

# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN SPAIN'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES

## Executive summary



## **RESEARCH CREDITS**

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"So let us open the doors to life. Let everyone come with what they know and share what interests them. Let us create the conditions so that the street does not stop at the doors of the building: let us remove the walls, the barriers, the locks and the passwords. Let us open up culture to everyone. Let us forget about resources and set libraries and museums to listening mode. There are many communities that are looking for a place to gather, that have nowhere to make their dreams come alive nor a place to find refuge" (Lafuente, 2022: 61).

"In any case, I speak of 'people's palaces' not because it is an expression of theirs, but because it is beautiful. It was said to me by the New York librarian we were talking about earlier, and I think it represents what a library is. If libraries had never been invented, I don't think our current society would be able to do it. It's too radical an idea, it's too far removed from the way we understand the world. But luckily, even though it's such a radical idea, we have them" (Klinenberg, 2022, interview in the newspaper *La Directa*).

# Introduction

This paper presents a study on citizen participation in Spain's public libraries. The aim of the research is to provide answers to a variety of questions: How is the idea of participation understood in the context of the library? What specific practices are being developed in order to foster community participation? What approaches are taken, and which areas of libraries are affected? Which actors are driving these practices and who is involved in them? Who is not involved and why? What opportunities and barriers exist when it comes to promoting participation?

This is a study commissioned by the Library Cooperation Council and supported by the Directorate General for Books and the Promotion of Reading of Spain's Ministry of Culture and Sport, with the aim of providing guidelines concerning how to encourage greater involvement of local communities in public libraries. The latter is an issue that features prominently in debates on the future of libraries and the role they can play in a society increasingly characterised by information technologies, the need for public facilities capable of responding to new social crises and a growing demand for citizen participation in public services. In fact, the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022) outlined a firm commitment to stimulating citizen participation in libraries, pointing out the need to involve local communities in decision-making.

In this paper, we firstly present a theoretical overview of the issue. Secondly, we present the methodology used, which alternates between qualitative, ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) approaches. Thirdly, we reflect on the many different approaches to participation that exist in the context of the library. The fourth chapter suggests different categories of participatory practices in public libraries, with a special focus on citizen laboratories. Subsequently, the origins and drivers of these practices are examined, as well as the areas of libraries they affect. In the fifth chapter, the different barriers and opportunities encountered by those seeking to promote greater neighbourhood involvement are looked at. The sixth chapter addresses the social dimension of libraries, analysing the profiles of the members of population involved in participation practices and the social links they can help to generate. The study ends by outlining a number of conclusions and areas for continued research.

Libraries are very special places, which are held in high esteem and greatly appreciated. They are seen by the majority of the population as open, trustworthy and welcoming spaces that play an important role for local communities. They are perhaps the facilities which are best equipped when it comes to fostering citizen participation and community outreach and represent ideal spaces for experimenting with new paradigms for the shared management of public facilities and common goods. We hope that this paper can make a small contribution in this regard.

# 1. Theoretical framework of the research

## **The shift towards a community-based approach in libraries**

In recent years, there has been a clear shift towards a community-based approach in public libraries in many parts of the world. This shift in focus has also been reflected in theoretical discourse. One of the most prominent analytical frameworks is the civic librarianship paradigm, which has focused on “strengthening communities through development strategies that enhance the educational mission of the public library in a democratic society” (Ford, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Within these frameworks, concepts such as that of community libraries have emerged (Kranich, 2012). In this context, libraries are evolving from being seen as passive spaces – or “grand repositories” of knowledge – towards becoming an active and responsive part of the community (Ford, 2002). In turn, they have become essential actors when it comes to the promotion of citizen participation at the local level, as well as spaces for citizen debate and deliberation (Kranich, 2012).

## **What is citizen participation?**

The idea of citizen participation has become so widespread in recent decades that it is now associated with a wide range of discourses and a variety of public policies. In the process, the concept has gradually been watered down and has lost some of the critical content it might have had when it first appeared in public debate some years ago. This research is based on the concise definition provided by Bonet (2011) within the framework of the critical approach to citizen participation (Martí and Parés, 2009): “the involvement of citizens (from individual citizens to associations) as actors in decision-making processes related to public policies in any of their phases: analysis, design, implementation and evaluation”.

