

# TAKING AFRICA'S BOOK DISTRIBUTION PROBLEM HEADLONG

Without a local market for books, there is no future for African publishers.

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There is no doubt that the future of Africa's publishers lies largely in developing markets for their products. Educational publishing has a rationale relying largely on government educational policy (for example, in curricula), government procurement policy and government spending. This paper is concerned with general books and the specific challenge of readership and marketing.

Firstly, let us be aware that the development of book markets has seen little systematic attention by either development agencies or governments: we could go as far as saying that this indicates an almost complete misunderstanding of the role of books as tools of national development. Above all, it is evidence of failure to appreciate how book industries function and develop.

Diversity of output is the barometer of a healthy publishing industry, particularly when viewed from the angle of national book development. To achieve diversity in publishing you need many points of sale for reading material to reach as many potential book buyers as possible. General book output depends on the marketing network.

The narrow view, heard so often amongst bureaucrats that 'book security' can be measured purely in volume of production, is destructive. What is the function of 'the book'? It is a vehicle for knowledge, information, and culture. Even in a small country,

the scope of knowledge, information and culture needed for national development is immense. Books are tools, which, correctly mastered, provide consistent access to a means of empowerment. Surely, national development means raising the ability of the population, at all levels, to make appropriate decisions and take action. Books, carriers of information, are therefore an irreplaceable tool of national development.

At this point we must therefore ask what books? Carrying what information? African books, steeped in African philosophy, bearers of African history, vessels of African culture and view of life, providers of the technical knowledge needed in Africa? Or European books? American books? Is this essential tool of national development a mainly African resource or are we largely dependent on others for this resource? If it is the latter, let us be realistic: the supply of a strategic resource, vital for national interests is not in our control.

The reason for raising the issue in this way is that a reading culture cannot be based solely on imported books. These books do help to broaden our outlook, but they do not create readers. Only a national literature performs that function. In Africa, books are a modern method of conveying our literature. Many changes in the past two generations have removed the social basis for oral literature. It still exists, but it is not the force it once was. Moreover, it cannot communicate the extent and accuracy of information required in our technologically-powered

world. So we need books, we need to master readership and this we can do most effectively through a national literature, a thing that simply cannot be imported.

Creating readership has tended to be seen as one problem. It is not. It is many problems occurring simultaneously. It is an economic problem, a cultural problem and an educational problem. Above all, it is not a theoretical problem but a practical one and it requires practical measures, applied in harmony.

The educational problem, or issue, is where national educational planning has proved most deficient. As an ideal, books are the route to lifelong personal development. If the education of a nation is seen simply in terms of curricula, examination and certificate a huge potential in education is lost. Many ministries of education have a pitifully under-staffed and under-funded department of 'adult education'. What does adult education mean? It means throughout the nation there is literacy and access to books. A huge undertaking! Without underestimating textbooks, adult education is a major catalyst for national development and it relies on our so-called general books. It is a booming business in publishing industries of the North. It accelerates their technological progress in every conceivable way.

The cultural problem has been partly dealt with. You need relevant reading material to create readers. But it goes deeper. Where in Africa is the book-

buying ethos? The local community bookshop? Where are the parents who, naturally concerned about their children's well-being, buy books and read to their children?

The economic problem could be itself divided in two ways: the ability to pay for a book out of a severely stretched family budget; and the economics of book distribution which determines the public's access to books.

This is a practical problem so let me be practical. I wish to describe to you how we have attempted to tackle these complex issues in the Zimbabwe Book Marketing Trust, and why.

Firstly, we decided on fundamentals: we need readers and we need books. We decided that access to books was the key to readership. Our thinking was simply that without this access the development of readership is an impossible task. Therefore, first solve the access problem and secondly look at the other problems.

We discovered that this has a drawback, mentioned earlier, in that by the very nature of developing a 'book market' you face inter-related problems. They cannot be tackled one-by-one, but only as multi-faceted programme. Access to books remains the priority, but amongst a range of measures.

Bookshops and libraries are the normal means of creating access to books. But in Zimbabwe bookshops require capital and must be viable to succeed. We could not set up bookshops all over the country. Therefore, we concentrated on alternatives to bookshops.

We started to supply books by mail order. We advertised in the popular

local press, to the effect that through the post office you can get any locally available book wherever you are. And, we concentrated exclusively on local, relevant books. Although this project has grown painstakingly (because people are not used to mail order purchasing of anything) the extent of the response from every district in Zimbabwe has shown that books are needed and wanted by

operation, so this project remains on the drawing board.

The book clubs project have tried to tackle the issue of affordability. We said to people, get together and form a book club. Buy books jointly and share the price. If there are six of you, the price is one-sixth each. To create incentives, we went further and asked the publishers to give a bigger discount to our book clubs.

