



Africa Rising
Interview with Lawrence Njagi

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KENNEALLY: With a land mass bigger than China, India, the continental US, and most of Europe put together, the African continent is immensely rich in natural resources. And though it remains the world's poorest continent, Africa has seen dramatic economic growth over the past decade. From the Sahara to the Cape of Good Hope, from Senegal to Somalia, Africans are eager to mark the 21st century as the era of Africa rising.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

In Nairobi, Kenya on June 14th and 15th, the International Publishers Association will welcome hundreds of delegates for a seminar program that aims to advance development of African publishing and to highlight achievements in literature, education, and freedom of expression. The program chair is Lawrence Njagi, Managing Director of Mountaintop Publishers and Director of the National Book Development Council of Kenya. He joins me today from his office in Nairobi. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Lawrence Njagi.

NJAGI: Thank you very much for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you about this very special program coming up on June 14th and 15th. The IPA seminar is concerned with realizing Africa's potential as a global publishing leader in the 21st century. I wonder if you can share with listeners how you see the current state of the industry in Africa, as well as the opportunities that you see for the future.

NJAGI: Thank you very much, Chris. As we know, the statistics are very clear that the African continent is the new marketplace, and this is appointed by the fact that there's a steady growth in the population, especially youth and young working class, and therefore making Africa in every industry, not just publishing industry the really place to invest. Looking at textbooks and the generating material, obviously where we have a young population, we get demand – or there's a rising demand for not only textbooks in schools, but as well as general reading material. So I would say yes, Chris, there's a lot of potential in Africa, there's a lot of



ongoing governments' interest in publishing industries, and especially provision of books and textbooks to schools. So yes, it is the place to be and the place to invest in.

KENNEALLY: A lot of potential, as you say, Lawrence Njagi. But what are the challenges? What challenges do African publishers face today?

NJAGI: Yeah, the biggest challenge obviously is the lack of proper coordination, and especially between NGO world and the national governments. Again, as publishers we've been saying there's need to have a national book policy that governs how books are produced, procured, and used in schools and other places. So one of the immediate challenges, obviously, is the lack of proper guiding policies that will tell us how to go about with books.

Obviously another second big challenge is that 80% of all books that are used that are published in most African countries are textbooks. So, again, driven by demand for rising number of kids in schools, and there is not enough interest for publishers to venture into general or trade materials because the market size is small. But, again, with encouragement of a good book policy, then that will be able to encourage publishers to invest in that directions.

Secondly we the mediation of piracy, that is copyright infringement (inaudible) corporate theft. That is a major, major, major concern in Africa, where with new technology people are getting books and basically printing them and distributing them without authorized permission from the publisher. This is a major thing because it kills the publisher and kills the writer, as well. So that's a major issue.

Finally, and I think this is important is there's need for education, especially trying to encourage people who have left school to read, and therefore libraries become quite important. But the kind of libraries, most of what we have in Africa today are stocked and stacked with old materials that are not really useful in today's 21st century. So there's need to restock and to revitalize libraries, for that matter.

KENNEALLY: Now I know, Lawrence, that you've expressed some concern that NGOs – non-governmental organizations – in their well-intentioned efforts to promote literacy and education in Africa have had an unintended detrimental effect on local publishing. Describe that problem for us, and how would you suggest addressing it.

NJAGI: Yes, we have NGOs that come in meaning very well, but having projects and programs that are haphazard in nature, not appreciating the role of the indigenous publisher they find on the ground. Some go as far as producing their own



materials, obviously which are irrelevant in terms of cultural content. They do not appreciate the local traditional well-being of the communities they find.

So we find an NGO coming in creating their own books, and distributing those books with funds from, whether USAID or World Bank or other places, and you find they distribute those books they have in the schools and that makes it very difficult for the local publishers to really survive because, again, we are targeting the same markets. Obviously knowing the per capita of most of the Africa countries and especially what we would call the poverty line, most of the indigenous people are living below the poverty line, which is really a dollar a day. So when you come in giving free books they accept it easily without looking at the real harm that will come, not just today, whether they are textbooks or not. In 10 years' time you'll have killed a publisher on the ground. You'll have distorted the book chain, and therefore there will be no publisher or author or writer to ensure that in future, books are available.

This is a major concern, not just for Kenya, but for most African countries. I know there's been a lot of that happening in Kenya, in Uganda, in Tanzania, in Rwanda, in Ghana, in Nigeria, in South Africa. So it's virtually every developed country in African context.

KENNEALLY: It's a really important observation. And the other piece that goes with this is trying to create not only a publishing culture, but a reading culture. I know you're going to moderate a panel for the IPA seminar called "Creating Readers of the Future." Tell us about that. What work are you undertaking in Kenya and perhaps elsewhere in Africa to develop a reading culture?

NJAGI: Thank you, Chris. First of all, I'm super excited to talk about a reading culture because really the world we are in today is about information and about acquiring relevant information for you to be able to fit in a fast-growing computer age. So I am very, very, very passionate about empowering our population to read to empower themselves.

