Sharing information across libraries in Africa and beyond
After 20 years of sharing news, knowledge and insights from across our global partner network, the ink will dry on the last print version of BookLinks in December 2022.

BookLinks began in 2002 and has continued through the support of the Unwin Charitable Trust, to whom we owe our thanks. Since then, the world has seen major shifts in how content for reading is generated, disseminated and consumed. Combined with the rising challenges of climate change, Covid and global displacement, librarians and educators today face a whole range of new challenges. But books continue to play a key role in building a fairer future for all.

The demand for printed books continues to grow, and we are proud to continue to work with you to meet that demand. Support for our charity remains strong and we look forward to a long future of supporting reading around the world.

Through the 34 editions of BookLinks, we have communicated the stories of our partnerships and successes of our projects, shared knowledge on library management and reading promotion from all corners of the book world and profiled some of Africa’s library leaders.

In this final print issue we have chosen to focus on the future with stories of exciting new ways that books are reaching the people who need them most. We hope that it will inspire you to explore new opportunities for reading in your community. Looking forward, BookLinks will continue in a digital form, and if you have ideas of how it could better serve you, we would love to hear them.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this final print edition, and we thank you for your contributions, readership and support.

Best regards,

Alison Tweed
Chief Executive

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Taking books to the readers

Community Reading Awards 2021

In many countries, public and community libraries are strategically located to provide easy access to books by community members. But sometimes, these are still too far from neighbourhoods for access to happen or the small charge to borrow books is too expensive.

At the same time, other community groups, run by NGOs or by faith-based organisations, seek to introduce reading to their constituents through a range of activities for children, young people and adults. They want to run these reading activities in spaces more convenient to community members. Book Aid International’s Community Reading Awards seek to provide the opportunity for children, young people and adults to find books closer to where they live – within neighbourhoods and outside of the formal library structures.

The Community Reading Awards funds the establishment of community reading activities, or ‘microprojects’, which make books accessible in neighbourhoods. Facilitated by local public and community libraries and working in partnership with community groups, these programmes create opportunities for children, adults and especially out-of-school girls to read.

Each microproject is as unique as the community it serves. Innovation and creativity enable readers who previously had no access to books to engage with reading locally.

With the support of players of People’s Postcode Lottery, the first Community Reading Awards programme was launched in June 2021, and a panel of judges selected the 14 grant winners.

Librarians who led the microprojects managed funds, brokered new relationships, organised and delivered training – and they were able to witness new readers excited and enthused at the wonder of books.

The result is an exciting range of projects which have sparked new reading journeys for more than 7,000 people. Read on to find out more.

Over 7,000 people have accessed books via the Community Reading Award project winners in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Eunice reads to her baby at the Bondeni Maternity Unit, Kenya.
Mobile mountain bike library

Volunteers from 2021 Community Reading Award winner, the Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library in Uganda, get on their bikes to get books out.

Kisoga might only be 35km from the centre of Kampala’s urban sprawl, but it is a world away in many other senses, characterised by red marram roads, banana plantations and groves of trees rather than the highways, high rises and high walls of the city. The communities in this area subsist on small-scale agriculture, and homes are spread far and wide. Like many Ugandan communities, children and their parents in Kisoga are coping with the aftershocks of the world’s longest Covid-19 lockdown. Schools were closed for two years and learning has been lost.

Reading books and textbooks are hard to come by in the area, so Rogers Sserunjogi, Director of Music for Life Africa, the foundation that runs the Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library had the idea to start a mountain bike mobile library service, figuring that if readers were struggling to get to the library, the library could get to the readers.

Once a week, specially trained volunteer cyclists pack their backpacks with books, don high visibility vests and pedal off along the bumpy tracks to deliver books to children and families at their homes.

The volunteers have been trained in basic library management, book handling, and communication skills.

Five villages in the area surrounding Kisoga now benefit from a regular supply of books. There are several primary and secondary schools in the area. There is also a specialist school for the visually impaired and to help these students the team has made MP3 recordings of information allowing them to catch up on their class work.

Since the start of the project, nearly 200 children have engaged with books and are showing great enthusiasm for reading and improvements in their education.

“I have realized that there is power in having books in the community, where there is access to free books for everyone.”

Rogers Sserunjogi, Founder
Books, bumps and babies

Another winner of our Community Reading Award is the Toto Smart Book Club. This club is based in the Bondeni Maternity Unit in Nakuru, Kenya. The club encourages mothers to read to their unborn babies to help create connections, nurture an early reading culture and increase self-esteem. We spoke to one mother who told us why she sees the value in the club.

“My name is Jane. I am an expectant mother and I live near this facility, it’s not too far. I’m married and I live with my husband. I would say my personality is jovial and loving!

I have no other children, but this is not my first pregnancy, I have lost three, and this has been the first one so I am happy with his journey.

