

## **Planting the Seed for the Love of Books – Running a School Library in The Gambia**

by Mrs. Haddy Sosseh- Saidy and Anna Stelthove-Fend

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### **Introduction**

(Anna Stelthove-Fend)

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for having the opportunity to present our work in a school library in Sukuta, The Gambia.

My name is Anna Stelthove-Fend. I am a member of the German non-profit organisation **Circle of Friends Sukuta Moormerland**. And for 19 years I have been supporting the school library in Sukuta. The presentation I will do together with the principal of the Sukuta Upper Basic and Senior Secondary School, Mrs. Haddy Sosseh-Saidy.

I was very glad when Akoss Ofori-Mensah invited me to this conference to talk about the school library. As I'm very interested in African children's literature I thought that meeting so many people working on African children's books would be very inspiring for the library project in The Gambia.

Akoss has been up to date about the library in The Gambia for more than ten years. And I'm very happy that we have all children's books of her publishing house in the library including all the books written and illustrated by Meshack Asare. And it is a great honour for me to meet him here and to attend the first presentation of the Meshack Asare Picture Storybook Illustrator's Award.

Haddy Sosseh-Saidy and I decided to split the presentation into three parts:

- First of all, Haddy will give you some general information about the school and the library.

- Then I would like to tell you something about my motivation, my work and about some things I had to learn.
- Then Haddy will tell you how the library is integrated into every day school life and what is done not only to improve reading skills but to plant the seed for the love of books
- At the end both of us will be happy to answer your questions and to receive your suggestions and stimulations.

### **The School and the Libray**

(Haddy Sosseh-Saidy)

Let me give you some facts and figures about our school:

The Sukuta Upper Basic and Senior Secondary School is a governmental school in Sukuta in The Gambia. Sukuta is a place about 20 kilometers away from the capital Banjul. It has about 16.000 inhabitants.



The Sukuta Upper Basic School was established in 1970 and the Senior Secondary School in 2013. There are 75 teachers. The number of students is 1875, 873 of them are boys and 1002 are girls.

The teaching language is English. The students learn French as well. The local languages are not taught. For a few years the five national languages Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Jola and Serahule have been taught at the Lower Basic Schools as there is evidence that children who are fluent in their mother tongue can be better at learning a second language and at developing other intellectual skills. But so far our students are not familiar with writing and reading the local languages.

At the school we have morning and afternoon classes, each class has about 55 to 60 students. The school has an assembly hall for several hundred people, so far no internet access and no website but a school library.

The library was founded in the 1980s. It is a lending library and it is open the whole day from Monday to Friday and on Saturday in the morning - with two librarians who work in double-shift. This is possible because more than 50% of the salaries are paid by the Circle of Friends Sukuta Moormerland.

The library is a place for reading and for doing homework with about 70 workplaces. There are not only students and teachers of our school using the library. There are also children of neighbouring schools and former students who are now studying at the university.

We have more than 12.000 books, about half of them are books which can be taken out, the other half are textbooks the students can use the whole year. In The Gambia many of the families are not able to buy books themselves. They are too expensive. And we are very glad to be able to supply each child of the Upper Basic School with a textbook for the lessons in English, Mathematics, Agriculture and Science. Using the books in the lessons will help the children to read and understand the texts better.

Many of the freehand books are from donation programs in Europe and North America. They are almost exclusively in English. These books the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe would call „beautifully packaged poison“ as they contain “nothing

that has to do with the environment of African children”<sup>1</sup>



I would agree with Achebe basically – but I don’t want to talk about the pros and cons of book donations from Western countries today. Our librarians are happy about each book. However, they would prefer to get more books from and about Africa.

With the support of the Circle of Friends Sukuta Moormerland we were able to buy many books from African authors and publishers in the last few years. And I can say that our library compared with many other school libraries in my country has an outstanding collection of African books. And we are very glad to give our students the chance to work on their own with the books in the library or at home and to enjoy reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe, opening the workshop “Writing and Publishing for Children in Africa and in the Third World”, 1987, Harare



At the moment the library is temporarily accommodated in our Assembly hall and we are building a new library with the help of the Circle of Friends Sukuta Moormerland who is bearing 85 % of the costs. The building will be finished next year. Then we will have more capacity for books, we will have more workplaces and also places with computer and internet access.

Building a new library gives us the chance to reconsider the choice of books. And in future we will focus more on African books representing the rich culture not only of my country - The Gambia - and of West Africa but of the whole continent. These books shall be the heart of our library and in addition non-African books shall be included in this collection.

