



IFLA
2005
OSLO

World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

2nd Version: July 25, 2005

Code Number:

137-E

Meeting:

118 SI - Reading

Developing Best Practice in Reading Tents in East Africa

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Abstract

Book Aid International and the East African Book Development Association (EABDA) are working in partnership to establish best practice in running reading tents in East Africa. The aim of the tents, which have been running since 1997, is to promote reading to school pupils and the wider community. They are organised by the Book Development Councils of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania under the EABDA umbrella. This paper uses The IFLA Reading Section's *Guidelines for Library-based Literacy Programs: Some Practical Suggestions*¹ as a framework to look at the strengths and weaknesses of this exciting initiative.

1. Background

Books and libraries are scarce and expensive in East Africa, as they are in many parts of the world. Publishing and bookselling is weak, and public and school libraries, where they exist, are under-resourced. Only 10% of schools in East Africa have properly functional libraries², and the majority do not have libraries at all. It is not surprising that a reading culture struggles to flourish and literacy rates are low. In Kenya, for example,

tests revealed that 35% of standard 6 pupils failed to attain the minimum level of English reading competency (recognition of basic linguistic building stones such as alphabet and simple words). In some rural areas, the figure rises to more than half³.

But members of the book sector in East Africa, including librarians, publishers and booksellers, are determined to do something about this. In 2001, they formed the East African Book Development Association (EABDA). Two key activities that EABDA facilitate are the setting up and running of reading tents, and the training of teacher-librarians.

In 2003, EABDA approached Book Aid International (BAI), a UK book aid charity, to help provide additional support for these activities and a working partnership was formed.

2. 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.

BAI was established in 1954 by Lady Ranfurly as the Ranfurly Library Service, in response to the need she saw for books in the Caribbean. In 1994 the name changed to Book Aid International. During the 1990s the organisation became increasingly more professional, employing librarians to select books for partners for the first time, in response to the stated needs of partners. BAI also moved beyond basic book provision to provide support for the wider book chain – librarians, publishers, and booksellers – through, for example, the purchase of African published books, local purchase schemes and the provision of training resources and capacity building workshops.

Developing successful partnerships is seen as key. In recent years, we have begun to work with partners to advocate for the role that libraries can play in national development and poverty reduction. We recently commissioned, published and distributed a paper written by Ruth Makotsi of EABDA entitled *Sharing Resources – how library networks can help reach education goals*⁴, sponsored by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

BAI now provides over ½ million good quality books a year, mostly from publishers in the UK, to 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa plus Palestine. However, providing books and capacity building support is not enough. Books need to be read, so working with partners across the book chain to promote reading has become a key goal. This is where working with EABDA comes in.

3. East African Book Development Association

EABDA's mission is to enhance a reading culture in the three East African countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, through a wholesome approach of developing all functions within the book chain (from authorship to publishing to distribution and readership) and to encourage cross border trade in books.

EABDA's membership is made up of five active stakeholder associations from each country, whose representatives are nominated by the respective book development council. Current members include reading associations, library associations, relevant universities and the national library services in each country. There is widespread commitment to and enthusiasm for EABDA aims and objectives which include:

- To develop effective projects that ensure sustainable creation and supply of appropriate affordable and easily accessible reading materials, especially to rural communities and schools
- To support the development of school and community libraries and the training of teachers in reading and library development
- To initiate and support projects and public campaigns towards the enhancement of a book-reading culture in the East African region.

To meet these objectives, EABDA has organised book week festivals, book donations, training seminars and workshops, and runs a school library development programme as well as the reading tents programme.



Relaxed reading at a tent in Kenya

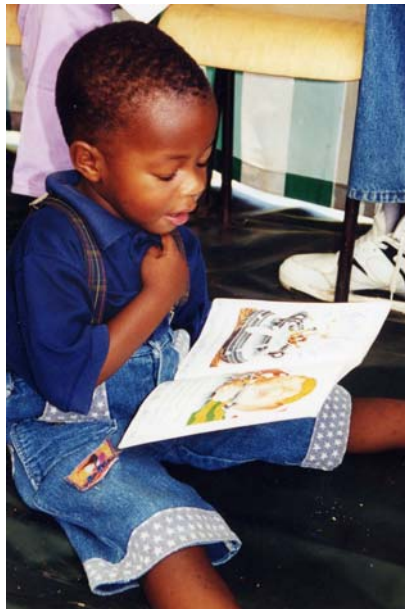
4. Why reading tents?