Reference should also be made to the analytical framework of the ladder of participation, which will be used at different points throughout the research. Citizen participation can take on many different forms and can therefore be characterised in a number of different ways. In the 1960s, Arnstein (1969) created the famous ladder of participation and used it to point out that certain participation practices were merely cosmetic devices, when not outright attempts to manipulate local residents. This ladder has been reformulated on many occasions. We have adapted the original formulation for the study of local participation in libraries, drawing on three aspects in particular: population-expert partnership; the delegation of power or

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<sup>1</sup> A list of the referenced bibliography can be found in the full version of the research.

principle of co-production; and citizen control or co-management.

Meanwhile, Castro and Forné (2021) identified three different models of urban governance, which can easily be applied in the case of public facilities. The first refers to public-private consultation and is characteristic of neoliberal urban policies. The second, participatory management, corresponds to those models of governance dominated by public authorities and the channels set up for this purpose: councils, mechanisms and processes. Lastly, the management of the commons is based on a concept of participation understood as the self-government of communities, which therefore goes beyond the regulatory spaces for participation that dominate the aforementioned format. This study will pay particular attention to how the incipient public-community models are taking shape in libraries.

### **Participation in the cultural sphere and libraries**

Barbieri (2020) has noted how in the cultural sphere cultural participation and mere cultural consumption, which of course refer to very different ideas, are often confused. This can be seen both in various articles on the subject of citizen participation in libraries and in many of the references to the practice of participation, including in the fieldwork itself.

To address this, the author himself has proposed a broader and more comprehensive definition of cultural participation, which also encompasses "(c) community participation, which implies being part of diverse cultural entities, groups or collectives; and (d) participation in public decision-making and governance; in short, in the processes of the development, implementation and evaluation of cultural policies" (Barbieri and Solazar, 2019: 11).

### **Local community participation and social inequalities**

A key matter when it comes to examining community participation practices is the issue of social inequalities. That is to say, it is important to look at which groups are involved in collective processes, and which remain absent. We have thus examined the ways in which local community participation is closely related to the radically unequal distribution of certain social factors and conditions (Font, 2004). These social factors include (Font, 2004): the free time available in everyday life or the economic capacity to "buy free time" and free oneself from care burdens; educational resources and the ability to access and understand information related to the most important issues; a person's interests, feelings and self-perceptions regarding his or her capacities to engage in participatory spaces.

## 2. Research methods

### 1. Consultation of the Oversight Committee

The Oversight Committee, made up of a group of 8-10 people with technical, professional and academic expertise, was consulted by the technical team in order to reach an agreement regarding its methodological decisions in the main phases of the research: 1) Initial phase (choice of subject matter and objectives), and 2) Intermediate phase (presentation of fieldwork results).

### 2. Semi-structured interviews

Fourteen interviews were conducted with library staff and seven interviews with users in order to examine more closely the meanings and significance given to participatory practices in libraries. In all cases, the libraries concerned were libraries that engage in participatory practices.

### 3. Participant observation

Participant observation was carried out around two libraries in order to observe the facilities in situ, learn about their most significant characteristics and the relationships and interactions that are established, as well as some of the participatory activities organised.


### 4. Documentary analysis

The analysis of the results was supplemented by an exhaustive bibliographical consultation concerning experiences of participation in libraries, in order to gather as much information as possible regarding these practices, as well as to look at the different theoretical positions taken in relation to these practices and libraries themselves.



### 3. Approaches to participation in libraries

The approaches identified in the fieldwork can be grouped roughly according to the upper levels of the ladder of participation: “cooperation”, “co-production” and “co-management”, as illustrated in the following table.

