



Special Paper

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The development of technical publishing in Africa

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In an article on publishing in Africa which appeared recently in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, the writer commented that 'in these countries of oral culture, the printed word has difficulty imposing itself.' The question as to whether or not the written word is an appropriate vehicle for the transfer of technical information in Africa was among the issues discussed at a workshop organized this year by CTA in The Netherlands on the promotion of technical books in Africa. An examination of the reports of studies commissioned for this workshop and of information from other sources indicated that, with increased enrolment in the formal education sector and the effectiveness of adult literacy campaigns, literacy rates in many African countries have increased rapidly and the demand for textbooks alone is enormous. In Tanzania, for example, over 85% of the population is now literate. In francophone Africa it is estimated that 20 million school children need textbooks, while in Nigeria, there are 32 million people in formal education who need up to 10 books each a year. There has also been a significant growth of the newspaper and magazine publishing industry in much of Africa. In effect, the myth about Africa's reading habits was exposed as little more than an excuse to do nothing.

The focus of this paper is on technical publishing. The term 'technical publishing' is used here to refer to books or booklets dealing with agricultural and rural development topics and written for researchers, students, university and college lecturers, personnel in development organizations, officials in ministries responsible for agricultural and rural development, extension workers and farmers. To what extent do these people rely on the printed word for the information they need to carry out their tasks effectively? To what extent are publishers producing appropriate material and can the target audience afford it? What role should foreign-based publishers play in technical publishing for Africa? What constraints do indigenous publishers face and how should they be overcome? These

are some of the issues that need to be addressed if Africa is to develop its capability to meet the growing demand for technical books.

The role, relevance and affordability of technical publications

There are three broad categories of technical books: those written for an elite audience of highly trained researchers and others in tertiary institutions; those written for middle-level development agents such as extensionists and leaders of development organizations; and those written for farmers and other village-level workers for direct, practical use.

Throughout the world the written word plays a crucial role in scientific and technical communication at all levels. In a survey conducted through CTA's bi-monthly magazine, *Spore*, the results showed clearly that even at the highest levels, where personnel were more likely to have access to other channels of communication such as regional workshops, television or CD-ROM technology, over 80% of the respondents indicated that their preferred channel for transmitting and receiving information was the book or journal.

The degree to which the content of technical books needs to be related specifically to the particular region, sub-region or country in which the users are working varies according to the audience. At the research scientist level, for example, this specificity is less important than it is at the community or village level. To put it another way, 'science is universal, technology is regional.' This leads directly to the question of where publications should originate — the more specific the topic, the greater the input should be from local sources. Here, one is talking not only of the local physical and cultural environment or farming conditions but also of local terminology and language. Whereas at researcher level the users of technical books are expected to have a working knowledge of English or French, at the local level any information being transferred through the printed media to users such as farmers is far more likely to be absorbed and used if it is written in the language of the farmer rather than in a foreign language.

At the Arnhem workshop, concern was expressed by many participants at the tendency of organizations in Europe and the USA to donate technical material for Africa without consulting their audience or those who have a good knowledge of that audience, such as local publishers, researchers and development workers. Similarly, many European and American publishers are producing material that reflects a lack of consultation with local experts or the intended audience.

Part of this consultation should focus on the purchasing power of the intended audience. While there are differences between one country and another in terms of what is an affordable price for a book, in general the purchasing power at all levels is very low in Africa. The cost of much of the literature produced in the world of agricultural science and rural development, from scientific journals and books to extension materials, is beyond the reach of most of the intended audience. And yet, as the postal survey mentioned above showed, these readers are willing to allocate a significant share of their limited resources to buying books. They will therefore be very selective in their choice of books, favouring those that are likely to improve their knowledge and hence improve their prospects of earning or generating more income.

Transnational versus indigenous publishers

The debate on the role of foreign-based publishers in Africa is often seen in terms of 'transnational versus indigenous publishing'. Among the major issues in this debate are commitment to the country concerned and the effect of transnationals on local publishers.

Historically, there are important differences in the approach adopted by transnational publishers in anglophone and francophone Africa. In the latter, there has always been considerable dependence on publishing houses in France to meet book needs. In English-speaking countries, however, private indigenous publishers, together with state and parastatal publishers, have gone some way towards meeting their own country's book needs. In Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, for example, indigenous publishers have taken over most primary school publishing and a good proportion of secondary school publishing.

This does not mean that, in anglophone Africa, the 'transnational versus indigenous publishing' issue has been resolved, or that all transnationals are selling up and leaving Africa. There are still many problems and a lot to be done. But at least a start has been made and the goal of independence in publishing is nearer. The return of many of these companies in the early 1990s when World Bank loans for book development became available is no proof of commitment to publishing in Africa; no doubt, many of them will leave as quickly as they did before when the money runs out.

