

Malawi Book Development Learning Paper

November 2022

Background

The Global Book Alliance (GBA), through the USAID Global Book Alliance in Action project, implemented a micro initiative in Malawi between 2019 and 2022. The process began with a Book Supply Chain Analysis undertaken with USAID/Malawi, the Malawian Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, and other key development partners in the country. The analysis was conducted from October 2019 through January 2020, drawing information from a battery of discussions from local stakeholders. The report highlighted challenging issues in each phase of the book supply chain for all primary grade reading materials in Malawi, resulting in not nearly enough titles to support children's regular reading practice that builds strong literacy skills.

To fill the identified gap in reading materials, GBAIA and USAID Malawi mission designed a book development activity. The approach centered around support to the local publishers to develop 50 new, openly licensed Chichewa children's book, while simultaneously providing practical capacity building to the private publishing industry.

Identifying capacity gaps to inform project design

A training needs survey was completed by publishers, authors, and MIE/MOE staff. The questionnaire documented stakeholders' perceived degree of book development knowledge and experience and identified the most appropriate areas of capacity building. Key findings from the survey highlighted the fact that:

- Most publishers had experience publishing books for children aged 11 and older. No publishers indicated experience publishing books for children younger than 8.
- The large extent of publishers' experience centered on textbook development, rather than supplementary materials or general interest books.
- Publishers reported capacity in book development skills were low, with a significant portion of publishers ranking themselves as beginners in terms of developing quality books appropriate for children's level and cultural context.
- Many publishers indicated higher levels of confidence in their business practices, specifically engaging in networking opportunities/fostering partnerships, distribution practices, and marketing.
- Half of the surveyed publishers lacked training in all the book development topics listed.

Based on the needs assessment findings, the following capacity building considerations were recommended for the publishing sector:

- Narrow the activity scope to supplementary materials, with a distinct focus on developing skills in developing one or two categories of books.
- Build capacity on understanding elements of books for younger audiences.
- Include sessions on inclusive themes and representations.
- Provide introductory information on open licensing to ensure project expectations are understood and opportunities are maximized.

Sector-wide orientation on children's books

The GBAIA activity kicked off with a **Children's Book Development Workshop** held in Blantyre between March 7th -11th, 2022. The workshop was well attended with 81 participants attending, including 18 publishers, 36 authors, 11 illustrators, 4 MOE representatives, 4 MIE representatives, 1 staff from Ekitabu, and 1 from World Vision. The principal objective of the workshop was to provide information on the materials development plans and to elicit feedback on the process. Publishers were introduced to the proposed model, including the open license requirements, the rigorous coaching plans as well as the remuneration package.

Considering the participants' limited experience making books for primary-aged children, a key area of focus was on exploring what makes content appropriate and engaging for young readers. Information moved from general features to a specific focus on the two target text types: fiction picture books and non-fiction information books. The workshop exposed participants to a wide range of books from around the world, allowing them to analyze age-appropriate themes and characters, effective design and illustration techniques and a variety of writing styles.

Another central objective of the workshop was to cultivate new working relationships between book publishers, authors, and illustrators. Publishers were asked to invite an author and illustrator they've worked with previously to attend the workshop, while the remaining content creators were identified through professional associations or known creative networks. It was clear that publishers knew very few authors and illustrators in country and benefitted from expanding their pool of book collaborators. The final workshop day provided authors and illustrators an opportunity to showcase their skills to the publishers in attendance.

"The initial five-day workshop gave publishers, writers, and illustrators the knowledge they didn't have about children's book development. It also challenged them to work as a team." -Publisher

Selecting and compensating publishers

Publishers who attended the Children’s Book Development workshop were invited to submit applications for participation in the book development activity. Applications required publishers to present evidence of meeting pre-determined eligibility criteria related to 1) the existence of a locally registered business 2) previous experience developing books and 3) commitment to the book development process. After a review of applications, 11 publishing houses were identified as having met the eligibility criteria and were issued contracts for engagement.

Across country contexts, the GBAIA activity used a relatively standard approach to compensating publishers to develop open licensed materials. As the activity required the books to be developed under Creative Common licenses, compensation for a non-all rights reserved copyright was considered. The total amount paid to publishers per title was \$4,000. The activity used a results-based financing approach which involved publishers receiving an advance market commitment of 50% upfront to cover the book development costs. The remaining 50% was paid only upon receipt and final approval of the title. Publishers were free to contract with illustrators, authors, and designers, determining their own terms. However, to avoid liability issues, GBAIA required publishers to demonstrate proof of contract completion with authors and illustrators when requesting final payments.

