Early-years book gifting in Africa

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Current access to early-years books

Photo: Book Dash

- In most African countries, there is no government funding for universal (or partial) book distribution to babies or preschool children.
- Governments' objective is almost exclusively on universal distribution of free textbooks to school-aged children.
- Here and there we see signs of a growing awareness of the importance of books for preschool children. However, this competes with many other priorities.
- Libraries are an effective but under-resourced public service.
- The formal publishing industry produces high volumes of materials and is technically skilled, diversified and commercially strong, but producing and distributing reading materials at all affordability levels and for all language preferences remains challenging.
- Digital access is growing but remains unequally distributed.
- Most households still do not have any fiction, nonfiction or children's books, and few have more than 20 books (though this number is growing).

Source: https://www.readingbarometersa.org/overview

Current access to early-years books

"Unfortunately, too many children are growing up without books. Only 2 percent of children under the age of five in sub-Saharan Africa are growing up with three or more children's books in their homes. Parents and caregivers with low literacy levels may not be aware of how they can support their children's learning with reading activities. In some languages, there are few (or no) books available, which means children can't practice reading in a language they know. Even where books are available, they are often costly, making it prohibitively expensive for families. In some countries where textbooks are purchased by the education system, challenges with procurement and distribution can result in low-quality, high-cost books which don't arrive in school on time (or at all).

These issues have lifelong consequences: seventy percent of children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand an age-appropriate passage by their tenth birthday (a situation we call learning poverty). Learning poverty wastes young peoples' potential, impacts future workforces and ultimately, erodes countries' economic competitiveness."

Source: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/read-at-home

Photo: Book Dash

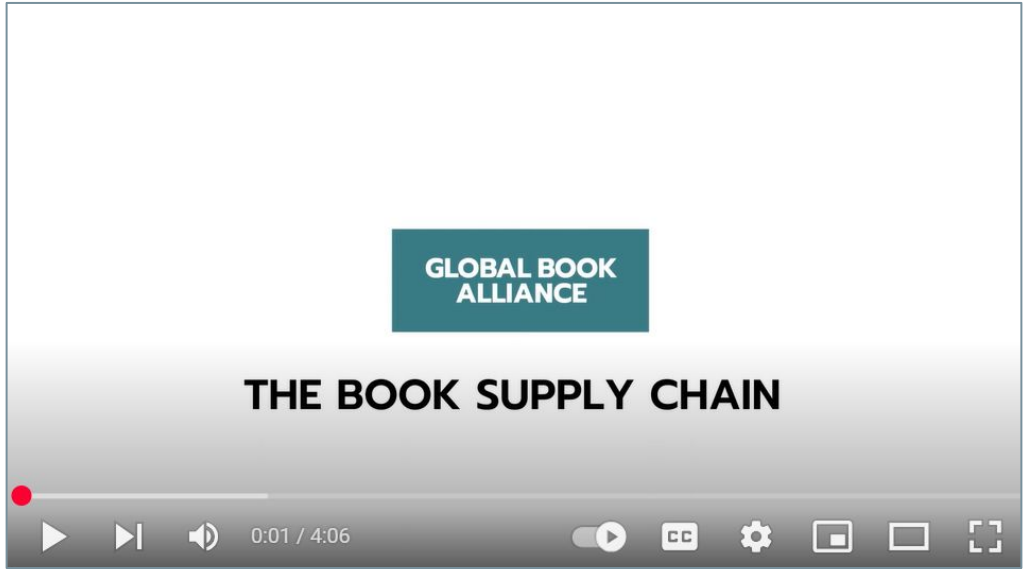
South Africa: Reading Barometer (2023)

Indicator	Data source	Year	Performance	Rating
Libraries per population: national ratio	NLSA	2022	1:31,000	Emerging
% of adult population with internet access	World Bank	2020	70%	Emerging
Cost of 1GB data in relation to global median	cable.co.uk	2022	26% above global median	Constraining
% of households with any fiction or nonfiction print books	National Reading Survey	2022	37%	Emerging
% of households with children <10 with any children's books	National Reading Survey	2022	35%	Emerging
% of adults who agree that reading with children at home is valuable for their schooling	National Reading Survey	2023	93%	Enabling

Source: https://www.readingbarometersa.org/overview

Another piece of the puzzle: challenges in the supply-chain

This video by the Global Book Alliance is very useful to understand the procurement and distribution problems facing many countries in the global south.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XMkNnaaBZ8

Partnerships as solution

In the absence of universal book gifting funded at government-level, the partnership model is an ideal solution.