Ladder of participation	Key concepts	Process leadership
Co-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institution as a facilitator in processes that originate from citizens and lead towards their autonomy.</li> <li>• Shared management and redistribution of power.</li> <li>• Institutions as common resources to be appropriated by citizens.</li> </ul>	Citizen participation  The leading role of the institution
Co-production		
Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual learning and transformation between administrative bodies and citizens.</li> <li>• Collaboration in processes that originate from both institutions and citizens.</li> <li>• Openness of the institution to proposals from the public.</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration with a variety of actors.</li> <li>• The social and community role of libraries.</li> </ul>	
Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensive range of activities to appeal to a diverse range of people.</li> </ul>	

Three areas for discussion emerge from these different ways of approaching participation in libraries:

1) A debate on the need to clearly distinguish between the concepts of “user” and “participant”, given the perceived misuse and imprecision of the latter term.

2) The contrast between “softer” approaches, associated with providing a very broad range of activities that can attract a wide range of people, and more “substantive” definitions, which focus on shared management, a greater redistribution of power and an increasing role for communities.

3) A debate on the limits of participation, comparing approaches that seek to avoid perceived risks associated with excessive participation and approaches that advocate for greater participation in the different areas of libraries.

# 4. Participation practices in public libraries

## 4.1 Participation practices identified

This section addresses the main community participation practices identified in public libraries. These are as follows:

### 1. Designing the space

This is understood as the involvement of communities in the layout of a new library in their local environment, although sometimes this process takes the form of reconfiguring existing facilities, in whole or in part.

### 2. Participative strategies for improving the library

These are processes that seek to involve the local community or users in drawing up strategic documents or documents related to the improvement of the facility, according to the different plans considered.

### 3. Promoting the creation of participatory groups

These are groups that are oriented towards a specific activity - such as a reading club or a film forum - in the library. A fundamental feature of these groups must be that all participants can take part in decision making, so that decisions are not left to library staff or to the volunteer coordinator of the group.

### 4. Citizen laboratories

These are collaborative initiatives that are deployed by means of a specific methodology, which has been developed in parallel in different parts of Spain, such as Medialab Prado (Madrid), Medialab Tabakelera (Donostia-San Sebastián) and the Bibliolabs in Barcelona. This is currently one of the predominant approaches to new participatory practices in use due to the impetus being given to it by the Ministry of Culture and Sport.

### 5. Practices involving co-management or community management of libraries

These practices involve a higher degree of participation, as mechanisms are created to ensure shared or direct management by the public. Three different scenarios of a public-community nature are identified: formal or informal devices that channel citizen participation on a permanent basis; the practices of community management of public libraries by local associations; and citizen laboratories themselves.

## 6. Intersectoral or community roundtables

These are mechanisms by means of which libraries are involved on a regular basis in their local environments. Intersectoral roundtables usually refer to spaces that bring the different areas of the local administration together with other services such as health centres and schools so that they can work in partnership on the integral development of a local environment. Community roundtables also tend to include local associations and social entities in the area.

## 4.2. An in-depth look at library laboratories

Among the different participation practices identified, a more in-depth examination of library laboratories has been carried out.

### Objectives and processes driving library laboratories

Three distinct objectives are identified as being central to the use of the citizen laboratory methodology in the library setting:

1) As a space for the collective construction of knowledge and the prototyping of technological and social solutions. In this

The practices identified are supported using different methodologies of citizen participation, shared between the different locations for participation being encouraged. At the same time, at least two different paradigms of participation can be seen to coexist:

<b>Methodologies used</b>	<b>Participatory Action Research (PAR)</b>	<b>Library stakeholder approach</b>	<b>Citizen laboratories</b>
<b>Paradigms of participation</b>	<b>Participatory governance</b>	<b>Governance of the commons</b>	

case, criticisms of an excessively technological outlook are identified.

2) As a way of fostering relationships between stakeholders from different social backgrounds, fostering unity in environments of diversity. It represents a commitment to a more community-based vision of the laboratories.

3) Cases in which the laboratories seek to involve participants in the planning or running of some of the library's activities.

### **Resources and partnerships for the development of library laboratories**

Given the lack of specific resources for this, in many cases they are made possible by means of a “motivated” member of staff, who dedicates time and personal resources because they are committed to participation. The lack of resources is perceived as a critical issue that leads to fatigue among these staff and jeopardises the sustainability of the laboratories. While some people argue that financial and human resources are needed in order to develop these laboratories, others see it as a good thing that we can stimulate participation without the need for large investments and believe that collaboration with other stakeholders in the country is key.

