



Support for ASSABIL, Friends of Public Libraries
to establish a Training and Resource Center in Lebanon

The ASSABIL Comprehensive Library Center

Project Description

Summary

ASSABIL, Friends of Public Libraries is a Lebanese NGO that was established in 1997 to develop public libraries in Lebanon. ASSABIL

- opened and manages Beirut's only two municipal public libraries.
- coordinates a network of 25 public libraries that are located throughout the country.
- has distributed more than 100,000 books to public libraries and schools in Lebanon.
- organizes activities at public libraries in Lebanon.
- conducts training sessions for those who work in libraries.
- has been asked by the Municipality of Beirut to establish—and manage—an additional ten municipal public libraries in Beirut.

We are guided by the principles that are set forth in the 1994 IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations)/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto:

Freedom, prosperity and the development of society and of individuals are fundamental human values. They will only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society. Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information.

The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.

Background

As the Lebanese civil war came to an end in the mid-1990s, a group of concerned men and women came together to talk about the needs of their country and what they could do to help. They decided to work to develop public libraries in Lebanon both because of the critical role that libraries play in the socioeconomic development of a country and because the incoming Lebanese government was neglecting the educational and cultural needs of the Lebanese people.

In addition to providing “free and unlimited access to knowledge,” public libraries are places where people from different socioeconomic, religious, and sectarian groups can come together. Very few such places exist in Lebanon. Some of us who had enjoyed the benefits of a public library system in other countries recognized the critically important role that they could play in Lebanon.

In December 1999, ASSABIL, Friends of Public Libraries organized the first symposium on the public’s right to “free and unlimited access to knowledge.” The response to this symposium convinced us to move forward to develop public libraries in Lebanon.

Beirut’s Two Municipal Public Libraries

ASSABIL opened Beirut’s first municipal public library in February 2001 in the Bachoura neighborhood of Beirut. We deliberately chose a central location in close proximity to a number of public schools to ensure that Beirut’s first public library would be convenient for those who could most benefit from its services. The number of people visiting the library—both individually and as participants in school visits—has grown steadily as the chart below indicates.

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005*	Rmeyl 2005*	Total
Visitors	8,756	16,778	26,121	27,411	11,846	3,519	94,431
School visits	35	68	74	107	36	30	350

*The current political instability in the country has resulted in a decrease in the number of visitors and in the number of school visits. Although ASSABIL closed the libraries on very few occasions, there have been periods during the year when people have been reluctant to visit public places, including public libraries.

A second municipal public library was opened in December 2004 in a public garden in the Rmeyl neighborhood of Beirut. This library, which is also located in a depressed neighborhood, is open only 28 hours per week. It has attracted a good deal of interest –and support—from those who live in the neighborhood.

A Network of Libraries throughout Lebanon

In addition to managing Beirut’s only two municipal public libraries, ASSABIL also coordinates a network of public libraries that includes a library for the blind and an association that brings some of the benefits of libraries to hospitalized children. The following libraries are part of the ASSABIL network :

- Public Library of Aitat - the Toufic Assaf Cultural Center (Mount-Lebanon)
- Municipal Public Library of Aitit (South)
- Municipal Public Library of Aley - the Municipality of Aley and the Aley Women's Association (Mount-Lebanon)
- Public Library of Baadarane (Mount-Lebanon)
- National Library of Baakline

Public Library of Babliye - the Association for Solidarity and Social Development (South)

Public Library of Barouk (Mount-Lebanon)

Public Library of Batroun

1st Municipal Public Library of Beirut - the **ASSABIL** Association, Friends of Public Libraries (Bashoura, Beirut)

2nd Municipal Public Library of Beirut – the **ASSABIL** Association, Friends of Public Libraries (Rmeyl, Beirut)

Public Library of Beit Meri (Mount-Lebanon)

Municipal Public Library of Bocsmaya (North)

Municipal Public Library of Hammana - the Dr. Nagib Abu-Haydar Public Library (Mount-Lebanon)

