

Elizabeth le Roux

December 30th, 2020

The myth of the 'book famine' in African publishing

0 comments | 8 shares

Estimated reading time: 4 minutes



Books and publishing in Africa are often described in terms of 'scarcity' and 'famine', evoking the need for a crisis response. But do these terms reflect the reality of how Africans produce and engage with books? Elizabeth le Roux argues that the famine analogy is perpetuated by a book aid industry that works counter to structural solutions based on local book development.

'Our goal: to end the book famine in Africa' – so says **Books for Africa**, a book donor organisation. Such book donors refer to empty bookshelves and the '**grave educational plight**' of 'deprived children' and 'desolate libraries', posting images of children in rural schools seemingly begging for books, images that remind us of starving children and famine responses. These concepts of booklessness are often based on the notion that African countries are incapable of producing sufficient books to meet local demand, and that Western aid is essential to development on the continent. This narrative of scarcity and famine has become widespread through frequent repetition, employing emotive language and images of children, anecdotal

evidence rather than broader data and the exclusion of competing narratives that could complicate the picture.

Book hunger as a narrative

Book famine is an extreme analogy, evoking a crisis response. However, with repeated use, the concept has lost its shock value and has come to be taken for granted. The term can be traced back at least to the 19th century, when it referred to a general shortage of books. Tracing the historical use of this term shows that, after World War II, it was used to draw attention to UNESCO's role in advancing literacy and development. UNESCO believed that, '[a] sound publishing industry is essential to national development'.

In *The Book Hunger*, Ronald Barker and Robert Escarpit describe an 'acute shortage of books' across the developing world in the 1970s, **arguing that**, 'Low production, inadequate distribution channels and the high cost of importing sufficient numbers of books combine to deprive the public of the reading materials they need'. Barker and Escarpit linked problems of low production and access directly to issues of access and selection, and sought to develop local industry to alleviate shortages.

A wide range of reports continue to emphasise the role of books in national development and highlight the urgency of a scarcity of books. The **World Bank argues** that 'A viable indigenous publishing industry is critical to the economic development of a country, as it supports its progress in literacy, education, and empowerment'. The World Bank has been criticised for focusing its funding and policy interventions on educational books, to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge and cultural production, and book donors could be accused of the same narrow focus on literacy and education.

The most commonly cited causes of book shortages are economic (such as the high costs of book production amid poverty); political (poor governance and corruption, and a lack of policy frameworks); and infrastructural (an inadequate supply and distribution infrastructure). What differs is how these causes are combined, and whether they are seen as internal or external. Books for Africa, for instance, **describes internal causes**: 'Wars, economic crises, poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy plague many areas of Africa'. The economic situation in African

countries is often presented as a cause of book famine, but African organisations view this as a problem with external causes, such as a shortage of investment finance or foreign exchange restraints. This reframing is absent from the donors' narratives.

Book aid or book investment?

Responses to famine often **rely on the logic** that it is 'simply a matter of sending money to feed the innocent starving victims which would solve the problem for good'. But such aid is a short-term response, and not the most effective. For book famine, similarly, there have been two main approaches: (i) short-term book aid or donation programmes, and (ii) support for local publishing industries – but the latter has been downplayed even as huge international charities have arisen to manage the former. These organisations actively perpetuate the discourse of famine, and set themselves up as the solutions to an ongoing crisis. Notably, they do not seek to address the causes of book shortages, only to alleviate the symptoms in the short-term. They also continue to promote the myth of a complete **lack of indigenous publishing**.

But their description of book scarcity contrasts sharply with the growth, viability and increasing visibility of indigenous publishers. The evidence for book hunger often relies on outdated statistics on book publishing and consumption to describe the entire continent of Africa, such as the oft-repeated claim that Africa produces only 2-3% of the world's books annually. This figure comes from an incomplete survey undertaken in the 1970s. A **CTA report** on technical publishing in Africa, based on later research conducted in 1990/91, found that local demand for books was, by contrast, strong and readership levels were comparatively high, but that reading was hampered by a lack of resources, problems with obtaining books and limited selection. This complicates the notion of a lacking 'reading culture' in African countries, as promoted by organisations such as the **African Union**.

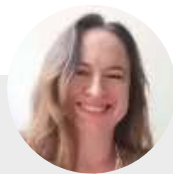
African meetings on book development, including by the World Bank, UNESCO, ADEA and African publishers, among others, have repeatedly called on donors to support local book publishing, rather than donating books, but their calls have gone unheeded. For years, scholars have criticised the World Bank for its focus on **provision rather than production**: 'it is only interested in putting books on the

children's desks and has no interest in assisting local publishers. Clearly, however, book provision from external sources ought to be a short-term, emergency operation'. While the Bank concluded in 2014 that donor solutions were not working, and that the only lasting solution was to strengthen the book chain within countries, this initiative was short-lived. Similarly, a UNESCO survey of textbook projects found that they were aimed at short-term gains to overcome immediate shortages, and paid **little attention to building local publishing capacity**. Book aid thus **works counter to the solution of local book development** instead of in parallel with it, and serves to 'sustain foreign domination of the African market at the expense of independent local publishers'. The narrative of 'book famine', which may have initially been intended to call attention to global inequalities, has been co-opted as a means of perpetuating those inequalities.

While we **lack sufficient data** to fully counter the myth of a book famine, research shows that African publishers very actively produce books, that African consumers buy and read them and that both print and digital formats are in widespread use. This suggests that the starting point should be support for indigenous publishers, national book policies that promote local knowledge production and consumption and simplified channels for intra-African trade. These interventions could make a real difference.

Photo by Suad Kamardeen on Unsplash.

About the author



Elizabeth le Roux

Elizabeth le Roux is Associate Professor of Publishing Studies in the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria. She is co-editor of Book History, and researches the history of publishing in South Africa and Africa more broadly. She is the author of *A Social History of the University Presses in Apartheid South Africa* (Brill, 2016) and *Publishing Against Apartheid: A case study of Ravan Press* (Cambridge, 2020).