

STATE OF PUBLISHING IN SIERRA LEONE
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INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone covers an area of 72,000 square kilometers in the west coast of Africa with a population of about 5.5 million. Sierra Leone was a sanctuary for freed slaves and a former British colony with an administrative system based on the English public service. The first university in West Africa was established in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, in 1874. From 1874 to the early 1960s Sierra Leone was the center of western education in Anglophone West Africa.

This history of long western influence and interaction should have placed Sierra Leone at the forefront of indigenous publishing in Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa. The current state of indigenous publishing in Sierra Leone is far from the 'take off' stage of development. The end of the ten-year war calls for the restoration and consolidation of government authority at the national and community level, maintaining security, establishing the rule of law, and the creation of structures that would implement and coordinate government policies and programmes. Restoration of state authority is a key element in the accomplishment of recovery strategies, including the restoration of the economy, which has a strong link with literacy, education and publishing.

This paper will briefly review publishing in Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa and then examine the nature of publishing in Sierra Leone along with the challenges for the development of the industry.

OVERVIEW OF PUBLISHING IN ANGLOPHONE AFRICA

Few countries in Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa have measured up as equally capable, professional and efficient in sustaining their respective publishing industries when compared to their counterparts in western countries. I am very proud of the standard of publishing in countries like Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana, to name but a few. Publishing is still in the pre-stages of 'take off' in some Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa countries.

In the early 1960s, the publishing industry in Anglophone Africa achieved some semblance of 'take off'. Publishers such as Heinemann, Longmans, Evans Brothers and Macmillan dominated the publishing scene. The British Broadcasting Corporation's African services started producing plays and poetry by African writers.

In addition, the economies of the new states which had attained independence from Britain were growing, and this, in turn, encouraged massive investment, especially in the area of education and literacy. In Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, indigenous publishing houses were established alongside the British multinational publishing houses.

African writers have a problem of cultural diversity and ethnicity. However, among the common experiences they shared in the 1960s were those of colonial education, religion, prejudice and discrimination, to name but a few. What they wrote for publication was greatly influenced by these common experiences. It is true to say that while there was an encouraging number of amateur and professional writers, there was hardly an encouraging number of indigenous African publishers. This is also true today.

Many problems faced by publishers today are echoed in almost all forums that relate to publishing in Anglophone Africa. Key among the problems are a shortage of capital and of state-of-the-art skills and technology, poor marketing and distribution infrastructures, relatively low levels of literacy and reading cultures, state policies intended to deter freedom of expression, political instability and the absence of good governance. These hurdles for the publishing industry in Anglophone Africa are frustrating not only for publishers but also for writers, booksellers and all connected with the book chain.

PUBLISHING IN SIERRA LEONE

The current, worrying situation for writing, publishing, book distribution and the reading environment has reached an alarming state in Sierra Leone. Induced poverty, chaos, coups and countercoups, and ten years of the most barbarous civil war in Africa have seriously reversed the earlier progress the publishing industry in Sierra Leone. The present state of the industry leaves much to be desired. Zell and Lowel (2000) stated that less than one percent of publishers is based in Sierra Leone, out of 921 publishers in Africa. Current statistics in the International

Standard Book Number (ISBN) Secretariat in Sierra Leone shows 20 publishers with registered publisher identifiers, as opposed to seven mentioned by Zell and Lowel. However none of these publishers currently meets the requirement of larger and medium-sized publishers. Almost all those who a few years back were classed as larger or medium-sized publishers have either ceased publishing or dropped to the level that characterizes small publishers. Out of the 20 with assigned publisher identifiers only three are presently undertaking publishing at a very small scale. Since the beginning of January 2003 to August 2004, the national ISBN agency recorded six assigned ISBNs to three publishers, and three of the assigned ISBNs were for three Christian literature publications from the same publisher.

There was a state-run publishing division that was a component of the Ministry of Education. It published textbooks prescribed for schools. There are presently two international publishers that have representatives in Sierra Leone. They publish mostly prescribed school textbooks for which there is a ready market. The Sierra Leone Association of writers and illustrators started off with the publication of two magazines but stopped short after the second publication. Nothing has since been published. Two non-governmental organizations formed in the mid 1980s also did some publishing.

The Peoples Education Association (PEA) was established in the 1980s to preserve Sierra Leone's cultural heritage. It published folktales, songs of Sierra Leone and literature that related to the culture of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone Adult Education Association (SLADEA) was formed to help the efforts of government to increase the literacy rate. Books published were geared to meet this objective. Not much has been done in terms of publishing by these two NGOs since 2002. The Sierra Leone Association of Archivist Librarians and Information Scientists was also involved in publishing. Two magazines were published in the late 1990s. Nothing has since been published. The Christian Literature Crusade (CLC) in Sierra Leone established a department of writing and publishing in 1990. In 1992 the CLC launched a quarterly magazine and has so far published seven books since the year 2000.

