

# Book Aid International: Vibrant libraries and empowered communities

**Alison Hubert, Book Aid International**

*Literacy is crucial for economic development and fighting poverty. If all children in low-income countries could read, it is estimated that poverty could drop by 12 per cent.*

– European Commission, 2013

Book Aid International works in partnership with libraries in Africa to support environments in which reading for pleasure, study and lifelong learning can flourish. Every year we provide more than half a million new books donated by UK publishers to libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa. We also provide training for librarians to ensure that readers get the very best from our donated books, and grants for purchasing locally published books and for library refurbishments. Our work is practical, effective and empowering.

Book Aid International was founded in 1954 by Lady Hermione, Countess of Ranfurly. The organisation became a charity in 1966 under the patronage of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh; our president is Nigel Newton, founder of Bloomsbury Publishing, and our chair is the Lord Paul Boateng PC DL. Since 1954, we are proud to have sent more than 30 million books to libraries in the developing world, reaching an estimated 150 million readers.

Last year alone, we provided training for 142 librarians and teachers, refurbished 54 libraries, sent 563,424 books to more than

3,300 libraries and provided funding for partners to purchase more than 21,740 locally published books.

The focus of our work is where the need for books is greatest: children, health information, under-resourced communities and higher education. We partner with national library services and non-governmental organisations to improve the service for users of libraries in schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, prisons, refugee camps, and under-resourced community and public libraries.

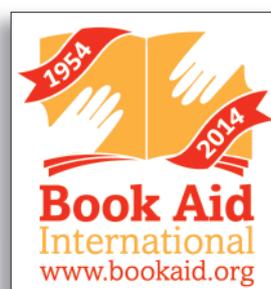
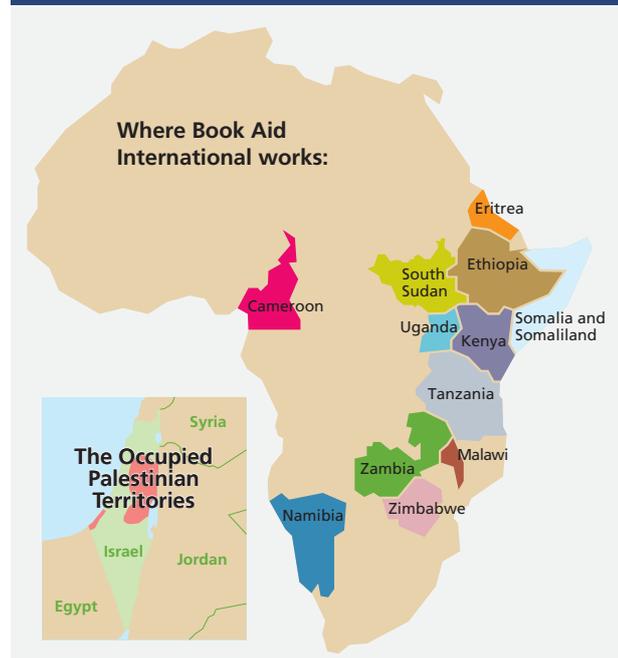
We work closely with our partners to select the books that most closely suit the requirements of the communities they serve and we donate solely new books. The majority of these books are donated by around 90 UK publishers and are valued at around £7 million annually. Where possible we also purchase books locally, both directly and through grants we give to our partners.

We cater for a readership that ranges from pre-school children to university students, health care professionals and members of the general public. Importantly, our books reach people not involved in any formal education, including street children and people who live in slums. As part of our commitment to supporting lifelong

learning, we provide readers with technical and vocational books on subjects such as engineering, plumbing and carpentry, or texts on business and management.

We have a turnover of approximately £1.4 million per

## Book Aid International's reach



Children's Corners are child-friendly spaces in public libraries. Pictured: Nambi Sseppuuya Community Resource Centre, Uganda



*Kibiti Community Library, Tanzania*

annum. Our individual giving programme, the Reverse Book Club, which is fronted by Joanna Lumley and Michael Palin, generates more than half our annual income. We are funded entirely through the support of individual donors, trusts, foundations and corporate supporters, and we receive no government funding. Our work is also supported by committed volunteers, who process books in our warehouse in London and fundraise in their local communities on our behalf. A small team of community ambassadors promote Book Aid International in their local areas.

## Our partners

We partner directly with more than 75 organisations in 13 countries and most of these are long-term partnerships. We have worked with some of our partners – such as the Kenya National Library Service – since the 1960s. We aim to be partner-led in both our book provision and programme development.

Books are selected for our partners based on their specific requirements, including library user reading levels, numbers of copies required and the subject matter that their users request. Monitoring and evaluation of our book provision and project work is undertaken by our partners and by Book Aid International staff. This enables us to continuously improve the way we work and to measure the outcomes of the joint work undertaken.

