

Activity of Public Libraries in Rural Areas during the Pandemic

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Abstract: The public library, in accordance with the Library Law no. 334 of May 31, 2002, republished, is a decentralized public service, having a very important role in the life of the local community, being an information, education and recreation center, a space for socialization. Although the role of the library is extremely important in the life of a community, during the pandemic their activity, especially in rural areas, was influenced by the existing situation, many of these libraries even having to close their activity for a period of time. In this article we want to research the way this service functioned during the pandemic in rural areas, but especially to see what effects the pandemic had on the activity of public libraries, taking as an example the library of a medium-sized local community, namely the Borlești library within Neamț County.

Keywords: *Public library; public decentralized service; rural area; active users; pandemic effects.*

How to cite: Bilouseac, I., & Socea, M. (2022). Activity of Public Libraries in Rural Areas during the Pandemic. *European Journal of Law and Public Administration*, 9(1), 13-22.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/eljpa/9.1/166>

1. Introduction

According to the law, public libraries are established and organized under the authority of the central or local public administration, being a decentralized service at the service of a local community, that ensures equal access to information and documents necessary for information, permanent education and personality development of users, without discrimination of social or economic status, age, sex, political affiliation, religion or nationality (Romanian Parliament, 2002).

The public library, as a decentralized institution, has the opportunity to know exactly the interests and needs of its users, depending on the specifics of the locality, from the geographical, cultural, professional point of view, and the degree of interest in certain fields (National Associations of Librarians and Public Libraries from Romania, 2022).

I chose as a study a library of a medium-sized local community, namely Borlești public library from Neamț County, because especially in the rural environment, unlike the urban one, sometimes the books at home are missing or there are less copies.

In order to be more efficient, the Borlești public library has partnerships with various institutions within the commune, namely with the secondary schools, with the police, the church, the health services – the local dispensary, VSES, Borlești Secondary School Parent Association, Noi Development Progress Community Association, there is a continuous cooperation between the library and them, cooperation whose beneficiaries are the inhabitants of the commune.

The Borlești public library is a decentralized service, subordinated to the Borlești Town Council and Town Hall, under the guidance of G.T Kirileanu library from Neamț County.

Founded in 1961 with the support of the teacher Aurel Prundu, based in the premises of the Borlești community center, the library occupies a space of 40 m², being located in the center of the commune, which consists of five villages.

The Borlești public library serves a population of approximately 6900 inhabitants (according to the 2011 census), within the commune there are two secondary schools with a total number of 800 school and preschool children. We specify the number of the school population because, as we will see, many of them are the main users of the communal library.

2. The operation of the library during the pandemic

In this case study, we will take as reference the year 2019, the year before the "arrival of the Sars-Covid 19 virus", when the library's activity was carried out normally, with the eight-hour program to which the public had free access.

The years 2020-2021 are associated with the words "coronavirus", "COVID-19", "pandemic". That situation, unprecedented for current generations, had also left its mark on the operation of the services offered to the population, including the operation of public libraries.

During this period, many libraries were even forced to close or reduce their activity for a period of time, within the rural or urban environment, the librarians were reassigned to work in the town halls in different positions. That was also the case of the librarian from the Borlești public library, who was reassigned by the mayor to work part-time at the Registry department of the Borlești Town Hall, between April 2020 and April 2021. The activity of the library was reduced during that period of time, but the librarian kept in touch with the users by email, telephone and through direct access to the library, while respecting the imposed restrictions. An attempt was made, as much as possible, to continue the activity of the library through various means.

We present, in the table below, the number of active users that the Borlești public library had in 2019 and during the pandemic between 2020-2021.

Table no.1 Number of active users of Borlești public library

Reference year	Active users
2019	793
2020	238
2021	490

Source: Internal data of Borlești Town Hall obtained between February – March 2022

As can be seen from the data in the table, there is a big difference in users in 2019 compared to the following years, during the two pandemic years the number decreased a lot compared to the reference year 2019. Due to the restrictions imposed, many of the library users avoided the public spaces, and book lending was also avoided due to the fact that they could be a potential virus carrier.

Information about how to keep book loans safe reached those interested, but despite all, local people avoided book loans. The rule for safe book borrowing was to keep the books in "quarantine", the librarian taking care upon returning the books by the user, to put them in a bag and deposit them in a specially arranged place, where they remained for five days (a measure taken by the Borlești library).

There was a 70% decrease in users in 2020, compared to 2019. Even if their number increased in 2021, there was still a 38.2% decrease compared to 2019. In 2021, an increase in the number of users was mainly possible due to the adaptability of the library to new technologies, and of the users to the pandemic situation.