Public Library of Hermel (Bekaa)

Municipal Public Library of Jezzine (South)

Municipal Public Library of Joun (Mount-Lebanon)

Public Library of Kefraya al-Koura - the INMAA Association (North)

Public Library of Khreybet Chouf

Public Library of Miniara (North)

Cultural Center for Francophone Activities, Mtein - the Association for Words, Art, and Light (Mount-Lebanon)

Public Library of Saida - the Maarouf Saad Center (South)

Public Library of the Cultural League in Tripoli (North)

Municipal Public Library of Zahleh

Bibliobus - AILES Association (South)

Bibliothèque Parlante (Library for the Blind) - YAB Association (Beirut)

ASSABIL assist these libraries in many ways. It has distributed books, organized activities, conducted training sessions for those who work in these libraries, and made itself available as a source of advice and expertise when needed. ASSABIL has also played a critical role in bringing these libraries together—to give the people who work in, and support, these libraries opportunities to learn from and to support each other.

Activities at the Libraries

It is not enough that public libraries exist. To be effective, public libraries must be dynamic and welcoming places—places where people **want** to come. To achieve this goal, we have conducted extensive training sessions for those who work and volunteer in libraries. We have also hosted a number of events at public libraries. In 2003, for example, we organized 134 activities at 17 libraries throughout Lebanon and at Lebanon’s two annual books fairs on children’s rights, human rights, women’s rights, and environmental issues. These activities, which were enormously successful, were only possible because of the existence of public libraries—of public spaces—in communities throughout Lebanon. In addition to being an occasion for discussion on critically important topics, these activities were also a rare opportunity for people from all sectors of Lebanese society to come together.

The Need for a Training and Resource Center in Lebanon

We are seeking support to establish a Training and Resource Center in Lebanon for librarians, teachers, educators, and those interested in the cultural development of our country—and our region. Educators and teachers lack many of the tools that they so desperately need to be able to respond to the educational needs of our students. All too often, when they do have books, films, maps, or slides that relate to Lebanon or the region they are materials that have been published abroad in a foreign language and are available only at a prohibitive cost. These materials are often not appropriate for our schools and our circumstances. We believe that our teachers and educators should have access to pedagogic materials—books, films, etc.—in Arabic. ASSABIL seeks to establish a center that would loan these materials to those who need them. In some cases, we would need to translate existing materials into Arabic. In other cases, we would need to publish material ourselves. For example, there is very little available in Arabic on Lebanon’s history or environment—or even on the problems that confront our region!

We would like to organize a program in public libraries and schools to promote reading. The program would include: story hour for young children; working with schools to promote reading as a research tool; reading to groups of children in the classroom; reading to children in the public gardens; establishing reading committees to educate parents about why it is important for children to read; organizing activities to encourage reading; sponsoring events with local authors so they can talk about their books; and developing and circulating exhibits throughout Lebanon on different themes (such as the environment) to encourage reading.

We would also like to launch a campaign in the media to promote reading: to explain why it is important to read to babies and to children; to participate in the book fairs; to develop television programs about reading; and to produce films to encourage reading.

Provide Hands-on Supervision of the Beirut Libraries

The management of the Beirut libraries is an enormous and time-consuming responsibility. As the number of libraries in Beirut grows, the amount of time and effort involved in supervising these libraries will also grow. ASSABIL is involved in all aspects of running the Beirut libraries: it hires and supervises the staff that work in these libraries, sets up policies and procedures for the libraries, organizes activities at the libraries, and oversees the budget.

Support for the Network of Libraries in Lebanon

There is so much to be done in this area. There are libraries in Lebanon that are well located and pleasant to visit, but have very few books. In other cases, the libraries themselves are in need of repair or basic equipment—and they need books. In all cases, public libraries in Lebanon need support to organize and sustain an active program of activities for children and would benefit enormously from the existence of a Training and Resource Center.

