

Problems Facing Children's Book Authors in Uganda: What Should Be Done?



April 2017

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Summary Quotes

'There are few people writing for children, so the opportunities are vast.' Nyana Kakoma, Publisher, *Sooo Many Stories*

'Many parents prefer buying big phones for their children to buying books.' Evangeline Barongo, UCWIA

'Authors should focus on producing good quality books which shall attract their readers.' Nabugubi Grace, Bookseller

'In Uganda, reading is an urban culture.' Charles Batambuze, URRO

Objectives of this research

- To contribute to Uganda's Children's book sector's existing body of knowledge.*
- To promote children's literature and the prosperity of children's book authors in Uganda.*
- To contribute to the nurturing of a sustainable reading culture among Ugandans, especially children.*
- To benchmark for future studies in Uganda and across the African Continent.*

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank, in a special way, the following people, who shared their opinions and experiences with this research:

Evangeline Ledi Barongo – Author and Chairperson, Uganda Children's Writers and Illustrators Association

Charles Batambuze – Executive Secretary, National Book Trust of Uganda

Nyana Kakoma – Publisher, *Sooo Many Stories*

Marcella Karekye – Children's Book Editor, Fountain Publishers Uganda Ltd

Jennifer Nalwoga – Senior Librarian, National Library of Uganda

Barbra Apolot – Librarian, National Library of Uganda

Agnes Suubi – Author, *Once Upon A Time Series*

Henry Abimanya – Bookseller/Teacher, Henry Books Belma Suppliers

Agnes Ajok – Children's Section, Aristok Bookshop

Sister Cecilia – Bookseller, Daughters of St. Paul Bookshop
Uganda Bookshop Staff

Plus all public officers, authors, booksellers, librarians, teachers and pupils that offered to share their views with me.

Thank you!

Abstract

The lack of a sustainable reading culture and limited publishing opportunities are some of the major problems hindering the growth and prosperity of children's book authors in Uganda. The children's book sector is still unstructured, with few linkages, hence a no-returns possibility. To invest a lot in your work but, three or more years later, still have piles of unsold books, is a story of most authors.

Being a children's book author in Uganda is tricky. You have to not only deal with an unpredictable market, but also work in an environment where authors lack solidarity. Authors of children's books are scattered, without a common ground and a shared, cohesive agenda. Other problems include widespread poverty, illiteracy, competition from imported books, piracy, ignorance and lack of government support.

This paper is backed by practical understanding of self-publishing, but it also taps the views of stakeholders in other areas such as authors, editors, traditional publishers, booksellers and organizations, including National Library of Uganda, Uganda Children's Writers and Illustrators Association, Uganda Reproduction Rights Organization and National Book Trust of Uganda.

It examines underlying facts and opinions, carves out workable remedies.

The aim is to stir progressive discussions about the future of contemporary children's literature in Uganda and across the African continent.

1.0: Background

Once upon a time in Uganda, stories were told while sitting around a lively fire. Oral storytelling was the mode through which important values were transmitted from one generation to the next. As time elapsed, more and more people learnt to read and write, and books started replacing the fireplaces. The rest is now history.

From colonial days, the Ugandan population has been relying heavily on imported books. Today, many libraries and bookshops are still suffocated with western books; books which tell stories of white people. In schools, children are made to read foreign texts instead of texts about their culture, geography and history.

Although several literary organizations have sprung up on the basis of promoting indigenous literature, in the world of children's literature authors are still faced with a shortage of organizations whose aim is to promote their work. Children's book authors in Uganda are unable to build sustainable networks among themselves, because they lack these potential convergence points.

These and more issues shall continue sabotaging the authors' prosperity, if nothing is done. Without a significant increase in the number of libraries and publishing companies that give priority to children's books, the shortage of local titles on the market may remain. Even with the increase in primary school enrollment in the last 20 years as indicated by National Development Plan, 2015, children's book authors shall remain poor, if the school curriculum doesn't emphasize inclusion of local titles.

Children's book authors need a reading population to thrive. To achieve this, reading ought to be nurtured in children at a young age. Authors are prime stakeholders in realizing this, because they are charged with a duty to create work that attracts children towards reading. Hence building capacity for locally written books is mandatory.

