

# Illustrating for the Common Good: South African illustrator perceptions of book creation initiatives and open licensing

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**Abstract:** The demand for children's reading materials that is representative of the diverse population of South Africa and addresses language and affordability issues has given rise to several book creation initiatives by local nonprofits. Illustration often plays an essential part in the creation of such reading materials. To expand the impact of their work, certain initiatives employ open licensing strategies. This paper explores how illustrators perceive their role in the creation of books for South African readers through book creation initiatives and investigates their views of open licensing. An online questionnaire was used to collect information pertaining to the experiences of book creation initiatives and illustrators' views on open licensing. Data was gathered from 32 illustrators and thematically analyzed. Participating illustrators were generally aware of the value of their contribution to such projects, and individual social responsibility and personal value seemed to mitigate concerns over licensing, adaptation, or remuneration. Illustrators aligned themselves with the mission and vision of the initiatives, and responses indicated that a deliberate value exchange occurred in initiatives through the methodologies used in the creation of the books, and the resulting artefacts. However, findings also indicated that such models may not be financially viable option for extended participation.

**Keywords:** *Illustration, Book Creation, Open Licensing*

## Introduction

According to a *Survey of Children's Reading Materials in African Languages in Eleven Countries* commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (RTI International 2015,47), "... [n]on-profit organizations, [faith based organizations] FBOs, and international development agencies play a very important role in the production of reading materials for children in African languages and are largely responsible for the availability of titles in more languages than anticipated". The need for reading material that is representative of the diverse population of South Africa and addresses language and affordability issues has given rise to several not for profit (NPO) managed book creation initiatives that make use of alternative publishing and content creation methods. These content creation models may include organized events, stories generated by communities (Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh 2019,13) or, in some cases, internships.

South African NPOs have steadily been building a collection of children's literatures that is locally produced and targeted specifically at South African readers, but are affordable, or free of charge, and accessible to the general population.<sup>1</sup> Many of these undertakings focus on providing materials, such as storybooks, for early literacy development. This makes sense given findings from studies such as the 2016 Progress in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, SAID's African Storybook Initiative, Book Dash, Vula Bula (Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy), Collaborate Community Projects, The Mikhulu Trust to name a few.

International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which is indicative of the dire state of South African children's literacy and reading capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Saide (in Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh 2019,56) notes that “[i]t is generally acknowledged that one of the key reasons for these low literacy levels is the shortage of appropriate storybooks for early reading in languages familiar to the young African child”- one of the reasons the authors propose for the inadequate reading literacy levels of African children after the first three years of schooling. De Witt (2007, 619) reports that many South African learners who are entering the school system for the first time lack early literacy skills.<sup>3</sup> Reading for enjoyment, outside of the classroom context, has received increased attention and is outlined as part of the National Reading Strategy (Department of Education 2008,11,17).

Eng, Godwin, and Fisher (2020,1) write that “[t]he typical design of books for beginning readers often includes engaging, colorful, detailed illustrations. There are a number of reasons for including illustrations in books for beginning readers such as defining the setting and characters, contributing to text coherence, reinforcing the text, providing additional information, and motivating the reader”. The manner in which picturebooks support early literacy has been well documented, with researchers such as Strasser and Seplocha (2007,223) explaining how picturebooks encourage the use and understanding of expressive language, phonological awareness, and high-level thinking. Reading picturebooks can help children build language skills, identify sequence, improve concentration, and foster an enjoyment of reading (Balcazar 2019).<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the specific format used, illustration tends to play an important role in early literacy materials.

As is the case in traditional publishing, funding constraints are a consideration in producing books among NPOs, who rely on sponsorship and donations to continue their work. Some of content creation methods used by NPOs rely on volunteers to donate skills and time or take the form of an internship. Others may offer a (sometimes reduced) fee for work created. Butcher, Levy, and Van Gogh's (2019) report, *Good Stories Don't Grow on Trees*, provides a valuable overview of several content creation methods as well as the cost models used in creating books. Regardless of the content creation model used, initiatives like these require input from several specialists. In many instances, illustrators are among those involved in creating content for early reading materials. Illustration, and illustrators, play a critical role in creating picture books that are appealing to readers from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, and in representing characters and landscapes with which readers can identify. Jenny Uglow (2009) notes that “behind apparently spontaneous images lie deep thought and hard labour”.

