The myth of the 'book famine' in African publishing

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Abstract

The publishing industry in Africa is usually described in terms of "booklessness", "hunger" or "famine". But does this language of scarcity reflect the realities of book production and consumption? In this paper, the concept of "book famine" is analysed as a central frame of discourse on African books, using a survey of existing documentation. Two ways of responding to book famine – provision and production – are identified, and the shortcomings of book aid (provision) are contrasted with strengthening local publishing industries (production). It is argued that the concept has become a cliché that is no longer relevant and that African publishing, while variable, is responding to local needs.

Keywords: book famine, book publishing, African publishing, book aid, discourse analysis, framing

Biographical note:

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Introduction

> "…the hunger for reading shall be treated like physical hunger and that books shall be protected, cultivated, improved and developed as the most precious of basic needs" (Barker and Escarpit 1973, 30)
>
> "Our goal: to end the book famine in Africa" (Books for Africa, 2019)

As recently as January 2018, the Global Book Alliance Partnership held a conference in Abidjan titled "Time to Eliminate Book Hunger for Children in Africa".[1] This metaphor of hunger reveals a specific perspective on the role and place of books and publishing in African countries. Hans Zell calls this "the *other* famine" (1987) and has noted that, "In the late 1980s and early 1990s Africa increasingly became a bookless society. The term 'book famine' was coined, and has been the subject of much concern by librarians, academics, and the international book community in their attempts to alleviate the distressing picture of book starvation in Africa" (Zell 1995, 366). The term "book hunger" or "book famine" in fact dates back at least to the post-war period, when it had a specific purpose – it was deliberately used for shock value to draw attention to Unesco's agenda in advancing literacy and development. However, after repeated use over time, the term as a concept has lost that shock value and has come to be taken for granted. The term has now become synonymous with the status of books in many developing parts of the world, and especially African countries. It is thus still common to find references to "the persistent book famine", "lack of access", "scarcity of locally published material", "bookless society" and "a continent with a recognized book famine" even in current texts and speeches, by a wide range of authors, publishers, academics and general commentators. For instance, the International African Institute held a symposium on 'The Book Famine in Africa' in London in 1985, the American African Studies Association set up a Book Famine Task Force in 1992, and academics still regularly refer to "the persistent book famine in the country" (e.g. Olujide 1998). In reports on the publishing industry, there are statements from the 1960s like "everywhere in Africa books are in short supply" (Fyle 1965, 19), which are echoed, for instance in the author Doris Lessing (2007) speaking of a "hunger for books" in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2007. Scholars still talk of turning a book famine into a "book banquet" (Ncube 2015) and of Africa as a "totally bookless environment" (Sturges and Neill 1998) – a phenomenon "too well known to need rehearsal here" (Fisher 1994, 225). The term has come to be linked with

[1] A partnership between the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and USAID.

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an assumption of a lack of a "reading culture" (another term that is seldom interrogated). It has also shifted, almost unchanged, into the digital realm: "e-books help ease Africa's book shortage" (Block 2016). In other words, through repeated use, the term has become an entrenched assumption – it is seen as self-evident and true, requiring no explanation, whether or not it is ill-informed and based on little evidence.[2]

The language of abundance vs scarcity is thus central to dominant images of African publishing and reading. But does this term reflect the realities of book production and consumption in African countries, and what are the implications of viewing these only through a frame of famine, lack, scarcity, and crisis? My concern is that this discourse of scarcity, of lack, has become the predominant one when considering publishing or reading in African countries. What does it mean to use the discourse of famine when referring to books? I argue that we should pose more questions about what such language means and accomplishes, how it is chosen, what assumptions it is based upon, and its short- and long-term ramifications, especially in terms of power relations. The narrative of famine or booklessness is not an accurate description of the state of African publishing any more, but its pervasiveness means it has real social, economic and policy implications.

In this paper, I provide an analysis of "book famine" as a central frame for public discourse on African books. I first examine the origins of term, which is important because its use has become ahistorical, ignoring developments in publishing and other fields. The method then shifts to a content analysis of a variety of official documents such as those from Unesco and non-government organisations, book aid programmes, and the most prominent book development conferences held since the 1960s (a full list of the documents that formed the corpus for this content analysis is provided in an appendix). The aim is to determine to what extent the narratives and discourses of scarcity are used in these documents, using the concept of framing. Framing analysis, which has become a widespread method for examining communications and media bias, examines how certain aspects of an issue are selected or emphasised, by exploring metaphors, narratives, stereotypes and visuals. Todd Gitlin

[2] There has also been a new shift in use of the term, linking the "book famine" to a "digital famine": "The book famine has not been overcome in many parts of the world, and now co-exists with the digital divide" (Johnson 2013); "Africa is not only deeply in book famine, but is in the throes of a digital famine" (Ng'etich, 2003). The term is also widely linked to access to books for people with visual disabilities, but that use is not the focus of this paper.