Amidst all the stumbling blocks associated with publishing in Uganda, such as high costs of production and poor quality for the case of self-publishers, strategic interventions must be made to ease access to professional publishing services. There is need to establish structures that refine talent, and to improve production, processing and distribution of children's books across Uganda and the African continent.

1.1 Relevance of children's books today

Children's books are very essential in primary education. Besides being a medium of instruction, children's books help to stimulate the child's brain, which facilitates their learning process. The habit of reading books enables children develop their ability to think critically and understand quickly. Children who read regularly are often able to express themselves well. They attain sharp comprehension skills, which is prerequisite for academic and general excellence.

An active children's book sector, consequently, would not only help Ugandan children attain quality literacy, it would also create more opportunities for Ugandans who write children's

books. A vibrant children's book sector is a more sustainable means of nurturing a reading culture in Uganda.

2.0: Methods Used

The methods of data gathering were largely qualitative. They included interviews, which were done both physically and through the internet. Questions relevant to the research question were asked, responses noted down and organized sequentially. The data was sorted and subjected to critical analysis.

The research also utilized web-based sources (Webliographies).

3.0: Discussing the key issues:

3.1 Problems facing Children's book authors

The problems hindering the growth and prosperity of children's book authors in Uganda are presented as follows:

3.1.1 Lack of enough children's author initiatives

The general literary landscape in Uganda has generally grown. There's an increase in the number of publishing companies and literary activities today. There are several writing contests, training workshop opportunities, writing festivals and conferences, even. However, most of these initiatives are not targeting to promote children's book authors.

The shortage of children's literature centered initiatives denies children's authors a chance to strategize, network and grow. These organizations and initiatives are platforms, through which the authors would converge and brainstorm. Without them, authors cannot confront their problems collectively. They cannot build sustainable networks which would enable them touch base with professional colleagues from across the continent.

This has also widened the research gap. There are few organizations interested in doing research about the children's book sector. Research being a major component of structural growth and development and a key ingredient that lacks in Uganda's children's book sector, stakeholders, including government, are left with no clear findings on which to hinge policies and/or decisions.

3.1.2 Lack of a sustainable reading culture

The argument that, *if you want to hide something from a Ugandan child, put it in a book* is, to a large extent, true. The reading culture among Ugandan children is badly wanting. We'll view the causes of this poor reading culture by examining the following factors;

i) Language

Language is a key component of the writing process. The language in which a book is written must be understood and/or appreciated by the book writer's target audience.

In a country like Uganda, where most authors write in the English language yet there are over 60 indigenous languages most of which lack orthographies, the challenge of limited accessibility to books becomes almost inevitable.

The national curriculum policy suggests that nursery and lower primary pupils be instructed in their mother tongue. However, Uganda being a tribally diverse country, if the policy is to succeed, its implementation must satisfy the specific variations in every region of the country. This is still far from being achieved.

It is also certain that writers for children are not motivated to write in local languages. There are no inducements. Not even for publishers and booksellers. The scarcity of books written in local languages widens the literacy gap, since it has been established that less than 30% of primary seven (P.7) pupils are able to read and understand a P.2 story written in English. (Uwezo, 2016).

ii) Very few libraries

Libraries are essential tools of promoting reading among communities. However in Uganda, the number of libraries is still small. According to National Library of Uganda, Uganda has about 22 public libraries and slightly more than 100 private community libraries. The shortage of libraries and children's reading spaces in many towns of the country impedes efforts to nurture a sustainable reading culture, since it limits readers' access to books.

The few library facilities are also unevenly distributed. Most children's libraries and/or children's reading spaces are situated in urban areas. Yet, according to the National Housing and Population Census 2014, over 80% of the population lives in rural areas. Only 6 million persons reside in cities (NPHC, 2014). That informs why in Uganda, reading is still seen as an urban tradition.

