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Operational Toolkit for Living Libraries Replication

COTAF

Connected Towns for a Shared Future

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0. INTRODUCTION & POSITIONING

0.1 Purpose of the Toolkit

This toolkit provides a comprehensive methodological and operational framework for the design, implementation, and scaling of Living Library events within the COTAF – *Connected Towns for a Shared Future* project.

At its core, the document serves three interconnected purposes.

First, it offers **practical guidance** for organisers, facilitators, and partner organisations to implement Living Library events in a consistent, safe, and impactful way across diverse European contexts. It translates a dialogical methodology into a structured and replicable operational model.

Second, it ensures **methodological coherence and quality assurance** across all partner countries. By defining shared principles, processes, and tools, the toolkit guarantees that each Living Library—regardless of location—adheres to common standards of ethical engagement, inclusion, and facilitation.

Third, it establishes a **strategic bridge between community dialogue and institutional transformation**. Living Library events are not conceived as isolated awareness-raising activities, but as structured mechanisms for generating qualitative evidence that feeds into policy dialogue at both local and European levels.

In this sense, the toolkit supports the transition from:

- individual storytelling → collective reflection
- collective reflection → structured evidence
- structured evidence → policy-relevant insight

This positioning transforms the Living Library into a **civic infrastructure for participatory democracy**, rather than a standalone event format.

0.2 What Makes the COTAF Approach Distinctive

While the Living Library methodology has been widely used in different contexts, the COTAF approach introduces a set of critical innovations that significantly expand its scope, depth, and impact.

A Human-Centered and Trauma-Informed Perspective

The COTAF model places participants—not stories—at the centre of the process. It recognizes that many Living Books may carry experiences of vulnerability, including migration trauma, gender-based violence, discrimination, or social exclusion.

For this reason, the methodology integrates a **trauma-informed approach**, ensuring that:

- participation is always voluntary and controlled by the individual
- narrative boundaries are clearly defined and respected
- emotional safety is actively monitored throughout the process

The goal is not to extract stories, but to create conditions in which individuals can **exercise agency over their narrative**.



A Strong Focus on Intersectionality and Inclusion

COTAF explicitly acknowledges that lived experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities—such as gender, migration status, disability, socio-economic background, and sexual orientation.

This perspective shifts the methodology from a simplified representation of “target groups” to a more accurate understanding of **complex and layered vulnerabilities**.

As a result, the Living Library becomes a space where:

- different forms of marginalisation are recognised and contextualised
- diversity is not symbolic, but structurally embedded
- inclusion is actively designed, not assumed

From Dialogue to Policy: A Structured Institutional Link

One of the most distinctive features of the COTAF approach is its **systematic connection to public policy processes**.

Living Library events are designed to generate **qualitative, experience-based knowledge** that complements traditional quantitative data used in policymaking.

Through structured monitoring, documentation, and synthesis, insights emerging from dialogue are:

- aggregated into recurring themes
- translated into policy-relevant findings
- integrated into local and transnational Policy Labs

This creates a direct pathway from:

lived experience → qualitative evidence → institutional awareness → policy development

An Embedded Monitoring, Evaluation, and ESG Logic

Unlike traditional community-based methodologies, the COTAF Living Library is built upon a robust **Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework**, integrated from the design phase.

Impact is assessed not only in terms of participation, but through:

- shifts in perception and attitudes
- quality and depth of dialogue
- emotional safety and participant well-being
- relevance of insights for policy processes

At the same time, the approach aligns with core **ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) principles**:

- **Social dimension**: inclusion, safeguarding, equity, empowerment
- **Governance dimension**: transparency, ethical protocols, accountability
- **Environmental dimension**: sustainable event design and resource use



This ensures that Living Library events are not only impactful, but also **ethically grounded and structurally sustainable**.

0.3 Target Users of the Toolkit

The toolkit is designed as a multi-level resource, addressing a diverse ecosystem of actors involved in the implementation and scaling of Living Library methodologies.

Facilitators and Trainers

They represent the operational core of the methodology. The toolkit supports them in:

- managing dialogue and group dynamics
 - applying trauma-informed approaches
 - ensuring ethical and safe facilitation
-

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

CSOs play a central role in organising and implementing Living Library events. The toolkit provides them with:

- structured operational guidance
 - tools for participant preparation and support
 - frameworks for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting
-

Public Authorities and Municipalities

For institutional actors, the toolkit functions as a bridge between community engagement and policy development. It enables them to:

- understand the value of qualitative, experience-based data
 - engage directly with citizens in structured dialogue formats
 - integrate insights into local governance and service design
-

Educators and Community Practitioners

The methodology is also applicable in educational and informal learning contexts. For these users, the toolkit offers:

- pedagogical tools for dialogue-based learning
 - strategies for addressing stereotypes and prejudice
 - frameworks for fostering active citizenship and critical reflection
-

0.4 Geographical Scope and Thematic Areas

Within the COTAF project, Living Library events are implemented across multiple European contexts, including:

- Italy (Bologna, Modena)
- Slovenia (Maribor)



- Greece (Lesvos, Athens)
- Spain (Donostia)
- Hungary (Budapest)
- Czech Republic (Prague)
- Latvia (Riga)

These diverse environments allow the methodology to be tested and adapted across different social, cultural, and institutional settings.

Across all locations, the Living Libraries address three interconnected thematic pillars:

- **Gender Equality**
- **Migrant Inclusion**
- **European Values and Active Citizenship**

These themes are not treated as isolated topics, but as **interdependent dimensions of social cohesion**, reflecting the broader objectives of the CERV Programme.

0.5 Positioning the Living Library within COTAF

Within the COTAF framework, the Living Library is not an isolated activity but part of a broader ecosystem of civic engagement and institutional dialogue.

It functions simultaneously as:

- a **safe space for encounter and dialogue**
- a **method for generating qualitative evidence**
- a **tool for participatory governance and policy innovation**

Through its integration with Policy Labs and project-level monitoring systems, each Living Library contributes to a cumulative process of knowledge production and social transformation.

This positioning ensures that:

- individual experiences are not lost after the event
- community insights are systematically captured
- dialogue leads to tangible, long-term impact

0.6 Introductory Theory of Change (Section-Level)

The foundational assumption underlying the COTAF Living Library model is that **structured, safe, and facilitated dialogue between diverse individuals can generate measurable social change**.

By creating conditions for meaningful interaction:

- participants are exposed to perspectives they would not normally encounter
- existing assumptions and stereotypes are challenged
- emotional engagement fosters empathy and reflection

These individual-level shifts can evolve into:

- changes in attitudes and behaviours



- increased civic awareness and participation
- stronger connections between communities and institutions

When systematically documented and translated into evidence, these outcomes contribute to:

- more inclusive local policies
- improved public services
- stronger democratic processes

0.7 ESG Positioning (Section-Level)

From the outset, the COTAF Living Library embeds ESG principles as a foundational layer of its design.

- **Social (S):**
Ensuring inclusion, safeguarding, and empowerment of all participants, with particular attention to vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- **Governance (G):**
Establishing clear ethical frameworks, transparent processes, and accountability mechanisms for all actors involved.
- **Environmental (E):**
Promoting sustainable organisational practices, including responsible resource use and adaptable (including digital) formats.

This integrated approach ensures that the Living Library is not only a space for dialogue, but a **model of ethical, responsible, and sustainable social innovation**.



1. THEORY OF CHANGE & IMPACT FRAMEWORK

1.1 The COTAF Theory of Change

At the foundation of the COTAF Living Library lies a clear and intentional Theory of Change that connects individual dialogue experiences to broader processes of social and institutional transformation.

The methodology is based on a simple but powerful assumption: when individuals are placed in a safe and structured environment where they can engage directly with diverse lived experiences, they are more likely to question their own assumptions, develop empathy, and reconsider previously held beliefs. This process, however, does not occur automatically. It requires careful facilitation, ethical safeguards, and a deliberate design of the interaction.

Within the COTAF framework, Living Library events are conceived as **catalytic spaces**, where the encounter between Living Books and Readers becomes the starting point of a transformation process that unfolds across multiple levels.

At the **input level**, the methodology mobilizes a set of essential resources: trained facilitators, prepared Living Books, structured environments, and ethical protocols. These elements are not merely operational requirements but are fundamental conditions to ensure that the interaction is safe, meaningful, and respectful. These inputs enable the **core activity**, which consists of facilitated dialogical encounters. Unlike traditional awareness-raising formats, these interactions are intentionally designed as two-way exchanges, where meaning is co-created rather than transmitted. The presence of a facilitator ensures that the dialogue remains within a framework of mutual respect and learning, even when tensions or misunderstandings emerge.

From these interactions emerge the **outputs**, which include not only measurable elements—such as the number of sessions, participants, and dialogues—but also qualitative outputs such as narratives, reflections, and emerging themes. These outputs represent the first layer of knowledge generated by the Living Library.

