

LIBRARIES POST-COVID:

HOW CAN THEY BECOME HUBS FOR DEMOCRACY?

A conversation with Marie Østergård - director for Aarhus public libraries.

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As much of the world is confined to their homes, we have seen the different approaches to government and citizen control. We continue to witness the erosion of rights and responsibilities as the crisis escalates. It is clear that policymakers should acknowledge the need for a deeper quality of citizen engagement at all levels.

Can libraries be a part of enabling a new era of participatory democracy? What role can they play in rebuilding trust, maintaining connections and developing different models of dialogue with decision makers?

5 calls to action/reflection:

- Public libraries at their core are a meeting place. They are a public institution as well as a town hall where people can meet, gossip, and talk. As this is a powerful infrastructure present across Europe, it can leverage its position to encourage civic engagement.
- Activities around democracy do not have to be driven by political democracy. Rather, each library should strive to identify the democratic deficit in their community and identify ways to encourage dialogue, participation, and stimulate free critical thinking to foster a discussion on public democracy.
- Libraries depend on communities that are strong and functional and communities are dependent on libraries that fulfill their role. Strengthening the community includes literacy activities that engage with the community and make them more competent in their lives.
- We shouldn't underestimate the power of public libraries as facilitators of public dialogue, but we should look at public dialogue as a change agent itself and libraries as the stage for this.
- The relationship between a library and its community is founded on trust. While this is a good foundation to build democratic participation activities on, this is a

fragile asset that requires nuance to navigate working in a biased but non-manipulative way.