more turns and we saw one light, and as we approached, we got to see what it seemed to be the whole community gathered in front of a small TV set, outside a small rural shop, all watching a movie, while sitting on chairs, in silence. The only sounds we could hear was from the actors speaking in Swahili, and the crickets in the grass. We have not stopped, but it seemed a very intimate moment in the life of that community, with probably 40-50 persons being together during a late evening night, in something that seemed like a normality for them.

This a case in which the shop enhanced its role and proved to proactively contribute to the social bonds within the community. But such examples are not to be seen with regularity, in small communities. During early or late evenings, the lights one can see on, are mainly from the pubs. And we need to make competition to the local pub. We need to invest into having other places, as part of the social infrastructure in rural areas, ones that can offer alternatives to those that are inclined and opened to *consume* and circulate other forms of socializing and of exchanging information, knowledge, and expertise. Or, the library, can do it, and in many places is already doing this.

In Maghileko, in Indonesia, Valentino, our friend and local librarian, otherwise a health professional, is organizing recurrent evening short films screenings and day reading sessions, via the local library we helped build on his piece of land (he calls it a *reading garden*). He also helped forming a group of women doing crafts, which meets at the library, once per month. In Soalia village, in Satkhira district there are sports competitions organized for the residents, reading competitions for the kids, and computer classes, all initiated and done by the library. In Chajul, in Guatemala, I have learned about meetings between old men and women, with the youth from the community, happening in the local library. In a community like Peretu, in Teleorman county, in Romania, parents can meet with specialists for discussing what are the challenges their kids are facing while using the internet, and social media websites, talking about issues like cyber empathy, cyber bullying, cyber security and many others. This is how the parents get to understand that the situation they face while their kids are surfing the web, are not any different than the ones parents from other communities are facing (no matter small or large communities).

And these initiatives all work when they make sense to the residents of those places, when they meet some of their needs, concerns, questions or curiosities. And this is where the library can fill in an empty space, especially in rural communities. This is the right moment for the libraries to take over the rural communities, and start acting as both curators and producers of content, knowledge and expertise, for assisting the people they serve to enhance their lives and horizons, and contributing to the sense of pride and of belonging of that particular place. It is not an easy road, it needs recurrence and persistence, but it is imperative to nurture such spaces that will practically make competition to the local pub.

## II.    Preliminary closing points

The chapters above are thought and written in the context of a larger study, **Fighting back with Democracy**, Enhancing World's Social and Civic Infrastructure for Promoting Democracy Concepts and Practices (How libraries can enhance democracy in small communities. Insights into the EduCaB methodology and interventions).

The goal was to give the big picture and the overall approach within the EduCaB methodology, as an instrument to maximize the potential and resources existing within small communities (small towns, and villages) to foster an ecosystem of *small-scale democracies*, as I've named in the beginning.

Also, I have showed the importance of acknowledging and then acting on what I have called *democracy distance,* which I defined as a space between what one knows and proactively uses from established democracy narrative and practices, but also the degree in which citizens are able to understand and consequently frame their local heritage of customs and practices within their communities as essentially *democratic* instances.

I was also interested in breaking the concept of democracy in smaller units (indices and indicators), ones that can make more sense for citizens in villages and small towns, and can

be easier seen in the day to day actions and all the experiences they are exposed to, while giving a wider range of space for specific interactions at local level.

Those mentioned above, and others that were subject to the chapters above, like the way one can relate to the concept and meaning of a community, insights into the various forces and actors that are influencing the civic and democratic realities in small places, all were seen through the lenses of practical interventions, since any intellectual endeavor should have, as I see it, and how we use it within the EduCaB methodology, a practical translation into communities, for people to be able to be able to access knowledge, expertise and smart ways of wiring with others, and learning one from another, all for a better life as individuals, and as groups, within communities.

Ultimately, the chapters above were meant to start a conversation that we all need to have, those caring about the revival of communities and of democracy, when trying to answer these questions: *How much we do not use from what democracies can offer right now?* And then*, how much can a library do in a small community to promote democratic practices and the whole experience of democracy, while using and capitalizing this existing 'offer'?*