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ORIENTATION AND EXTENSION OF A PROGRAMME
OF MINI-LIBRARIES IN VENEZUELA

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In these few pages we propose to explain briefly the intention and the beginning of a programme of mini-libraries at present being carried out in Venezuela. We don't want to boast, we don't claim to be presenting the only solution to the problems of training, information and community life. We just want to describe the meaning, orientation of an experiment taking into account the needs, conditions and limits of a one Third World country among others.

Introduction : Aims of culture in Venezuela

Before coming to the main point, it is not superfluous to give briefly a picture of the background. A few words, then, about our country.

Considering only the economic and cultural aspect, Venezuela would not seem to be in good odour among the so-called developed countries. Venezuela is something like the Saudi Arabia of Latin America; it is the "nouveau riche" of the continent, greedy for publicity and ostentatious luxury. The Venezuelian admit this with a certain sense of humour. Not long ago a very successful national film openly made fun of their fellow countrymen who consider themselves above all as citizens of "our Miami" where they belong to the "Tabarato-Damedos" Tribe ("esta barato, dame dos", it means : "it's dirt-cheap, I'll buy two of them !"). The owner-classes, by means of the mass media, have no trouble in instilling the consumer-society philosophy into the minds of the proletarian classes. There is, all the same, a gulf between the rich and the poor as in many new countries, and it must be recognised that the efforts of successive governments to combat this fundamental injustice have not succeeded. At the political level, however, our country has probably a better reputation. Our possession of oil gives a certain stability - rather artificial - to the national life and its political institutions. The democratic government, too formal and still imperfect, even gives us a superiority complex with regard to most other Latin-American countries.

Here are four conclusions to this brief analysis :

- 1) All efforts towards culture in our country should be an answer to the invasion of foreign culture (economic, political, social) of which we are too often the willing victims; these efforts should be directed to deepening national consciousness. Our work for culture through reading cannot be neutral if we are to fight the threat of the destruction of native culture.

2) Right from the start, the effort of spreading libraries should combat, not the passive acquisition of goods in itself, but the consumer society as it exists in Venezuela. We should contribute to re-establishing the balance between invention and utilisation, between the creator and the user, so that both roles may be played by the same person.

3) In order to take charge of the very society where we work it will be necessary to favour the least favoured, i.e. those whose social, economic or geographical situation cuts them off from power, from political divisions, and from the distributors of goods and services. Here again the people's libraries cannot remain neutral when confronted with this painful division of our society. The choice of site, the contents of the programme, the orientation of our efforts, the selection of material (books, etc.) must contribute to the creation of harmonious structures, and to the giving of knowledge and power to those too often deprived of it.

4) If our system of government does not yet greatly favour participation by the people, the library, on the contrary, should provide a training school for decision-making. Power with its expression ought to be more evenly shared; or in other words, because of the social inequalities in our country at present, being educated to act and to think should help those on the fringe of society to gradually take an active part in its transformation, capable of planning their own lives and also society life. This shows once again that the library in our country cannot soar above the material difficulties and faults of our national life; on the contrary, it must be instrumental in correcting the social vices and injustices of all kinds.

However, it would be premature to be either scared or over-enthusiastic on hearing these observations which, unfortunately, are rather good resolutions than practical conclusions. Indeed we are too realistic to forget the weight of mental structures and all the other obstacles; these prevent our desires from becoming imperative, lightening programmes. The result of our efforts to increase the number of mini-libraries is still small and vulnerable; finally, having such a utopic vision and such a strong conviction of the potential importance of the library in the cultural, social and political transformation of our country and its people, we may consider that what we actually achieve from day to day is agonizingly slow and feeble. That is what we are going to ana-

The origin of the mini-library

The mini-library barely exists and yet it was not born overnight. It came into existence by the meeting between a flexible, dynamic Venezuelan institution - the "Banco del Libro" - and the work of several "culture volunteers".