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(1980/2003) argues that a frame is built through selection, emphasis, and exclusion, based on the purposes and agenda of the creator of the message. Robert Entman's classic work on framing identified four functions for a frame: defining a problem, identifying causes, making judgments, and suggesting remedies or solutions (1993, 52). He also identifies the strategies at work as repetition, the location of information, and association with certain social and cultural symbols. Frame theory also speaks to the relative strength of a frame, based on the frequency with which it is repeated, accessibility to individuals, and relevance (Chong and Druckman, 2007). It will become clear that part of the reasons for the success of the frame of book famine are its frequent repetition, its association with images of children and human interest, and the exclusion of competing narratives that could complicate the picture.

The problem of scarcity

What does the language of famine tell us about how books and publishing in Africa are represented? Scholarship on famine shows that the term is not a neutral one: "Famines are seen as failures of development and modernization and, what is more, failures that can be overcome by progress and more advanced technology … Modernity sees the solution to scarcity in progress: progress that leads from a past of privations and primitivism to a future of abundance and civilization" (Edkins 2000, xv, 1-2). But reporting, especially in the West, often focuses narrowly on a "disaster" or "crisis" caused by various internal problems, and usually solved only by massive charitable donations. Edkins (2000) criticises the self-congratulatory tone of these donors, and the emerging problems of celebrity aid and "philanthrocapitalism". Similarly, Nandita Dogra (2013), in her work on representations of global poverty in the communications and imagery used by international development NGOs, shows that these images are far from neutral, and that they reveal the power dynamics between the West and the developing world (what she calls the "majority world"). Dogra categorises the "cast of characters" in communications about poverty as innocent children, 'deserving' third world women, and givers and takers. The settings are mostly rural rather than urban. She describes the discursive strategies of infantilisation and feminisation – an image of helpless children dependent on the West for handouts, which evokes a response of pity – and notes that this dominant frame of poverty tends to override other frames also competing for attention, and is thus self-reinforcing. In other words, if we keep talking about famine, we become unable to see abundance. And abundance is linked, in the dominant narratives, to measures of progress.

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Moreover, international responses to famine have been criticised for ignoring broader social and political issues. Amartya Sen (1982) has theorised that famines occur not as a result of a lack of food, but because of a lack of access or "entitlements" among certain segments of a population. The dominant narratives of famine as a failure of progress seldom consider the historical context, and "how historical inequalities due to colonialism, exploitation and elite control have affected patterns of resource access and control" (Scoones et al. 2014, 7). Representing famine in terms of distributional justice requires a reframing: "current mainstream narratives emphasise absolute and relative scarcity, while ignoring political scarcity. We suggest a more political framing of scarcity requires paying attention to how resources are distributed between different needs and uses, and so different people and social classes" (Scoones et al. 2014). This framing enables us to recognise that real, material scarcities continue to exist, at the same time as we see that narratives of scarcity and famine are constructed:

> "Recognising that scarcity narratives are constructed does not mean that scarcities are not 'real'; rather, we show that it is how these are presented and interpreted that is subject to processes of construction, and that a knowledge politics is at play … Scarcity narratives do not merely describe but justify changes in access to and control over resources, in ways that might reduce but also reallocate scarcities across regions and populations" (Scoones et al. 2014, 21)

A political understanding of book famine thus requires a re-examination of the global distribution of resources.

Origins of the "book famine"

The word famine is an extreme one, meaning a lack of something that is essential to life – usually food. As an extreme image, it evokes an extreme response. Applying the analogy to books has sometimes been deliberate. The term "book famine" or "book hunger" can be traced back at least to the 19th century, when it was used to refer to a general shortage of books. For instance, in historical newspapers we find an appeal for books in Chicago after a fire at a library in 1871 (*New York Tribune*, 11 November 1871); a complaint about the lack of reading in Australia in the 1880s ('Mrs Spurgeon's Book Fund' in the *Christian Colonist*, South Australia, 27 April 1883); and a similar complaint in Russia in the 1890s: "The book famine in the Czar's dominions seems no less real than the food famine" (*Daily Northern Argus, Qld*, 17 December 1891). These reports link book shortages to events like natural disasters, but also to the "prohibitive cost of production" (*Daily Observer*, NSW, 8 May

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1920), to rising prices, and to a ban on imports during World War II. The words famine and hunger were often used to refer to schoolbook shortages.

