Sharing resources - how library networks can help reach education goals

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A research paper looking at libraries in Africa. Commissioned by Book Aid International.

Book Aid International works with partners in developing countries, to create reading and learning opportunities for people of all ages to realise their potential and alleviate poverty.
Executive Summary

Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names\(^1\).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the problems of illiteracy and the scarcity of learning resources gravely limit the opportunities people have to learn and to transform their circumstances. Policy change is needed to ensure people of all ages have access to relevant information. This in turn will support literacy, quality education, and underpin the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Public libraries offer a unique opportunity to provide practical and cost-effective solutions, with their principles of open access and resource sharing. They are well placed to offer learning resources to a wide public, in both print and electronic form. Libraries go beyond formal education: they are at the heart of personal and community development, and can provide equal access to information for women and girls. Libraries encourage and sustain literacy, and support the development of cultural industries such as publishing and bookselling.

But for this to happen, public library networks must be properly resourced, and recognised as mainstream for education and development. This paper argues that investing in books and libraries as part of strengthening the book sector as a whole is central to educational reform, literacy enhancement and subsequently poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge everyone who helped with the paper, including: Walter Bgoya, Carmelle Denning, Ali Mcharazo, Diana Rosenberg, Kelvin Smith, Philip Ziegler and the library services of the Gambia; Kenya; Malawi; Namibia; Sierra Leone; Tanzania; Uganda; and Zambia.

\(^1\)The State of the World’s Children (UNICEF, 1999)
Overview

Without a basic education, people have little scope for changing and improving their lives. Education brings opportunities for development, because it enables people to think critically and make informed choices. The ability to read is central to education.

Illiterate people are at a permanent disadvantage, often unable to better themselves and to play a full part in society. At a national level, it is not possible to have a skilled workforce without people who can read and write. People need literacy skills if they are to benefit from education, not just through school but for life. The ability to read is at the heart of self education and lifelong learning.

What are the conditions for learning to read, and for sustaining literacy skills? Ideally, a home environment where reading is encouraged, good teachers and schools, plentiful books which are relevant and up to date, and access to computers. Such conditions are likely to obtain in countries:

- which produce much of their written information, thus defining and preserving their own cultural identity;
- which have a common language;
- where the demand for reading materials is matched by the ability to afford them, and information technology is widely available;
- which have a strong infrastructure of authors, printers, publishers, booksellers, and librarians.

In these environments, many people can afford to buy books and computers – and those who can’t have access to the information they need through library services.

The contrast with sub-Saharan Africa is stark. Publishing and bookselling are fledgling industries, struggling to develop in an environment where there is virtually no purchasing power. In most countries there are many languages, some not written down. The vast majority of children who go to school are not educated in their mother tongue, the language they speak at home, yet research has proven that initially this is the best way develop strong literacy skills. There is a chronic shortage of relevant books and learning materials, and an increasing digital divide. The demands of Universal Primary Education have put huge pressure on education systems, with a rapid and dramatic increase in the number of pupils, and a corresponding demand for more teachers and learning materials. Even if relevant books were available, low family incomes would prevent their purchase. These issues lie at the heart of enabling personal and community development.

Context

The framework for tackling poverty

The turn of the Millennium saw a renewed commitment by countries and governments worldwide to the development of sub-Saharan Africa, with specific emphasis on poverty reduction. This commitment was outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), namely eradication of poverty and hunger, provision of free and compulsory primary education, promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, reduction of child mortality, improvement of health services, fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, management of the environment and development of regional trade.

The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) further translated these goals into region-specific objectives; among them, to place African countries on a path of sustainable growth and development, and to halt the marginalisation of Africa in the globalisation process and enhance its beneficial integration into the global economy. In the quest to achieve the MDGs and the NEPAD objectives, sub-Saharan African countries have launched national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). These provide a macroeconomic, structural and social framework to promote broad based growth and reduce poverty. Knowledge and technology transfer are fundamental to progress in all these areas.

Quality education for life

Education has emerged as pivotal in helping to reduce poverty by equipping people with the necessary skills to increase productivity and tackle the above goals. In PRSPs education has been highlighted as a prerequisite for the
development of human capital and hence critical for economic growth and poverty reduction.