iii) Lack of awareness

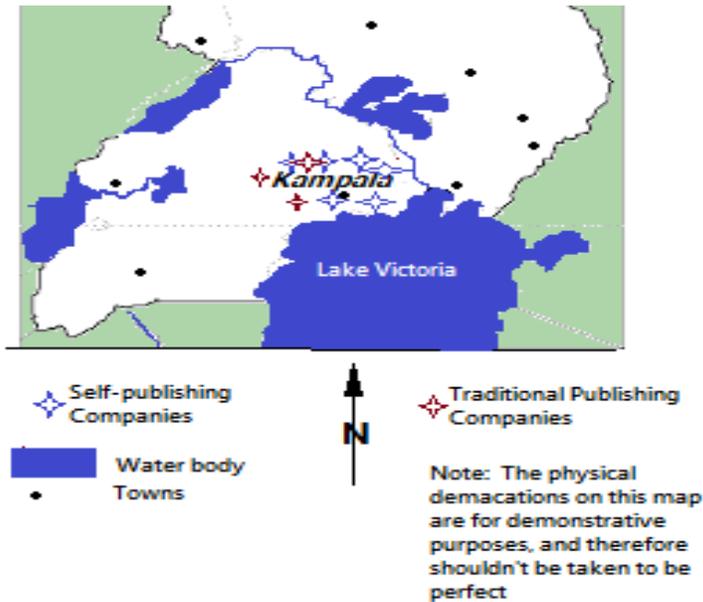
Most parents are unaware of the role reading plays in the learning process and development of their children. They are busy investing in expensive video games and toys instead of children's books.

3.1.3 Limited publishing opportunities

i. Few publishing companies

The number of publishing companies in Uganda is still small. Traditional publishers don't exceed 25 in number and these are also poorly distributed. Having all publishing companies concentrated in central Uganda (See Fig. 1) may thwart access to publishing services and literary aspirations of authors located in other parts of the country.

Fig. 1: A map demonstrating uneven distribution of publishing companies in the regions of Uganda

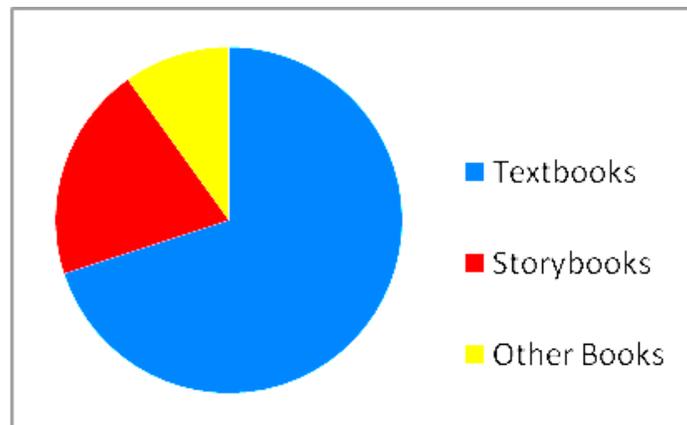


ii. The Textbooks obsession

Subject books, commonly known as textbooks, cover over 70% of what traditional publishers produce. Few publishers are willing to invest sufficiently in as many children's storybook manuscripts as per the demand. Majority argue that the market for storybooks is too small.

According to Marcella Karekye, a children's book editor, 'publishers aren't too keen to publish everyone who comes along, because 'publishing is an expensive venture'. Too much selectiveness and less priority for children's storybook manuscripts omits the aspirations of many writers, who may be interested and/or skilled in authoring for instance, children's fiction and not subject books/text books.

Fig. 2: A pie chart showing traditional publishing priority of textbooks



3.1.4 High cost of publishing

- *High production costs*

There expenses involved in publishing are high, both for self-publishers and traditional publishers. High costs frustrate authors and publishers alike, because both have limited budgets. Because of the ever-high production costs, few books are published.

- *High book prices*

Due to high production costs, book prices also tend to be high. In Kampala, the average price of children's storybooks written by local authors is about Shs. 6500, which is relatively expensive. High book prices discourage potential low income buyers.

3.1.5 Poor quality of books and less marketing

- i) Poor quality*

The quality of the book determines its success on the market. If a children's book has a hard, attractive cover, colorful pages, striking design, good printing, lamination and well-edited content, it stands better market chances. Unfortunately, most locally authored children's books, especially the self-published ones, lack these qualities.

Poor quality is informed by the reluctance of writers, who often don't do enough to see that their manuscripts meet the required standards. Many indigenous publishing houses reject manuscripts because they're substandard. And this substandard output is caused by the lack of training opportunities for local children's writers, illustrators, editors and publishers.

