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# LIVING LIBRARY IN THE WORKPLACE

## *A guide to organize Living Libraries for employees and managers*



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# Introduction

In today's diverse and dynamic workplace, creating an environment where empathy, understanding, and open communication are prioritized is more important than ever. The Living Library is a unique and powerful tool designed to foster these qualities by providing employees and managers with the opportunity to engage in meaningful, small group conversations with individuals who represent different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds.

This manual is designed to help organizers of Living Libraries with the implementation in workplaces, to create stronger, more inclusive teams. By encouraging dialogue and breaking down stereotypes, the Living Library allows individuals to 'borrow' a 'Living Book' - someone who shares their personal experiences and stories about prejudices, thus providing insights that challenge preconceived notions and promote understanding.

## Implementing a Living Library in the Workplace



This guide will equip you with the tools and knowledge to organize a Living Library event for employees or managers. You'll learn how to make the most of this experience, how to contribute to a safe and respectful labour environment, and how to foster deeper connections within organizations. By embracing the Living Library, you will contribute to the development of a workplace culture rooted in empathy, collaboration, and mutual respect. Let's embark on this journey of learning, connecting, and growing together!

This manual has been written as part of the project 'Living Library in diversity management- Getting there together!' (project number: 2023-2-HU01-KA210-ADU-000175766), implemented by Szubjektív Értékek Alapítvány (Hungary), Jongeren voor Uitwisseling en Begrip (Netherlands) and Associació Educativa i Cultural Blue Beehive (Spain), supported by the Erasmus+ program of the European Union.



The first Living Library (Menneske Biblioteket in Danish) took place in Denmark in 2000 during the Roskilde Festival. The idea was developed by the youth organization "Stop the Violence." After the success of the first edition, it caught the attention of the Council of Europe (CoE). Through their European Youth Centre Budapest (EYCB), many editions were organized at the Sziget Festival starting in 2001. Additionally, the CoE helped spread the concept internationally, promoting it as an activity within youth work. In the Netherlands, Living Library has been active since 2014. The first event took place at Forum Groningen, initiated by the foundation Jongeren voor Uitwisseling en Begrip (JUB). The initiative was held annually until other libraries began showing interest. Thanks to financial support from various sources, new editions could be held in cities all across the Netherlands. Over the years, more than 250 events have taken place.

The Living Library shares a history closely tied to the 'Human Library' movement, with similar goals of challenging discrimination and fostering empathy.

While it originated around the same time in the early 2000s, the term 'Human Library' is used more often in Denmark and 'Living Library' more in other parts of Europe. Living Libraries have been held in more than 60 countries worldwide.

## Unveiling the Dimensions of the Living Library





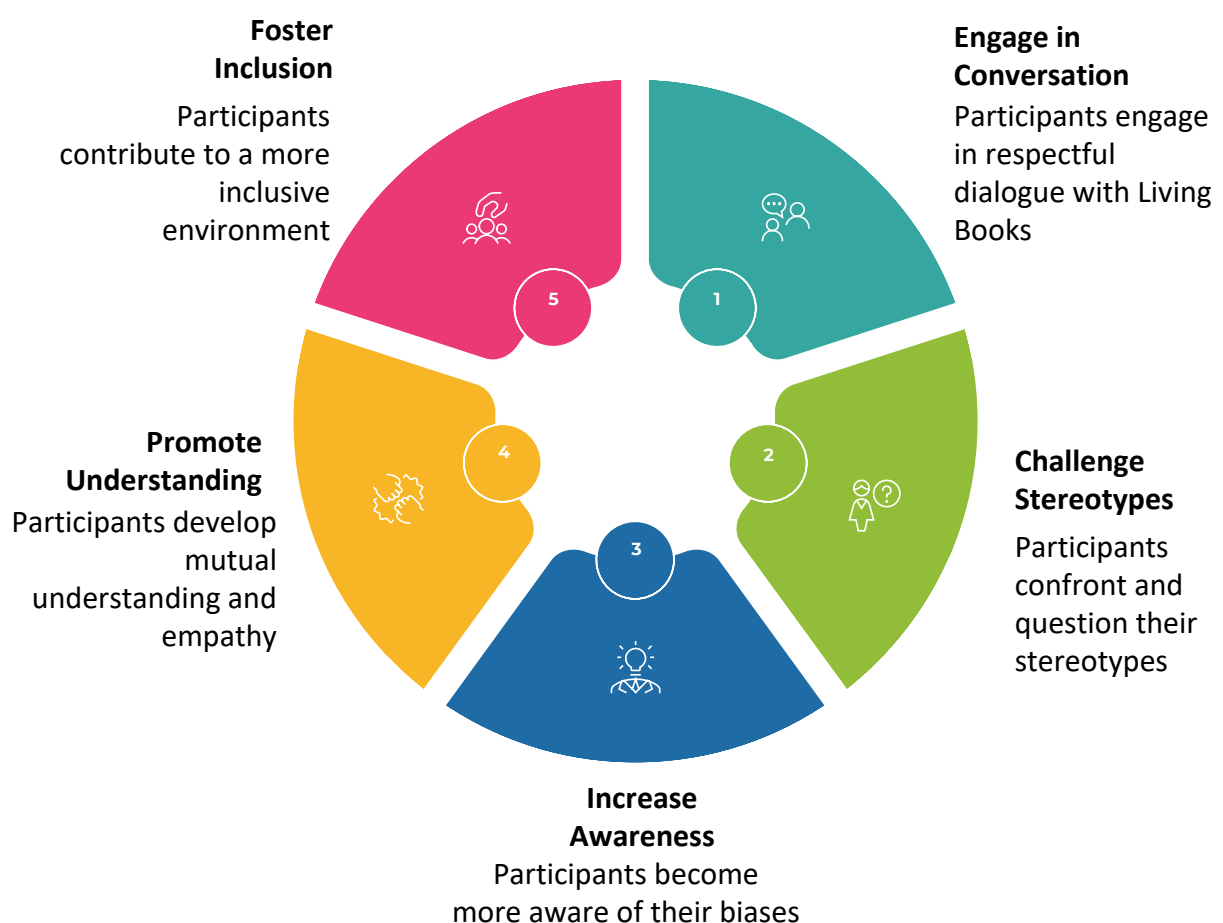
# Goals

In the Living Library you don't read books, but Living Books. Interesting persons, whom you perhaps would not meet in your daily life. How valid or true are the stereotypes? Every Living Book is personally dealing with stereotyping, prejudices and possibly discrimination. For example, you can have a conversation with a transgender person, somebody with autism, a refugee, a wheelchair user or an ex-convict. Everything can be asked and discussed, as long as it happens with respect. In that way, we can challenge prejudices. There should always be Living Books from different 'genres', for example relating to health, sexuality, gender and ethnicity.

The Living Library brings people together, in order to investigate and challenge our thinking. Just like a real library, where books provide an insight to unknown worlds, the Living Library offers its visitors the chance to step into the world of another person. In a very simple way: by providing a space for a frank conversation..

The primary goal of the Living Library is to reduce stereotypes and prejudices. Everyone has them, they are naturally parts of our thinking habits. But we do want to create awareness about them. By engaging in a conversation you learn new things, from a personal perspective. Everyone can choose their own Living Book, for example because you know little about a particular subject or because you know somebody who is also dealing with that subject. Or because you want to challenge yourself with a subject that stands far away from you. Or maybe you are just curious about some subject. Maybe you read and hear a lot about transgender persons, but have you ever had a good conversation with a trans person?

## The Living Library Cycle





As said, the central objective of the Living Library is to challenge stereotypes and prejudices. But it has specific benefits for companies and organizations, when they organize it for their employees and / or managers:

- The Living Library is an accessible way to put Diversity and Inclusion on the agenda and to promote dialogues.
- A reduction of stereotypes and prejudices amongst employees leads to better connection between them, more happiness at work, a better working atmosphere, a higher productivity and less absenteeism.
- It reduces stereotypes and prejudices that employees might have. It leads to a more open attitudes amongst employees themselves and towards clients, partners and future employees.
- A more open attitude of employees towards clients, partners and future employees leads to new chances and improved utilisation of talents.

At the Living Library we assume that everybody has stereotypes. Which is a normal thing. It has to do with categorization: all information (what your senses capture) you have to process, has to be 'judged' and put in a certain box, in other words: organized. With this in mind, it can be seen as a survival mechanism. Without categorization, you would probably go crazy. But awareness is very important. When you are aware of certain stereotypes you might have, you can change your actions. Then knowledge is the key. And that is exactly what we are working on at the Living Library. By bringing people from different living environments together, people learn from each other. It leads to a unique exchange of thoughts and usually to mutual understanding.



