

PRIMARY COMMITMENTS

Joseph O'Reilly sets out how Book Aid International hopes to support the creation of rich literate school environments that will play a part in extending education and enhancing the quality of learning.



In 2000 the international community made a commitment that by 2015 all of the world's children would complete primary education.

Since then the number of out of school children across the world has declined each year. In particular, Sub-Saharan Africa has shown historically unprecedented rates of enrolment growth.

But the picture is not universally positive. If the goal of universal primary education is to be reached two key challenges must be addressed.

Firstly there are still 72 million primary age children out of school. One in missing out on a basic education and getting them into school must become an urgent international priority.

Secondly, for those in school, we need to enhance the quality of their learning. In many countries a student's experience of school is characterised by repetition, drop out and poor learning outcomes.

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Education for all

Education provision has long been acknowledged as an integral part of development. In 1945 the 37 countries that founded UNESCO signed up to a constitution expressing a belief "in full and equal opportunities for education

for all." Also, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to education" (Article 26).

However, it is only since 1990 and the World Conference on Education For All that concerted efforts have been made by the international community to act jointly to prioritise education and to focus significant resources in this area. Education then became a major theme in development in 2000 with a second global education conference in Dakar and the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals at the UN Millennium Summit in New York.

More children in school than ever before

The result of these investments is that there has been a significant rise in primary school enrolment. For instance, in the last 15 years, and with rising population levels, the gross enrolment in primary education in sub-Saharan Africa rose from 77.5% to 84.9% – almost 10 million more children in school. And globally, 47 countries have achieved universal primary education. More girls have become enrolled in primary schools, although the 2005 gender parity goal has been missed. The number of secondary students has also risen substantially – more than four times the increase in the number of primary students. In about 70 countries out of 110 countries with data, public spending on education has increased as a share of national income.

But access continues to be a problem

However, access to schooling still remains a problem for around 80 million children worldwide. Key policy challenges include the need to provide equality of access to education for girls, children with disabilities, communities in fragile states (particularly conflict and post-conflict scenarios), and for those poor communities that find the costs of school attendance prohibitive.

The costs of purchasing uniforms and textbooks, or transport costs to reach school, are frequently a problem for the poorest families and so also are school fees in countries where education is not provided for free.

The quality challenge

There is a growing recognition that the quality of teaching and learning outcomes are a significant challenge for countries that are implementing universal primary education. Poor literacy and numeracy, high levels of grade repetition and low levels of pupil retention are all symptoms of poor educational quality that are common to many developing countries.

A 1995-1998 study by the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) measured primary school students' reading literacy against standards established by national reading experts and sixth grade teachers. In four out of seven countries, fewer than half the sixth graders achieved minimum competence in reading.

This study was compared with another done by SACMEQ two years later, which saw literacy scores falling even further in five out of six countries (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005). Effectively this means that a significant number of children are completing school to all intents and purposes functionally illiterate.

There are numerous challenges that bear on a school's ability to provide quality education including teacher training, pay and retention, school leadership and management and the quality of school infrastructure.

The role of books and learning materials

There is also a growing awareness of the importance of access to good quality books and learning materials to educational quality. In fact, student book ratios are sometimes used as a proxy indicator of quality. However, there are a number of challenges in respect of book provision.

Firstly, there is a serious lack of available titles. Secondly the quality and relevance of the material, including the language that it's printed in, is often inadequate or not appropriate. Even when books and learning materials are theoretically available schools don't have access to them, they either lack the funds to purchase them or the knowledge and systems to do so. Finally even when books are made available to schools, the school often lacks the skills and knowledge that enables it to store and manage the books to best effect and its teachers don't have the experience and confidence to use the books in the classroom to greatest effect. These challenges apply both to text books, supplementary non-fiction and children's fiction based readers. Addressing the challenges across the continuum from availability to use is vital if books are to realise their potential to contribute to better learning outcomes in schools.

In exploring these challenges further this article looks at how one organisation, the Tanzanian Children's Book Project has developed a comprehensive approach to addressing each of the challenges.

Established in 1991 in an effort to alleviate the acute shortage of children's books in Tanzania, the Children's Book Project is widely recognised as a leading provider of books and reading support. In 2007 the Children's Book Project won the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize.

Availability

The publishing industry in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa remains very small and reliant on text book publishing for its core business. The market for books other than text books is extremely small and as a result publishers lack incentives to publish non-text book materials such as children's readers.