In East Africa, as in many parts of world, reading is seen as a route to academic success and as a means to pass exams. Reading is therefore associated with textbooks and being at school, but to really develop a reading culture, reading for pleasure must be promoted from an early age. If reading and literacy skills develop early on, they become the foundation or building blocks for learning and achievement.

As librarians we have a responsibility to sell the reading experience to potential readers, and we must therefore develop strategies that make reading fun - that sell the sizzle of reading. The reading tent is exactly that – ‘an outreach tool used to promote reading, stimulate a desire and love for reading, develop reading skills and a reading culture.’⁵

5. What is a reading tent?

Reading tents take books out of the library or classroom environment and into a more relaxed and informal setting where a wide range of enjoyable activities can take place. Being mobile, they can take books into communities where no libraries exist. Activities which might take place during a typical reading tent include story telling, drama, puppet shows, face painting, drawing (e.g. favourite characters from books), quizzes, puzzles and games.



Kenyan boy enjoying a good read

‘The Arusha Reading Tent was the first held in the region. Both the teachers and pupils were very much excited (and) ...enjoyed reading the story books and playing educational games. Small children were particularly attracted by the puzzles. Some of them returned after school hours to read and enjoy the games’

6. The role of BAI

EABDA saw collaboration with BAI as a means of taking the reading tent programme forward, and by identifying best practice and building capacities, address weaknesses that had been identified by the various stakeholders. In particular:

- Effective training for teacher-librarians to maintain momentum after tents have gone or in areas where tents do not take place
- Book provision to address inadequate supply of books
- Evaluation of activities to assess the impact of the programme

For BAI, it presented an excellent opportunity to take forward key goals in the areas of capacity building, reading promotion and advocacy. As library services are BAI's main partners, we also saw it as an opportunity to further integrate reading tents and reading promotion into their day-to-day work, thereby establishing a more sustainable future for the tents.

By working together, EABDA and BAI aim to:

- Promote reading as a basis for education and lifelong learning
- Increase access to relevant information through libraries
- Strengthen the capacity of all stakeholders within the book chain
- Develop a common platform within the book sector for effective advocacy
- Support professional skills development
- Improve assessment of the outcomes of programmes and projects

7. The Reading Section's Guidelines

I will now follow the Reading Section's *Guidelines for Library-based Literacy Programs: Some Practical Suggestions* to run through the project cycle particularly highlighting where it needs strengthening:

7.1 Who is our audience?

Most tents are targeted at disadvantaged rural communities and urban slum dwellers where no public or school libraries exist. Children are the most obvious target – it is they who we wish to become enthusiastic readers and to participate in the tents. But the tents are aimed at everyone in the community - parents, teachers and ordinary adults. Teachers are a particular target because many do not read themselves.

7.2 How do we start planning and developing community co-operation?

The programme benefits from the wide involvement of stakeholders. Initially these were brought together at a regional seminar in 1997 on *Overcoming Barriers to East African*

Book Trade, after which participants developed an East Africa Book Weeks project. Recognising the need to do more beyond book week, the participants formed EABDA to develop an all year book development programme. As we have seen, the EABDA membership itself comprises most of the relevant stakeholders, who between them have developed the specific objectives of the programme and have a good knowledge of the educational and cultural context in each country.

Every year, all the stakeholders take part in an annual workshop to plan activities, budget and timetable for the year ahead. The relevant national book development council is responsible for co-ordinating the programme in each country. For each reading tent, an organiser is appointed (this varies but is usually the library service, library association or reading association) and is responsible for arranging the location and timing of the tents, in consultation with local partners.