# What does it look like?

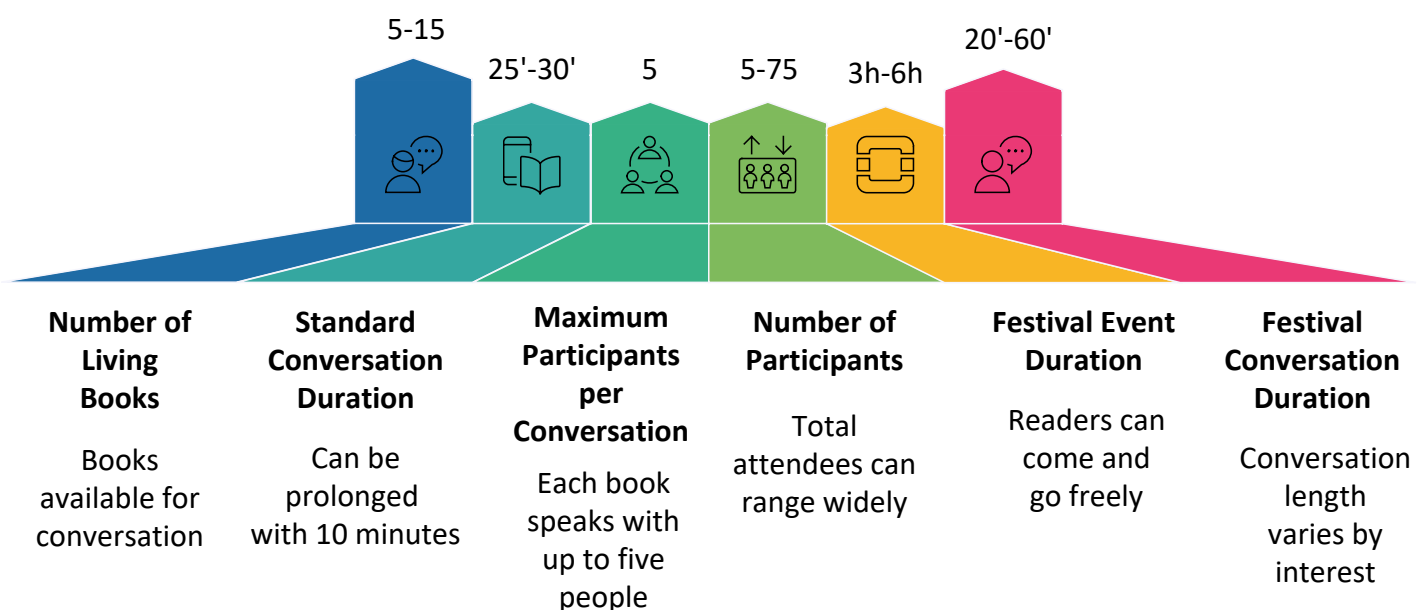


Generally speaking, there is a plenary introduction, two or three conversations in small groups and a plenary closing, with an evaluation form and a short reflection. The number of Living Books can vary, but usually it is between 5 and 15. A group conversation with a Living Book lasts 25-30 minutes and can optionally be prolonged with 10 minutes. It takes about two hours altogether. Each Book speaks with a maximum of 5 participants per conversation. The employees choose the Book themselves, according to their preferences. The number of the participants can vary between 5 and 75 persons.

It can also be organized as a 'Festival type'. Then it is a 3-6 hour event, where readers are free to arrive and leave when they wish. There is a front desk where they can choose the title of the Living Book they wish to have a conversation with. The conversations last 20-60 minutes, it depends on the Reader and the Living Book. Participants can have one or more conversations.

Joining a Living Library is voluntary and readers have to be open for a conversation. It is a meeting, where the conversation can go any direction, but the basis of the conversation is the title (and with that the topic) of the Living Book, for example 'Migrant' or 'Transgender'. It is explicitly not meant as 'storytelling', but as a real dialogue. The reader will also speak and can ask specific questions. It can be recommended that the Book starts with a question to the participants, such as "Why have you chosen this title?" or "What do you already know about this subject?".

## Living Libraries Event Figures



During the introduction, the following rules are read aloud (the rights of the Book and the readers):

- Books and Readers have the right to be treated with respect.
- Books and Readers have the right not to answer a question if they do not want to.
- Readers do not have the right to take a Book outside.
- Books and Readers have the right to ask any question.
- Books and Readers have the right to end a conversation if they wish to.
- Readers do not have the right to bend or tear pages, to annotate or to take notes, and must return the Book in the same physical and mental condition in which it was issued.



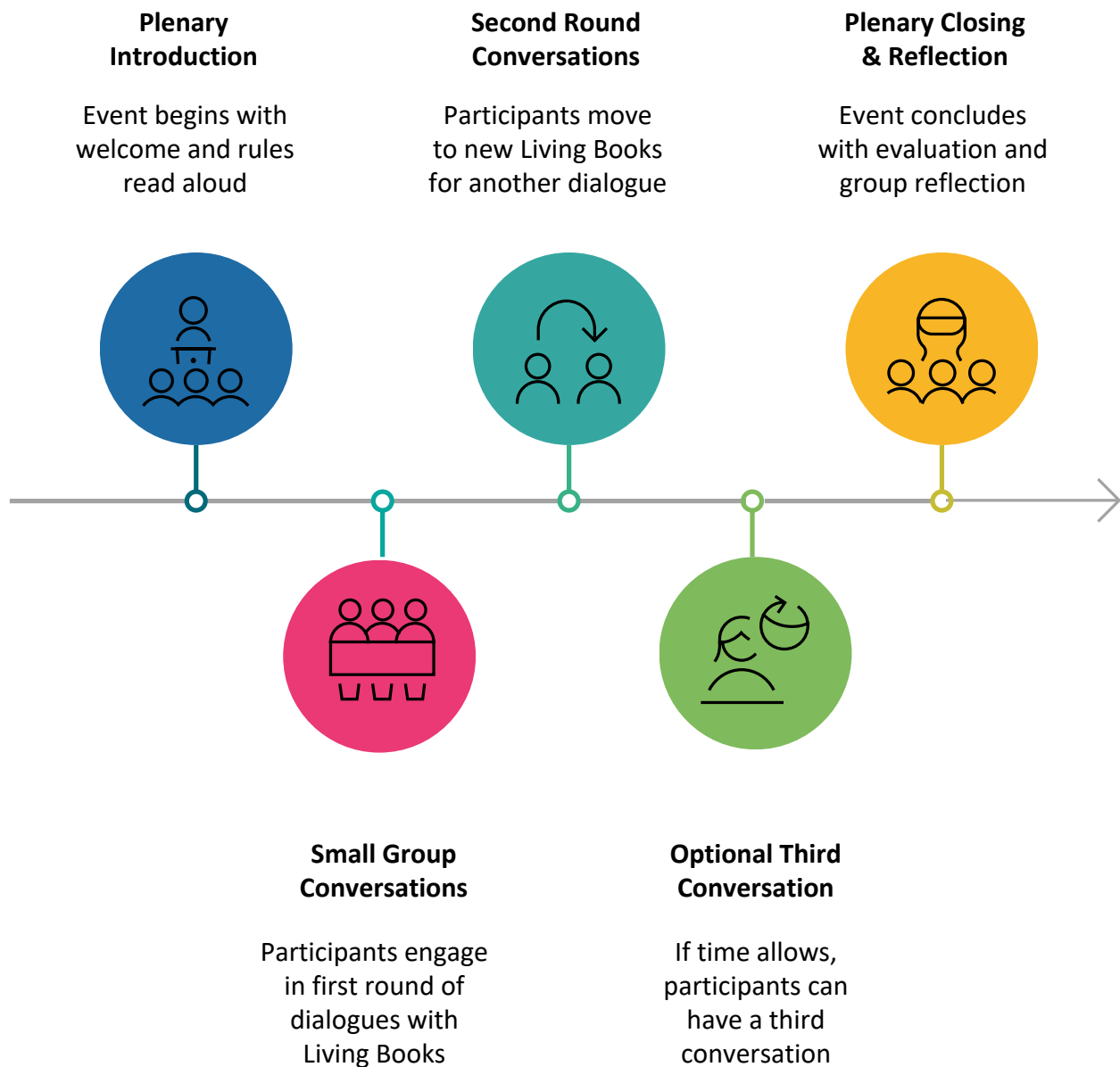
### Rules for Book and Reader Interaction



For a detailed description of the day please see the chapter called ‘Script of the day’. Usually it takes place in the building of the company or the organization. An external place is also possible.



## Typical Living Library Event Schedule



# Recruiting & training Living Books



Living Books are people who are members of marginalized groups or groups about whom people have a lot of stereotypes. Usually they have experienced prejudices themselves and are willing to talk about it. The collection should involve as many different topics as possible, including subjects related to gender, sexuality, social status, health situation, cultural background, disability, profession and lifestyle. Books can be recruited through known contacts, partner organizations or an open call.

Client organizations can also recruit Living Books amongst their own employees. In that way there is an added benefit: it will be clear that diversity does not only come from outside, but that it is also present on the inside. An open call can be published within the organization or specific people can be invited.

## Who can become a Living Book?



The Living Books can be prepared by a personal intake conversation and a physical or online Book training, where all Books are present.



# The intake conversation

It can take place by telephone or in person and can last 20-30 minutes. During the conversation you can get to know each other, explain the method, ask questions about the topic of the Book and decide on the title. It is important to find out if the person is mentally ready to discuss the topic, as sometimes it can be related to traumatic experiences. If you notice that you feel hesitant to ask questions during the intake conversation, mention it. It's important for the reader to feel free to ask anything, with respect of course. If a Book prefers not to answer certain questions, discuss the best way to handle that. If you notice someone is only telling their story without leaving room for questions, you can also mention it. The Book should understand that it's about a conversation, not about sharing their entire life story — just certain chapters.

You can ask about the core of their story. Ask: "If you had two minutes with someone, what is the most important thing you would want to share?" Suggest that the Living Book could start with a question themselves, for example: "Why did you choose me? / What would you like to know?". When the Book starts like this, it is immediately clear for the reader that it will be a dialogue, and not storytelling or an interview. The reader has to engage in the conversation. Safety is safeguarded as much as possible through reader registration, reading of the rules, and guidance from team members. If necessary, a 'safe word' can be agreed upon.

