

# Independent Evaluation of IABSS Project 2001-2004

The comments in this report are based on the following: study of all evaluation forms returned by distribution partners, libraries and publisher partners during the 2003 and 2004 evaluations; interviews with Catherine Nicholson and Brian Steenson at Book Aid International in November 2004, an interview with Mary Jay at African Books Collective in November 2004, reports of sales made by participating ABC publishers through IABSS scheme, and interviews I conducted in Uganda in February 2005 with Ugandan distribution partners, librarians, school teachers, library users, publishers and booksellers.<sup>1</sup>

## Aims and Objectives

*To enhance partners' capacity to provide appropriate services to end users and help overcome shortages of culturally relevant books in libraries in Africa*

The key issue for librarians and distribution partners is the provision of a wide range of relevant material which will be popular with users. IABSS has been successful insofar as it has increased the available range of relevant titles.

*'[IABSS has benefited us] tremendously. It gave us access to large numbers and varieties of good quality, relevant and interesting African authored and published book which would otherwise have been impossible.'*<sup>2</sup>

This has to be seen in the context of a hugely expanding demand for reading material overall, both in schools and in the general population. See for example the increase in the primary school population in Uganda from 2 million to 7 million, following the introduction of universal primary education in 1997, and the forecast tripling of Uganda's overall population from 25 million in 2005 to over 75 million by 2035<sup>3</sup>. Similar, though, less extreme, population increases are expected across the continent.

*'[The] community library service has 48 constituent libraries and is in the process of opening more. The books help to build up starting collections, and increase the number of books in existing libraries. The libraries are in rural areas and the users love the books with an African background which they feel they can relate to.'*<sup>4</sup>

In this context IABSS is less than a drop in the ocean, but it does point the way to the only possible source of sufficient reading material that the millions of new readers in Africa will want – African published books written and produced locally.

BAI has throughout, in its evaluation material, requested information on promotional activities carried out by libraries to encourage readers to make use of their library's services. These requests, together with other activities such as the information materials resource pack, are admirable attempts to help enhance capacity. The majority of these activities lie outside the scope of this report.

*To raise awareness of materials published in Africa within and between the target countries, and promote intra-African trade in books*

IABSS has raised awareness among librarians of African published books, but there is no clear evidence that librarians have made additional purchases of African published material (outside the project) that would not have been made anyway.

Most libraries' acquisitions budgets are so small that experimental purchases from a new source are an unaffordable luxury.

For a good many libraries the IABSS project appeared to be a significant source of information about African-published books, and many specifically mentioned it as having opened their eyes to African published material. Other sources of information, where mentioned, included publishers' catalogues (mentioned by librarians from Namibia, Nigeria, Cameroon), African Books in Print (librarians from Gambia and Sierra Leone), local booksellers (librarians from Tanzania and Sierra Leone), the Zimbabwe International Book Fair (librarians from Zimbabwe), and generally through the internet<sup>5</sup>. But many librarians did comment that they did not get much information about African published books. This may appear to reflect poorly on African publishers, but it is also a function of the limited spending power of the libraries themselves. It is not worthwhile for publishers to send marketing material and catalogues to potential customers with no money to spend. Publishers are surely in the best position to judge what marketing and promotion techniques work for them, whether through catalogues, representatives making personal calls, or book fairs and exhibitions. It will be interesting to see to what extent e-mail marketing becomes a significant tool for African publishers, trying to reach African librarians, booksellers and the media.

One of the objectives of the project has been to help promote intra-African trade in books. The success of this aim is dependent on the overall environment for intra-African trade, and the comment of one publisher from Uganda is relevant here: "Intra-African book trade will grow only alongside and as a consequence of the wider growth in intra-African trade, which, while it has been growing, is not yet fully developed." In other words, the book trade will follow, rather than set, trends.

*'I did good business with booksellers [in Zimbabwe] but when times got rough it became difficult. I lost heavily in 2003 in Zimbabwe: a bookseller who owed me close to US\$4000 decided to pay in Zimdollars at bank rate: I got less than half the amount. Selling directly to an African country is risky, expensive and the chances of success are minimal.'*<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, as this same comment suggests, there has been a clear trend for intra-African book trade to grow, largely confined to regional trade to neighbouring countries. This was apparent in publishers' reports from Ghana and Kenya, and from the publisher interviews in Uganda. It was also apparent from librarians' reports from Cameroun, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, in 2003 and 2004, which all noted book purchase from South Africa (and in the case of Namibia from Botswana and Zimbabwe also). I do not believe this growth is to any significant extent attributable to the IABSS project.