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2 This study indicated that 78% of South African learners did not have basic reading skills by the end of the Grade 4 school year and were unable to read for meaning in any language (Howie, et al 2017,11).

3 Reasons for this are complex and cannot be adequately explored in this article, but the author acknowledges that literacy cannot be discussed without consideration of the context in which it occurs.

4 This is a very simplified overview of the benefits of engaging with picturebooks; the process of language and literacy acquisition is much more complex. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, and the author is not suggesting that picturebooks on their own foster the aforementioned skills.

## Conceptual Considerations

### Open Licensing, OERs and Creative Commons

To make their work available for sharing, translation, or even adaptation, some book creation initiatives make use of open licensing to increase the reach of their products. An open license allows for any material to be reused, adapted, and distributed without needing permission from the copyright holder (Cozzolino and Green 2019,5). Open licensing is increasingly being used for educational purposes, and can be seen in approaches to early childhood literacy through university settings (Butcher, Levy, and Van Gogh 2018,7). Making use of an open license is one way to contribute to Open Educational Resources (OER), whereby the illustrations produced in book creation initiatives can be reappropriated for use in other educational materials without any cost to those adapting the material. According to OER Africa (2019,3), OERs should “be free, not require permission to use and allow new users to adapt and find new ways to use resources”.

This has clear benefits for the South African context and a demand for reading material in indigenous languages. Books created by South African NPOs are for example readily available on reading platforms such as World Reader, a digital reading platform that works “globally with partners to support vulnerable and underserved communities with digital reading solutions that help improve learning outcomes, workforce readiness, and gender equity” (World Reader 2021). Open licensing also allows for materials to be adapted; for example, illustrations could be used to create multilingual flash cards or narrated videos.

Open licensing helps to increase access to and distribution of books to people who would not have had access to books through traditional publishing methods (Book Dash 2021). It also increases options for developing new solutions to the reading crisis. Open licensing (as in the case of OERs) removes the time needed to procure permission to use and adapt illustrations, and significantly reduces the cost for content creation, as royalty and licensing payments for illustrations are not required. Ultimately, this means that the creatives involved in book creation initiatives that make use of open licensing might not be remunerated, nor have control over how their work is used beyond the initial project. Ofori-Mensah (in Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh 2019,81) notes that “[g]ood illustrations for good picture books are quite expensive and hard to come by.”

Open licensing does not cover the costs incurred in the production of books published using this license, and although the artefacts themselves are free to use, adaptation and production costs may not always be (Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh 2019,2). In the case of illustrations, professional illustrators may have invested in an education in the form of a college degree, short course or the time spent completing online tutorials, honing their skills, and purchasing hardware and/or paying monthly software subscription fees in order to craft their work. On top of this, the time it takes to develop skills and illustration methods, which are highly complex and individualized, is considerable (Gannon and Fauchon 2021,14).

Giving away creative products ‘for free’ is however not a new concept. Blumenfeld (2019,247) writes that: “With the battle for attention raging, many online creators have turned to a business model in which they attract a following by giving away their creative product for free, then derive the majority of their revenue by leveraging this attention in other ways.” This does not, however, always lead to success or financial viability (Blumenfeld 2019,248)

