

## BookPower: submission to the Africa Commission

The goal of a strong and prosperous Africa can only be attained if African countries have sufficient numbers of trained professionals to be self-supporting in crucial developmental areas such as medicine, engineering and agriculture. Such professionals also enable African countries to help themselves towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals.

The whole developmental process is therefore underpinned by education; and in sub-Saharan Africa textbooks are still the key educational tools. The infrastructure for ICT is both patchy and unreliable in most African countries, in addition to being unaffordable to the majority. Textbooks, as the only viable source of knowledge other than the teacher, offer low-cost resources and flexible, multiple usage.

### Textbook Hunger

African students at all levels are crying out for textbooks. This was recognised in the **Halifax Statement on Education in the Commonwealth** issued at the 14<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in November 2000. Paragraph 5 states - "The Commonwealth Secretariat should explore ways of enhancing the capacity of member states .. to access quality teaching/learning materials at affordable prices for .. tertiary institutions in Commonwealth countries. Resources may include high quality textbooks .."

### Successful Provision

A very successful pilot scheme was set up and ran for two years, providing a total of 43,000 affordable textbooks for a budget of £45,000. This averaged out to only **£1.05 per book**, or about one tenth the cost of a typical locally-produced tertiary-level textbook from any of the 37 countries (over half African) involved in the pilot.

All the books included in the project were written by **international-level authors**. Both the paper and the technical processes employed in their production conformed to the highest standards to **maximise their durability**, ensuring that their shelf-lives would equal those of any internationally-produced titles.

The low-priced textbooks produced by the project were marketed and distributed through campus and academic bookshops in participating countries, thus **supporting local booktrades rather than undermining them**. In disseminating both local and international knowledge and research, **the development of local booktrades forms another vital component of strong and prosperous countries**.

The books were sold to end-purchasers at between only one fifth to one third the price of the cheapest standard editions (e.g. **£17.99 books sold for £5.99; and one £120 title cost only £25**). Because they were bought by students and institutions of limited means, it was obvious that they were genuinely needed.

### Textbooks and the Millennium Development Goals

By the time of their 2003 conference, the Commonwealth Millennium Development Goals and the pilot textbook project, though recognised as successful, was not

continued. However, it is clear that such accessible and affordable resources for tertiary level education are essential to the realisation of the MDGs:

**Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger:** by contributing to the training of business studies, IT, hotel, catering and tourism professionals, tertiary education assists the development of participating countries' infrastructures and economic growth. This in turn results in the creation of more jobs at all levels. Higher employment rates are a significant factor in reducing extreme poverty and hunger.

**Promote gender equality and empower women:** although this aim is expressed in terms of primary and secondary education, tertiary education promotes gender equality in a highly visible way by assisting women to train - especially as nurses and as workers in the developing hotels, catering and tourism industries.

**Reduce child mortality:**

**Improve maternal health:** the training of increased numbers of competent doctors, nurses and other health workers is fundamental to the realisation of both of these goals. None can be adequately trained without access to up-to-date and affordable textbooks, which will also support them as reference sources in their later professional lives. Equally, properly trained health professionals are essential for in-country training of future health staff who will be crucial in sustaining health improvements.

**Ensure environmental sustainability:** the small but growing number of students in the fields of range management, ecology and conservation will directly support sustainable development in these areas - addressing in particular the preservation / reversal of the loss of environmental resources.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Policymakers should recognise that tertiary education has a key role in the achievement of a strong and prosperous Africa.

Policymakers should recognise that, for the foreseeable future, only textbooks can be sufficiently affordable and widely available to provide adequate educational resources for students reading key subjects.

Policymakers should recognise that ICT will never replace books; the two media are at their most effective when they complement each other, but books are the staple.

Policymakers should allow African countries to benefit from proven successful schemes rather than moving on to other priorities and means of fulfilling them.

September 2004