### **Characteristics of participants and relationships formed in the laboratories**

In general, it is felt that it is the usual types of people who participate. However, it is also pointed out that in some cases the creation of laboratories facilitates the participation in the library of people from social sectors that tend to be excluded,

underlining their potential to foster interaction between a wide range of people. In contrast, obstacles to participation highlighted include the incompatibility of the makeup and timetable of the laboratories with work and care responsibilities, the symbolic distance that may exist between certain vulnerable groups and the approaches of certain cultural facilities, as well as resistance on the grounds that it is seen as excessively institutional.

### **Impact and continuation of the laboratories**

With regard to the laboratories themselves, all those involved rate them very positively and show an interest in their continuation. However, staff fatigue means that in practice few libraries have developed new laboratories. In relation to impact, there are different examples of projects that have continued to operate after the laboratory has ended, either with the support of the library, within other institutions or independently. At the same time, a number of people feel that the laboratories perpetuate the central importance of the institution and dependence on the facilitating teams.

### 4.3. Origins and drivers of participatory processes

The research identifies four different origins of participatory processes in libraries, which can lead to different forms of leadership of same. What seems very significant, however, are the ways in which different actors create environments which are conducive to the implementation of participatory practices.

Political leadership	Staff leadership	Community or association leadership	External initiative
Can create environments conducive to participation by means of plans and policy frameworks. Particularly noteworthy is how they can function as frameworks for legitimising participatory practices on the part of local staff.	Can create environments conducive to participation by means of intersectoral roundtables and the stimulation of concrete activities. Given the limited resources of libraries, this often involves establishing horizontal partnerships with government staff, as well as external specialists.	Can create environments conducive to participation by means of appeals and complaints. In places where there is a greater sense of ownership of libraries on the part of local associations and communities, there may be conflicts between these local actors and the institution as regards approaches.	This becomes especially important in regions where there is little inclination to develop spaces for participation in public libraries.

### 4.4 Where and how to participate? An analysis of the practices identified

#### What are the approaches to participation?

In order to explore participation practices in greater depth, it can be useful to look at the approaches to citizen participation that are at play within these practices. To this end, we employ the “ladder of participation” analytical framework that has often been used in the various fields of the social sciences. Below is a brief description of three different approaches that can be observed in citizen participation.

**Cooperative approach.** This is when the public administration invites citizens to take part in a particular process or practice that is to be carried out. This involvement generally does not extend to all phases of the process, but rather it is limited to a specific stage. In particular, the public are not usually involved in the initial stages of the initiative, when it is being formulated.

**Co-production approach.** The co-production of public policies and actions by the public and the administration itself involves the local community throughout the entire decision-making process, from its design up to its completion and evaluation.

**Co-management approach.** In the case of projects that are co-managed or managed by local residents, the public is directly involved in many areas of the facility, when it is not directly managed by them, as in the case of community-managed projects. They are characterised by strong community leadership.

### Where does participation take place?

Another highly significant aspect to be considered in the analysis of participatory practices concerns the areas of the facilities they take place in. In other words, how participatory groups, forms of local resident co-management or community roundtables are involved in areas such as the organisation of activities, the management of the catalogue or budgetary decisions.

The following table has been created for this purpose:

Ladder of participation	Types of participatory practices
Cooperative approach	Strategic plans
	Cross-sectoral roundtables
Co-production approach	Participatory design of the space
	Participatory groups
	Citizen laboratories
Co-management approach	Co-management or community management

Frequency of participation	Areas of the library
Main areas of participation	<p>Organising activities</p> <p>Three levels of involvement:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organising one-off activities</li> <li>2. Proposals arising from the participatory groups</li> <li>3. Permanent, established participatory bodies</li> </ol>
Relatively new areas of participation	<p>Production and use of space</p> <p>Strategic planning</p> <p>Catalogue management</p>
Areas where participation never or hardly ever takes place	<p>Budgeting</p> <p>Providing information regarding the facilities</p> <p>Establishing standards</p>

