

**AFRICAN BOOKS COLLECTIVE  
AFRICAN PUBLISHERS USE LIGHTNING  
SOURCE TO BRING THEIR BOOKS TO  
GLOBAL MARKETS**

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**ABOUT AFRICAN BOOKS COLLECTIVE**

African Books Collective (ABC) is a worldwide marketing and distribution outlet for more than 1,500 titles from Africa, including scholarly publications, literature and children's books in 56 subject disciplines. This non-profit organization is based in Oxford, England, and was founded by a group of 17 African publishers who own and govern the organization. Its mission is to strengthen indigenous African publishing through collective action and to increase the global visibility of and accessibility to the wealth of African scholarship and culture. The organization's catalog includes titles from 19 different African countries.

## The Struggle to Succeed

A recent article<sup>1</sup> in *The Christian Science Monitor* highlights some of the issues facing African economies, reporting that much of the average growth of 6% per year seen by these economies has been the result of higher commodities prices, which are now falling. The article points out that growth based on commodities alone is not enough to create jobs and reduce poverty in Africa, stating: "Africa and its partners should focus on reducing the costs of doing business by combating corruption, adding more and better post-primary education and skills training based on private sector demand, and providing access to investment capital, better energy supply as well as basic infrastructure."

ABC, founded in the late 1980s, has been working to support publishers throughout Africa, helping them more widely distribute titles around the globe through access to funding, technology and other resources that are out of reach for all but the largest African publishers. ABC represents exactly the sort of initiative the article recommends to drive economic growth in the continent.

"When we first began operations in 1990," says Mary Jay, ABC's Chief Executive Officer, "we worked with publishers to import books to the UK, where they were warehoused and distributed based on demand. This was made possible by donor funding, without which we would not have been able to found ABC." ABC manages distribution of titles for the African publishers it represents and distributes funds back to them as books are sold. Publishers were responsible for printing the books and paying for shipment to the UK.

The traditional book publishing process

is inherently inefficient, Jay points out. "Books are typically printed in long runs to keep the cost per unit down," she explains, "and warehoused until they can be sold. As books make their way through the supply chain, there is typically waste in excess of 40%, largely because the quantities of books that are produced and shipped are estimated and often do not represent actual demand. This results in lots of returns, associated shipping costs and long-term storage or destruction of many books."

For ABC, this was exacerbated by the fact that books were shipped multiple times as they made their way to their final destination, and often did not sell as well as expected because they did not comply with standard formatting, sizes and quality expected in northern cultures.

Nonetheless, ABC's donor-supported model worked relatively well in the early years. But the goal for the organization was to become self-sufficient, and that goal simply was not being met. "In effect," Jay explains, "the returns we were sending to African publishers were about equal to our donor funding. This was attractive to our donor aid agencies, since their funding was going to Africa, but it was being recycled in a way that allowed African works to be disseminated, preferable to sending funds directly from the donor agencies to the publishers."

Donor contributions also funded

cultural activities such as writer tours and training workshops.

"We reached a critical juncture," Jay says, "when we learned that we would lose our donor funding at the end of 2006."

## Finding a New Model

ABC knew a dramatic change in operations was required if the organization was to continue to accomplish its mission. "We had heard about print on demand in the mid-1990s," Jay says, "and even tried it out in 1998, when our Chairman of the Board worked with us to publish our very first print on demand book for a conference in Tanzania. Although it was in its infancy then, we could see it was the wave of the future. We decided to look into this model to see if it would help us overcome some of the challenges we were facing."

*We knew our business was underperforming, but we thought that Lightning Source's projections for the opportunity represented by converting our catalog to print-on-demand were overly optimistic. Astonishingly, Lightning Source's estimates were much more accurate than my conservative projections!"*

*Mary Jay  
Chief Executive Officer  
African Books Collective*

Partnering with Lightning Source, ABC conducted a pilot program with a Nigerian publisher from July 2001 through March 2002. The pilot incorporated 100 titles. "The approach worked extremely well," recounts Jay. "It was perfectly clear to us that this was the model we should be using. And with ABC as the intermediary, we felt there was more opportunity for success than with

Lightning Source trying to work directly with hundreds of publishers all over Africa."