However, the real transformative potential of the methodology lies in the **outcomes**. Through exposure to lived experiences, participants often experience a shift in perception. Stereotypes are challenged, emotional engagement is activated, and a deeper understanding of structural inequalities begins to take shape. These changes may initially be subtle, but they are critical in reshaping how individuals relate to others and to society. Over time, when these individual transformations are aggregated and systematically documented, they contribute to broader **impact-level changes**. These include reduced social distance between groups, increased civic awareness, and stronger engagement in democratic processes. Most importantly, within the COTAF framework, these insights are translated into qualitative evidence that feeds into policy dialogue, creating a direct link between personal experience and institutional change.

In this sense, the Living Library becomes not only a space for dialogue but a **mechanism for producing socially relevant knowledge**, capable of informing more inclusive and responsive governance.



1.2 Impact Pathways: From Individual Experience to Systemic Change

The transformative logic of the COTAF Living Library unfolds across three interconnected levels: micro, meso, and macro. These levels should not be understood as separate domains, but as parts of a continuous process through which individual experiences contribute to collective and structural change.

At the **micro level**, the impact is centered on the individual. Participants—both Living Books and Readers—engage in a process of reflection that often leads to increased self-awareness. Readers are exposed to perspectives that challenge simplified or stereotypical narratives, while Living Books experience recognition and validation of their lived realities. This interaction fosters empathy, reduces prejudice, and encourages a more nuanced understanding of social complexity.

The **meso level** refers to the community dimension. When multiple individuals within a community undergo similar processes of reflection, the cumulative effect begins to reshape social relations. The Living Library contributes to building bridges between groups that might otherwise remain distant or disconnected. It creates shared spaces where dialogue replaces assumption, and where diversity is experienced as a resource rather than a threat. Over time, this leads to stronger social cohesion and a more inclusive community environment.

At the **macro level**, the impact extends into institutional and policy domains. The qualitative insights generated through Living Library events—when properly collected, analyzed, and synthesized—provide valuable information about systemic barriers, gaps in services, and unmet needs. These insights are then fed into structured processes such as Policy Labs, where they can inform decision-making. In this way, individual experiences are not only heard but transformed into inputs for governance and policy development.

What distinguishes the COTAF approach is precisely this ability to connect these three levels. The methodology does not stop at individual transformation but intentionally creates pathways through which these transformations can influence collective dynamics and institutional frameworks.

1.3 ESG Framework: Embedding Ethics, Inclusion, and Responsibility

The COTAF Living Library is inherently aligned with ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) principles, not as an external requirement, but as an intrinsic component of its design and implementation.

The **Social dimension** represents the core of the methodology. The Living Library is explicitly designed to promote inclusion, equity, and the active participation of individuals who are often marginalised or excluded from public discourse. This includes migrant women, survivors of gender-based violence, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Beyond participation, the methodology ensures that these individuals are engaged in a way that respects their dignity, protects their well-being, and strengthens their agency. Safeguarding mechanisms, trauma-informed approaches, and accessibility measures are not optional features but fundamental conditions of the process.

The **Governance dimension** is reflected in the strong emphasis on ethical standards and accountability. The implementation of Living Libraries requires clear protocols, including informed consent procedures,



confidentiality safeguards, and data protection measures in line with GDPR. Transparency in how data is collected, used, and reported is essential, particularly given the sensitivity of the narratives involved. Moreover, the structured link to policy processes introduces an additional layer of governance, ensuring that the knowledge generated is used responsibly and contributes to the public good.

The **Environmental dimension**, while less central, is also integrated into the methodology. Organisers are encouraged to adopt sustainable practices in the planning and delivery of events, such as minimizing material waste, selecting accessible and resource-efficient venues, and incorporating digital or hybrid formats where appropriate. These practices contribute to reducing the environmental footprint of the activities while increasing their scalability.

By embedding ESG principles into its operational and methodological framework, the COTAF Living Library positions itself as a model of **responsible social innovation**, capable of generating impact while maintaining high ethical and sustainability standards.

1.4 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Key Indicators

To ensure that the impact of the Living Library is not only experienced but also demonstrated, the COTAF framework integrates a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system.

This system is designed to capture both the **depth and the breadth** of the impact.

On one hand, **quantitative indicators** provide information about the scale of the intervention. These include the number of participants, the diversity of profiles represented, the number of sessions conducted, and the level of institutional engagement. These indicators are essential for reporting and for understanding the reach of the activities.

On the other hand, **qualitative indicators** are crucial for capturing the transformative dimension of the experience. The Living Library is not primarily about numbers, but about changes in perception, emotional engagement, and the quality of dialogue. For this reason, particular attention is given to indicators such as:

- evidence of shifts in attitudes or stereotypes
- expressions of empathy and emotional connection
- depth and openness of conversations
- participant reflections indicating new understanding

A key element of the evaluation process is the **emotional safety of participants**. This includes assessing whether Living Books felt respected, in control of their narrative, and supported throughout the process, as well as whether Readers experienced the environment as safe and conducive to learning.

In addition, the framework includes **governance-related indicators**, such as the presence and effective use of ethical protocols, the level of compliance with informed consent procedures, and the degree of institutional participation in the events and follow-up activities.

Environmental considerations are also monitored, albeit in a lighter form, focusing on aspects such as the sustainability of the venue, the use of materials, and the adoption of digital solutions.



Importantly, data collection is not treated as a purely administrative task. It is an integral part of the methodology, serving multiple purposes:

- improving the quality of future events
- providing accountability to funders and stakeholders
- generating evidence for policy dialogue

By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the COTAF M&E system ensures that the Living Library is not only impactful in practice but also **credible, measurable, and transferable** across contexts.

1.5 Section-Level Theory of Change: From Dialogue to Systemic Impact

Bringing together all the elements described above, the Theory of Change of the COTAF Living Library can be understood as a progressive and cumulative process.

It begins with the creation of a **safe and structured dialogical space**, where individuals are willing to engage openly. Within this space, participants encounter perspectives that challenge their existing beliefs. This exposure triggers a process of reflection, which in turn fosters empathy and shifts in perception.

These individual transformations, when repeated and aggregated across multiple events and contexts, contribute to changes in community dynamics, reducing social distance and strengthening cohesion.

At the same time, the systematic collection and analysis of insights generated through these interactions allow these experiences to be translated into **evidence-based knowledge**. This knowledge is then used to inform policy dialogue, ensuring that decision-making processes are grounded in the lived realities of citizens.

In this way, the Living Library operates as a bridge between:

- personal experience and collective understanding
- collective understanding and institutional action

This integrated approach is what enables the COTAF methodology to move beyond awareness-raising and become a **tool for sustainable social and institutional transformation**.



2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE LIVING LIBRARY

2.1 Understanding the Living Library: From Concept to Practice

A Living Library is a participatory and dialogical methodology designed to create structured encounters between individuals from different social, cultural, or experiential backgrounds. In this format, people take on the role of “Living Books,” sharing their lived experiences with small groups of participants known as “Readers,” through direct, face-to-face conversations.

What distinguishes the Living Library from traditional storytelling formats or awareness-raising events is its **interactive and relational nature**. The objective is not to transmit information, but to create a space where knowledge is co-produced through dialogue. Readers are not passive listeners; they are active participants who ask questions, reflect, and engage in a process of mutual learning.

Within the COTAF framework, this methodology is further strengthened by a deliberate shift in perspective. The Living Library is not conceived as a space where stories are “told,” but as an environment where **meanings are negotiated**. This distinction is crucial. The value of the experience lies not only in what is shared, but in how participants engage with what they hear, how they question their assumptions, and how they reinterpret their own perspectives.

In practice, this means that each session is inherently dynamic and unpredictable. A conversation may start from a simple question and evolve into a deeper exploration of identity, discrimination, belonging, or rights. Moments of tension, misunderstanding, or discomfort are not considered failures of the methodology, but rather essential components of the learning process—provided they are carefully facilitated.

For example, during a session on gender equality, a Reader might express a skeptical or minimizing view of discrimination. Instead of shutting down the conversation, the facilitator supports a reframing process, helping both participants move from confrontation toward understanding. Similarly, in a session focused on migrant inclusion, a Living Book may choose to share their journey through aspirations and future goals rather than past trauma, asserting control over their narrative and redefining the terms of the dialogue.

These examples highlight a fundamental aspect of the methodology: the Living Library is not a neutral exchange, but a **structured and facilitated process**, where the quality of interaction is intentionally shaped to foster reflection, empathy, and transformation.

2.2 Core Principles of the COTAF Approach

The effectiveness of the Living Library within the COTAF project is grounded in a set of core principles that guide every phase of its design and implementation. These principles are not abstract values but operational criteria that shape how the experience is structured and facilitated.

At the centre of the methodology is a **human-centered approach**, which prioritizes the dignity, autonomy, and agency of each participant. Living Books are not expected to perform or expose their experiences; instead,



they are supported in defining what they wish to share and how they wish to share it. This ensures that the narrative remains under their control at all times.