First the "Book Bank". This private non profit-making association was itself founded by volunteers. At first its sole function was to facilitate the exchange of school-books by poor pupils; this explains the name of the Institution, Banco del Libro. But each year, encouraged by success, the aims were diversified and today the Book Bank acts as a Documentation Centre dealing with librarianship, pedagogics, literature for the young, as a non-academic training school for librarians, as a publishing house for quality books especially in the field of children's literature, as a structure for experiments in library services (school and public libraries, including mobile libraries), as a workshop for the creation of games and didactic programmes, etc. The "Book Bank" whose annual budget is always very precarious, does not seek to form a network distinct from the official libraries network. Their idea, on the contrary, is to invent and test out the most suitable techniques and methods in the field of books and libraries in order to transfer them afterwards to the bodies concerned, and in the first place, of course, to the national network of libraries which is part of a State institution.

And next the culture volunteers. Volunteers for culture or for social service, for this soon became the conviction of the young budding librarians (they were then 15 or 16 years old) : the book could not be an end in itself; knowledge is only an instrument for further plans; for certain people it will be a question of economic or political domination and the tentacular extension of power; for others, among whom we count ourselves, the aim will be the joy of understanding life and the world around us, the desire to control one's own destiny, individually and collectively, the concern of taking into one's own hands the reins of life and actively assisting in the setting up of a less anarchic, less brutal social order. Not that these volunteers were capable of expressing all that, the day that in a room less than 12 m. square, with no project, no ideas, no ambition, and without external help, a mini-library opened with ... two books. The first patrons of this mini-library were some children from a suburban district of Caracas

and they soon obliged it to increase its stock of books and to propose a variety of leisure and instructive activities. Books were sought in all possible places : privately, from embassies, from official bodies, etc. Some were bought thanks to the financial aid of a few friends. At the same time means were sought to reduce the distance between book and poor child by introducing such techniques of expression as drawing, games, singing, acting.

But all that soon proved insufficient and it was just then that the meeting occurred between an institution open to research and these volunteers in action. The "Book Bank" offered its experience and its means : the travelling book-case (100 to 200 books lent for a month, constantly renewed) and then the book-mobile run jointly by the volunteers and the institution staff. Finally the "Book Bank" decided to give its full support to the work of the volunteers and to try out a new type of library which would reduce, as far as possible, the traditional barrier between formal culture and the needs of the working class people. From that time onwards a few of the volunteers became part of the institution's paid staff, spontaneously maintaining the vitality and enthusiasm of pioneers.

Undoubtedly, then, the meeting between the voluntary workers and the specialised institution was beneficial to everyone : for the local workers themselves who started a course of training where theory and practice were constantly intermingled; for the "Book Bank" which saw its field of action enlarged and was then able to come closer to that part of the public said (half unjustly perhaps) to be difficult and apparently uninterested in culture; for the inhabitants of a densely populated barrio, who not only sometimes discovered that books were not necessarily frightening, but were also able to participate actively in the drawing up of programmes. They thus learned to shake off that crushing passivity so often cause and consequence of being rejected to the fringe of society.

Nowadays, and in order to meet local needs, the programmes developed by this library, no longer really a "mini" one, are in theory of unlimited diversity, and in practice quite numerous. With the children, for instance (who are a little more than 60 % of our public), in addition to reading itself and the lending of books, we organize, or have had at one moment or other, a succession of small workshops such as : handiworks based on telling of tales, puppets and theatre, dance, singing and music, ceramics, gym, games of chess, training for handicrafts, maths games, elementary