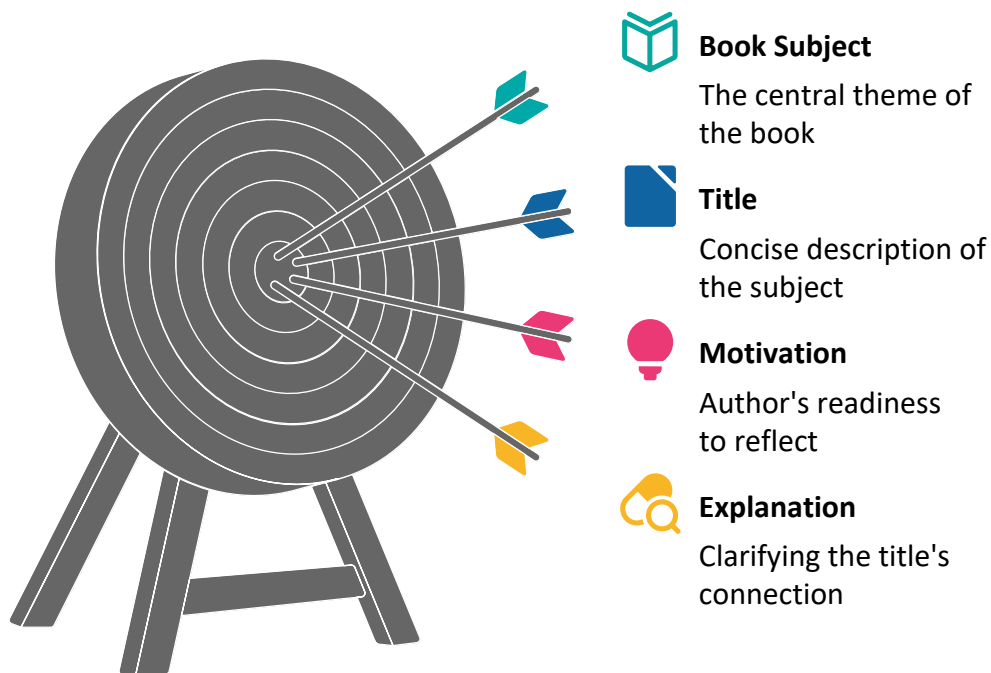
## Living Book Recruitment and Training Process

1	<b>Identify Potential Living Books</b> Recognizing individuals from marginalized groups
2	<b>Conduct Intake Conversation</b> Initial discussion to understand the Book's story
3	<b>Assess Mental Readiness</b> Evaluating the Book's emotional preparedness
4	<b>Decide on Title</b> Choosing a title that reflects the Book's story
5	<b>Conduct Book Training</b> Preparing Books for interactive sessions

## About the Book title

The title describes the subject of the Book in only a couple of words. It should immediately be clear what it is about. In many cases, it represents the label that people give them, which is precisely not what they want to be known for in daily life. The title is intended to be somewhat provocative, but not offensive. Examples include 'Refugee person', 'Homosexual' and 'Addicted'. There is no room for a more 'poetic' title or subtitle. If a Book is not happy with the 'logical' title, it requires extra explanation. Look at their motivation: is the person ready to be a Book? Have they gained enough distance from their identity to reflect on it? If not, perhaps they cannot be a Book. If they are ready, it is important to clearly explain the concept again: why the title is directly connected to the subject.

### Book Title Selection Process



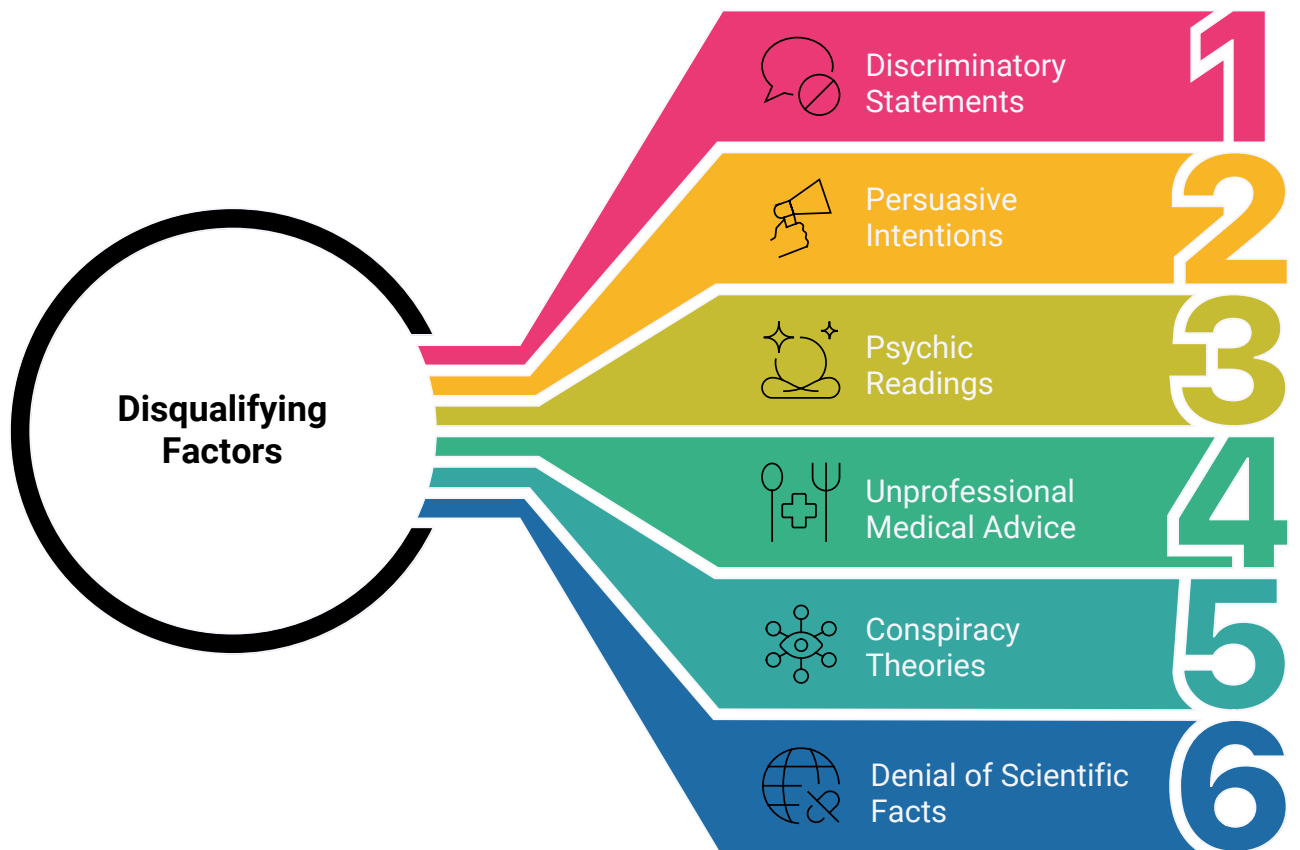
## Note regarding topics related to religion or life philosophy

As a general rule, a person cannot be a Living Book if the person:

- Does not support the goals and working methods of the Living Library or makes discriminatory statements.
- Has the intention of persuading the reader to something, such as evangelizing, instead of an open dialogue
- Performs 'readings' as a psychic (due to potential harmful influence on vulnerable individuals).
- Provides medical advice that goes against professional care.
- Spreads blatant conspiracy theories.
- Denies widely accepted scientific facts, such as claiming to be able to speak to deceased persons or being able to predict the future.



## Disqualifying Factors for Living Books



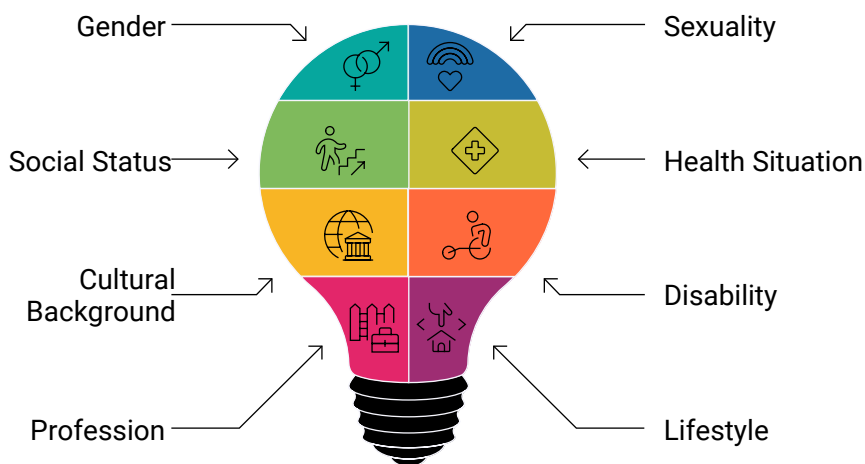
The Living Books can be prepared by a personal intake conversation and a physical or online Book training, where all Books are present.

### No exclusion of certain topics

A Living Library should always involve a wide range of titles, connected to various 'genres', such as gender, sexuality, social status, health situation, cultural background, disability, profession and lifestyle. The client organization can suggest certain titles, when they are deemed extra important for their employees. However, if a client organization wishes to exclude a certain topic, it should not be allowed. The Living Library organizers should in the end decide on the collection of titles. We are aware that certain topics are very sensitive, but that is also exactly why we organize a Living Library. In order to prevent a difficult situation where readers are too uncomfortable to join a certain conversation, it is important to remember that the participants can always choose the Books themselves.



## Ensuring Diversity in Living Libraries



## The training

The Living Book training can take place online or at a physical place. In a meeting of about two hours, the goal is to equip Living Books with the tools and understanding they need to engage meaningfully in dialogues, share their stories, and navigate the challenges they may face while participating in the Living Library. It can consist of the following elements:

- Introductions and getting to know each other
- Going through the objectives
- Explaining what will be the plan
- Practising in pairs
- Discussing what possible challenges can come up

## Steps to Effective Living Book Training



# Internal promotion



The participation of employees or managers in the Living Library can be mandatory or voluntary, with a sign-up form. Either way, it is important for the company or organization to give information and promote the Living Library internally. Promoting the Living Library concept within companies to encourage employee participation involves a strategic approach that highlights the value of the experience both to the individuals and the organization as a whole. Here are some suggestions to promote the Living Library within a company.