Creative Commons (CC) is a “nonprofit organization that helps overcome legal obstacles to the sharing of knowledge and creativity to address the world’s pressing challenges” (Creative Commons 2021). These licenses provide a straightforward overview of what users are allowed to do with material. The permit allows copyright owners to retain copyright while determining in what way and to what degree users are permitted to reuse or adapt material. CC licenses range from very open, making provision for users to copy, adapt, and use the work commercial purposes, (CC BY) to more restrictive licensing that will allow distribution of a work without making allowance for modification or commercial gain (CC BY-ND) (Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh 2019,9). Illustrators could arguably still make money using their own open licensed image — for example selling prints, t-shirts or other merchandise with the open licensed image on it. In addition, open licensing offers illustrators a platform to have their work made visible, or to increase visibility. African author and translator, Lerato Trok (cited in Early Learning Resource Network 2020), comments on open licensing, saying that “[i]f one cannot make a living out of their work, publicity means nothing.” Blumenfeld (2019,260) notes that “not even the most restrictive form of the license reserves for a work’s author the exclusive rights to reproduction, distribution, public performance and display, and creation of derivative works”, and as such CC licenses are not necessarily a good way for illustrators to monetize their work.

Licenses that allow for adaptation require that any modification of source material be noted in adapted works. However, illustrators that make work available under a CC license cannot control how the material is used, or disallow use if they do not agree or like how their work is adapted — even if CC “licenses prohibit using the attribution requirement to suggest that the licensor endorses or supports a particular use” (Creative Commons 2021). Several authors have also raised questions about creatives’ understanding of licensing work. Trok (cited in Early Learning Resource Network 2020) believes that there is a lack of copyright education in South Africa, and that creatives “have been burned” because of laws that they do not fully understand. Trok (cited in Early Learning Resource Network 2020) also voices concerns over the remuneration that local creatives receive, stating that “creatives in this country are not being fairly compensated”. Similarly, Koščik and Šavelka (2013,220) warn about the dangers of such licensing – including incomplete understanding of licensing terms, incorrect use of licenses and the misperception of Creative Commons as an “easy and safe” route, without giving proper attention to vital information.

In a workshop on developing OERs, Neil Butcher and Associates (NBA 2022,31) argue that “Content developers producing openly licensed content must be appropriately compensated” and that if appropriate contracts are in place “content creators will not lose

money if agreeing to open license work”. Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh (2019,34) note that if:

spending does not find its way to local organizations, authors, illustrators, and other players, initiatives that seek to solve short-term problems of book supply run the risk of perpetuating the problems they seek to solve in the long run because they will not leave behind a sustainable legacy of high-quality local content creators for the future.

## Social Responsibility

Feelings of social responsibility may outweigh concerns about income streams of adaptation. The Strategic Advisory Group on Social Responsibility (SAG in IISD 2004,5) note that “in developing countries ... SR [social responsibility] initiatives are often identified with long-term national development priorities and defined by current capacity gaps”. As noted earlier, the NGO sector in South Africa is a driving force in addressing affordability and other serious barriers to reading. South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, where equal access to opportunities is hindered by a poor education system, high rates of unemployment and other social issues (Stoddard 2022). Where people are unable to donate money, they may opt to donate time, services, or a reduced rate for NPOs.

Social responsibility extends beyond organizational structures to individual members of society. Individual Social Responsibility (ISR) is an individual’s awareness and understanding of how their personal actions can affect a community. ISR may include donating money or time to charities, advocating for social issues through actions (such as recycling), and individual ethics. Participation in ISR can improve self-esteem, self-perception and emotional intelligence (Dias 2012,174-175). The illustrators’ motivation for creating work as part of their own individual social responsibility may then be of interest in mitigating concerns over licensing or adaptation.

## Illustration and the Illustrator in Picture Books

Research into picturebooks as a cultural item, and the way they work to engender an aesthetic experience for the reader, has been well documented over the last four decades (Kiefer 2013,20). Colomer, Kümmerling-Meibauer, and Silva-Díaz (2010,1) write that picturebooks are a “subtle and complex art form that can communicate on many levels and leave a deep imprint on a child’s consciousness”. An increasing body of literature argues that not only is the visual modality in picturebooks is as important as the verbal for readers to produce meaning, but it is also essential in molding the reading experience (Painter, Martin and Unsworth 2014; Arzipe and Styles 2016; Kiefer 1995; Nodelman 1988; Serafini

2012). Arizpe and Styles (2016) provide a comprehensive overview on research that explores how children engage with picture books.