#### *To support independent African publishers through sales revenue*

The sales directly attributable to the project are made through ABC (i.e. via the UK), and it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of these sales themselves. But the wider aim of the project in terms of sales revenue support was to encourage the growth of consequent sales as a result of the awareness of African books generated by the project. Any such sales would need on the whole to follow different channels than through ABC, whose prices and marketing are directed at a Northern, rather than African, market.

The initial step in boosting sales is to achieve awareness of the product, and one of the objectives of the project was to do just this. Some publishers considered that "more libraries within Africa have come to know about us through this scheme" but a

more common comment was that “it has not had any impact on direct dealing between us and libraries”.<sup>7</sup>

Another objective was to promote independent publishing. It should be noted that the definition of independent could be contested. IABSS broadly followed ABC’s definition which determines eligibility for participation, and which excludes the local branches of international publishing conglomerates. The approach adopted seems perfectly reasonable to me.

Sales through the IABSS project have been of great importance to a number of ABC publishers whose books have been popular. In my opinion one of the many positive aspects of the project has been the direct support – through sales not subsidy – to African publishers whose catalogues have included titles which have wide appeal across the continent. The scale of the support has not been so great as to distort publishing decisions, as far as I can tell (i.e. books were not published simply because it was believed that IABSS sales would make them profitable), but it has allowed reprints to be done that might not otherwise have been possible.

*‘Additional income made it possible for us to buy two Sollatek UPS equipment to enable us to deal with the power fluctuations, we replaced one of the PCs, enabled repairs of our equipment, we bought one HP printer.’<sup>8</sup>*

*Have the target groups been reached?*

The project had a number of target groups, divided into two main categories: (a) library users (children, students, teachers and adults), (b) the book trade (publishers, booksellers and librarians). I think the multiplicity of target groups reflects well on BAI’s understanding of the diversity of library users and the complexity of the book chain; but it has also presented the project with a challenge, since it has had to try to operate a number of levers at once.

An objective in relation to readers was to try to provide appealing books to disadvantaged or marginalised groups. BAI’s key decision in this regard was in selecting their distribution partners, since it is through the distribution partners that books were able to reach libraries serving these groups. This choice lay outside the parameters of the project, since the distribution partners had already been selected. As far as I have been able to tell, however, IABSS benefited immeasurably from ongoing efforts by distribution partners to reach those same marginalised groups, and from the general promotional efforts made by distribution partners to alert readers to the availability of new titles in general, and IABSS titles in particular.

BAI’s evaluation forms to libraries asked specific questions about the target groups library partners attempted to serve with their selections of IABSS books. Most completed forms made mention of women and young people, and recognised minorities, and where relevant reported a wide geographical distribution of titles. If my impression of Uganda is indicative librarians’ commitment to reaching marginalised and vulnerable people goes well beyond filling in evaluation forms appropriately.

In Uganda both the distribution partners I met are committed to the widest possible distribution of books to libraries in rural areas, and throughout the country, and take this responsibility seriously. I also saw evidence of a number of events organised to promote books, and BAI’s books in particular, as part of a continuing programme of promoting reading and libraries.

*How well do the books supplied meet the demands of the target group?*

One of the questions I tried to explore in Uganda was how appealing IABSS books were compared with other titles. This was difficult to test, but I would make the following comments. With such a shortage of books overall, to some extent any book will do, in that it is probably better than nothing – but this is too disheartening. Some books are clearly more popular with library users than others. What makes them so is of course one of the great mysteries of publishing, but comments from a variety of distribution partners, and from some of the users I spoke to, make it clear that books which connect immediately and vividly with the lives and concerns of readers will always be preferred. Novels or stories set in an environment with which readers are familiar will be more popular.

*‘These books are used by the aged and literate community people, therefore they love books of African nature, styles, and culture. People are more interested in African setting than European ones.’<sup>9</sup>*

Several of the interviews I conducted with secondary school pupils suggest that books set in cities in South Africa or Nigeria will appeal greatly to rural Ugandan readers, and do not appear exotic, if the issues: family life, moral choices, love and relationships, are those which face the readers themselves. A librarian in Zimbabwe reported that ‘teenagers could relate to the love stories in the Aids Awareness booklets and other novels on romance and adventure...’<sup>10</sup> Among the adult readers I interviewed there was also an expressed desire, from some of them, for books set in the western world, though this request did not arise when talking with the younger readers. “Set in Africa” and “Published in Africa” are not identical, of course, but IABSS books were all set in Africa, where the term makes sense, and those books selected by distribution partners from the IABSS list were presumably chosen because it was felt they would appeal to the readers the distribution partners served. If many of the distribution partners responded that the IABSS books were no more or less popular than other titles it is no criticism of the IABSS selection criteria. Books published in Africa

