



**African Children Deserve Stories about Themselves
The Intersecting Roles of African Authors, Illustrators,
Communities, and Languages in Story Creation**

**Lisbeth Levey, Consultant (levey180@gmail.com)
Kirsty von Gogh, Project Manager, Neil Butcher & Associates
(kirstyvg@nba.co.za)**



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Background

With funding from the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#), and as part of its work on the early literacy ecosystem and open licensing, [Neil Butcher & Associates](#) (NBA) is conducting research on the different components involved in storybook creation in Africa. NBA's goals are to contribute to enhancing the availability of children's books in mother-tongue languages in Africa and to explore the potential of open licensing.

This paper was written for the [5th IBBY Africa Regional Meeting](#), which was held 29 August-1 September 2019 in Accra, Ghana. The conference took as its theme: the importance of illustrations in children's books.

NBA has also created a website, the [Early Literacy Resource Network](#) (ELRN), to share information on toolkits and research about open licensing, teacher training, national language and book policies, access and distribution, and key players in early literacy. The ELRN website gathers together work carried out by major organizations and researchers in this field.

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Cover page photo, from one school children, Lira, Uganda



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A simple question with no easy answers

If all young children deserve books in their own language, how do we make it happen?



Introduction

All children are curious and should be able to read about other children from around the world. But children also want to see themselves and where they come from in the books that they read.

In his 2015 essay, *Culture to Free Our Children: Looking Back at My Work over Five Decades*, Meshack Asare, the prize-winning children's author and illustrator wrote:¹

I took on the task of creating the kind of children's books that I would have loved to have when I was a child. At that time, most books that we saw were written and published abroad and imported to Ghana. My goal then was to create books in which local children engaged in their usual activities and real-life experiences in environments and conditions that were familiar to them.

In 2011, speaking about the importance of African publishers, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, co-founder and publishing director of Cassava Republic in Nigeria, pointed out the need for beautiful African books for African children:²

In contrast to their Western and Asian counterparts, many African children grow up without ever having seen, let alone owned, beautiful, well-illustrated books which inspire them to a life of reading, beauty, learning and curiosity for the world. With a youthful population, there is a pressing need to produce more content that will invite children to dream, to question, to imagine, to look to the past with a view to understanding the present and provoking the future. There are simply not enough publishers on this continent catering for the kind of varied tastes required to transform this continent.

Asare's books are in English, and Bakare-Yusuf did not mention language in her remarks, although the children's books on her website are in English. However, research shows that many children learn to read more effectively if they learn in their mother tongue. Literacy can come more easily when children have books in a language that is familiar. In its February 2016 policy paper, *If you don't understand, how can you learn?*, UNESCO juxtaposed language, literacy, and the parents' comfort with 'official' languages:³

In many countries, large numbers of children are taught and take tests in languages that they do not speak at home, hindering the early acquisition of critically important reading and writing skills. Their parents may lack literacy skills or familiarity with official languages used in school, which can then reinforce gaps in learning opportunities between minority and majority language groups.

UNESCO backed up its argument with statistics from the Global Education Monitoring report.

¹ Asare, M. (2016, January). Culture to Free Our Children: Looking Back at My Work over Five Decades. *World Literature Today*. <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2016/january/culture-free-our-children-looking-back-my-work-over-five-decades-meshack-asare> Meshack Asare is the first African recipient of the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature (2015); The Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (1982); the Toyota/Children's Literature Foundation Best Picture Story Book Illustrator's award (1999) and the UNESCO First Prize for Children and Young People's Literature in the Service of Tolerance.

² Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Technology and the Future of the Book, keynote address at Information for Change 2011, May 11, 2011, Lagos, Nigeria, <https://www.foresightfordevelopment.org/sobipro/download-file/46-404/54>

³ UNESCO (2016). *If you don't understand, how can you Learn?* Retrieved June 28, 2019, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713>





Many countries now require use of mother-tongue languages from grades one to three. But policy has not always translated into implementation. In its 2016 report, *The Impact of Language Policy and Practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa*, UNICEF reported on the disjuncture between policy and practice:⁴

In more than 90 per cent of the countries studied, the national language policy environment supports the use of local languages of instruction in early primary grades. Classroom practice, however, does not generally conform to these pro-local language policies; classrooms use international languages of instruction far more commonly. This lack of alignment between national policy and classroom practice in effect nullifies the policy's intended effects.

In some countries, such as Ethiopia, communities play an important role in writing and illustrating stories. These stories not only help capture oral traditions before they die out, they can also give elders, teachers, children, and others a role in maintaining their own cultural heritage in their own language.

Reading for pleasure is also important because it is a significant indicator of success in school. In its June 2017 study, *Celebrating Reading for Enjoyment*, the UK National Literacy Trust reported:⁵

Whether or not children and young people enjoy reading has been a focus of recent research and policy, and evidence is now accumulating that shows that reading enjoyment is beneficial not only for reading outcomes but also for wider learning.

In this paper, we therefore focus on storybooks that children read for enjoyment because of their positive impact on academic success and also because these stories underpin the sustainability of a viable reading culture.

We explore the role of content, illustrations, communities, and language in giving children stories in which they can recognize themselves. In addition, because appropriate stories and illustrations require sustainable story creation ecosystems, we also explore the capacity building necessary and the costs involved for both African commercial publishers and community story production. Commercial publishers may have different cost drivers and expenses from the NGOs that help local communities write their own stories in their own languages. The paper also assesses the benefits and challenges entailed in open licensing,⁶ which donors, such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), now require in grants and contracts. Open licensing can impact deleteriously on cost recovery and income unless all members of the publishing ecosystem understand its principles. Careful consideration of its ramifications is therefore necessary to ensure that costs are fairly and fully covered.

Supporting good African authors, illustrators, and publishers

Children's book awards can support publishing by validating excellence in the field, promoting book sales, as well as increasing the income and visibility of authors and illustrators. Publishers typically put a sticker or

⁴ Trudell, B. (2016). *The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa* (Rep.). [https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF\(2016\)LanguageandLearning-FullReport\(SingleView\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF(2016)LanguageandLearning-FullReport(SingleView).pdf)

⁵ Clark, C., & Teravainen, A. (2017, June). *Celebrating Reading for Enjoyment: Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey 2016 Report*. Retrieved June 28, 2019, from <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/celebrating-reading-enjoyment-findings-our-annual-literacy-survey-2016-report/> (A PDF of the full report is available from this website.)