As noted by Per Gedin, a Swedish publisher who has monitored developments in book publishing in Africa for many years, long-term stability and progress lie not in

providing conditions to attract foreign-based companies but in strengthening the capacity of indigenous publishers to meet their country's book requirements. The indigenous publisher 'is part of the culture of his country, he will always be prepared to invest the profit he makes on best-selling books in new talent and ideas. Not because he is an idealist — he has to survive as a businessman — but because he always wants to invest in the future.... A book market with a functioning infrastructure from writer to publisher, distributor and bookseller will not be created by the transnational publishers.... The only way to achieve this is by strongly supporting indigenous publishers.'

State versus private publishing

Where a publishing industry is well developed, with viable markets, solid state support and a good infrastructure, publishing is best left in the hands of private publishers. This encourages creativity and competition, ensures greater efficiency in book production, prevents books from being used as vehicles to promote government propaganda and offers readers more choice, quantitatively and qualitatively, of materials.

Currently, the only really viable type of publishing in Africa is textbook production for primary and secondary schools. In Kenya, for example, it has been estimated that school textbook publishing accounts for 90% of the activities of the country's private publishing sector. For countries with a less developed infrastructure, the percentage is even higher.

Outside the primary and secondary school markets the state may have to continue to publish certain types of books, such as technical publications on agricultural topics, until private publishing is better developed. As has been observed by a Nigerian publisher, Victor Nwankwo, at present technical publishing for 'African markets is remunerative for neither author nor publisher' and thus state or parastatal publishing may be the only way to ensure that the required books are available. With the type of state support described below, however, together with the support of the donor community and the efforts of African publishers themselves, the goal of transforming technical publishing by indigenous publishers into a viable activity can be achieved.

Private publishers could also seek support from non-governmental organizations, particularly for simple, inexpensive publications such as farmers' primers or extension booklets for which there is a great need. Co-publishing between publishers in different countries is another avenue to explore. By sharing the costs of compiling and printing

books through co-publishing arrangements, great savings can be made. Co-publishing also offers the advantage of longer print runs, which reduces unit costs and thus brings down selling prices. The state should ensure that there are no obstacles to such ventures in terms of the cross-border movement of books or money where necessary.

Developing and financing the indigenous publishing industry

All African publishers face the same critical infrastructural problems, whether they are producing textbooks for the formal educational sector, light reading material such as fiction or popular reference books for the general public, or publications for agricultural scientific and technical personnel. These problems include unreliability in the supply of locally manufactured or imported paper, poor communications and transport facilities, and unfavourable policy environments in terms of import licences and foreign currency. Access to information and training in many areas of publishing is restricted. Many of the materials required by the printing industry, such as film, plates, chemicals and spare parts for what is usually very old machinery, are difficult or impossible to obtain.

To solve these problems requires cooperation between the state and the private sector. For example, building a paper mill that goes some way towards serving a country's paper needs may be too big an undertaking for a private company; with state support, however, such a venture might be possible. Printing should remain in the hands of the private sector, with the state facilitating the acquisition of modern machinery, for example, rather than attempting to run large printing concerns itself.

The greatest problem faced by most indigenous publishers is lack of capital. Most publishers in Africa start out with minimal capital. The setting up costs, including staff recruitment, vehicles, equipment and office space, are considerable, and the nature of publishing is such that 2-3 years may elapse before a publisher begins to see a return on his/her investment in producing a book and a further 2 years before a break-even situation is reached. Little help is provided by banks in Africa, whether private or state owned, as they tend to regard publishing as a risky business; where banks are willing to lend, the cost of a loan is usually so high as to make the facility unaffordable.

There is case to be made for the state to give special consideration to indigenous publishers who are producing technical publications concerned with agricultural and rural development. In most African countries, the development of the agricultural sector

is the key to progress and the state should support strongly all efforts which contribute to such development, including indigenous technical publishing. The state must be encouraged to recognize that locally written and produced technical books are as important as any other agricultural input, such as fertilizers, in improving productivity and thus require the same level of support and investment.

An important area in the development of the publishing industry in Africa is training. The editorial standard of the material produced by an indigenous publisher must be high if these materials are to compete successfully with books produced by transnational publishers. Indigenous publishers are at a disadvantage in that, however well-trained their staff are, the poor quality of the materials at their disposal is such that the product will seldom 'look' as good as that produced by transnational publishers. Nevertheless, they do have the advantage of being more familiar with the needs and culture of their readers. Combining this advantage with a commitment to high editorial standards will pay dividends. Parallel efforts need to be made in the printing industry, so that staff are able to produce the best possible products given the limitations of out-of-date machinery and a shortage of good quality materials.

