

Our values, our professionalism: rereading the mandate strategic issues CEN AIB 2023-2026

A new three-year period of AIB activities begins. A new three-year term with an almost completely renewed National Executive Committee that has decided to invest me with the task of representing the Association as president. A role that, thinking of all the good colleagues who have preceded me, starting with Rosa Maiello, makes me proud and quite excited.

In any case, it is in the three years to come that we must think about how to ensure that the AIB can continue to be a point of reference for all Italian librarians and for all those, individuals and institutions, who are involved in supporting our fellow citizens in their cultural growth.

The new CEN felt that identifying several strategic issues and declining them into objectives towards which to direct the Association's actions, was fundamental to give consistency to everyone's actions and to concentrate resources on what we feel is essential to achieve at this time.

To have a short but clear document, in which the objectives we set ourselves are made explicit, is the only way to create a recognisable red thread to guide the actions of an organisation as complex as the Italian Library Association and to enable accountability towards our reference community.

Proposing strategic lines means analysing the situation of the world of libraries and librarians and identifying priorities, having in mind a vision for our Association that is as inclusive as possible towards all librarians, but respectful of the specificities of the different contexts and the different professions.

We know that the world of libraries has been and is subject to constant change daily because the world in which they operate is changing, but also because the organisational models and activities that take place in libraries are changing.

Libraries in Italy are distributed in a capillary but not homogeneous way, they are different in type, size, and institutional set-up. They face many common problems, but also very specific ones, linked to their history, territories, purposes, materials handled, and communities of reference.

Librarians work in libraries and also outside them, and they in turn differ in age, study and career paths, specialisations, and skills. Freelance librarians (fewer and fewer), public or private employees, members of cooperatives, and temporary workers with very different contractual situations. Professionals with the most diverse specialisations, much more than is normally highlighted in the classifications of professions and consequently surveyed.

What do a system librarian or a librarian teaching information literacy have in common? What does one who contracts and manages packages of electronic periodicals in an academic library share with a colleague in a public reading library who offers reading workshops for children? And again, how much of a 'colleague' can

one who works to foster the emergence of community libraries feel with a school librarian, perhaps a former teacher, or an expert who 'cares' for volumes damaged because they are old or because they were printed on acid paper?

I could go on comparing the thousands of facets of such a varied profession, discovering so many differences that one might think that nothing unites us, that we use the same word for people doing different work.

Instead, there are many different approaches, but for a common work, because we all contribute to a common goal.

Our common goal is to build and maintain a system in which information sources are selected, organised, managed, valued, stored, actively mediated and disseminated for the entire community of citizens, understood in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. regardless of legal status, but as bearers of rights. Citizens who in various moments of their lives may take on a thousand different roles - from children learning about the book object to the most advanced researchers - but who will always have the right to a service that enables them to understand the world in which they live, to enjoy beauty expressed in all its forms and, above all, to be able to plan their growth as conscious human beings capable of creating the new.

All librarians help to ensure that people can choose what to read, what to study, and what medium of expression to occupy themselves with, with no limits other than their abilities.

Doing this means helping people to be free because they can develop their information competence to consciously decide what is worthwhile and what is just noise, and chatter. This value level of the profession is present in every context where librarians live their work in a professional and non-bureaucratic way.

Is there still a common interest in this country to disseminate relevant, quality information in an organised physical space, and as such suitable to support reading, learning, and questioning about the reality around us?

Definitely yes, even if at times this interest does not seem to be shared by everyone.

However, it is from the dialogue with those who share this interest that we must start again, to extend the consensus around it.

Statistics tell us that the post-Covid has led to a decline in attendance at all libraries. Even some of the young people who used to frequent public libraries the most and who gave us hope for the future seem to be attracted to other things. The forced discontinuation of the service has created a dangerous rift, but this must not diminish our determination. The challenge to put people at the centre of library policies and libraries at the centre of social cohesion policies has become more difficult and complex, but precisely because of this our commitment will have to be greater and our actions better planned.

Facing this challenge alone, within individual libraries, within their library systems is indispensable, but it is not enough. We need to do this by associating ourselves with an organisation that brings together librarians who differ in terms of preparation, skills, ideas, and working conditions, but who are united by the aim of making information resources, books, videos, and tools for cultural and social growth available to their users.

Not to associate is a risk. The risk is to remain isolated in one's narrow sphere; it is a real risk and rarely turns into an opportunity.

Firstly, it is a subjective risk. Without confronting one's ideas and problems with others, one can become trapped in visions and paths that are too narrow. Paths that in an ever-changing reality may prove to be unproductive. Confrontation with those who act for the same end, but think differently, is an opportunity to grasp other perspectives, to evaluate other possible solutions.

Secondly, it is an objective risk. Being together means being able to make one's voice heard more effectively, it means being able to support others knowing that others will support us when it is the aspects of the profession that most directly affect us that are being questioned. Particularism, the belief that one's specificities make us completely different from others, are mistake that makes it difficult to safeguard common values.

It is my opinion that the profession will not disappear, as we have been hearing for so many years, even though libraries without librarians already exist, but instead the possibility of becoming less and less significant in the system of education and the dissemination of culture, to the point of becoming an increasingly small and marginal group, is real.

The problem will be that of not being able to keep up with the speed with which innovation impacts not only on all the dynamics of the information sector, but above all on people's habits and perceptions. This speed requires continuous updating, but certainly also adequate investment and the ability to work together, because it is precisely the smaller realities that will be in the greatest difficulty if they remain isolated. The enemy is not social networks or artificial intelligence, which are in fact already being used in libraries in various forms, but the widespread underestimation of the need that those who want to be active citizens and not passive consumers have to be able to identify sources of information, texts, films, images, quality music, that is, capable of increasing their knowledge and autonomy of judgement.

