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THE BUSINESS OF BOOK PUBLISHING IN AFRICA

*Document\* prepared by Mr. Brian Wafawarowa, Managing Director, New Africa Books,  
Cape Town, South Africa*

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\* The views expressed in this document are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the WIPO Secretariat or its Member States.

## Publishing Against the Odds: Innovative Publishing Models for the Developing World: A Case Study

Compared to the developed world, the African and the developing world's book publishing industry is too dependent on textbook publishing and procurement by the state, the World Bank and donor agencies. The findings of the APNET/ADEA research of 2000, where more than 95% of all books published are textbooks still rings true today.<sup>†</sup> The very little trade publishing that happens outside education publishing is often subsidised by education publishing and the procurement is through state institutions like public and school libraries. While education publishing has been prioritised because of the urgency of education after independence in many African countries, the shortcomings of education publishing are as follows:

- too dependent on the state, the world bank and donor funding which are by their nature seasonal temporary and unsustainable
- limits the creativity of authors and publishers due to the specificity of curricula
- do not enhance the free flow of books between geographical and cultural boundaries due to the idiosyncrasies of curricula
- do not enhance lifelong habits of reading due to the instructional and institutional nature of their content.
- do not contribute significantly to the development of the book industry as a sustainable commercial and cultural sector
- Obsessed with differences in dialect and strict curriculum requirements.

Yet if Africa and the developing world have to:

- create dialogue with the rest of the world along the UNESCO protocol on the Free Flow of books;
- explore greater creativity through books;
- engender a culture of reading among its population and
- develop and sustain the book sector.

It is imperative that we take a serious look at general publishing. For this reason, this presentation will look at the challenges facing general book publishing in Africa in general and South Africa in particular and make recommendations on how best to go about publishing for Africa and the developing world around these challenges. I will be looking at some of the initiatives that we have taken to work around these challenges. I will be focussing on South Africa and New Africa Books, not because they are the only examples but because I am more familiar with these examples.

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<sup>†</sup> APNET/ADEA survey on Intra-Africa Trade, 2000.

The challenges facing general book publishing in Africa include:

- limited economies of scale that are a result of
- linguistic fragmentation at national and continental level
- little disposable income
- low literacy levels
- preference by African authors to be published outside the continent.

The reasonable economies of scale that are presented by a shared cultural heritage; shared languages; common socio-economic issues and a relatively large population are difficult to exploit due to:

- vast discrepancies between national currencies
- huge trade tariffs between countries
- significant disparities between national production quality and production standards
- inadequate general economic infrastructure and
- high distribution costs against the material value of books as dense cargo
- Stifling VAT and tax on books in different countries.

It is clear from the above noted problems that for the trade book publishing sector to be sustainable and for any publisher to survive in this industry there is critical need to harness innovative ways of tapping into the economies of scope and overcome the trade barriers. Developments in information and communication technology have played a critical role in overcoming some of the barriers.

New Africa Books as a publisher based in Africa has grappled with some of these publishing challenges and has had significant success with all the three projects involved. One of the projects involved a collaboration with Africa World Press in the United States; ZED Books in London; James Currey Publishers in London and Ian Randle Publishers in Jamaica. This is referred to as Example 1 below. The other project involved the publication of children's books across the African continent in collaboration with Edicef in France and African Christian Books (ACP) in Ghana. This is referred to as Example 2 below. The third and most recent is the Stories Across Africa Project in collaboration with the African Union, its Academy for African Languages (ACALAN) and the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA). The publishing approaches in these three case studies clearly illustrate how the various barriers listed above can be overcome or mitigated.

#### EXAMPLE 1 / COLLABORATION WITH INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS IN THE US, THE UK AND THE CARIBBEAN

##### Description of Project:

Highly specialised social studies and academic books on African studies, politics, development and the Diaspora. The content is vital for purposes of social studies and personal enquiry. These are very prestigious publications but are economically dicey and not sustainable for publishing in any one region due to the small size of the market.