Building capacity and connections through professional coaching

In April 2022, a subsequent series of **Materials Creation Workshops** were held exclusively with the content creators: publishers, authors, illustrators, and designers. Initial manuscript drafts had been received, and the first day of the workshop provided an opportunity for the authors and publishers to discuss the feedback with the professional writing coach, Wesley Macheso. Illustration and design coach, Jethro Longwe, shared information on the formatting templates to be used and guided illustrators and designers through the process of selecting effective color templates. The initial day of the workshop also brought in a cadre of identified editors to copyedit the manuscripts. Editors had limited experience working with children’s books and required specific training in editing in Chichewa language. To build capacity and consensus, lead coach, Professor Pascal Kishindo, trained the editors on editorial principles as well as introduced a newly- developed writing style guide for Chichewa children’s books.

Book Teams, comprising a publisher, author, illustrator, and designer, were then set up for each manuscript. The Book Teams worked together to map out the text and illustrations on to a storyboard template, a tool first introduced in the previous Children’s Book Development

“For the first time as an illustrator, the publisher has asked for my opinion on how we should illustrate the book. And my opinion has counted. Previously, I was just given an art brief and told to get on with it.” -Illustrator

Workshop. Content creators were then guided through a series of sessions to apply new techniques to the materials development process, continuously incorporating input from the coaches and the Book Team. Collaboration was key throughout the workshops. Each role contributed creatively to the development process, with the publisher playing a coordinating role to ensure the manuscript was progressing.

After the workshops, publishers were responsible for overseeing the book development process with support from the team of professional coaches. Throughout May and June 2022, the author and illustrator coaches conducted regular check-ins with each of the content creators to monitor progress and provide suggestions for improvement. After multiple revisions and rounds of editing, all 50 books were completed in July 2022. Publishers submitted design files to the professional coach for pre-flight check and then the publishing coach for final approval.

“The coaching and mentorship process was invaluable as the production was working closely with the coaches at all stages.” -Publisher

Progress within the sector

After the completion of the books, a questionnaire was circulated to understand the impact the activity has had on the sector, as well as the perceived success and challenges experienced throughout the process. The most salient responses informed the following analysis of progress for each publishing role as well as the subsequent section on perceived achievements.

Publishers

There was an indisputable increase in publishers’ familiarity with the concepts underpinning children’s book development. Publishers noted a clearer grasp of the various type of children’s books, their distinct defining features, and the associated development processes. The increased knowledge seemed to contribute to an attitude shift with several publishing commenting on a newfound sense of intentionality they bring to children’s book development. In addition, publishers observed how the coaching processes required them to professionalize their management processes. The practical experience of being guided through the book development cycle, from planning to pre-press, provided tutorials on new and different approaches to improve book efficiency and quality.

This was the first time most publishers had led a creative book project, and the emphasis on originality was initially challenging. Their previous experience with textbook development resulted in a clear preference for traditionally educational text types and themes. As publishers embarked on the development of their second and third titles, there was an observable shift in the recruitment of content creators. Rather publishers sought out more talented content

creators that were able to produce unique texts and illustration. This expansion of professional networks was another area of growth noted by many participating publishers and content creators alike. Prior to the GBAIA activity, publishers regularly used only one or two authors or illustrators, regardless of the nature of the project. The demand for publishers to create between two and four books each necessitated publishers to move outside their comfort zones to identify and engage different content creators. In several incidences, publishers noted the new professional partnerships resulted in the best quality books.

This project has made us realize that we didn't know anything about children's storybooks. What we called storybooks are not. Creativity has been ignited."

"We have all changed. We've come to know and appreciate the complexity of children's book writing."

Authors

Authors reflected on the confidence they now possess when writing both text types targeted through the GBAIA activity. They commented on how they are aware of how to 'change gears' and adjust their writing style to write both fiction and non-fiction books for children. Drafting original fictional picture books was largely a new experience, and authors appreciated the technical guidance on how to develop memorable characters and storylines. While authors largely felt more comfortable writing non-fiction, they noted significant changes in how they approach the genre. Authors expressed their confidence writing informative books that are also engaging, commenting that they recognize the need to choose book topics that pique children's interest.