With a successful pilot behind them,

<sup>1</sup> February 9, 2009

ABC began converting titles to print on demand as they could afford to do so. "In terms of getting books into the wholesale channel, our limiting factor in the beginning was our ability to pay for printing of those books," Jay says. "This was previously the responsibility of the African publishers, who would include our books in the longer runs they were producing locally." By the end of 2006, the organization had converted about 400 titles to print on demand to supply Publisher Direct orders, but only about 75 titles were available to the wholesale channel. "Publisher Direct orders had been our bread and butter," Jay adds, "but we could see that the real opportunity lay in getting more titles into the US and UK wholesale channels."

#### [Print On Demand Exceeds Expectations](#)

During 2007, in partnership with Lightning Source, the organization stepped up the conversion activity to include all of its titles, and began working with publishers to transfer expertise on preparation of books for digital publishing. By the end of the year, ABC had more than 1,000 titles in the system, all available to both US and UK Publisher Direct and wholesale channels; and the gamble was paying big dividends. Short-run Publisher Direct orders grew 121%, and wholesale print on demand orders grew by a factor of almost 15. "Overall, our gross sales revenues were flat, considering that we were not fully up to speed with the new process until several months into 2007 and still selling from pre-printed inventory," says Jay. "We were happy with these early results, but even better, we were able to increase net sales income after remittances to publishers by 70%. This was a big breakthrough for us, and necessary if we were to become self-sufficient." By the end of 2008, ABC had nearly 1,500 titles in the

system, and 2008 was a banner year, with US and UK Publisher Direct orders for print on demand units reaching nearly 18,000, and wholesale orders in the same markets growing to almost 10,000 units.

"Migrating to print on demand through our partnership with Lightning Source has totally revolutionized our business," Jay exclaims. "We have depleted most of our physical book stocks and are using a much smaller storage facility; we have reduced the amount of staff required to run our business from eleven to two full-time and two part-time people; and we are basically running a zero-inventory business with no returns." Jay proudly reports that in 2007, ABC generated a surplus for the first time ever, as a result of moving to the print on demand model.

ABC has also been able to standardize book formats and improve overall quality, making the books more salable in the US and UK markets without precluding African publishers from doing whatever best meets the needs in their local markets. In addition, the organization no longer bears the expense of running an import/export and warehousing business. Books are printed to order in Lightning Source's US and UK plants, entirely eliminating the need for international shipments.

#### [Fulfilling the Mission](#)

For the African publishers ABC supports, the benefits have been huge. "They are selling more books and gaining significant visibility in targeted markets," Jay says, "And they no longer have to bear the costs and delays of printing books locally and shipping them to us, as well as the administrative support required for these efforts. Files are placed in Lightning Source's digital library where



## **AFRICAN BOOKS COLLECTIVE HISTORY**

A group of African publishers met in 1985. This self-help initiative arose from the constraints publishers were experiencing in financing, marketing and distributing their books, and the dearth of African published materials in the North. Collectively, it would be possible to strengthen the economic base of independent African publishers and meet the needs of Northern libraries and other book buyers. Operations began in 1989, after securing sufficient support from funding agencies. ABC has, over time, adapted itself to changing markets and methodologies, although its founding ethos and aims remain unchanged.

they are immediately ready to order, and publishers receive their payments with virtually no additional effort on their part.”

Walter Bgoya of Mkuki na Nyota Publishers in Tanzania is one example of an African publisher that is delighted with the new process. He says, “Working with the African Books Collective has meant a great deal to our authors, especially in having their works recognized in the US, UK and European markets. Now that ABC is working with Lightning Source to print all of our works on demand, we are getting even greater exposure for our authors while building a better understanding of Tanzania’s culture abroad.”

His sentiments were echoed by Francis Nyamnjoh from the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) headquartered in Senegal, saying, “Print on demand has made it possible for CODESRIA to minimize the headaches of having to send hard copies of its publications to ABC and its US partner, while ensuring that CODESRIA maximizes its dissemination and income. We don’t have to worry about any of our titles ever getting out of print. This is a most welcome initiative.”

Jay points out that as the model gains more traction, ABC plans to increase the percentages paid to African publishers, contributing even more to their economic well-being.

“We are a social enterprise and we have a mission,” concluded Jay. “Working with Lightning Source has enabled us to both survive commercially and fulfill our mission. Had we not made this migration, I don’t think we would be here today.”

“Lightning Source is delighted to have played a role in the rejuvenation of the African Books Collective,” said David Taylor, President of Lightning Source. “Bringing print on demand services to African publishers through ABC will have a long-reaching impact on their ability to increase both the distribution of their books and the flow of revenues into these developing countries. It’s great for their authors, their books and those readers who can now get these titles.”