⁶ Butcher, N., Levey, L., & von Gogh, K. (2018). *Open Licensing Made Plain: A Primer on Concepts, Challenges, and Opportunities for Publishers*. Retrieved June 28, 2019, from <http://www.earlyliteracynetwork.org/content/open-licensing-made-plain-primer-concepts-challenges-and-opportunities-publishers> (This work carries a CC BY licence.)



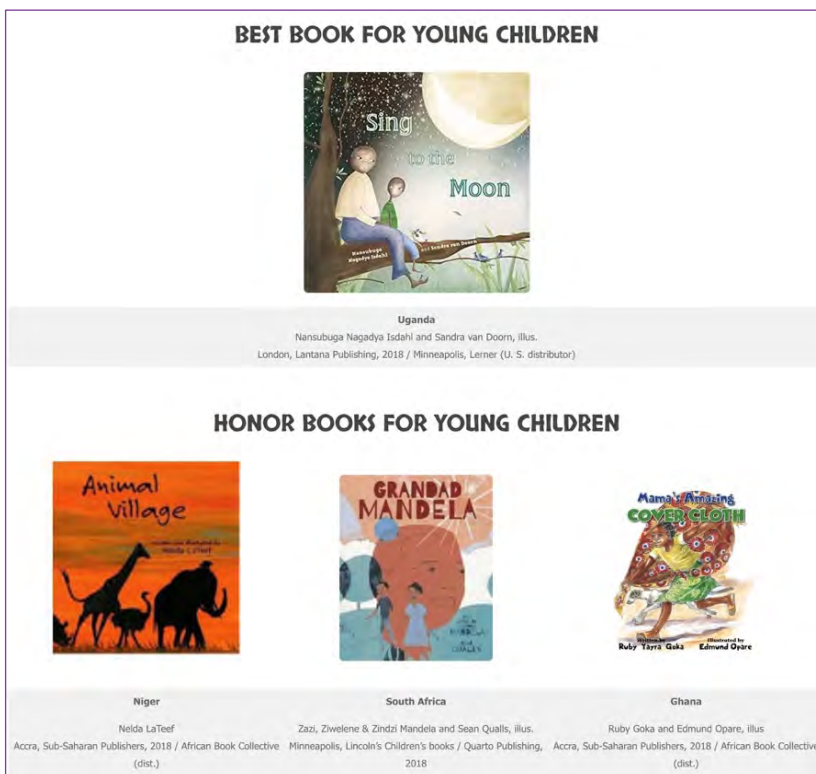


award logo on the cover of prize-winning books. Writing in his blog, *the Purple Crayon*, Harold Underdown, a children’s book editor, described the importance of children’s book awards to the US publishing industry as follows:⁷

Awards are important in children's books. They tell publishers, writers, and illustrators what is considered to be "the best," and thus the standards they must strive to attain.

The American Library Association’s Caldecott Medal for US illustrators and its Newbery Medal for US authors stand out in this regard. Sweden’s Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award is the largest international children’s and young adult literature award in the world. The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa won the SEK 5 million (about US\$ 500,000) award in 2015, the only African awardee, thus far. No African illustrator has won IBBY’s Hans Christian Andersen Award, to date. Why the paucity of representation in international awards, except for those aimed at Africa?

Figure 1: CABA 2019 awards



The US African Studies Association has held an annual Children’s Africana Book Award (CABA) since 1991, which goes to both books published in the United States and in Africa. The 2019 award went to Uganda’s *Sing to the Moon* written by Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl and illustrated by Sandra van Doorn. Three books received honorable mention: two from Ghana and one from South Africa.

There are also three notable awards that focus specifically on Africa. The Bologna International Book Fair has an annual prize for best children’s publisher, subdivided by region. The 2019 award went to Sub-Saharan Publishers in Ghana.⁸

CODE’s Burt Literary Award recognizes excellence in young adult fiction in Tanzania, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya,

with separate competitions for each country. Winning authors in each country share CAD\$21,000 in prize money. CODE supports the publishers by subsidizing 60 percent of the initial print run of 5,000 copies, which is distributed to schools and libraries, on condition that publishers pay for the remaining 40 percent and actively market the books.

⁷ Underdown, H. (n.d.). Home: Articles: Children: Publishing: Pictures: Reference Award-Winning Children’s Books. Retrieved July 31, 2019, from <http://www.underdown.org/childrens-book-awards.htm>

⁸ Bologna Names 2019 ‘Best Children’s Publishers of the Year’ Awards. (2019, April 02). Retrieved July 28, 2019, from <https://publishingperspectives.com/2019/04/bologna-announces-2019-best-childrens-publishers-awards-six-regions>





As a final example, the fifth Africa regional meeting of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) has as its theme ‘the importance of illustrations in children’s books’. The first IBBY Ghana Meshack Asare prize was awarded to a Ghanaian illustrator at the conference⁹ Therson Boadu won the award.

All of the African award-winning books are in English, however. Where is the prize for a children’s book in an African language?

African publishers, authors, and illustrators sometimes require capacity building to attain high-quality and sustainable story creation. Initiatives by two organizations stand out because they provide necessary support to build the capacity of the entire book chain in the countries where they work: CODE and Save the Children. Their efforts are noteworthy both because they provide children with books they want to read and simultaneously strengthen the ability of local publishers and content creators to produce relevant and high-quality books, thus obviating the need to bring in organizations from outside Africa.

CODE, which is located in Canada, has as its mission advancing literacy and education by supporting the publication and distribution of ‘engaging books’ for children around the world, professional development for teachers and librarians on teaching literacy, and school and community libraries and reading corners.¹⁰

CODE supports African publishers to increase the availability of and access to learning and reading materials.¹¹ In countries where a publishing sector exists, CODE works through guaranteed purchases (subsidization of demand) and partner organizations. An annual call is issued to submit proposals for children’s fiction or nonfiction books. Each proposal is reviewed by an independent committee, with representation by parents, teachers, linguists, and reading specialists, after which each title is rejected, accepted with modifications, or accepted unconditionally. Winning publishers are required to produce a minimum of 5,000 copies of the title, 3,000 of which are paid for and distributed by CODE. The publisher is responsible for marketing and selling the remaining 2,000 copies in this initial print run. Winning publishers are also required to submit a marketing and sales strategy.

CODE subsidizes book production costs in order to build local publishing capacity. Sierra Leone and Liberia are two such countries because they were forced to rebuild their entire publishing industry from scratch following civil wars. The 2014–16 Ebola crisis in these countries put even more pressure on an overstretched economy.