This conviction has led policy makers and educationists in African countries to continue to seek ways of improving the provision of education in the region. Attention to educational reform in Africa has received equal attention from Northern donors and agencies. The World Bank, for example, asserts that education must not only meet the growing demands for workers to acquire new skills but also support the continued expansion of knowledge\(^2\). Education must be relevant, of high quality, and ideally continuous. A vital part of this continuous education is access to appropriate information - in print or electronic form - to help ensure that people’s skills are frequently updated to keep abreast of new demands.

**The need for learning resources**

The reality is that most people in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to books or other learning resources, and without such access, it is hard to establish a reading culture. This challenge is fundamental. Children and adults need access to a wide range of reading materials to help them acquire and maintain fluent reading skills, broaden horizons, and think independently and critically. Improving access to relevant information and promoting a reading culture are prerequisites for strengthening literacy skills, widening education and learning opportunities, and helping people to address the causes of poverty.

After teachers, books are the principal medium for the transfer of knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, the region’s book sector is still young. Despite the fact that it accounts for 12% of the world's population, Africa produces a mere 2% of the world’s books. Such low output is insufficient to reduce levels of illiteracy; currently only 65% of the population are literate\(^3\). It is estimated that sub-Saharan Africa imports close to 70% of its books\(^4\). The majority are tertiary and vocational training books costing an average of US $25 per copy, which is far beyond the reach of the vast majority of people. Compare this with the statistic from the official MDG website that, in sub-Saharan Africa, 314 million people live on less than US $1 per day.

**Literacy, books and educational attainment**

**Literacy**

Illiteracy remains the greatest single barrier to getting on in life. Reading is not only about enjoyment; it is a necessity, the basic tool of education. To be unable to read basic instructions, for example those on a medicine bottle, is to go through life permanently at a disadvantage.

A 1995-1998 study by the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) measured primary school students reading literacy against standards established by national reading experts and sixth grade teachers. In four out of seven countries, fewer than half the sixth graders achieved minimum competence in reading. This study was compared with another done by SACMEQ two years later, which saw literacy scores falling even further in five out of six countries\(^5\).

This issue goes beyond schooling. Parents who cannot read themselves are unable to help their children to read, and the cycle continues. That is why the drive for literacy in schools must go hand in hand with the drive to promote literacy in adults.

Although formal education provides the ground for the germination of literacy, literacy skills can be lost within a few years without regular use. Education policies should set a framework for maintaining literacy after formal education has ceased. Promoting reading and providing relevant reading materials are the keys to sustained literacy.

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\(^2\) Priorities and Strategies for Education, A World Bank Review (The World Bank, 1995), p1

\(^3\) Source: World Bank, Literacy Rate, adult (% of people ages 15 and above), 2002

\(^4\) Expanding the Book Trade Across Africa, Ruth Makotso (ADEA/APNET, 2000), p2

\(^5\) Education for All - The Quality Imperative EFA Global Monitoring report (UNESCO, 2004), p1
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Books and educational attainment
Numerous studies have given evidence of the link between the availability of books and educational attainment. For instance, Elley’s 1996 study on reading promotion in developing countries:

There are many potential benefits in a good book, provided it grasps and holds students’ interest. Not only do students expand their language by reading widely, they also learn much about other times and places, stimulate their imagination, gain insights into human nature, are able to follow their specific interests and hobbies, and enjoy an escape from unpleasant realities. And once children learn to appreciate books, they will read more often and improve their skills.¹⁶

Regular access to books while at school and developing the habit of reading for pleasure have dramatic results in terms of increased vocabulary, text comprehension, and an improvement in writing skills and self expression. In an experiment in Sri Lanka in 1996 described by Elley, the provision of basic collections of attractive reading materials and the introduction of very simple practices, such as a silent reading period at the beginning of the school day and the reading of stories to children, almost doubled reading scores in a few months. If there is a significant general improvement in reading, comprehension and writing skills, it is bound to have an impact on learning and performance in all other curriculum subjects.

The key role that books can play in giving children a good start in life is recognised by the UK government, which has recently pledged support for Bookstart, the books for babies scheme. Bookstart aims to give free books to every baby in the UK. The scheme is being extended to provide packs to children up to the age of three.