## Align with company values and goals

- Link to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): frame the Living Library as a valuable tool for promoting diversity, inclusion, and empathy in the workplace, aligning it with the company's CSR or DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) initiatives.
- Inclusive Leadership support: have senior leaders endorse the program to show commitment from the top. They can emphasize how the Living Library promotes key company values such as open communication, mutual respect, and innovation.

## Highlight personal and professional development

- Learning opportunities: position the Living Library as a chance for employees to expand their perspectives, improve interpersonal communication skills, and develop empathy. These are soft skills that can enhance their professional growth.
- Interactive workshop: promote the experience as an interactive way to learn from colleagues or others with different backgrounds, helping employees step out of their comfort zones and challenge their biases.
- Team building: emphasize that it can serve as a unique team-building exercise, where employees can engage in thought-provoking discussions that promote collaboration and mutual understanding.

## Use real-life testimonials

- Stories from previous participants: share testimonials from employees who have already participated in the Living Library. Let them talk about how it expanded their understanding and created new opportunities for connection.

Impact Stories: showcase how the Living Library has helped individuals change their perspectives, resolve conflicts, or deepen relationships within the organization.

## Leverage internal communication channels

- Email newsletters & intranet: announce the Living Library in internal newsletters, emails, or on the company intranet. Provide key information such as the program's objectives, how it works, and how employees can sign up to participate.
- Posters and flyers: create visually engaging posters and flyers to display in common areas like break rooms, kitchens, or conference rooms. These materials should explain the concept briefly and include a call to action to join.
- Social media: use internal social media platforms like Slack or Microsoft Teams, to promote the event. Post engaging content about the benefits of the Living Library. Include employee testimonials or highlights from previous events.

## Facilitate employee engagement

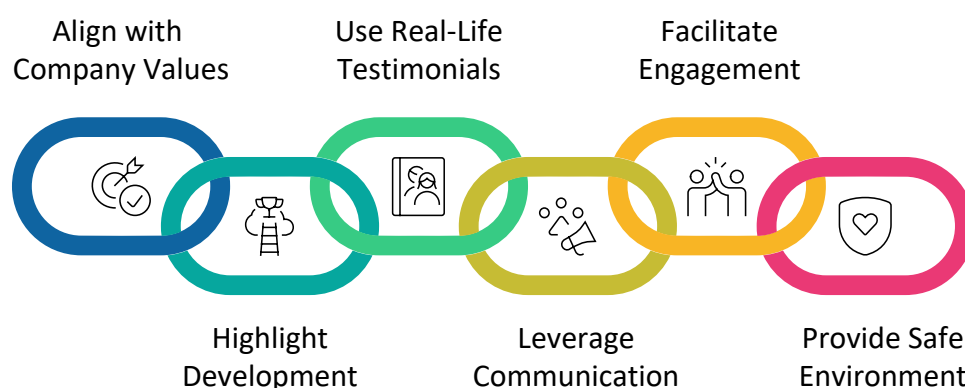
- Internal champions: identify passionate advocates within the company (such as HR professionals, team leaders, or diversity officers) to act as ambassadors for the program. These employees can share their experiences and motivate others to join.
- Pilot programs: start by offering a pilot version of the Living Library to a smaller group of employees or departments. Once it proves successful, expand the program across the company.

## Provide a safe, inclusive environment

- Confidentiality assurance: some employees may hesitate to participate due to concerns about privacy or sharing personal stories. Ensure that the process is framed as a safe, confidential space.
- Involve a trust person: a trained trust person can be appointed, if available, for anybody who feels the need to talk about certain issues that come up during the Living Library.

By framing the Living Library as an opportunity for both personal growth and organizational development, and using these strategies to promote it, you'll be able to generate interest and encourage employee participation in a way that feels exciting, engaging, and relevant.

### Promoting Living Library Participation in Companies





# Script of the day



This script for the day takes you through the event. It is meant as a suggestion, as there can be several ways of working. It includes what to bring, what to prepare beforehand, how to brief the Living Books, what to say during the plenary introduction and how to finish the day. Please note it can be adapted to the local circumstances.

## What to prepare beforehand

The following suggested list of things need to be prepared beforehand, in cooperation with the client organization:

- Laptop, connected to a screen: to show the available Living Books, the rules and the QR-code for the evaluation
- Microphone (depending on the size of the group)
- Chairs and tables for each conversation spot
- A desk / table for the introduction
- A separate room to accommodate the Living Books and have the briefing
- Something to drink for all books, snacks, if needed lunch
- A roll-up banner or any other banner for visibility of the Living Library
- Promotional materials, such as bookmarks, stickers, pens etc.
- A professional camera
- Stickers (for persons who don't like to be photographed, see Plenary introduction)
- For each reader a 'library card' (title and number, see Plenary introduction)
- Printed numbers for each table

## Inclusivity

In order to be as inclusive as possible, please consider the following things:

- Is the space wheelchair accessible?
- Is there enough space between the conversation spots?
- Is there a low low-stimulus room available for persons who need it?
- If somebody has a visual or hearing impairment, do you have measures in place?
- Use the correct pronouns
- Keep in mind that not all disabilities are visible, do not assume, but ask
- Be proactive in these inclusive elements, as books and readers learn by example



## Briefing books

Before the plenary introduction with the readers, you can have a briefing with the Living Books. It can consist of the following elements:

- Introductions of people in the room
- Explain the plan of the day
- Practical comments, such as: where to leave your valuables, where are the bathrooms
- Recommendations: book can start with a question themselves
- Explain the policy on photos and videos
- Safety: address concerns - it is always ok not to answer a question, stop the conversation, etc.

### Briefing Session Sequence

1	<b>Introductions</b> Participants introduce themselves
2	<b>Explain Plan</b> Outline the day's schedule
3	<b>Practical Comments</b> Provide logistical information
4	<b>Recommendations</b> Suggest starting with a question
5	<b>Explain Policy</b> Detail photo and video rules
6	<b>Safety Concerns</b> Address safety protocols



## Plenary introduction

During the plenary introduction you can explain shortly what the Living Library is, why it is being organized and how it works. The following serves as a suggestion.

“My name is XX and I work for the Living Library. The Living Library is an event where you can borrow a Living Book. These are people who regularly face certain prejudices in their daily lives. You are invited to have a conversation with a Living Book, in order to learn more from each other. Today, you can have two conversations and choose your own book. But I would like to start with a story. I invite you to close your eyes, if you feel comfortable enough, and listen to my story. And I want to ask you to imagine the situations and the people.

Imagine: You go for a walk in the park. At the entrance, a police officer nods at you. You enter the park and hear the birds singing. On the grass, a group of children is playing while their parents watch over them. A little further on, on a bench, you see a young couple kissing. On the other side of the park, you see an ice cream cart, and you buy an ice cream. Raise your hand if the following applies to you:

- Did you create images in your head of the scene? Did you somewhat picture the people?
- Did you imagine a person with a skin color other than white?
- Did you see someone with a visible physical disability?
- Police officer — who imagined a female police officer?
- Kissing couple — who pictured a same-sex couple?
- Ice cream seller — was it a man or a woman?

Sometimes people feel a bit upset now. That's not the intention. But there is a lesson here. What could it be? (reactions of the participants) We quickly form associations in our minds, based on how we were raised, among other factors. Everyone has biases; it's completely normal. But we need to raise awareness about unconscious biases. Talking to each other is key. That's why we have Living Books in the Living Library. They deal with prejudices. We want to connect people so they can talk about these things. The Living Books invite you to ask questions including the difficult ones. But there are also a couple of rules, or as we call them, the 'Rights of the book and the reader':

- Books and Readers have the right to be treated with respect.
- Books and Readers have the right to ask any question.
- Books and Readers have the right not to answer a question if they do not want to.
- Books and Readers have the right to end a conversation if they wish to.
- Readers do not have the right to take a Book outside.
- Readers do not have the right to bend or tear pages, to annotate or to take notes, and must return the Book in the same physical and mental condition in which it was issued.

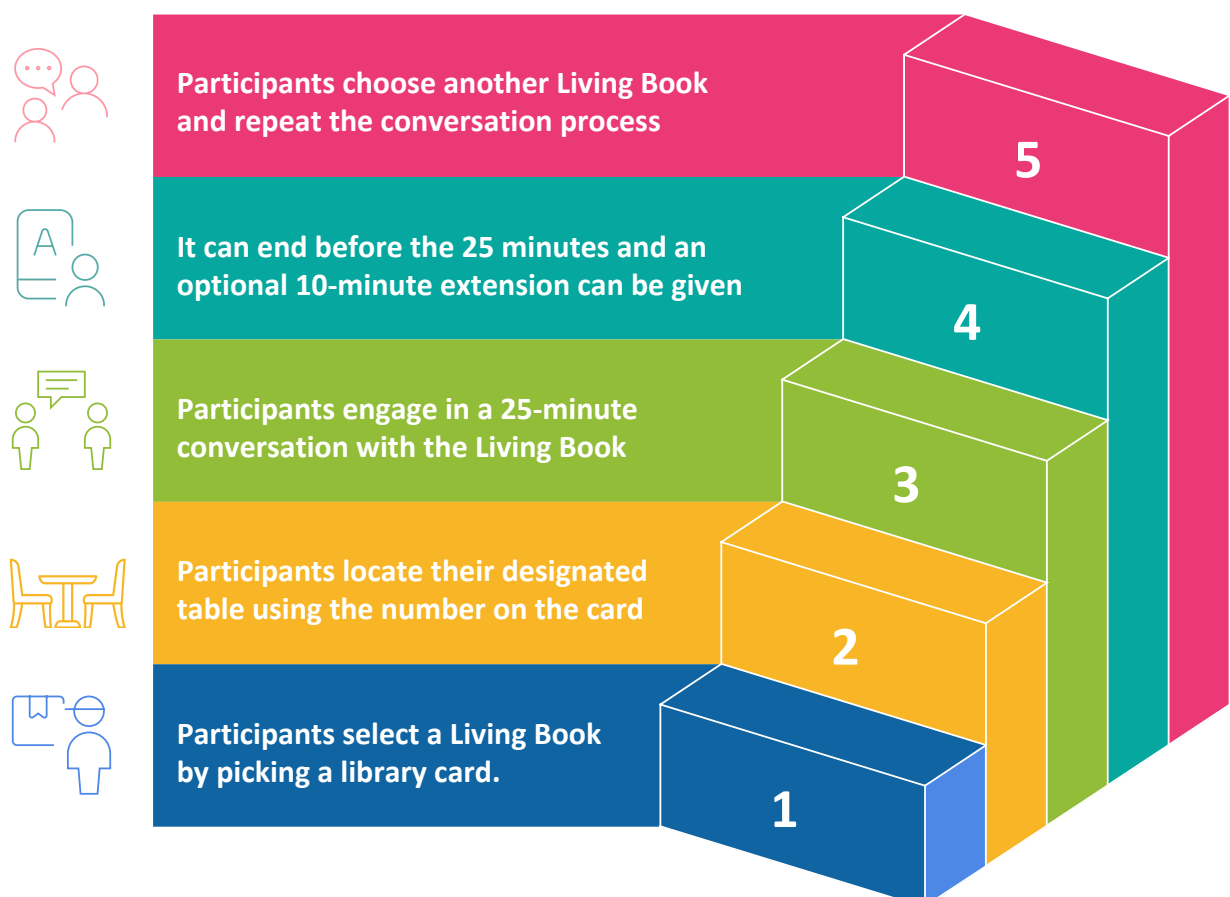
Now, it works like this:

- The conversation lasts 25 minutes, with an optional 10-minute extension. It can also end earlier. I will keep track of time and let you know.
- Everyone will have two conversations, with no break in between
- In a moment you can come forward to choose a Living Book, by picking a library card
- On a library card you see a title and a number
- The number corresponds with a table number where you can sit
- There is a maximum of 5 readers per Living Book, but we need to make sure each book has at least two readers
- Take one library card; for the second round you have to choose again.
- Photos will be taken. If you do not want to be photographed, please put a sticker on your shoulder. The pictures will be published on our social media, to show our work. We will make sure we only choose the best photos.”
- I wish everyone an insightful conversation. Books can go to their conversation spot and readers can come forward to get a library card. Enjoy!”

There are several ways to set up your introduction depending on the needs of the organization and the time available. It might also be useful to explain the history of the Living Library and to go through relevant definitions (stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination).

For the earlier mentioned Festival-model, where Readers come and go as they please, the Librarian is explaining the concept, the rules and the titles when they arrive, so there is no plenary introduction.

### Living Book Conversations





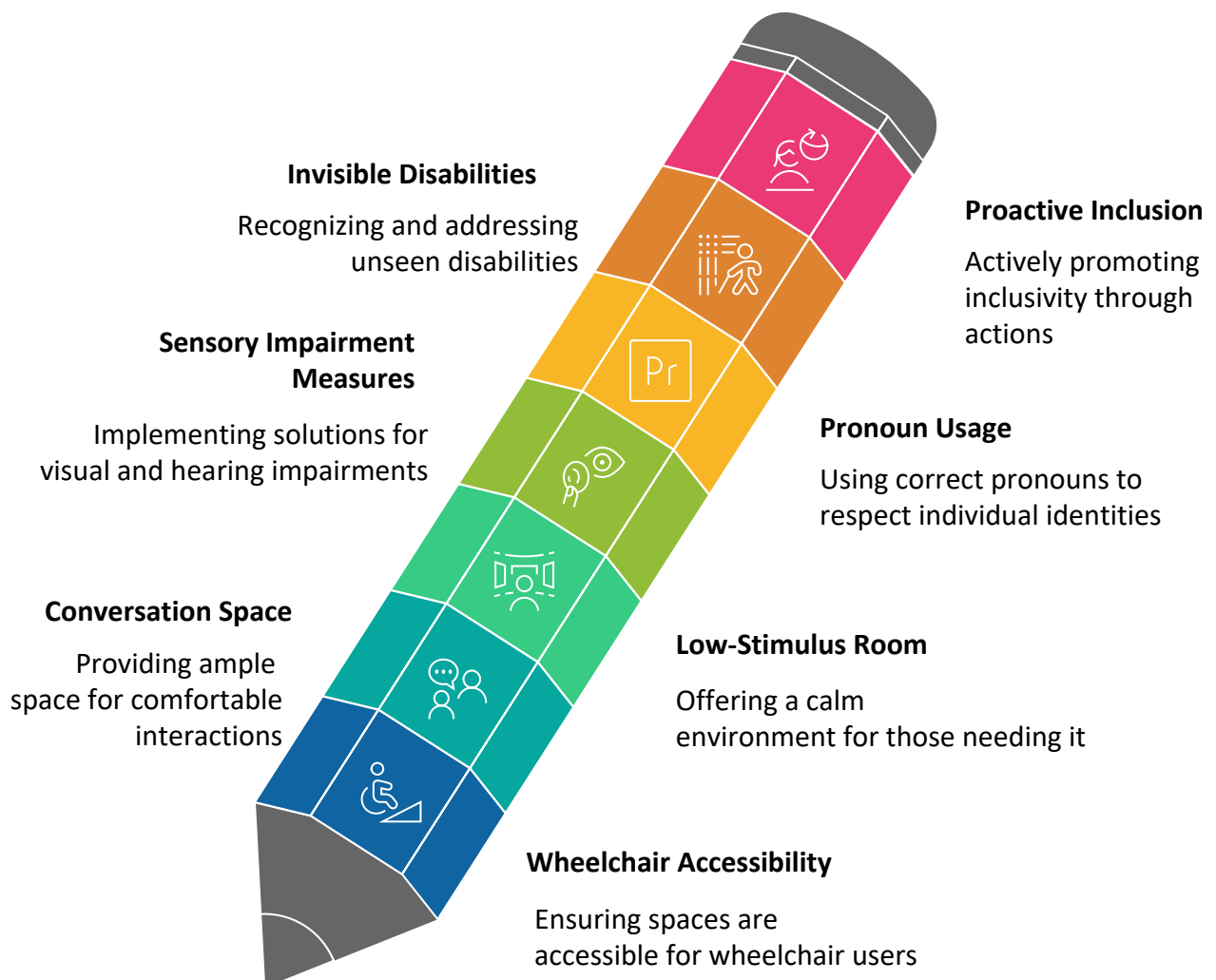
## Two or three conversations

Keep track of time and let each group know when the time is up. If they want, they can extend the time by a maximum of 10 minutes. For the second round, put all library cards back on your desk. After that, the second conversation round can start. In the meantime, also check with your books, to see if everything is ok.

## Plenary closing

Ask everyone to scan the QR-code for the evaluation, give 5 minutes and then ask the participants about their experiences and perhaps about their learning developments. What are they taking away from this? Feedback is also welcome.

## Enhancing Inclusivity in Spaces



# Evaluating



Evaluating a Living Library is crucial, as it helps ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the program. There are two main reasons:

## Measure success

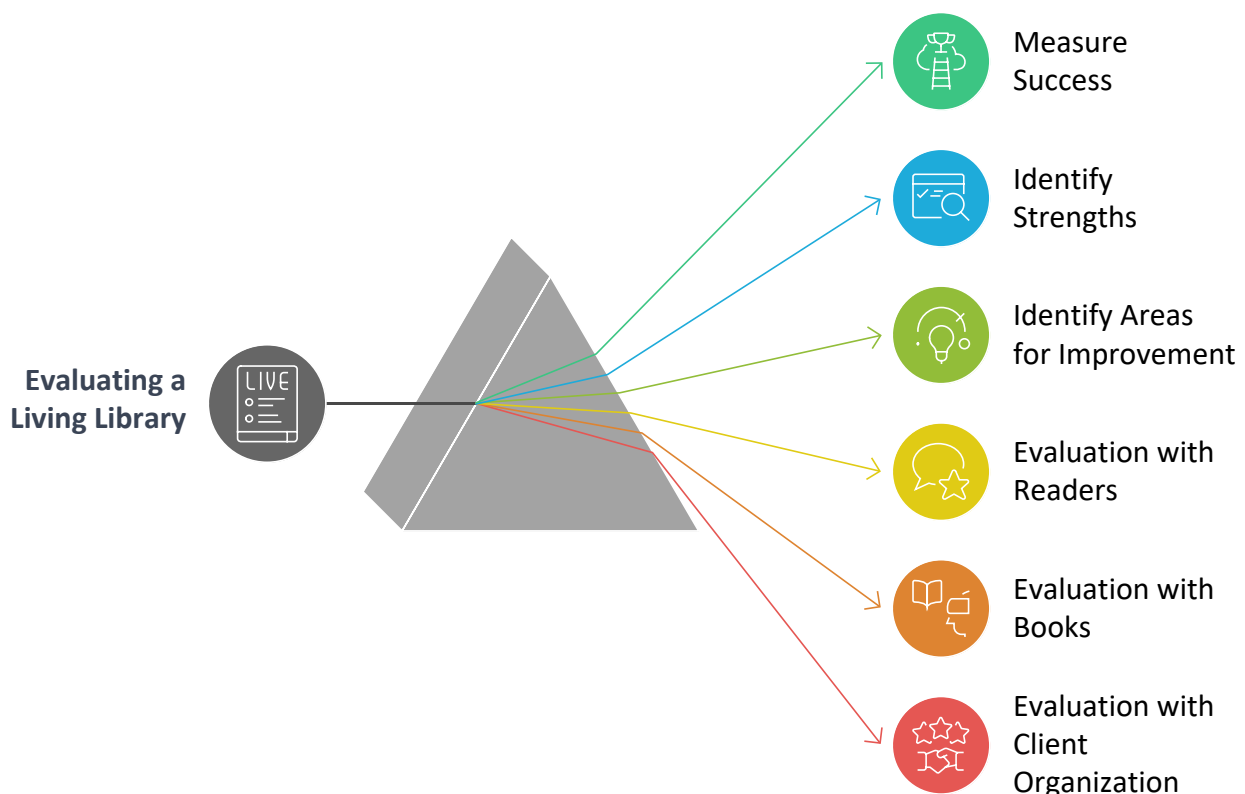
Evaluation helps determine whether the Living Library has achieved its intended goals, such as increasing empathy, breaking down stereotypes, or fostering greater understanding between different groups. By assessing the outcomes, you can gauge how successful the event was in terms of personal growth for participants and its overall impact on the community. The evaluation results can help leadership and stakeholders see the tangible benefits of the event, from improved diversity and inclusion to better team dynamics.