Closely connected to this is the principle of **safe space and trauma awareness**. Given that many participants may carry experiences of vulnerability—such as migration trauma, discrimination, or gender-based violence—it is essential to create environments that are both emotionally and physically safe. This involves not only the presence of clear rules and protocols, but also the active role of facilitators in monitoring emotional signals and intervening when necessary.

The COTAF methodology also emphasizes **co-creation**, rejecting the idea of storytelling as a one-way process. Meaning emerges through interaction, and both Living Books and Readers contribute to shaping the dialogue. Facilitators play a key role in encouraging Readers to move beyond curiosity and toward reflection, transforming the encounter into a shared learning experience.

Another defining principle is **conflict transformation**. The Living Library does not aim to avoid difficult conversations; on the contrary, it creates conditions where sensitive topics can be addressed constructively. Disagreement, when properly managed, becomes an opportunity for deeper understanding rather than a source of division.

Finally, the principle of **empowerment versus exposure** ensures that participation strengthens individuals rather than placing them in a position of vulnerability. The methodology actively prevents situations where participants feel objectified, instrumentalized, or reduced to a single aspect of their identity.

Together, these principles form the ethical and methodological backbone of the COTAF Living Library, ensuring that each interaction is both meaningful and safe.

2.3 The Structure of the Living Library Experience

While the Living Library is based on open dialogue, its effectiveness depends on a **highly structured environment**. This structure is not intended to limit spontaneity, but to create the conditions in which meaningful and respectful interactions can take place.

The experience is built around three core roles: Living Books, Readers, and Facilitators.

Living Books are individuals who share lived experiences related to the thematic pillars of the project—such as gender equality, migrant inclusion, or active citizenship. Their participation is carefully prepared in advance, ensuring that they have defined their narrative boundaries and feel confident in their role.

Readers are participants who engage with Living Books through guided conversations. Before entering the dialogue, they undergo a **briefing or induction process**, during which they are introduced to the rules of engagement. This phase is essential to shift their role from passive observers to respectful interlocutors.

Facilitators and Librarians act as guardians of the process. They monitor the interactions, manage the flow of sessions, and intervene when necessary to maintain a safe and constructive environment. Their presence ensures that the principles of the methodology are upheld in practice.

The interaction itself typically unfolds in a structured sequence. It begins with a short introduction, followed by the storytelling phase, and concludes with a dialogue and question-and-answer segment. This sequence allows for a balance between narrative expression and interactive engagement.



The physical or digital space is also carefully designed to support the quality of the experience. Small group settings—ideally no more than three to four Readers per Living Book—create an intimate environment that encourages openness and reduces performance pressure. The use of “private bubbles” or separated areas ensures confidentiality and minimizes distractions.

Importantly, the structure includes mechanisms to manage unexpected situations. For example, if a conversation becomes emotionally intense, participants can activate a “Stop Protocol,” pausing or ending the session without justification. Similarly, “withdrawal spaces” provide a safe area where participants can step away and regain emotional balance.

This structured yet flexible design allows the Living Library to function as a **controlled environment for authentic human interaction**, where both safety and spontaneity are preserved.

2.4 Critical Challenges and Risk Management

Despite its potential, the Living Library methodology involves inherent risks that must be proactively addressed. These risks are not anomalies but predictable dynamics that emerge when individuals engage in dialogue around sensitive topics.

One of the most common challenges is the presence of **stereotypical or intrusive questions**. Readers may unintentionally reproduce biases or ask questions that place the Living Book in a position of discomfort. Without proper facilitation, such interactions can undermine the safety of the space.

Another critical issue is the **emotional dimension of the dialogue**. Conversations may trigger past experiences or create moments of vulnerability. Facilitators must be able to recognize early signs of distress and intervene appropriately, ensuring that participants feel supported rather than exposed.

Power imbalances can also emerge, particularly when participants come from different social, cultural, or institutional backgrounds. These imbalances may influence the dynamics of the conversation, requiring facilitators to actively ensure that all voices are heard and respected.

Additionally, there is a risk that the Living Library is misunderstood as a debate or interrogation format. In such cases, the focus shifts from understanding to argumentation, which can compromise the purpose of the methodology.

To address these challenges, the COTAF approach relies on a set of practical strategies. These include reframing questions to encourage curiosity rather than judgment, reinforcing participants’ right not to answer, and maintaining continuous observation of group dynamics. The facilitator’s role is not to control the conversation, but to **guide it toward constructive engagement**.

2.5 Exemplification: The Methodology in Action

To fully understand the Living Library, it is essential to consider how these elements come together in practice. In a session focused on gender equality, a Living Book may share experiences of workplace discrimination. A Reader, influenced by unconscious bias, might question the validity of these experiences. Through careful facilitation, this moment of tension is transformed into an opportunity for reflection, allowing the Reader to reconsider their assumptions and engage more deeply with the narrative.



In another context, a session on migrant inclusion may involve a participant who chooses to share their story through a visual tool, such as a “Life Journey Map.” This approach shifts the focus from trauma to identity and aspirations, allowing the participant to maintain control over the narrative while still contributing meaningful insights.

In educational settings, such as schools, structured rotations and time-bound sessions ensure that participants remain engaged while preventing emotional overload. Facilitators play a key role in managing energy levels and supporting participants throughout the process.

These examples demonstrate that the Living Library is not a fixed format, but a **flexible methodology** that adapts to different contexts while maintaining its core principles.

2.6 Theory of Change within the Methodological Framework

At the methodological level, the Living Library operates as a mechanism for **transformative learning**.

By engaging in direct dialogue, participants are exposed to perspectives that challenge simplified or stereotypical narratives. This exposure creates cognitive and emotional dissonance, which can lead to reflection and, ultimately, to a shift in perception.

The structured nature of the interaction ensures that this process occurs within a safe environment, allowing participants to explore complex issues without fear of judgment or harm. Over time, repeated exposure to such experiences contributes to changes in attitudes and behaviours, fostering greater openness, empathy, and social awareness.

This transformation at the individual level is a necessary condition for broader social change, as it influences how individuals interact with others and engage with societal issues.

2.7 ESG Dimension of the Methodology

The methodological framework of the COTAF Living Library is deeply aligned with ESG principles, particularly in its social and governance dimensions.

From a social perspective, the methodology actively promotes inclusion, equity, and participation. It creates opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard and ensures that these voices are engaged in a respectful and empowering way. Accessibility, both physical and communicative, is integrated into the design of the experience, ensuring that participation is not limited by structural barriers.

From a governance perspective, the emphasis on ethical protocols, informed consent, and confidentiality reflects a strong commitment to accountability and transparency. The methodology establishes clear responsibilities for facilitators and organizers, ensuring that the process is conducted with integrity.

Environmental considerations are integrated through practical choices related to event design, such as the use of sustainable materials and the adoption of hybrid formats, contributing to the overall sustainability of the model.

By embedding these principles into its methodological core, the COTAF Living Library demonstrates that **ethical rigor and operational effectiveness are not separate dimensions, but mutually reinforcing elements of impactful social innovation**.



3. TRAIN-THE-TRAINERS (ToT) SYSTEM

3.1 The Role of the Train-the-Trainers Programme within COTAF

The Train-the-Trainers (ToT) programme represents the methodological backbone of the COTAF Living Library. It is not simply a training component, but a strategic mechanism designed to ensure that the methodology can be implemented consistently, safely, and effectively across diverse local contexts.

Within a transnational project such as COTAF, the risk of fragmentation—where each partner adapts the methodology in ways that compromise its core principles—is particularly high. The ToT programme addresses this risk by creating a shared foundation of knowledge, skills, and ethical standards among all facilitators and implementing organisations.

More importantly, the ToT programme transforms the Living Library from a project-based activity into a **capacity-building system**. Rather than relying on external expertise, it equips local actors with the competencies needed to independently design, implement, and evaluate Living Library events.

In this sense, the ToT acts as a multiplier. It ensures that the methodology is not only replicated, but also **internalised and adapted responsibly**, maintaining both its integrity and its relevance across different social and cultural environments.

3.2 Objectives of the ToT Programme

The objectives of the ToT programme go beyond the transfer of technical knowledge. They are structured to support a comprehensive process of professional and ethical development.

At a foundational level, the programme aims to ensure that all participants acquire a **deep understanding of the Living Library methodology**, including its principles, structure, and intended impact. This includes recognizing the difference between dialogical engagement and traditional communication formats, and understanding the importance of facilitation in shaping meaningful interactions.

At the same time, the ToT focuses on building **practical competencies**. Participants are trained to manage group dynamics, facilitate inclusive dialogue, and respond effectively to challenging situations, including conflict, emotional distress, and power imbalances.

A central objective is the development of **ethical awareness and responsibility**. Facilitators must be able to navigate sensitive narratives without causing harm, ensuring that participation remains voluntary, respectful, and empowering. This requires not only technical skills, but also a strong ethical grounding.

In addition, the programme equips participants with tools for **monitoring, evaluation, and documentation**, enabling them to contribute to the broader evidence-generation process that supports policy dialogue.