Another key area of growth noted by the professional coaches related to authors' experiences refining their writing through the editorial process. The concept of undergoing multiple stages of rewriting based on feedback garnered from publishers and editors was largely unprecedented. While it was a pain point for some authors, the revisions were critical to the quality assurance process. Authors are now better prepared to seek out and incorporate editorial feedback into future manuscripts as they now understand this as a necessary professional step in the book development cycle.

"I am not the same. I'm ashamed to read a children's book I wrote before this project. I have learnt a lot."

"The training has taught me how to write informational books for children. Before, I would write stories or books that were not appealing to children's interests. They were more like textbooks."

"It was my first time working with publishers. The experience has increased my knowledge on how the book industry works. I am using this knowledge and skills from GBAIA for my next book project."

"Character development was a hard one, but I now know how to go about it."

Illustrators and designers

Illustrators appreciated the professional training received, as many were self-taught artists attempting to transfer their skills to the illustration vocation. Specifically, illustrators felt they benefited from instruction on strategies for developing unique, and memorable characters for children's books. They recognized the power of an aesthetically appealing protagonist and the need to put thought into how to best depict each unique character. Publishers similarly noted appreciation for how their contracted illustrators were being supported to attempting different types of characters, unlike their previous drawings developed to date.

There was a general appreciation for a range of other illustration and design techniques introduced during the training and coaching, namely instruction on determining color palettes, layout considerations, and using a variety of angles and perspectives to create impactful images. Similarly, designers broadened their skills using the industry standard platform, In Design. They are now able to use a greater range of the in-built features helpful in book design.

Interestingly, illustrators noted an attitudinal shift towards greater agency for their own creative role in book development. Previously, there was a largely universal practice of publishers providing art briefs to specify exactly the illustrations to be developed for the book. Illustrators did not have an opportunity to propose ideas and did not feel confident deviating from the proposed illustration directives. The collaborative process of storyboarding required illustrators, authors, and publishers to map out the text against images and created the space for illustrators to contribute creatively to the illustration planning process. As a result, illustrators commented on their greater levels engagement and appreciated the opportunity to actively contribute to the creation process.

"I realize now designers shouldn't sit by the window and wait for instructions. We must buy in the concept and use our professional capacities to the design the best possible book."

"I have gained a lot of skills through this project. I didn't know most of the things we have been taught."

"Our creativity has progressed tremendously."

"We have learned new and better ways of working."

"The exposure to this project has sharpened my drawing skills. I will now take this profession seriously."

Perceived achievements

The most cited achievement of the GBAIA activity was the actual production of 50 Chichewa children's books now available for long-term use. The fact that the local sector was able to develop this number of unique children's book titles was perceived as both unprecedented and important. The variety of children's books developed by Malawians and for Malawian children's taste is seen as significant milestone in the country's path to increasing literacy.

Participating publishers also noted an increased interest in children's book publishing, most especially in expanding their efforts to include the development of non-textbook reading materials. As one publisher described it, "A passion has been ignited in us. We now know how to work efficiently books to make within limited time frames and have seen the fruits of labor." Since the completion of the GBAIA book development activity, several publishers have indicated continued investment in new title development. One noted his ambition to plan to create a series of books for children covering different themes.

The aspect of collaborative development was also repeatedly mentioned as a key success factor. The fact that GBAIA brought the publishers, authors, designers, and illustrators together and work as a Book Team increased efficiency and creativity. One publisher described the benefits of this approach, noting: *"To have an author, an illustrator, a designer, and a publisher come together and discuss the illustrations was a great experience. We worked as a team and came up with what I couldn't do by myself."* Participants similarly appreciated how the GBAIA approach encouraged them to work with different industry actors. Through the trainings and workshops, content creators had an opportunity to team up with a range of new collaborators, effectively extending their professional networks for future creative endeavors.

"Through the activity, I developed confidence to work on two children's books with individuals that I met through GBAIA. GBAIA also made it possible for me to grow my portfolio as a young author." -Author

Challenges and learning

Participants and professional coaches noted several challenges in the partnership between the publisher and the illustrator. The initial pool of trained illustrators was too small considering the number of titles to be developed. This led to a single illustrator being offered multiple titles from publishers. The illustrators were not always open to the publishers about their other engagements, both GBAIA sponsored titles and other professional tasks. This resulted in several instances where publishers were waiting for an illustrator to finish his/her other engagements. There will be need to strengthen the illustrators' professional discipline.

The use of open licensing is not yet widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, and this was the first experience for most publishers. During the development process, there were inconsistencies in the use of clear labeling of copyright status signaling publishers' need for additional support to understand the terms of re-use for Creative Commons Non-Commercial licenses. Publishers and authors will benefit from additional support in understanding the opportunities of open licensing, otherwise this activity risks not having sustained market benefits.