In a critical discussion on art styles used by selected South African illustrators, Fairer-Wessels and Wessels (2007,118-119) note that pictures in picturebooks stimulate an inner imaginative process, give readers clues and cues about the story, and provide a visually attractive artefact with which readers can engage. Beth Olshansky (2014,120) describes illustration as a visual language and argues that “pictures speak volumes and that we can read pictures and ‘write pictures’ in satisfying and meaningful ways that run parallel to the way we read and write words”. Sulzby (in Dowhower, 1997,70) also emphasizes the significance of pictures in the process of becoming literate.

When writing about the importance of illustrations in early reading, Barza and Von Suchodoletz (2017,3) state that “the literature calls for high-quality illustrations that inspire both children and parents to respond to children’s storybooks”. Illustrations are especially important because preschool children, who have not yet learned to decode print, tend to focus on illustrations. Although pictures can help readers make sense of a text’s meaning, research also shows that illustrations that are not congruent with a child’s reality might actually hinder this decoding process (Levy and Von Gogh 2019,19). Speaking at a seminar on the progress and challenges in multilingual storybook development,<sup>5</sup> Elinor Sisulu (in Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) 2017,4) from the Puku Foundation highlights that children “need literature to mirror their world before they gaze out of the window to the rest of the world”. For books to be considered as goods of cultural value, their contents should then be appropriate, relevant, and accessible to the culture in which its importance needs to be established (le Roux 2017). Creany, Couch, and Caropreso (1993,193) write that:

Children who will come of age in the twenty-first century need to see their reflections in the mirror provided by children's book illustrations. They need a validation of their own background and values. They also will benefit from a glimpse through the window provided by children's books into the lives of people from another culture. The artist's images in multicultural literature give children the opportunity to see the similarity among peoples and also to appreciate the differences.

Children’s picturebooks are not neutral but reflect the values and beliefs of the culture in which they are located (Barza and Von Suchodoletz 2017,3). Nigerian poet and writer, Mabel Segun (1988,27), notes the value of illustration in providing children with an awareness of their cultural heritage and refers to illustration as “purposeful as literature in its own right”(25). Segun (cited in Poon 2016,193) further encourages illustrators to

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<sup>5</sup> The session was part of a two-day seminar at Bibliodef in Pinelands, Cape Town, titled Issues in the Development of Multilingual Children’s Literacy and Literature in South Africa – Taking Stock (PRAESA 2017).

challenge stereotypical depictions and the need for accurate portrayals of cultural heritage symbols and identities. Poon (2016,193) writes about illustrators as “pictorial linguists”, arguing that the ability to decode and encode visual messages is a skill that can promote the developmental goals of a particular society. Illustrations, and the illustrators who create them, are as such an important part of creating the visual representation of a multilingual, multicultural society such as South Africa.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Whereas there are a number of resources that examine the creation of open licensed content, (Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh, 2018;2019; Butcher, Hoosen, Levey, Moore 2016; OER Africa, UNESCO 2019), the majority do not contain viewpoints from individual contributors of illustrated materials, and their feelings about the long-term impact of open licensing on their work. Room to Read’s REACH Project<sup>6</sup> in South Africa (2019,34) includes one quote from a publisher, editor and illustrator, and refers broadly to the capacity building that the event offered creatives – using the following as an example: “[W]hile an illustrator usually only sees the illustration process, they were able to expand their understanding of book development by engaging in the process of writing stories, editing, and designing. The authors, especially, were fascinated to see their stories being transformed into books right in front of their eyes as the illustrators worked on the artwork and the designers laid out the pages”.

In response to the limited insight into illustrator motivation, the purpose of this study was to explore how illustrators perceive their role in the creation of books for South African readers through book creation initiatives and to investigate their views of open licensing and adaptation to address South Africa’s literacy crisis. The focus is on what Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh (2019,10) describe as “basic storybooks” - standalone books intended to be read for enjoyment. These books are not linked to any specific educational outcomes and comprise a variety of topics.

A better understanding of creatives’ willingness and motivation to participate in initiatives that make use of open licensing could help tailor content creation initiatives in order to better meet the needs of the creative contributor and build lasting, positive relationships and attitudes towards open licensing work.