I am just a housewife, but I have my small projects that I do at home to keep me busy.

I am a lover of books. I love reading. I started when I was young and I have always loved reading a lot. It has been in me since I was a child, so I am not worried about the challenges of reading for my baby.

My dad was a teacher of English, so he inspired us to read sometimes as he knew it would help us learn languages and in class. So I grew up with that.

When a child is introduced to books at a tender age it does help them a lot; for that child to grow up knowing to read and loving the books. The child will love books and it means education won’t be so much of a challenge for the child.

For me particularly, the reading room here was introduced to us expectant mothers. For many it’s new, but reading is already in me.

But coming here to the library, well I just feel that it’s something that I love.

When I’m bored at home, I come down and take a book and read for my baby. That’s what we all do. It makes the mothers happy and it brings happiness to both the mother and the baby when you read together in the room here. It’s very good for us.”

Jane reads to her unborn baby at the Bondeni Maternity Unit, Kenya.
Five doors that libraries open

Nkem Osuigwe believes libraries are essential to the fabric of every community. As a Director of African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AFLIA) she has spent a lifetime advocating for African libraries. Here, she tells us why.

Open doors signify new opportunities, potential and freedom to access what lies beyond the doors. But many people who are born in poorer communities face a series of slamming doors throughout their lives.

It is our belief at AFLIA that libraries can open doors for everyone. But how do public and community libraries open doors? And which doors can they open?

1. The door to success in school

Early literacy is the foundation of academic achievement, but many parents cannot introduce children to reading, phonics and vocabulary development at home because they cannot afford books either in the official school language or the mother tongue.

Libraries open the door to literacy and educational success by giving children early exposure to book-rich environments.

This helps children to become equipped to learn when they begin school, at school and most importantly, to internalise learning as part of their everyday lives.

2. The door to informal education

Children who don’t finish school lack basic literacy and life skills that will enable them to operate confidently in today’s world. Across sub-Saharan African there are large numbers of out of school children, so this is an important issue. Some do not even finish primary school.

When libraries are stocked with current textbooks, curriculum support books and other reading materials, they can be learning spaces for informal education and therefore a pathway for mitigating the consequences of missing school.

They open a door to informal learning that can really be a lifeline.
3. The door to truth

Evolving technologies have enabled the rapid creation, dissemination and processing of information. This has created a deluge of misinformation and disinformation that is easily believed by those who may not have media and information literacy skills.

Well-equipped libraries staffed with confident, professional librarians and other well-trained staff can equip their communities to discern between facts and fake information. They can, in effect, open the door to truth.

They can do this through the provision of accurate and relevant information as well as by teaching their users media, information literacy and digital skills. These skills will enable users to confidently search for, use and even create information in online spaces.

4. The door to lifelong learning

When libraries have books for all sections of the community, they open the door to lifelong learning.

They can help adults who cannot go back to school develop new knowledge and skills to develop their careers as well as build reading confidence for those who may not have finished their education. They can even support senior citizens who want to continue learning! If it has the right books and resources, anyone at any point in life can use the library to continue exercising their brain.

5. The door to innovation

We are facing never-ending changes in the world – and they are coming so fast! We need to cope with them innovatively. For that, you need an open mind.

The books and other information resources in libraries stir curiosity and introduce new ideas. This increases readers’ ability and motivation to adapt and change in time with the world. Libraries open that door to imagining these new possibilities by helping everyone to imagine beyond the familiar.

Libraries are so much more than rooms full of books – they have the power to transform lives, and help communities develop. And that is why at AFLIA we’re determined to empower African libraries to open doors for all of their readers.

You can find out more about AFLIA’s work at https://web.aflia.net.
African Story Box

Discovering stories from near and far

One of the many joys of reading, both fiction and non-fiction is the insight gained into different ways of seeing, being, and thinking. It’s also recognised that young readers, who are just learning to read, benefit greatly from stories and pictures that are rooted in the familiar.

The African Story Box project is a new collaboration between Book Aid international, new local partners and local publishers. It sets out to provide primary school children in under-resourced schools with a box library full of books from “near and far”. Each box contains 100 books donated by Book Aid International and 100 books written, published and purchased in each country.

Project partners include African chapters of international organisations IBBY¹ and PEN International², and the Ghana Book Trust³. These new partners are all committed to promoting reading and have solid relationships with their respective local publishing industry, either directly through their membership or through organising other joint events.

Alongside the book boxes, a key component of the project is the “event”. This is a day or half-day function where children, teachers, parents and education officials participate in reading activities, listen to guest writers speak about their work and browse the exhibition stands of local publishers. In Uganda, the reading event also included a short training workshop for teachers, and in Ghana, children were involved in celebrity story reading, acting and quizzes.