*‘Readers for young learners bought are more focused with pictures of African children in [southern] African countries and other war-torn countries. Names of characters and places reflect a partly African society and all African children identify with the books more.’<sup>11</sup>*

Several librarians reported a demand for local language titles. In Zimbabwe (Bulawayo Public Libraries) librarians had bought (outside IABSS) South African titles in Zulu for Ndebele-speaking ‘younger readers’. In Uganda locally purchased titles had included books in Luganda, and in Tanzania the three categories of books specified as popular were text and supplementary books for primary and secondary schools, story/fiction books with African settings, and books written in Kiswahili. The IABSS project is not well-suited to the provision of African language titles, except marginally in the case of Kiswahili, since it is in any case an international language within the region. But it would be well to remember this interest in reading material in local languages when considering future projects.

*‘What books are most popular in your library? ‘Text and supplementary books for primary and secondary schools, story/fiction books with African settings, books written in Kiswahili.’<sup>12</sup>*

The same three categories of books (textbooks, fiction, local language titles) came up frequently throughout the librarians’ comments, but fiction usually appears to have been the most popular category overall. Reading for pleasure seems alive and well.

The IABSS project has had a number of complex and occasionally overlapping objectives over the ten years of its operation. The changes in those objectives over time reflect the various, and changing, priorities of BAI, ABC, funders and project partners, and also the changed environment for libraries and publishers in Africa. This review looks only at the last four years of the project, which had already undergone a number of evolutions. Evaluation is a more complex process under such circumstances. My task would have been easier had the project had clearer and more stable objectives, but the project might not have been as responsive to changed circumstances or to insights gained through interim evaluations.

Those changes include the general policy shift throughout Africa towards privatisation and liberalisation which has reduced library budgets, but also relaxed foreign exchange regulations. The overall trend of globalisation may well have produced an increase in intra-African trade, but in the case of books this has been a minor increase, and largely restricted to growth in regional trade within eastern or southern Africa, for example. Local publishing has continued to grow in a number of African countries, and there are, as a consequence, more African-published books available now than there were a decade ago. Local textbook publishing, which makes up a large part of this growth, is often dominated by the African branches of publishing multinationals – publishing's own version of the 'glocalisation' phenomenon.

The most significant insight, in terms of the IABSS project, is BAI's growing awareness of the importance of booksellers as intermediaries in the book chain, and the organisation's refocusing from just librarians and publishers to booksellers also. This has led to a more nuanced understanding of what is required in order effectively to promote intra-African book trade. The partnership with ABC is illustrative of the potential relationships that may be built up with other organisations which share a commitment to the book in Africa, and whose key contacts and specialist knowledge are with other links in the book chain overall.

## **Operational issues**

BAI's decision to operate three levels of choice, depending on the size of the library partner, seems proportionate and appropriate.

There have been no significant problems reported with either the selection of books actually delivered or the delivery schedule itself. It is a comment on BAI's perceived and actual competence that this issue did not arise in discussions or comments.

Operationally, the evaluation stage of the project was more problematic because it was not clear at an early stage that the IABSS project books were to be separately accounted for from other books received from BAI. In Uganda the NLU had not kept separate records of where they had sent IABSS books.

There is no longer the level of concern previously expressed by some publishers and by ABC over the selection procedures used by BAI in choosing books to be included in IABSS. This is largely because the greater role played by library partners themselves in the selection of titles has meant that the 'customer' is, rightly, calling the tune.

Publishers were much slower than librarians in returning their evaluation forms, which I suspect reflects the more distant relationship between them and BAI, and the fact that for most publishers IABSS is much less significant in the totality of their

operations. Most of the publishers' contact with BAI was through ABC, as the organisation consolidating and supplying the books. One of the two publishers I visited in Uganda was not aware how many, if any, of their titles were included in the IABSS project, though the other (a much more commercial operation overall) was very well aware.

For publishers, sales through IABSS form a more or less significant part of their overall sales through ABC, which again will be more or less important to the company depending on individual circumstances. So, for some publishers IABSS is insignificant, whereas for others it has been an important source of sales income. But nearly all publishers express their appreciation of IABSS principally in financial terms.

