

## The First Five Years of Saide's African Storybook Initiative: Impact and Sustainability

*Tessa Welch, 17 October 2017*

This talk will outline the impact of the African Storybook, and also its potential for sustainability. We understand that these are two issues with which you are grappling.

I will assume that you are aware of the website of openly licensed picture storybooks for early reading – to date 843 unique storybooks and 3837 translations in 116 of the languages spoken in Africa. I think you are also aware that we are an African initiative by African people: almost all our storybooks written by the African communities that use the storybooks.

### **Impact**

We are a site that is directed at stimulating reading for pleasure and practice, rather than one that teaches reading per se. So we have not measured impact on children's reading achievement.

However, there are indicators of the popularity of our content. For example, World Reader reports that two of our titles were top of the list of books that made people readers in 2016. World Reader is using 51 of our titles on their mobile site as well as in their reading projects on the continent. They report that they have pushed 42,968 individual ASb storybooks to their projects with the majority going to Nigeria.

Our content is also snapped up in contexts where there is a dearth of local language material. For example,

- In Niger, Save the Children has used 64 titles in French and 14 in Hausa for their 75 Literacy Boost centres across the country.
- In Cameroon, a teacher educator is translating 42 of our titles into Lamnso – the first storybooks in that language for children, even though the government has stipulated that the local language must be used for teaching in the early grades.

In the external review of our work in 14 pilot sites in three countries, the impact of our engagement on teachers was evaluated. These were some of the findings.

- Availability of local language storybooks had an effect on attitudes to mother-tongue literacy. Doubts about the value of mother tongue literacy have largely been dispelled.
- It also had an effect on methods of engaging children in reading. While traditional, choral rote responses to reading persist, more effective practices have been introduced so that children now interact with texts more meaningfully.
- The review shows gains in the level of teamwork amongst the teachers, increased autonomy and greater learner centeredness.

### **Sustainability**

But now for the second aspect of this talk – considerations of sustainability. Another of our external evaluators used four indicators to determine how far the initiative has come in terms of sustainability.

**The first indicator is: Has the ASb secured continued funding, and from diverse sources?**

Our response is:

- We have (almost) secured continued ASb dedicated **core funding** for maintenance and improvement of technology, as well as ensuring that storybooks continue to be published, and that independent use is stimulated and tracked.

We believe that we will continue to need core funding, but at less than a third of what was required for start-up.

- We are working on diversification of funding through collaborative project procurement for Integration into large scale literacy development schooling programmes as well as library programmes (for example, we have responsibility for one of three components of the USAID funded Reading Support Programme currently running in all schools in two provinces in South Africa);
- We are also working on developing and offering marketable services: for example, publishing services such as illustration, translation, storybook selection for printing, and management of printing. We are also considering offering pool procurement services.
- Finally, we intend to experiment with crowd-sourced funding for non-project related storybook illustration, translation and creation.

**The second indicator is: Has the African Storybook been able to “operationalize” its ideas?**

In other words, are the African Storybook’s ‘big ideas’ beginning to be embodied in processes and organisations and thus taking on a life of their own?

Well, our external evaluator thought yes:

- The website is the major way in which the idea has been operationalized – and our website analytics show the considerable extent of uptake.
- However, there has also been government buy-in. We have prepared content for two government websites, in two of our pilot countries, South Africa and Kenya. Increasingly governments are wanting digital content, and openly licensed local language digital content is in scarce supply.
- The African Storybook concept of communities producing their own storybooks in their own languages to service their mother tongue enliteration policies has been taken up enthusiastically and speedily in countries outside of our pilot countries. For example, a 1.5 day workshop in Zimbabwe resulted in 11 translations in local languages, 2 donated storybooks, and the creation of a network to further translate into 16 local languages.
- Through the Global Digital Library, storybooks from our website, in addition to being accessible on the platform, are likely to be streamed through on OPDS system to apps that subscribe.

**The third indicator is: Has the ASb built “deep” relationships with implementing organisations?**

These are partnerships that move beyond one-off collaborations to longer-term jointly conceived and funded projects.

Increasingly, we work with partner networks, rather than individual partners – creating an eco-system in a particular country. For example, in Uganda, we work with a university, a college, the Community Library Association, as well as individual libraries and schools. The Library Association is raising its own funds to generate storybooks on and for our website. They are likely to continue to use African Storybook whether or not we are involved.

**The fourth and final indicator is: Has the ASb “codified” its initiative in policy or practice?**

Our experience and learnings are captured in external evaluation reports; academic articles; and increasingly, in popularly written stories of use.

In terms of policy, initiatives like African Storybook have been disruptive in both Kenya and South Africa. Availability of free digital versionable content changes the game. It is difficult for paid content to compete with free openly licensed content.

We are also hoping that our multilingual platform will change the way in which language learning is conceptualized – rather than as separate languages taught separately in boxed periods in the school curriculum, we believe that languages should be learned together, supporting each other, and flowing into and out of each other dynamically. The reality of Africa is multilingual, and schools need to equip children to celebrate and participate in this multilingual reality.

**References**

Gultig, J. (2017). External Accountability Evaluation of the African Storybook Initiative.  
[http://www.saide.org.za/documents/2017\\_03\\_29\\_ASb\\_accountability\\_evaluation.pdf](http://www.saide.org.za/documents/2017_03_29_ASb_accountability_evaluation.pdf)

Harley, K. & Janks, H. (2016). External Mid-term Review of the African Storybook Project.  
[http://www.saide.org.za/documents/Executive\\_Summary\\_ASP\\_Mid-term\\_Review\\_\(1\).pdf](http://www.saide.org.za/documents/Executive_Summary_ASP_Mid-term_Review_(1).pdf)