CODE collaborates with the WE-CARE Foundation in Liberia and PEN Sierra Leone, which work with local authors and illustrators. CODE pays all creation, production, and print costs entailed in publishing the stories but encourages both organizations to solicit advance book sales to NGOs and donors working in the literacy sector. According to Scott Walter, CODE Executive Director, this strategy has begun to pay off in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, with the former especially seeing success in marketing their books to a wider audience.¹²

While still much work is to be done, they have sold tens of thousands of copies in this regard. Although very up and down, this has generated important revenue, in part because with larger print runs, the cost per copy is significantly reduced. It has also of course meant far more actual copies of the books throughout the country.

⁹ Meshack Asare is an award-winning Ghanaian children’s book author and illustrator. He won the prestigious Neustadt Prize for Children’s Literature in 2015 for *Kwajo and the Brassman’s Secret*, which he also wrote.

¹⁰ CODE. (2019, March 01). Retrieved July 7, 2019, from <https://code.ngo/>

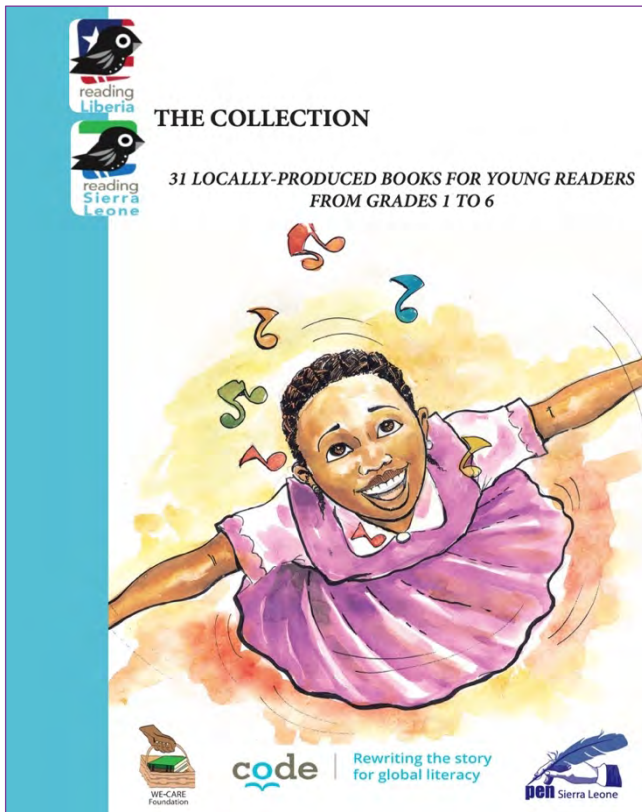
¹¹ Scott Walter, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey, 27 January 2016

¹² Personal communication from Scott Walter to Lisbeth Levey, 8 July 2019



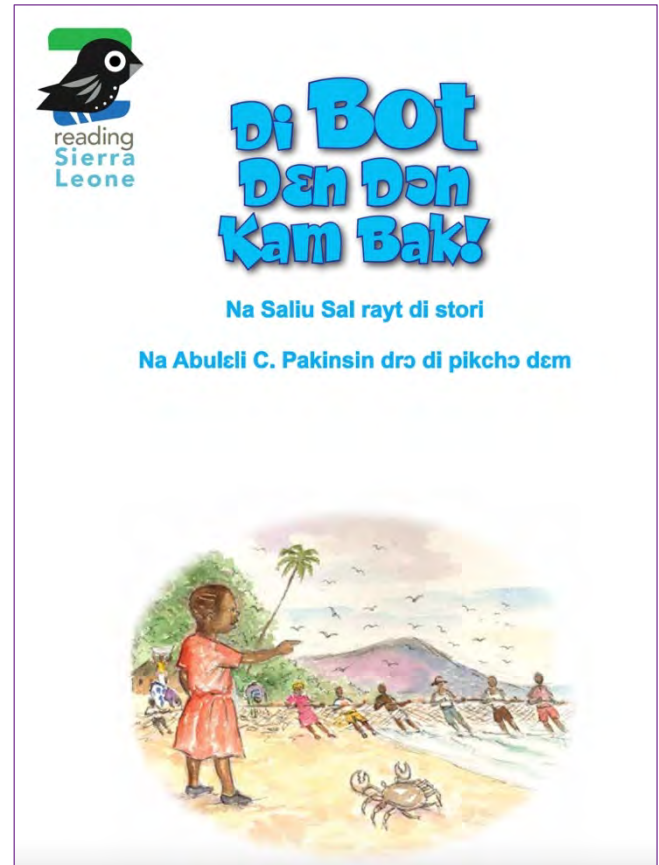


Figure 2: The CODE collection for Sierra Leone and Liberia¹³



There are now 50 English-language titles for children in the first through the sixth grades, all of them written and illustrated by Sierra Leoneans or Liberians. The books are in English because that is the language of instruction from kindergarten on in both Sierra Leone and Liberia.¹⁴

Figure 3: Krio-language story



As a pilot programme, however, CODE is producing four titles of 32-page supplementary readers in Krio, authored and illustrated by Sierra Leoneans, together with a 150-page pedagogical guide to early reading intervention in Krio.¹⁵

About overall production costs, Scott Walter wrote:¹⁶

It's harder to put a number on the production costs but printing [with high-quality paper stock in full colour and quality saddle stitching] and shipping costs are about 45 cents per copy. This includes shipping to port. Cost varies quite a bit between size of print runs -- we generally do 5,000 to 10,000 per title per order. Book size also varies between 32 and 48 pages.

¹³ The Collection: 31 locally produced books for young readers from grades 1 to 6. (n.d.). Retrieved 7 July 2019, from https://code.ngo/sites/default/files/Reading Libera-Sierra Leone promotional piece_revised13_03_26.pdf

¹⁴ Personal communication from Scott Walter to Lisbeth Levey, 8 July 2019

¹⁵ Personal communication from Scott Walter to Lisbeth Levey, 8 July 2019 (Krio is Sierra Leone's lingua franca and de-facto national language.)

¹⁶ Personal communication from Scott Walter to Lisbeth Levey, 8 July 2019





Authors and illustrators are paid outright for their work (generally \$500 for a single title). However, we have also instituted the practice of paying this sum again if a sizable re-print of a title takes place. Everyone seems to be happy with the arrangement.



Save the Children uses many of the same strategies as CODE for its work in Rwanda. In 2013, Save the Children launched its five-year programme, Advancing the Right to Read (ARR), with an overall objective of exploring strategies to support children's literacy development in ways that were effective, sustainable, and scalable in the context of Rwanda.