The project has been implemented so far in six countries, in partnership with IBBY Zimbabwe, IBBY Ghana, Uganda Children’s Writers and Illustrator’s Association⁴, Ghana Book Trust, PEN Sierra Leone, PEN Malawi and PEN Zambia. By the end of 2022, 76 primary schools will have received their book box and a package of materials designed to help teachers and pupils make the most of their donation.

Over 22 publishers have been involved across the six project countries.

A second round of funding for 36 schools in Ghana, Uganda and Zimbabwe has recently been secured thanks to the African Publishers Innovation Fund and we hope to report on more of the projects in future communications.

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1  International Board on Books for Young people. https://www.ibby.org/
2  PEN International. https://pen-international.org/
4 Uganda Children’s Writers and Illustrator’s Association. https://ucwia.or.ug/
Spotlight on partners. Tanzania

New Chapter Development for Youth

New Chapter Development for Youth (NCDY) is a small grassroots NGO, based close to Lake Victoria, in Mwanza, Tanzania. Their focus is on addressing problems that contribute to the marginalisation of vulnerable children, youth, women and people with disabilities.

NCDY runs two libraries in Mwanza, at Misungwi and Ibungilo B-Nyamanoro. The libraries are used by children attending local schools. NCDY also uses the library space for running study programmes and their English Club.

In 2021 NCDY received a donation of 2,074 books from Book Aid International which have been integrated into the library collection and used extensively in the study programmes. The books have been used recently to support children with special needs. After reading the “colourful and richly illustrated books”, the children are beginning to find it easier to remain in class and engage in the lessons.

Staff of NCDY run after school clubs at the library most days of the week. “Learn and connect” is a firm favourite. Stories are read out loud and the children are encouraged to discuss what they have learned and to identify new words. Both libraries are open on Saturdays, and children attending activities are given time to read on their own and join the weekly English Club.

Micky Millian, NCDY Coordinator, is a strong advocate for the power of books.

“Not only does the increasing access to books promote literacy, but it also contributes to the development of children and communities at large. Children and youth who learn to read are healthier, more self-sufficient, can earn a better living and have more opportunities to become productive members of their societies. Nurturing the reading spirit can start at the individual level, and through donations from Book Aid International, we get the chance to impact the life of a child who does not have access to materials and funds to acquire knowledge and better themselves”.

“Book Aid International boosts the capacities of academic libraries and gives our students a chance at optimal learning through the provision of up-to-date and relevant tertiary education books. It has a significant impact in promoting literacy and the reading culture across the lake zone region in Tanzania”.

Children attending an after school club at an NCDY library enjoy their new books.
Spotlight on Partners. Ukraine

Conflict intervention

After many years of tension, Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. This invasion resulted in what is thought to be Europe’s largest refugee crisis since World War II, with an estimated population of 7.6 million people either displaced or fleeing the country.

Shortly after the invasion began Book Aid International was able to support two initiatives aimed at supporting children displaced by this conflict.

We donated 1,087 books to Packed with Hope, a campaign set up by two independent UK publishers Little Toller and Blue Moose. Around 10,000 backpacks were filled with books and other essential and comforting items such as head torches, notepads, colouring pencils, toothbrushes, puzzles, playing cards, activity books, bags of marbles, hot water bottles, socks, hats, scarves, and reusable drinking bottles. The packs were distributed to displaced children crossing the border to Romania.

We also partnered with the Universal Reading Foundation, a Polish literacy organisation, giving them a donation of 14,657 children’s books.

1 https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

Ukrainian children with their back packs full of books and other handy items. © Packed with Hope, 2022

Ukrainian children engrossed in their brand new books.
Ms Deskur (CEO and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Universal Reading Foundation) told us:

“We strongly believe, and this is scientifically proven, that reading reduces stress, stabilizes emotions, helps work through trauma, and supports bonds”, and from this belief, they are implementing an initiative that aims to distribute the books in Poland, reaching a total of 20,000 locations, with 70% of the books going to orphanages, refugee centres and other locations such as underground and train stations, that became shelters for those fleeing the conflict, and the remainder of the books will be donated to kindergartens, preschools and primary schools hosting Ukrainian children.

Following our donation, Ms Monika Gołdycza (Volunteer Refugee Centre Wołoska) said: “The books wonderfully filled the children’s time during the long days of adaptation in the new environment”
About our charity

Book Aid International is the UK’s leading international book donation and library development charity. Every year, we ship around one million books to thousands of libraries in communities where people have very few opportunities to access new books.

We work with an extensive network of libraries, schools, hospitals, NGOs and other partners to ensure that the books we send reach those who face the greatest barriers to accessing books. In addition, we also run library development projects which build the capacity of librarians to support readers and communities.

We only send books at our library partners’ request. These books are carefully selected by our UK team led by professional librarians to ensure that they meet the needs of local communities. All of the books we send are donated by the UK book trade so they are all new.

To find out more, visit www.bookaid.org.