As a term applied to the developing world, the "book famine" emerged soon after World War II, mostly through the newly developed United Nations bodies and specifically Unesco. At Unesco, which was established to promote "the free flow of ideas by word and image", it was used for a specific purpose, to create awareness and as a call for action, to help implement the aim of "Books for All". In an article on "books and cultural reconstruction" after the war, the term was already being referred to as a commonplace in Unesco circles: "It is certainly difficult, it may even be impossible, for an American, in a country where books are abundant and library services well developed and efficient, to understand the full meaning of the phrase that UNESCO has often used: 'the book famine'" (Bodet 1949, 539). The term also occurs regularly in the *Unesco Courier*, as in the following example:

> If we are lucky enough to live in one of the countries where books are abundant, it is difficult to realize that in most countries there is still a book famine, particularly at the two extremes of book use, by children in schools and by the scientists in their research stations and laboratories. If we live in these famine areas it is equally hard to understand that in many countries the most difficult problems come not from scarcity of books but from their abundance. ("The Public Library" 1953, 2)

Unesco World Book Year was declared in 1972, and many references to "a veritable book famine" in the developing world may be found from that time. The term was discussed and elaborated at a number of conferences and reports on publishing in the developing world, being defined in terms of a lack of resources:

> Problems facing book publishing in developing countries include lack of experienced authors, insufficient or complete non-availablility of paper, shortage of printing and binding facilities, publishers' lack of knowledge about editing, production and distribution techniques and shortage of finances. (Malhotra 1970)

One of the most prominent references comes from a series of articles and then a book by Ronald Barker and Robert Escarpit, who argued: "With an ever-widening need for reading material, we find areas of abundance, areas of scarcity and areas of famine" (Barker and Escarpit 1973, 15). In their now classic work, *The Book Hunger* (1973), they stated:

> In Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Arab States, in varying degrees, there is an acute shortage of books. 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 1973, i)

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Barker and Escarpit set the concept of book famine explicitly against perceived problems of abundance: "… the pressing problem facing books is how to keep up with information which is proliferating, obsessional, with a temporary and, by definition, fleeting import" (1973, 13). They linked problems of low production and access directly to issues of access and selection – noting particularly that religious books were in greater demand in various developing countries, and that attention should be focused on such areas of demand (1973, 17-18). They argued: "Encouraging people to read is of little use if books likely to appeal to them are not available. It is not merely a problem of selection. Over half the reading population of the world does not, as we have seen, have access to the reading material it needs to satisfy its basic requirements" (Barker and Escarpit 1973, 123). In other words, Barker and Escarpit did not use the term "book hunger" simply as a frame: they were using it as a descriptive term of what they saw as a real problem of both shortages and lack of access.

In describing the African situation as a "book famine", a number of sources construct their narratives using significant facts or figures, their provenance often uncertain. In a report on a 1968 book development meeting in Ghana, the issue of book shortages is supported by key figures from a Unesco survey on "Books in the Promotion of Development in Africa": "The working paper noted that Africa contained 9.4 per cent of the world's population but produced only 1.5 per cent of the books printed annually" (Unesco 1969, 9). They went on to state that book production on the continent was only about 1/30th of a book per capita per year, and noted that literacy remained a problem. Five years later, the Unesco "Books for All" programme based its diagnosis on the same survey:

> Although the 'book revolution' which has occurred in the production and distribution of books has made it possible to publish vast quantities of printed materials to meet growing needs throughout the world, the effects of this striking change are felt unequally. Developing countries suffer in varying degrees from a grave shortage of books. Representing some 70 per cent of the world's population, they produce barely one-fifth of the books published in the world, while the rest of the production is centred in some thirty industrial countries. (Unesco 1973, 20)

Similarly, the report of a 1973 book development conference held in Nigeria referred to Africa's book hunger as a "severe impediment", based on Unesco figures showing a disjuncture between supply and demand (Oluwasanmi, McLean and Zell 1975, 355). The 1981 report on a similar conference, held in Senegal, reported that production had doubled in African countries between 1975 and 1978, based on Unesco statistics from 1978 (Unesco 1981, 26). Newer studies continue to repeat the 'fact' that Africa produces only 2% of the

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world's books (e.g. Bgoya and Jay, 2013) or even just 1%: "It is a context where an entire continent has over 11 per cent of the world's population, yet only 1 per cent of its book production" (Sturges and Neill 1998, 6 – referencing Unesco statistics from 1986). Few of the book aid donors examined provide any evidence for their claims, preferring to emphasise the figures relating to their donations and shipments. The evidence for book hunger, in other words, often relies on outdated Unesco statistics on book publishing and consumption to describe the entire continent of Africa. And while Zell (2013) has repeatedly pointed out the need for improved data on African publishing, these figures are in short supply. In the absence of such data, the "cognitive shortcut" of book famine remains in widespread use. Thus, "it is the ideas actors hold about the context in which they find themselves, rather than the context itself, which ultimately informs the way in which they behave" (Hay 2002, cited in Brüggemann et al. 2016).