According to the final evaluation of the ARR programme, Save the Children's book industry intervention was able to shift the trajectory of the country's publishing sector from one dominated by international and regional publishers to one with numerous Rwandan publishing companies that could produce high-quality children's books in Kinyarwanda. The programme established the Rwandan Children's Book Initiative (RCBI), which embarked on extensive training and capacity building for local publishers, writers, illustrators, and designers:¹⁷
A total of 258 book industry professionals (82 women and 167 men) including publishers, authors, illustrators and book sellers were supported in creating and supplying high-quality age-appropriate children's books in Kinyarwanda resulting in the production of 549 new titles for children.

The success of RCBI led to the establishment of the Rwandan Children's Book Forum (RCBF), now called the Rwandan Children's Book Organization (RCBO),¹⁸ an independent NGO that:
is a professional member-based organization that fosters the growth of the children's publishing industry in Rwanda. It was established in 2015 with the mandate to promote the production and use of quality books for children by Rwandan publishers.

The organization, which currently has 15 publisher members, has had a major impact on international donor policies, by joining forces with the government of Rwanda:¹⁹
to insist that development partners working in country adopt working with local publishers rather than making books themselves as they had previously done.

In addition to the establishment of RCBO, two platforms were created, the Abana²⁰ Writers' Café and a group called Rwandan Illustrators.

¹⁷ Malik, S. S. (2018, June). *Advancing the Right to Read (ARR) Save the Children's Signature Education Program in Rwanda*. Page 54. Retrieved 8 July 2019, from

https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15095/pdf/arr_final_evaluation_final_version2.pdf

¹⁸ 'Increasing the literacy rate for children help their ability of learning to read.' (n.d.). Retrieved 8 July 2019, from <http://www.rcbo.rw/>

¹⁹ Malik, S. S. (2018, June). *Advancing the Right to Read (ARR) Save the Children's Signature Education Program in Rwanda*. Page 57. Retrieved 8 July 2019, from

https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15095/pdf/arr_final_evaluation_final_version2.pdf

²⁰ Abana means children in Kinyarwanda.





Figure 4: The Abana Writers' Café



Abana Writers' Café

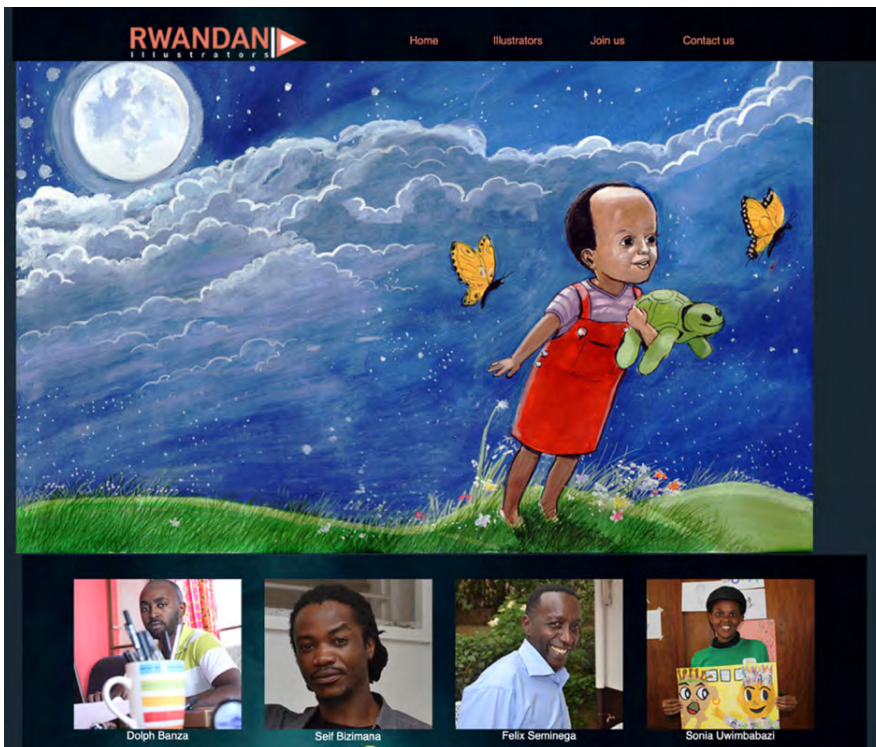
Abana Writers' Café is a monthly children's book event, the first of its kind in Kigali. It serves as a platform for upcoming and established writers, poets, artists, storytellers and other enthusiasts with a keen interest in children's books to come together to support the production of more and better books. It is also an opportunity for book sector players to spot and recruit new talent, and for budding writers and illustrators to get peer feedback and suggestions on new work. So come share your writing or simply learn more about children's books!

Languages: Kinyarwanda & English
Venue: Kigali Arts Center KG 654St House 44
 Gishushu Sonatube Road
Date/Time: Last Monday of every month,
 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

The Abana Writers' Café holds monthly meetings for aspiring and established authors, illustrators, and others in the book trade as one way to spot and nurture new talent. Writing in The Inspirer newspaper, Elias Hakizimana explained the significance of the Abana Writers' Café for Rwandan children as follows:²¹

Rwandan Children will benefit from Abana writers' café to improve their reading skills in a local language that also contributes to social and cultural development by enabling them to think and dream how they can write own stories in the future.

Figure 5: Rwandan Illustrators



Rwandan Illustrators²² is a group of 25 young children's book illustrators that established a website to give Rwandan illustrators more visibility. It also allows them to be contacted directly through the portal.

²¹ Hakizimana, E. (2019, May 3). *Improving children's reading: The Dreams of Abana writers' café*. Retrieved 9 July 2019, from <http://rwandainspirer.com/2019/05/03/improving-childrens-reading-the-dreams-of-abana-writers-cafe/>

²² Rwandan Illustrators. (n.d.). Retrieved 9 July 2019, from <http://www.rwandanillustrators.org>





The role of commercial publishers

The books described above were created using commercial publishing processes. The picture books to which Bibi Bakare-Yusuf referred in her 2011 keynote are probably produced by these types of publishers and, are usually in English, as are all of the children's books listed on the Cassava Republic website.²³ As Akoss Ofori-Mensah, director of Sub-Saharan Publishers, wrote in a 2015 email:²⁴

It is easier to sell them in English than in local languages. The snag is that the educated elite do not allow their children to speak their mother tongue: they speak English with them.

Ofori-Mensah licenses her stories to publishers elsewhere in Africa and overseas, a process that is simpler when the book is in English. The UNESCO award-winning story *Sosu's Call* has been licensed in English in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. Translation rights were also sold for Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, French, Italian, Danish, Czech, and Ki-Swahili.