We must tackle this underestimation together because it is only by acting in all contexts and seizing opportunities with this common purpose that we can really make an impact.

Being many is fundamental. A priori, with respect to the strategic themes outlined below, the new CEN considers it fundamental to broaden the representativeness of the Association, convincing those who are members to contribute to this end, those who have been members and have drifted away to return to membership, and those, especially the younger ones, who have so far not considered it worthwhile to join, to experience for the first time how significant the experience of participating in the construction of a common project for all Italian librarians and libraries can be.

Lastly, a thought for those who already experience the Association in a more direct and active way, for those who are involved as volunteers in the many national and local associative bodies. As in all associations, even in professional ones active volunteering is a possibility, but not an obligation. It is, however, a possibility that offers great growth opportunities, because it allows one to go beyond one's own particularity to tackle wide-ranging problems on a regional, national and international scale. In fact, AIB involves many colleagues in political, technical and scientific functions, both at national, regional and international levels, who dedicate their time to projects and activities that benefit everyone. All my personal thanks go to these colleagues for what they have done and best wishes for a good job for what it will be.

AIB. Strategic areas and objectives 2023-2026

The CEN identified and presented to the AIB's territorial bodies, the chairpeople of the regional committees, and the strategic mandate lines at a meeting held on 24 June. There are five major areas on which, during the period 2023-2026, the Association's action must be focused, as regards both central and regional bodies: advocacy, community, information and reading, profession, and inclusion.

The areas identified outline frames of reference within which specific actions will be identified, to be launched in the different contexts according to specific needs and conditions. In this first phase, CEN and regional committees are called upon to work together in order to identify, as early as this autumn, which types of actions will be implemented in each area. Starting in September, an actual strategic plan will be drawn up based on what has already been identified, with a 2026 horizon. At the same time, a study will be launched to draw up a social balance sheet for the Association.

Described below are the strategic areas of intervention identified with the specific objectives to be pursued over the next three years. The work is in progress and will be integrated with the contribution of the AIB's territorial realities.

1) Advocacy for librarians and libraries

Libraries and librarians must be recognised, first and foremost by citizens and administrators, as agents of educational, cultural and knowledge development. It is crucial to improve communication with institutions and all stakeholders to obtain support, including financial support, for library activities and to establish a local and national legislative framework for the benefit of library services, communities and individual citizens.

Objectives:

- 1) To promote the association's presence in all spheres, institutional and non-institutional, in which libraries, librarians, reading, books and documents, information are discussed
- 2) Enhancing the positive impact of libraries on their communities
- 3) Ensure a positive presence of libraries in the media
- 4) Support the rights of librarians as workers in the various trade union and institutional offices
- 5) To cooperate with other cultural associations in particular with a view to the integration of museums, archives and libraries
- 6) Promote political/institutional action in order to achieve a national law on libraries and for the definition of uniform minimum quality levels for libraries

2) A community of shared values

Work will be done to strengthen relations within the AIB member community, through actions that involve professionals more closely in experiences of sharing the values of the profession, while respecting the specificities of each working and territorial reality.

Objectives:

- 1) To make people understand that joining the AIB means reaffirming membership in a community
- 2) To orientate action towards respect for associative and professional ethics
- 3) To encourage communication between librarians belonging to different types of libraries in order to recognise common ethical-professional roots

3) Quality information for all and reading policies

The information system is constantly evolving and subject to strong risks of censorship, lack of democratic access to sources, gaps in information and digital competence, and impoverishment of available resources. AIB will act to ensure a supportive position for open access to information, to foster reading literacy, information and media literacy, digital literacy and the ability of individuals to learn on an ongoing basis.

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Objectives:

- 1) To safeguard equity in access to information
- 2) To educate in reading
- 3) To spread information literacy among citizens
- 4) To counteract information monopolies and oligopolies in information organisation systems
- 5) Counteracting all forms of censorship and fostering bibliodiversity
- 6) Improving the quality of research and adapting professional tools to current needs
- 7) Promoting digital competence among citizens

4) Professional development and leadership

AIB is to contribute to the professional qualification and training of information professionals, both by cooperating with tertiary educational institutions in the sector and by organising training activities for the necessary continuing education in all areas of interest to libraries.

Objectives:

- 1) To enable librarians to continuously increase their professional knowledge and skills
- 2) To cooperate with the tertiary education system for the basic training of future professionals
- 3) To support librarians, especially members, in being protagonists within public, private, associative, national and international bodies, where the future of the world of education, knowledge, training, publishing, and the profession is debated
- 4) To direct library policies so that libraries can allocate sufficient resources to life-long learning

5) Equity, diversity, inclusion and social cohesion

The AIB recognises the value of diversity and pursues equity concerning the diversity of gender, ethnicity, ability, culture, and religion by promoting and supporting services for all and the development of the bibliodiversity of library collections. First and foremost, diversity must be recognised and valued within the library community itself.

Objectives:

- 1) To ensure that libraries are perceived and perceive themselves as places open to all people regardless of gender, ethnicity, ability, culture, religion
- 2) To make libraries increasingly accessible places
- 3) To work for equal opportunities in the profession regardless of gender, ethnicity, cultural ability, religion
- 4) To support libraries so that they can organise themselves and provide useful services to ensure the social cohesion of specific communities according to their needs
- 5) Building decolonised libraries and collections that take into account all points of view

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