scientific experiments, gardening, editing of a little newspaper, etc. Of course activities are more difficult with the young, owing to the precariousness of their milieu. Avoiding all school methods, the point is to go through into our knowledge of the country, our belief in national culture, the need to participate in local life, and this is done with their active cooperation. Thus we develop friendly clubs, study and reading groups, courses on sexual information, workshops for serigraphy, ceramics, music, etc. For adults, we try to launch programmes mainly about problems of education, infrastructure of public services but, more important, we try to set up permanent groups in view of local action; in such groups, through very little and limited projects, the people may have an actual experience of success and the indispensable training of their own capacities, opportunities they seldom have although it is quite necessary for personal and community fulfillment. This explains the creation of courses on ceramics, natural and unexpensive food, sewing and making of trousers for children, macramé and flowers, nursing and first aid, just as exhibitions, forums, discussions preparing for community activities, not forgetting education programmes where a mother learns about her important role as an educator.

Of course, all these programmes encounter numerous difficulties, and partial or total failures; listing them would be too long but would be of great interest as an introduction to the analysis of the social and human context inside which we are struggling. Anyhow this is why we reach only partly and very slowly, our objectives of the people's education, these objectives being the main part of our library work.

Programme of the Mini-Libraries

We briefly described hereabove the birth and evolution of a mini-library, located in an almost anonymous area of Greater Caracas. One mini-library. It would be hardly worth mentioning, were not this concrete and limited realization at the same time like the announcement of a wider project. In fact, we are ambitious. We intend to propose the organization of the mini-library as a model for the establishment of libraries and cultural centres in all our country.

What's the situation just now ? Here it is, briefly.

In Venezuela there exists an official type of library which has been steadily repeated, for many years, by the National System of Libraries (SINASBI), belonging to the National Library, an Autonomous Institute. The library pattern proposed by this State Institute

is really modern and attractive. It has taken into account the best from children's and adults' libraries in the most advanced countries : Scandinavia, North America, socialist or western Europe.

It is a huge effort, necessary but not sufficient. It calls for considerable material and human investment, inappropriate to the urgent needs and actual availabilities in our region. If we propose the mini-library, it is also to take into account these important needs and limitations, always more dramatic in unprivileged areas. As a matter of fact, as we have just said, the mini-library doesn't come from high above, neither from a governmental organization nor from anywhere else outside the local community. It must stem from the initiative of a group of persons dedicated to community service : students, young people's groups, "juntas" or associations of residents. They must themselves find the premises intended for the library. Thus the mini-library springs up from the basis, from the ground level, which offers the best guarantee for a consistent development, the sort of consistency which should exist between means and aims, in view of creating an authentic popular culture. Created on the spot and not imported, selfmanaged, not pitchforked, nor directed from far-away offices and national plans. In exchange, this birth and growth represent a difficult, slow and uncertain progress : spontaneous groups, mostly when they have no legal frames, are submitted to many hazards; they depend first of all on the perseverance of their members and their resistance to misfortunes. In a country like ours, bulging with young people and also full of insecurity, the stability and continuity of a mini-library is never sure.

Where do we stand now ?

Since 1976, the initial mini-library is officially integrated in the national network, although it has maintained the organization and autonomy of the mini-library, including the ideology and utopia hereabove described. But this library has multiplied. At present six mini-libraries have, by our efforts, been created in the suburb of a million inhabitants where we dwell. Apart from this limited network, about thirty other mini-libraries scattered all over the country were helped by us during the past years, when they started. However we don't know the exact number of those who survived difficulties and resisted the temptation of joining SINASBI; this organization sometimes tends to offer its services and

resources when a mini-library appears, at the price of autonomy and selfmanagement by the founding group.

It must be said, in fact, that in the present elementary state of development of the mini-library, the latter requires from the volunteers uncommon willingness to serve. A volunteer is an adult or a young person from the working class, often having no personal resources. If he is a student he is always short of money and suffers psychologically from dependance on his family; his family itself more or less surviving in the economic insecurity. And this type of person is asked to volunteer in favour of children and adolescents of the same class, all undergoing the same kind of difficulties.