Price points and the target audience are important considerations. In Ghana, for example, Sub-Saharan Publishers has a sliding scale of prices, depending on where books are purchased. *Fati and the Honey Tree* costs \$10 internationally (US or Canadian), but it is sold in Ghana for GH¢ 10 (\$2.60).²⁵

When stories are translated to African languages, it is frequently through donor funding. *Fati and the Honey Tree* was selected for inclusion in a USAID/Ghana Education Service project for translation to the Northern Ghanaian language, Dagaare, and 9,600 books were ordered through this contract.²⁶ UNICEF subsequently bought 935 copies, also in Dagaare, during the 2016-17 school year. The question is how to build up demand and willingness to pay for high-quality books in mother-tongue languages.

Some commercial publishers produce books in African languages without donor or government funding, however, particularly when the language is widely spoken. This is the case at Mkuki na Nyota in Tanzania, which sells a collection of attractive children's books in Ki-Swahili, the language of instruction in schools. Walter Bgoya, founding director of Mkuki na Nyota, wrote about Tanzanian languages as follows:²⁷

For us the idea of 'local language' as usually discussed in 'African publishing' is not relevant. Swahili is our national language. There are at least another 120 other languages apart from the national language. The point is that all children - with very few exceptions in remote areas - speak Ki-Swahili and education at all levels is in Ki-Swahili.

²³ Children's books. (n.d.). Retrieved 29 June 2019, from <https://cassavarepublic.biz/children/?v=88588bacf0da>

²⁴ Akoss Ofori-Mensah, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey, 17 December 2015

²⁵ Akoss Ofori-Mensah, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey, 19 January 2016

²⁶ Akoss Ofori-Mensah, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey, 8 January 2016

²⁷ Walter Bgoya, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey, 11 July 2019



Figure 6: Children's books published by Mkuki na Nyota

<p>Hadithi ya Morile</p>	<p>The Magical Little Bird</p>	<p>Zimwi la Mrima</p>
<p>6,000.00 TZS</p>	<p>7,500.00 TZS</p>	<p>5,000.00 TZS</p>
<p>ADD TO CART</p>	<p>ADD TO CART</p>	<p>ADD TO CART</p>

Children's books range in price from 5,000–7,500 TZS (about US\$2.17–3.26). Mkuki na Nyota pays its authors a standard ten percent fee, based on net receipts. The rates for illustrators are negotiable, but they rarely go above \$1,500. The minimum print run for children's books is 1,500.²⁸ Some books are in Ki-Swahili, others in English; still others are bilingual, English and Ki-Swahili.

The Rwandan commercial publishers with which Save the Children collaborates also have a market for their Kinyarwanda-language books, partially through sales to projects supported by international donors, but also through the Rwanda Education Board, the Kigali public library, and sales directly to schools, bookshops, 'briefcase booksellers,' and community bookselling points.

The table below delineates Sub-Saharan Publishers costs in US\$ for a 32-page children's book.²⁹ Overhead costs of ten percent are included. These cover staff time, warehousing, delivery costs, and other expenses. Even though the actual costs may differ from publisher to publisher, the cost drivers will remain the same. Note that translation fees are also given.

²⁸ Walter Bgoya, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey, 11 July 2019

²⁹ Information for the table is derived from a publishing costs questionnaire that Sub-Saharan Publishers completed in April 2016.





Table 1: Costs involved in producing a children’s book published by Sub-Saharan Publishers

Cost Driver	Amount
Writing fee	10 percent of net sales up to 10,000 copies 12.5 percent of net sales exceeding 10,000 copies
Illustrator’s fee	\$1,113 per full-colour title
Editorial fee	\$22 per page
Translation fee	\$668 per title
Translation review	\$223 per title
Proofreading	\$111 per title
Design and layout per title	\$1,103 per title
Typesetting	\$780 per title
Pre-press review	\$446 per title

The role of communities in story creation: CODE Ethiopia

The sections above focus on commercial storybook creation and production processes. Communities can also play an important role in story creation and re-telling – originally orally and now in writing. In some instances, communities write stories in mother-tongue languages, which may draw on local folktales, fables, traditions, and contexts. Sometimes, the stories are professionally produced and illustrated; in other cases, they are not. The significance of these stories lies less in their form of production than in the role they play in protecting a centuries-old culture of story-telling and in bringing together communities to create new content that promote reading. Community story writing thus uses old traditions in new and dynamic ways.

Writing about the importance of communities in story development, Jennifer Glennie, Executive Director of *Saide* wrote:³⁰

Storybook development is not merely a technical process among established experts. In the African context, it can be a broadly participative, empowering and collaborative social and cultural process spanning multiple countries and languages. At its best, it includes unleashing and nurturing the creativity of prospective local authors, developing upcoming artists, ensuring that some stories reflect local contexts and others spark the imagination of young readers, or systematically but informally introducing young readers to new concepts and ideas. The costs involved will vary accordingly. Key is building the agency of communities served.

³⁰ Jennifer Glennie, Director of *Saide*, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey and Neil Butcher, 13 January 2019





CODE Ethiopia (CE), which receives core funding from CODE, works with 97 community libraries throughout Ethiopia. Community story writing is a part of its remit for some of these libraries. Community involvement starts with a three-day workshop for librarians, teachers, and school directors on story-writing; illustration; story evaluation; and library organization and use. Trainees go home with the responsibility of training 30 other community members. This nucleus then forms the basis for a community's efforts to create, illustrate, and evaluate stories.

Figure 7: CE workshop, Finote Selam, March 2019



At a community library in Sheno, Ethiopia, for example, a school principal explained the process this way:³¹
Local society generated ideas – then teachers wrote the ideas in clear language.

A village elder added:

We were motivated to write and express our cultures according to our context. Amharic. From the oral stories that were not written before.

CE has also received three grants for its efforts with community libraries and story production. The first was in 2014-15 from Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL)³² to work with rural community libraries on family literacy and story creation. Three libraries received desktop computers, a projector, and a projection screen through this grant. The grant also covered the cost of developing workshop facilitation guides in Amharic and English for community librarians on family literacy and storybook use. These three pilot libraries wrote six stories, which CE and the Regional Education Bureau translated into seven Ethiopian languages (Amharic, Afaan Oromoo, Sidaamu Afoo, Harari, Af Soomaali, Silte, and Tigrigna). CE printed 1,000 copies of each story plus 500 copies in big-book format of two of them and subsequently loaded all of them in PDF format on the

³¹ Harley, K. (2018). Community Libraries Action Research in Ethiopia and Uganda: Review Report. Retrieved 4 December 2018, from <http://www.earlyliteracynetwork.org/content/community-libraries-action-research-ethiopia-and-uganda-review-report>

³² EIFL | . (n.d.). Retrieved 24 July 2019, from <https://www.eifl.net/>



tablets that the libraries received through other grants. The stories are openly licensed, with a Creative Commons licence.³³ Open licensing is explained in detail below.

