The Book Chain in Kenya

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Kenya consists of eight physiographic regions divided into administrative provinces. Within these administrative units are districts followed by divisions, locations, sub-locations and villages. The climate differs throughout the country and is determined by topography, altitude and precipitation. Most of the northern and eastern part of the country is semi-arid, and less than one third of the country is arable.

In Kenya, agriculture remains the leading sector in stimulating economic growth. The most important foreign-exchange earners are coffee and tea in the agricultural sector and tourism in the non-agricultural sector. Although the government has played an important role in the economy, private enterprise has been given more weight in the development process and today accounts for about two thirds of gross domestic product.

In Kenya, several social factors are relevant to the provision and use of books:
- a low level of literacy, meaning that a sizeable proportion of Kenyans are excluded from readership;
- the dominance of books written in English, which means that people with basic literacy skills in vernacular languages are excluded from using the books stocked by libraries as so few of them are available in the vernaculars;
- the absence of a reading culture, which results in few individuals buying books and other reading materials;
- Kenyan culture encourages people to spend their leisure time in sporting activities, recreational places (bars, hotels) and in churches and mosques rather than spending it reading;
- the HIV/AIDS scourge has become a major hindrance to the promotion of a reading culture in Kenya as large numbers of people are affected either because they are ill or because they are caring for people who are ill.
- there is still a large nomadic population, especially in the arid and semi-arid parts of the country.

Recent political trends have, however, been favourably to the development of the book industry. There has been greater liberalization of, and increased access to, library and information services and materials. Government has, for example, removed restrictions on the number of books that school libraries can buy per subject. Some of the developments that have taken place during the past decade include a larger number of information professionals graduating from training institutions. The introduction of multiparty politics in the political system has led to greater democratization of Kenyan society.

Although Kenya has no comprehensive information policy, there are several sectoral policies in the form of legislation, regulations and guidelines covering, for instance, public libraries (the KNLS Board Act), archives (the Public Archives Act), and legal-deposit material (the Books and Newspaper Act). Other relevant laws include the Copyright Act, the Industrial Property Act, the Science and Technology Act, the Museums Act, the Universities Acts, and the Education Act.

A common feature of all the above laws is that they are in need of major review and harmonization. There is a need to formulate a comprehensive national information policy in Kenya to enhance co-ordination in the information sector and in the book industry.

Literacy, languages and writing

Levels of illiteracy are still very high in Kenya, and many complex factors that must be taken into account in dealing with adult literacy development in the country.
- First, there is the principle of national commitment. The achievement of full adult literacy should be one of the priorities of national economic and social development. A relevant policy should be set out and implemented, supported by adequate financial provision.
- Second, there must be popular participation. The participation of people in determining the content, levels of competence and methods of learning should be part of national development strategies in Kenya.
- The third principle is co-ordination. The task of implementing an adult literacy campaign involves

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various ministries, institutions, industrial plants, trade unions, government organizations and individuals. It is therefore very important that those planning library and book development in Kenya identify relevant stakeholders and work closely with them. These include such people as village headmen, religious leaders, village teachers, social workers, agricultural extension workers, etc.

- The fourth principle is that of mobilization. It means preparing learner-oriented materials, securing volunteers, setting up library and information systems, and providing effective distribution of the books and information needed.

- The final principle is that of education, which recognizes that every human being is entitled by right to basic education.

I have given a summary of the problems in accessing information caused by a multiplicity of languages in Kenya in a previous article. While linguistic and cultural diversity is part of the world's cultural wealth, it is also a significant barrier to communication. In Kenya, the multiplicity of tribes, large and small, each speaking its own vernacular, is a problem. It is clearly impossible to base a large information service on the small number of books that could be produced in readers' mother tongues. Most books and journals in the country are written in English, and this is therefore the language on which the information services are based. This has some obvious drawbacks. For example, for the reader whose mother tongue is not English, understanding the vocabulary, grammar, word-association, discriminate selection of adverbs and adjectives, evocative references and subtle expressions found in English-language books can be very trying experiences. The language barrier is, in fact, a major obstacle to the free flow of information in Kenya. The national language, Kiswahili, would have been a better language on which to base information services, since it is better understood and more commonly spoken in the rural areas than English, but unfortunately there are too few books written in Kiswahili.

