MOBILE LIBRARIES, CROSS EXPERIENCES THROUGH COMOROS AND MADAGASCAR

Information sheet

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CONTEXT

Reading, one of the pillars of children's independent learning, allows children to reinforce their learning outside of class time and at a distance - while gaining independence and openness. Mobile libraries allow children to have access to books, even when there is a lack of infrastructure, or when it is difficult to travel. It is a very adaptable device and a local service for which children do not need to have digital access.

Vahatra (Madagascar) launched a mobile library system in 2020, in response to travel restrictions and school closures, related to the Covid-19 crisis. Started with 18 trunks in 18 agencies (the centers where the children usually meet), the program continues to evolve. In the Comoros, **Maeecha** launched its first experiments with decentralized libraries in 2003 - a system that has constantly evolved since then between mobility (motorcycle library then bookmobile) and decentralized mini libraries.





Mobilized resources



the means to operate it (drivers, fuel, etc.);

A means of transporting books (motorcycles, mini-buses, trunks, donkeys, etc.) and

Facilities, such as a library corner in the district agencies of Vahatra or in the schools accompanied by **Maeecha** (the device can also be mobile only);



A variety of books (e.g. each Vahatra trunk contains about twenty books, the scheme was launched with about 400 donated books but it is possible to start smaller); a budget to buy books later;



A system for identifying and tracking books (in this case, tracking books and a list of available books);



Facilitators to bring the system to life.

What is important to bring a mobile library to life?



Choose the device based on the availability of books and resources, and ensure the quality of the books;



Convince teachers, inform parents;

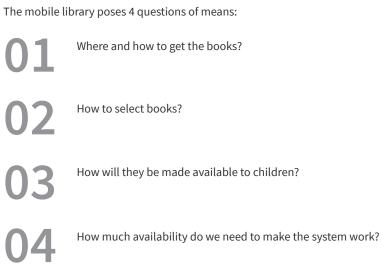
Work on the animation of the device and emphasize the notion of pleasure;



Organize the follow-up to evolve the device and the available books.

Steps

Adapt the system to the availability of books and the means available at the outset



Get the books

In many countries, books are expensive and not widely available. To gather books, the call for donations is the cheapest and fastest solution, the trick being to start with the available books. It is also possible to set up a partnership to bring in books from outside the country, although there are issues of language and transportation costs, and in some cases the "filter" of the partners can have an influence on the type of book offered. Finally, in the case of purchases, it is possible to sign a partnership with one or more local booksellers from the start, but the cost of building up the initial stock can be high.

In Madagascar, Vahatra called for donations from its hundred employees to launch its mobile libraries. This made it possible to start quickly with a collection of about 400 works, ranging from comic books to story books, from novels to school books, or even children's magazines. If we consider the purchase price of new books in Madagascar, we can estimate that this fund represents a value of 3000 to 6000€ (for a base of 7,5 to 15€ / book). In order for this system to work, the animators of the 18 Vahatra agencies were sensitized and invited to mobilize their team, then an official call was launched. The criteria was broad, for books aimed at 5-15 year olds, and then a final selection was made.

Choose the books

The choice of books to be included in the library is important, even if the constraints at the start of the system can be strong (few books available, dependence on donations...).

The implementation of a policy of choice and selection of books from the outset puts the library on the right track, and can be strengthened as the system grows (means, number of books available, and identification of books that please...).

It is a question of finding criteria flexible enough to allow the implementation of the system without aiming too high, but to have, from the beginning, a desire for appropriate selection.

Vahatra has set up simple criteria to make its call for donations to its employees and then choose the books after its first collection:

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The book must be in good condition

The book must be suitable for 5-15 year olds and not carry cultural, political or religious messages that are too established / open to debate



The book must be in French or local language

It is important to have a variety of books (counts, stories, comics, educational books...).

In a second phase, this selection was enriched on a more voluntary basis, according to the shortcomings observed, for example by looking for more books in local languages, or by looking for classics of local literature (see last point on the evaluation of the system).





Make the books available

The distribution strategy must be adapted according to the number of books available at the outset and the distribution area. In the case of a small number of books, trunks or other devices that can be transported with small means are suitable (motorcycle, donkey, car ...): the books can be easily moved between different areas. If the means are there, it is possible to develop the device with a dedicated vehicle, like a bookmobile. With a larger number of books, it is also possible to consider less mobile devices where the books are distributed among different fixed points and rotate regularly.