Our partners fall into three categories. Distribution partners, usually the National Library Service or a non-government organisation (NGO), work with us to distribute more than 550,000 books

annually to libraries in their country. Each distribution partner receives up to 90,000 books per year in up to four shipments and manages the customs clearance and logistics on behalf of all the libraries to which they distribute. These partners are responsible for monitoring and reporting on use of the books in the recipient libraries. Partners in this category include the Kenya National Library Service, Malawi National Library Service and EISERVI (Education Information Services International). We send books to distribution partners in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Somalia (Somaliland and Puntland), South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. We also have a small programme in Palestine.

Recipient partners receive books from the distribution partners, either selected according to their requirements by Book Aid International staff or selected by the distribution partner staff. Partners in this category include: Forum for African Women Educationalists of Zambia, Chancellor College in Malawi and Windle Trust in Kenya (for Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps).

Project partners (which may also be distribution or recipient partners) work with us to deliver library development projects. Partners in this category include Uganda Community Library Association, Tanzania Library Services Board and African Prisons Project.

Book Aid International is constantly seeking new strategic partnerships with organisations that can help increase the impact of the books we are distributing through complementary programmes.

## Our projects

*A child born to a mother who can read is 50 per cent more likely to survive past the age of five.*

– European Commission, 2013

Library services for children are at the heart of our work and more than 70 per cent of the books we send are for children. These books help build collections in public, community and school libraries, and contribute to literacy development, learning and the cultivation of reading for pleasure. Training for librarians is integral to our work to improve services for children.

We create child-friendly spaces – Children’s Corners – in public libraries, providing books, grants for refurbishments and the purchase of locally published books, and training for library staff. We have created Children’s Corners in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. These spaces can have a huge impact on children in under-resourced communities, providing books in English and local languages that are suitable for their age and reading ability as well as space to read, study, play and relax with adults who are trained to support children’s development and encourage reading. Where Children’s Corners have been created, librarians report up to a fourfold increase in the number of children using library services.

To mark our 60th anniversary in 2014 we are creating 60 Children’s Corners in public libraries in six countries – Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Zambia. The aim of this ambitious project is to help nurture a love of reading in the tens of thousands of children who will use the libraries we support, opening doors to literacy, learning and a lifetime of opportunity.

Another project supporting library services for children is our School Library in a Box initiative in Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania. This provides portable libraries to schools that do not have resources for a permanent library building. Since it began in 2007 the project has given more than 36,000 children in 70 schools in isolated communities access to a library of books in English and Kiswahili. Over 200 teachers have been trained to use the books in their classroom.

Health information provision is another strategic priority. In 2013 we provided partners with more than 30,000 highly valued medical textbooks. For many of our partners the medical and health books we provide constitute the vast majority of their collection and are an essential resource for health practitioners – from doctors and nurses to community health workers and traditional healers. Some of the books we provide are for lay readers in communities where there may not be a medical practitioner.

We also run projects to support the development of community libraries, currently in Ethiopia, Uganda and Cameroon. These small libraries, owned and managed locally, receive a collection of new books, small grants to refurbish library buildings and purchase locally published books, and librarianship training for staff.

## Looking ahead

We are conscious of the changing needs of library users. Book Aid International and Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) began working together in 2013 on a three-year project piloting the use of hand-held computers (tablets) in three selected libraries. The project is giving children the opportunity to use technology for



Paidha Public Library Children's Corner, Uganda

reading and for educational games and activities. At present many of the areas we work in cannot access digital content; despite rapid technological advances in Sub-Saharan Africa, internet access is largely restricted to cities, while vast rural areas do not have electricity, let alone access to the internet. However, by the end of 2015 this pilot project will give us the experience and skills to develop similar projects where there is the infrastructure to support them. In future, we will be including the provision of digital resources in projects where possible.

Demand for and provision of tertiary education in Africa is growing rapidly. We will target our support to the newer institutions most in need of support with collection development. We will also make higher education textbooks available in public and community libraries where appropriate.

We will continue to add value to the books we send by implementing an integrated programme of library support. Librarian training will remain central to this, whether through in-service training programmes, training trainers, exchange visits, conferences or published resources. We also aim to expand our programme of book provision to current partners and to seek new country partnerships, particularly in post-conflict areas where resources are scarce. Everywhere we work our vision is, and will continue to be, of vibrant libraries that inspire readers and empower communities.

*To find out more about Book Aid International, visit:*  
[www.bookaid.org](http://www.bookaid.org)

**ALISON HUBERT** is director of Book Aid International. Prior to this she worked for Macmillan Education in Africa for 20 years, first as publishing director and then as curriculum director.