Many editors in indigenous publishing firms have been trained outside Africa or have received training whilst employed by transnationals. While this familiarises them with the latest developments in publishing, it does not prepare them for the conditions most of them will face when working for indigenous publishers. For this and other reasons African editors and other production personnel should be trained in Africa. Proposals for regional training centres such as the African Book Institute which is to be established under the umbrella of the African Publishing Network (APNET) are to be encouraged.

Creating a market for technical publications

Where book distribution channels are weak and high prices make most books unaffordable, the state should make the establishment of public libraries a priority. In the short term these libraries, particularly the reference sections, would provide a small market for technical publications. Greater access to such publications will gradually create a greater desire among the target audience for them, and the market will grow.

To improve awareness of technical books and encourage book buying, the state should also invest in promoting publications through media such as radio and television which

indigenous publishers cannot afford to use. For example, the state could sponsor farming programmes on radio in which locally produced agricultural titles were reviewed.

There should be closer liaison between publishers and bookshops, with the former ensuring reliable distribution to bookshops on terms favourable to both parties and the latter providing useful feedback on the prices customers will accept, the titles that are in demand, the subjects customers are seeking information on, and so on.

International donor agencies should be encouraged to buy books produced by indigenous publishers for local distribution. Too often, donor money is spent on buying materials produced in western countries for shipment to Africa. This may fill short-term gaps and should not be condemned out of hand, but it does nothing to strengthen the publishing infrastructure in Africa and thus postpones the time when African publishers will be able to produce such materials themselves. Also, local books are usually cheaper than foreign ones, and thus donor money could be used to buy many more copies, giving a greater number of agricultural and rural development workers access to technical publications.

Other areas where donor agencies could help develop the market for technical publications include guaranteeing loans to publishers from local banks. The loans would enable publishers to keep costs, and thus book retail prices, down while they build up their publishing lists. An example of this is the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation's Loan Guarantee Scheme, whereby a fund has been created to guarantee loans to indigenous Kenyan publishers from a local bank. This bank now has a far greater understanding of the business of publishing and is likely to look more favourably upon further requests from indigenous publishers for loans. The Kenyan scheme is a pilot project and plans are being drawn up to extend it to Tanzania. Another measure which donor organizations could implement to stimulate technical book publishing would be to guarantee a buyback, at cost, of a substantial proportion of a local publisher's print run of a book that is needed but might not otherwise get published.

A viable market for technical publications will not be created if the marketing and distribution capabilities of African publishers remain weak. Few indigenous publishers have the variety of books or the material resources to warrant trying to set up a marketing system which involves sales representatives covering the whole country. More modest but effective use of catalogues, monthly letters to bookshops and the prompt handling of orders achieve better results than attempting to be everywhere all the time. Publishers should also consider joining forces with other publishers in storing, marketing

and distribution so that the costs of these operations can be shared. Unfortunately, the tendency among publishers in Africa is to go it alone, which too often results in publishers overstretching themselves and ending up in the bankruptcy courts.

Conclusion

The development of technical publishing in Africa requires dedication and hard work not only from all those in the book business — writers, editors, publishers, printers, book sellers and distributors — but also from governments, development agencies and the international donor community. Publishers must work with each other and with other players in the book production chain to ensure that good-quality materials are published. Governments must attempt to create an environment in which indigenous publishing can flourish. Donor agencies should devote fewer resources to supplying books to Africa and more to encouraging Africa to meet its own book needs. And the ultimate consumers — researchers and technicians, policy makers, leaders of development organizations, extension agents, community-level development workers and the farmers themselves — must make it known that their need for relevant, affordable and readily available technical publications will be adequately met only when Africa's capacity to produce such materials has been considerably strengthened.

Note: The reports of two studies commissioned by CTA, Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (ACCT) and the French Ministry of Development Cooperation provided background material for some aspects of this paper. The reports are *Promouvoir le Livre Technique en Afrique* by D. Chabrol, Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques (GRET), and *Technical Publishing in Africa* by P. Osborn, Socially Appropriate Technology Information System (SATIS). The author also referred to the Background Discussion Paper produced by CTA for the Arnhem workshop.

A valuable source of information was the book entitled *Publishing and Development in the Third World*, edited by P. Altibach and co-published by Hans Zell Publishers (London, UK), Heinemann Kenya Ltd (Nairobi, Kenya) and Vistaar Publications (New Delhi, India). The chapters in this publication include 'Publishing in Nigeria' by Victor Nwankwo and 'Cultural Pride: The Necessity of Indigenous Publishing' by Per Gerdin.

The author also consulted the paper entitled 'Reading the Book the World Over' presented by M. Meek-Spencer at the 24th Congress of the International Publishers Association in India in January 1992. The author presented a paper on 'Publishing in Tanzania' at this congress.