



BIBLIONE F SA

...bringing books to the bookless

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Executive Director

The importance of reading and the lack of literacy in South Africa have been the topics of much interest over the past few years, resulting in renewed efforts among educationists at all levels to get people reading. Literacy programmes for both adults and children abound, as do emerging initiatives to promote reading and writing in the mother tongue, encouraging both writers and publishers to produce literature in indigenous languages. These have already seen positive results. One remaining problem is that many communities in South Africa simply lack access to reading material. There are many homes without books, schools without libraries, even entire communities without access to library facilities, particularly in rural areas. Although people may have the ability to read, having no access to books puts them at a great disadvantage. It is this need that BiblioneF seeks to address.

Background

BiblioneF SA is part of an international organisation that was established in France in 1989 at the initiative of a former Dutch ambassador, Maximilien Vegelin van Claerbergen. The organisation is recognised by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund and the Council of Europe and has offices in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, the United States of America, South Africa and Surinam. Van Claerbergen (1998) expressed the underlying aim of BiblioneF as follows:

'The idea behind BiblioneF came to me as a result of meeting children who live in squalid cities or who are isolated in jungle encampments. These children want to live,

and they want to learn. They lack virtually everything ... books above all. A dream was born

from these encounters - that of skipping a ship on the high seas, travelling around the world bringing a treasure trove of books to children and young people who need them. Such a sea-going vessel has remained a dream, but the book shipments are a reality.'

The dream of shipping books to children in need is also present in the name of the organisation, with *biblio* referring to books, and *nef* to a

ship. In this way BiblioneF has shipped new books to carefully-selected correspondents in 46 countries throughout the world, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Haiti, Rwanda, Senegal, Burkina-Faso, Russia, Mongolia and Hungary.

BiblioneF is sincerely concerned about the hundreds of millions of children and adolescents throughout the world who are being developmentally sidelined because they do not have access to knowledge through books. The motivating factor behind BiblioneF's creation was the realisation that, without books, the doors of knowledge, progress and freedom might remain shut to those children. BiblioneF has therefore set itself the goal of providing new books to deprived children from childhood to adolescence, thus stimulating their curiosity and desire to learn. Through pictures and words these books will help youngsters understand the world around them and will enable them to lay the solid foundation of knowledge and awareness which is every person's birthright. Books convey ideas, in return fostering hope.

BiblioneF SA

The organisation was established as a result of the conviction that literacy and education will be of prime importance in guaranteeing the success of the new South Africa. Moreover, BiblioneF SA believes that this country has the potential to play a leading role in the whole of the southern part of the continent. Knowing that South Africa faces tremendous education and literacy problems, and that a large part of the problem is due to a lack of reading material, it was decided that a depot be opened in South Africa. BiblioneF SA was started in August 1998 and is housed at the Huis der Nederlanden in Pinelands, Cape Town. This depot houses a book stock of 45 000 books, covering all eleven of South Africa's official languages. The books are bought from South African publishers, at reduced prices. BiblioneF SA receives book donations, but most of its stock is purchased. Having a rolling book stock is necessary, as often it is extremely difficult to access titles in many of the African languages. This system enables BiblioneF SA to react without delay to requests for books.

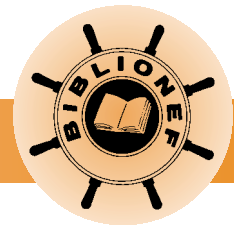
Although BiblioneF SA still receives support from the international body, it operates as an independent, non-profit organisation. It is fully responsible for obtaining and distributing the books in South Africa and also for securing much of its own funding. The cost of the books, as well as the cost of shipping, warehousing, administration and publishing is raised through foundations, corporations and individuals. BiblioneF SA has a very small staff and relies heavily on volunteers and friends for help.

Aims of BiblioneF SA

Promoting a culture of reading

The most important aim is to respond in a quick and efficient manner to the increasing demand for appropriate

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reading material for children aged three to eighteen. Requests are received from schools, libraries, hospitals, refugee organisations, children's homes and other organisations with a socio-educational goal.

In rural and township areas, a major challenge is to motivate teachers to tell stories and to inspire them to create a culture of reading in their schools. With this end in mind, Bibliodef SA arranges story-telling workshops, motivational talks, workshops for teachers and other recipients of books and co-hosts or participates in reading days, reading competitions and book fairs.

Promoting mother tongue reading

Another important aim is to provide books in the mother tongue of the children, with a firm belief that children have the right to develop themselves in their home language. Its aim is to support, equally, all eleven of South Africa's official languages and to ensure that this is reflected in the book stock. The purchasing power of readers in the African languages was previously so inadequate that not only were publishers reluctant to publish books in these languages but, even where books were published, bookshops were not willing to stock them. Bibliodef SA has subsequently commissioned translations and publications of books most needed in these languages and has also arranged for re-prints of several children's books.

Awareness of Bibliodef SAs book stock is spreading and organisations looking for specific titles are coming to Bibliodef SA for assistance. It is relatively easy to find titles in English and Afrikaans but for many of the African languages there is little or no information available on published titles. This is proving to be one of Bibliodef SAs strengths, as organisations and individuals who are unable to trace the titles they need, and who have funding, have been willing to make donations to Bibliodef SA in exchange for these books.

To further the aim of providing all children with access to books in their mother tongue, Bibliodef SA works closely with the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) which aims to encourage multilingualism and the development of the more marginalised indigenous languages such as the Khoi languages of the Northern Cape.

Promoting children's literature in indigenous languages and local publishing

Bibliodef SA promotes indigenous languages by encouraging local writers and illustrators to write and publish new stories in their mother tongue. Several such books have already been produced and distributed. One of Bibliodef SAs partners in this regard is *First words in print*, a project of the Centre for the Book, which commissions the writing and translation of books for pre-school children and donates them to children throughout South Africa.