In addition to the EIFL grant, CE has received funding for tablets from the International Research Exchange Board (IREX),³⁴ and from Book Aid International (BAI).³⁵ IREX supplied four tablets each to 23 community libraries and two primary schools. BAI has provided an additional ten tablets for CE libraries. The IREX grant also included support to develop early literacy apps in Amharic and Afaan Oromoo.³⁶ These apps, as well as 39 titles, have been mounted on each of the tablets. (The apps are also available for download from the Google Play store.)

In 2017-18, with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, NBA gave CE a small grant to help five community libraries write stories in mother-tongue languages. By the end of the project, the libraries had completed 85 stories, 59 of them illustrated, in Amharic and Afaan Oromoo. All stories were then loaded on community library tablets.

In 2019, CE received another grant to train three new community libraries on content creation and to collaborate with three of the 2017 libraries on story use.

Figure 8: Kuy story-writing team



In some instances, such as in Sheno, community elders or teachers write the stories. In other instances, students have taken the lead, as was the case in Kuy, where the stories were written by students in the eighth to eleventh grades. Everyone trained in all libraries take part in evaluating and selecting the stories.

Evaluation criteria include appropriateness of:

- story content for children;
- language and dialect; and
- illustrations.

As a part of its own evaluation process, CE works with language specialists and teachers.

³³ Inspiring library family literacy project supports pre-school children in Ethiopia. (2015, October 01). Retrieved 2 July 2019, from <https://www.eifl.net/resources/inspiring-library-family-literacy-project-supports-pre-school-children-ethiopia>

³⁴ Investing in people. Inspiring change. (n.d.). Retrieved 27 July 2019, from <https://www.irex.org/>

³⁵ Book Aid International. (n.d.). Retrieved 27 July 2019, from <https://bookaid.org/>

³⁶ IREX Launches Suite of Local Language Literacy Apps in Ethiopia. (n.d.). Retrieved 10 July 2019, from <https://beyondaccess.net/2016/09/30/ethiopian-local-language-literacy-app-launch/>





Figure 9: Teacher in Durbete holding the book she wrote



CE would prefer to use illustrations from the community as a way to give everyone a role but will contract a professional illustrator if the story is good and the illustrations are inadequate. The woman on the left is a teacher from Durbete, who wrote a story about why the crow and the hen are enemies. This story and all the others from Durbete were illustrated by sixth grade students. In Finote Selam, students who were given art lessons with an illustrator employed by the city culture and tourism office were the illustrators of that community's stories.

CE's methodology benefits from the fact that librarians are all paid by the local government, usually the culture and tourism office, and many of the libraries form the nucleus of community activities. Some libraries are built by the community, others by the government. Teachers, librarians, parents, and students are all involved in the libraries. In addition, although the libraries are not located in the schools, they have strong links to schools. CE also has well-established mechanisms to train librarians and work with communities. Finally, everyone strongly believes that community members should write down and illustrate their own stories.

Otherwise, the stories might be lost in a world that relies increasingly on written rather than oral traditions.

These efforts require experienced facilitators and trainers. Although the cost of content creation may be lower than the expenses encountered by commercial publishers, the staff time necessary for training, mentoring, and additional interventions can be considerable. Even so, the process of capturing local stories can have significant value to young readers and to the community members who volunteer their time.

CE cost drivers include all the work involved in building the capacity of local communities to collaborate as well as expenses entailed in story production. They include:

- Staff salaries;
- Training-of-trainers workshop costs;
- Community-library workshop costs;
- Monitoring and evaluation, including mentoring reading and writing clubs;
- Typing and editing stories;
- Professional illustration costs when necessary; and
- Story production of ten stories from each library in e-format and a total of 20 stories in print (three titles per library).

CE estimates that its work with the three community libraries will cost about US\$6,600. Note that there are no author fees.

The impact of open licensing on income

Open licensing is a form of licence that permits users to share and, under some licences, translate or otherwise adapt the work of others without requesting permission or payment. Open licences do not replace copyright;



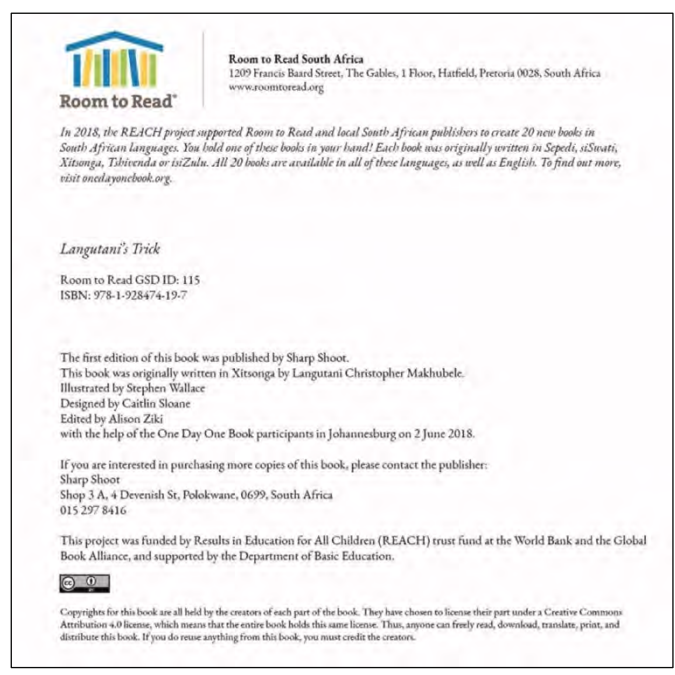
instead they revise ‘all rights reserved’ to ‘some rights reserved.’ They can be applied to any creative work, including music, books, articles, photos, and videos. Output can be online and/or offline. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all open licences require that the original work, author, and publisher be acknowledged.

Creative Commons licences are the ones most frequently used for open licensing in publishing and education.³⁷ They permit copyright owners to retain copyright while determining the extent to which others are allowed to reuse material. Creative Commons licences range from very permissive, allowing copying, modification, and commercial use (CC BY), to those that are more restrictive, for example, permitting distribution of a work in its original form, but no modification (CC BY-ND).³⁸

Donors responsible for educational publishing typically want to ensure that the resources they support are freely used as widely as possible. Therefore, many now require their contractors to publish textbooks and other learning materials, including in early childhood education, under Creative Commons licences.