So our "mini-librarians" are not, far from it, professionals in library, educational or social services. We believe it is advisable for them to have a level corresponding to approximately the first half of secondary school studies, but quite a number are of higher level. Besides we have organized for them a short basic course lasting 18 hours scheduled during a whole week-end of 48 hours. Using inductive methods and group dynamics, reflection is based on the three following points :

- 1) necessity, meaning, objectives and actors of the mini-library in an unprivileged area;
- 2) organization of the book collection : how to find the books ; learning to know the various kinds of books ; classification and cataloguing (1);
- 3) discipline of the mini-library, distribution of the tasks among the members of the team in charge, organization of book lending, relations between the mini-library and the community to be served.

This elementary "cursillo" we organised four or five times for approximately 80 learners, is of course quite insufficient, not only

(1) We propose a simplification of the Dewey decimal system, keeping only one figure for each division in the classification, so that a group of mini-librarians have not to face insurmountable difficulties when going through the whole processing of a book, after the theme and subject have been determined. Besides, this simplification is an introduction to an understanding and future utilization of the decimal system used in all public libraries in Venezuela.

because the amount of subjects considered is too crowded and overlooks the capacities of participation of persons who are not yet much accustomed to using books; not only because the short length of time available hardly gives an opportunity for practical work which will take place at the mini-library itself; but also because the techniques learned during this first training session are mainly related to the library, the book and its handling, more than to what we believe is essential, I mean relationship between reader and book, and active promotion of the mini-library as a dynamic centre of popular culture, specially orientated towards those who would never approach books spontaneously. Bearing this in mind, we arranged two second level sessions for mini librarians more or less veterans. Only 12 persons gathered at each of these two meetings which were of the highest interest and led us to believe that permanent training together with experience/^{of relationship} will be important and absolutely necessary.

We mentioned 80 learners who followed at least a first "cursillo" for mini-librarians. In fact we have here two opposing movements. On the one hand, each of the 80 mini-librarians delegated by their mini-libraries shared the fruit of this quick training with one or two other volunteers; thus it may be said that approximately 200 workers in mini-libraries may have benefited indirectly from the cursillo. On the other hand, we are aware that there is also a high percentage of mini-libraries that died out before the end of their first year. Many mini-libraries close down even before they are able to develop for various reasons : difficulties in finding suitable space, people dropping out, the lack of consistent help experienced by almost all mini-librarians, shortage of money, rarity of books, the inability to get efficiently organised and to observe a certain discipline in the accomplishment of tasks. Cross checkings and estimates allow us to say there are currently about 20 mini-libraries operating. Our being unable to tell their exact number and actual situation shows clearly that the help they deserve is not yet really organised nor continuous. Extension is still on a small scale, depending on individual help, and suffering from the lack of communication. Such a situation must not last long or else the model will disappear for ever.

Scheme for the organization of mini-libraries

Our wish is to create a sort of federation of mini-libraries in unprivileged areas, a horizontal network, and to prepare its possible integration as a "subsistema" under the National System SINASBI. This type of organization would be profitable from many points of view : particularly it would enable the mini-libraries to be in touch with government organizations in order to receive material support, and a number of resources the lack of which may be decisive. This organization would also prevent the mini-library from selling its freedom, through weakness or lack of faith; and getting in exchange the "mess of pottage" consisting of material support and official technical help.

However, the installation of a sort of federation of mini-libraries, or the preparation of a national sub-system, would require a participation that we could not assume now; we lack the necessary material and human means. We should be in a position to have an effective responsibility for the existing and future mini-libraries : this help would consist in an efficient and recognized mediation with the government organizations, or by creating legal frames, starting a permanent training plan that would receive legal ratification, by visiting at regular and frequent intervals the mini-libraries, by helping them to find all necessary materials, by organizing meetings for the mini-librarians, etc. So far, we are responsible only for the six mini-libraries already mentionned, and now and then we try to get in touch with one of the mini-libraries located outside the indicated area.