If books can have such an impact on educational attainment in the UK where information is so plentiful, the impact is likely to be greater in sub-Saharan Africa, where learning resources are so scarce.

Educational reform: is quality compromised?

Universal Primary Education: quantity and quality
Since the declaration of the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000 that countries should achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015, enrolment in schools in a number of sub-Saharan countries has risen tremendously. In Uganda for example, it has grown from 2.5 million pupils in 1997 to 7.7 million in 2004.²⁷ While this can be said to have contributed towards raising literacy levels³, it has also introduced major challenges. The increase in the number of pupils per class has caused the per pupil budget to fall, severely stretching resources and compromising quality for quantity.

This had led analysts of UPE to raise a pertinent point: improved access to education should not overshadow the issue of educational quality. The success of development-oriented education policies depends on the combination of increased access for girls and boys alike, and improved quality. The movement in favour of basic education might be wasted if children go through school without acquiring the minimum skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.⁴⁹

Local language publishing
These difficulties are compounded by the complex issue of local languages in Africa. In many countries it is government policy that pupils should be taught in their mother tongue for the first few years of primary schooling. But the local language books are often not published. The issue is complex because there are so many

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¹⁶ Warwick B. Elley, “Using book floods to raise literacy levels in developing countries”, in Promoting Reading in Developing Countries, ed. Vince Greaney (International Reading Association, 1996)
³ Adult literacy 68.9% in 2002; 56.1% in 1990: Human Development Report website (15/11/2004)
⁴ Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Newsletter, Volume 15, Number 2-3 (2003), p13
local languages and many are not written down (in Kenya for example there are 29 languages classified as mother tongue). Yet given that research has proved that literacy skills are initially acquired most effectively in mother tongue, much more needs to be done to address this issue. Local publishers need to be supported to develop appropriate materials, which are made widely available to schools and libraries, so a child’s initial reading experiences are grounded in something familiar which gives a solid basis for learning other subjects. Local language materials are equally critical for adults to acquire literacy skills.

**Learning resources for schools**

In many schools that are trying to meet government targets for UPE, there is an acute lack of textbooks, let alone supplementary reading materials. It is common for one textbook to be shared between six or more pupils, and often there are no textbooks at all. This puts more pressure on teachers. In many low income countries some teachers do not even meet the minimum standards for entry into teaching and some have not fully mastered the curriculum. Both teachers and pupils need access to a wide range of learning resources, to support the quality of teaching in the classroom.

School library creation has been neglected. The 2000 Education for All Assessment revealed that the majority of schools in sub-Saharan Africa possessed no library. Where some semblance of a school library existed, it was often no more than a few shelves of outdated and worn out material. In addition to the challenges of delivering UPE, what can be done about school libraries?

The fundamental aim should be continuous access to relevant learning materials, and strategies to ensure that teachers appreciate the importance of reading, and can therefore motivate their pupils to read widely. This is not an optional extra. Fluent reading and comprehension skills are the foundation of educational attainment.

**Libraries: for education, community development and lifelong learning**

**Realising the potential of libraries**

With adequate support and a coherent policy framework, libraries can provide practical solutions. They offer a unique and cost effective means of providing access to information for all, because resources are shared. In the context of great scarcity that exists in sub-Saharan Africa, libraries have a more important role than in the North - they are the ‘universities of the people’. Those who benefit from communally held resources include distance learners (for example teachers studying to gain qualifications) the poor, people with disabilities, and women and girls.

A cost effective strategy for equipping schools with library resources is to link them with the public library network. In Kenya, for example, the community library in Karatina has introduced school book boxes of supplementary reading materials, transported by motor bike, each box rotating among a number of schools. Through this initiative, teachers from the benefiting schools are trained in basic library skills. Reading materials for the schools are regularly replenished, using book stocks from the library as a sustainable source of supply.

Libraries can be at the heart of personal and community development: encouraging and sustaining literacy, and supporting education for all. Libraries also support non formal education, and give equality of access to information to women and girls.