After having collected 400 books, **Vahatra** wanted to distribute them among its 18 agencies. But this limited the number of books per agency to about twenty. The team chose to use trunks to easily transport the books from one agency to another and to rotate them quarterly, so that the books available would be quickly rotated for the children.

When **Maeecha** started in 2003, it only had a stock of books and a box for transportation. The facilitator at the time (Youssouf Dainane) had created a list of the stock of books available to the schools, so that each teacher could indicate which ones they were interested in. On his next visit, he brought the requested books in the box and on a motorcycle. Later, Maeecha acquired a bus to transport the books and serve as a library. But the bus is frequently stopped because of technical problems (repairs) or road conditions. Maeecha continues to use other solutions such as reading and leisure centers located directly in schools.

Make the system work

The resources needed to run the mobile library differ greatly depending on the ambition of the system and the frequency of visits (or opening hours in the case of relocated mini-libraries). It is quite possible to operate with reduced time resources to allow the borrowing of books. However, this may not be enough to get children excited about reading if they don't have time or space for "pleasure" reading. For a more sustained animation, and in particular time on site with the child, it is necessary to foresee animation positions, or work in partnership with teachers, volunteers...

Transportation and acquisition of books also takes time. The more books are limited, the more often they need to be transported or the number of beneficiaries reduced.

At the start of the system, **Vahatra** only opened its libraries once a week for one hour, during which time children could choose books to borrow. This did not mobilize the social workers very much. The system was then reinforced with more opening days. In 2022, faced with the fact that the format did not allow for on-site reading and was an obstacle for some children, Vahatra decided to open the library 2 half-days a week in each branch. Each branch initially had about twenty books, which rotated among the branches, allowing for many small local points rather than one larger library with the same number of books.

Maeecha tested until 2012 the animation of mini-libraries placed in schools by trained volunteer teachers, to provide access to books. However, teacher volunteers had little time to devote to the library during school hours. In 2012, a 1st facilitator was hired for one of these mini libraries. Today Maeecha operates a mobile library, for which a driver and an animator have been recruited, in order to visit 3 schools per day, from Monday to Thursday (2 in the morning, 1 in the afternoon). As well as reading and leisure centers located in certain schools and which are animated by animators supervised by the school council - the animator of the mobile library also visits them regularly.

1 - Maeecha's bookmobile now carries books.

Inform parents, convince teachers

Mobile libraries are entering the world of parents and teachers. At first, the parents do not necessarily know about the existence of the system (they must be informed). They are not all at ease with books either, some are illiterate, so it is also necessary to explain the use and interest of the system to them and their children, so that they assimilate the rules.

Teachers are also sometimes wary of mobile libraries: if the activities take place during their class hours, they "take up their time", and outside of class, they do not always see the connections that can be made with their job.

Since November 2021, Vahatra has incorporated information about the mobile library into the general information meeting about its services, which all parents attend. This prevents parents from coming to the agency without knowing the rules and choosing the books themselves, for instance - the rule being that the child must choose the book.

Maeecha reminds teachers that reading will enhance the child's ability to follow and understand the lesson, to participate, to be comfortable. This will help them in their work, with students of a higher level. The teachers are also reassured about the workload that this requires, since the animations are taken care of by Maeecha's animators. Once teachers are convinced, they are better at promoting the system to students.

Work on the animation of the system to encourage and inspire

Reading does not come "naturally" to children, especially when the mobile library is new to them. To help them develop an interest in reading, it is important to accompany and encourage them.

The notion of "reading for pleasure" - in Nyumakele (Maeecha Comoros intervention area) - strongly contributes to the development of reading, and it is transmitted through animation. The animation can be done everywhere with very little means and equipment (1 animator, 1 mat, books), the trick is to vary the animations well.

At the launch of the program, the Vahatra agency facilitators showed the children who visited the agencies how to use a book: how to take care of it, how to open it, in which direction to read it... The logic was really that of appropriating a new object, of not leaving the child alone to read, while gradually becoming independent. The child chooses the book.