## Identifying strengths and areas for improvement

Evaluation helps identify the aspects of the Living Library that were particularly effective. This can include types of topics discussed, the atmosphere created, or how well Living Books and visitors connected. It also highlights areas that need refinement. For example, perhaps some conversations didn't go as expected. Gathering feedback can point out logistical issues, such as timing or organization, and can improve the overall structure for future events.

There are three categories of evaluations: with readers, with books and with the client organization. Each can have their own methodology.

### Unveiling the Dimensions of Living Library Evaluation



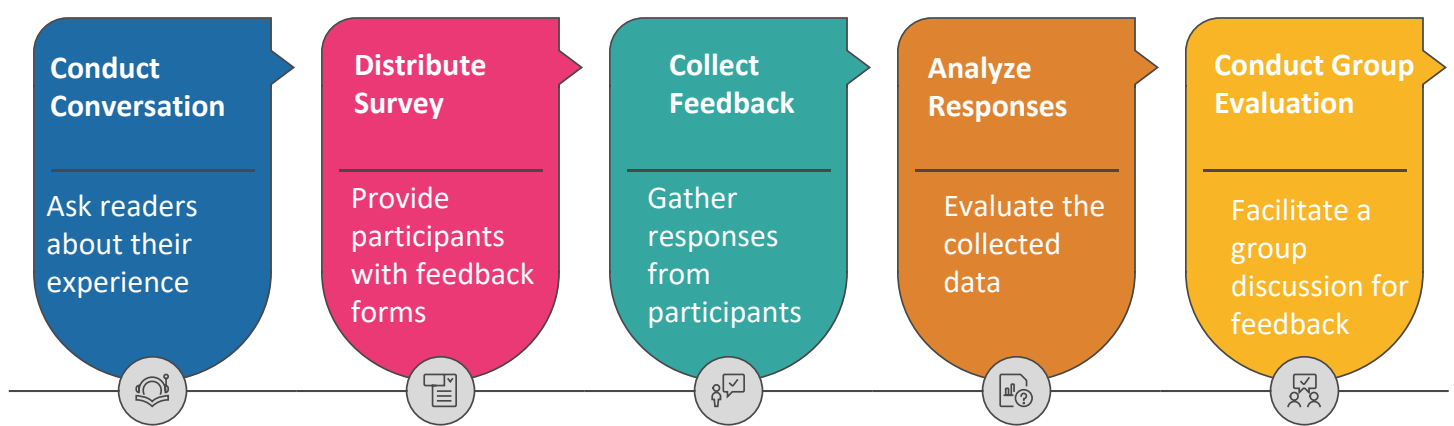


## With readers

Collect feedback from participants after the conversation through a survey and by asking them personally how their experience was. The participants can fill out a form with their smartphone, or you can have a paper version if they prefer that. In that case please consider that not every handwriting is readable and it needs to be typed over later. By using a QR-code on a screen, participants can be referred to the evaluation form quickly. The questions of the survey can vary, depending on your needs. The following aspects can be taken into consideration:

- Not too long; maximum 5 minutes to fill it out seems a good number
- Quantitative and qualitative questions
- Measure the general impression
- Measure the impact

### Reader Feedback Collection Process



It can result in the following questions for the survey:

- Which 'living book' did you borrow?
- How was the Living Library experience for you? (1-10, 1 is very bad, 10 is very good)
- Please explain your answer
- To what degree did you learn new things about the topic of the 'book' you've read? (scale)
- Would you recommend the Living Library to others? (yes/no)
- Can you now get a better understanding of the situation of the 'book'? (scale)
- Any suggestions / comments

If it is applicable, you can also have a short closing group evaluation with the participants, where some of them can share their experiences. We suggest two exercises for this group evaluation:

1. If your time is limited you can ask them to raise their hands if they agree and then read out the following statements:

- I learned something new
- I felt engaged in the conversation
- I was bored during the conversation
- I felt sadness during the conversation
- I became inspired by the book
- I would recommend this program to others



This is a very quick way of evaluating how the experience was for the group, it is also very visual, everyone can see. The statements are only suggestions, you can change them.

2. If you have more time you can use feeling cards for the evaluation. Prepare ca. 50 cards (A4 size is the best, because of good readability) with different feelings (involving positive and negative ones). Spread them on the floor through the room evenly and ask the participants to walk around, stop at some feelings they felt during the event and connect to it a little bit. They can walk around and stop at some cards, and then choose one that they are willing to share with the others and stay there. They can even pick up the card and hold it in their hands. More people can choose the same feeling, and participants can choose more than one card, if they want. When everyone stops at a card, we can go round and they can share what they want. They can also pass as well.

It is best to do these group evaluations before the written evaluation form.

## With books

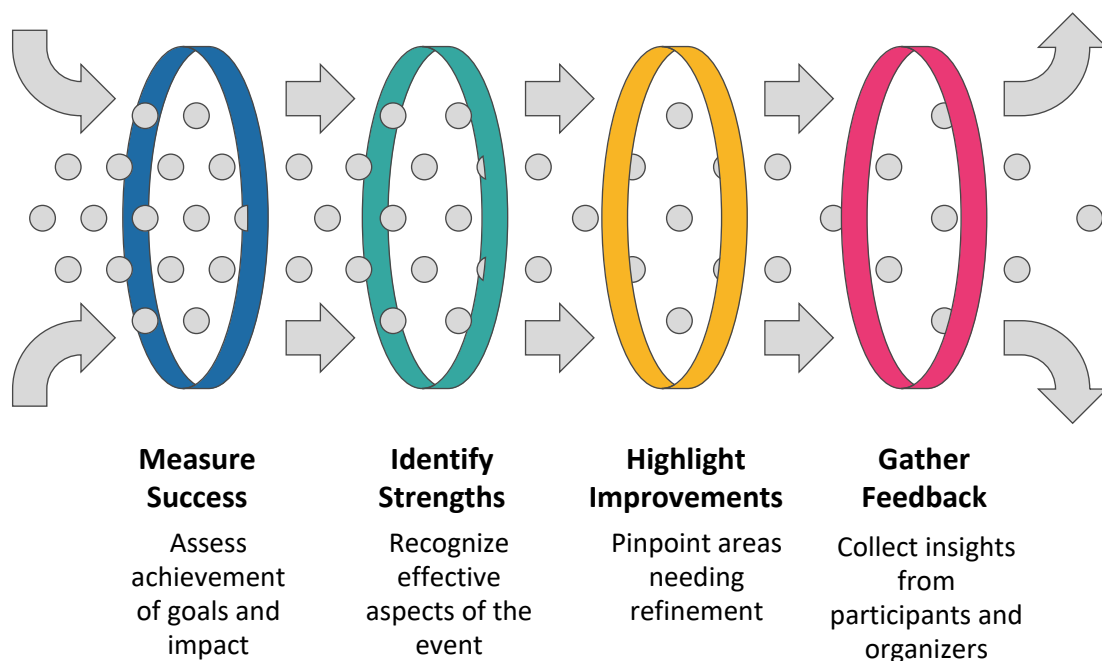
After each Living Library, it is recommended to have each book have their say about the event. If somebody does not feel like talking, that is of course also okay, but each person can get the chance to say whatever they want. They can be invited to share their emotions and experiences, but also encouraged to provide feedback. Afterwards, make clear to all books that you will take their experiences seriously and that you are also available for further talks and feedback, either via e-mail or via a (video) call. Of course you can also thank them for their contributions.

## With the client organization

Afterwards, it is recommended to have an (online video) call with the client organization, discussing the impact, based on the results of the participants' questionnaire and the experiences of the books. Of course you can also include observations from the day itself and the reactions of the participants given later that week, directly to the client organization. The focus of the evaluation meeting with the client organization is on improvement, but also on making plans for future events.

In summary, evaluating a Living Library is critical for assessing its impact, improving future events, ensuring inclusivity, and demonstrating its value to stakeholders. It not only helps optimize the event itself but also enables long-term sustainability and growth of the program, ensuring it continues to foster meaningful connections and understanding.

### Enhancing Living Library Effectiveness



# Research



Organizers of Living Libraries usually see a very positive response of readers and Living Books. But just like any social intervention, research on the Living Library is important to evaluate its effectiveness in fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and promoting social inclusion. After all, it is important to know if your activity has the effect you desire. The evaluation results are a good indicator, but it is not a scientific, independent way of proving its impact. In the past years, several scientific papers have been written about the Living Library. Please find them summarized below. Key theories and concepts are also mentioned and explained. Additionally, on September 14th, 2023, an online symposium was held about the impact of the Living Library, organized by Living Library NL. It has been recorded: view it [here](#).