An important aspect of Bibliodef SAs task is the support of the local publishing industry. Many organisations that promote literacy in South Africa are relying on donations of books that are shipped here in containers from other

countries for use by South African organisations. Although this has its merits there are also disadvantages. Not only does the South African publishing industry suffer, but the books themselves often have little bearing on the lives and experiences of South African children.

In commissioning titles for reprinting or publishing, Bibliodef SA tries to focus on stories that have particular relevance to South African children, or which instil the values of *ubuntu* and other values important in our society.

Although stock includes books in English, Bibliodef SA does not consider this to be one of its priorities, as many other organisations in South Africa provide English books.

Distribution

The process of distribution is not simply a matter of packing a box of books and sending it off to whomever makes a request. Once a request is received, Bibliodef SA determines the specific requirements of that particular group of children and of the area in which the school or organisation is situated. This first stage involves establishing close links with local partners. In the second stage, new books specifically geared for the needs of that community or group are selected. If required stock is not immediately available, books are re-edited, written or translated. In the final stage, books are distributed through libraries, schools, cultural centres and associations, under the supervision of efficient local representatives.

Bibliodef SA also engages with other associations, philanthropic initiatives and institutions concerned with education, culture and development with a view to long-term collaborations. Some examples of such collaborations have already been mentioned, namely PanSALB and Centre for the Book.

Another partner is Nozincwadi, a project in which Gcina Mhlophe, well-known story-teller and author, hosts a road show visiting schools throughout South Africa, telling stories and promoting reading and writing. After each show she hands out book packages provided by Bibliodef SA. Other partners include Rotary International, whose literacy and numeracy division provided packs of Bibliodef SA books to teachers who had completed their courses, and Tape Aids for the Blind, who are recording Bibliodef SA books onto audio-tapes for visually-impaired children.

Qualifying to receive books from Bibliodef SA

Organisations wanting to apply for book donations have to fulfil a number of requirements. In the first place, the organisation should have a need for books written in the mother tongue of the children. A letter of request should provide information on the number and age of children involved, their mother tongue, the background of the school or

Bibliodef SA believes that this country has the potential to play a leading role in the whole of the southern part of the continent





BIBLIODEF SA

organisation and an outline of how the organisation plans to use the books donated.

It is important to note that Bibliodef SA does not intend to compete with public libraries. Its first aim is to reach those children who have no access to books at all, both in suburban and rural areas. Organisations, especially schools, should state in their application whether there is a public library in their vicinity and whether or not the children can make use of it. Once the request form is evaluated and the organisation meets the necessary criteria, a set of books will be selected according to the specific needs of the organisation.

Bibliodef SAs donations are not simply handouts. All organisations that benefit from Bibliodef SA are required to write a report on utilisation of the books. No organisation is considered for a second donation unless it has given feedback on their progress and/or problems. These reports will enable Bibliodef SA to adjust its next donation, or to arrange for a specific workshop, if necessary.

All organisations that have benefited from Bibliodef SA are asked to do something in return for their own communities. Children undertake community upliftment projects, such as community clean-ups, visiting elderly people or starting a food garden.

Children always participate in these activities with enthusiasm. Bibliodef SA believes that this will make the children aware of the value of books, encourage a sense of responsibility and help them gain respect for themselves and their communities.

Braille books and farm libraries

One of the objectives is to support blind and visually-impaired children with Braille and large print books. With funding from the Netherlands it was possible for Bibliodef to donate Braille and large print books to nine organisations for the physically and visually impaired.

In our quest to make books accessible to children everywhere, Bibliodef SA has had some interesting additional developments. This includes the establishment of several farm libraries in the Western Cape.

Monitoring and evaluation of projects

Naturally, an important part of the work of Bibliodef SA is to ensure that books donated are properly housed and used for the purpose that they were given. This means that from time to time the executive director, Jean Williams, as project manager, or sometimes one of the board members, visits recipient organisations, monitors usage and gives sup-

port and advice. On a recent monitoring and evaluation visit, ten rural schools and three public libraries were visited. It was disturbing to find that some schools were not yet using the books, partly due to a lack of understanding among teachers of the importance of story-telling and reading for pleasure. A contributing factor is that many of the teachers in these areas did not have books when they were children. In some schools, books were only used for display purposes and to impress visitors and education officials.

No two organisations are ever alike, and stories arising from these visits are either heartbreaking or heartwarming. During a visit to a primary school in the Eastern Cape, a girl read a story about the importance of light in life, comparing it to the light Bibliodef SA brings into their lives. This was followed by praise singers. I was rather disturbed when one of the group, a little boy, burst into tears and expressed my distress to the principal. Great was my relief to learn that the child was crying to express his pleasure and gratitude for the great gift of books.

Bibliodef SA in the future

In its four years of existence, Bibliodef SA has made enormous strides towards improving the lives of South African children who have no access to books. Over 108 000 books have already been donated to 850 children's organisations, container libraries have been set up, Braille and large print books provided for visually-impaired children and the translation and publication of several children's books into African languages have been commissioned.

In order to provide a more efficient service, Bibliodef SA is seeking to establish a network of agents, in all nine provinces, to act as agents. These agents will inform the local communities about the existence and objectives of Bibliodef SA and will be in charge of the initial investigation into the needs of local organisations. Bibliodef SA intends to open a second depot at the University of South Africa in Gauteng and would ideally like to have depots in each province.

The work Bibliodef SA does is vitally important to the future of South Africa. Books and their stories are instrumental in helping children discover the childhood world many have been deprived of because of poverty, violence and conflict. Books change lives, they help children develop on both an emotional and educational level. With language at the heart of education, children who have had access to books from an early age have a great advantage once they start school.

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