However, I shall make no secret of the fact that running the library in the way we do is possible only through the support from the Circle of Friends Sukuta Moormerland. And I hope that in future former students of the school and the Gambian government will be able to give more financial support.

### **My motivation, my work and about some things I had to learn**

(Anna Stelthove-Fend)

Like in many other cases of voluntary work my motivation is very personal. I grew up in a small village in Germany with five brothers and one sister. My parents had a farm and apart from a newspaper there was no reading matter at home. I was lucky to have a newly built library in our parish and it became a habit for me to go there on Sundays to take out books. Reading was not regarded as an activity worth doing, because my parents had a lot of work for their children on their farm. But I found a way to read and I'm sure this was the basis for getting a better education than my parents received at their time. I studied chemistry at the university and worked for more than 30 years for the German Customs Authorities. With this experience in mind I would like to give other children similar opportunities.

I happened to visit the school in Sukuta in 2000, because three children I sponsored, went there. Seeing the library, I decided to give some support. When I started, I thought I would raise some money to buy books now and then. I didn't expect it would be a project that would accompany me for so many years. As I'm 66 years now I would be glad to know how this project could be continued in future. And as the world has changed a lot there is the question what could be done better in future e.g. how to integrate the new media and the internet.

But let me start with what have we done in the last almost 20 years:

We started with new shelves for the library. At the beginning the shelves were full of text books and of second hand books from Western countries. There were no illustrated books for the children.

Having Achebe in my mind I discussed with the former Principal of the school about buying books from Gambian and other African authors in The Gambia. There are several books published at Macmillan's like Ebou Dibba's *Fafa* and *Chaff on the Wind* or Sheriff Sarr's *Meet me in Conakry* or Nana Grey-Johnson's *The Magic Calabash*.

But I had to learn that it was not enough to have books from Gambian or African authors to get children interested in reading. And I had to learn that there were several challenges.



## **What are the challenges?**

### **1. Poor reading skills**

One of the challenges are the poor reading skills of many students who get to grade seven. Many of them are not able to read the wonderful stories we bought. I knew that the children were taught in English which is not their mother tongue. But I have to confess I didn't have any idea what it means learning in a foreign language until 2006.

In 2006 I organised a lecture in Germany with the dedicated pan-africanist academic Kum'a Ndumbe from Cameroon. He talked about the problem of teaching children in foreign languages. He invited us to imagine we wouldn't have been taught in German but in Chinese and our parents wouldn't have been able to help us because they didn't read and write Chinese. I'm sure I would have had a big problem at school.

The next one who opened my eyes to the truth was the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o who said in his essays *Decolonising the Mind*:

"Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard".

His ideas impressed me so much that I initiated the German translation of the texts and Ngugi will come for a reading and discussion to my home city in Germany now for the third time. Ngugi's concern are the African voices which have been silenced by the dominant Western voices. There should be African stories for African children in the library. And I would like to hear African stories around the globe. That's why I'm organising readings with African authors in my home town in Germany, too.

## **What has this to do with the children at the school in Sukuta?**

Understanding more and more how hard the children's learning situation is I got more and more respect for their performance. And I wanted to give them more support. As I wasn't able to change the system my idea was to empower the children. My idea was to buy illustrated books with texts written in a clear and simple way. I'm sure I don't have to tell you about the importance of illustrations

in children's books to make them appealing. And I wanted to buy the books in The Gambia. So we bought hundreds of books of the MacMillan Series *Reading Worlds, Mactracks* and so on.



To present them attractively one of the teachers constructed new shelves. The students like these books very much and enjoy reading them. As we have books for all levels each child is able to find a book to read. One of the favourite books is *The Little Blue Boy* by Fatou Keita.

## 2. Buying books in The Gambia

Unfortunately, the Macmillan branch in The Gambia closed down some years ago. That's why we had to look for other sources. We checked all the small booksellers around Sukuta. They usually sell text books and a few other books but often pirated copies. It is easier and cheaper to buy pirated copies and not the original books - but of course this is no option for us.

There is only one big bookshop in The Gambia with a good collection of books by Gambian and other African writers. But the broadest collection is that of the of Western books. Also in the National Library in Banjul the shelves are exploding with books donated by Western countries while the collection of African writers is very small. That's why it is not easy to get information and an overview about book production in other African countries in The Gambia.



