



Books change lives

Why books?

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Can books contribute to national development? At first sight, the answer seems obvious, given the huge publishing industry found in most developed countries. The world is relentlessly turning into an information and knowledge society. The World Summit on Information Society, held in Tunis in 2005, belatedly recognized this fact, one already expressed by sociologist Anthony Bell in his 1970s book *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*. Books and other information media are at the heart of this new world of development.

Yet the benefits of the information society arriving in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions of the world can be disputed. With many people having no clean drinking water or basic sanitation, let alone access to health centres and basic education, what role can books – harbingers and symbols of modernity – play?

The answer lies in the thirst for knowledge in developing countries and its desire to use the knowledge to address the problems associated with development. A West African elder was

once quoted as saying: 'Our basic need is knowledge. If you gave me a choice between money and knowledge, I would choose knowledge.' In an era inundated with hi-tech communication methods, books remain the simplest and cheapest means of conveying knowledge to the furthest reaches of Africa and to quench the thirst for development information. Electricity is not required to access the information in a book!

Developing societies need to change fast in order to keep pace with the rest of the world, and this requires new skills, attitudes, and practices. Gunnar Myrdal, in his book *Asian Drama*, identifies these requirements as: efficiency, diligence, orderliness, frugality, scrupulous honesty, liberation from static customs, abandoning group allegiance and favouritism, self reliance, abandoning superstitious beliefs and prejudices, being ready for change and alert to opportunities as they arise, and a willingness to take the long view. The implication being that vast quantities of knowledge are required for developing societies to reach the take-off stage in their development.

In many cases books are the only practical tool through which people can obtain the required skills in large enough numbers to accelerate the cultural change and development processes of their country. A few such books have already shown what is possible: David Werner's *Where There is No Doctor: A Village Health Care Handbook* is often mentioned across Africa as a book which has changed lives, alongside the Bible and the Koran.

So books are an agent of social change, but access to them remains a major challenge for most people in the developing world. They have low incomes, which prevent them from purchasing books, and this makes it impossible to sustain a viable book publishing industry. Of course, a good network of public and community libraries and school libraries could bridge the gap between supply and demand, but in most developing countries public and community libraries are only available in towns and cities, home to less than 30 per cent of the population. The top-down policies of library development, which have not been adjusted despite numerous evaluations showing their failings, condemn over 70 per cent of the population to a life without access to books. The book distribution process in many African countries is either very weak or doesn't exist at all, and government policies to strengthen this aspect of human capital development are lukewarm at best. Illiteracy among a sizeable percentage of the population is another challenge, one which is made more critical because those who have learnt to read and

write often relapse into illiteracy when there are no books for them to practice their literacy skills. In some countries, age-old gender customs driven by religious beliefs mean that women and girls may be forbidden to visit public reading places unless accompanied by a male chaperone, and a woman who dares to break this ancient code may suffer abduction, rape or other forms of humiliation.

A number of northern hemisphere NGOs, including Book Aid International, have begun to address this important but neglected facet of human development. They send books published in developed countries to libraries in developing countries. They support public, community and school libraries, and lobby governments in developing countries to enact policies which will support the local book publishing and distribution industries. For books can indeed contribute to human development – but only when the relevant books are put in the hands of those who need them most.

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