Train Teachers, Librarians, and Volunteers

We have always recognized that it is the people who work in libraries who are critical to making these places strong and vibrant centers in our communities. We have found that

many of those who work in public libraries need—and want—training. We have already done a lot to meet this need. We could—and should—do more. We would like to offer training through regularly scheduled sessions at a central location such as the proposed training center, by providing on-site training at libraries throughout Lebanon, and be a source of advice and expertise when needed.

Training activities would focus on **the needs of public libraries**: how to classify books; what you need to know to host successful activities at the libraries; how to organize storytelling and workshops on reading and writing; how to use NTIC (“Nouvelles Techniques d’Information et de Communication” or “New Information and Communication Technologies”) and the most popular software packages.

We would also offer training and advice in the area of **publishing**: What are the types of materials that are needed? What are the particular needs of young people? How does one write for a young audience? What is involved in illustrating a book? We want to both encourage people who are interested in getting involved in the production of materials as authors, illustrators, editors, or publishers—and be a place where “users” could come to find out what is available.

This training would be inclusive and wide-ranging. Because of the critical and central role that public libraries play in a society, ASSABIL would cooperate with NGOs, universities, and others to ensure that public libraries are at the heart of pedagogic and educational efforts in the community.

Offer Expert Advice

There should be a place—a resource center—in Lebanon where everyone can go for advice on how to manage a library, how to classify books, how to build a collection, how to organize activities, etc. ASSABIL already provides this type of advice on an informal basis. We need to institutionalize these activities.

A Depository for Children’s Literature in Lebanon

In thinking about what needs to be done to encourage reading, our attention turns quickly to our young people and the need in particular for books in Arabic for children. We want to gather in one place all that is currently available so that we can conduct a serious evaluation of the current offerings. Are there quality materials that we should be promoting and distributing? Should we instead be working to encourage the production of new books for children? We envisage that this center would work with university researchers and with teachers, librarians, and educators to encourage the development of materials that are relevant and interesting for children—that attract children and young people to books. We also anticipate that this center will assist illustrators, authors, and editors—and will establish itself as the place to come for information about Arabic-language materials for young people.

Establish Additional Libraries in Beirut

We are in the midst of a feasibility study to establish ten additional public libraries in Beirut. The establishment of a Training and Resource Center would enhance our work in this area.

Produce and Publish Materials for Libraries

With the help of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, ASSABIL has already entered the world of publishing. These resource materials have been enormously helpful to those who already work in libraries and to those who are considering the establishment of new libraries. We want to develop this aspect of our activities and to publish materials for children. Publications would include books, of course, but could also include posters, flyers, and bookmarks depending on the content and the need.

Beneficiaries/Primary Target Groups

Everyone in Lebanon would benefit from the existence of a dynamic network of public libraries that is supported by a Training and Resource Center. However, we recognize that those who are most likely to benefit are the most underserved sectors of our society: the old, the poor, the young, and the economically disadvantaged—in other words, the men, women, and children who rely on public libraries as their **only** way to get “free and unlimited access to knowledge.”

In addition, we seek to target all those—educators, librarians, teachers, employees in the Ministries of Education and Culture, editors, illustrators, authors, publishers, and parents—who are concerned with the education of young people in the broadest sense.

Location

The proposed Training and Resource Center would be located on the first floor of the Sardouk Building, 394, Mohamed el Hout Street, in the Ras Nabejeh area of Beirut. We anticipate, however, that its presence would be felt throughout Lebanon.

Duration/Time Frame

We are seeking three years of support.

Staffing

An all-volunteer administrative committee manages the association. ASSABIL recently received a three-year grant from OSI/Soros “to establish an office and hire staff to support public libraries in Lebanon.” It currently has one paid staff person.

Donors

ASSABIL has attracted support from a number of funders including the Conseil Régional d’Ile de France (CRIF), the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Hachette Foundation, AMIDEAST, Rotary International, UNESCO, and the Ousseimi Foundation.