## 5. Barriers to and opportunities for participation

There are a multiplicity of interrelated factors that can operate as barriers to and opportunities for the promotion of participation in libraries, which we organise into four areas, as illustrated in the table below:

Area	Sub-area	Barriers	Opportunities
Libraries	Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resistances of certain staff</li> <li>• Lack of training in participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation and initiative of certain staff members</li> <li>• Increasingly diverse staff</li> </ul>
	Operating approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff approaches vs. community norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Openness to new uses and functions</li> <li>• Relaxation of rules and procedures</li> </ul>
Local environments	Type and location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small and/or rural: more personal relationships and trust</li> <li>• Large: diversity of resources in the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small and/or rural: dispersed population, depopulation</li> <li>• Large: longer distance, entity-mediated participation</li> </ul>
	Cross-sectoral and community work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence of libraries in local roundtable discussions and plans</li> <li>• Tensions with other municipal departments or services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trajectories of community and intersectoral work</li> <li>• Community potential of libraries</li> </ul>
Users	Perceptions of the library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Libraries as places of silence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very positive social perception of libraries</li> </ul>
	Culture of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived lack of a culture of participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People and groups involved</li> </ul>
Structural issues	Governance frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discontinuation due to political cycles</li> <li>• Lack of resources and risk of fatigue of “motivated” individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Committed government teams</li> <li>• Availability of some resources</li> <li>• Benchmarks and replicable good practices</li> </ul>
	Institutional approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of honesty and transparency in some processes.</li> <li>• Symbolic barriers</li> <li>• “Institutionality” as a barrier</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergence of more open and flexible institutions</li> </ul>

# 6. The social dimension of the library

## 6.1 Who participates in participation? Local community involvement and social inequalities

### Users or participants?

When asked which social groups participate in the library, many library staff point to the projects and initiatives they carry out for two social groups in particular: the elderly and people with disabilities.

After careful analysis of the descriptions of these initiatives, one concludes that they cannot be said to be strictly participative groups or spaces. This is mainly because the target groups usually become involved through a third-party entity or public service, affecting the capacity for active participation in the management of the group or in the activities that take place. These programmes are more often led by the institution or the collaborating entities.

### A variety of strategies aimed at young people

The fieldwork identified four different strategies for involving young people in participatory practices in libraries. They are as follows:

1. Organising activities specifically geared towards young people.
2. Activities managed by young people themselves in specific spaces.
3. Creation of participation pathways.
4. Participatory and innovative reading groups.

### Social proximity and distance in relation to cultural diversity

In our research, we have not been able to gather sufficient information on the ways in which people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds get involved in library groups or participative spaces.

However, it is apparent that there are libraries located in multicultural neighbourhoods where there is a wide range of services available to the migrant community, which means that these groups are more prominent in these facilities. Examples of these services include: Spanish classes, conversation groups, computers with Wi-Fi connection or more holistic integration projects.



### **What about social class? An analysis of discourses concerning participating social groups.**

If we look at which aspects of social inequality appear most frequently in these discourses, we can clearly see that those related to age predominate. Staff tend to focus their attention on older or younger people. Conspicuous in this regard is the absence of the notion of social class in reflections regarding what kind of people attend the library or get involved in local community participation practices.

It can be concluded that the dominant view as regards population diversity as it refers to participation in libraries is centred on a certain "comfortable diversity". The institutional discourse and practice focuses on those forms of social inequality that can be more easily addressed, such as those related to age and capabilities. To a certain extent, this leads

to a failure to examine the responsibility of the institution and social structures as regards groups who are absent in the day-to-day running of the facilities and in their participation practices.

### **Participatory methodologies and population diversity**

It should be noted that participatory methodologies are sometimes used as a tool to reach out to groups that are most excluded from libraries. This can be observed in two cases in particular. On the one hand, in the case of young people, as has been demonstrated by the diversity of strategies described above. On the other hand, certain citizen laboratories have the declared intention of reaching the most vulnerable groups and to facilitate interaction between these and other social groups.

