

IPA NAIROBI SEMINAR

JUNE 14th – JUNE 1st 2019

COMMENTARY

Brian Wafawarova, *Outgoing President, South African Publishers Association; IPA Executive Committee Member*



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“Whether we are the older generations that are grappling with the transition to digital or the younger generations that are taking to it with greater ease like ducklings to water, we are on the same journey and our future is bright.”

The future of African publishing is in good hands and is looking bright. Last week in Nairobi at the second IPA African Publishing Seminar, I found myself sitting between two generations of publishers, with my own being the middle and the second. It was great to mingle with my contemporary generation of publishers from the continent, including Tchotcho Ekué from Cameroun; Laurence Njagi from Kenya; Gbadega Adedapo from Nigeria; Elliot Agyare from Ghana; Hamidu Konate from Mali; Fatou Sy from the Ivory Coast, Akoss Offori-Mensah from Ghana and many others. It was also great to see our mentors including Henry Chakava and James Tumusiime from Uganda, still active and straddling the old and the new models of our craft. Yet it was also quite promising to meet new pioneers taking on the mantle in the new digital era, including Bibi Bakare of Nigeria; Tonee Ndungu of Kenya; Deborah Ahenkorah of Ghana; Dawn Makena of Kenya; Chidi and Chika Nwaogu of Nigeria and many others.

The journey of this intergenerational mix was best summed up in Professor Ngugi wa Thiongo’s presentation at the same seminar, which though from an author’s perspective, was also an African publishing journey. In his classical fashion, he

opened his presentation with his poem, *Venice* in Kikuyu, which he then translated to English. His presentation started from the time when there was virtually no publishing on the continent, a time when African authors' manuscripts had to be sent overseas to be considered for publishing, through the time when multinational companies started establishing branches in Africa and appointed local editors like the great African writer Chinua Achebe at the birth of the *African Writers' Series*. Professor Ngugi took us through the time of the pioneers of African publishing, including his publisher, East African Education Publishing (EAEP) under the stewardship of Dr Chakava in Kenya and Mkuki na Nyota in Tanzania under founder Walter Bgoya and the establishment of local publishing. Professor Ngugi's presentation took us through the challenges of writing in African languages and translating to several international languages, to this time when the task has been made easier by technology and multiple simultaneous translations are possible. This was evident in his short story which has been launched in 54 African languages out of a total of 86 world languages. Ngugi's presentation is a great illustration of the fact that digital is a tool that enables us to deal with the challenges we have grappled with for years more effectively.

Education publishers have a new tool to enhance the learning experience and improve learning outcomes in an area of great need while other publishers have an opportunity to improve the reading experience and create greater access to our work. I came across new companies and older ones deploying content in more exciting ways in the age of platforms and digital content and promising to reach more people on a continent where many people remain without access to textbooks and reading materials.

I felt a new action-oriented impetus to resolving challenges in African publishing. The Lagos Action Plan programme is a practical solution to these problems. Critical issues for African publishing were identified at the first seminar in Lagos. They were prioritized through consultations across the continent and turned into projects which include industry statistics, national book policy initiatives and the African Publishing Innovation Challenge Fund, which seeks to identify worthy projects for funding across the continent. Already at the second conference we could see evidence of the implementation of these projects. The issues that come out of Nairobi will be matched to those from Lagos. Similar issues will be added to the existing programmes while new ones will be taken on and turned into new projects. Every seminar, including Marrakech next year will be an opportunity to report back to the African publishing community, to identify new challenges and take them on.