## Impact assessments

Two scientific papers have been written about the impact of the Living Library in the Netherlands, by two Master students Psychology (Anna Handke in 2017, University of Groningen en Öykü Cantürk in 2023, Radboud University). Both master theses explored the question whether the visitors' attitudes towards the minority group, with whom they had contact, improved after the conversation. The visitors were questioned in three parts: beforehand, directly afterwards and two weeks to one month later. Both studies offer powerful support for the final goal of the Living Library. Already a short, voluntary conversation can change people's presentation of minority groups significantly. Concluding, it can be stated that visiting a Living Library can be very useful to improve inter-group relations in our society. Important notes are the quality of the conversation and the motivation of the visitor. In the end, the studies promote the slogan of the Living Library: 'Don't judge a book by its cover'. Download [here](#) the thesis of Anna Handke and [here](#) the thesis of Öykü Cantürk.

In 2016, Hungarian researchers examined the effectiveness of the Living Library method in reducing prejudice towards roma and LGBTQ people with high school students. In Hungary, prejudices toward Roma and the LGBT community are highly salient and explicit in public opinion, the media, and in the political discourse. They applied a pre-post intervention study with high school students. Results suggest that the Living Library intervention reduced participants' scores on multiple measures of prejudice. The Living Library intervention appeared to be effective among both those participants whose friends endorsed prejudice or more tolerant attitudes toward Roma and LGBT people. In sum, Living Library appears to be a useful method for reducing prejudice in contexts which are characterized by strong negative attitudes toward these different groups. You can read the full study [here](#).



## Operating mechanisms

Lilja Kanerva, Master student Gender Studies at Utrecht University wrote her thesis (2023) about the operating mechanisms of the Living Library and she brings up two recommendations, based on in-depth interviews with 'Living Books' and 'readers'. She states that the Living Library dialogue encounter can act as a catalyst for perception change by constructing a space for a respectful dialogue. It humanizes the Living Books and their subjects. Her advice is to promote the Living Library as widely as possible, so many different kinds of people can participate. She also recommends to invite people to choose a subject they do not have a lot of experience with. However, an unexpected finding from her research was that when readers choose a subject they are familiar with, it can be experienced as very positive as well. For example: one reader conversed with the Living Book entitled 'Survivor of sexual abuse' and she stated the following: "I also had some kind of abuse, but I still find it hard to say abuse, but I never spoke about it. Yeah. And then it was one of the first experiences speaking openly about it". For her it was a big relief to speak about this and it turned out to be an opening to reflect about it more, in the end together with her family and a psychologist. It can also be about friends, family or colleagues who are dealing with a certain situation. After the conversation, the reader can then understand and support them better. This type of 'peer support' is not an official goal of the Living Library, but it is seen as very valuable. Download [here](#) the thesis of Lilja Kanerva.

## Impact on Living books

Mafalda Couto, masterstudent 'Social Challenges, Policies and Interventions' at Utrecht University did her internship at the Living Library and with her master thesis (2024) she explored how migrants with a refugee background develop their identities through dialogue and storytelling. She has conducted thirteen interviews and has made observations during events. One of the most important conclusions is that although stereotypes could reduce self-confidence, an exchange of stories leads to a reflection of the situation. It gives a new meaning to their identity and experiences, beyond the refugee-label. It can be seen as a form of narrative therapy. As Mafalda Couto says: "This paper strongly encourages the exchange of stories not only to promote a cohesive society and the integration of refugees but also for individual well-being." Download the thesis of Mafalda Couto [here](#).

## Supporting scientific theories

Several theories and concepts have been introduced by different scholars around the world to understand prejudices better and to find ways to combat them. They are described below, as it also gives a better understanding of the Living Library concept.



## Prejudices

First it is needed to understand what prejudices are. One of the most famous descriptions of prejudice comes from the American psychologist Gordon Allport (1954), describing prejudice as one's positive or negative feelings toward a concept, thing, or person based on personal experiences. Prejudices can be formed based on factors such as a person's sexual or gender identity, ethnicity, skin color, health or disability. Prejudice is known to be a major cause of discrimination and for conflicts in intergroup relations, which can have a significant negative impact on minority or marginalised groups. It could have dire consequences for their physical and mental well-being such as depression, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety.

## Contact theory

The most known theory to combat prejudices is the intergroup contact theory, by Allport as well. The theory suggests that the contact between two social groups can have a positive impact. They get new knowledge, understand the other better and develop more empathy. There have been many studies that scientifically prove that prejudices decrease when different social groups come in contact with each other. The Living Library relies strongly on this theory, as readers can borrow a Living Book about a subject they have little experience with.

## World Traveling

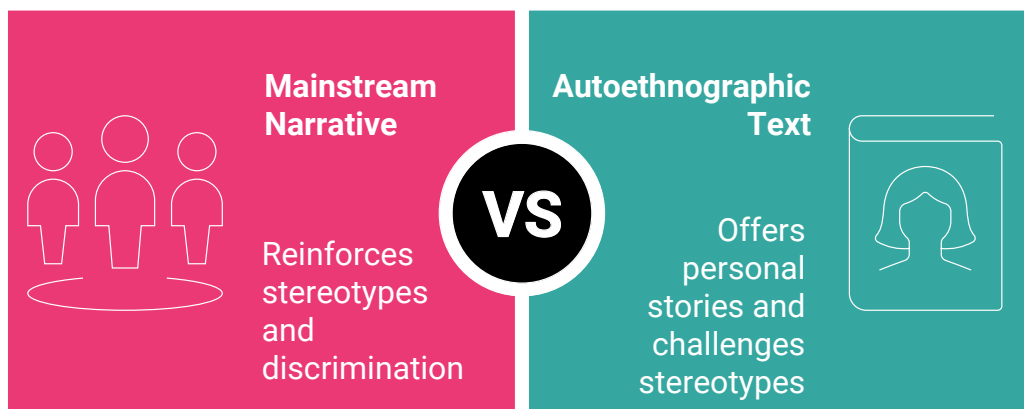
The Argentine philosopher Maria Lugones introduced the concept of 'World Traveling', which refers to conceptually traveling into another person's world and way of seeing and experiencing life. In her article, Lugones encourages the use of 'world'-traveling as a tool for resistance. 'World'-traveling, according to Lugones, in the most productive case, helps one to understand another person better. She explains that when you travel to the other person's world you can "understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes". At the Living Library we often hear how personal conversations really change the view of the readers. Living Books take readers on a journey by sharing their life story. This gives the readers an insight into what it means to be in that situation and allows the readers to perceive the subject through the words of the Living Book instead of through the mainstream narrative imposed by society. The readers can gain a more personal, human perspective into what the lived experience has been. This enables perception change to occur.



## Autoethnographic texts

The American scholar Mary Louise Pratt coined the term ‘autoethnographic texts’, which are texts in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. It deconstructs the dominant narration of themselves, constructed by the oppressor. The Living Books use their position as the ‘other’ to re-narrate the story of being the ‘other’. Lilja Kanerva’s thesis quotes Living Book Remke (book title: Trans woman): “I always want to convey that it’s okay to be transgender. You can be happy, you can be successful. So take your own path and be yourself”. In this way, Remke is re-narrating the mainstream story that positions transgender people at the fringes of society through stigmatisation and discrimination. Remke’s autoethnographic text, a text of resistance, is her very real narrative about being happy and successful while also being transgender. She is using the position of the ‘so-called other’ to transform how the identity category of ‘transgender’ is viewed in the mainstream narrative by adding depth and diversity through sharing her own lived experience with the readers. Through the Living Library, it challenges a one-dimensional view on the subject.

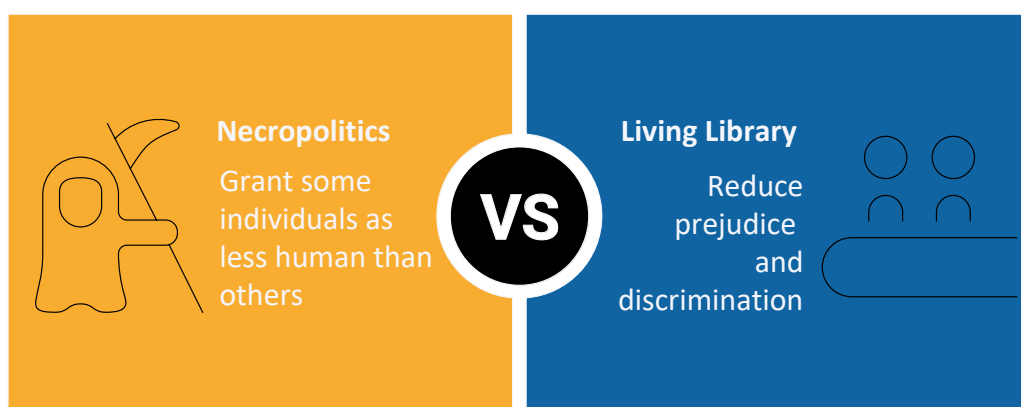
### How to challenge mainstream narratives about marginalised groups?



## Necropolitics

The Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe explored this concept for the first time, to describe the power relations at play which grant some individuals as less human than others due to their identities which are considered marginal by the mainstream. The Living Library aims to challenge this dehumanisation of certain identities by bringing people together to reduce prejudice and discrimination. What is more, the Living Books who inhabit the position of the marginalised ‘other’ in the intervention intentionally use their position to challenge the mainstream narrative which locates them at the fringes of society.

### Necropolitics vs Living Library







## Brave Space

The American diversity educators Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens published an article to introduce the concept of a Brave Space and to question the usefulness of 'safe space' by asking if safety is the right expectation for honest social justice dialogues. They use the term brave space instead of safe space because they question "the degree to which safety is an appropriate or reasonable expectation for any honest dialogue about social justice". They instead highlight the concept of brave space: as a space where common ground rules of communication apply but where the focus is on emphasizing the need for courage to have disagreements rather than the illusion of safety. This connects closely with the view of the Living Library, but at the same time the space should be as safe as possible, for example by reading the rules out loud, before every conversation. Both the reader and the Living Book can ask each other any question, but both also have the right not to answer a question. Both can also finish the conversation at any time. Downright disrespectful or threatening behavior is not tolerated in the brave space or the Living Library. By setting these rules in the informal setting of the Living Library, it does create a space where readers become aware that any question is welcome, if asked in a respectful way. This paves the way for a deep, meaningful conversation.