Ultimately, the ToT programme aims to create a network of practitioners who are not only capable of implementing Living Libraries, but also of **acting as local reference points for inclusive dialogue and social innovation**.



3.3 Competency Framework: The Profile of a COTAF Trainer

The effectiveness of the Living Library depends largely on the competencies of the facilitators who implement it. For this reason, the ToT programme is structured around a comprehensive competency framework that reflects the complexity of the role.

At its core is the ability to facilitate **dialogical interaction**. This involves guiding conversations in a way that encourages participation while maintaining balance and respect. Facilitators must be able to create a space where different perspectives can be expressed without leading to confrontation or exclusion.

Closely linked to this is the **ethics of storytelling**. Trainers must ensure that narratives are shared voluntarily and responsibly, and that participants are never reduced to their experiences of vulnerability. This requires a constant attention to power dynamics and the potential risks of exposure or instrumentalization.

Another critical competency is **intercultural mediation**. Given the diversity of participants, facilitators must be able to navigate differences in language, cultural norms, and social expectations. This includes recognizing and addressing misunderstandings in a way that promotes learning rather than reinforcing division.

Conflict management is also essential. The Living Library intentionally creates space for challenging conversations, and facilitators must be able to transform moments of tension into opportunities for reflection. This involves skills such as reframing, de-escalation, and active listening.

Finally, facilitators must develop a basic level of **trauma awareness**, enabling them to recognize signs of emotional distress and respond appropriately without overstepping their role. This includes knowing when to intervene, when to pause, and when to activate support mechanisms.

These competencies together define the role of the COTAF trainer as a **mediator, guardian of safety, and enabler of transformative dialogue**.

3.4 Structure of the Training Pathway

The ToT programme is designed as a progressive learning journey, moving from foundational understanding to advanced application. This structure ensures that participants not only acquire knowledge, but also develop the ability to apply it in real-world contexts.

The pathway begins with an introduction to the **Living Library methodology**, establishing a shared language and conceptual framework. Participants explore the roles of Living Books, Readers, and Facilitators, and gain an understanding of how these elements interact within the structure of the event.

The second phase focuses on **intersectionality**, helping participants understand how overlapping identities and vulnerabilities shape lived experiences. This module is essential for ensuring that the methodology is applied in an inclusive and context-sensitive manner.

The training then moves into **facilitation and safety**, which represents the ethical core of the programme. Participants learn how to manage dialogue, handle sensitive topics, and apply trauma-informed approaches. This phase includes practical exercises that simulate real-life scenarios, allowing participants to test their skills in a controlled environment.



Once this foundation is established, the pathway shifts toward **operational design**, where participants learn how to plan and organise Living Library events. This includes logistical considerations, stakeholder engagement, and communication strategies.

The final phase focuses on **institutional engagement and policy linkage**, highlighting how the outcomes of Living Library events can be translated into evidence and used to inform policy processes.

This progression from methodology to policy ensures that participants understand the full lifecycle of the Living Library, from preparation to impact.

3.5 Learning Methodology: From Knowledge to Practice

The ToT programme is based on the principle that facilitation skills cannot be developed through theory alone. For this reason, the training adopts a **learning-by-doing approach**, combining conceptual input with experiential learning.

Participants engage in a variety of practical activities, including role-playing exercises, simulations, and case studies. These activities are designed to replicate the dynamics of real Living Library sessions, allowing participants to experience both the challenges and the opportunities of the methodology.

One particularly effective approach is **shadow facilitation**, where trainees observe or simulate real facilitation scenarios. This allows them to develop an intuitive understanding of timing, intervention, and group dynamics. Another key component is **peer learning and reflection**. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences, provide feedback to one another, and reflect on their own assumptions and biases. This process is essential for developing self-awareness, which is a critical aspect of effective facilitation.

By integrating theory and practice, the ToT programme ensures that participants do not simply understand the methodology, but are able to **apply it confidently and responsibly**.

3.6 Exemplification: Training in Action

To illustrate how the ToT programme translates into practice, it is useful to consider some concrete examples. In a simulation exercise, a trainee may be asked to manage a situation where a Reader asks an intrusive or inappropriate question. Rather than simply stopping the interaction, the trainee learns to reframe the question in a way that preserves the dignity of the Living Book while maintaining the flow of the conversation.

In another scenario, participants engage in a “title workshop,” where they support potential Living Books in defining how their stories are presented. The goal is to create titles that are engaging but not sensationalist, ensuring that the narrative remains respectful and empowering.

During shadow facilitation exercises, trainees may observe how experienced facilitators handle complex group dynamics, such as managing dominant participants or supporting individuals who are reluctant to speak. These experiences provide valuable insights that cannot be gained through theoretical instruction alone.

These examples demonstrate that the ToT programme is not only about learning what to do, but about developing the ability to **respond effectively in unpredictable situations**.



3.7 Theory of Change of the ToT System

The ToT programme plays a central role in the broader Theory of Change of the COTAF project.

In the short term, it ensures that facilitators are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to implement the methodology safely and effectively. This directly impacts the quality of Living Library events and the experience of participants.

In the medium term, trained facilitators act as multipliers, building local capacity and enabling the methodology to reach a wider range of communities. This decentralization is essential for ensuring accessibility and inclusivity.

In the long term, the ToT contributes to the creation of a network of practitioners who can apply the principles of dialogue, inclusion, and conflict transformation beyond the Living Library context. These individuals become agents of change within their communities, influencing how social challenges are addressed and how institutions engage with citizens.

Through this cascade effect, the ToT programme transforms individual training into **systemic capacity for inclusive dialogue and governance**.

3.8 ESG Dimension of the ToT Programme

The ToT programme reflects ESG principles in both its content and its structure.

From a social perspective, it promotes inclusive facilitation practices and ensures that trainers are equipped to work with diverse and vulnerable populations. The focus on intersectionality and trauma awareness reinforces the commitment to equity and safeguarding.

From a governance perspective, the programme establishes clear standards of ethical conduct and accountability. Trainers are not only responsible for delivering activities, but also for upholding the integrity of the methodology and ensuring compliance with ethical and legal requirements.

The training also fosters a culture of **responsible leadership**, where facilitators understand their role not as authority figures, but as enablers of dialogue and protectors of the space.

Environmental considerations are integrated through the design of the training itself, encouraging efficient use of resources and, where possible, the adoption of hybrid or digital formats.

By embedding ESG principles into the ToT programme, COTAF ensures that the capacity-building process is aligned with the broader objective of creating **sustainable, ethical, and impactful social interventions**.



4. INTERSECTIONALITY & MANAGEMENT OF VULNERABILITIES

4.1 Understanding Intersectionality within the COTAF Framework

The COTAF Living Library is grounded in an intersectional understanding of human experience. This means recognising that individuals do not belong to a single, isolated category, but rather exist at the intersection of multiple identities—such as gender, migration status, socio-economic condition, disability, and sexual orientation.

These dimensions do not operate independently. Instead, they interact in ways that shape unique and often complex experiences of inclusion, exclusion, privilege, and vulnerability.

Within this framework, vulnerability is never treated as a fixed or singular condition. For example, the experience of a migrant woman cannot be reduced to either migration or gender alone. It emerges from the interplay between legal status, cultural expectations, economic barriers, and gendered dynamics. Similarly, an LGBTQIA+ individual with a migration background may face risks that are significantly different from those experienced by other members of the same community.

Adopting an intersectional perspective allows the Living Library to move beyond simplified representations of “target groups” and instead engage with participants as **complex individuals embedded in broader social systems**.

This shift is essential not only for ethical reasons, but also for the quality of the dialogue. When participants are recognised in their complexity, the conversation becomes more nuanced, more authentic, and more capable of generating meaningful insights.

4.2 The Architecture of Safety: From Principles to Operational Protocols

In the COTAF approach, safety is not an abstract value—it is a **designed and operationalised system**.

The Living Library involves real people sharing lived experiences that may include trauma, discrimination, or deeply personal challenges. For this reason, safety must be embedded at every stage of the process, from preparation to follow-up.

This requires the development of a structured set of protocols that function as the operational backbone of the event.

The first element is the **Participant Safety Protocol**, which maps the entire journey of the Living Book before, during, and after the event. This protocol defines roles and responsibilities, identifies safe and withdrawal spaces, and ensures that participants are never left unsupported.

Closely linked to this is the **Informed Consent Framework**, which guarantees that all participants fully understand the nature of the activity, the potential risks, and their rights. Participation must always be voluntary, and individuals must retain the right to withdraw at any moment, without explanation.



Another essential component is the **Referral System**, which connects the Living Library to external support services, such as psychological assistance, anti-violence centres, or social services. This ensures that, if needed, participants can access professional support beyond the scope of the event.

These protocols must not remain theoretical documents. Their effectiveness depends on their **practical usability**. Facilitators and organisers must be familiar with them, understand how to apply them, and be able to act quickly in response to emerging situations.

4.3 Rethinking Participation: The Proxy Book Model

A key innovation within the COTAF methodology is the recognition that not all individuals can—or should—participate directly as Living Books.