These are the elements that are required:

- Understanding the need and outlining a programme
- High-quality, relevant and age-appropriate open-licensed content
- Funding for translation, printing & distribution
- Local print capacity
- Distribution channels
- Ways to gather feedback

Photo: TECEC

Partnerships case study - Book Dash, Unicef & DBE

Books for Early Childhood Development (birth to five): **Stories for Joy**

Collaborative project between Unicef (funder), DBE (implementer) and Book Dash (book development).

Objective: develop a collection of 50 age-appropriate stories for children aged 0-5, and train officials, practitioners, and parents on emergent literacy and the importance of reading in the early years.

Translation and distribution: not yet clear where funding for print and distribution will come from.

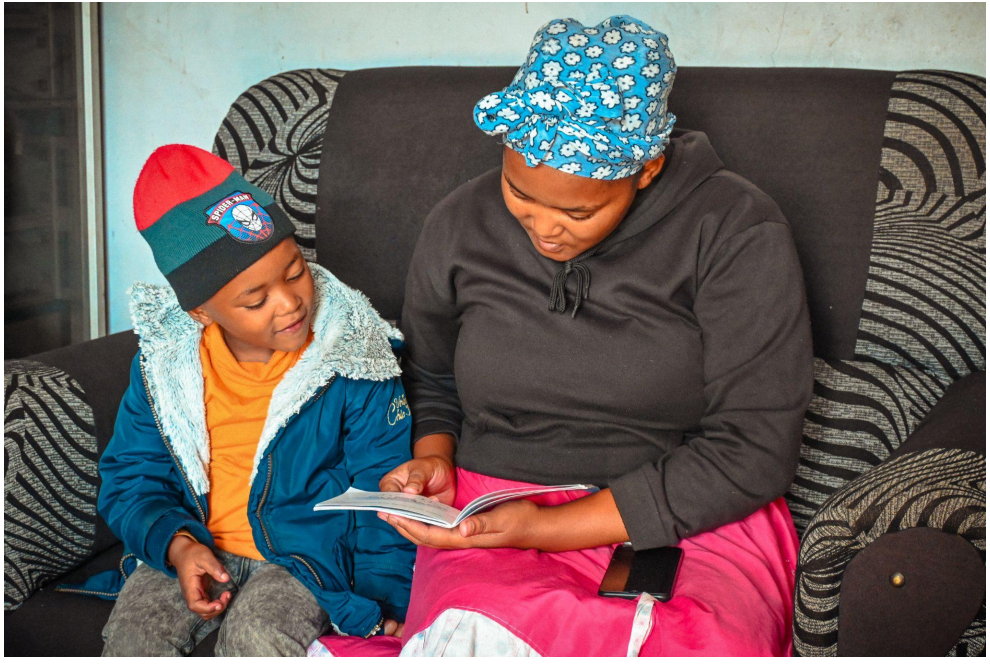


Photo: Thanda

book dash

unicef

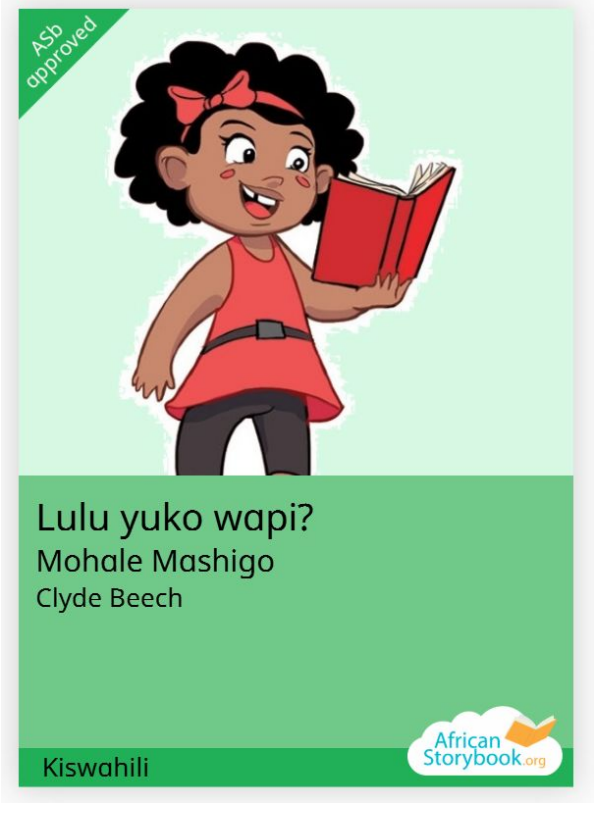
basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Partnerships case study - Book Dash & TECEC

Photo: TECEC

TECEC:
“We’re partnering with Book Dash and Theirworld to give every child in Tanzania 100 books by age five, promoting early literacy, stronger parent-child bonds, and making book ownership a core part of TECEC’s long-term early childhood development support.
We plan to distribute 30,000 books to 10,000 families by November 2025 as part of our pilot phase. The baseline study revealed limited parent-child interaction, guiding our training and distribution approach. Early results show books are strengthening bonds, laying the groundwork to scale this initiative to more communities.”

