

## 2.18 Books in the Third World: The Role of The Ranfurly Library Service

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### Introduction

*"Through lack of funds and chronic foreign exchange constraints, much of Africa is becoming a tragically **bookless society**, and the situation has deteriorated still further since 1983 [date of the previous edition]. Foreign exchange is so scarce that many university and public libraries have been unable to purchase any new books for the past five years at least, much less maintain their current periodicals collections. Most bookshops present a picture of empty shelves; schools are without books; and teachers and scholars are divorced from the material to pursue their studies, to maintain their understanding of developments taking place in their disciplines elsewhere in the world, and to keep their teaching and research up to date ... lasting damage is being inflicted across a whole generation of people going through either primary, secondary or university education in Africa today. A generation of students are now being taught by lecturers who are unable to gain access to current research and scholarship".*

(Hans Zell, *The African Book World and Press*, 4th ed., 1988, p. vii.)

*"Somehow we have to keep trying to get across the message that development is to some extent dependent on access to information, and most information is contained in publications ... It can hardly be argued that any country can develop far without educated people, or that education can be carried on without books ... It is not a question of choosing between information or health care: to provide food and health care in the longer term requires investment in information".*

(Maurice Line, 'Universal Availability of Publications in Less Developed Countries' in *Nothing to Read? The Crisis of Document Provision in the Third World*, ed. D. Membrey, 1990, pp. 35-44).

*"I have now returned to Nigeria and while I await the delivery of the first consignment I wish to indicate that the need for books here is just immense. Frankly there is no library here that has anything like current periodicals. Most libraries I have visited in the North since my return have scarcely added any new stock in the last eight years. I have visited some leading bookshops in Zaria, Ibadan, Owerri and Enugu and I find that the cost of textbooks is so high (compared to the average income) that it is no wonder that most students are unable to buy any at all".*

(Letter from Dr D Igbafe, Department of Animal Science, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria).

The above quotations give an idea of the problem. There is no shortage of people who can tell you at first hand how bad the situation currently is in the universities and tertiary institutions of the developing world, but what can be done in both the short- and the long-term to alleviate the problem?

The long-term solutions lie in two areas: firstly, building up in all countries a healthy publishing industry that can publish the majority of the literary output of the nation; secondly, the availability in all countries of enough hard currency so that books published overseas can be easily imported when necessary. These are situations that we in the West are so used to that it is difficult to imagine life without them. In the UK we publish some 65,000 new titles every year; in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa the annual publishing output is about a thousandth of that! What little is published tends to be predominantly school textbooks (a reasonably safe market) and moral or religious pamphlets (such ephemera are cheap to produce and are a sign of the lasting influence of the mission press in Africa). It is a sad fact that in many countries both the strength of the local currency and the viability of local publishers are deteriorating at the moment. So the long-term solutions to the book famine are receding into the distance year by year. Clearly some short-term 'disaster relief' measures are needed to help those whose requirement for books cannot wait.

## **Publishing in Africa**

A complex mesh of problems combines to make the publishing scene in Africa extremely fragile. Most people that have any experience of it agree that it will be many years before the publishers of sub-Saharan Africa are able to satisfy their own markets. The risk is that, in the meantime, the very market upon which such an industry depends will wither and die.

Paper production, printing, authorship, editorial skills, government support, distribution and advertising, all present their own particular problems. Not enough book-quality paper is produced (it is cheaper and safer to produce paper for packaging), wood has not yet been properly developed as a cash crop in Africa and even where papermills have been set up (as in Mafinga, Tanzania) other problems plague the process. The lack of suitable rolling-stock for the railways meant that it was not easy to transport the paper. Lack of foreign exchange meant that the lack of one small spare part could bring a huge machine to a halt for months. This is one unfortunate result of new technology that has hit both paper production and printing; as the machines get more complex, down-time increases. Some of the most reliable printers in rural Africa are the old mission presses that still use old letter-press machines. Ironically, some of the African papermills are forced to sell their paper overseas in order to earn the foreign currency they need to keep their machines going, consequently putting their paper financially out of the reach of the local printers. Paper production - or importation - is often controlled by the government as a covert means of censorship, especially of the popular press.