We also subsidized these books ourselves. Over forty book clubs have been formed in this way, but there are problems. The book clubs lack organizational skills. Book clubs are, in their way, hard work, and within the group somebody must take responsibility. Book clubs are in effect small informal libraries, run by their members. Our policy is never to give a book for free. We are trying to create a consumer culture of books, which we realized can be devastated by free books. Once you have got a

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people.

We worked out, as an estimate, that around one per cent of Zimbabwean adults are book consumers (i.e. they purchase one book per year). We learnt that the immediate aim is not to have on hundred per cent readership, an impossible task, but to expand general book consumption from one per cent to, say, two per cent. In Zimbabwe, that would be no mean achievement, almost an extra one hundred thousand book buyers.

We have plans on the drawing board to create mobile bookshops. The idea here is that if a permanent bookshop in a small town is not viable, what about a bookshop once a month? We have had mobile banks in Zimbabwe and we adopted a similar plan. Unfortunately, we have not been able to obtain funds to put this into

book free the idea of buying doesn't appeal.

To confront the cultural problem we have adopted several successful schemes. We publish a quarterly newsletter, called the *Grassroots Book News*. It talks about books with articles from all angles. It is sent free to libraries, mail order customers, book clubs and many others in both rural and urban areas. Its aim is to generate an interest and excitement about what is happening in the book world.

We have a project to take writers to the rural areas, literally to meet their potential readership. This has been a successful project and it has generated tremendous interest and excitement. When we take the writers out, we always take books - the two must go together. We have had national competitions, for example one called the Budding Critics Competition which called on people to write a critical

essay on their favourite author or book. The response was impressive.

We have supported the Budding Writers Association, a body of unpublished writers, for several years as a more general means of promoting the book culture. We have trained booksellers from Tanzania and also addressed meetings in Tanzania. We believe that in the long term the solution to many problems in book development lies in regional co-operation. We have supported the publishing of local books, such as the much-acclaimed *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on His Life and Work*.

One of Zimbabwe's pioneering bookshops, Grassroots Books, in Harare, and Bulawayo, has been associated with us since our inception. Grassroots Books, as a matter of policy, has promoted and stocked African books of all types from many countries. It has also been for a decade the primary source of all development literature in Zimbabwe, including political and social literature. It has made a major effort to promote appropriate books and intra-African book trade.

Grassroots Books has, in Zimbabwe, pioneered the importation of books from other African countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Botswana, South Africa, Nigeria, Zambia, Mozambique, Mauritius and many others.

We have also been associated with Anvil Press, a publisher devoted to the publishing of 'popular' books which serve the cause of reading.

In our efforts to generate markets for Zimbabwean books we have developed Zimbabwe's largest book export project of books published by Zimbabwean-owned publishers. About fifty thousand books have been exported to twenty-one countries, but mainly in the region in the past eighteen months.

As a specific project to develop new readers of Zimbabwean books in the 'North' we developed the South-North project. This project is aimed at development agencies and educational institutions in the North and it promotes Zimbabwean books. As a special part of the South-North project, book packs - that is, small thematic catalogues of Zimbabwean books - have been devised.

These activities as described form the main part of our marketing programme. They are all inter-related and have been designed that way. The principle is that African book development cannot be sustained without an expansion in readership and book distribution. Practically, to create readers requires four components, all of which you will have seen in our programme: affordable books; a book distribution infrastructure which creates access; reading matter which ordinary people identify with; information about books

and the promotion of books to new readers.

We view this in the long term. Results do not come overnight. The challenge of creating book markets and generating new readers and book consumers is a huge undertaking. It will take a decade or more to achieve the results we desire. Ideally, it is a task the government should support in the national interest.

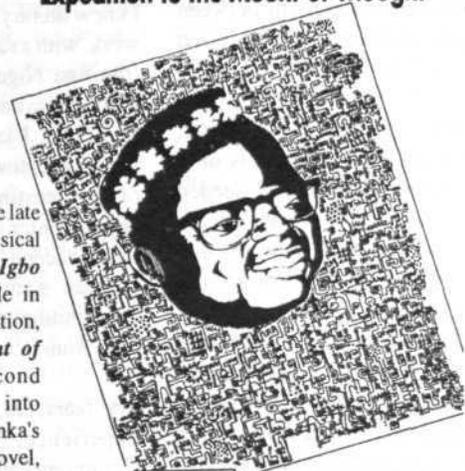
Unfortunately, governments do not fully appreciate the issues at stake and therefore we struggle on as best we can on a scale that comes nowhere near what is needed. However, the point is to start because we believe you must start somewhere.

Our efforts have confirmed over and over that our basic thesis is correct. The engine of book development is the creation of the book market and book consumers of African books. Without a market, there is no future for African publishers. **GR**



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