

# INCLUSION THROUGH PARTICIPATION:

## The Croatian Library for the Blind

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# Inclusion through Participation: The Croatian Library for the Blind

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## **Abstract**

This case study describes an example of successful inclusionary practices for persons with disabilities, realised through participative governance and employment in special format book production for ‘a small European language’ audience. From a cultural policy point of view, the Croatian Library for the Blind can be seen as a successful example of ‘civil-public partnership’ between a civil society association (the Croatian Association of the Blind) and a government body (the Ministry of Culture and Media). It is particularly noted for its participatory governance structure and its efforts to contribute to the social inclusion of persons with visual impairment through employment. Likewise, the library, which is located in the capital city of Zagreb, offers its services to users across Croatia through digital borrowing of books and interlibrary loans. It also promotes and supports the development of sections for blind and partially sighted users in libraries across the country.

**Keywords:** library, persons with visual impairment, inclusion, civil-public partnership, cultural policy

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# Inclusion through Participation: The Croatian Library for the Blind

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## Introduction

This case study describes an example of successful inclusionary practices for persons with disabilities, realised through participative governance and employment in special format book production for ‘a small European language’ audience. Namely, although the Marrakesh Treaty (WIPO, 2016) has enabled copyright-free use of materials in the production of formats for users with visual impairments and print disabilities, the production of such formats is nevertheless expensive given the size of the audiences in countries with relatively small populations. Croatia’s current population is under four million inhabitants, and the size of the audience for special format books can be illustrated by the fact that in 2021 the Croatian Library for the Blind<sup>1</sup> had 1,059 users who borrowed a total of 54,191 special format books (an average of 49 units per user).<sup>2</sup> In the same year, the library produced 178 new books in Daisy<sup>3</sup> 2.02 format, recorded a total of 1,429 hours and 29 minutes of sound materials, and published 68 books in EPUB format<sup>4</sup> and Braille<sup>5</sup> (the latter printed on demand).

From a cultural policy point of view, the Croatian Library for the Blind can be seen as a successful example of ‘civil-public partnership.’ Namely, it was established as a public institution in 1999, with a civil society association (the Croatian Association of the Blind) and a government body (the Ministry of Culture) sharing the responsibility for its financing and governance. The library also has the right to engage in independent economic activities, receive donations, and compete for EU funds, which contributes to the diversification of the funding resources. It is particularly noted for its participatory governance structure and its efforts to contribute to the social inclusion of visually impaired people through employment. Likewise, the library, which is located in the capital city of Zagreb, offers its

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<sup>1</sup> The Croatian Library for the Blind, as well as the Croatian Association of the Blind, are the official names of the library and civil society association, which have a historical background. Elsewhere in the text, the ACE DisAbility Network’s guidelines on the ‘language of disability’ have been followed (ACE, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The library’s collection is home to 2,528 Braille books (out of which 650 have sheet music), 4,524 audio books in MP3 and DAISY formats, 56 Playaway audio books, 365 Daisy 3 XML textual books, 209 EPUBs, and 65 music CDs (CLB, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> DAISY is an acronym for ‘Digital Accessible Information System’. It refers to an international standard for producing accessible and navigable multimedia documents. DAISY books are designed to be a complete audio substitute for print material.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF’s (2023) describes EPUB as ‘an electronic publication, a file format that is the current industry standard in digital publishing. EPUBs are a standardized format that can support the digitization of traditional print books and make best use of the flexibility of digital screens to resize, reflow and enhance text and media rich content’. According to the same source, this format is a basis for accessible digital books, i.e. those that ‘have features designed to make reading more inclusive for specific users’. This includes ‘compatibility with screen readers for people who are blind or have low vision and for users with dyslexia or with learning disabilities who benefit from read aloud text, and support for assistive devices like switch control for users with motor impairment.’