The first draft of books reflected challenges with author's capacity to develop unique and age-appropriate content. Particularly in the second and third title submissions when authors hadn't been coached through a storyline development, they fell back on the habit of retelling of traditional folk tales or already existing narratives, for instance, the perfect student inspiring his/her peers or the orphaned child overcoming the tribulations of an evil stepmother. This resulted in several titles with similarities to each other or existing books on the local or international market. There was also a noticeable trend of developing stories around the use of realistic violence, in a bid to connect with Malawian children's fears and anxieties. However, the resulting text and images were, at times, overly graphic and had the potential of frightening or triggering young readers. The commonly held perception of children's books as vehicles to relay information and even cautionary counsel, rather than enjoyment or pleasure, persists amongst Malawian writers

While all participants were familiar with the concept of conducting research, very few were using it as a mechanism to generate fresh and relevant content. Illustrators struggled to develop unique characters that weren't highly derivative of well-known children's animations, e.g., a lion that didn't look like Simba from Disney's *The Lion King*. Similarly, there were instances of authors submitting work that borrowed heavily from already published books in the region. Content creators would benefit from training on the importance of conducting research to inspire, but not duplicate, existing work. As copyright legislation is strengthened across the continent, this will become increasingly important.

Designers, by and large, had very little professional experience developing children's books and would have benefitted from explicit training at the onset of the GBAIA activity. Most designers require basic digital skills training on the industry standard software necessary to work efficiently such as Adobe InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator, etc. Further training on the principals of design for children's books would be beneficial to build designers' understanding of important issues such as ensuring the readability of selected typography. Additional capacity building on finalizing and checking design files is necessary to ensure the printing processes are handled professionally and efficient.

Recommendations for future support to the Malawi book sector

Stimulating demand for the newly developed books should be a central program outcome. To raise awareness on the availability of Chichewa language children’s books, there is a need for publishers to invest in innovative marketing strategies. Prospective purchasers of books, including libraries, bookstores, literacy projects and private schools, must be made aware that both content and capacity exist within the local publishing sector. Further support beyond the development of books would concretize the advancements and more sustainably transform the understand market dynamics.

Plan for longer term activity timelines to promote sustainability within the sector. The duration of the project was both short and light touch. For the book development investment to yield permanent progress in the Malawi publishing sector, industry actors require more tutelage and opportunities to practice. Publisher would benefit from additional support to improving ways of working and identifying market opportunities. As one publisher commented, *“It would be relatively easy to fall back old routines if there is no demand for children’s books.”*

Evaluate progress and gaps in the sector to design the next phase of bespoke capacity building activities for Malawian publishers. Advance market commitments proved to be an effective means for jumpstarting book development in the early stages of market development. All publishers completed the awarded titles indicating that the 50% upfront financing model was effective in supporting development costs while still minimizing risk. In subsequent activities, publishers request to be to actively engage in the initial design of the support and compensation structure.

Version existing books in other underserved Malawian languages. Storybooks in Chichewa were done, practicing developing in the other local languages would also be helpful. A versioning workshop where the 50 titles are translated into other common Malawian languages would provide skill building in other orthographies as well as provide much needed reading materials to underserved communities. The Creative Commons non-commercial licenses provides the option to adapt materials to other languages. Publishers could maximize this opportunity to expand their title lists and expand their market opportunities.

Engage in recruitment efforts to identify more talented creatives to work in the publishing sector. There is a need for a broader pool of creatives with experience in children’s books beyond those currently participating in private sector associations. It is recommended that further activities seek out aspiring authors and illustrators to equip a new cohort of potential book creators. In parallel, efforts to promote the legitimacy and professionalization of writers, illustrators’ and editors’ associations can be made to empower distinct professions within the book chain.

Design a sector-wide training on child development and the psychology of children’s books.

Significant progress was made on participants’ understanding of non-textbook reading materials, however, submitted drafts consistently featured reoccurring motifs of gruesome and violent imagery. Several publishers and authors maintained the position that young children experience violence, trauma and death in their day-to-day life, and such events were therefore appropriate and relevant to include in their books. This was not accompanied with the thoughtful sensitivity necessary to present such issues in a way that doesn’t risk psychological harm to young readers. A training on positive use of challenging themes may reduce the prevalence of gratuitous violence in future children’s book development.