A crisis of development

Book hunger is often represented as a crisis, requiring urgent intervention, because it is linked to the discourses of progress and development. This framing relies on a specific model of development, which was promoted by Unesco: "A sound publishing industry is essential to national development" (Barker and Escarpit 1973, 138, quoting from the book charter of Unesco), and the idea that cultural development can lead to other forms of development. Thus, in the 1960s and 70s, and right into the 80s, we find a whole raft of meetings, associations, declarations around book development. Books were seen as equivalent to development, or even as a cause of it. The Books for All programme of action argued that "adequate supplies of books must be made available to all who need them" because "[t]his poverty, so acute in some countries as to be characterized as a 'book famine', is a grave obstacle to social and economic development" (Unesco 1973, 6). A 1981 regional meeting on book development in Africa also stressed that books are "indispensable factors in economic growth and national development" (Unesco 1981, 7).

A wide range of studies and reports continue to emphasise the role of books in national development (e.g. Ogunrombi and Adio 1993; Farah 1989) and highlight the urgency and crisis 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. Publishing is also an important productive sector

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which provides a number of skilled jobs across the continent" (Crabbe and Nyingi 2014). A 2017 high-level conference on publishing in Africa explicitly linked publishing to education and economic growth – the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) hosted a two-day conference on "The Publishing Industry in Africa and its Role in Education and Economic Growth', in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in November 2017. The Action Plan emerging from this conference is focused on access to educational material, i.e. books are equated with textbooks.

Because of the link to development, most of the focus has fallen on a perceived shortage of educational books: "… education is a basic investment for development and that books in turn are a basic tool of education" (Unesco 1969, 8). The following reports illustrate the same linkage:

> Textbooks, moreover, may be the only introduction to reading for students who come from homes without books. They may be a young person's only exposure to reading in villages so remote that there are no newspapers, magazines or even shop signs. They are essential to teaching literacy in the many parts of the world where book hunger – even book famine – is endemic, where teaching is by rote and memorization of information, not always accurate and seldom up to date. (Montagnes 2000)

> Most bookshops in English-speaking Africa present a picture of empty shelves, schools are without books; and teachers and scholars are divorced from the material to pursue their studies, to maintain their understanding of developments taking place in their disciplines elsewhere in the world, and to keep their teaching and research up to date. (Zell 1995)

Similarly, the motivations expressed by the majority of book donor organisations on their websites and in their promotional materials refer to development and education: Books for Africa speak of donating books "to help create a culture of literacy and provide the tools of empowerment", while the mission of Books2Africa is based on "a belief that education is key to defeating poverty, and a desire to develop the African continent". School Aid argues that "every African student can advance and contribute to the developmental, social and economic needs of their country", while Textbooks for Change similarly state that "We can create the next generation of doctors, entrepreneurs, and artists by helping students learn with high quality material". The donors emphasise the urgency of the situation at the same time, referring for instance to "crisis" and to the "grave educational plight" of African children (Book Aid for Africa). As can be seen, they tend to interlink development and education as mutually reinforcing.

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The rhetoric of development and progress has been criticised for its reliance on outdated and neo-colonial attitudes (i.e. advancing populations from "primitive" to "civilised"). Young points out that the causes and effects of book famine may be identified differently, depending on the ideological position:

> Thus, in the modernization paradigm, book famine was put forward as a cause of underdevelopment – and thus requiring the correction of problems relating to the undersupply of books to Third Wold countries by means of book aid policies, transfer of expertise and technology, and development of (western) publishing and distribution procedures and infrastructures. Later theorists working in the dependency/ disassociation paradigm insisted that "book hunger" was "an effect of the underdevelopment of peripheral economies, and a symptom of the debilitating effects of the global economic order, with its skewed international distribution of knowledge, resources and capital" (Young 1994, 1).