Books in Africa are usually closely associated with study and the need to pass exams. To broaden perceptions, library services and book development councils have introduced children’s reading tents in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The reading tents introduce young children to reading in a non formal environment, as an activity to be enjoyed, with games, competitions and story telling. The aim is

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10 Education for All - The Quality Imperative EFA Global Monitoring report (UNESCO, 2004), p10, p20
to inculcate an enduring love of reading, which will underpin learning in the classroom. Following the reading tents, books are placed in schools and training provided to teacher librarians. Community reading tents are also used to encourage parents to read with their children, and to attract new users in remote rural areas.

The Children’s Book Project is an NGO in Tanzania which publishes children’s readers in Swahili. They are working with schools to develop reading skills by providing access to readers on a class by class basis. Creative activities are encouraged, for example children write and make their own books. These books are placed in a community library which is part of the school, so adults as well as children can benefit from the resources that are available.

Often more boys than girls are enrolled in school, and this is reflected in the usage of libraries. Unfortunately this continues beyond school age. More women and girls must be encouraged to use libraries. To this end, Zambia Library Service has introduced Women’s Corners in three of its provincial libraries (Solwezi, Mongu and Choma). These corners are looked after by women from the community and have information particularly of interest to women, for example, books about childcare, food production and farming.

Libraries can provide information about all sorts of issues which can help alleviate poverty, and act as a focal point for the community. They can host local forums where people can talk through problems, such as HIV/AIDS and community health, or civil and human rights, as well as building the local capacities of businesses, industry and agriculture.

Most public and school libraries in Botswana have created HIV/AIDS corners, which give focus and emphasis to HIV/AIDS as an issue needing daily confrontation. Through the corners, young people are targeted with fiction titles covering different aspects of the disease and how it comes about.

Libraries need not be made of bricks and mortar, but can adapt to the environments of their users, especially those living in rural areas. This calls for creativity and innovation, for example, the donkey cart mobile library in Zimbabwe and the camel mobile library in Kenya where the animals are used to transport books from the regional library branches into the interior communities. These mobile libraries are also suitable for serving nomadic communities and refugees whose dwellings are non-permanent.

The effectiveness of all these initiatives rests on a sustainable supply of relevant materials. With more support the role of libraries in sub-Saharan Africa could be greatly enhanced, not least in the provision of IT based information, which will be discussed below.

**Working against the odds - the challenges faced by libraries in Africa**

The infrastructure of public libraries that exists in sub-Saharan Africa has been largely neglected by governments and the international development community. Dwindling public funds has made it hard for library services to extend their networks. For instance in Uganda the government’s development budget for libraries amounted to just $75,000 (US) over the last five years, to cater for both capital expenditure and book buying.

In the UK, the library network extends to every community (there are 3,500 public libraries including mobile services). It is very different in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Kenya, with its population of 32 million, and large literate population of over 15 million, has only 36 public libraries. Namibia has 48, and Zambia 22. Yet librarians have developed low cost ways of extending the reach of their services, targeting rural and disadvantaged communities. In Kenya, 21 libraries were established when the local communities provided a building and equipment, and the library service provided training and books. In Malawi the library service has established 200 community library centres, as well as

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providing resources for 900 schools. A similar programme operates in Zambia.

Existing library structures in Africa (buildings and trained staff) should enjoy investment of resources and new initiatives, so that libraries respond to the information needs of urban and rural people in Africa. Much work has been done exploring models for information provision in Africa. Community Information Resource Centres (CIRCs) have been developed in Ethiopia for people working at the grassroots in villages, towns and rural areas, who wish to transform their communities through information sharing. Local people identify their information needs, and high status is accorded to indigenous knowledge and locally generated information. A well functioning CIRC will provide information from internal sources within the community, as well as external sources such as books, newspapers, radio, audio visual materials and the Internet. Such approaches offer excellent opportunities for libraries. Support and encouragement should be given to such initiatives, so libraries can realise their potential to meet education and community information needs.

Information and communication technologies

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have great potential to help bridge the information gap between developed and developing countries. Information available in electronic format and through the Internet can supplement and in some cases replace that available in print.