Owing to present difficulties in organizing a system or sub-system, we are temporarily limiting our action, according to the suggestion of the Président of the Autonomous Institute National Library, and propose that each mini-library adopt the legal form of an association, to avoid undesired integration, meaning disintegration, through the necessary connection with the Government Institute.

Tasks for the near future

Bearing in mind all the above factors, and our present possibilities, what would be in a near future the tasks to be realized in order to ensure a better foundation for an enlarged network of mini-libraries ?

We believe there are seven emergencies :

- 1) First, and it goes almost without saying, it would be necessary to initiate regular contacts with the mini-libraries or the mini-librarians we contributed to involve in the difficult adventure of community service. It/^{even}seems convenient to establish periodical relations with them, so that they may profit from a support owed/^{to}them.
- 2) Considering this, we should examine the possibility of publishing a short periodical newsletter for training and information, that would be a co-ordinating medium between all the generous book and library volunteers.
- 3) We also plan to typescript a sort of "mini-library guide" that could be used as a fundamental textbook for those in charge of mini-libraries. Such a textbook, based on several existing documents, could stand as a theoretical and practical basis for mini-library service.
- 4) It seems advisable to propose meetings allowing the mini-librarians to get better acquainted, to exchange views, to look together for solutions to community difficulties, and improvements in the organization and service, etc.
- 5) It would probably be necessary to organize not only first level "cursillos" but also a more elaborate course on librarianship (theory and practice) leading possibly to an official degree. Another solution would be to adapt the training of non academic library schools, specially those of the SINASBI and of the "Banco del Libro".
- 6) It would be advisable to establish semi-official relations with the State Institute National Library, head of the SINASBI. Such relations should not introduce insuperable difficulties, inasmuch as the present managers of the State Institute have clearly expressed their sympathy towards the principle of mini-libraries. Thus could be found the place of mini-libraries within the State Institute, respecting the independence and autonomy of the small group who, at the same time, would have to accept a certain discipline and the necessary working relations with the head institute.
- 7) Finally, all these conditions being fulfilled - and now we are no longer speaking of the immediate future - the project could be proposed on a large scale and we could encourage a great number of volunteers and mini-

Conclusion : The mini-library, an utopia

One may reproach us, after these short considerations, to have emphasized beyond due measure the state of research, the difficulties, unanswered questions, instead of making enthusiastic triumphant statements, or simply giving the explanation of our method. But could we do otherwise, being so young and unexperienced on the path we are taking ?

However we wish to fly a bit higher in our conclusion. We wish once more to underline our faith in a struggle for a real culture of the people, culture to which books may lead; or, more precisely, a struggle in favour of a whole people, especially of its most unprivileged classes, who have not only the right to learn and read, but also to speak and express themselves in a society pretending not to hear.

Culture, in a Third World country like ours, is not, in the first place, being able to understand and appreciate the Illiade or the Divine Comedy, or to let oneself be entranced by Bach or Beethoven. Culture is to be able to find in oneself, and in one's own community the stimulus for a harmonious and social life; it is to be able to find or rather to re-invent in a new social context, the sources of conviviality, the meaning and means of education, a liking for celebrations. Culture is being the master of one's work and its fruit. A huge problem ! After eight years work, we can say that the library, and particularly what we have called the mini-library, may play an important part in this endless task. Having pointed out why books matter greatly, we wish to determine and limit their main function. Books may help to initiate a new awareness and creative activity, but they/^{will}never be an end in themselves, the principal concern of the librarian. What matters to us is the encounter between the book-medium and the reader; between book and society; in order that the library never forgets its duty to serve a certain type of society and foster a certain way of considering life. Reality with its injustices and hardships, is where our activity as librarians begins; but we are seeking quite a different utopia, marked by joyful creation, individual or social. The mini-library strives to be a tool for research in this direction, so that the power to read leads to the power to speak, to decide, and to transform life.