# Best practises

This manual is produced by a consortium of three organizations, from The Netherlands, Hungary and Spain. Each organization also has some specific experiences and best practices, which are shared below.



## The Netherlands

More and more companies and organizations in the Netherlands are becoming aware of the benefits Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives offer, such as enhancing innovation, employee engagement, and overall business performance. Diverse teams bring a variety of perspectives, leading to more innovative solutions and improved decision-making. Research indicates that diverse teams are better at making decisions, and companies. Inclusive workplaces where employees feel valued and respected also contribute to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. And a diverse workforce enables companies to better understand and meet the needs of a varied customer base, leading to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty. In the Netherlands the first Living Library for employees took place in 2021. As the first general Living Library took place in 2014, there was a steady base of living books and volunteers. Many Living Books appreciate the specific questions they get from employees or managers, regarding inclusion in the workplace, such as a manager asking how they can make the office as inclusive as possible for transgender persons. For employees it is also interesting to read a Living Book together in small groups. By hearing the questions and remarks of your own colleagues, they create a stronger bond and culture of openness about topics that are normally difficult to speak about. What we find important in the Netherlands is to give space to Living Books to give advice to each other and always welcome new Living Books warmly. The collection of Living Books is always a work in progress. Lastly, in the Netherlands we have always welcomed researchers to assess the success of the methodology. This has given valuable insights and all results are summarized on our website, [livinglibrary.nl](https://livinglibrary.nl).



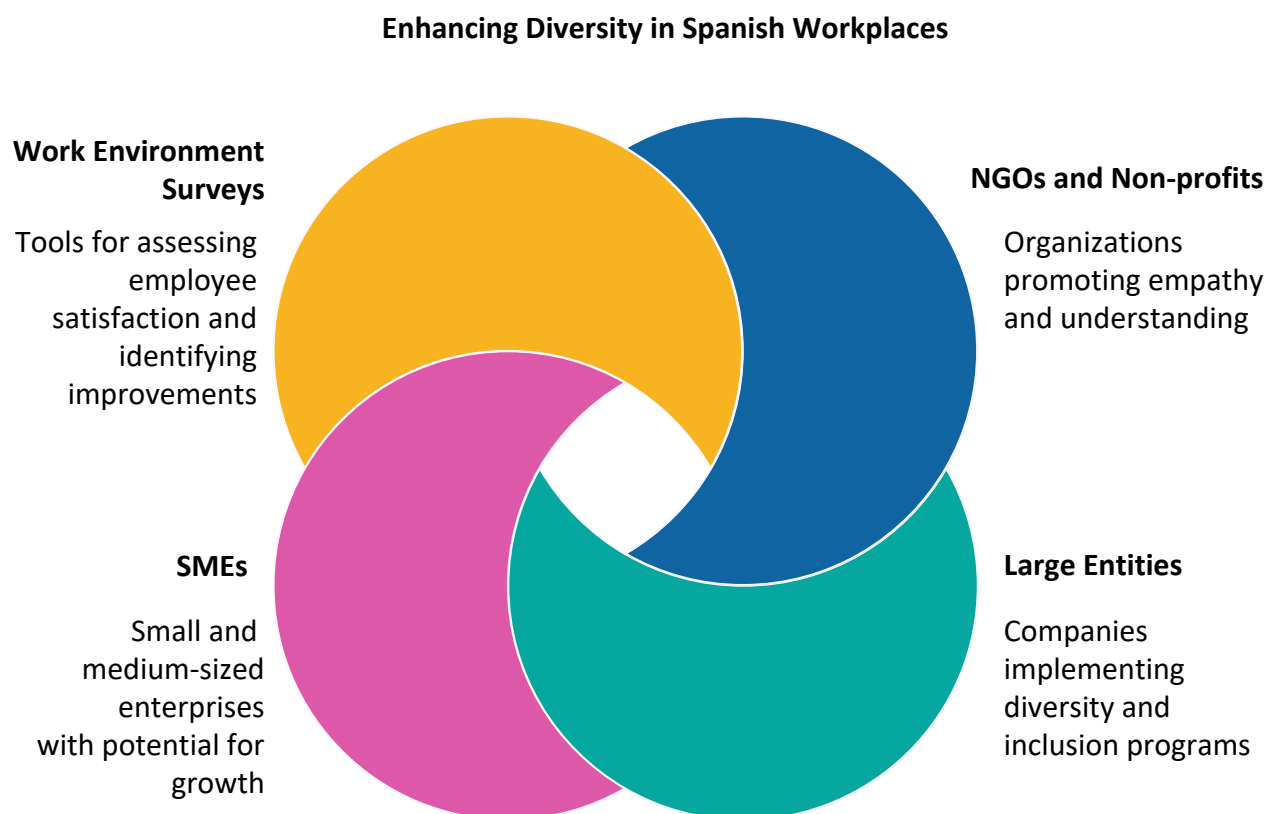
## Hungary

In Hungary we started the Living Library program as a school and a festival activity, companies were not on our radar originally. As a school program, it was very successful and we grew as a group and as a team. In 2021 there were some legal changes that prohibited the topics of sexuality and addiction to be talked about in schools so we had to reinvent ourselves and look for other places where Living Libraries could be impactful. We already organized some successful Living Library events at companies and had some connections to a few companies thanks to our Living Book volunteers, so we had the idea to focus more on that sector. Corporations in Hungary are not generally obliged to provide diversity training activities for their staff, so we need to be adaptable to still fit into their workplace culture and busy schedules. First, we were trying to use the somewhat modified framework of the school sessions or the other one that we use at festivals, but as we worked more and more in the corporate setting we realized that it may need a new approach that merges the two: so we created a flexible yet structured system that fits the environment of workplaces better. We divide the time to 30 minute slots, and the readers can book their sessions in advance and it is clear when they can join in. This allows them the freedom to adapt the timing to their workdays, they don't have to participate in the whole event necessarily. Also it gives a predictable and transparent framework to the conversations. We managed to widen our corporate partner base by conducting a survey of HR and DEI professionals about the needs of their companies and we also organized a workshop for them to develop personal connections and to get their feedback and ideas about the methodology. By now we have a few contact persons that are inviting us year by year, because they are satisfied with the Living Libraries that we organized. We have a few corporate partners that have multiple sites and sometimes they invite us to provide a Living Library at more of their locations.

One of the feedbacks from these partners was that sometimes it can be challenging for the participants (the readers) to fully be themselves and express their curiosity in a workplace setting in fear of being exposed as ignorant/prejudiced or disclosing sensitive data. To solve this issue we came up with the idea of a table of content for each Living Book so the readers can see which topics are there to discover and they only need to choose from those. We also started to develop the idea of question cards that could be an option for people to use in a workplace setting, if they feel that their professional persona does not allow for personal interest to show. To sum it up, in our experience, it is very important to pay close attention to the needs of the companies, be flexible, evaluate the event with the contact person after and nurture personal connections with them before and after the event.

## Spain

Although there are experiences in Spain, there is still not as widespread a tradition as in other countries in the application of Living Libraries. The entities that have applied them most deeply have been NGOs and non-profit associations (such as Blue Beehive) to promote empathy and understanding, address prejudices and social stereotypes, especially towards migrants or people with different lifestyles. We can find some references in Spain, only large entities, that have promoted their experiences with Living Libraries to improve the stereotypes of workers within the framework of diversity and inclusion programs, or have launched mentoring and coaching programs. These programs are designed to help employees overcome stereotypes and biases by providing personalized support and guidance.



There is no obligation or regulation that Spanish companies must apply to promote diversity and inclusion. That is why the vast majority of companies in Spain, which are SMEs, do not apply activities related to attention to diversity among their workers. Work environment surveys are applied in some companies to find out the opinions of workers and their employment situation in the company. These surveys are usually carried out by external consultants in the case of SMEs or by the HR department in the case of larger companies. But the objectives are different from Living Libraries, as they aim to improve the organization and identify areas for improvement, although employee satisfaction is also measured. Our motivation is to convince Spanish SMEs of the improvement that Living Libraries bring in terms of improving the work environment, promoting communication, improving results by increasing the commitment and collaboration of employees and better understanding the needs of customers.



# Appendix: Checklist

This checklist will help you cover all the essentials for the implementation of a successful Living Library in your company

<div>Preliminary preparation</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Coordination with the client company: ensure clear and continuous communication.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Selection of the place: choose an accessible space.</div> </div>	<div>Living Book recruitment and training</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Identification of Living Books: recruit people with diverse life experiences.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Admission interview: conduct individual interviews to learn about their stories.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Training: offer training to facilitate dialogue.</div> </div>
<div>Internal promotion</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Internal communication: to inform about the Living Library.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Internal ambassadors: engage influential employees.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Alignment with company values: connect with CSR or DEI initiatives.</div> </div>	<div>Event Logistics</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Equipment: prepare space with necessary equipment.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Promotional materials: have promotional materials.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Library cards: create cards for each Living Book.</div> </div>
<div>Inclusiveness</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Accessibility: verify access for all.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Sensory considerations: have a quiet space.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Language and communication: using the correct pronouns; asking and adapting.</div> </div>	<div>Event development</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Plenary introduction: explain the concept and objectives.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Clear rules: communicate the "Rights of the Book and the Reader".</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Small group conversations: facilitate small group conversations.</div> </div>
<div>Evaluation</div> <div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback collection: collect feedback from participants and Living Books.</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation with the client organization: hold a meeting to discuss the impact.</div> </div>	<div>  </div>