<sup>5</sup> The practice of always capitalizing the word ‘Braille’ has recently been abandoned by some associations. The Braille Authority of North America has issued a position statement (BANA, 2006) in which it recommends that the word ‘braille’ should not be capitalised when it refers to the code (i.e., the tactile reading system), but only when it refers to the proper name of its inventor, Louis Braille. However, many individuals, as well as the U.S. National Federation of the Blind, continue to capitalise the word, as do some relevant sources in the UK and New Zealand (including the Braille Authority of New Zealand Aotearoa Trust). In this text, we follow their practice.

services to users across Croatia through digital borrowing of books and interlibrary loans. It also promotes and supports the development of sections for visually impaired users in libraries across Croatia.



**Figure 1 – The reception area of the Croatian Library for the Blind** (Credit: CLB)

In what follows, we put a special emphasis on the fact that the Croatian Library for the Blind not only enables cultural participation for its users but also helps achieve inclusion by employing blind and partially sighted people in book and journal production. Inclusion is also achieved by means of participation in institutional governance: in the Library Board, two places are reserved for the representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, two for the representatives of the Croatian Association of the Blind, and one for the representative of the library personnel. This means that the interests of the users and employees are well represented and enable an active role in governance. We would also like to emphasise that the policy model applied in this case makes possible the production and distribution of special needs books for a specific community in a ‘small European language’, which is often more challenging than in contexts with larger markets.

## Context and background of the case

### Theoretical framework

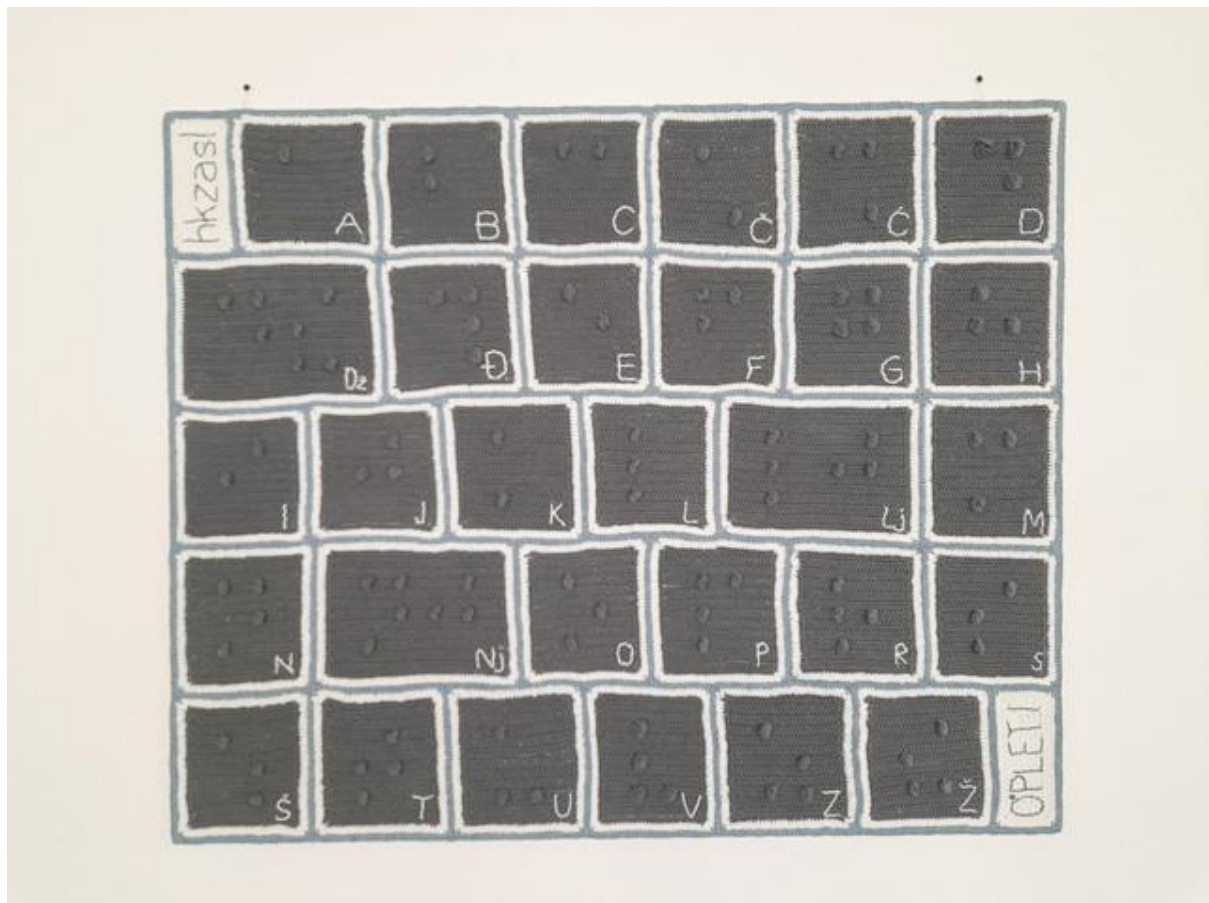
The question of feeling excluded or included always concerns a number of social and cultural factors that contribute to the experiences of inclusion and exclusion of individuals, groups, and communities (Taket et al., 2009a). According to Crisp and Taket (2020:3), the concept of social inclusion emerged in the late decades of the twentieth century. Initially, it related to entrenched poverty and economic marginalisation as well as the inability to access social and cultural resources such as education and employment. With time, however, the concept became increasingly used to ‘make sense out of the