James Currey, ZED Books and Ian Randle publishers are probably some of the leading publishers of these types of books in the world. Through their reputation they are the preferred publishers of this content by authors. The books are so specialised and the market is so small that even the market in Europe which James Currey and ZED can reach, is not sufficient to make this type of publishing a commercially viable undertaking. The authors are usually reputable African, African-American and Caribbean scholars who prefer to be published in Europe and the United States, yet the content is vital for the African market and the Diaspora as well, since the issues they address focus on the African continent and its interaction with the rest of the world.

Africa World Press is arguably the leading publisher of African content outside the continent. The prestige of the authors and the profile of the books are very similar to ZED's. The economies of scale that they face are as restrictive as the ones faced by ZED and James Currey.

In this example, it is important to emphasise the Diaspora dimension. Ian Randle Publishers are probably the biggest publishers of general books on the Caribbean with an international appeal. The constraints that they face are similar to those of ZED, James Currey and Africa World Press.

It is important to note that neither New Africa Books nor any of the three publishers listed above can afford to publish these important books for their territories alone as the markets are just too small. New Africa Books entered into agreements with all of them to ensure that the books that they publish can be "repatriated" to Africa and that those that New Africa Books publishes can be availed to the audience in their regions. The model that was used with all of them included various market informed models as follows:

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|------------|---|
| Category 1 | books with sales potential of less than 100 copies per annum. NAB bought copies directly from the publisher and distributed them in South and Southern Africa along territorial rights granted. NAB did not necessarily hold stock but ordered on demand with a time delay of approximately 3 months.   |
| Category 2 | Books with market potential between 100 and 200 copies per annum. NAB bought and held stock in significant quantities. Stock is projected and built into originating publisher's print run. The discount in these books is higher than in category 1 and NAB takes the risk of holding stock.   |
| Category 3 | Books with sales potential above 200 copies per annum. NAB entered into co-publishing arrangements with originating publishers and got all its details included on the cover and the imprint pages as if it was the originating publisher. NAB would have its stock printed together with the stock of the originating publisher and that of other developing world regions with similar arrangements with the originating publisher. |

Benefits.

NAB has been able to publish books that it would not have been able to publish on its own and that would not have been offered to it by the authors. The reputation of NAB as the “*definitive gateway to new African content*” was enhanced by this arrangement and most importantly we were able to bring back vitally important content back to Africa and get ours to a broader global audience. In a small way we think we have helped reduce the inequity in the exchange of content between Africa and the North.<sup>‡</sup>

The arrangement enabled the originating publisher to build up adequate scale to publish books that they would not have been able to publish on their own.<sup>§</sup>

Print on demand technology has always been an option for NAB and I guess for all the other partner publishers but this would have fragmented the print run and made the books prohibitively expensive for all of us individually.

Challenges

While this model has been very successful the following challenges were experienced:

- courier costs were significant and the cost of moving cargo as dense as books were disproportionate to realisable value of the book on the market
- The collapse of the Rand against the dollar and the pound between 2002 and 2003 and the volatility that followed thereafter challenged the model significantly
- The changing business circumstances of the partners presented regular challenges.

While we continue to use this model with all the partners, the reduction in the price of print on demand technology has encouraged us to explore trading in territorial rights and doing small print runs for the local market. This has the potential to take care of the foreign exchange challenges as well.

## EXAMPLE 2 LE CAMELEON VERT/ NEW AFRICAN STORIES DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Edicef, a French publisher with limited presence in Africa published the most comprehensive series of children’s books in Africa under its le Cameleon Vert series. These stories, which included modern stories and folklore were collected from all over the continent and originally published in French. The books are ideal for children between the ages of 5 and 12 outside the curriculum and are useful supplementary reading books for schools as well.

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<sup>‡</sup> The APNET ADEA survey of 2000, indicated that while the African continent consumes approximately 13% of all the books produced in the world, it contributes less than 3% to book output.

<sup>§</sup> At the African Scholarly publishing conference held in 2002 in Zanzibar, James Currey indicated that were it not for the partnership that his company had in various parts of the world, he would not have had adequate scope even to publish for his domestic market in the United Kingdom.