Several organizations mount online stories in English and other languages for young children. The stories are published under a Creative Commons licence, which allows users to read, download, print, translate, and otherwise adapt each one. Users are also encouraged to write their own stories. These organizations include African Storybook,³⁹ StoryWeaver,⁴⁰ and Bloom’s Book Library.⁴¹ The Global Digital Library (GDL)⁴² is another platform to access and translate stories, but users are not permitted to mount their own work.

Figure 10: Room to Read REACH project



In addition, some multilateral programmes, such as the Results in Education for All Children (REACH) trust fund, which is supported by the governments of Germany, Norway, and the United States, mandate that literacy materials produced with its funding bear a CC BY licence. Figure 10 on the left is the back page of a South African story that the US NGO, Room to Read, published on an online platform with a grant from REACH.

³⁷ When we share, everyone wins. (n.d.). Retrieved 14 August 2018, from <https://creativecommons.org>
³⁸ About the Licenses. (n.d.). Retrieved 14 August 2018, from <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>
³⁹ African Storybook. (n.d.). Retrieved 13 July 2019, from <https://www.africanstorybook.org/>
⁴⁰ StoryWeaver. (n.d.). Retrieved 13 July 2019, from <https://storyweaver.org.in/>
⁴¹ Bloom Library. (2018). Retrieved 13 July 2019, from <https://bloomlibrary.org/browse>
⁴² Global Digital Library. (n.d.). Retrieved 13 July 2019, from <https://digitallibrary.io/>





In commercial publishing environments, authors typically receive payment through royalties based on sales. Illustrators are usually remunerated by a flat fee. In their negotiations with publishers who wish to produce content under an open licence, authors and illustrators should receive fair compensation for their work. Authors who are typically paid through royalties will need to calculate a fixed fee based on previous royalty payments. The source of the funding is not important, only that neither author nor illustrator forfeit income.

Contracts for openly licensed books should be understood by all parties concerned and negotiated just as carefully as those for fully copyright protected materials. (The same is true for publishers and every person involved in the publishing ecosystem, of course.)

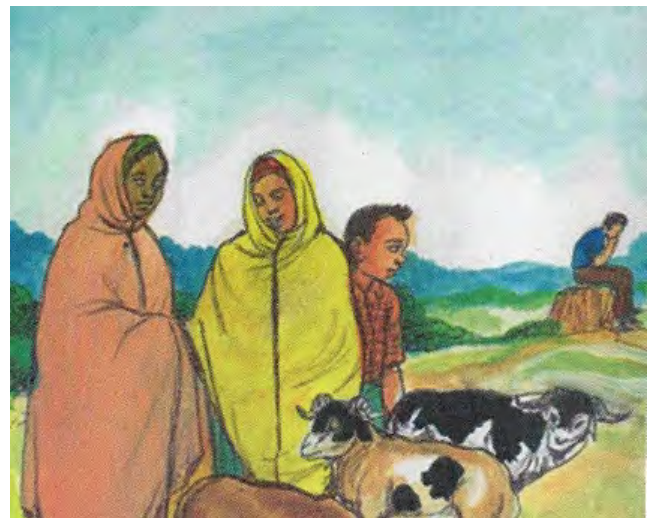
Getting the elements right

Many stories can and should be translated, as was the case with *Sosu's Call*, which was licensed to numerous publishers and translated. The story about a disabled African boy who saved his village was written for older children and carried an important message.

According to Lorato Trok, an early literacy consultant and author, translating from one African language to another, particularly when they come from the same language family, is easier than translating from English. In a 2017 African Storybook blog, she wrote:⁴³

There is some inter-connectedness to African languages even if they do not fall under the same language group. When translating from one African language to the other, the translation is based more on the cultural aspect of the language and its people, unlike in English where some translators concentrate on finding meaning of words in English to translate to an African language.

Figure 11: New Year and Children



In some instances, the story can be translated, but the illustrations must be changed. CODE Ethiopia, for example, published a story called *New Year and Children* in Amharic, Afaan Oromo, and Somali. The content is common in these three regions of Ethiopia. The cover above on the left is for the Amharic version; the one next to it is the one for Somali. Note the different clothes and animals, each change suitable for that particular

⁴³ Trok, L. (2017, 17 July). What are the issues in translating and versioning stories for early reading in local African languages? Retrieved 4 August 2019, from <https://research.africanstorybook.org/wordpress/#> (This work carries a CC BY licence.)





culture. CODE Ethiopia paid for two sets of illustrations; editing; translation; design and layout; and printing for both books.

As shown above, illustrations must be consonant with a young child’s experience. The openly licensed illustrations used on the platforms mentioned above may not always be appropriate, nor are the stock illustrations available from various websites, which would require commissioning and paying for new illustrations. In their 2018 article, *Considerations for Design and Production of Digital Books for Early Literacy in Ethiopia*, Dobson, Asselin, and Alemu describe a workshop at Addis Ababa University during which participants had a chance to look at four African Storybook stories, one by CODE Ethiopia in Amharic and three that were translated from other languages into Amharic. One of the three was cause for consternation because its illustrations were so discordant with conditions in Ethiopia:⁴⁴

The fourth text, I Like to Read, drew an audible gasp of surprise. What garnered the group’s attention was not the story, but the illustrations. The cover and first page spread show a smartly dressed boy in a well-appointed home. He is seated in an orange upholstered chair, next to which is a leafy plant in a large vase. A landscape painting hangs on the vibrant green wall behind him, and it appears there is wall-to-wall carpeting on the floor.

This story, which is meant for young children just learning to read words, is from South Africa. It was illustrated by Wiehan de Jager and translated to Amharic by Sehin Tefera and Mezemir Girma. Even if there was nothing wrong with the text or the translation, the illustrations were totally discordant with the experience of most Ethiopian children.⁴⁵ Research has pointed to the importance of illustrations in helping beginning readers to make sense of a text’s meaning. Illustrations that do not conform to a young child’s reality may complicate this decoding process.⁴⁶

Alemu Abebe of CODE Ethiopia further explained in an email:⁴⁷

Stories are reflections of each community’s realities and every community has its own particular characteristics. It cannot be assumed that all stories are suitable someplace else or can be adapted to be so. Context matters as do cultural differences!

Conclusions and more questions

This paper discusses the centrality of African authors, illustrators, and languages in creating high-quality content that children will enjoy reading. A child who loves to read will do better in school and has a better chance of carrying the habit into adulthood. It begins with a simple question: if all young children deserve books in their own image and language, how can we make it happen? The response, not answer, is that it is only happening to a limited extent and incrementally.