Technologies are developing faster than ever imagined, leading inevitably to a split between those who can access and utilise technology and those who cannot. In the North, society has integrated ICTs into its development strategies, which has made access to information easier, faster and cheaper. For example in the UK, public libraries have secured government funding for computers in every library as part of the ‘people’s network’, aimed at addressing the digital divide within the UK, and making sure no-one need be excluded from the information revolution.

In sub-Saharan Africa most libraries already have Internet connectivity, in particular access to e-mail, but almost none are providing Web-based library information services to users. ICT facilities are not yet therefore being used directly to benefit user communities. The challenges are complex. They include lack of funds; inadequate telephone systems, electricity supplies hardware and software; limited skills for maintenance and training in the use of computers, and in the development of e-services. Since the late 1990s, telecentres have begun to emerge in the developing world. By providing tools and skills to enhance communication and access to information, telecentres are seen as an important development tool. Yet many telecentres have proved to be unsustainable, lacking the necessary infrastructure and being too reliant on external donor funding.

By using an infrastructure that exists, public libraries and community resource centres are ideally placed to serve as universal access points to global information in their communities. They could give access to a wide range of technology, from radios to the Internet and have computers available for people to explore and learn through experimentation. The potential of libraries to serve this purpose was recognised at the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003:

In disadvantaged areas, the establishment of ICT public access points in ... libraries...can provide effective means for ensuring universal access to the infrastructure and services of the information society.

The need for training and for information resources
Investment is needed in training to upgrade and refresh the skills of librarians. Many libraries in Africa are run by personnel who were trained in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

15 Sharing Knowledge Handbook 2 Dr Kingo J Mchombu (Oxfam Canada, 2004)


and ‘70s when the context was very different. Today topical issues include poverty eradication, HIV/AIDS, adoption of new technologies, income generation, and globalisation. Librarianship curricula have to be reformulated and staff retrained to provide services that reflect the present-day environment. Such training should be outward looking and include advocacy, public relations, and community mobilisation.

The role of professional librarians has changed worldwide, no longer the keeper of books but the provider of information and learning opportunities. This point is made in a Ugandan study in 2000:

A library is not a shrine for the worship of books, but ought to be a ‘maternity room’ of ideas, a workshop for creativity. In Africa, librarians have a crucial role to play, since they provide the only environment in which most people can access books. They need not only to attract reluctant readers, but to expose people to the joys and benefits of reading. Librarians can open up reading choices, increasing readers’ enjoyment and offering opportunities for people to share their reading experiences.

As for information resources, books remain the basic tools for literacy and learning in Africa, and they need to be made widely accessible through libraries. As well as textbooks to support the curriculum, supplementary reading materials are needed in local languages, to foster literacy skills. Locally generated and indigenous knowledge is needed to reflect community information needs. Books are needed in English, since in most anglophone African countries this is the medium of instruction in schools from midway through primary school. Equally important is relevant information about key development issues. For example books reinforcing positive role models are particularly important for girls. The demand for, and acute shortage of, books at all levels cannot be overestimated. Local publishing industries cannot currently meet all these needs (see below). In these circumstances there is a legitimate case for well managed donated book schemes, particularly when in the rich, industrialised world there is such a surplus of good books.

At the same time, there is a need to develop electronic information services. Books and ICTs complement each other. The Internet offers immediate access to information, both international and national. Networked information is not limited by physical constraints like the book. Radio and audiovisual materials can increase the range of information sources for the library, while access to newspapers can play a key role in maintaining literacy skills.

Change at policy level
Sub-Saharan governments need to grasp the advantages of exploiting library services in meeting the economic and social challenges of communities. Policy on library development should not end at the documentation stage, but should reflect the commitment of governments to enabling people to integrate and access relevant information so as to improve their lives socially and economically.

Information is a pre-requisite for education and skills development and should therefore receive priority during the allocation of resources.

Given the scarcity of resources, efforts must be made to avoid duplication when it comes to setting up specialist information centres, for example for teachers, HIV/AIDS, or agriculture, to ensure best possible use is made of existing library networks. Libraries can and should be equipped to play a pivotal role in development initiatives. They need to be encouraged to develop partnerships with other sectors, and to adopt innovative approaches to resource sharing. With sufficient investment and support, libraries could have a major positive impact on the achievement of the MDGs.