There are few writers in Kenya and not many professionals write books in their disciplines. Kenya has produced several successful writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Francis Imbuga. The country's literature has been fairly successful compared to that of many other African countries; however, most books used in libraries have to be imported from developed countries. Purchase from abroad has many problems—especially the availability of foreign exchange and import taxes, taxes amount to 35% of the cost of each purchase.

Local writing and publishing is being actively encouraged by organizations such as the African Publishers Network (APNET). I believe that it is better, both culturally and economically, to encourage local writing and publishing; and to promote library collection development centred on locally produced reading materials, instead of continuing to rely on imported foreign literature.

Book publishing

In Kenya, the business of book publishing has changed over the years, moving towards its present form. Although the government played a leading role in the development of educational publishing in the first decade of Kenya's independence, private publishing firms also flourished. The number of local private commercial publishing houses registered in Kenya grew, notable examples being East African Publishing House and Transafrica Publishers, among others. In the recent past, this growth has continued. At present there are more than 40 publishing firms in Kenya, which include multinational ones, indigenous commercial publishers and state-owned publishers, including the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, the Kenya Literature Bureau and the Government Press.

Although in the middle of 1970s and early 1980s, the number of local publishing houses increased, the textbook market was still dominated by the foreign publishing houses and parastatal publishing firms. One of the firms that made an early impact in Kenyan indigenous publishing was the East African Literature Bureau (EALB). When the East African Community broke up in 1977 owing to political differences among the member states, the EALB ceased to operate, as did other regional bodies. The market for the foreign publishing houses which were operating in Kenya also shrank. The Kenya Literature Bureau, established in 1980, was to take over functions that had been performed by the EALB.

According to Nyririki and Makwtsi, Kenya has performed better in publishing development than most
other African countries. Compared to other countries in East and Central Africa, Kenya has the most active book industry. It is commendable that the industry has managed to grow in spite of a fairly weak skills base.

The Kenya Publishers Association (KPA) brings together book publishers in Kenya. The KPA is the only recognized body that liaises with the government of Kenya on matters regarding the development of the book industry, and particularly the development of a book policy that would ensure an integrated and interdisciplinary approach to the creation, distribution and promotion of books and reading. KPA, for example, fought for the creation of a liberalized book market, especially for schoolbooks. Previously, the school book market, which is the biggest and most lucrative in the Kenyan book industry, was monopolized by two state-owned publishing firms, the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation and the Kenya Literature Bureau.

Book printing

According to Rotich, the success and development of a well-established publishing industry needs to be supported by other industries; most importantly the printing and paper industry. Mbenge observes that Kenya has adequate printing capacity, with more than ten printers capable of achieving a reasonably good standard of book production. The country has a number of printing firms that are used by the publishing industry; the state-owned publishing firms have their own printing machines. Printing machines available for publishers are mostly of the offset variety, there are printing firms with four-colour web machines, but these are mostly used in newspaper and magazine printing. There are also letterpress printing machines (both linotype and monotype) which are used mainly by the government printers.

The leading commercial printers in Kenya are based in Nairobi, and include English Press, Printpak, Kenya Litho, General Printers, Pizzone Printers, and the Government Press. Kenya is the largest paper producer in Africa after South Africa. The Pan African Paper Mill at Webuye in Western Kenya, which was established in the early 1970s, continues to produce enough paper to meet the country's needs.

Bookselling and distribution

Rotich says that two models of book distribution exist side by side in Kenya. In the first model, publishers sell their books directly to bookshops, maintaining accounts for each bookseller. This arrangement allows the retailers higher discounts from the publishers than they would from a distributor. However, in some cases, the trade discounts to book retailers are lower when the volume of the purchases are lower. Under this arrangement, publishers must maintain a lot of records and deal with a large number of customers, which might mean that they require more personnel in their sales and marketing departments.

There are a number of book distributors in Kenya who purchase books from publishers and sell them to bookshops, and sometimes to schools and libraries. These form the second model. The distributors stock titles from all the publishing houses in Kenya and provide a one-stop shop for bookshops. The book distributors are commonly present in all the provinces of Kenya, unlike the publishing houses almost all of whose distribution departments are located in Nairobi.

In Kenya bookshops come in various shapes and sizes, with different sizes of stock, ranging from hundreds of titles to tens of thousands. They may be small individual bookshops or large ones with a number of branches. They are a vital link between the author and the reader. The number, size and availability of bookshops across the country will determine whether books will reach all the actual and potential customers. People in urban areas have greater access to bookshops than those in the remote rural areas of the country. In some rural areas, especially in the arid and semi-arid regions of the country, the public have no access to bookshops of any kind.