For participants who have experienced severe trauma, such as survivors of gender-based violence or individuals in highly vulnerable migration situations, public storytelling may pose significant emotional or even physical risks.

To address this, the methodology introduces the concept of **Proxy Books**.

In this model, professionals such as social workers, educators, healthcare mediators, or support operators act as intermediaries, sharing collective or anonymised experiences derived from their work with beneficiaries.

This allows critical realities to be represented within the Living Library without exposing individuals to harm.

For example, instead of asking a survivor of violence to share her story directly, a support worker from an anti-violence centre may present a narrative that reflects common systemic barriers faced by women in similar situations. This ensures that the issue is brought into the public dialogue while fully protecting the individual.

The use of Proxy Books requires careful preparation to ensure that the narrative remains **human, authentic, and respectful**, avoiding both over-simplification and professional detachment. Facilitators must also prevent dynamics where the operator unintentionally speaks “on behalf of” individuals in a way that removes their agency.

When applied correctly, this model allows the Living Library to include perspectives that would otherwise remain invisible, expanding both its inclusivity and its relevance for policy.

4.4 Target Group-Specific Approaches

While the intersectional framework provides an overarching perspective, the COTAF methodology also recognises the need for **specific operational approaches** when working with different groups experiencing vulnerability.

Women Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

Working with survivors of gender-based violence requires the highest level of ethical sensitivity and psychological awareness. The primary objective is to ensure that participation does not lead to re-traumatisation.

This requires a fundamental shift in focus—from the traumatic event itself to the participant’s **agency, resilience, and pathway toward autonomy**. Facilitators must actively prevent intrusive or sensationalist questions and ensure that the narrative remains within the boundaries defined by the participant.



The presence of support mechanisms is essential. This includes access to specialised services and the ability to intervene immediately if signs of distress emerge. In some cases, the use of Proxy Books may be the most appropriate option.

A critical risk in this context is the emergence of **voyeuristic dynamics**, where Readers are driven by curiosity about trauma rather than a genuine interest in understanding systemic issues. This must be addressed through careful preparation and active facilitation.

Women with a Migration Background

Women with a migration background often experience overlapping forms of vulnerability related to legal status, economic conditions, cultural expectations, and gender roles.

The Living Library must create space for these experiences to be expressed in a way that reflects their complexity. This may involve alternative storytelling approaches, such as focusing on aspirations, identity, and future perspectives rather than past trauma.

Language support, cultural mediation, and sensitivity to power dynamics are essential to ensure meaningful participation. Facilitators must also be aware of potential risks related to legal insecurity or social exposure.

People with Disabilities

Inclusion of people with disabilities requires moving beyond a purely physical understanding of accessibility. The Living Library must adopt a **holistic approach to accessibility**, encompassing communication, interaction, and perception.

This includes providing alternative formats, adapting the structure of sessions, and ensuring that participants are not reduced to narratives of limitation or “inspiration.”

A critical issue in this context is the risk of reinforcing **ableist narratives**, where disability is framed either as tragedy or as exceptional achievement. Facilitators must guide the dialogue toward recognising individuals as active participants in society, with diverse experiences and contributions.

LGBTQIA+ Participants

The participation of LGBTQIA+ individuals requires particular attention to issues of **visibility, confidentiality, and safety**.

In many contexts, disclosing one’s identity may involve significant risks. For this reason, the methodology must ensure strict control over information sharing, including the use of pseudonyms and limitations on documentation or recording.

Facilitators must use inclusive language and avoid assumptions about identity. Participants must have full control over how they present themselves and what aspects of their experience they choose to share.

A critical risk is **involuntary outing**, which must be prevented through careful planning and strict adherence to confidentiality protocols.



4.5 Exemplification: Intersectionality in Practice

To understand how these approaches are applied in practice, it is useful to consider concrete scenarios.

In a Living Library focused on migration, a healthcare mediator may act as a Proxy Book, sharing the challenges faced by refugee families in accessing medical services. This allows participants to engage with systemic issues without exposing individuals to risk.

In a session involving a participant with a visual impairment, the experience may be adapted to include tactile or descriptive elements, creating a different form of interaction that challenges conventional communication patterns.

In a dialogue involving LGBTQIA+ participants, facilitators may actively redirect questions that attempt to probe into personal identity, maintaining the focus on the participant's chosen narrative.

These examples illustrate how intersectionality is not a theoretical concept, but a **practical framework guiding decision-making and facilitation**.

4.6 Theory of Change: From Protection to Representation

Within this section, the Theory of Change operates through a critical sequence.

The first step is **protection**. By ensuring safety and respecting boundaries, the methodology creates the conditions for participation.

This enables **participation**, where individuals can engage in dialogue without fear of exposure or harm.

Participation leads to **representation**, as diverse experiences and perspectives become visible within the public space of the Living Library.

Finally, through structured documentation and policy linkage, these representations contribute to **systemic change**, informing policies and practices that address the needs of different groups.

This progression highlights that inclusion is not simply about presence, but about **safe, meaningful, and impactful participation**.

4.7 ESG Dimension: Safeguarding, Inclusion, and Ethical Responsibility

The intersectionality and vulnerability framework of the COTAF Living Library is deeply aligned with ESG principles.

From a social perspective, it ensures that inclusion is not symbolic but operational, with concrete measures to support participation and protect well-being.

From a governance perspective, it establishes clear ethical standards and accountability mechanisms, ensuring that all actors involved understand their responsibilities and act accordingly.

The emphasis on safeguarding, consent, and confidentiality reflects a commitment to ethical integrity that is essential when working with sensitive narratives.

While environmental aspects are less central in this section, the overall approach contributes to sustainability by promoting practices that are respectful, inclusive, and socially responsible.



5. OPERATIONAL DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 From Methodology to Practice: The Operational Logic of the Living Library

The effectiveness of the Living Library depends not only on its conceptual framework, but on the quality of its implementation. Within the COTAF approach, the transition from methodology to practice is understood as a structured process, where each phase contributes to ensuring both the safety of participants and the impact of the dialogue.

Rather than being a single event, the Living Library is conceived as a **multi-phase intervention**, where preparation, execution, and follow-up are equally important. Each phase is interconnected, and weaknesses in one stage can compromise the integrity of the entire process.

This operational logic reflects a broader principle: meaningful dialogue does not emerge spontaneously, but is the result of **intentional design, careful preparation, and continuous monitoring**.

5.2 The Five-Phase Implementation Model

To ensure consistency and quality, the COTAF methodology structures the implementation of the Living Library into five key phases.

Phase 1: Strategic Preparation

The process begins with defining the purpose and scope of the event. This includes identifying the thematic focus—such as gender equality, migrant inclusion, or active citizenship—and ensuring alignment with local needs and project objectives.

At this stage, organisers also engage with relevant stakeholders, including civil society organisations, public authorities, and community actors. The choice of venue is equally critical: it must not only be accessible, but also capable of supporting the creation of a safe and inclusive environment.

Preparation is not limited to logistics. It involves building a **coherent vision** of the event, ensuring that all elements—participants, facilitators, and structure—are aligned with the methodology.

Phase 2: Selection and Preparation of Living Books

The selection of Living Books is one of the most sensitive and decisive phases of the process. Participants are chosen not only for their lived experience, but also for their willingness and readiness to engage in dialogue. This phase involves a series of preparation sessions, during which Living Books are supported in structuring their narratives. The focus is on transforming experience into reflection—moving from what happened to what it means.

A crucial element of this process is the definition of **narrative boundaries**. Living Books must be able to clearly identify what they are comfortable sharing and what they prefer to keep private. This ensures that they enter the interaction with a sense of control and confidence.



Simulation exercises, when possible, allow participants to rehearse the encounter, anticipate potential challenges, and develop strategies to manage difficult questions.

Phase 3: Training and Alignment

Before the event takes place, all actors involved—including facilitators, organisers, and, where relevant, Readers—must be aligned with the principles and rules of the methodology.

Facilitators receive specific training on dialogue management, conflict transformation, and trauma-informed approaches. At the same time, Living Books are briefed on the structure of the session and the available support mechanisms.

Readers also undergo a short induction process, often referred to as the “Gatekeeper phase.” This step is essential to set expectations and establish the rules of engagement, reinforcing the idea that the Living Library is a space for learning, not judgment.

This phase ensures that the event does not rely on improvisation, but on a **shared understanding of roles, responsibilities, and ethical boundaries**.

Phase 4: Delivery of the Living Library

The delivery phase represents the moment when preparation is translated into interaction. It includes the full experience, from welcoming participants to facilitating dialogue and managing the flow of sessions.

The event typically begins with an introduction, where participants are welcomed and reminded of the principles and rules of the Living Library. This is followed by a series of structured sessions, where Readers engage with Living Books in small groups.

Facilitators play a central role during this phase. They monitor the emotional climate, observe group dynamics, and intervene when necessary to maintain a safe and respectful environment.

Time management is also essential. Sessions are usually structured in defined time slots, allowing for multiple rotations while ensuring that participants are not overwhelmed.

