

The last word

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The weak book reading culture about which we lament so much will have no chance to develop, there being no books other than textbooks being produced

In the fifty years of the union of the two parts of the United Republic of Tanzania, Zanzibar and the mainland, great successes have been made in all areas, not the least in education. In Zanzibar there were only 62 primary schools at the time of independence. There are currently more than 350 primary schools and enrolment is well over 100 percent. There has also been an increase in secondary schools and a State University and two private universities have been built. But while these improvements are recognised and applauded, there are reasons for concern over the shortcomings in the quality of education offered in these schools because of shortage of adequately trained teachers, non-availability of textbooks and a host of other reasons common to African countries. For understandable reasons, the predominantly Muslim character of the Zanzibar population and its cultural heritage, primary and secondary education is one of the areas that are not under union affairs.

In this brief article we single out one of the major problems that affects provision of quality education at all levels; lack of textbooks.

Throughout Tanzania's post independence history the book to pupil ratio has at best been 1:3, although the ultimate target remains at 1:1. In the 1980s it was more likely to be 1: 5 in the privileged urban schools and 1:15 – 20 for pupils in rural areas. In very remote areas of the country it was not unheard of for a class to have only one textbook, which the teacher used, or none at all.

From 1966 to 1990, all textbooks were published by state-owned companies. From 1992 on, after the total collapse of the monopoly and distribution model, the government deregulated the publishing industry and directed private publishers to be the only suppliers of textbooks. Many senior government official and other well-intentioned citizens lack in-depth knowledge of the publishing industry and have great difficulty in understanding why the government should not be responsible for the entire book chain, cutting out the pejoratively named "middleman" and "exploitative" publishers. There is ample evidence to show that textbooks produced under the new policies were superior to those produced under the state monopoly system. Primary School Leaving Examination results improved considerably in the

three years that followed (2006 – 2009), from 22 per cent pass marks to 70.5 per cent, and one of the factors that accounted for the improved results was the quality and availability of the new textbooks under the multi-textbook system.

The idea of equity and uniformity wended its way into the debates following particularly bad results in the Primary School Leaving Examinations in 2012. Proponents of the single textbook system argued that allowing different schools to use different books (despite all textbooks requiring the Education Ministry's approval, and that "poor quality books" was responsible for the bad results. They pressed for a return to the single textbook system and for books to be written and published by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) under the Ministry of Education. In addition to performing its traditional role of curriculum development, it would henceforth be responsible for textbook writing, publishing and printing as well as distribution. This is a return to the system that existed from the 1960s to the 1980s.

No doubt there will be those who will conclude that as a publisher, I could not but oppose the new measures because of my own interests. But returning to the old system would go against the ethos of the economic reforms that have been under way for the last twenty-five odd years in our country. Like all investors, publishers are entitled to investment policy stability and transparency. This has not been the case, despite numerous attempts to engage the government in looking for possible mutually beneficial arrangements.

The imminent collapse of publishing in Tanzania will also kill off bookselling, as happened during the era of monopoly state publishing and distribution. Book distributors, bookshops in rural areas, which began as a result of liberalisation of textbook trade, will fold again. The weak book reading culture about which we lament so much will have no chance to develop, there being no books other than textbooks being produced. But an even greater question is whether one institution (TIE) alone can write, publish and distribute the millions of textbooks over such expansive territory each year; a task that was a huge challenge to at least ten publishers mobilising all their resources, unfettered by government bureaucracy and rigid procedures? Time will tell. **F**