## **Research Methods and Design**

Three South African NPOs that had managed book creation initiatives were approached for participation in the study. The initiatives made use of different book creation models, such

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<sup>6</sup> The Results in Education for All Children (REACH) Project’s aim was “to strengthen the South African publishing industry by 1) raising awareness of the critical need for storybooks to create a habit of reading in children, and 2) increasing the supply of quality storybooks in African languages” (World Bank Group 2019, 3).

as one day events, single fee payments or internships. All NPOs made use of, or considered open licensing, at the time of the book creation initiatives, spanning from 2014–2022.

Purposive sampling was used to select illustrators that had taken part in at least one book creation initiative that produced books that were open licensed and fell into the category of “basic storybooks” (Butcher Levey, and Von Gogh 2019,10), that is, standalone books that can cover a variety of topics that do not follow a specific teaching methodology, but are aimed at reading for enjoyment. Participants were accessed through three NPO managed book creation initiatives, and illustrators who expressed interested in taking part in the study were sent an email link to an online questionnaire with open ended questions through the NPO itself. The link provided an explanation of the purpose of the study and outlined participant rights, as needed for informed consent. The open ended questions were used to collect information pertaining to the experiences of book creation projects and illustrators’ views on open licensing. All questions were voluntary. Responses were anonymous and could not be linked back to individual illustrators. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time before submitting their responses and could contact the researcher if they decided to remove their responses after the completion of the survey. In total, responses from 32 illustrators were collected and thematically analyzed. Braun and Clarke's (2012,62-67) approach to thematic analysis is an iterative process comprising six sequential stages: (1) gaining familiarity with the data, (2) creating codes, (3) establishing themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and labelling the identified themes, and (6) identifying specific examples that represent each theme.

Responses that refer to a specific book creation initiative, event or organization were coded to maintain the confidentiality of the organization. It is important to note that the aim of the study was to investigate illustrators’ perceptions of such initiatives and open licensing, not to bring any individual organization or initiative into disrepute, or to judge their methods of operation.

## **Findings**

Of the 32 participants, 34% classified themselves as “full time” working illustrators, who earned a living from illustration. Other participants did illustration part time, on a freelance basis, while earning their primary income from other occupations, such as graphic design or lecturing. Of all the participants, only one was an illustration student.

The discussion that follows is structured according to themes that emerged from the data analysis, namely, the duty of an illustrator; contribution to the South African reading landscape; community and collaboration; mission, vision, and mode of operation; personal development; remuneration and views on open licensing.

### The duty of an illustrator

The majority of participants identified their illustration skills as a means to contribute to their community, or to “give back”, as the primary motivation for taking part in a book



creation project. Responses that spoke to initial motivation to get involved with the book creation projects included their personal connection to books, for example: “My love for books and the magic of visual storytelling and the privilege and opportunity to support the initiatives that provide books to children who don’t have access to reading materials.”

Illustrators also felt a sense of duty to use their skills to address issues surrounding literacy and a culture of reading. One noted that “if you want to make a difference to the [world] around you and to literacy, it’s your duty to participate in this type of process”. The majority of participants were attuned to the broader contexts in which South African illustrators’ function. One noted that they “... see the conditions people live in and have a grasp of the complexities of South African life ... have some knowledge of the poverty that many [people] struggle with where obtaining food is a priority.” It was illustrator’s duty to “help create books and tell relatable stories for children who aren't catered for in traditional publishing, both in terms of cost and content”.

Participants indicated that there was an appreciation of the individual role they played in the creation of reading materials, with some referring to “visual communication” as a means of making reading more accessible and relevant to South Africans.

### Contribution to the South African reading landscape

Participants noted how these projects, and individual illustrators, contribute to shaping the South African reading landscape. Emphasis was placed on the visual representation of “authentic” stories, which might inspire children to engage with books, and illustrating “stories that include and represent them and their experiences in life”. They noted their role in increasing the relevance and appropriateness of reading materials. Here their answers seemed to closely link to Sisulu’s (in PRAESA 2017,4) assertion that children need literature to “mirror” their context before being introduced to the rest of the world. Only one participant felt strongly that South African illustrators were not taken seriously enough to feel that they could make a difference in the literacy crisis in South Africa, stating that, “We're vastly underappreciated ... People don't trust our insights.”