lived experience arising from multiple deprivations and inequities experienced by people and localities, across the social fabric, and the mutually reinforcing effects of reduced participation, consumption, mobility, access, integration, influence and recognition' (Taket et al. 2009a: 3). Likewise, it was realised that '[t]he language of social exclusion recognises marginalising, silencing, rejecting, isolating, segregating and disenfranchising as the machinery of exclusion, its processes of operation'. (Taket et al. 2009a: 3).

This wider understanding of social exclusion obviously extends beyond poverty and takes into account a whole range of factors and mechanisms limiting acceptance, equality of opportunity, equity and citizenship. Such an approach makes it possible to understand that blind and partially sighted persons can also be faced with high levels of social exclusion and even be denied their human rights, despite the mandate of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD] (United Nations 2006).

Furthermore, it is important to understand that practicing social inclusion cannot be limited merely to promoting and securing access to various services (Farrington and Farrington, 2005). Rather, the concept presupposes the fulfilment of civic, political, economic, social and cultural rights to participate in society, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Securing these rights implies the removal of mechanisms that make such participation difficult, also in the cultural field, in which blind and partially sighted persons frequently encounter obstacles limiting participation and inclusion.



**Figure 2 – A crocheted blanket with Braille characters exhibited in the library space** (Credit: CLB)

Taket et al. (2014: 256) emphasise that '[a]chieving social inclusion is a continuing challenge which will involve ongoing political will and support from all levels of the community'. According to the same

authors, some initiatives to promote social inclusion are bound to be more effective in achieving this goal than others, and there will be an ongoing need to reflect and identify factors influencing both success and failure. The first step, however, is that the needs of a certain population are defined in terms of the mentioned extended understanding of the concepts of social exclusion and inclusion. This is the case in Croatia, where such approaches were introduced in 2007: following the adoption of the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion of the Republic of Croatia (JIM, 2007), social exclusion and inclusion are taken to refer to any vulnerable group (Žganec and Opačić, (2021: 73), which obviously includes the blind and partially sighted citizens.