There remains a difficulty in extricating causes and effects from the literature. For example, the problem of (lack of a) reading culture is sometimes depicted as a cause of book hunger, and sometimes as an effect. The issue of demand is contested in the sources – for instance, the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP–EU (CTA 1994) reports strong demand, while other sources refer to poor demand for books (e.g. Zidouemba 2001, 2). A CTA report on technical publishing in Africa, based on new research conducted in 1990/91, found that demand was strong and readership levels were comparatively high, but that reading was hampered by a lack of resources, and problems obtaining books (e.g. a poor range of books).

The most commonly cited causes of book shortages are economic (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" (Watkins 1997). Similarly, Sturges and Neill (1998) blame poverty but also government suppression of information. The issue of low literacy rates is often found, although some African sources emphasise improvements in literacy (e.g. Farah 1989; Unesco 1981), and it is sometimes linked to the difficulties of producing books in multiple languages (e.g. Fyle 1965; Zell 1987). The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency also sees illiteracy as a key cause: "Many African men, women and children have limited access to written material, because of poverty

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and illiteracy, the absence of written material in languages they know and poor distribution systems" (SIDA 1998, iv). So too, the economic situation in African countries is often presented as a cause of book famine – but African sources tend to reframe this as a problem with external causes, such as a shortage of investment finance, as well as foreign exchange restraints, which are lingering effects associated with the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programmes. This political reframing is absent from the donors' narratives.

Responses to famine

From the identification of causes emerge issues of agency, of who can solve the problem identified. Many responses to famine 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" (Franks 2013, 7). But such aid is a short-term response, and not the most effective – research shows that supportive techniques that impact on livelihoods help more, such as providing fodder for livestock, improving health facilities, improving water supplies, providing seeds, and seeing food as a source of income as well as a nutritional source (see e.g. De Waal 1989). For book famine, similarly, book donations are often seen as the *only* response, even if they too are not the most effective:

> In the short term this needs a massive scale act of 'famine relief'. In the long term means must be found whereby African countries can, like India, through firmly-based local publishing and printing industries, largely feed themselves at the level of primary and secondary, as well as tertiary textbooks. (Crowder 1986)

As Crowder notes, there have been two main approaches to alleviating book shortages: (i) 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 it. Notably, they do not seek to address the causes of book shortages, only to alleviate the symptoms in the short term. African meetings on book development have repeatedly called on donors to support local book publishing, rather than donating books, but their calls have gone unheeded.

These two competing solutions can be classified as either 'provision' or 'production', but they are not equally represented as frames. Rather, book provision or aid has been emphasised while production has been excluded from most narratives. For years, scholars have criticised the World Bank for its focus on provision rather than production: "it is only

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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" (Bgoya 1997, 23). Similarly, a Unesco survey of textbook projects found that they "were directed to short-term gains to overcome immediate and urgent shortages. Typically, they lasted three to five years and gave little attention to building local publishing capacity" (Montagnes 2000, 16). A CTA report explicitly likened these approaches to "food aid" vs "food security development" (1994, 21). In the sections that follow, the responses relating to book provision or book aid will first be interrogated, followed by a discussion on improving book production.

Book provision

It is striking that the same images and terms described by Dogra and Edkins as being used in the discourse on famine can be found in the reports and websites of book donor organisations. This equivalence may partly be the result of the almost ubiquitous images of famine displayed in the media. The terminology used is often highly emotive, as when Book Aid for Africa describes "deprived children" and "desolate libraries". This emotive appeal forms part of the construction of a narrative of scarcity. The other key elements are the use of children; a focus on education and development; representations of both emptiness and abundance; and "parables of success" (Scoones et al. 2014, 16-17). These elements mirror those found by Scoones et al. in their examination of narratives of land scarcity, as do the missing elements: the absence of history; abstract discussions of geographic space or time; and a lack of consideration of the politics of access. Of the sample, only Books for Africa actively uses the term "book famine", and boasts of sending containers of 22 000 books at a time to the continent: "Our goal: to end the book famine in Africa". While most donor organisations do not use the term famine, almost all refer to a lack of access and lack of resources:

> "Although Books For Africa has made tremendous progress in its mission, the book famine in Africa remains a reality. Where books are available, there are still very few. Empty library shelves are a constant reminder of Africa's desperate need for printed materials" (Books for Africa)
>
> "Books for Africa fills empty shelves in a continent starved for reading" (Watkins 1997)
>
> "Bringing Books to the Bookless" (Biblionef, as quoted in Williams 2004)