### Community and collaboration

Apart from ‘giving back’, participants noted that their motivation for taking part in the project was that it presented an opportunity to collaborate with other creatives. One illustrator stated that “[It was an] opportunity to collaborate live in person with a writer, designer, editor. Normally my work is always through email so human contact is great”. Working in a team was often described as a reason for enjoying the project.

Quotes like “I gained exposure to a wonderful community” and “working together in the same space with the same goal” highlighted a sense of community created by these types of projects. This seemed to be particularly true of projects where illustrators worked in the same space. Other participants also noted a sense of awareness of community, or at least an

identification with a community, for example, “it was a wonderful experience being able to visually portray the story from and for the community.”

The book creation initiative’s mission, vision and mode of operation

Illustrators clearly aligned their motivation for participation with the mission and vision of the organization, which are readily available online. For example, “I was also inspired by the organization’s goals and mission and wanted to be a part of it”, “I am very passionate about getting children to read more in South Africa” and “I am passionate about both literacy and diverse representation and hoped my work on a [Project] could aim in bettering both of these in a South African context”.

There was a clear link between illustrator responses and aspects of Individual Social Responsibility, as illustrators explained how their actions could impact the lives of others, and clearly showed in empathy for others (Dias 2012, 174).

The methodologies used by the projects were referred to a number of times. Illustrators appeared attracted to the novelty of the projects, which made use of time limited events, stories from communities or internships. Responses such as “[t]here's opportunity for more creative freedom or experimentation”, “[v]ery seldomly do you get such open briefed projects”, and “it was the uniqueness of the project” are evidence that illustrators may have been attracted to the novelty of the projects. Project management and organization was mentioned regularly, indicating an appreciation for efficiently run projects.

Illustrators often described the project’s methodologies as challenging. Where there was negative feedback, it was often related to the time aspect of the project. Projects in which many participants took part in produced books in a shorter amount of time than in traditional publishing models. Illustrators described the time sensitivity as “stressful”. On the one hand, illustrators found this challenging, with one noting that creating good work in a limited time was stressful and may negatively reflect on their abilities as an illustrator. Another noted that they may use an alias in future, as their personal website search engine optimization (SEO) was not as good as that of the book creation initiatives, and they were concerned that their ability would be judged on work produced in a limited time, rather than paid work that afforded them more flexibility. On the other hand, tight timelines did not drag out the commitment required from an illustrator, especially in instances where illustrators volunteered their skills, rather than receiving remuneration for their work.

Personal development

The projects seemed to provide illustrators with an opportunity for personal development in one of two ways, either through the methodology used or the artefact produced.

Participants noted that they had learned a lot by interacting with other creatives who took part in the project. For example, one illustrator said that “[the project] exposed me to ... other illustrators and to see their work and workflow”. Another noted the ability to learn about different drawing styles from fellow illustrators encountered during the project, whereas others appreciated learning about what goes into making a book. Individual

development was also noted, with one illustrator stating that “I found it [the method] more challenging ... but it was a good exercise”, whereas another participant added that “not having time to doubt anything clarified my style”.

Feedback also indicated that illustrators benefitted from developing work for their portfolios, and having an illustrated children’s book to their name, with one noting that, “It aided me in making my dream of being a published children's illustrator a reality” and “I gained not only a great piece to add to my portfolio but also the experience of working with an authentic story written by [an author] with a background so different to my own”.

#### Remuneration

As noted above, some book creation initiatives include remuneration in the form of a flat fee, whereas others rely on illustrators to volunteer their skills. Only two responses indicated that the financial aspect (if any was offered) of the book creation project was their initial motivation for participating. One stated that the remuneration was a “fair enough” amount to justify spending time crafting illustrations. In these cases, other motivating factors were also listed, indicating that money was generally not the primary motivating factor for participation. Illustrators referred to non-monetary ways of feeling valued and benefiting, as noted in earlier themes.