#### How the Croatian Library for the Blind was established and what it does

The understanding of social inclusion as defined above is our starting point in this case study. Our aim is to establish how efficient a cultural institution can be in facilitating the inclusion of a vulnerable group not only in cultural activities but also in wider community life. The Croatian Library for the Blind seemed like a good case in point on several counts. Firstly, it makes possible the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural content for a specific community in a ‘small European language’ in an expanding transnational space (Lalich, 2010). Secondly, it contributes to the economic inclusion of a vulnerable community through the employment of blind and partially sighted persons in special needs book production (Braille, audio and DAISY formats). Finally, it contributes to political empowerment and inclusion of the vulnerable community members by means of participatory governance.



**Figure 3 – Books in different formats in the library's collection** (Credit: Inga Tomić-Koludrović)

It should be mentioned that the Croatian Library for the Blind and its governance structure were established in 1999/2000, i.e., several years before Croatia's adoption of the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion. Likewise, it should be said that the library's current activities have a long prehistory. Namely, a library for the blind is said to have existed in Zagreb already in 1921, but its functioning was interrupted by World War II. However, the intensive hand production of books in the Braille system

started in 1949, and a large number of works created that way served as the basis for the establishment of the library of the Croatian Association of the Blind in 1965. That library, in turn, was integrated into the present-day collection of the Croatian Library for the Blind, which now functions as an independent public cultural institution.



**Figure 4 – A tactile picture book for children with visual impairment** (Credit: CLB)

We should repeat that, although the library premises are located in the capital city of Zagreb, its services are digitally accessible to users throughout the country. The library also helps establish sections for the blind and partially sighted users in Croatian libraries, publishes an e-bulletin on its activities, and produces a podcast series of up to 12 episodes per year on topics of interest to library users. Furthermore, it organises various events in the library space and sponsors an award for persons who have significantly contributed to the activities important for the development of cultural life, education, and literacy among library users. The library also organises cooperation with other cultural institutions, with studio readers of audio books, and collaborates with pharmaceutical companies to secure quality Braille inscriptions on the packaging of pharmaceutical medications. The facilities for the production of books and audio formats, where visually impaired employees work, are located on the library premises. It should also be mentioned that the library has received several national and international awards in recognition of its contributions to the development of its field of activity.

## Methodology

The research for this descriptive case study included desk research, a focused ethnography of the interactions in the library space, and six semi-structured interviews. Three of these interviews were with blind and partially sighted library employees: one with a library user, one with an experienced librarian, and one with the library director. The interviews with the blind and partially sighted persons focused on the meaning of the library for them as users and employees, and interviews with the librarian and the director focused on the activities of the institution. All interviews were realised on the library premises and made inclusion their central topic. The desk research was realised during the months of September and October 2022, and the interviews and focused ethnography were conducted on October 28th, 2022.

### The library as an inclusive space

A general impression that the researcher is left with after carrying out the interviews with different actors connected with the work of the Croatian Library for the Blind is that they see its tasks and functioning in a convergent way. In other words, there is a high level of agreement about what the users, the employees, and the management say about what the library should do and what it actually does. Furthermore, the interactions observed in the library space also indicate that the space is perceived as friendly and inclusive. This does not only refer to the library space in the narrow sense of the word but also to the special format book production facilities.

A user interviewed on the premises (interview 1, female, 60, secondary education) stressed that *'the librarians are kind'* and that she always talks to them about what is new in the library and what events she can visit. The blind and partially sighted library employees emphasised that all of them were library users before they were employed and that the library still means a lot to them in the capacity of users.

Interviewee 2 (female), who works in the production of audio formats, says, *'Now I am [...] what other people were for me [...] when I listened to the books when you hear at the end that the book was recorded by that and that person. And that is such a good feeling.'*

Interviewee 3 (female), who works as a proofreader, says *'I have been a library user for so many years. I borrowed books already during my elementary school. [...] During my university studies [of communication science] I never imagined that I would work in a library, that that would be my job. And now.. While proofreading, you have users in your mind, those people who will borrow.. And you know that, while you were borrowing, how important it was for you to get a book in which every dot is [legible], even the smallest one. That there are no errors.'*

