



THE WORLD IN BOOKS – ABOUT BOOKS AND GOLD DIGGERS IN TANZANIA

A pilot project by Baobab Books and terre des hommes switzerland.

Baobab Books has been promoting the north-south dialogue for around twenty years through its projects, book recommendations and by publishing the Baobab series. These children's and young people's books enable the voices of authors and illustrators from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East to be heard. 55 books have been translated into German and published so far. These books bring the reality and concerns of people from other cultures closer to Europe, and provide children and young people in Europe with an authentic taste of the reality of another world.

For example with John Kilaka: This Tanzanian Tingatinga artist and children's book author's works are published by Baobab, and his colourful and humorous stories, which have been transmitted orally for generations in Tanzania, are now enjoyed all over the world. Terre des hommes switzerland and Baobab Books, together with John Kilaka, have now initiated a new project in Tanzania. In the provincial town of Geita in the northwest of the country, books are not common, many schools have hardly any school materials at all and there are practically no libraries – a condition that prevails in most of the country. But this could soon change in Geita. Read this is the report of a small success story.

It is dusty in Geita, the red sandy roads are unpaved. A few months ago Chinese investors finished building a highway that reduced the journey time from the town of Mwanza on Lake Victoria to Geita to just over two hours. A year ago a section of the road was still missing, which had meant an arduous three-hour journey.

Calling Geita a town may be an exaggeration, though at least 140,000 people are estimated to live here. This faceless and featureless place emerged after gold was discovered here around 100 years ago. After a turbulent history, the mine here is now the most profitable in Tanzania, producing ten tonnes of gold a year, according to official figures. As is the case with so many companies in the country, however, it too belongs to a foreign consortium, namely to South Africa's AngloGold Ashanti Ltd. All that the town gets from the mine are 1,800 dangerous jobs.

For the last several years the precious metal has been removed from the rocks with a highly toxic chemical solution, yet the consequences for the environment are hardly discussed. The first page of an AngloGold Ashanti project report from 2007 describes community projects it says benefit the local population. But in 2011 there is not a trace of the promised water programme to be seen. People still have to buy overpriced cans or individual bottles of drinking water. The forced resettlement of the people that took place without compensation has also not yet been sorted out, many people still live in makeshift tents, having been forced out of their homes.

There is definitely no gold rush in the red streets of Geita. Instead the working conditions are inadequate and dangerous, women suffer as their children's fathers are absent, prostitution is a means of survival for many young women, the creeping environmental destruction and the undermining of the local economy is a powder keg waiting to explode. Cheap Chinese goods or products from Dubai have replaced domestic products in the small local shops. Even the traditional colourful Kanga cloth is "made in China". The schools that we visited during the course of our work have hardly any infrastructure. There is a lack of teachers, a lack of school supplies and a lack of sanitation. 1,800 primary school pupils and 30 teachers share two lavatories without running water. Everything is lacking – except hope for a better future.

Books are a lifeline too

We decided to carry out a pilot project here – "The World in Books". The aim of the cooperation between Baobab Books and terre des hommes switzerland with the Tanzanian illustrated book author John Kilaka is to preserve the local story-telling tradition and use the simplest means to produce little books by hand, and then circulate them through libraries. Books in Geita? Do people here, who often do not have enough to eat or drink, really want them?



Yes, because literature is one of the important ways of expressing cultural identity. It reflects the values and realities of a society, creates a collective memory, reflects rules and values and promotes social renewal and social change. If these elements are missing, then there is a social vacuum, which has a negative impact especially on the development of young people. They have no common reference points, no framework for positive individual development, no critical confrontation with tradition and modernity.

Reading and writing skills, and thus the ability to recount and to listen, are key educational and career skills. The book as a medium of expression thus plays a central role in the development of a society.

It all started with an idea

It is against this background that Baobab Books and terre des hommes switzerland decided to bring together their expertise in psychosocial support, cultural identity and children's literature. John Kilaka from Dar es Salaam and the local organization Nelico in Geita were identified as suitable partners who would be able to anchor the pilot project locally. The pilot phase was to last a year. At the beginning and end there was an in-depth seminar run jointly by Irene Bush, John Kilaka and Sonja Matheson. In the intervening period the ideas developed during the seminar were to be tested in everyday life in Geita, in order to see whether people there wanted books.

The first one-week seminar was held in Geita in January 2010. 33 teachers from the district wanted to know how they could introduce the project in their school. In an intensive week of work they analysed children's books, debated the value of their own culture, and even learned how to make a book – from writing the story through to bookbinding with needle and thread. John Kilaka taught them how orally transmitted stories turn into written texts, and how illustrations can be used to deepen a text visually. On the last day of this intensive week of work, small working groups devised plans of action to decide which components were to be implemented in the course of the year. Something akin to a gold rush then set in...

One year later

The question of whether books are really relevant in a place like Geita was answered during the course of the year, as we discovered on a visit to the project. Children and young people created around 3,000 books in less than a year. They did so using what were often very simple means, but always deployed great creativity and ingenuity – and were, above all, always very relevant. "Life as an Orphan" is the title of one of the books, another one is called "The Sad Girl". It's about an exploited girl. Some students dealt with the terrible massacre of albinos, a very sad but realistic topic.

But there are also entertaining and factual books, such as volumes on pop stars, the country of Tanzania, a biography of the president and much more. A glance through the little books is a mirror held up to life and society in Geita. The children and young people certainly have touched on the most important contemporary issues.

When we asked them how they found their stories, a primary school student from standard four replied that he "listened to what people were talking about in the village." Others asked their parents and grandparents to tell them a story, and others made up their own. Many children talked about their self-confidence and their newfound talents. They were all impressed by John Kilaka, when he recounted how he started without money, with just pen and paper, and that today his pictures are admired by children even in Europe.

"The World in Books" project is based on voluntary work, the teachers are not paid for the additional work they do. Some have cleverly succeeded in integrating the project into the existing curriculum, having informed parents and their fellow teachers about their plans. A network has come into existence and the children improve their writing and reading skills almost unnoticed. One child said about himself that "I've learned to listen in this project."

At another school, whose infrastructure is in a very desperate condition, the participants were inventive. Local baskets made of bamboo and banana leaves were used for the mobile library. In other places the book project hardly manages to break through apathy in the staff room, but the enthusiasm of the children and the clarity of their statements very quickly sweep our doubts away.



Facing the future with talent and enthusiasm

We concluded the pilot phase in January 2011 with a second seminar. The experiences of the past year were evaluated and problem areas analysed. John Kilaka provided knowledge on the subject of book design, and a speaker from the Children's Book Project, an organisation based in Dar es Salaam, gave a talk on the practical aspects of book production and distribution in Tanzania. One or two of the books from Geita may one day make their way to one of the country's publishers... The networking, at least, has been done. Passing on the basic knowledge required to set up and organise a library completes the circle of storytelling, writing, reading and transmitting knowledge of the world of books.

The long-term success of "The World in Books" is based on the fact that teachers, parents, school authorities and the organisation Nelico are now taking over ownership of the project after this one-year pilot phase. Thanks to the financial commitment by terre des hommes switzerland and its local coordination office in Tanzania there is support during this inception phase. There are stories available in plenty, there is talent, enthusiasm and creativity as well – there is thus no dearth of resources for a vibrant world in books in Geita! If things continue like this, then there will soon be several thousand more books – and readers will be able to access plenty of reading material in the mobile libraries in the town, containing stories written by life in Geita. Their young authors are the true gold miners of this town.

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