As I'm busy on the internet I get some information about the African book market. And I was really very pleased when I found the IBBY-homepage with books for and from Africa some years ago. It was a very promising start with 84 reviewed books. And I was very happy to see titles in several African languages, too. I would be very glad if IBBY could continue this great work and update this part of the homepage. Another source I found is the bibliography of 1759 titles of „African Children's Literature“ published by Nyambura Mpesha in 2007. This is a list of authors and book titles without information about the content. The only source up to date with descriptions of children's books from Africa is the Homepage of the African Books Collective in Oxford with 183 titles at the moment. Additionally, I visit the Frankfurt Book Fair every year and have come into contact with publishers from several countries like Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa.

As you will know the next challenge is ordering the books from other African countries. But with the problems of shipping, customs barriers and payment modalities you will be more familiar than me. And I really hope that with a growing publishing industry these problems will be solved.

### **3. “Beautifully packaged poison”?**

I was very happy about the books we got from different African countries but soon there was a new question I only want to mention here:

As African countries are very different from one another there is the question whether the environment in a story about children Johannesburg written by a South African author has anything to do with the environment of children in Sukuta in The Gambia. Would Chinua Achebe call the story a “beautifully packaged poison,” too? I don't know.

Or when I think of Kathy G. Short's keynote “The Dangers of Reading Globally” delivered at the IBBY International Congress in Athens last year. She describes that reading books from other countries and cultures cannot only broaden one's mind but also perpetuate stereotypes and misunderstandings. And it is a problem how a

small team of librarians like ours will be enabled to find out which books are suitable for our school library.

However, we bought many African books and displayed them attractively on shelves. We also bought some books with CD and a radio with a CD player. Listening and reading a text at the same time is a very effective method to improve reading skills. So far the CDs are not used very often but we hope we can make a new start in the new library where we will have better workplaces where students can listen to CDs.

I would like to stress that “improving reading skills” sounds a little bit technical. My idea is “Planting the Seed for the Love of Books”. Only when children are falling in love with books they will be motivated to read and only then reading will open up new perspectives to them.

### **Encouraging Children to read**

(Haddy Sosseh-Saidy)

As already said we have a big problem with poor reading skills. We have to deal with this situation and we have to do the best for the children. Our school system sets a priority on good reading skills and they certainly play a vital part in education today. If you look for guides to improve reading skills you will usually find some advice how to involve parents and other caregivers. In most cases the parents of the children at our school are very anxious that their children will get a good education. But often they are not familiar enough with reading and writing to support their children as proposed in certain guides.

The next group of people concerning reading skills are the teachers. As already mentioned there are about 55 to 60 students in a class. As a consequence of this the chances of the teachers to support individual students are very limited.

What can we do in such an environment to support children? The library plays an important role. With the library and with suitable books we want to give the

children a chance to do something on their own - if they want. The librarians help them to find suitable books for their questions and their interests.

To get the children in touch with the library and with various kinds of books, we have study lessons there. In these lessons teachers or the librarians introduce the students to suitable books. Then they will get interested in one of them or more and hopefully come back for more.

We are planning to encourage students of the Senior Secondary to help students of the Upper Basic School to read. The idea is to create an autonomous system from which both – the senior and the junior students – will benefit. It is evident that the younger students will benefit by this support. It is not only their performance at school but very important for them is to see role models in the older students. For the senior students, this voluntary work can be rewarding because they can feel the respect and appreciation given to them. Another great advantage for both groups would be to develop social and communication skills.

In addition, we are planning reading competitions at our school to reach our goal to plant the seed for the love of books. And we hope this will be basis for a joyful ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated lifelong learning.



As I said we are building a new library. The heart of this new library should be African books. And we would be very delighted, if some African publishers would donate some books next year when the new library is opened.

Short professional profile of speakers

**Mrs. Haddy Sosseh- Saidy** (\*1965) is the Principal of the Sukuta Upper Basic and Senior Secondary School (SUBSSS) in Sukuta, The Gambia. She studied at The Gambia College from 1984-86 for the Primary Teachers' Certificate, from 1991-93 for the Higher Teachers' Certificate and at the University of The Gambia for the certificate in school management. She has 36 years of experience and has taught in many schools across the country. She has been the head of the school for almost 15 years.

**Dr. Anna Stelthove-Fend** (\*1953) studied chemistry in Germany. She worked for more than for over 30 years as a scientist in laboratories of the German Federal Customs Service. During the last ten years of her professional career she was the head of the Department of Science and Technology. Since 2001 she has sponsored the library of the SUBSSS and has followed developments in the publishing of children's books in African countries.