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All of the organisations focus on children rather than adult readers, using phrases such as "every child in Africa", "a better future for the children of Africa" (both from Book Aid for Africa); ""Putting a book in the hands of every African child" (Books2Africa); and "The majority of children in rural Africa are impoverished and deprived of adequate educational resources" (Australian Books for Children of Africa). The pictures used in the book donation materials are almost exclusively of children, in a rural classroom setting – school children reading or holding books, often in posed or artificial settings. These images are familiar because they are similar to the images of famine and food scarcity that predominate. But they do differ from those used for famine relief, in that they tend to show happy, smiling children – the grateful recipients of aid, rather than those still in need of it. Aligned with the focus on children is a focus on educational resources: this implies that books are seen as a tool for educating, not for other purposes such as leisure reading. The repeated image of children in a rural school reinforces this trope. The idea of education is also linked to changing lives or empowerment: "Help us to change lives through reading today" (Book Aid International). In other words, the philosophy behind such charitable initiatives remains one of development.

All of the donors list indicators of success, usually in the form of numbers of books donated or numbers of schools reached. They emphasise this quantitative assessment of their work, although scholars such as Zell and Thierry (2016) argue that the quality and appropriateness of books is more significant than the quantities: "libraries need specific individual titles and not grain by the tonne" (cited in Otike 1993, 13). The positive indicators cited also do not appear to be making inroads into the perpetual crisis of book famine – if the book hunger has continued this long, with millions of books donated, why is there still a "famine"? This question is not addressed. Apart from quantitative evidence of success, some also provide anecdotal stories of how one child's life has been improved by their work. This use of the singular enables them to offer individual stories as emblematic of the whole – the story of one child becomes the story of all children in Africa. This form of generalisation is significant in sustaining the "book famine" narrative, as it simplifies the complex reality of a collection of 54 individual countries that may have dramatically different needs and interests, not to mention languages and economic status, into a single story of an abstract "Africa".

The politics of access are seldom integrated into the narrative of book famine, at least by the donor organisations. Several talk about partnership, but this is largely a one-way, somewhat paternal relationship. One of the issues is the 'hidden costs' of cataloguing and making new

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books accessible (and sometimes overt costs, such as shipping and customs). Moreover, selection remains disputed: "Many book aid organizations argue, albeit not always convincingly, that they are taking into consideration the expressed needs and interests of those who will be using the books donated" (Zell and Thierry 2016). On closer inspection it is clear that this is not the case, and that books are sometimes collected for convenience, as library discards or even as a tax write-off. The very existence of excess can lead to book donations – as with publishers donating new but excess stock for tax relief. There are questions as to whether the books are relevant, or are being dumped, as some African recipients claim. Several of the donors, for instance, mention law books as a specific need, in spite of differences in legal systems, and educational books, in spite of country-specific curricula. Books are also not always age-appropriate, with for instance early childhood development books sometimes being donated to university libraries. Carol Mills criticises blanket donations given without prior collection assessment by recipients, saying that this lack of joint responsibility institutionalises aid and causes an "aid dependent mentality" (1994). Similarly, Mary Niles-Maack (1986) warns of a hidden "neocolonialism to perpetuate cultural and economic dependency" on donor countries (see also Curry, Thiessen and Kelley 2004). She also details the ideological role in which book donations are used to further the cultural and political aims of certain countries.

These problems of book donations often stem from a lack of detailed knowledge: "Funder and national policies fail when they are directed to short-term provision of learning materials without concern for the totality of the process" (Montagnes 2000, 51). A review of library aid programmes found that "[d]onors paid little attention to the language, currency, or context of the material, and the recipient countries were rarely, if ever, able to choose their own books" and recommended that "[d]onor countries need to shift from facilitating the dumping of unwanted materials, such as surplus print runs, to supporting indigenous publishing" (Curry, Thiessen and Kelley 2004). Indeed, the "Politics of 'developing' books and reading in Africa thus sometimes only sustain foreign domination of the African market at the expense of independent local publishers" (Carré 2016: 57).

Improving book production

The main channel to "make a positive contribution to addressing the root cause of the book famine in Africa" is to support the African publishing industry (Jay 1994). In contrast to book aid, Unesco's solutions to "book famine" mostly revolved around developing local

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book industries and providing training and technical assistance. In their Books for All programme of 1973, they identified four key areas for intervention, one of which included support for the local production and distribution of books, and the development of libraries. Similarly, scholars such as Mills (1994), Nyquist (1991) and Priestley (1989, 1993) emphasise the key role played by aid or assistance to support indigenous publishing, and argue that such aid is essential if developing nations are to gain autonomy and supply relevant materials to their citizens. However, these voices are in the minority, within the context of a remarkably persistent narrative that there is a lack of local publishing in most African countries: "The myth of an almost total absence of indigenous publishing – 'there are few or no publishers in the countries we work' – has been perpetuated by many book donation organizations for years" (Zell and Thierry 2006). It is commonplace to find statements like: "The lack of a strong, indigenous publishing industry in the regional languages is a factor in the general 'book famine' which afflicts neoliterate populations" (Richardson 1983). However, "The outside world's faulty and fragmentary perception of publications in African languages does not mean they do not exist" (Gérard 1990).