Many African commercial publishers concentrate on English-language storybooks because of market dynamics. Mkuki na Nyota is able to sell its children’s books in Ki-Swahili because of the prevalence of that language in Tanzania and customer demand. Rwandan publishers can do the same in Kinyarwanda because it is the main African language spoken there. Rwandan publishers further benefit from constructive relations

⁴⁴ Dobson, T., Asselin, M., & Abebe, A. (2018). Considerations for Design and Production of Digital Books for Early Literacy in Ethiopia. *Language and Literacy*, 20(3), 134-158. <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29414>

⁴⁵ The Amharic version of this story is no longer on the African Storybook website.

⁴⁶ Nicholas, Judy Lavender, ‘An exploration of the impact of picture book illustrations on the comprehension skills and vocabulary development of emergent readers’ (2007). LSU Doctoral Dissertations. 801.

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/801

⁴⁷ Alemu Abebe, personal communication to Lisbeth Levey. 5 June 2019





with the government and Save the Children's capacity-building initiatives for the entire book ecosystem. These Rwandan publishers sell both to donor-funded projects and also to the local market. Are there lessons to be learned from the Rwandan experience? What do the publishers, authors, illustrators, and the government have to say?

The market is even further constrained because even though there are now policies mandating local-language books in the first three grades of primary school in most African countries, there is insufficient money to fulfill those requirements. Donors are responsible for much of the textbook publishing in mother-tongue languages, but their support frequently goes to international NGOs rather than to local publishers.⁴⁸ Funders and governments frequently prioritize textbooks over storybooks, so even if local-language books are available, they are more likely to be textbooks than books that children will read for enjoyment.

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argues that commercial publishers must not depend on governments or donors:⁴⁹

Our focus should be on producing early literacy books that we can market directly to parents so that they can get into the habit of buying books. We therefore need to create a robust marketing campaign targeted at parents. Use donor funding as seed funding to jump start our initiatives and use it to develop long-lasting marketing campaigns the way we do for fiction and other products.

To her advice, we should add producing early literacy books in mother-tongue languages, which may require convincing parents why it is important for their children to start reading in their own language rather than in English. What kind of promotion should commercial publishers do, both to market to parents and to help them understand the significance of local-language learning for young children? Do we fully understand what constrains parents in both urban and rural areas from buying children's stories in English and in home languages? If it is lack of money, is there a price point at which they would buy a book for their child? Bakare-Yusuf will now have an opportunity to experiment with children's publishing in mother-tongue languages because in October 2019 Cassava Republic received a \$20,000 grant from the African Innovation Publishing Fund. She commented after receiving the grant:⁵⁰

I have been nursing the idea of a publishing imprint devoted to African languages forever. The idea became even more urgent...when I witnessed the birth of my grand-nephew last year, and the mother, my niece, wanted a Yoruba-style naming ceremony and party, yet does not speak Yoruba. Young mothers like her are desperate for their children to speak the language their parent did not speak to them (maybe they are ones we've been waiting for!). I started making notes about what it would mean to have a publishing imprint in African languages, but the cost was enormous! I decided, I'd tackle it in 2020, as a 50th birthday gift to myself and to African publishing.

Online story platforms and open licensing emphasize translation as a cost-effective way to enhance access to stories in mother-tongue languages. These platforms also provide illustrations that can be freely used by anyone. Neither translations nor illustrations come without their own set of issues, however. None of the online platforms mentioned in this paper discusses criteria for selecting stories with sufficient universality to translate well. Nor do they raise issues pertaining to the applicability of illustrations. More research needs to

⁴⁸ See the discussion of the USAID Tusome project in *Good Stories Don't Grow on Trees*:

http://www.earlyliteracynetwork.org/search?search_api_views_fulltext=Good+stories

⁴⁹ Early Literacy and Open Licensing Workshop Report 2018. (2018). Retrieved November 16, 2019, from

<http://www.earlyliteracynetwork.org/content/early-literacy-and-open-licensing-workshop-report-2018>.

⁵⁰ Teoh, J. (2019, November 3). Cassava Republic Press to Start African Language Imprint with \$20,000 African Publishing Innovation Fund Grant. Retrieved December 5, 2019, from <https://brittlepaper.com/2019/11/cassava-republic-press-publishing-director-bibi-bakare-yusuf-plans-to-start-african-language-imprint-with-20000-african-publishing-innovation-fund-grant/>.





be done on the extent to which translation and illustration impact on a child's reading comprehension and enjoyment.

This paper shows that storybook creation efforts in Africa that include actors who have not traditionally been involved in the publishing process are supporting an evolving publishing ecosystem. Communities can play an important role in storytelling and writing in their own languages. CE plans to write a case study about its work mentoring and helping communities to write and illustrate their own stories. The CE case study will also discuss the costs involved in carrying out this work. How well might the Ethiopian experience 'translate' to another country?

The central questions are whether and how local storybook creation efforts can be scaled up to strengthen indigenous language storybook publishing efforts in Africa?

Further reading

Neil Butcher, Lisbeth Levey, Kirsty von Gogh: *Good Stories Don't Grow on Trees: A Guide to Effective Costing of Storybooks in the Global South*

http://www.earlyliteracynetwork.org/search?search_api_views_fulltext=Good+stories

Neil Butcher, Lisbeth Levey, Kirsty von Gogh: *Open Licensing Made Plain: A Primer on Concepts, Challenges, and Opportunities for Publishers* <http://www.earlyliteracynetwork.org/content/open-licensing-made-plain-primer-concepts-challenges-and-opportunities-publishers>

Espen Stranger-Johannessen: *Africa Language and Literacy. A Landscape Review of Language and Literacy Research in African Contexts* <https://code.ngo/sites/default/files/code-africa-language-and-literacy-report-aug2017-web.pdf>

Agnes Gyr-Ukunda: *Publishing in African Languages Using Editions Bakame as a Model*

<http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=723>

Hans M. Zell: *Publishing in African Languages: A Review of the Literature*

https://www.academia.edu/36334936/Publishing_in_African_Languages_A_Review_of_the_Literature?email_work_card=view-paper (Zell discusses a number of publications specifically about children's publishing in African languages.)





African Children Deserve Stories about Themselves The Intersecting Roles of African Authors, Illustrators, Communities, and Languages in Story Creation

Lisbeth Levey (levey180@gmail.com)
Kirsty von Gogh (kirstyvg@nba.co.za)

Neil Butcher & Associates
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