Interviewee 4 (male), who records audio format and also works as a language editor, explained how he sees his work and what it means to him. *'By the end of my studies, I had already noticeably started to lose my sight. And then, I worked various jobs, and as my eyesight was failing, you know, it is like you fall into a funnel, and your job opportunities decrease. Because blind people cannot be drivers after all, nor this or that. There are many jobs we cannot do, but some we can do. One of the jobs we can do excellently, because the listening part is the most important, is to record sound editions. The job involves not only recording but also organising everything. [...] I understand it as a life mission and not only as something I should do eight hours a day as an employee. I put a lot of effort into my work because I know how much books mean to blind people.'*





**Figure 5 – Different aspects of book production on the library premises** (Credit: Inga Tomić-Koludrović)

Interviewee 4 explained the importance of the library not only to himself but also to other users. *'The library means a lot to me and this job means a lot to me. To our users, it is the window to the world, you know. And to me, this is a second home. I love my job and when I go to work, I am happy that I will do something new that day.'* Describing why working in a library is so important to him, Interviewee 4 mentioned that when he started to lose his sight, he was worried not so much about how he would do *'practical things'* but rather about how he would live without books and the possibility to read them.

Interviewee 3 also says that the library means *'quite a lot'* to her, *'primarily because I get to read many new books, published last year or the year before [...]'*. This would not happen if she read only privately. The interviewee also stated that she was happy *'because of what we do here'* and *'because I got this job immediately after I graduated, which is also important to me'*.

Asked the same question, Interviewee 2 said, *'I don't even know how to express this. [The library] is an integral part of my life. When I was small, I mostly came to get required readings in secondary school. I used to come a lot when I was at university. If it weren't for this library, I would be dependent on what someone else would read to me.'*

Interviewee 5 (female), who works as a librarian, says she has worked with many generations of blind and partially sighted people. *'Many of them were children and are now adults. [...] It pleases me so much when I see someone who was a child, an elementary school pupil [when they first came to the library], and is now a university graduate. An example that comes to mind is someone who was a young girl when her parents brought her here to this library counter and who is now a simultaneous interpreter in Brussels.'*

Interviewee 6 (female), the library director, says she and her team highly appreciate the data about the number of users, borrowed books, and other library services. It is good to know that *'an average user of our library reads more than 50 books annually, which is far beyond the national average.'* However, what she sees as *'truly irreplaceable'* is *'the feeling that [the users] come to their library, take a book in a format acceptable to them, and return home [with it]. Or visit a public discussion [on the library premises]. [...] Or get a code that makes it possible for them to borrow books from our digital library.'* Numbers are certainly important, but it would also be worth the effort even if the library had only *'five users a month who you make happy.'* What matters is satisfying *'a need, a basic human need.'*



**Figure 6 – A concert and a quiz organised for the users on the library premises** (Credit: CLB)

The library director also holds this to be true when it comes to employing people with visual impairments. She informs us that out of 17 employees, five are blind and partially sighted persons, and one is with both a vision and hearing impairment. According to the director, this is a high percentage of employees with a disability, perhaps even the highest among similar institutions. But more importantly, these *'colleagues [...] participate in the [work] process on equal terms and with professional competence, using the tools and technologies appropriate for the workplaces they are employed at, such as professional associates for proofreading, recorders of sound editions, or graduated librarians. We all learn from each other, and that also holds true for interactions with our users, that is, with persons who, for different reasons, cannot read standard print.'*

According to the ACE DisAbility Network's definition (ACE, 2006b), the term 'inclusion' refers to 'the process whereby every person (irrespective of age, disability, gender, religion, sexual preference or nationality) who wishes to can access and participate fully in all aspects of an activity or service in the same way as any other member of the community'. According to the same source, this process requires time, space, effort and resources but it creates a fairer, more cohesive and richer society. The description of work done by employees of the Croatian Library for the Blind can be seen both as a good illustration of a successful inclusion process and an indication that it creates a better society.