The printing and publishing market is often dominated by huge parastatal bureaucracies. Not the least of the problems with such organisations is that as soon as someone proves good at their job they are moved on to something else. They also kill competition because the government will make it very hard for small publishers to get into the textbook market (by far the most lucrative market for African publishers).

Many printers have given up on books and now only print labels, bags and wrappers. Like the paper producers they are plagued by a lack of foreign currency with which to buy spare parts, printing plates and chemicals. I have come across many books published in Africa that were in fact printed in the Far East!

The influence of the large publishing houses in Europe and the USA is also far from beneficial. There was a time a few decades ago when Nigeria was the biggest market for UK-published books outside of the UK. There are still many publishers in the West for whom the textbook market in Africa is still very important. Because of economies of scale these publishers can produce competitive textbooks (printed in the Far East) and market them intensively in Africa.

Distribution is probably the weakest link in this chain and is often left out of the equation altogether. As we all know from television documentaries about food aid, it is one thing getting produce to the main port or capital of a country but the logistics of distributing it to the far corners of the country are often literally insurmountable. We are now quite used to hearing of famine relief funds being spent on lorries; a few years ago that would have been considered extraordinary. Books are bulky and they are rarely considered a priority so they often have to wait at the back of the queue.

I have tried to give a general picture of the publishing scene in Africa in this section. I have conflated experience and knowledge gained from various anglophone sub-Saharan countries and, although the picture is better in some than in others, all these problems and many others are endemic throughout the region.

## **The Book Aid Scene**

*"In Africa I have seen rooms full of unusable books. Graciously received, and displayed during official visits, they consume needed accommodation and other resources ... Gifts of fewer, selected, especially requested, up-to-date books and journals can be a god-send".*

(Professor K Kirkwood, Letter, 18 January 1988, The Times.)

When faced with the true scale of the problem, it is very easy to get carried away and decide that anything would be better than empty shelves. In fact some things are worse than empty shelves. I have seen schools in Zambia where almost the only books were the rows of works of Kim Il Sung donated by the Korean Government: similarly I have seen university libraries that did not know what to do with 500 copies of one title donated by an American publisher when the library could barely justify one copy on its shelves. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of supplying only what is requested. There may be an eight-year run of a journal available in the UK, taking up many meters of shelf space but if (as often happens) overseas libraries only want the last ten years of the journal, then it is better to break up the set than waste time and money on collecting and shipping books that are not wanted.

Similarly with monographs, in a well-stocked UK library, out-of-date books that still have some useful sections can be of use; however, in a poorly equipped library with few academic or library staff to guide readers, it is very important that the few books that are available are 100% useful.

In the UK there are many professional or academic bodies and individuals that send books overseas on an ad hoc basis, usually doing it just once, though sometimes there is an ongoing commitment. Often a retired academic will endeavour to get his library to a university where he has links. Sometimes this is carried out independently, sometimes it is done with the help of an organisation such as the Ranfurly Library Service (RLS).

Large scale book aid in the UK is carried out by two organisations, RLS and the British Council. The British Council administers the ODA-funded Book Presentation Programme. This takes the form of grants given to institutions to spend a certain amount of money on UK published books. A list to the value of the grant is made out by the institution and the British Council orders the books.

## **The Ranfurly Library Service (RLS)**

RLS is Britain's largest book aid charity. It is an independent NGO, which works in partnership with people in over 70 developing countries. It despatches about 700,000 books every year and has been operating for over 35 years. RLS sends about 75% of its output to Africa; the rest goes to the Caribbean, South East Asia, Central America and the Pacific, with a small but growing percentage going to Eastern Europe. Currently about 25% of its output is at tertiary level.