The delivery phase requires a balance between structure and flexibility. While the overall flow is planned, facilitators must be able to respond to unexpected situations, adapting the process without compromising its integrity.

Phase 5: Follow-Up and Policy Linkage

The Living Library does not end when the sessions are over. The follow-up phase is where the insights generated during the event are collected, analysed, and translated into meaningful outputs.

This includes gathering feedback from participants, documenting key themes and observations, and identifying patterns that may be relevant for policy discussions.

These findings are then integrated into broader processes, such as Policy Labs, where they contribute to the development of recommendations and the improvement of local services.

This phase ensures that the Living Library is not a one-off experience, but part of a **continuous cycle of learning, reflection, and institutional engagement**.



5.3 Participant Preparation: From Experience to Narrative Agency

The preparation of participants—particularly Living Books—is a critical factor in determining the quality and safety of the Living Library.

This process is not about shaping a “perfect story,” but about supporting individuals in developing **narrative agency**. This means enabling them to reflect on their experience, define their message, and communicate it in a way that feels authentic and empowering.

Participants are guided through a structured process that helps them:

- contextualize their experience
- identify key moments and reflections
- define the core message they wish to convey

Equally important is the identification of personal boundaries. Participants must feel fully entitled to decide what to share and what to withhold. This reinforces their autonomy and reduces the risk of over-exposure.

Simulation exercises further strengthen this process, allowing participants to practice the interaction and gain confidence in managing dialogue.

5.4 Facilitation: Managing Dialogue, Power, and Emotions

Facilitators are the operational guardians of the Living Library. Their role extends beyond moderating conversations—they are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the space and ensuring that all participants feel safe and respected.

Effective facilitation requires a constant awareness of group dynamics. Facilitators must be able to observe verbal and non-verbal cues, identify emerging tensions, and intervene when necessary.

One of their key tasks is managing **difficult or sensitive questions**. Rather than blocking these questions entirely, facilitators aim to reframe them, shifting the focus from judgment to understanding.

For example, a question that challenges the validity of a participant's experience can be redirected toward exploring the broader context or the meaning of that experience.

Facilitators must also be prepared to act decisively when boundaries are crossed. This may involve pausing or ending a session, always prioritizing the well-being of participants.

At the same time, facilitators must avoid over-intervention. Their role is to support the dialogue, not to dominate it. The goal is to create conditions where participants can engage directly, while ensuring that the interaction remains constructive.

5.5 Logistics and Spatial Design: Creating the Conditions for Dialogue

The physical or digital environment of the Living Library plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of the experience.



Spaces must be designed to support **privacy, comfort, and accessibility**. Reading sessions typically take place in small groups, creating an intimate setting that encourages openness and reduces performance pressure.

The venue should be organised into distinct areas, including:

- a reception space for welcoming and induction
- dedicated reading areas for dialogue
- a reflection or waiting area where participants can rest and process their experience

Acoustic considerations are particularly important. Conversations should not be easily overheard, as this can compromise both privacy and emotional safety.

Accessibility must be ensured at all levels, including physical access, communication formats, and sensory conditions. The objective is to create an environment where all participants can engage fully and comfortably.

5.6 Monitoring and Evaluation: Capturing Impact and Learning

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is an integral part of the Living Library methodology. It is not limited to reporting requirements, but serves as a tool for understanding and enhancing the impact of the intervention.

The M&E process is structured across three moments: before, during, and after the event.

Before the event, baseline data may be collected to understand participants' initial perceptions and expectations. During the event, facilitators observe group dynamics, emotional responses, and key moments of interaction. After the event, feedback is collected to assess changes in perception, quality of dialogue, and overall experience.

The methodology combines **quantitative and qualitative approaches**. Quantitative data provides information about participation and reach, while qualitative data captures the depth of the experience.

Particular attention is given to indicators such as:

- shifts in attitudes or stereotypes
- expressions of empathy
- level of engagement in dialogue
- perception of safety and respect

Facilitator observation plays a crucial role in capturing elements that may not emerge through standard feedback forms, such as emotional breakthroughs or moments of tension.

The data collected serves multiple purposes. It supports internal learning, ensures accountability toward funders, and provides the evidence base for policy dialogue.

5.7 Exemplification: Operational Models in Different Contexts

The flexibility of the Living Library allows it to be adapted to a variety of contexts while maintaining its core principles.



In a small community setting, the event may take place in an informal venue such as a community centre, creating a familiar and accessible environment. In this case, facilitators play a key role in encouraging participation and managing close social dynamics.

In a school context, the structure may be adapted to include shorter sessions and more frequent rotations, ensuring that students remain engaged and that the experience fits within the educational framework.

In institutional settings, the Living Library may be designed to involve public officials as Readers, creating direct opportunities for dialogue between citizens and decision-makers.

These variations demonstrate that the methodology is not rigid, but adaptable, provided that its core principles are preserved.

5.8 Theory of Change: From Operational Quality to Impact

At the operational level, the Theory of Change emphasizes the relationship between **quality implementation and impact**.

When the Living Library is carefully designed and executed, participants are more likely to feel safe, engaged, and open to dialogue. This creates the conditions for meaningful interaction and reflection.

Conversely, when preparation is insufficient or facilitation is weak, the quality of the experience decreases, and the potential for impact is reduced.

Operational quality is therefore not a technical detail, but a **determinant of social transformation**. It ensures that the methodology functions as intended, enabling the progression from dialogue to learning, and from learning to change.

5.9 ESG Dimension: Ethical and Sustainable Implementation

The operational design of the Living Library reflects a strong commitment to ESG principles.

From a social perspective, the focus on participant preparation, facilitation, and safety ensures that the experience is inclusive and respectful. The methodology actively works to reduce barriers to participation and to protect vulnerable individuals.

From a governance perspective, the structured approach to roles, protocols, and evaluation ensures transparency and accountability. Each phase of the process is clearly defined, reducing the risk of inconsistency or ethical breaches.

Environmental considerations are integrated through the choice of venues, materials, and formats, encouraging sustainable practices without compromising the quality of the experience.

By aligning operational design with ESG principles, the COTAF Living Library demonstrates that **effective implementation and ethical responsibility are inseparable**.



6. POLICY ENGAGEMENT & INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

6.1 The Living Library as a Strategic Tool for Policy Dialogue

Within the COTAF framework, the Living Library is not conceived as a standalone community activity, but as a structured mechanism for generating policy-relevant knowledge.

Traditional policymaking processes often rely heavily on quantitative data—statistics, indicators, and aggregated reports. While essential, these tools frequently fail to capture the lived realities of individuals, particularly those experiencing marginalisation or systemic barriers.

The Living Library addresses this gap by bringing “**human data**” into the policy space. Through direct and facilitated dialogue, it creates a unique environment where personal experiences are articulated, explored, and understood in their complexity.

This process transforms the Living Library into a **diagnostic tool**, capable of revealing:

- hidden forms of exclusion
- gaps in service delivery
- structural barriers that are not visible through standard data collection

Importantly, these insights do not remain at the level of individual stories. Through structured documentation and analysis, they are aggregated into patterns that can inform policy processes.

In this way, the Living Library becomes a bridge between:

- citizens and institutions
- lived experience and decision-making
- qualitative insight and policy development

6.2 From Individual Narratives to Collective Evidence

One of the most critical transformations within the COTAF approach is the shift from individual storytelling to **collective, structured knowledge**.

Each Living Library session generates a range of insights, expressed through narratives, reflections, and interactions. On their own, these may appear as isolated experiences. However, when multiple sessions are analysed together, recurring themes begin to emerge.

These themes may include:

- difficulties in accessing public services
- experiences of discrimination or exclusion
- barriers related to language, bureaucracy, or cultural misunderstanding

The role of organisers and facilitators is to capture and synthesise these insights without losing their depth and authenticity. This requires a careful balance between **systematisation and humanisation**.

If the process is too analytical, the richness of lived experience is lost. If it remains purely narrative, it risks being dismissed as anecdotal.



The strength of the COTAF methodology lies in its ability to maintain this balance, transforming stories into **evidence that is both credible and meaningful**.

6.3 The Policy Translation Process: From Dialogue to Action

To ensure that the insights generated through the Living Library lead to tangible outcomes, the COTAF framework includes a structured process of policy translation.

This process begins with the **collection and analysis of data**, where qualitative insights are organised into themes and patterns. These findings are then synthesised into structured outputs, such as reports, summaries, and thematic briefs.

The next step involves **connecting these findings to existing policy frameworks**. This requires identifying where current policies or services fail to address the issues raised during the Living Library, and where there is potential for improvement.

Based on this analysis, organisers develop **concrete and actionable recommendations**. These recommendations must be realistic, clearly articulated, and aligned with the competencies of relevant stakeholders.

Finally, these outputs are brought into **Policy Labs or stakeholder dialogues**, where they are discussed, refined, and, where possible, integrated into decision-making processes.

This structured pathway ensures that the Living Library does not remain at the level of reflection, but contributes directly to **institutional learning and change**.