Table no. 2 Users distribution by occupational status

Occupational status	2019	2020	2021
Schoolchildren	493	167	361
Stay at home people	44	12	22
Workers	35	11	17
Intellectuals	32	19	26
Unemployed	23	5	8
Clerks	21	8	22
Students	19	9	19
Other categories	63	4	8

Source: Internal data of Borlești Town Hall obtained between February – March 2022

As can be seen in the table above, 2019 was a year in which library provided to its users library services in quite high numbers. Firstly, schoolchildren are the main users of the communal library. Of course, the main purpose of the students is to study and then in this period of their life they use the library services more often, but it is still important that the library tries to attract readers from other social categories.

For the rest of the categories, regardless of occupational status, there was a decrease in users due to the pandemic context; they came in much smaller numbers to request library services, even with compliance with the rules imposed by the pandemic.

Table no. 3 Distribution of users by gender

	2019	2020	2021
Women	522	147	312
Men	271	91	178

Source: Internal data of Borleşti Town Hall obtained between February – March 2022

It can be observed that the number of women who used the library services was higher, and that was due to the fact that they were much more active in educating their own children, they were the ones who came with children to borrow books or participate in activities dedicated to children.

3. The effects of the pandemic on the activity of rural libraries

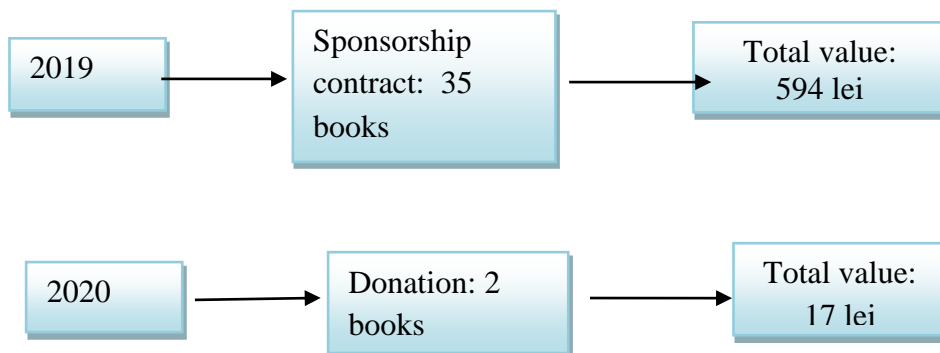
Libraries have a special role in the modernization of the village. Although we recognize the competition created by the virtual environment, book reading remains a means of information and human training, through which lifetime skills are acquired.

The pandemic has brought to light the problems associated with the traditional model in which the public library has operated in recent years, highlighting the problems it has. This "pandemic" period is a period of adaptation to the "new time" at the current time.

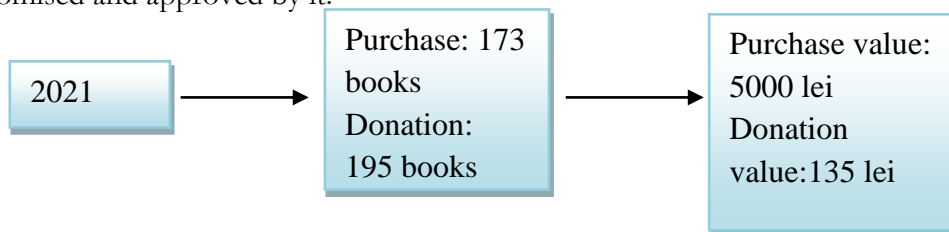
It is true that the rural library is more disadvantaged in some situations compared to large libraries, urban libraries, county libraries, which have the opportunity to self-manage from a financial point of view.

The rural library is a service under the authority of the local council, of the town halls where it is funded, but funding is almost never enough to cover the needs of the library, to renew the book fund and its related utilities.

In 2019, the Borleşti public library had a request for funding for the purchase of books in the amount of 5000 lei, which was approved by the local Council in February of the same year, but until the end of that year it did not benefit from that amount. Thus, the entries of documents (books) in the library were only from sponsorship contracts.



The same thing happened at the beginning of 2020, the same request for funding was approved by the local Council, and followed the same course as in 2019, concretely – the library did not receive the funding promised and approved by it.



Source: own data of Borleşti public library

In 2021 the situation changed radically. In light of the pandemic's effects upon the operation of public services, following the request for funding for the book purchase, that request was not only approved, but respected, and the book purchase followed its course, it was carried out as it was natural. A number of 173 books worth 5000 lei were purchased (the amount approved by the local Council).

Within rural libraries, there is also the problem of staff. Most of the time, in rural areas, the staff is not trained according to the library law no. 334/2002, due to the lack of funds and low interests on the part of the management units.

According to the internal data obtained from the Borleşti town hall, from 2017 until now, the librarian from the Borleşti public library has not participated in any training course, as required by law (Borleşti Town Hall, 2022).

