

28th Panhellenic Academic Libraries Conference  
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"Green & Sustainable Academic Libraries in the post-COVID Era"

# **We Need Books: how inclusive libraries promote social sustainability**

Ioanna Nissiriou, Margarita Sianou, Paraskevi Loulo



WE  
NEED  
BOOKS

Πολυγλωσσική Βιβλιοθήκη / Multilingual Library  
Πολυπολιτισμικό Κέντρο / Multicultural Center

## Introduction

Athens is becoming more diverse. This creates a need for libraries to re-examine their services & for new library models to emerge.

How are inclusion & social sustainability understood in terms of community libraries?

For the purpose of this paper we will use We Need Books as a case study.



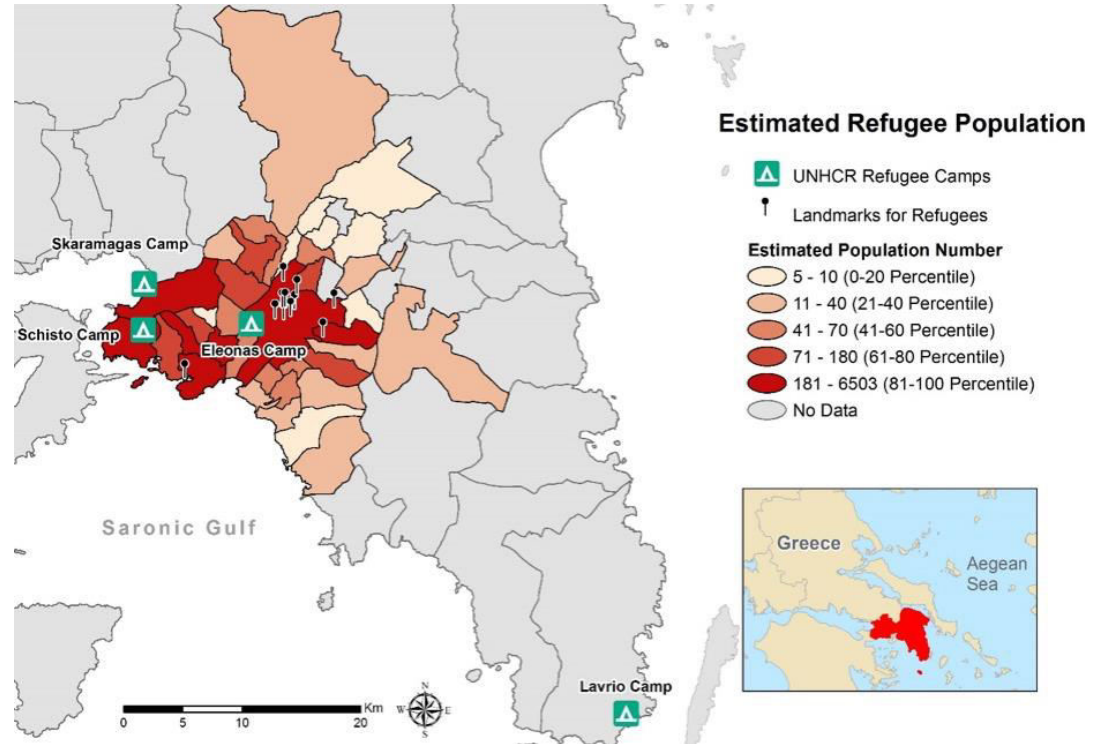
October 2016

We Need Books was the name of the crowdfunding campaign that raised money for a library to be created in Elliniko camp. The camp was closed and the population was transferred in an industrial park outside of Theva before We Need Books was incorporated. The books that were sourced for Farsi speaking asylum seekers in the picture were taken to Schisto camp a few months later.



