

## **Publishing for Africa: Working creatively around the challenges.**

The publishing sector in Africa is not a homogenous entity. There are huge spatial and generic differences. One therefore risks making unforgivable generalisations unless one confines the discussion to specific sectors of the book and specific regions. However, I have chosen to give a broad overview of the publishing sector, including scholarly publishing, general publishing and education publishing. I will proceed to highlight some of the common challenges that are experienced in the different sectors and make recommendations on how we need to publish for Africa in this day and age. I will look at the role that digital technology can play in solving some of the challenges that we face in line with the general theme of this conference.

### **General Overview**

The African publishing sector is heavily dependent on state/world bank/donor procurement of education content. The findings of the ADEA/APNET survey of 2000, which showed that up to 95% of all books published in Africa are education books still applies today. This, compared to 60 to 40% ratio in favour of general books in Europe shows the stark difference between the two continents. This means that outside South Africa, Egypt and very few other countries, there is very little general publishing and scholarly publishing taking place. The reasons for this are well documented and it is not my intention to over dwell on them. It suffices to mention that lack of disposable income among the general public, low literacy levels and poor economies of scale has tended to discourage publishers from going into this area. It is therefore true that in the majority of the continent it is not possible for publishers to envisage publishing without going into textbooks. It is also true that the very little general publishing that happens on the continent is supported by textbook publishing and the general books that are published are mainly materials that are meant to supplement the curriculum and for libraries, like children's books and reference material. Again, the state through various support agencies is the main consumer of such materials. However, it is important to acknowledge that in more developed African economies like South Africa and Egypt, there is less dependency on education publishing and there are sustainable general book publishing sectors that can match global expectations in terms of output and quality.

The scholarly publishing seminar that was organised by the African Books Collective in 2005 in Zanzibar indicated that scholarly publishing was in decline due to decline in funding of University and other research institutions. It was felt that unless new technologies and co-operation were harnessed, output in scholarly publishing would continue to decline. Yet again there is a stark difference between regions and countries. In South Africa for example, the output of the Human Science Research Council in the last few years has been phenomenal and there has been a number of online initiatives that has increased scholarly publishing output. The same can be said of CODE SRIA in Senegal. The success of the HSRC and CODESRJA compared to other scholarly publishing outfits has been the sustainable funding, the demand for their content and innovative publishing methods.

The disturbing trend in attempts to address the problems of African publishing is that it is being tackled from outside along the belief that the North has to free its content for the benefit of users in the South. Some of the suggestions have included free content or the

relaxation of copyright law in order to increase the flow of content from the North to the South. This argument informed the UNESCO Infoethics proposals of 2002 and most initiatives of the open access movement. The argument has failed to recognise the potential that the continent has for publishing for itself and in so doing creating a better balance in the exchange of content between North and South along the UNESCO protocol on the free flow of books. It fails to realise that in the first place the continent cannot meet its own needs because of its over dependence on content produced elsewhere. The same ADEA/APNET survey cited earlier indicated that the African continent consumes in excess of 12% of all books produced in the world but contributes less than 3 %.

### **What do we need to do to publish effectively for Africa?**

The traditional approaches for publishing for Africa have included the colonial model where international companies produced inappropriate books in Europe and distribute them in huge numbers to colonies and former colonies in Asia and Africa. The economies of scale were huge and this publishing was successful. It is still the case in mainly French and Portuguese speaking Africa. These are also the areas where local publishing output is most dismal. Huge literary phases and initiatives like the negritude movement and the era of the African writers series were missed opportunities for the continent's publishing sector because the books of these eras were produced outside the continent. With the curriculum reforms that followed independence, there was need to base the publishing activities of international publishers in the regions concerned and publish more appropriate books. Although this was a more desirable model which managed to impart skills and publishing capacity to the local industry, the presence of international companies was temporary and linked to periods of curriculum implementation and economic success. When they pulled out during economic depressions or after the curriculum implementations, voids were left in the local industry. In my opinion and that of the African publishers' Network, publishing for Africa requires the development of permanent and sustainable local capacity in all facets of the book, including local book publishing, libraries, distribution and selling capacity, beyond textbooks. Given the low economies of scale, this involves the exploitation of economies of scale along regional, linguistic, cultural and economic ties. It involves thinking creatively on how electronic technology can be used to circumvent the barriers that are created by poor physical distribution networks, border tariffs; economic and currency discrepancy barriers and the fact that books are dense cargo with inhibitive distribution costs when it comes to getting books to the hinterland and to other countries. In scholarly publishing, especially where the economies of scale are too small to warrant conventional publishing, it is high time that African publishers embraced the open access agenda and they look at how best to network the activities of scholarly publishers on the continent and outside the continent.