References

18 Language and Literacy in Uganda: Towards a Sustainable Reading Culture, ed. K Parry (Fountain Publishers, 2000), p84
19 Reader Development and Reading Promotion: Recent Experiences from Seven Countries in Africa ed. Diana Rosenberg, (INASP, 2003), p14
20 Learning Development Francois Matarasso (The British Library Board, 1998) p1
21 A Study to Establish the Various Players in the Library and Information Services Sector (Uganda Business Information Network, 2004)
A healthy book industry supports the growth of strong libraries

The precondition for sustainable library development is the availability, accessibility and affordability of relevant reading materials - which can inspire people’s interest, involvement and confidence in reading. In this way, a vibrant local book industry helps to sustain a literate population. Books must be written and published, distributed widely through booksellers, and then made accessible through libraries or other outlets. Given the minimal purchasing power in Africa, publishing and bookselling are small and struggling industries and therefore local book production is still low. With adequate support, libraries have the potential to act as a driver for the cultural and commercial development of publishing and bookselling, and to strengthen relationships among these industries.

**Strengthening the book sector as a whole**

Books are part of a complex process involving many players and policy issues. To meet local demand, African authors and scholars need to be encouraged to research and write more books, including those in local languages. A strong book chain, linking author to reader, via publishers, booksellers and libraries is essential. A vital part of nurturing this sector is to minimise taxes and tariffs on books and the raw materials used to produce books. This will help to ensure the creation, supply and access of appropriate and affordable reading material for people.

Potential for cross-border trade is minimal because most books published in the region are textbooks (65%), tailored to unique national curricula. In order to raise the book sector’s level of economic output, book markets need to be expanded by supporting the increase of academic, vocational training, fiction and general interest books that can be traded across borders.

Additionally, considering the lack of training opportunities for people working in the book sector, and the fact that the majority of employees are self-trained, support to the book sector should include training in writing, editorial and book production in order to increase the quantity and improve upon the quality of locally published books.

ICT in Africa, especially new technologies in book production and printing should be developed, for example print on demand. Such initiatives will contribute to reduced costs in information packaging and dissemination, while improving its access. Training and financial support should be extended to publishers, booksellers and librarians to enable them to understand and harness ICT.

Of equal importance therefore, and in tandem with library development, the development of the local book sector needs to be supported as a way of effecting home-grown, cultural and sustainable solutions to book provision, reading promotion and sustenance of literacy.

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Conclusions and recommendations

Public library networks already exist in sub-Saharan Africa, but support is needed if they are to realise their full potential. Book and information needs are vast. Governments both in Africa and the developed world should take note and include the proposals of this paper in their funding strategies, taking into consideration the cited successful practices.

These are the key issues that need be addressed:

Policymakers need to recognise that libraries have a key role to play in the delivery of education goals and in maintaining people’s literacy skills for life. Library networks should be included in all relevant PRSPs and country strategy papers, and libraries should be encouraged to form partnerships to avoid duplication of effort.

Increased funding is vital: to increase the size of library networks; to build staff capacity in areas such as reading promotion; to equip libraries with good, relevant book stocks; to ensure that libraries can take advantage of new technologies and share these with local communities.

As part of teacher training programmes, teachers themselves should clearly understand the importance of reading. Only then will they be truly committed to promoting the reading of supplementary reading materials among their pupils.

For libraries to function effectively, the whole book sector must be strengthened, creating a supportive environment in which local authors, publishers, booksellers and libraries can work together and flourish. Local language publications must be made available to support the acquisition of literacy skills for children and for adults.

Within agreed policy structures, surplus books (provided they are needed, relevant and requested) donated from the North to African countries have an important role in supporting education. As the home of the English language, and of an international publishing sector, the UK has a unique role to play in this respect.
Books contribute to the transmission of knowledge, a knowledge which is intellectual, emotional and practical. There are books for all ages and all times. Indeed, with an extraordinary variety of genres, books are the most accessible and cheapest means of communication around.

Véronique Tadjo, author and artist, Côte d’Ivoire

Nobody who has been in a developing country and seen the hunger for the written word could ask what is the point of Book Aid International. This is a cause which I recommend to you with all my heart.

Alexander McCall Smith, author, UK