We thought that it was important to make these books available to African children in other parts of the continent too.

New Africa Books entered into a publishing consortium with African Christian Press and Edicef. African Christian Press and New Africa Books bought publishing rights and electronic files from Edicef. The territorial rights included Southern Africa for New Africa Books and West Africa for African Christian Press. African Christian Press and New Africa Books replaced the text files from Edicef with new text files including English, Akan and all the of the 11 South African languages across 8 titles. The consortium allowed us to increase the print run from 40 000 copies across the 8 titles to 240 000 copies. Printing was done together between ACP and NAB and stock and costs were shared accordingly. The partnership allowed us to reduce the unit cost of these books from an initial quote of 52 US cents to 29 US cents. There is no way a conventional publishing arrangement or right transaction would have allowed us to make such high quality full colour illustrated books from all over the continent available to African children. During the publishing process the publishers met once and made fast exchange of material and raised queries on line. The text for each region was adapted to accommodate the cultural and linguistic nuances.

New Africa Books has since expanded the list from 8 to 40 titles across all the South African languages, including the minority languages of Pedi; Venda; Tsonga and Ndebele. The list has become the most extensive and most popular children's book list in South Africa and the continent and on its own contributes more than 25% of NAB's annual revenue. This project illustrates how good books can be published profitably and affordably through:

- Increasing economies of scale through collaboration
- Managing linguistic and cultural nuances through adaptations
- Manipulation of available technology to reduce costs
- Repatriation of African content back to Africa for the benefit of African readers
- The creation of a starting base by working on existing content from bigger companies and expanding thereafter.

### EXAMPLE THREE

#### Description of Project

The African Union declared 2007 the Year of African Languages and has been working through its Academy for African Languages (ACALAN) to look at how the children on the continent can share stories in the official languages of the union. ACALAN in turn turned to the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) for implementation. On the success of the New Africa Stories, PRAESA asked NAB to do a presentation on a publishing model. New African Stories was selected as the best model for Stories Across Africa and NAB became the lead publisher. New Africa Books role was to co-ordinate the biggest publishing initiative on the continent. The project involves publishing 16 booklets for children from birth to 5 years in all the languages of the Union. These include Swahili; French; English; Portuguese and Arabic. We have since expanded the project to include Amharic;

Kinyarwanda; Twi; 10 South African indigenous languages and 4 Mozambican indigenous languages . The project involves publishers from Rwanda, Kenya; Ghana; Mozambique and

South Africa. Each publisher has indicated the number of copies they will need in various languages. The publishers and experts from each region have been involved in making input on the language, illustrations and cultural nuances.

This has been particularly helpful in setting different and unfamiliar languages like Amharic and Arabic. The joint print run which will take the complete run above 500 000 copies has reduced the unit cost significantly and allowed us to make these books available at an affordable price, including poor countries that would not have afforded this. The African Union is distributing a number of copies in its official languages to different Countries.

In addition to the benefits that we have derived from example 1 and 2 above, this project has assisted in giving the African Union some practical example of its campaign along the African renaissance, African Unity and NEPAD, concepts which have been regarded as empty political rhetoric and unfulfilled aspirations. In addition to making shared stories available to children all over the continent, there are significant economic benefits for the publishers involved. Following significant demand from the other regions and other languages, the project will be expanded in April next year.

In this presentation I have tried to argue that general publishing is a better indicator of the level of development of any publishing sector. I have highlighted some of the problems that inhibit publishing and distribution of general books across the continent, against the need to exchange books on Africa across the continent and with the rest of the world. Through the case studies I have tried to show how some of these challenges can be overcome through the creation of better economies of scale and how collaboration and simple production technology can be utilised to achieve this. While these projects have been aimed at alleviating the content needs on the continent it has also allowed us to get the books that we originate available to other parts of the world as the books in the Little Books for Little Hands and in our collaboration with the publishers in Example 1, have been sold to the rest of the world. This innovation is borne of necessity, as sometimes, this is the only way one can publish successfully in a developing world context.

Brian Wafawarowa  
NEW AFRICA BOOKS  
CAPE TOWN  
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