6.4 Stakeholder Engagement: Building Bridges between Communities and Institutions

Effective policy impact requires the active involvement of institutional actors. Within the COTAF approach, stakeholder engagement is not treated as a final step, but as a continuous process that begins from the early stages of implementation.

Key stakeholders include:

- municipalities and local administrations
- social services and public agencies
- educational institutions
- civil society organisations

Engagement strategies go beyond formal invitations. Institutional representatives are encouraged to participate directly in Living Library sessions, often as Readers. This allows them to experience the methodology firsthand and to engage with citizens in a non-hierarchical setting.

This type of participation is particularly powerful, as it transforms the relationship between institutions and communities. Instead of interacting through formal channels, participants engage in **direct, human dialogue**, where roles are temporarily redefined.

Additional strategies include organising targeted sessions for institutional stakeholders, facilitating follow-up discussions, and sharing structured reports that highlight key findings.



Early and meaningful engagement increases the likelihood that insights generated through the Living Library will be taken seriously and translated into action.

6.5 Exemplification: From Dialogue to Policy Change

To illustrate how this process works in practice, consider a Living Library session where multiple participants highlight difficulties in accessing healthcare services due to language barriers.

While quantitative data might show low usage of certain services, the Living Library reveals the underlying reasons: lack of translation, cultural misunderstanding, or administrative complexity.

By identifying this recurring theme, organisers can formulate a specific recommendation, such as the introduction of cultural mediators or multilingual information systems within healthcare facilities.

In another example, a Living Library involving young migrants and local authorities may reveal a lack of safe public spaces for social interaction. This insight can lead to the co-creation of community initiatives or the redesign of urban spaces.

These examples demonstrate how individual experiences, when properly captured and analysed, can lead to **concrete and targeted policy interventions**.

6.6 Theory of Change: From Dialogue to Governance

At the policy level, the Theory of Change of the COTAF Living Library follows a clear trajectory.

It begins with **dialogue**, where individuals share their experiences in a safe and structured environment.

This dialogue generates **qualitative evidence**, capturing insights that are not accessible through traditional data sources.

Through analysis and synthesis, this evidence is transformed into **knowledge**, which can be used to inform decision-making.

When this knowledge is integrated into institutional processes, it leads to **policy development and improvement**, resulting in more inclusive and responsive systems.

Over time, this process contributes to a broader transformation of governance, where decision-making becomes more participatory, evidence-based, and aligned with the lived realities of citizens.

6.7 ESG Dimension: Governance, Accountability, and Inclusive Policymaking

The policy engagement dimension of the COTAF Living Library is strongly aligned with ESG principles, particularly in the area of governance.

The methodology promotes **transparency and accountability** by ensuring that the insights generated through dialogue are systematically documented and shared with relevant stakeholders.

It also supports **inclusive policymaking**, by creating mechanisms through which marginalised voices can be heard and integrated into decision-making processes.

From a governance perspective, the Living Library contributes to strengthening the relationship between institutions and citizens, fostering trust and mutual understanding.



The emphasis on ethical data collection and responsible use of information further reinforces the integrity of the process.

While environmental considerations are less central in this section, the overall approach contributes to sustainable governance by promoting policies that are socially inclusive and responsive to real needs.

6.8 The Living Library as a Transformative Space for Democracy

Beyond its immediate outputs, the Living Library functions as a **transformative space for democratic engagement**.

It challenges traditional hierarchies between “experts” and “beneficiaries,” creating a horizontal environment where knowledge is shared and co-created.

Participants are not passive recipients of policies, but active contributors to the processes that shape them. This fosters a sense of ownership and collective responsibility.

At the same time, institutional actors are exposed to perspectives that may challenge their assumptions and expand their understanding of the communities they serve.

This mutual exchange contributes to rebuilding trust, reducing social distance, and promoting a more collaborative approach to governance.

In the long term, this transformation extends beyond individual events, contributing to the development of more inclusive, participatory, and responsive democratic systems.



7. SCALABILITY, REPLICABILITY & SUSTAINABILITY

7.1 A Living Methodology: Adaptation without Losing Integrity

The COTAF Living Library is not designed as a rigid or standardised product. It is conceived as a **living methodology**, capable of adapting to different social, cultural, and institutional contexts while maintaining its core identity.

This distinction is fundamental. Replicability does not mean reproducing the same event in different locations, but rather **translating the methodology into diverse local realities** without compromising its principles.

Each context presents specific conditions—urban or rural environments, different levels of institutional engagement, varying degrees of social diversity, and distinct cultural sensitivities. The strength of the COTAF approach lies in its ability to respond to these differences.

In metropolitan areas, Living Libraries may focus on managing high levels of diversity and anonymity, creating spaces where individuals can connect beyond fragmented social identities. In smaller or rural communities, the methodology may address more localized tensions, where social relationships are closer but often more resistant to change.

Adaptation also applies to target groups. Events designed for young people may incorporate educational settings and interactive formats, while those involving institutional stakeholders may emphasise policy relevance and structured dialogue.

Despite this flexibility, certain elements of the methodology remain **non-negotiable**:

- the ethical framework and “Do No Harm” principle
- the creation of a safe and controlled environment
- the dialogical nature of the interaction

These core components ensure that, regardless of context, the Living Library maintains its transformative potential.

7.2 Key Success Factors: The Foundations of Impact

The long-term effectiveness of the Living Library depends on a set of interconnected success factors that must be consistently maintained.

The first of these is the presence of **strong local partnerships**. The Living Library cannot operate in isolation; it requires collaboration with civil society organisations, public institutions, and community actors. These partnerships ensure that the methodology is grounded in local realities and that its outcomes are relevant and actionable.

A second critical factor is the quality of **facilitation**. Facilitators are central to the success of the methodology, as they shape the interaction and safeguard the environment. Their ability to manage dialogue, navigate conflict, and protect participants directly influences the impact of the event.



Equally important is the **preparation and support of participants**, particularly Living Books. Without adequate preparation, the risk of emotional distress or ineffective dialogue increases significantly. Supporting participants in developing narrative agency is therefore essential.

Another key factor is **institutional engagement**. The involvement of public authorities enhances the legitimacy of the Living Library and increases the likelihood that its outcomes will influence policy processes. Without this connection, the methodology risks remaining at the level of awareness rather than contributing to structural change.

Finally, **effective communication and outreach** are necessary to ensure that the Living Library reaches diverse audiences, including those who may not already be aligned with its values. Avoiding “echo chambers” is essential for achieving meaningful impact.

These factors are interdependent. Weakness in one area can compromise the entire process, highlighting the need for a balanced and integrated approach.

7.3 Common Pitfalls: Risks to Avoid in Implementation

While the Living Library offers significant potential, its implementation is not without risks. Recognising and addressing these risks is essential for maintaining the integrity of the methodology.

One of the most common pitfalls is **tokenism**. This occurs when participants from marginalised groups are included for symbolic purposes, without being given meaningful space to express their experiences. Tokenism undermines the credibility of the methodology and can cause harm to participants.

Another risk is the organisation of **one-off events** that are not connected to broader processes. Without follow-up, documentation, and policy linkage, the impact of the Living Library remains limited and temporary.

A further challenge is the **lack of adequate support for participants**. Insufficient preparation or absence of emotional support mechanisms can expose Living Books to unnecessary risks, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics.

Poor or inconsistent **facilitation** represents another critical risk. Without skilled facilitators, the dialogue may become unbalanced, confrontational, or superficial, reducing both its safety and its impact.

Finally, there is the risk of **over-simplifying complex identities**. Reducing participants to a single dimension of their experience ignores the intersectional nature of their realities and limits the depth of the dialogue.

Avoiding these pitfalls requires constant attention to quality, ethics, and methodological coherence.

7.4 Sustainability: Beyond the Project Lifecycle

Sustainability within the COTAF framework is not limited to the duration of the project. The Living Library is designed to create conditions for **long-term continuity and systemic integration**.

At the organisational level, sustainability is achieved by building local capacities through the Train-the-Trainers programme. By equipping facilitators and organisations with the necessary skills, the methodology can continue to be applied beyond the project timeframe.



At the network level, sustainability is supported by the creation of a **transnational community of practice**, where partners share experiences, tools, and lessons learned. This exchange strengthens the methodology and facilitates its adaptation to new contexts.

At the institutional level, sustainability depends on the integration of the Living Library into existing structures and processes. This may include incorporating the methodology into educational programmes, community initiatives, or participatory governance mechanisms.

The development of shared digital platforms and knowledge repositories further supports this process, enabling continuous learning and dissemination.

In this way, the Living Library evolves from a project activity into a **permanent tool for dialogue and social innovation**.

7.5 Exemplification: Adaptation and Replication in Practice

The adaptability of the Living Library can be illustrated through concrete examples.

In a remote or rural area with limited infrastructure, the methodology may be implemented through a “mobile Living Library,” bringing the experience directly to different communities. In this case, informal settings such as local cafés or community centres can be transformed into dialogue spaces.