Library services

Libraries occupy a central position in the distribution of books. They are often the most effective means of getting printed matter to the reader. Kenya's national library system consists of public, educational and special libraries. It is estimated that, excluding school libraries, the nation's libraries have a total book stock in excess of five million.

Libraries in Kenya, irrespective of their size, face similar problems, albeit at different levels of severity. These include:

- lack of adequate funds for the purchase of publications;
- inadequate professional human resources;
- inadequate physical infrastructure;
- inadequate use of information technology;
- lack of well-defined inter-library cooperation;
- lack of an all-embracing national policy on the provision of information.

Kenya does not have a true national library. However, the Kenya National Library Service (KNLS), which is the national public library system, plays the role of a national library. It was established by an Act of Parliament that set up the Kenya National Library Service Board in 1967. The functions of the KNLS Board are to:

- promote, establish, equip, manage, maintain and develop libraries in Kenya as a national public library service;
- plan and co-ordinate library, documentation and related services in Kenya;
- advise the government, local authorities and other public bodies, on all matters relating to library, documentation and related services;
- provide facilities for study and training in the principles, procedures and techniques of librarianship and such other related subjects as the Board may from time to time decide;
- advise the government on library, education and training;
- participate and assist in a campaign for the eradication of illiteracy;
- stimulate public interest in books and promote reading for knowledge, information and enjoyment;
- acquire books produced in and outside Kenya and such other materials and sources of knowledge necessary for a comprehensive national library;
- publish the national bibliography of Kenya and to provide bibliographical and reference services.

A recent survey has revealed specific inadequacies and shortages in the areas of infrastructure and physical facilities for the provision of library services in Kenya. First, the existing KNLS libraries do not provide adequate reading space in many regions where they exist. Secondly, quite a number of libraries are in need of repair. Thirdly, the library network does not cover most districts in Kenya. As at the end of the year 2000, there were eight provincial libraries (one in each province), six district or branch libraries, and twelve other community-based libraries, giving a total of 26 operational libraries.

Education (or academic) libraries serve the tertiary level of education, that is, universities, colleges and polytechnics. University libraries in Kenya are the best provided for in terms of stock, staff and budget. The University of Nairobi Library System, for example, has a stock of more than 500,000 items. The other five public universities also have fairly well-equipped libraries. Kenya has several private universities and other institutions of higher learning which have good libraries with good facilities and reading materials.

The four national polytechnics - Kenya Polytechnic, Mombasa Polytechnic, Eldoret Polytechnic and Kisumu Polytechnic - have a total book stock of about 200,000 volumes, mainly in technological subjects and business education. Educational libraries also include those in diploma colleges and in teacher training colleges.

Book-related agencies and events

Kenya has a vibrant National Book Development Council which was relaunched in 1988 with the assistance of UNESCO. The functions and activities of the Council include:

- Co-ordination of planning - submission of advisory documents to government agencies and private sector associations.
- Book promotion - through book fairs, book and library weeks, advertising and other efforts.
Education and training

The changing information environment in Kenya requires a workforce that is familiar with the emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) and, of course, with the traditional printed resources, mainly books. The best education and training and the most effective management structures must support them. In this context, training institutions must play a vital role in designing their curriculum to the required education and training at the appropriate level.

In 1995 Kenya had five training institutions in information sciences. These were Kenya Polytechnic's Department of Information and Library Studies, Kenyatta University's Library Studies Department, the Department of Library and Information Studies at the School of Professional Studies, the Faculty of Information Sciences at Moi University, and the Department of Library and Archival Studies at Sigiagala Technical College.

Several training programmes have been established in public universities in the country in the recent past to train library/information staff at diploma level. It is encouraging to note that most institutions offer training in book publishing, sales, marketing, and distribution.

The faculty of Information Sciences at Moi University has a whole department for training graduates specializing in publishing and the book trade at degree level.

Conclusion

The book chain in Kenya, like that in many other African countries, faces various problems which make book services ineffective. These problems include inadequate funding, inadequately trained staff in the book industry, and a lack of appreciation of book services in some key sectors. However, it is true to say that the information infrastructure in general and the book industry in particular, continue to develop.