Within the context of the IABSS project itself it may not have been possible to do much more to involve the publishing partners in its unfolding – those for whom IABSS was (financially) important paid attention and the others had other things to pay attention to. But future projects should continue to encourage full involvement of publishers as partners, and it is encouraging to see this work already taking place with the Accra intra-African books purchase workshop in 2004. My expectation is that publishers will, on the whole, continue to find projects like IABSS marginal to their current commercial objectives; certainly the comments from publishers' evaluation forms suggest that they had more pressing issues on their minds. But some publishers, and certainly publishers' organisations, will want to support this work, particularly through improving distribution through importing booksellers in other countries. Publishers are competing with one another in a way that is quite alien to the way that libraries work, and it may be difficult to promote cooperation between publishers in this field. I note that ABC's experience is that African publishers are largely very willing to share experiences with one another, perhaps because of the underdeveloped state of the African publishing industry. Whatever the reasons, such sharing of experiences is to be applauded and encouraged. But examples of good practice in international distribution within Africa could help, as well as continuing opportunities for publishers to network with booksellers and other publishers and share experiences and contacts.

For users, IABSS books are not visible as such, though they are marked with the BAI stamp, as are other titles supplied by BAI.

There is an interest in "materials about Africa, produced by Africans for Africans with an African background"<sup>13</sup>, which IABSS books are in an excellent position to help fulfill. Librarians from Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Namibia, Tanzania and Zambia all reported similar responses from readers.

Librarians in Zimbabwe, and several of the secondary school readers I interviewed in Uganda, reported that teenagers could relate to the love stories with AIDS awareness messages. The significance of such comments is that the appeal of the books is that they reflect the concerns of readers in their lives outside the library, and suggest that African books can most easily achieve this.

The overall comments collected from readers suggests that librarians are making diligent efforts to assess what books will appeal to their readers and making appropriate selections as a result. It is only the dramatic mismatch between demand and supply which gives any cause for concern, and it is beyond the scope of any one organisation to address this.

The aims of the project were broadly understood by BAI, ABC, libraries and publishers, but I would suggest that the length of the project, and its changing nature over the years, have meant that the partners have become less clear about specific

project objectives. This is entirely understandable, but it would be better to be clearer and more focused throughout, in order to ensure that the project, as a project, does what it is intended to.

### *Conclusions as regards the skills of the implementing body*

The organisations implementing this project comprised BAI, African Books Collective, the African distribution partners and the African library partners.

The process of selecting, ordering, packing and shipping the books seems to have gone extremely well. From time to time fewer copies of particular titles were available than were requested by libraries and distribution partners but I do not regard this as a reflection on the skills of the implementing organisations.

BAI has kept full records of which books have been shipped to which library partner throughout the project, and has made admirable efforts – largely rewarded – to garner regular, annual feedback from library partners on the use made of the books shipped.

As far as was reasonably possible distribution partners and library partners noted the final destination of IABSS titles but often the IABSS books were processed along with other books received from BAI. This was because it was not requested of the distribution partners that they keep a separate record of the final destination of IABSS titles.

Library partners undertook a wide range of imaginative and effective promotion activities to encourage library users to read the books available, and BAI has ensured that library partners hear about the different activities organised by their various library partners.

All the organisations involved appear to have operated the project competently and diligently, and with admirable professionalism.

## **Lessons for Future Projects**

In general, it will be helpful to libraries and distribution partners if the entire project process can be given in outline at the outset. This is well understood by BAI, and it is only the ongoing and complex nature of the IABSS project that has caused minor difficulties in ensuring effective evaluation.

The chief impact of IABSS for publishers has been on their sales income. There is a dilemma for publishers in that a project like IABSS may run into one or other of two contrasting dangers: it may have either an insignificant impact on sales income, in which case it is irrelevant, or a major impact, in which case it may – given that the project is necessarily time-limited – distort publishing decisions and leave publishers exposed when it comes to an end. It appears to me that IABSS has managed to steer a middle course between these two dangers, by providing significant support to publishers without distorting their priorities. In any future projects a clear sense of how long the project will last will help to minimise any distorting effect. But it is worth re-emphasising that for those publishers for whom IABSS has indeed been significant in sales terms it is very welcome given the peculiar challenges of publishing in Africa.

It is also worth noting the major impact of IABSS on African Books Collective as an African publishers' organisation. IABSS has been a significant source of income to

ABC and has enabled it to provide services to its participating publishers that it would not otherwise have been able to offer. So participating African publishers have benefited indirectly as well as directly.

The attempt to encourage intra-African book trade has been more difficult to achieve. Future projects with this objective should focus more explicitly on actions designed to boost this trade, through incentives, training or support, and by encouraging contact between publishers, librarians and booksellers in different countries, rather than generally to foster the growth of such trade without doing much to make it happen beyond exhortation and encouragement.