Only two responses raised concerns about remuneration within the context of book creation initiatives. One illustrator noted that the initiatives made “... poorly illustrated books for free”. Another noted that “I think that charities could pay for illustrations, rather than illustrators having to work for free. Illustrators don’t get donations like charities do”.

In response to a question if illustrators had been approached to work for free at a reduced rate for any other organizations, regardless of licensing conditions, 15 participants indicated that they accepted such work, with the overarching reason for agreeing being that they felt that they were using their skills for a good cause — a cause or organization that they believed in. One illustrator noted that “I am happy to work for free or for lower rates for NGOs, depending on the context (who the company is, scope of work, amount of freedom I have, who benefits from the cause etc.)”.

Among participants who had agreed to take on work for free, or at a reduced rate, two responses included regrets or the wish to be taken more seriously. One wrote, “I tend to agree to these jobs, as I enjoy illustration projects and I like to make other people's dreams a reality at a reasonable cost ... However, I wish that illustrative work could be seen as a professional job (people are far more happy [sic] to pay more for design work compared to illustrative jobs ...).”

Another said that although they had initially agreed to take on the work, they later “felt taken advantage of after being asked to do more and more for less, after which I have declined many requests, unless there is fair compensation or if it is for a reputable, charitable organization...”.

Three specified that they declined such work offers. One noted that they are “often asked to create spec [speculation] work for books without prior publishing agreements for which I am not offered remuneration. I decline these offers”. Another wrote that:

I declined because there is just so much thought, time and energy put into such a project and as a well-seasoned illustrator, I think it's not very reasonable to ask this. It also really damages the industry by means of devaluing the hard work an artist/illustrator creates, making it very hard to earn a decent living without working abnormal hours and working yourself to death.

A number of illustrators expressed concern about the general remuneration for illustration work locally. One felt that in South Africa, many illustrators already work at a reduced rate, adding that, “illustrators are vastly underpaid and underappreciated, so making a good income is essential. It's difficult to take on charitable work. I would do it more often if I was able to, but I rarely am”. Another echoed this sentiment, stating:

Generally, to make a sustainable living off licensing your art, I believe only a very small percentage of an illustrator's time can reasonably be devoted to non-remunerative/pro bono work. Good work takes time of course. Concentrated [projects] are a clever initiative because they're not supposed to take the illustrator much time. But my experience squeezing good work into limited time was extremely stressful. I wish it weren't so, but I'd hesitate participating [sic] in such an initiative in the future unless the working model changed.

Generating an income and making a living were clearly a topical issue for the participants, and a number of answers included finding a balance between doing good and generating an income. An example of this was a response that noted that many illustrators would likely want to contribute to charitable initiatives but that “there are ... real concerns about whether it is worth their time, aside from the ‘feel-good’ factor”.

Despite the above feedback, it was interesting to note that 10 illustrators indicated that they had participated in more than one book creation initiative, one noting that they had contributed to six books.

### Views on open licensing

The general consensus among participants was that open licensing has merit. Participating illustrators expressed an understanding and appreciation of it as a method to make books accessible to more people. Here again, responses aligned with the vision and mission of the organizations. Participants felt that there was little risk, as organizers had been transparent and upfront about the use of the books – although they did not go into detail about how this was done. Several participants noted clarity on intended use and audience was important. Only five indicated that the initiative itself had not clearly explained their decision for licensing terms.

The low risk associated with open licensing was generally linked to trust in the initiative and NPO, and half the participants were aware that their work had been adapted through ‘translation’ and ‘download’, but only one mentioned a specific instance where the work had been adapted into a newspaper supplement. No one noted any digital distribution channels, where open licensed storybooks (and subsequently individual illustrations) are available to read, remix and share.