Tanzania's Children's Book Project supports the publication of local language children's book by committing to purchase a set number of approved titles in return for the publishers committing to a larger run. The Project's current practice is to commit to purchasing 3,000 books on the basis that 5,000 will be printed.

Books published in excess of those purchased by the Children's Book Project are sold commercially, helping to create and feed local markets for children's material.

This model stimulates demand for children's books in the form of a guaranteed order and by working directly with publishers it supports the supply side of the equation.

Appropriateness

Even when locally published children's books are available they are often not appropriate. The absence of a vibrant local children's book industry often means that publishers don't have a well developed understanding of what makes a good children's book.

Appropriate books are those where specific issues like local language and context are used in. Appropriate books will also be of a high quality which will be reflected in illustrations and of course in the quality of what's written.

In order to improve the quality of the children's books being produced in Tanzania the Children's Book Project has provided training and skills development for stakeholders in the book industry, including writers, illustrators and publishers. Since its inception three-hundred fifty-six writers, 191 of them women, have been trained in CBP workshops.



Student book ratios are an important indicator of educational quality



In addition to building the capacity of industry stakeholders the Children's Book Project works with publishers on a book by book basis, assessing titles that are submitted as camera ready art work and suggesting improvements, thereby increasing the quality of the books published with the Project's support.

The Children's Book Project has also published good practice guidelines on writing and illustrating for children with which publishers must comply for their books to be purchased.

These efforts mean that books that are published with the assistance of the Project are widely regarded as being the best in their class.

All of the Project's books are published in Swahili, the language of instruction in Tanzania's primary schools.

Accessibility

When appropriate children's books are available they also need to be made accessible to end users, i.e. children in schools. However a wide range of barriers exist that inhibit children's access to available books and learning materials. The cost of books is obviously

a key factor, including for schools that have little or no funding to buy books. But cost isn't the only factor. Many schools don't have the knowledge and systems to select and purchase books from publishers.

Subsidized and free book donations can play a vital role in improving children's access to available books and learning materials.

The Children's Book Project makes material available to schools that are part of its network. In addition to starter sets which consist of multiple copies of a selection of titles the Children's Book Project also commits to donating newly published titles to schools within its network on an annual basis, thereby ensuring the growth in the school's book collection and a steady supply of new material to teachers and students.

The Project also produces a catalogue of its material that it distributes to educational institutions and book shops throughout Swahili speaking East Africa with a view to improving stakeholder's knowledge of available material.

Effective use

Access to good quality books is critical to achieving better educational outcomes but it won't guarantee it. Research indicates that moving from a teaching environment with almost no books to one where books are used to support teaching and learning requires new skills and confidence on the part of both teachers, students and ideally parents.

Schools also need support and training to ensure that they store and manage their book collections to best effect. Without a system for storing books and recording their use there's a real risk that the book collection will deteriorate or be misused.

Effective book provision in schools includes help for the school community to establish an agreed system for storing and retrieving the books and support for teachers in using books as part of a more participatory and child centre approach to teaching.

In the schools in which it works the Children's Book Project works with teachers and school principals to establish a school library and with teachers throughout the school to support them to use the school's new books in the classroom. Peer based teaching is used to encourage teachers to reflect on their own class room practice and to share what works in the classroom with each other.

Involving the community, changing policy and improving practice

All the evidence from educational researchers points to the fact that activities aimed at improving teaching quality and learning outcomes, including book provision and library creation, are more effective when parents, carers and community members know about and participate in those activities. These activities help build recognition in the local community for the importance of a rich literate environment, not just in the school but more broadly.

Training and support for teachers and parents to undertake budget monitoring conducted by Action Aid and its local partners has helped to improve the effectiveness of spending by school managers and principals, including in some areas on school books and teaching materials.

However small, projects aimed at supporting improved access to and use of books in schools also have a vital role to play in showing local communities and decision makers the difference that books and learning materials can make to teaching quality and learning outcomes. Monitoring and evaluating these initiatives must be done to build a more robust evidence base for our argument. As part of the implementation of our new strategic commitment to promote the quality of universal primary education by increasing the availability, improving the appropriateness and enhancing access to and the use of books and learning materials Book Aid International is currently developing a range of new projects and proposals with community based partners.