One of the few exceptions, Book Aid International has been involved in local purchase projects, to buy locally produced books instead of donating externally produced books (Blue 1994). In the digital sphere, providers such as WorldReader stress "the importance of providing relevant local content and the need to build sustainable revenue streams for African authors and publishers" on their website, but their e-readers are also pre-loaded with international titles. After supporting book provision as their main strategy for many years, the World Bank launched the Africa Publishing Initiative (API) in 1997 to strengthen the capacity of publishers. The Bank concluded in a 2014 report that donor solutions were not working, and that the only lasting solution was to strengthen the book chain within countries (Crabbe and Nyingi 2014). This initiative is no longer active, however. The African Books Collective, a non-profit organisation dedicated to circulating books from African publishers in the international market, has made an effort to invite donors to select books for donation from their catalogue, which features a wide range of locally published works. This too has met with only limited success (although ABC's broader print on demand and distribution work remains vital).

It is beyond the scope of this article to review the many publishing initiatives currently active in different African countries, but the past decade has seen an upswelling of new writing and

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publishing and examples could be cited from Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and so on. These publishers work in often difficult economic conditions, and a recurring complaint is that their markets are decimated by book donations. Thus, it could be argued that the solution of book aid works counter to the solution of local book development instead of in parallel with it:

> Most book donation schemes are well-intentioned, but even the most well-intentioned programmes may sometimes have unintended, potentially negative consequences. … As the figures of annual book donations from overseas dramatically demonstrate, African publishers have legitimate cause for concern that their main potential markets are flooded with millions of free books every year – a large proportion of them publishers' overstocks or remainders – which could jeopardize the sales prospects of their own locally produced books, not to mention the damaging effect on the retail book trade. (Zell and Thierry 2016)

The CTA argues similarly that "there is widespread resentment for what is perceived as the unfair competition that sometimes arises from the institutional publishing practices of donor and external development agencies. These practices have no commercial basis or logic to them, and pour free or virtually free books onto the market" (1994, 16).

Brouillette (2014) argues that Unesco's work in book development called for governments to intervene in the book industry as a corrective, "to shift the disastrous imbalance in the global media system". She maintains that the shift in Unesco's policies away from such book development was as a result of lobbying in the interests of the developed world. Thus, 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. Thierry (2015) goes so far as to say the image of book famine was deliberately misused to perpetuate the power of European publishers in their former colonies: "… in the late 1970s, it [external influence] was strengthened by the pressure of the Bretton-Woods economic institutions that counteracted Unesco's initial will to support autonomous African book development. When the economic crisis appeared in Africa in the 1980s, all those foreign presences met a philanthropic involvement. This charity movement – with Scandinavian, Francophone and US governments and NGOs in the first place – broadcast at that time the false picture of a 'book famine' in Africa." The book famine discourse remains current because of the global political economy, with its inequalities and an unequal playing field.

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The key factor identified by African sources is the political one: the role of government. While media coverage of famine usually has some effect in exerting pressure on governments to alleviate suffering within their own country, this has not been the case for the book famine. Book development has had remarkably little impact on government policies. Zell (2008, 188) argues that, "The main reason why the African book sector has not yet realized its potential is that very few governments have provided positive support for their book industries, or created environments conducive to writing, reading, and publishing." Similarly, Farah (1989, 8) refers to "short-sighted" government policies, which have under-resourced African public and national libraries and have failed to develop local book industries. In the absence of such a commitment to book publishing, the regular government pronouncements promoting reading and lifelong learning appear hollow.

What are the implications of book famine discourse?

Publishing is central to the dissemination of information and thus to power relations. Thus, Dike and Amucheazi (2003) ask: "Is a developing country like Nigeria information rich or information poor? The first impression is of scarcity, but a closer examination reveals unexplored riches." The most significant implication of a narrative of scarcity is that evidence of abundance is overlooked. Even without hard statistics on the numbers of books produced in Africa, evidence of growth can be seen in the number of book fairs held in African countries for local audiences; the increasing number of blogs dealing with local publishing such as Africa in Words and Read African Books; and even the growing number of entries for awards such as the Caine Prize, which received 148 entries from 22 countries in 2017. This is not to mention informal and small-scale publishing and bookselling, especially online:

> "local production is of great importance, and often throws into doubt external and official categories. 'Books', for instance, locally published in Onitsha, Accra, Ìbàdàn, Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam, rarely exceed a hundred-odd pages. They merge into booklets and booklets merge into pamphlets. In Tanzania, a constant stream of Swahili detective novels is produced to be sold not from bookshops but from mats on the pavement" (Barber 2001, 13)

Stephanie Newell supports this view, arguing that there does not seem to be a book famine when it comes to popular literature. She cites the sales of fiction by Kenya's Aubrey Kalitera and Ghana's Asare Konadu, and the popularity of magazines such as *Joe* (Kenya) and *Drum* (South Africa) to refute the view that Africans, even non-intellectual and non-affluent Africans, lack an interest in leisure reading: "one can persist in holding such a view only if one assumes that literature cannot be didactic, or that only works of such cosmopolitan

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writers as Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi, and Ben Okri count in considerations of African's reading" (2002).

African publishers and scholars tend to agree that the book industry is growing: for instance, Anges-Félix N'Dakpri (2018) noted in an interview that, "In the Ivory Coast, the publishing industry is healthy in the sense that we have a market that is growing. This growth is down to the stable legal and institutional environment regulating the sector. Another element is the professionalisation of the professions within the sector. You can feel that it is a dynamic sector." Meanwhile, Olatoun Williams (2018), reporting on the IPA-NPA meeting in Lagos in 2018, speaks of "a world hungry" for African voices. However, Eileen Julien, in "The Extroverted African Novel", cautions that "the most renowned names in African Literature in Western media are those whose work has been published in the West" (2006, 395). Thus, although "there is publishing taking place in African countries, … in a sense there is a reverse famine of Africa-published books in Britain" (Crowder, 1986; Thierry 2015). In other words, this discourse obfuscates the ongoing politics of distribution and access: "the emergence of a community of readers is perhaps not the main issue facing African publishers. Rather, it is the lack of financial support at a national and local scale which leaves African publishers in a relatively non-competitive position globally" (Carré, 2016: 57).

Similarly, in academic publishing:

> Postcolonial Africa's political and economic transformations may have led to a severe book famine on the continent, but this has not stopped serious-minded African scholars from publishing regularly. A perusal of book review sections in major journals would have revealed that African scholars are as active as anybody else. It is the boldness with which African voices are excluded from discussions about their continent's historiography that is more disconcerting than the once-fashionable apologies that the African voice was lacking because there were not many African intellectuals to cite. (Kusimba and Kusimba 1999)

Moreover, underlying the language of famine and the giving of donations is the assumption of a need or a demand. But is this a real need? We could quote statistics that approximately 40% of several different populations around the world can read, but do not: "in addition to asking what people read, it is also necessary to ask how and why they read" (Barker and Escarpit 1973, 120). Barker and Escarpit explored this issue in *The Book Hunger:* "only 10 per cent of readers using public or school libraries in Chad declare that they read 'to avoid being bored', 'to forget' or 'to send themselves to sleep', whereas 51 per cent of readers in a

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French town-only one-quarter of whom use libraries-say that they read 'for amusement, for relaxation, to "switch off" or to get away from it all'" (1973, 121).

Another implication of the continuing use of this discourse is that diversity is flattened into a single script. The use of a single term also occludes the fact that "Africa" is not singular – there is huge diversity within regions and even within countries. It is difficult to argue that there is a book hunger in a well-resourced country, but the diversity of markets means certain sectors are better served than others. The middle class, which is growing in most African countries and has access to a wide range of media, is unlikely to encounter book famine. This is not to deny that there are still shortages, and these are most felt by the unskilled, the poor, and the less educated – but even these groups are more differentiated and tech savvy than often assumed. So we have pockets of people who really are experiencing a shortage of books, in the sense of poor access to books and other reading material; a group of people who can read and have access to publications, but choose not to; and a group with access to abundance. This is a spectrum, not a single image, and book hunger should be reframed as a problem of access and distribution, not an absolute lack.

Thus, the framing of the "book famine" falls into two broad categories: these are similar in their identification of the problem (a shortage of books in certain situations) and there is some overlap in how they see the causes, but they diverge markedly in the solutions they propose. This can be summarised as a basic division between book provision and book development; between a short-term solution to what is seen as an intractable problem, or a long-term solution to a social and economic challenge that can be overcome. The discourse is not only significant because it reflects and perpetuates ignorance of African realities, but because it shapes policy making. The dominance of the framing of famine rather than growth can be seen in policy agendas which continue to minimise the importance of the book publishing sector within African countries.

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