The semblance of an established indigenous African publishing house was established around 1998 and named the Mount Everest Publishing House. Its first six books were launched in March 2002. It has so far published eight titles, seven of which were written by its founder.

Newspaper publishing is apparently the most viable in the publishing industry. However, the quality of publishing is far behind most of the publishing in Anglophone West Africa. The parameters that are set for publishing a standard

newspaper are not reflected in the publications. The print quality is low; the editorials are of questionable standards. The publishing industry, like the primary and secondary industries, has not made significant progress since the 1960s. This has been attributed by some persons connected with the book chain in Sierra Leone to low literacy, poor reading habits, low capital injection, absence of a reliable electricity supply and a poor distribution network.

The current literacy rate is 36 percent. Compounding the prevalence of illiteracy is the absence of a reading and writing culture. People do not appreciate reading and writing. Leisure reading is not a priority. When it comes to allocating resources for reading and writing by local funding agencies and the government, reading and writing are low on the priority scale, even though the importance of reading and writing is recognized.

Programmes coordinated by the government and some NGOs to improve the literacy rate are on course, such as the SABABU Education Project. This project, which was started in the Kambia District, will see the construction of primary schools within a reasonable working distance from settlements, each with a separate room reserved for a library.

The lack of adequate capital has hampered the development of the indigenous publishing industry. Current findings have revealed that only two publishing entities have the financial wherewithal to maintain an office and pay even a skeletal staff. The low capital injection is made worse by the high cost of printing. Almost all equipment and production materials required for printing must be imported, and these imported equipment- and production materials are sometimes paid for in foreign currency obtained from the black market because the banks cannot always provide the required foreign exchange requested. Foreign currency obtained in the black market is bought at a very high exchange rate, much to the disadvantage of printers. Moreover, banks do not consider printing a viable sector in the economy to extend credit to, and printers, in turn, are not motivated to apply for loans from the banks because of the high interest rate. The cost of printing is made worse by the very frequent electricity cuts. Sometimes the power cuts will last for over two weeks. The power supply has been a national problem since the late 1970s, and it has continued to worsen. This has seriously slowed down the printing process, and it escalates the cost of production when printers have had to go the painful extra mile to purchase personal electricity generators, which are very expensive to buy and maintain.

The absence of an organized network in the book chain has significantly retarded the growth of the publishing industry. There is a serious disconnection in the line

from writers to end-users. This has resulted in poor distribution and low sales returns from published materials. It is very difficult to get books into the hands of potential buyers. In most of the cases identified, writers have to do all the publicity and sales of the published materials. It is most frustrating when the cost of production and marketing could not be recovered because the structures that should be in place to promote the industry are not coordinated.

Booksellers are the primary agents for the publishing houses. The majority operates in the informal sector and lacks the requisite expertise. Bookshops are very few; only four of them are operating in Freetown. There are no bookshops in the three other regions. Clemens (2004) noted that the only way one can survive as a publisher in Sierra Leone is to do books that have the potential to be prescribed as textbooks in schools, and to lobby hard with the government to get them into their approved list of books. Otherwise, books will be left in stores to rot. It is true that most books approved by the government as prescribed texts in schools are published outside Africa, usually in Europe and Asia. These are among the many problems faced by the publishing industry in Sierra Leone.

CHALLENGES

My story so far has been gloomy, and this is the reality. So much hard work and resources are required to inject life and professionalism into the industry. All those connected with the book chain need to come together and talk about these problems and come out with realistic solutions at least to contain the situation. If not, the problem will forever stay with us and even get worse.

Notwithstanding the hurdles, my organization, the Sierra Leone Book Trust, and Sierra Leone PEN, a writers' organization-two organizations that share similar aspirations-have started working together to arrest and reverse this negative trend in the publishing industry. We have formally agreed to work together through training and workshops that will bring all stakeholders in the book chain together as soon as funds are available. A proposal for this area of intervention has already been submitted to APNET, Sabre Foundation, Friends of Sierra Leone and Book Aid International

Aside from joint interventions, the respective organizations have also embarked on individual programmes geared towards improving literacy, writing and publishing. The Sierra Leone Book Trust has organized book exhibitions, supported the acquisition and distribution of indigenous language texts written by Sierra Leoneans, and published in Sierra Leone with funding from Sabre Foundation.

Sierra Leone PEN is currently involved in the establishment of PEN school clubs, adult literacy programmes, and training and workshops for writers.

Sierra Leone PEN and Sierra Leone Book Trust are also networking with local organizations that promote reading, writing and literacy. Efforts have been made with some of these organizations to set up pilot libraries for primary schools in Freetown.

I strongly believe that the future of the publishing industry in Sierra Leone will be a success story if only stakeholders in the book chain are willing to network, put resources to work, support capacity building and engage in advocacy. Moreover, it will be beneficial to share experiences and best practices with those who have success stories to tell in Africa-how they got where they are today and what have been their recipes for success in the publishing industry.

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