Its aim is to support education and literacy in developing countries by providing relevant books in response to requests from libraries and educational institutions suffering acute book shortages. It achieves this by acquiring surplus books from UK donors (publishers, libraries and individuals), employing librarians with relevant experience to select from the donated stock and, where necessary, raising funds for the purchase of essential books. It is also a long-term aim to promote local publishing and library development.

RLS sends books through either the Donated Book Programme or new book projects. The Donated Book Programme involves the shipping of about 500,000 books a year. These are given to RLS by publishers, institutions and individuals and then matched up to the requests RLS receives from all over the world. Whenever possible we encourage the people requesting books to come and select personally from our warehouse. Over the last few years we have placed increasing emphasis on various new book projects. These involve raising funds specifically for the purchase of books that are often donated. The receiving institution selects the books they want and RLS ships them. We have recently carried out a project in cooperation with the Tropical Health and Education Trust that involved buying sets of essential texts on AIDS and sending them to rural health centres in Malawi and Ethiopia. We also worked with the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) to send core collections of books on African studies and development to universities in Tanzania and Nigeria.

RLS also has a commitment to supporting local publishing in the countries that we help. We do this indirectly by ensuring that our book donations are not likely to damage local publishing. An initiative that we have recently started to develop for the support of African publishers is the buying of books published in Africa for re-distribution in Africa. This is possible due to the existence of the African Books Collective (ABC) which is an umbrella organisation run by a group of African publishers to make their books available in Europe and the USA. The list is predominantly university level at present and represents about twenty publishers. By buying large quantities of books from these publishers, RLS is not only providing them with much-needed hard currency but also making their publications available in Africa. Ironically it is much easier to import books from one African country to the UK and then export them to other African countries than it is to transport them directly within Africa - a result of the continued existence of well-worn colonial trade routes.

**International Campus Book Link (ICBL).** This is a project that it is planned will operate as an element in the tertiary level program at RLS. It was set up with the help of various other organisations to try and make our book aid to universities more targeted. We hope that this project, once operational, will enable us to handle runs of journals much more easily than has so far been the case. A pilot version of ICBL was run in 1989/90 and once fundraising has been successful it is hoped that the full scale project will get under way later in 1991. The main difference between this project and the way RLS handles tertiary material at the moment is that we will have enough staff to be able to send out lists of books so that unwanted material can be vetoed by the receiving institution. ICBL will also set up a database of journal titles and issues that have been offered and requested.

## Conclusion

The aid agencies in the North and governments in the South need to attach more importance to publishing as an essential element in long-term development and as a crucial support to cultural independence. The whole question of the choice of language and the importance that has for a country's cultural and economic development cannot be faced until the country has the capacity to publish what it wants in the languages it chooses. The famous Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has only been able to start publishing in his native Gikuyu language now that he is well enough established in the English speaking world that his works are automatically translated; for most other Africans this is not an option.

Cooperative publishing and distribution projects are an answer to some of the problems mentioned above. An international publishing venture such as that proposed for SADCC countries ought to thrive but has no hope unless all the governments involved are firmly committed to it. The African Books Collective is another such venture that has already got off the ground but is still a long way from financial security. Most people in Europe and North America still would not think seriously about buying a book published in Africa, but without the foreign currency that we can provide they will never thrive. Even such an eminently sensible venture as ABC has faced many hurdles, harsh export controls and currency laws being the prevalent ones.

So far as the short-term relief, book aid, is concerned the most important development that is needed is a recognition by people with support to give (that is both books and money) that this form of aid is actually as important as any other. You only have to look at the huge improvements in perinatal mortality when the mothers are literate to see that no development is possible without information.

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## Some Useful Addresses

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)  
Sub-Saharan journals distribution program  
1333 H Street NW  
Washington DC 20005  
USA

This initiative began in 1985, now 88 professional societies and organisations provide more than 2,400 subscriptions to some 100 journal titles. These are sent to 150 university and research institutions in 35 countries.