31% of participants saw benefit in exposure in open licensing, or in having URL links to the illustrator’s portfolio pages present on the NPO’s webpages. Only 6% indicated that they received paid work based on illustrations produced for a book creation initiative, but, because their work may have been used in their portfolio, this could be underestimated. Just over half the participants indicated that they saw no direct benefit to the illustrator, whereas 9% mentioned that the illustrator only benefitted emotionally.

15% indicated some concern over licensing, expressing concern that people might not credit them for their work. This concern could be addressed by the specific license used; however, the concern over commercial use of their work is real – as some licensing used by initiatives allow for work to be commercially used. None of the responses expressed concerns about illustrations being used in a manner that the creator did not endorse – although illustrators were not asked this directly.

## **Discussion**

Participating illustrators were generally aware of the value of their contribution, and individual social responsibility and personal value seemed to mitigate concerns over licensing, adaptation, or remuneration. Illustrators recognized capacity gaps and how their contribution assisted in meeting long term national goals. As noted earlier, the NGO sector in South Africa is a driving force in addressing affordability and other serious barriers to reading.

Regardless of the content creation method used, there seemed to be a deliberate value exchange occurring in initiatives, either through the methodologies or the book as artefact. Illustrators noted emotional benefits and personal development as two of the outcomes of the book creation methods. In addition, adding work to their creative portfolios and being a “published” book illustrator were also valued. NPO initiatives may then indirectly validate local illustrators by entrusting them to visualize narratives created for local audiences. The questionnaire did not specifically ask about the amount of control the illustrators felt they had over the type of work they produced, but words like “freedom”, “experimentation” and “value” in their feedback may indirectly speak to a sense of ‘trust’ that these projects foster. The non-monetary benefits are supported by the fact that one third of the illustrators had contributed to more than one book created through such initiatives. These findings echo the sentiments of the Room to Read report, which notes the capacity building that a book creation event could offer illustrators and other creatives.

However, general concerns expressed about remuneration indicate that volunteering for such initiatives is not always a financially viable option for extended participation. This may not be an immediate concern, as Butcher, Levey, and Von Gogh (2019,20) argue that in South Africa “there is a sufficient supply of qualified authors, illustrators, and designers who can volunteer their time”, which might be evident in the repeat participation of 10 participants. The argument can also be made that often participation may allow book creation initiatives to produce more diverse content, as many different illustrators produce images that vary in style.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The research employed a relatively small sample size, particularly when considering the substantial number of books produced by the three NPOs. Nevertheless, it provides insight into illustrator motivations in the South African context – where inequality, access to reading materials and quality education is in a dire state.

Additionally, the study only includes responses from illustrators who were able to participate in such initiatives, thus ruling out input from those who, owing to a lack of access to hardware, software, or the need to prioritize income, may not have had the financial ability to volunteer or produce work for such initiatives. The study did not identify the demographic of participating illustrators, and as such, leaves an important gap into determining which creative communities contribute to the production of open licensed materials, and which communities may be excluded.

Those who declined to participate in such initiatives were also not part of the sample, and as such there is room for further research into the views of illustrators who disagree with initiative methodologies and open licensing. Therefore, future research could not only concentrate on conducting a larger quantitative study but also consider reaching out to different populations for participation, as noted above. Given the limited scope and exploratory nature of this study, opportunities are opened for future research to delve deeper into the elements identified in this article. Subsequent follow-up studies can build upon the findings presented here and expand upon the conclusions drawn.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, participating illustrators were positive about their involvement and contribution to book creation initiatives and saw merit in open licensing content. This can be attributed to a clear value exchange in the initiatives, as well as illustrators’ understanding of the South African context and the extent to which access to quality reading materials is limited for the majority of the population.

Although the findings present insights into the motivations of illustrators who have previously participated in such initiatives, the limitations of the study indicate that future research should draw on a larger sample that includes illustrators who deliberately do not participate in, or may be excluded from, such initiatives owing to their methods of operation.

Finally, as a means to increase the sustainability of initiatives, NPOs can educate or remind illustrators of how they can search for and track the use of their work, as well as provide guidelines on how to monetize illustrations that they agree to open license, and actively promote participating illustrators on social media posts.

### **Informed Consent**

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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