7.3 Who are our potential partners?

Prior to each reading tent, significant efforts are made to prepare and mobilise the local community and stakeholders. Officers from local district or education authorities are usually involved in the preparatory stages such as organising publicity and recruiting participants. A lead school or library is identified to host the event, and invite other guests and schools to attend, which should include school children, teachers, local leaders, business people, members of library committees and other professionals in the community.

'The publicity and the way the occasion was executed created a sense of ownership and appreciation of the library by the local community (and) laid the ground for future participation of the local community, including the business people, in library related projects'

Evaluation report, Mwingi Library, Kenya⁷

7.4 What materials are needed and how do we choose them?

Books are needed to support each new tent because after each reading tent has taken place, books are left behind at a host or lead school, so that opportunities to read continue after the tent has gone. Book boxes are provided to enable the books to rotate between the other participating schools.

Each reading tent has a local book purchase grant of \$500. BAI matches this with books from UK publishers, including many African readers as well as relevant UK titles, and also provides funds for books in Swahili for Tanzania. However, the number of books is still inadequate – to support reading more effectively, more books are needed.

During a BAI facilitated workshop last year, criteria for materials was drawn up, and included:

- Relevance to target group and local situation
- Appropriateness of language, style and content
- Variety/diversity of overall selection
- of good physical quality (durable, paper quality etc)
- origin – priority given to national and regional titles in order to promote the local book industry

The last point is significant – BAI’s books are supplementary. It is important that local books are prioritised, and local publishers are also beginning to donate more books.

7.5 How do we train?

Training is a key part of the project. Both the stakeholders managing the project – library and book professionals, and some of the beneficiaries, such as teachers, need training to make the project a success. For example, workshops have been held to provide guidelines on running reading tents and prior to each tent, mobilisation seminars are arranged for teachers. Given that most teachers have not been trained on how to manage and use libraries, book donations to schools are accompanied by basic library skills training for teachers.

However, external evaluation of the project together with feedback to EABDA from the project stakeholders has indicated that additional training is required to strengthen the project, which is where BAI has come in to assist. BAI has now conducted three participatory training workshops. The first was aimed at establishing best practice for running reading tents. The second was on advocacy, with a focus on developing advocacy strategies linked to national development goals (e.g. poverty reduction strategy papers). The third was a training the trainer workshop for librarians, to enable them to train teacher-librarians to manage a small collection of books and promote reading. A fourth workshop on impact assessment is planned for next year.

Feedback from participants has been positive. As well as new skills and knowledge, the participatory nature of the workshops was welcomed and facilitated the sharing of experiences between countries, and learning from each other. One participant said the third workshop had provided ‘a new impetus to promote reading. A vision of how to do it nationally has always been there, but seemed not so easily possible. Now it looks quite possible’.

7.6 How do we promote the project?

Sensitisation is an important part of the project. Prior to a tent taking place, posters are displayed, loudspeaker announcements made and invitations sent out. Once up, the tent itself usually provokes interest and curiosity as people wonder what’s going on, and the emphasis on involving the local community from early on ensures that the project becomes well-known locally.

Media coverage is a key part of the strategy to publicize the project. The tents usually attract a good deal of interest – for example, one tent in Arusha, Tanzania, was aired on the Tanzanian Radio One programme called Nipashe, and was featured in the *Arusha Times*. EABDA also participates in book fairs and seminars. However, external evaluation⁷ has noted the need for a more sustained media campaign throughout the year. In the UK, BAI has publicized the project through its *Booklinks* and *Bookmark* newsletters, as well as its web-site.

In the wider context, though, greater advocacy is needed if we are to get the message across to governments and policy makers. Evidence of impact is key here, and it is hoped that the training provided on advocacy and future training on impact assessment will help here.

7.7 How can we tell if we are successful?

Given the project's limited resources, judging success is always going to be a challenge, but one that needs to be met head on. At one level, just observing children at a reading tent is one way of telling whether an event has been successful. If the children are enjoying books and having fun, then that tent can be judged a success.

But this does not provide a longer-term assessment of the tent's impact. Nor do short narrative reports or evaluation forms, which are completed after each tent and provide some hard statistics (e.g. numbers attending) and a flavour of how the event went, valuable though they are.