At Maeecha, reading is above all portrayed as a pleasure. When we read to children, we invite them to close their eyes, to escape, to listen attentively... Children can also spend time with the book, whereas at school they are often several around the same book. The animation then consists of games ("spell me"), questions... to provoke the child's feedback. The facilitators create sheets with the level, the objectives, the material for each animation?

Use other media around the book so that reading is associated with a moment of pleasure

All means are good to interest children in reading: propose theatrical animations, movie sessions, games in the reading places. The playful aspect, the images, the collective challenges are all opportunities to put the book forward and to associate it with a moment of pleasure.

Vahatra has started to set up a mini toy library with its mini libraries. Each child who has borrowed at least 2 books has the right to borrow a game, to be played alone or as a family. This strengthens the child's desire to read.

Maeecha organizes many activities around reading. The new bookmobile has a video projector powered by solar panels. Artists or members of the book club led circus (clown) and theatrical animations to promote reading.





2 - Vahatra's animators help children discover books. 3 - Maeecha's animators read to the comfortably seated children.





4 - Animations such as clowns or projections are part of Maeecha's strategies to draw people into the pleasure of reading.

Give children a sense of value

Enhancing the value of reading also means enhancing the value of children who want to be more involved. The collective dynamics, the exchanges, the rewards around reading stimulate the readers who can also share their liking with others.

At Maeecha, the children who read are put forward: after 2 readings, they are invited to speak about what they have read. Finally, the children can represent the school in the reading contest and about thirty of them contribute to a collective newspaper by writing stories, their emotions, related to events such as weddings, Eid celebrations, etc.

Organize the follow-up

As the mobile library is often launched with "the means at hand", the implementation of a monitoring framework makes it possible to better understand how books are used and to adjust and grow the device, while ensuring the "right" use of books. By follow-up, we mean primarily a follow-up list of the books borrowed by each child (which makes it possible to monitor both the rate and the time of use of the book, and the child), but also in a more qualitative way the way in which the books are used (genre, reading on the spot or at home, solitary or collective...). Once this data is collected, it is possible to reinforce the library's collection with the type of books that are most appreciated, to buy a book that is used twice, to organize contests on a particular book, to modify the rules for borrowing books, to remove books that have deteriorated or that are not read, etc.

Vahatra has set up a simple tracking logbook in its agencies. Each book is listed with the date it was borrowed and returned. This allows a follow-up of the movements of the book, and of the child. The social worker uses the notebook to discuss with the child what he or she has learned, sometimes suggesting that he or she make a summary... At the same time, the notebooks made it possible to quickly identify that books in Malagasy were very much in demand and the team therefore decided to reinforce the Malagasy collection, but also to make dictionaries available to facilitate reading in French. In addition to the notebooks, observations have made it possible to identify that some of the books (or games) made available could be sub-rented by the families, or that the parents themselves came to choose the books. Vahatra has therefore amended its rules governing the use of the library to prevent such deviations.



Why is this interesting?

- including in times of crisis limiting travel:
- accessible to all, including in very rural areas;
- a large number of children; the basic book collection can be built up at a lower cost and then enriched;
- exercises, theatrical animations... They thus link learning and pleasure;
- They strengthen the efforts of teachers, who can then work more effectively.

Points to watch out for

- The flow of books must be fast enough to keep the children's reading experience fresh;
- The device must grow gradually: it is better to start "small";
- appropriation by the children);
- If the flow is not possible at all, the system is shut down;
- of libraries, their ability to read may be challenged and frustration may result;
- refusing free books.

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Example of a loan sheet (Maeecha)

5 - Children are invited to present what they have learned from their reading in the Comoros. 6 - Each book movement is recorded, which allows Vahatra to check in with the child

Mobile libraries are interesting devices for all areas lacking access to books (or where reading is not encouraged),

• The mobile libraries represent a service of proximity, reinforcing the autonomy of the children but remaining very

• They can be implemented with very limited means, with the help and motivation of a team or partners, while reaching

• They meet an existing need of the children, but also make it possible to work on other aspects by proposing specific

• Without follow-up or without a framework, the system is likely to degrade rapidly (loss or deterioration of books, appropriation by parents, etc.); however, it is necessary to allow the manipulation of the book object (and thus facilitate

Plan for the future: If children who have learned to read through mobile libraries are unable to find books because of a lack

• Find books adapted to both the cultural universe and the ages of the children and promote local books... even if it means



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