## The demographics of our societies are changing

It is estimated that in 2018 23% of the people living in the municipality of Athens are documented first or second generation migrants, not counting undocumented migrants & asylum seekers which would bring the percentage closer to 25%



Picture source:  
[www.RefugeesInTowns.org](http://www.RefugeesInTowns.org)

2020

Source:

www.GreekCityTimes.com

ΑΔΩΝΙΣ ΚΥΡΟΥ  
Διαδουκτής (1896-1918)  
ΑΧΙΛΛΕΥΣ Α. ΚΥΡΟΥ  
(1918-1950)  
ΚΥΡΟΣ Α. ΚΥΡΟΥ  
(1918-1974)  
ΑΔΩΝΙΣ ΚΥΡΟΥ  
(1974-1997)  
ΑΛΕΞΗΣ ΖΑΟΥΣΗΣ  
(1997-2015)

# ΕΣΤΙΑ



ΗΜΕΡΗΣΙΑ ΕΦΗΜΕΡΙΣ • ΕΤΟΣ ΙΔΡΥΣΕΩΣ 1876

**Τετάρτη**  
**25 Νοεμβρίου 2020**

Απόδοσις των Εισοδίων. Αίκατερίνης τῆς μεγαλομ.  
Σελήνη 11 ἡμερῶν | Ἀνατολή ἡλίου 7.17' – Δύσις 5.08'



**ΑΤΤΙΚΗ.** Νεφώσεις. Ἄνεμοι βορειοανατολικοὶ ἕως 6 μποφόρ. (Ἔως 15β.)  
**ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗ.** Καλοκαιρία. Ἄνεμοι βόρειοι ἕως 4 μποφόρ. (Ἔως 13β.)

Ἀριθμ. φύλ. 41817  
Ἔτος 144ον  
Τιμὴ 1,50€

**ΚΛΕΙΝΕΙ Η ΔΟΜΗ ΤΟΥ ΕΛΑΙΩΝΟΣ ΜΕ ΤΗΝ ΔΙΠΛΗ ΑΝΑΠΛΑΣΗ**

## Τό 25% τῶν κατοίκων τῆς πόλεως τῶν Ἀθηνῶν εἶναι μετανάστες!

# Social inclusion and social sustainability in a library context

World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, 1995: “The aim of social integration is to create ‘a society for all’, in which every individual, each with rights & responsibilities, has an active role to play. Such an inclusive society must be based on respect for all human rights & fundamental freedoms, cultural & religious diversity, social justice & the special needs of vulnerable & disadvantaged groups, democratic participation & the rule of law.”



A community library must be accessible to every member of society:

- no financial barriers keeping visitors away
- visitors' legal status irrelevant
- accessible to disabled visitors
- aware of needs of parents of young children
- culturally aware staff
- resources on human & legal rights
- no discrimination
- processes in place that involve users in decision making



Picture source:  
Oak Park Public Library  
[www.oppl.org](http://www.oppl.org)

For Eleni Meredoula, 29, whose family is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but moved to Athens when she was a toddler, feeling like she is not accepted in Greek society has been the biggest challenge. “[It’s] the Greek mentality that they don’t accept you as you are ... **it takes so long for people to accept the differences,**” she said. “These are the kind of things that are making me feel like I can’t breathe.”

Source: ‘They don’t accept you’:  
Afro-Greeks struggle to be seen’  
Aljazeera.com



Afro-Greek demonstrators shout slogans during a protest march against racism in Athens, 17/8/2017 [Simela Pantzartzi/EPA]



A key component in achieving social sustainability, is addressing social and spatial fragmentation. In order to bring people together, it is not only policies that need to be adapted, a city also needs to have spaces where coexistence is not just possible, but normal.

Stern, R. & Polèse, M. “The Social Sustainability of Cities Diversity and the Management of Change”



Event at the Kypseli Municipal Market  
Source: AgoraKypselis.gr

Library staff needs to display cultural awareness in its interaction with the public, in order to bring people together.



Photo source:  
The University of West Alabama  
[www.online.uwa.edu](http://www.online.uwa.edu)

## The case of We Need Books: good practices and limitations

- non profit organisation
- no stable funding
- no employment stability
- relies greatly on volunteers & interns
- moved to Kypseli in 2019
- has a collection of 16.000 books in 38 languages, the vast majority donated
- 30% of its collection has been catalogued



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## **Vision**

to help shape inclusive & thriving communities, free of prejudice & racism

## **Mission**

to enrich lives and empower individuals by providing free & equal access to information, knowledge & services, to foster social inclusion & promote interculturalism in a safe & welcoming environment.

## Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

1. Curates a diverse collection:
  - balancing between female & male authors
  - ensuring authors with different gender, social & cultural identities are well represented.
  - books relevant to the experiences, concerns & information needs of contemporary readers
  - not separating queer or black or asian literature from the main collection
  - not separating books written by refugees



# Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

- asking:  
Is this book helpful?  
How does it benefit its reader?  
Is it still relevant?



## Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

2. Creating a space that is:
- wheelchair accessible
  - double pushchair accessible
  - breastfeeding friendly
  - toddler friendly
  - equipped with tablets for safe public use



## Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

3. Designs inclusive programmes: CHARMMS Challenging Refugee & Migrant Media Stereotypes
- training locals, refugees & migrants in storytelling techniques for human rights advocacy
  - discussing issues of identity & media representation with creators of content
  - creating networks between writers of content & refugee, migrant & local youth





# Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

An Eco Activist is Born – A Film Festival Against Climate Change, workshops & screenings on:

- environmental activism
- eco anxiety
- climate refugees
- the economy of wellbeing

Speakers:

- from Greece, Bangladesh, Kenya & U.S.
- 5 out of 6 female, all leaders in their profession

*festival against climate change*

Saturday  
25 June  
18:00 - 20:00  
We Need Books  
7 Evas St  
Kypseli



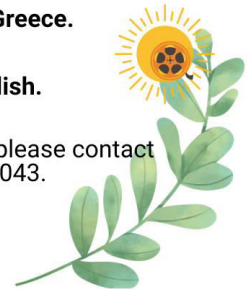
We will talk about climate refugees with academic, researcher and former Senior Research and Evaluation Specialist (Migration and Displacement) for UNICEF Dr Bina D'Costa and the director of Asante, Nikodimos-Maina Kinyua.

The event is part of Refugee Week Greece.

Part of the discussion will be in English.

For more information and bookings please contact [info@weneedbooks.org](mailto:info@weneedbooks.org) or 211182 4043.

The event is free.



## Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

### Participants:

- locals, foreign visitors, refugees & migrants
- one with mental & one with motor disabilities
- youngest participant 8 years old
- oldest participant in her 80s



## **Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability**

Supporting Children to Thrive:

- after school tutoring for unprivileged elementary school children
- 35 students
- arts & culture workshops

## Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability

4. Bringing academics to the neighbourhood:
- makes information available
  - draws the public into discourses not usually discussed outside of academic circles or in the mainstream media
  - results in citizens becoming more informed & more engaged in important subjects that affect them
  - provides further resources



## **Actions We Need Books Multilingual Library has taken to promote social sustainability**

5. Operating according to the servant leadership model:
  - every member of the organization, the founders, the staff, the volunteers, see their personal & professional growth as an integral step into serving our community better
  - all members are encouraged to pursue training & to undertake initiatives & challenges that will contribute to their advancement

## **We Need Books Multilingual Library shortcomings**

- no computers for public use
- no printing service
- no assistance available to computer illiterate visitors with online forms and procedures
- only a few titles in Braille
- no audiobooks
- unable to do interlibrary loans
- online database not complete

## **Ways in which academic libraries can become more inclusive:**

- diversifying their collections
- ensuring access for disabled users
- working with university faculties, students and NGOs through synergies to promote social sustainability
- providing mentorship to disadvantaged youths
- working with local schools
- hosting language practice
- partnering with the third sector to train in computer literacy vulnerable members of the community

“an inclusive society is equipped with mechanisms which accommodate diversity, and facilitate/enable people’s active participation in their political, economic and social lives. As such, it over-rides differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography, and ensures equal opportunities for all to achieve full potential in life, regardless of origin. Such a society fosters, at the same time, emanates from well-being of each individual, mutual trust, sense of belonging and inter-connectedness.”

Brown, T. (2021). *Building an inclusive society in the post pandemic world*



Thank you for attending.

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