- ii) Less marketing*

Whereas it is vital to produce good quality books, it is even more important to market the books well. In Uganda, few publishers are investing sufficiently in the marketing of children's books. Besides the expensive mainstream media advertising, there is social media and online advertizing, which most publishers and self-published authors are not (yet) harnessing to promote their books.

3.1.6 Poverty among the general population

- i) Low incomes*

Ugandans living below the international poverty line of one dollar (\$1) are at 34.6 (in 2013), dropping from 53.2% in 2006 (Uganda Poverty Assessment, 2016). Those living below the national poverty line, in abject poverty, are at 19% (in 2013), dropping from 31% in 2006. Despite this progress in curbing poverty levels, the number of people with very low purchasing power remains high. Many Ugandans still cannot afford to buy books.

- ii) Income and social inequality*

According to a 2017 report by Oxfam - Uganda, the rich people in Uganda comprise only 10%, and these enjoy an entire 35.7% of the national income. It is a small urban minority of the population that accesses basic services, like education, while the remaining population remains isolated.

The wide gap between private and government (UPE) schools, is a classical case of social inequality among children in Uganda. In some rural areas, pupils in UPE schools still study under trees, with limited access to basic structures like school libraries, quality reading materials and trained reading instructors.

3.1.7 Lack of Information

i) Authors who are not readers

Regular reading helps writers to think and write well. But unfortunately, most children's authors in Uganda are not avid readers. Few authors spare time and resources to read other authors' work. Those that do, restrict themselves to particular genres of literature. This limits their imaginative growth.

ii) Lack of market information

Learning about one's market is crucial. It helps one to plan and respond more appropriately to the demands of a particular market. For many years, there's been a consistent shortage of local children's books on the market, but local authors and publishers are not responding sufficiently to this need. It is apparent that either the market players have not analyzed this trend or they are unable to respond appropriately.

A demonstration of lack of information is the reluctance of local authors and publishers to embrace technology. In the 21st Century, you'd still find a Ugandan author or publishing company without social media presence. This not only keeps them out of touch with the changing society in which they operate, but also diminishes their likeliness to provide unique products and services for their audiences, whose needs keep changing.

iv) No priority for reading in schools

In Ugandan schools, a lot of focus is put on passing exams and finishing the syllabus. Most schools are more interested in seeing their pupils score highly in UNEB examinations than in helping them develop soft competences such as critical thinking. They restrict pupils to reading only a few subject books. Children are not nurtured to read on their own, thus their intellectual abilities remain unrefined.

3.1.8 Piracy and Intellectual Property rights violation

Not many authors are well acquainted with the provisions of The Copyright and Neighboring Rights Act, 2006. This law provides for the protection of authors' intellectual property rights, including their economic rights, which place granting of permission to use, produce and reproduce their work in the latter's hands. Very few authors know this. As a result, their rights continue to be infringed upon.

Some of the most critical Intellectual Property concerns that affect children’s book authors are presented as follows:

- i. Many Children’s book authors are denied formal agreements with publishers. This exposes them to exploitation. In other cases, authors sign unfair contracts, which often lead to unfair payment and delayed royalties.
- ii. The network of book pirates is growing, which exposes the authors’ work to duplication and plagiarism.
- iii. Children’s book authors lose control over their works after they have been published.
- iv. Intellectual Property offenses are not included in the penal code. This makes it difficult for law enforcers and judicial officers to determine charges whenever an IP violation is reported.
- v. The market is infiltrated by players who are reluctant to adhere to the Intellectual Property law. Authors fall victims when their books are pirated or sold at abnormal prices.

3.1.9 lack of a deliberate government policy

^IThe government, through the National Development plan, demonstrates a definite lack of interest in supporting Uganda’s book industry. For many years, the relationship between authors and government has been amorphous. The lack of a comprehensive government policy that supports and/or popularizes books is devastating efforts to grow the children’s book sector.

^{II}In the Uganda Vision 2040, Human Capital Development is identified as a fundamental factor in accelerating the country’s transformation. However, government has not supported book authors, who are key stakeholders in accelerating human capital development.

^{III}Thus, the prospects of book authorship in Uganda are hanging in space. Children’s book authors lack incentives provided by the government. Incentives would help to facilitate and motivate them. Such incentives include soft loans, travel grants, sponsored fellowships, training workshops, et al. The absence of these inducements diminishes their motivation.