Potential for digital distribution



Challenges to digital distribution in Africa:

- Unreliable electricity and digital infrastructure
- Prohibitive data costs
- Sub-optimal digital devices

There are organisations that provide age-appropriate Home Language books on reading platforms, like the two free platforms below:

- African Storybook https://www.africanstorybook.org/#
- Storyweaver https://storyweaver.org.in/en/stories/189269-kom-terug-kat

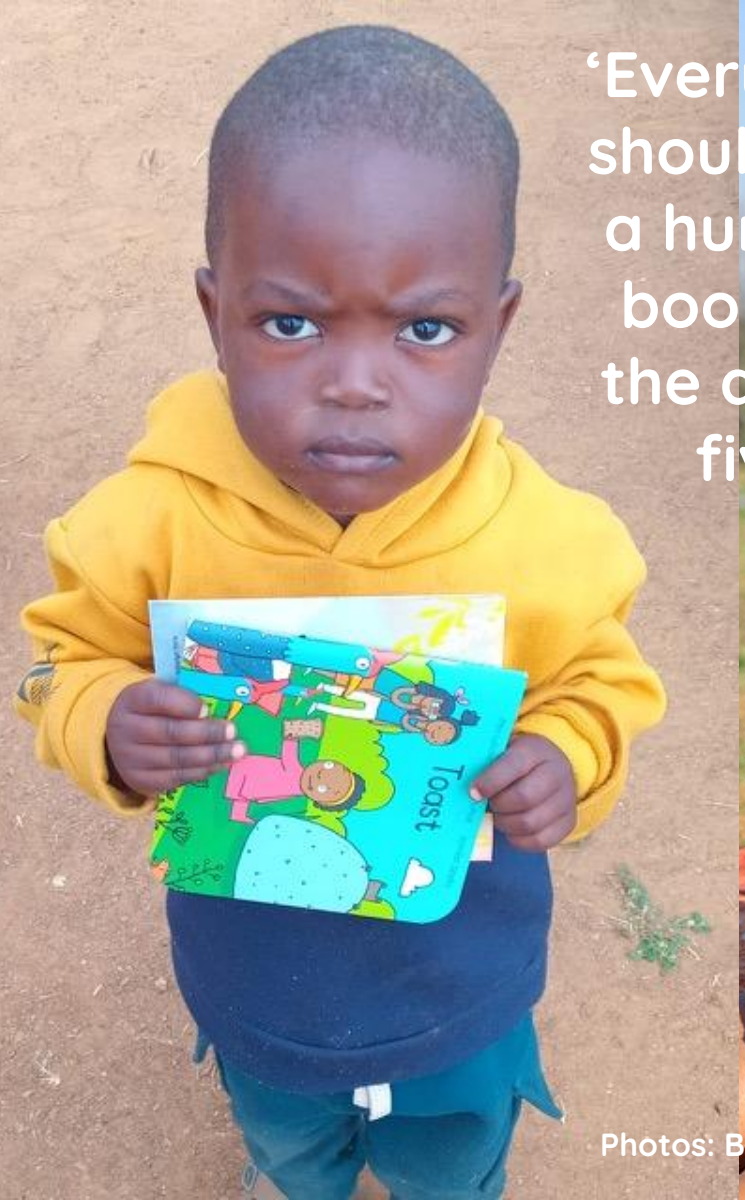
There are also many paid-for websites and apps, aimed at affluent parents, offering a wide range of reading materials including gamified books, augmented reality books, etc (e.g. Ambani). These books are often aimed at school-aged children.

International support & connections

Learning networks: The Global Network for Early Years Book Gifting: instrumental to make contact with other organisations who work in this field, exposing us to different models of book gifting, advocacy, distribution channels, research, etc. This has informed and shaped our thinking around our ideal of universal book distribution - and continues to do so.

The power of open: Our own Open Content Strategy brings us into contact with organisations around the world that re-use our content. The aim of our strategy is to encourage them to print locally, and the open license is brilliant for this. Examples of how these international connections have lead to increased book ownership for children are:

- Pratham Books/Storyweaver translated 12 of our books into Hindi, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi and French, and printed and distributed 360,000 copies in schools in India.
- ChangeX is an organisation that connects communities to proven ideas and funding. They empower local changemakers with proven ideas from social innovators (like Book Dash) and accessible funding from our partners (Lego Foundation, etc). The local changemakers receive funding to print Book Dash books locally in places as far afield as Ukraine, Mexico, South Korea and Vietnam.



‘Every child should own a hundred books by the age of five’

Photos: Book Dash

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