The library director says that the institution she heads follows the approach according to which *'blind persons should be included in literally all segments of society'* and, to that end, *'adapts all that we have, from the space through which we move to the media content relying on visual communication'* to the needs of its users. The experienced librarian adds that *'people usually think about a library as a passive [environment]. But after 40 years of working here, [I can say] that in fact there is so much activity, so much content, and so many contacts.'*

A part of the library's activities are outreach events that sensitise citizens to the problems that blind and partially sighted persons encounter in everyday life. To that end, the library cooperates with many schools, school libraries, and other public libraries. In addition to lectures, workshops are also organised, and the library director points out that *'children are enthusiastic and excited by that kind of presentation. Children love trying [to read] Braille.'*

The events organised on the library premises are visited not only by persons who are blind or partially sighted but by other interested visitors as well. One should also mention that there is a group of library

users without vision impairments, which consists of all those persons who, for some reason, cannot read standard print well. The most numerous such users are children with dyslexia, but also persons with motor difficulties who find it difficult to hold heavy books while reading. Such persons can borrow units from a continually expanding collection of audio-format books.



**Figure 7 – School children visiting the library to get informed about Braille and tactile picture book reading** (Credit: CLB)

Digitalisation has made the process of borrowing and reading much simpler for blind and partially sighted users. The librarian with 40 years of experience remembers a time when reel-to-reel tape recorders were used. These formats were much more cumbersome to use, and the users would frequently return the tapes in conditions that required rewinding and repair. To a somewhat lesser degree, the same holds true for audio cassettes that replaced reel-to-reel tape recorders. The manipulation and storage of contemporary audio-format carriers (CDs and memory sticks) is much simpler. Likewise, electronic notebooks for blind persons have made the educational process much more convenient and practical for new generations.

However, the library director emphasises that the impact of digitalisation goes far beyond that. She says that digital formats have enabled a new level of independence and self-reliance for blind and partially sighted persons. *‘Everything has become more accessible, from better information flow and easier and speedier communication to competitiveness on the job market’*. Last but not least, the digital mode of communication made it possible to work from home and continue book production during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## Concluding remarks: What could be improved?

Assessing the effectiveness of the inclusion of blind and partially sighted persons is always a challenge. However, it is obvious that the Croatian Library for the Blind has already transcended the achievements of small-step approaches preparing the ground for later larger interventions, sometimes advocated in the educational context (Pressley, Graham and Harris, 2006). It functions as an efficient public institution, helping to satisfy cultural needs and facilitate the inclusion of a vulnerable population. Furthermore, it can be said to truly enjoy the support from all levels of the community, as well as from different political actors, that Taket et al. (2014: 256) claim is crucial for achieving social inclusion. Owing to the cultural activities of its users and efforts of its employees, as well as to its model of participatory governance based on the cooperation of the government and a civil society association, the Croatian Library for the Blind can be seen as in many ways a model institution.

The question that should nevertheless be asked is: how could the activities of the library be further improved? It is certainly commendable that it has stable financing from the Croatian Association of the Blind and the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media, as well as the right to receive donations and engage in independent economic activities. However, this solid support from national sources means that the library has so far rarely engaged in securing further funding from European Union sources, although Croatia has been an EU member for almost ten years at the moment of writing. The library's recent application for an Erasmus Plus project signals that this is beginning to change. Reliance on this component of the diversification of funding can only be recommended in the future.

Another aspect of the library's activities that could be improved relates to further decentralisation. As we have mentioned, although located in the capital city of Zagreb, the library offers its services to users across Croatia through digital borrowing of books and interlibrary loans. Likewise, it has an important role in promoting and supporting the development of sections for visually impaired users in other libraries across Croatia. In addition to expanding the scope and further improving the quality of services, the next step in the decentralisation of library activities of this kind in Croatia should be the introduction of the library's model of participatory governance in different locations across the country. This would represent a significant step towards political inclusion in contexts where the library already performs a highly important cultural role.

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