4.0: Opportunities for children’s book authors in Uganda

Opportunities available for local children’s book authors include:

4.1 Growing market for local content

With the introduction of the “Buy Uganda, Build Uganda” policy, the demand for local products is steadily growing. Ugandan readers are progressively honing a preference for books written by local authors. This is a trend local children’s book authors can explore.

4.2 Market opportunity

There’s a shortage of proper reading materials in many primary schools, which presents an opportunity to local children’s authors. The remarkable increase in primary school enrolment

since the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1996 has expanded the market scope for local children's books.

4.3 Untapped Ideas

Local children's authors have a wide range of topics to write about. Uganda's history, culture, social behavior, religion, education among others. Uganda is a more open society today compared to its turbulent history. Children's book authors, in this generation, enjoy a lot more freedom of literary and artistic expression, with minimum fear of being censored.

4.4 The internet opportunity

The level of internet access has more than doubled in Uganda since 1994 when the first mobile phone service was introduced. Internet makes it easy to access a wide range of virtual services and opportunities. Local children's authors can market their books more easily to a bigger audience; they can also access cheaper publishing platforms and services, among other things.

4.5 Intellectual Property Law

The current Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act, 2006 protects the rights of authors. This law provides for author-publisher contracts, a measure meant to safeguard the authors' exclusive intellectual property rights from any kind of infringement.

5.0: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Uganda's children's book sector has a lot of untapped potential. The authors' prospects would be unlimited, if only they united and worked to build robust and sustainable networks among themselves; sought valuable partnerships with relevant stakeholders such as government, publishing companies and literary organizations, both from within and outside; and worked to generate opportunities among themselves.

5.2 Recommendations

For the growth and prosperity of children's book authors in Uganda, this paper proposes the following remedies:

1. Formation of children's writer organizations to coordinate local authors and aspiring writers;

The functions of these organizations include, but are not limited to;

- I) Promoting proper reading habits among writer members.
- II) Organizing training workshops, fundraising campaigns and writer conferences, through which aspiring and experienced children's authors and illustrators can interact, learn new skills, share experiences and market their work.

- III) Introducing initiatives such as children’s story writing competitions, children’s author conferences and festivals to enable author interaction and to generate more public awareness of local children’s literature.
 - IV) Introducing mentorship/training programs aimed at skilling budding and established writers, editors and publishers.
 - V) Advocating for the rights of children’s book authors.
 - VI) Bargaining for better contracts on behalf of children’s book authors.
 - VII) Providing professional and affordable services, such as quality editing, proofreading, typesetting, printing, reviewing, critiquing, marketing and market assurance, et al to the authors.
 - VIII) Availing more publishing opportunities to children’s writers and authors.
 - IX) Giving children’s authors a face and a voice to lobby for support, in terms of incentives, and to secure useful partnerships.
2. Establishing more publishing companies willing to experiment with new styles and forms of writing; for instance, children’s fiction and children’s poetry. These companies would support the prosperity of writers and authors in the following ways;
 - a) Providing more publishing opportunities.
 - b) Increasing the production of local children’s books.
 - c) Facilitating the emergence of new and fresh voices in contemporary African children’s literature.
 3. Sensitizing the masses about the importance of children reading at an early age. The campaign should involve children, parents, teachers and relevant government and non-governmental institutions;
 4. Encouraging/motivating authors to write in local languages;
 5. Urging schools to include as many local children’s book titles on their reading lists as possible and creation of book reading clubs in primary schools;
 6. Including the creative industry in national planning by, for instance, allocating a special fund to the writing and publishing sectors;
 7. Amending the Penal Code Act to include intellectual property offences and allocating more funding to training of more IP enforcement officers and field inspectors;
 8. Establishing more children’s spaces at all public and private community libraries, reinforcing the existing children’s reading corners and boosting the library grants sent to local governments;
 9. Setting up more community libraries;
 10. Harnessing the power of technology to;
 - Market and sell books – a case of online bookstores
 - Grow networks and fan bases beyond national borders
 - Publish work in several formats such as audio, video and Braille, for inclusivity

Technology can also be utilized to diversify reading methods through integrating ICT with community and schools’ library systems.

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