We are delighted to be working with the Children's Book Project for Tanzania supporting them to produce and distribute new children's books and to run a series of whole of school reading promotion events in collaboration with Tanzania's Book Development Council

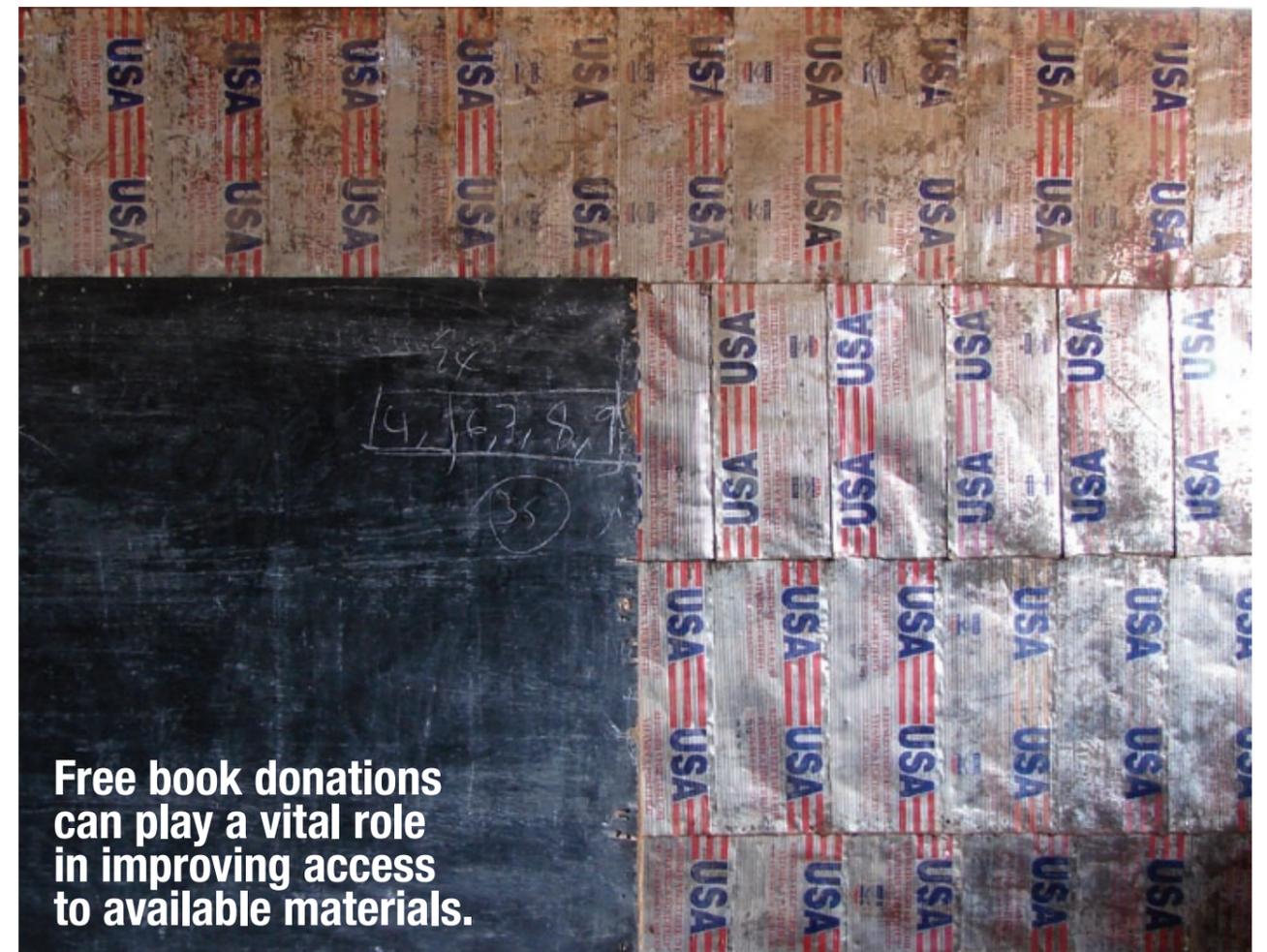
In Zambia we are working with Zambia's Open Community Schools Movement to support the provision of both text books and locally published children's readers, along with training and support for their teachers in using books more effectively in the classroom.

Also in Zambia we are working with the Forum of African Women Educationalists, supporting their mobile library project which visits schools that would otherwise not have access to the range and variety of reading material that the mobile library offers.

In Kenya we are developing a project with the Windle Trust Kenya aimed at improving access to text books, non fiction reference material and children's readers in primary schools in the Dadaab refugee camp. The project proposes to create libraries in three schools and to support the professional development of the school's largely untrained teacher workforce.

We're looking forward to implementing these projects, documenting our and our partner's experiences and sharing our collective learning with a view to helping shape the policy and practice of other stakeholders in the field.

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