## **6.2 Libraries as spaces for generating social capital**

Cox et al. (2000) have pointed out that there are two mechanisms which build trust in public facilities in a community: the first is when the library is seen as an accessible and egalitarian institution, open to all social groups, especially the most vulnerable (the institutionalist hypothesis); and the second involves the informal interactions which are fostered between users, which are socially significant and which engender social trust (the contact hypothesis).

### **Facilitating social connections in the library**

According to the contact hypothesis, social infrastructures are crucial when it comes to building social capital and potentially fostering community. Libraries can thus be particularly suitable spaces for enhancing a sense of community, facilitating social connections which in turn can lead to greater social trust. Let us look at some examples of interactions in this regard.

**1) Regular ongoing activities as a space for establishing social ties.** Regular ongoing activities in libraries are an ideal opportunity for social bonding, fulfilling a dual function: 1) they allow users to pursue their cultural interests; and 2) they are a source of social relationships that extend beyond the activities themselves.

**2) Staff as a catalyst for social relationships.** Sometimes the library staff themselves are a catalyst for social connection, maintaining close social relations with users, engaging in regular conversation with whoever approaches their post or area, and facilitating connections between users, who often belong to different social groups.

**3) Partnerships between services and resources.** The need to share space and resources can also establish a system of interdepartmental collaboration that was not previously common. Working in libraries with scarce resources entails a process of adaptation which often involves establishing partnerships.

### **Libraries as meeting places for diverse actors**

The institutionalist hypothesis regarding social capital argues that it is the very existence of universalist institutions that generates trust in communities, especially when they are accessible to all social groups, including the most vulnerable. Thus, libraries play a fundamental role when it comes to establishing a series of routines and gatherings that facilitate the creation of contacts and support networks, especially in cases where people are from other cultural contexts and/or are in a situation of social vulnerability. In these situations, the interactions that take place can gradually build a certain sense of community and bonding.

### **Social connections and influence on the design of spaces**

From a social infrastructure point of view, it is very important that we consider how the design of spaces affects the creation of social ties, and whether it facilitates or hinders social relations. Interestingly, staff can sometimes be observed to transform their library into veritable experimental laboratories in order to foster the creation of these links.

## 7. Conclusions

In this section, the main conclusions of the research are listed in summary form. For ease of reading, they are ordered sequentially according to the research chapters themselves, corresponding to the analysis laid out in each one.

In recent decades, there has been a shift in the way libraries are seen that is contributing to increasing citizen participation. In terms of this participation, the fieldwork reveals a multiplicity of ways of approaching the concept, which move between the top three rungs of Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969): cooperation, co-production and co-management. Within these, a distinction can be made between a group of definitions that could be considered "softer", in which participation is understood as cooperation with a diversity of actors and the attraction of a multiplicity of diverse kinds of people to the library, and more "substantive" ones, which consider that in order for participation to occur, institutions are required to delegate power, for public facilities to be jointly managed and for citizens to play a greater role and to be more autonomous.

When we begin to look at specific practices, the research identifies six significant participatory practices in the Spanish library sector: the design of the facility's spaces, the strategic plans of the library, participatory groups, citizen laboratories, library co-management practices, and inter-sectoral roundtables at the local level. Different participatory methodologies coexist in the sector, as well as two different

paradigms (Castro and Forné, 2021): participatory governance, which has driven all these initiatives in recent decades, reserving leadership for local administration, and the emerging governance of the commons, which resignifies these practices in favour of the power of communities and the development of public-community management systems.

The research has looked in greater depth at citizen laboratories, given their widespread implementation in the library sector. We can see how this methodology is negotiated by library staff, adapting to local particularities, backgrounds and capacities. In this regard, a certain distance is identified from an approach that is excessively centred on technology or the co-production of knowledge, in contrast to which a more community-based approach to the laboratories is required, orienting them towards a collective rethinking of libraries and the stimulation of social cohesion in local environments, especially when these are characterised by cultural diversity and social vulnerability.