As Kenya (inaudible)ization we do a bit of what we call our part, we play our part in trying to promote reading. We run probably now the biggest book fair in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Nairobi International Book Fair, which happens once a year, and this attracts a lot of not just schoolchildren, but a lot of grownups who just come in and interact with the books at their own leisure. It runs for a whole week, so it gives everybody a chance out of their busy schedules to just walk in, look at that very interesting book they've been looking at, and they interact with the teachers and the authors and the publishers, and most importantly, the books, themselves.



Now we have taken that a step further in Kenya. We are taking the books to the regions. Only last week I came back from what we are calling a regional book fair, which was one town in the country, and all the publishers from Kenya mount a book show in that town. Now this is a small town with indigenous people who probably have never met an author before, who probably have been thinking they can also venture into writing. So we promote that mix where they meet, and they talk, and they are able to interact with the books at their pace. So we have been doing that.

On top of that, of course, you can't have reading if there's no writing. We have been running probably one of the oldest prizes in Africa, the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature, which happens once every year. This is in recognition to the various writers who have excelled in the various fields from youth writing, to children writing, to adult writing. So we do that in our two national languages, English and Swahili, and this encourages writers, especially young writers, because we ask for books that have been published only in the last two years. So we encourage writing that way, but most importantly we encourage reading that way because these books are profiled all over the country, whenever we go for the book fairs, and they are profiled (inaudible) as the winning titles that year.

We try to do our best, Chris, but as I said, definitely we do require to do a lot of civic education to ensure that the population understands and appreciates the advantage of reading and the advantage of acquiring knowledge – genuine knowledge, not to pass examinations, but rather for lifelong learning.

KENNEALLY: And that picture you painted for us of this book fair – this mini book fair in a rural town – it really sounds like a lovely and heartwarming experience for everyone involved – for the authors, for the publishers, for the readers, for the local population. But it strikes me that what that's about is about personal contact, it's about the physical contact, as you said, with authors, with publishers. So really, as important as digital transmission is to getting text and other types of media to people in the 21st century, it still is important, the physical book, to have the actual author to meet children, to meet young people.

NJAGI: Certainly what I see when we do the original book fairs is that we see especially people who have not had a chance to interact with a publisher, but most importantly, publishers always have been assumed, and I think this is the world over, to be a bit elitist in their approach of things because they hide behind offices, behind computers, but we want to show that these are real people who are not different from the next gentleman going to the next school. And we wanted to (inaudible). So most people cannot afford to come all the way to Nairobi, where



we hold the Nairobi International Book Fair, so instead of waiting for them here in Nairobi, we take the books to where they are. We find that very encouraging and we feel very fulfilled because we see real, genuine interest.

Chris, you'd be amazed at how long children will take at one book, both just sitting there and just going through the book and taking it and sitting on the seat and going through and getting the writer, and sometimes asking the writer, why did you write the book this way? Why couldn't you have written this way? So when we have that kind of engagement, we are quite happy. I feel that we are nurturing the next generation.

KENNEALLY: Lawrence Njagi, for the IPA seminar that's coming up this coming weekend, June 14th and 15th, one of the sessions will consider the threat of piracy that you mentioned earlier, and the danger it represents to African authors and publishers. My colleague, Michael Healy from Copyright Clearance Center, is also going to participate in a copyright workshop with a former Executive Director of the Kenya Copyright Board. I wonder if you can tell us if there's any legislation you would like to see African nations adopt to protect intellectual property.

NJAGI: Thank you very much, Chris. I think the weakest link in the protect incorporate is actually legislation. In Kenya, for example, if you infringe on copyright, including outright piracy, the maximum fine is just about 800,000 shillings, less than \$10,000. That's the maximum fine, or a jail term of one year. That is really neither here nor there.

In fact most times when we are prosecuting cases in court successfully, we have found they have been given fines as low as \$2,000. Somebody was infringed on copyright and pirated material worth millions and millions of dollars. So it become actually lucrative for an individual to actually infringe on copyright, because if the fine is that small, then it becomes sensible, business-wise, to infringe on copyright.

We have been asking the Kenyan Copyright Board, that is why I'm quite happy about the seminar and the focus on copyright, and the fact that the both of the Kenyan Copyright Board will be there. We've been asking for the attorney general to assure that we have relevant legislation, that where the crime is commensurate with the punishment. And we are saying if you infringe on copyright or, say, you pirated books worth say \$1 million, then we are asking that it should be three times – the repayment should be – the fine should be three times the amount infringed on. That will become painful. That will then deter the ease of infringing copyright.

I think, if we can get legislation right in Africa, then you will find not only younger publishers coming in, because if I am just going to publish one book and it is



pirated the following day, I have no more funds, I have no more market to ensure that I keep producing books. It is discouraging. So if we can get legislation right, then we will be correct, and we'll be going somewhere as African publishers.

KENNEALLY: Copyright and piracy, just one of the important subjects to be covered this weekend in Nairobi, Kenya as part of the International Publishers Association seminar on Africa rising. We have been speaking today with Lawrence Njagi, the Managing Director of Mountaintop Publishers and Director of the National Book Development Council of Kenya.

Lawrence Njagi, thank you so much for joining us today from Nairobi, and good luck with your seminar.

NJAGI: Thank you, Chris. It's been a pleasure talking with you, and I do hope we shall have a great seminar going on in Nairobi.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at beyondthebook.com. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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