Australian Centre for Publications Acquired for Development (ACPAD)  
International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges  
GPO Box 2006  
Canberra 2601  
Australia

Started in 1982 to collect academic books and journals for universities in developing countries. The scheme now involves some 50 universities in South East Asia and the Pacific. Publications offered by ACPAD are listed and these lists are circulated to libraries in the program so that they can select their requirements. However, if a large collection of books is offered, it is not cost-effective to list each title so the entire collection is offered on the understanding that unwanted material will be passed on to other libraries.

Netherlands Periodicals Project  
NUFFIC  
Institute of Social Studies  
The Hague  
The Netherlands

A small but efficient project that concentrates on the provision of back runs and current subscriptions of journals but which also arranges the shipment of collections of textbooks.

The Canadian Organisation for Development through Education (CODE)  
321 Chapel Street  
Ottawa  
Ontario K1N 7Z2  
Canada

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This is a large educational charity that has programmes dealing with the shipping of donated books as well as providing materials and training for local publishing projects.

The Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS)  
International Centre for Theoretical Physics  
P O Box 586  
34136 Trieste  
Italy

Formally founded in 1985, the aim of TWAS is to unite men and women of science from the Third World with the objective of enhancing the promotion and vitality of basic and applied sciences in the Third World through nurturing excellence and fostering the future generation of promising scientists. There is an extensive programme of research grants and fellowships as well as a scheme to provide spare parts for scientific equipment. TWAS also runs a journals and research textbooks scheme. They ship relevant material, to libraries and institutes in over 50 countries. If anybody has relevant material the cost of packing and transportation is covered by TWAS. TWAS also supports local publishing by buying a number of copies of popular scientific publications produced in the Third World for distribution to local libraries within the region.

African Books Collective Ltd (ABC)  
The Jam Factory  
27 Park End Street  
Oxford  
OX1 1HU

Tel: + (44) 865 726686

A major new self-help initiative by a group of about twenty African publishers to promote their books in Europe and North America. Used by RLS as a means of distributing African books within Africa. They include many of the most significant publishing houses in the following countries: Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa (represented by Skotaville Publishers) and Zambia.

Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA)  
23 Bevenden Street  
London  
N1 6BH

Tel: + (44) 71 251 1503

Established in 1986, the purpose of IFAA is to encourage research and discussion on contemporary problems in Africa. They run conferences, seminars and courses and produce a newsletter and occasional publications. They have been very active in publicising the plight of book-starved African universities and in raising funds to help alleviate this problem.

The International Group of the Library Association (IGLA)  
25 Bromford Gardens  
Westfield Road  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham  
B15 3XD

This body represents those members of the UK library profession who have an active interest in supporting and learning about libraries overseas. It holds seminars and conferences and publishes a quarterly journal, *Focus*. The most recent set of conference proceedings is of particular relevance to the book famine and is called: *Nothing to Read? The Crisis of Document Provision in the Third World*. Proceedings of the seventh conference of the International and Comparative Librarianship Group of the Library Association, Westhill College, Birmingham, 31 August - 2 September 1989, ed. D Membrey, 1990. The proceedings represent one of the few recent, in-depth studies of the book famine.

The African Book Publishing Record  
Hans M Zell, Editor  
Hans Zell Publishers  
Butterworths (Services) Ltd  
Borough Green  
Sevenoaks  
Kent  
TN15 8PH

This is the only journal covering the publishing scene in Africa in detail. It has, over the years, provided many excellent articles on all aspects of the book scene in the continent. One issue (vol. XVII, no. 1, 1991) has a report entitled 'Crisis in Third World Publishing: Recommendations for Action'. Besides publishing articles and reports, about half the space is taken up with a detailed subject, country and author index to books recently published in Africa.