An external evaluation report in Tanzania⁸ in 2004 pointed out that there was a need to follow up the impact of book donations on libraries, and furthermore that 'there is a need to carry out an impact study to measure how far a reading culture has been nurtured'. After the tents, are the books left behind being read in schools? Are they relevant? Are teachers proactively promoting the books? If the books are being read and libraries being set up, are literacy skills improving?

To address this issue, the next BAI/EABDA workshop early next year will be providing training in impact assessment and looking at ways in which the impact of the reading tents programme can be better assessed.

7.8 How do we keep our program going?

The Tanzanian report also pointed out that 'the issue of sustainability needs urgent attention'. EABDA has relied heavily on funding from SIDA so far, and BAI's involvement is funded by Pearson Plc. Although reading tents do attract local support and enthusiasm too, given that an average of twelve tents take place in each country per year, and that each one is attended by a minimum of 10 schools, only 120 or so schools benefit each year at present. This is but a drop in the ocean and there is a need to lobby governments to support and expand the project.

In the long-term, advocacy remains key, particularly if evidence of the project's impact can also be provided. Reliance on international donors is not a secure way forward so local politicians, national governments and the *East African Community* must be persuaded to invest more in libraries, reading tents and the book sector as a whole. Reading must be given more prominence in the classroom and teacher training colleges.

But the reading tents programme is already sowing seeds. More schools are setting up reading clubs or are timetabling library sessions, and further training of teacher-librarians will help bring the spirit of the reading tent into the school, particularly if more teachers can be inspired to become active readers themselves.

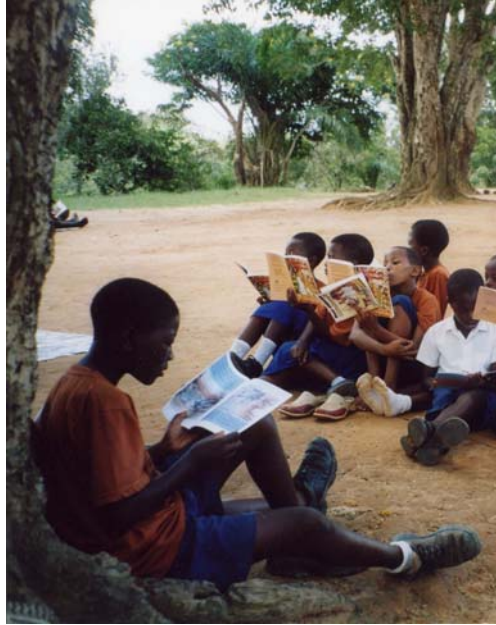
There is also evidence that governments in East Africa are beginning to value reading and libraries more greatly – for example by providing funds to schools for supplementary readers. And EABDA's collaboration with relevant government departments has already resulted in increased support from government, especially during book weeks, where national library services receive government funding to host book week activities in up-country branches – so now is the time to advocate strongly.

8. Using the Guidelines

The reading tents project has been strong in the earlier steps featured in the reading section's literacy guidelines such as partnerships where all the main players in the book chain have been involved from authors to publishers to librarians, but weaker in the areas of training, impact assessment and keeping the program going. BAI and EABDA are currently focussing on these areas - for example by training school librarians and by advocating the importance of books and reading - to ensure the future success and sustainability of this exciting initiative. The guidelines themselves do provide an excellent and comprehensive framework for setting up a new literacy project in libraries but also provide a framework to look back at existing projects, as I have done, to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

9. Conclusion

It is clear that there is a strong will to build a reading culture in East Africa. It is often said that there is no reading culture in Africa, but given the right opportunities and right resources, children all over the world enjoy and love reading. Reading tents – by taking children on an enjoyable voyage and journey of discovery – provide one of these opportunities. A reading culture can be developed, but it needs nourishing. It is always difficult to secure sufficient resources in East Africa to keep things going, but by forming a successful network of partnerships for literacy both within and outside East Africa, EABDA together with friends like Book Aid International, will ensure that disadvantaged children in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have the opportunity to become enthusiastic readers.



There's no room in the tent so children read under the tree, in Kiserawe, Tanzania.

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