Most of the publishers who responded to the most recent evaluation listed among their sales priorities for the next three or four years work to improve local rather than international sales, often by trying to get textbook adoptions through their ministry of education. One Ghanaian publisher reported significant *imports* of Nigerian books (though no Nigerian publishers talked of exports), but for most publishers international sales remain small and insignificant. A Ghanaian publisher also reported that some of her titles had been 'adopted by the ministry of education in Zambia. Unfortunately the books were never purchased by the ministry for reasons which were never made known to me.'<sup>14</sup>

It was encouraging to see evidence of BAI's more recent interest in bringing in to discussions the other partner group in the book chain, the booksellers, and including them in projects. Most publishers, even in the 2004 evaluation, continue to report only very limited contacts between themselves and libraries<sup>15</sup>, and indeed it may be more appropriate for booksellers to take on this intermediary role. BAI can help encourage this conversation, and its work with the Pan African Booksellers Association (outside the IABSS project, but about which I heard enthusiastic reports from librarians in Uganda) is exactly the kind of facilitation it is uniquely well-placed to undertake. The kinds of work that BAI could usefully undertake in this regard include:

- Facilitating the exchange of experiences between non-competing booksellers in different countries in their attempts (a) to import books, and (b) to sell African-published books within their local markets.
- Providing information on practical experience of what works and what does not when attempting to ship books directly from one African country to another, in terms of costs, paperwork, reliability of service, time for delivery.<sup>16</sup>
- Continuing to work to increase awareness of African-published books among librarians and other potential book buyers.
- Encouraging African publishers to bid for whatever other local book purchase opportunities may arise which are supported by BAI, such as through its local purchase projects. This would involve letting African publishers know that such funds were available and inviting them to send relevant catalogues to the purchasing librarians.

My only note of caution to BAI in its efforts to develop the book chain would be that it should not forget that there is no other organisation with such deep relationships with, and such a wide knowledge of, African librarians and their concerns. In the absence of any counterpart organisation for African librarians alongside APNET for African publishers and PABA for booksellers it is all the more important that BAI retain this special concern for librarians. I see no sign that BAI is in danger of forgetting this unique attribute. BAI should be warmly congratulated on staying faithful to libraries as key institutions for reaching large numbers of poorer people,



even at times when the policy environment for libraries, in terms of recognition of libraries' ability to assist in meeting the millennium development goals, for example, is not as friendly as it surely should be.

Guy Bentham

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<sup>1</sup> From the National Library of Uganda I met Gertrude Mulindwa, Charles Endra, Ben Bagenda. From Kyambogo University I met Justin Kiyimba. I met school librarians and resource centre managers at the following schools: Muduuma Coordinating Centre, Muduuma (plus pupils from five other primary schools), St. Kizito Primary School, Mpigi, St. Michael's Coordinating Centre, Ssete, St. Charles Lwanga Primary School, Bukerere, Ngandu Primary School, Makono Town, Lwesa Primary School, Makono Town, St. Thereza's Girls Primary School, Namiryango, Caesaria Public Library Complex, Buikwe, Bishop Nkoyoyo Secondary School, pupils from five other primary schools at Caesaria library, Nakaseke Telecentre. I met the following publishers: James Tumusiime from Fountain Publishers, and Violet Barungi from Femrite. I visited two booksellers: Augustine Lusiba from Gustro, and Aristoc Booklex booksellers.

<sup>2</sup> 2004 Library Evaluation, Gambia

<sup>3</sup> UN Population Division, World Population Prospects, 2004 revision.

<sup>4</sup> 2004 Library Evaluations, Namibia

<sup>5</sup> 2003 Library Evaluations

<sup>6</sup> 2004 Publisher Evaluation, Ghana

<sup>7</sup> 2004 Publisher Evaluations from Uganda and Ghana respectively

<sup>8</sup> 2004 Publisher Evaluation, Ghana

<sup>9</sup> 2003 Library Evaluation, Bo

<sup>10</sup> 2003 Library Evaluation, Highfield, Zimbabwe

<sup>11</sup> 2004 Library Evaluation, Cameroon

<sup>12</sup> 2004 Library Evaluation, Tanzania

<sup>13</sup> CAM/BC, library partner, 2003 evaluation

<sup>14</sup> 2004 Publisher Evaluations

<sup>15</sup> A typical comment, 'Our relationship with libraries has not developed considerably throughout the scheme.'

<sup>16</sup> See *Expanding the Book Trade in Africa: A study of current barriers and future potential* (Apnet/ADEA, 2000) available from African Books Collective, for an earlier attempt in this area.