The activity of the Borlești public library during the pandemic period saw new activities, things that were not carried out before, we refer here to online meetings on Google Meet, Zoom, Webex, Facebook, Youtube (Borlești Public Library, 2022). The pandemic period accelerated the technological trend, which for various reasons was slow to happen in public libraries, especially in rural ones (perhaps due to the lack of technological equipment or the lack of training of librarians).

Today, rural libraries should not be limited to their traditional role of offering books, but they have to become meeting places for people with various interests, they must become centers that are focused, first of all, on educational activities for adults, on pensioners who are looking to learn new things, on children interested in attending creative workshops, etc. Those approaches were also tried at the Borlești public library.

As a result of the pandemic, due to increasing awareness of the need to adapt to technology, to technical progress, the Borlești public library was equipped with computers, so from April 2021, the library joined the project "CODE Kids - Children do coding in public libraries", a project carried out with the financial support of the "Romanian-American Foundation", and supported in its execution by means of public libraries throughout the country, as well as by "Société Générale", "Orange", the "Aspen Romania" Institute and "CEZ Romania". "The CODE Kids project had a positive impact among the libraries and librarians who joined this initiative started in 2017 and aims to develop digital skills and involvement in the life of the community they come from. The project is targeted towards children from rural and small urban areas, aged between 10 and 14, aiming to develop programming skills among them, as well as learning technology and using the Internet in a practical way."

In the first part of the project, the meetings were online as required by the new restrictions, but from the end of May, when the restrictions were relaxed, the meetings took place in the library, where we got to know each other better, we could interact better with each other, the children coming from different villages and from 2 schools located on the territory of the commune made friends. The club consists of 12 children between the ages of 10 and 13.

With the easing of restrictions, especially during the summer, the library carried out a series of projects aimed at children of different ages in its community and not just children, a series of workshops for adults was organized as well.

"Time to LEARN"-is a national project, supported by the Progress foundation, whose objective is to stimulate the interest of rural children in

reading and other subjects in the area of LEARNING (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)". "The project is implemented with the help of librarians from public libraries located in rural areas of Romania and the Republic of Moldova" (Progress Foundation, 2022). According to the "Time to KNOW" model, various activities were held at the Borlești library between October 2018 and March 2020.

During the holiday from June 22 to September 10, 2021, a series of reading activities and practical workshops, experiments, games for all children between 3 and 10 years of age were held in the library.

The library, in partnership with Nicoleta Negreanu - guitar teacher at the "Victor Brauner" Art High School Piatra-Neamț, organizes and conducts guitar lessons for children aged 7 to 18. Thanks to this initiative, there is a band in Borlești commune called "Folk Impressions", a band that was formed and developed at the Borlești library, which still hosts them for rehearsals. The pandemic situation affected group meetings for a period of time, but they resumed as soon as possible.

The library was the host of the "Borlești Get-together", where women of all ages gathered, every Friday evening from 6:00 p.m. and many activities specific to the sitters of the past were carried out: sewing, knitting, crocheting, felting.

Due to the specificity of the area, the fact that the library is located in a rural environment, and the fact that the activity of the library is not only book lending, a new library service named "Seed Library" has been implemented in Borlești - which offers free seeds to all those who want to cultivate and to eat Romanian vegetables and fruits. Initially, the project came to life with the help of local residents and volunteers, by donating seeds and forming a "seed bank" so that later, the inhabitants of the commune and not only, can exchange seeds, bring seeds that they have in excess and take seeds they need.

Several activities from the annual program established by the library for the years 2020-2021 could not be carried out due to the restrictions imposed and the small space in which the library operates, which did not allow a larger number of people, especially during the cold period.

4. Conclusions

The activity of libraries, especially those in rural areas, during the pandemic period, when the library world experienced totally unexpected situations, will serve as an example of how this service will have to be modernized. We must admit that, in addition to the negative effects, the

pandemic has also brought benefits in terms of the future way of organizing and operating some services.

During the pandemic year 2021, public libraries from all over Romania experienced the biggest union so far, solidarity mostly due to the pandemic. Groups were set up in social networks, groups to which the Borleşti communal library also joined. On the Facebook social network there is a group of "Libraries and librarians" which currently has 2,563 members, most of whom are librarians; here librarians support each other with activity ideas, information needed by libraries and librarians. On the WhatsApp platform, the County library established the group of rural librarians, where all information related to the library and the situation of librarians is provided.

As stated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, during the pandemic "libraries around the world have faced difficult choices about services and how to provide them, from minimal restrictions to complete closure" (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020).

Since the library is a decentralized public service, subordinated to the local authorities, it is important to collaborate with them to raise awareness of the need to modernize libraries, through the presence of an electronic catalog, the existence of copiers, the renewal of the book collection, the offering of virtual books and the development of projects education of adults in the local community. In conclusion, libraries must respond to the challenges of digitization by offering hybrid services in both real and virtual space.

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