In urban contexts, hybrid or digital formats may be introduced to reach broader audiences, particularly younger participants or professionals who may not attend physical events.

In educational settings, the Living Library can be integrated into school programmes, contributing to the development of critical thinking and active citizenship among students.

These examples demonstrate that the methodology is not bound to a specific format, but can be **reconfigured while preserving its core principles**.

7.6 Theory of Change: From Replication to Systemic Transformation

At this stage, the Theory of Change focuses on the expansion and consolidation of the methodology.

Replication allows the Living Library to reach new contexts and communities, increasing its scale and diversity. As more events are implemented, a growing body of knowledge and experience is generated.

This accumulation leads to the formation of a **network of practices**, where organisations learn from each other and continuously refine the methodology.

Over time, this network contributes to a broader process of systemic transformation. The Living Library becomes a recognised tool for dialogue, inclusion, and policy engagement, influencing how social challenges are addressed at different levels.

In this sense, scalability is not only about quantity, but about **building a sustainable ecosystem of dialogue and impact**.

7.7 ESG Dimension: Sustainability, Responsibility, and Long-Term Value

The scalability and sustainability of the Living Library are closely linked to ESG principles.



From a social perspective, the methodology promotes long-term inclusion by creating ongoing opportunities for participation and dialogue. It ensures that marginalised voices are not only heard temporarily, but integrated into continuous processes.

From a governance perspective, the emphasis on transparency, accountability, and institutional engagement supports the development of more responsive and inclusive systems.

Environmental considerations are reflected in the promotion of adaptable and resource-efficient formats, contributing to the sustainability of the model.

By integrating these dimensions, the COTAF Living Library positions itself as a **sustainable and responsible model for social innovation**, capable of generating long-term value beyond the immediate scope of the project.

7.8 Final Positioning: A Replicable Model for a Shared European Future

Bringing together all these elements, the COTAF Living Library can be understood as a model that combines flexibility with rigor, local adaptation with transnational coherence, and dialogue with policy impact.

It demonstrates that inclusive and structured dialogue is not only possible, but essential for addressing complex social challenges.

By providing tools, frameworks, and processes that support replication and sustainability, the methodology contributes to the development of a **shared European approach to social cohesion and participatory governance**.



8. OPERATIONAL ANNEXES: TOOLS, TEMPLATES & MONITORING SYSTEM

8.1 The Role of Annexes within the COTAF Toolkit

The annexes are not an accessory component of the toolkit; they represent its **operational core**.

While the previous sections define the methodological, ethical, and strategic framework of the Living Library, the annexes translate these principles into **practical tools** that can be directly used by organisers, facilitators, and partners.

Their function is threefold.

First, they support **standardisation**, ensuring that Living Library events implemented in different contexts maintain a consistent level of quality and alignment with COTAF principles.

Second, they enable **monitoring and evaluation**, providing structured instruments to collect data, assess impact, and generate evidence.

Third, they facilitate **policy translation**, by organising qualitative and quantitative information in formats that can be used in institutional contexts.

For these reasons, the annexes are structured as an integrated system, rather than a collection of isolated templates.

8.2 Operational Planning Tools

The first group of annexes focuses on supporting the planning and organisation of the Living Library.

At this stage, the objective is to ensure that all key elements of the methodology are in place before the event takes place.

The **Event Planning Checklist** serves as a strategic guide, covering the full preparation phase. It includes the definition of objectives, alignment with thematic priorities, stakeholder mapping, and communication strategies. It also ensures compliance with EU visibility requirements and project standards.

Complementing this, the **Stakeholder Mapping Tool** supports organisers in identifying and engaging relevant actors, including civil society organisations, public authorities, and community groups. This tool helps to visualise relationships and clarify roles, ensuring a coordinated approach.

The **Implementation Timeline** provides a structured overview of the different phases of the event, from preparation to follow-up. It allows organisers to plan activities in advance, allocate responsibilities, and monitor progress.

Together, these tools ensure that the Living Library is not improvised, but built on a **clear and structured operational foundation**.

8.3 Participant Preparation Tools

The second group of annexes focuses on the preparation of participants, particularly Living Books.



The central instrument is the **Living Book Preparation Sheet**, which supports participants in developing their narrative in a structured and reflective way.

This tool guides them through several key steps:

- defining their core message
- structuring their narrative (context, experience, reflection)
- identifying safe zones and boundaries
- expressing specific support needs

By using this tool, Living Books are not only prepared for the event, but also empowered to take ownership of their narrative.

In addition, the **Reader Induction Template** provides a structured format for briefing participants before they engage in the dialogue. It clearly outlines the rules of engagement, emphasizing respect, active listening, and the right of Living Books not to answer certain questions.

These tools ensure that both sides of the interaction—Living Books and Readers—enter the Living Library with a **shared understanding of the process and its boundaries**.

8.4 Facilitation Tools

Facilitators require practical tools that can support them in managing complex and dynamic interactions.

The **Facilitator Guidelines** provide a structured reference for navigating different phases of the dialogue. They include guidance on introducing the session, managing group dynamics, handling sensitive questions, and intervening in case of conflict.

A key component is the **Conflict Response Protocol**, which outlines possible strategies for dealing with difficult situations. This includes reframing questions, reinforcing boundaries, and activating the Stop Protocol when necessary.

The **Observation Template** allows facilitators to document key elements of the interaction, including group dynamics, emotional responses, and emerging themes. This tool is essential for capturing qualitative data that may not be reflected in participant feedback.

These instruments transform facilitation from an intuitive practice into a **structured and reflective process**, enhancing both consistency and effectiveness.

8.5 Safety and Ethical Documentation

Given the sensitivity of the Living Library methodology, a dedicated set of annexes is devoted to safety and ethics.

The **Informed Consent Form** ensures that all participants are fully aware of the nature of the activity, their rights, and the use of their data. It formalises the principle of voluntary participation and reinforces transparency.



The **Participant Safety Protocol** provides a detailed framework for managing risks throughout the event. It defines roles and responsibilities, identifies safe and withdrawal spaces, and outlines procedures for responding to distress.

The **Referral Directory** connects the Living Library to external support services, ensuring that participants have access to professional assistance if needed.

These documents are not merely formal requirements. They represent the operationalisation of the “Do No Harm” principle and are essential for ensuring that the Living Library remains a **safe and ethically sound environment**.

8.6 Monitoring & Evaluation Toolkit (Reconstructed System)

The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) annexes are designed as a coherent system that captures the full impact of the Living Library.

This system combines different tools that correspond to various stages of the process.

The **Pre- and Post-Event Surveys** allow organisers to measure changes in participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and understanding. By comparing responses before and after the event, it is possible to assess the transformative effect of the dialogue.

The **Emotional Safety Scale** focuses specifically on participants’ sense of comfort, respect, and control during the experience. This is a critical indicator, particularly when working with vulnerable groups.

The **Perception Change Indicators** provide a structured way to capture shifts in attitudes, including the reduction of stereotypes and the development of empathy.

The **Facilitator Observation Grid** complements these tools by documenting qualitative aspects of the interaction, such as emotional breakthroughs, moments of tension, and the depth of dialogue.

Together, these instruments allow for a **multi-dimensional evaluation**, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of impact.

8.7 ESG Reporting Framework

To align the Living Library with broader standards of sustainability and accountability, the annexes include a dedicated ESG reporting framework.

This framework integrates indicators related to the social, governance, and environmental dimensions of the methodology.

From a social perspective, it includes measures of inclusion, diversity, and participant well-being. From a governance perspective, it assesses the implementation of ethical protocols, transparency, and institutional engagement. Environmental aspects are captured through indicators related to resource use and event design. The ESG framework ensures that the Living Library is not only evaluated in terms of immediate outcomes, but also in relation to its **long-term sustainability and ethical integrity**.



8.8 Policy Reporting and Advocacy Tools

The final group of annexes focuses on translating the outcomes of the Living Library into policy-relevant outputs.

The **Policy Brief Template** provides a structured format for presenting findings and recommendations to institutional stakeholders. It ensures that insights are communicated in a clear, concise, and actionable way.

The **Qualitative Evidence Collection Grid** supports the systematic organisation of narratives, quotes, and themes, allowing organisers to identify patterns and recurring issues.

The **Policy Recommendation Framework** guides the development of concrete proposals, linking identified problems to potential solutions and responsible actors.

These tools are essential for ensuring that the Living Library contributes to **evidence-based policymaking**, transforming dialogue into action.

8.9 Final Integration: From Tools to Systemic Impact

When considered together, the annexes form an integrated system that supports the entire lifecycle of the Living Library.

They ensure that:

- events are carefully planned and implemented
- participants are prepared and protected
- interactions are monitored and documented
- outcomes are analysed and translated into policy

This system transforms the Living Library from a series of isolated events into a **structured and scalable model for social innovation**.

By providing clear tools and processes, the annexes enable organisations to implement the methodology with confidence, consistency, and accountability, ensuring that its impact can be sustained and expanded over time.