Furthermore, the fieldwork allows us to examine the idea of the laboratories as horizontal spaces where a diversity of citizens come together to collaborate harmoniously. In practice, it can be observed that it is the same kind of people attending the libraries, with attendance being largely mediated by associations and local bodies. We can also see that leadership and power negotiations take place between subjects with

different social and cultural capitals. Furthermore, with regard to the impact of the laboratories, on the one hand, cases are identified in which they have led to the creation of remarkable social links or catalysed processes which are maintained, whether inside or outside the library. At the same time, some critical voices are detected, questioning to what extent this methodology allows for the fostering of autonomy or perpetuates a dependence on and centrality of the institution.

If we analyse in depth all the participation practices identified in libraries, we can see how they are led by different actors. These are mainly political coordinators, staff, local community initiatives or, in certain contexts, external staff. These types of leadership have different characteristics and sometimes lead to conflicts between different approaches. However, what seems to be crucial are the different means by which the different actors create environments conducive to the stimulation of participatory practices. To this end, senior management, staff or the local community bring different resources, alliances and legitimacy into play.

If participation practices are again cross-referenced with the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969), we can examine the dominance of the approaches of cooperation (in the case of the strategic plans and the intersectoral roundtables) and co-production (space design processes, participatory groups or citizen laboratories), as well as the ways in which systems of the co-management of spaces are beginning to appear. At the same time, it should be noted that areas of the library where local community participation is more established have been

identified, as is the case with the organisation of activities, as well as other fields where it is beginning to take place in an incipient form. Finally, the drafting of rules for the space, communications or the drawing up of library budgets are for the moment outside the scope of local community participation.

With regard to barriers and opportunities in relation to participation in libraries, it was found that these respond to a multiplicity of interrelated factors, in different areas such as the library itself, its local environment, the users and the systems of governance and institutions that operate at a more structural level. In relation to the opportunities identified, we can highlight the key role played by "motivated" staff that are willing to try out participatory practices and that serve as an example for other libraries and their staff. However, the lack of resources and support can lead to fatigue among these staff and make it less likely that certain participatory practices will be persevered with.

Among the many barriers identified, two can be highlighted. On the one hand, a more traditional or conservative view of the profession and of libraries themselves, with participation being perceived as denigrating the profession in some way, of distorting what libraries should be, or even as a threat to the very career of librarians. On the other hand, many barriers are connected with the approaches of the institutions themselves. In response to this, there is a need to make procedures more flexible, to broaden the objectives and functions of libraries, and to make efforts to ensure that the institution cedes some power and prominence in favour of greater flexibility, openness

and citizen leadership, which can be linked to Lafuente's (2022) proposals for a new institutional framework.

If we consider the socio-demographic characteristics of the people who get involved in libraries, it is clear that many of the most participatory and community-based initiatives studied take place in low-income, multicultural local environments. In addition, participatory methodologies are used to try to involve groups that are typically most excluded from libraries, as well as to facilitate relationships between diverse groups of people. In spite of this, discourses on population diversity focus mainly on issues related to age and disability. As a result, the institution of the library embraces a certain "comfortable diversity" that does little to address factors such as social class and often avoids the most contentious uses of the space.

The fieldwork reveals that both the contact hypothesis and the institutionalist hypothesis are relevant when it comes to considering the development of social relationships in libraries. However, the ethnographic dimension reveals that the capacity and methods for fostering contact are socially and regionally situated. Thus, social capital settings do not take shape, but rather are influenced by matters that prove to be significant,

such as: the design of library spaces, their location and geographical dimension, the type of activities that take place, as well as the perceptions and discourses of the library staff who organise them.

In short, public libraries are experiencing a remarkable upsurge as regards initiatives involving the participation of local communities. This research outlines some of the challenges that need to be faced in order to extend these processes to more libraries, while at the same time strengthening those that are already in place. From a more methodological point of view, it seems that permanent participation mechanisms need to be designed that allow for the deployment of co-production or co-management systems for the space, while at the same time encouraging local community involvement in new libraries. As far as library staff is concerned, the aim is not only to further their training in the areas of participation and the community, but also to engage actively in efforts to broaden the definition and role of the librarian. Lastly, and from a more structural perspective, it is likely that interventions regarding symbolic barriers, social imaginaries and the rigidity of the institution will open the doors of libraries and their participatory spaces to groups that remain most excluded from them.