### **Co-ordinating and Exploiting Economies of Scale**

What is clear from the strategies and activities of international publishers is that publishing for Africa and indeed for other parts of the world where national economies of scale are small has to involve publishing for a number of countries along cultural, economic, linguistic and other ties. This is not a new argument but it has been treated as an impractical dream for a number of years. The model where one publisher in one country published and sold to all the others has been undermined by physical barriers to

trade in finished books and currency discrepancies. No matter what discount one gives, one cannot today supply finished books to Zimbabwe from South Africa today. However, new electronic technology allows publishers to collaborate and jointly develop product together fast and effectively- sometimes without even meeting. This allows publishers to share stock or exchange digital files and convert their content to books at appropriate points, without shipping books across the borders. Arguably, the most successful children's books in Africa, the New African Stories was developed by Edicef in France, African Christian Press in Ghana and New Africa Books in South Africa without the editors ever meeting and at cost that was more than 50% below the cost that any one publisher could have produced it on their own. The same model is being applied today with the Academy of African Languages, New Africa Books, the Project for Alternative

Education in South Africa and 6 regional African publishers to implement that Little Hands Project in all the African Union languages and many other African languages to celebrate the African Union's Year of African Languages. For many publishers from elsewhere, the question would be to what end and for what benefit. The answer is lower unit costs, access to communities and markets that we would have never reached on our own and most importantly, recognising the challenges of publishing for Africa and working around them. The tendency is to think about technology in high-end terms without looking first at how what has now become simple production technology can be used to allow us to exchange information rapidly in formats that meet our needs.

### **The Open Access argument**

Of late, publishers have been under a lot of pressure to free content for the benefit of poor users. Opening up access for Africa, especially the education sector has been the major drive. The assumption has been that the content rich North must free content to the content starved South and that additional exceptions to copyright protection must be granted to the developing world. Although it is mainly publishers in the North who are being asked to release free content, it is publishers in Africa that are under a lot of pressure to think about how they will exist in an environment of free content and additional legal exceptions to copyright. Unfortunately for publishers in Africa, the free content argument is very seductive to governments that face budgetary constraints in procuring content for education. My view is that indeed content that can be procured for free must be made available through the open access means but careful thought must be given to the long-term information needs of the continent. The impact of this on the local publishers and booksellers could erode the gains that we have made in terms of developing local infrastructure. My argument is that several commercially viable alternatives should be explored before the free content route is taken. This unfortunately may need to be looked at case by case. Co-production partnerships, rights trading and licensing of cheaper editions between publishers in the North and Africa would meet both the need to make books accessible and helping the local publishing and bookselling sector grow. In this case, free access would not be the better choice. However, publishers in Africa have to come to terms with the fact that not all content has sustainable commercial value and that analogue is not always the most suitable format. We need to work with the proponents of free content to make that content available for free in appropriate formats to people that need it. It is for this reason that I think that the Automated Content Access Protocol (ACAP) of the IPA, which helps readers and rights

users understand which content can be used under what terms can take the pressure off the publishers and portray us as partners and not hindrances to access to information.

In conclusion, publishing for Africa is a tough challenge that takes a publisher who can think around all the barriers and challenges by working creatively with other book practitioners on the continent and take appropriate advantage of existing technology.

Thank you.