FEELING AT HOME WITH LITERACY
IN THE MOTHER TONGUE

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"...and it's the story that makes the young reader want to turn the page"
Rumer Godden 1975.

Introductory Remarks

We write this paper against the background of many exciting developments in the domain of cultural politics on the African continent. This is why we try to give a socio-historical frame of reference which, we hope, might provide useful perspectives for the kind of work in which most of the participants at this conference are involved. We raise and suggest ways of discussing some fundamental issues and developments that frame and influence the decisions and actions of educational policy makers and practitioners for language use and learning in Africa. Because of the context of the conference, we place the emphasis on written language, and in so doing, spotlight the fact that power and status functions of language are most clearly marked in its printed form. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1993:17) Ngugi wa Thiong 'o makes the fundamental point that while the dislocation of children from their mother tongues in school could not actually destroy the vitality of oral language, it had serious negative impacts on literacy development

> So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school
> (…) became divorced from his (sic) spoken language at home. There
> was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world,
> which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his
> immediate environment in the family and the community.

We know from first principles, particularly in respect of early childhood, that appropriate and effective teaching begins with and builds on what children already know and can do. Because this does not happen in so many cases, for

many children the 'written world' that Ngugi refers to, does not ever come into existence. This is the reason for our belief that it is essential to find ways to exploit the creative potential of African languages by healing the rift between their oral and written forms, thereby giving children the chance to experience their world as a coherent, meaningful one.

English dominant and hegemonic

English is today universally perceived as a global language[1]. In fact, outside of France, most people accept that for the foreseeable future it is *the* global language, a kind of universal lingua franca. If one were to ask almost any person who is not conversant with the processes of language development, why English has acquired this status, s/he is very likely to put it down to the beauties of the language as manifested in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and all the rest of the writers of "the great tradition". Others might put it down to the popularity of U.S.-American as well as British pop music and television. In this sense, the Beatles might be considered to have been as important as the Bard of Stratford-on-Avon.

Be that as it may, few people would put the hegemonic status of English down to the mundane fact of colonial conquest and imperialist expansion of Europe and of North America over the past 300 years or so. Yet, it is the fact of military supremacy and capitalist development, specifically of the British Empire up to the end of World War I and of the U.S.A. after World War II that constitutes the fundamental cause of the dominance of English in the world. The invaluable treasury of English literature is obviously one of the most important complementary and reinforcing material facts that explain this dominance. Ultimately, however, it is the fact that a certain measure of proficiency in English equips one for operations in and benefiting from global as well as regional and often even local economic transactions that ensures this dominance and perpetuates it.

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[1] See Crystal 1995

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In this connection, it is of the utmost importance that we distinguish clearly between the *dominance* of English, on the one hand, and the *hegemony* of English, on the other hand even though the two are necessarily connected. In our view, the dominance of English, which is driven by market forces – aided and abetted by British, U.S. and other pro-English agencies – is a phenomenon, the continuation of which is tied up with global political and economic developments that go beyond the specificities of cultural and linguistic dynamics. One of the most debilitating effects of hegemony is to make speakers of languages other than English – in this case – begin losing faith in the value of their home languages. They begin to ask themselves why they should bother maintaining and developing their languages when in any case, everything happens in English. And, let it be said, at many levels of international communication, there is every reason to pose this question, even though there is no reason at all to believe that there is only one answer, i.e., *let's shift into English*. This is the reason why scholars such as Tové Skutnabb-Kangas have gone to the extent of speaking of "linguistic genocide" which, as she explains, is the direct result of globalisation.

If English stands at the top of the global linguistic pyramid, the indigenous languages of the African continent are to be found as close to the base as possible. In Africa, the disempowering effect of the hegemony of English has gone so far that we can be forgiven for seeing it as a kind of social pathology. African people are not, however, different from any other people on earth. What we are observing in the domain of language is no more than a reflection of the continuing neo-colonial malaise of most African states, the economic and to some extent also the cultural dependency of the continent on the largesse of their former colonial masters and on other countries of the North.

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As things stand now with regards to language policy and language use, the post-colonial situation accurately reflects the reality of dependence and secular stagnation. The starkness of the situation is captured best in the words of Ali and Alamin Mazrui:

> …. (An) important source of intellectual dependence in Africa is the language in which African graduates and scholars are taught…. (Today), in non-Arabic speaking Africa, a modern surgeon who does not speak a European language is virtually a sociolinguistic impossibility….. (A) conference of African scientists, devoted to scientific matters and conducted primarily in an African language, is not yet possible…. It is because of the above considerations that intellectual and scientific dependence in Africa may be inseparable from linguistic dependence. The linguistic quest for liberation, therefore, must not be limited to freeing the European languages from their oppressive meanings in so far as Black and other subjugated people the world over are concerned, but must also seek to promote African languages, especially in academia, as one of the strategies for promoting greater intellectual and scientific independence from the West (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998:64-65).

It should be said, on the other hand, that in spite of all the evidence in respect of the publishing industry, the internet, international trade, among other domains, that demonstrate the global dominance of the English language, it would be a mistake to imagine that developments in this domain must go in one direction only. Social development is historical, i.e., always changing. The second half of this century or the beginning of the 22nd century may well present us with a totally different picture. But, even if things stay more or less as they are today, it would still be a catastrophe if we were to accept the counsel of those who believe that linguistic homogenization and hegemonisation are our destiny and that it is simply pointless to try to counter them.

Countering hegemony

Is there an alternative to the apparent juggernaut of English dominance and hegemony? Can we help to get most people in the world to understand the

many reasons why it is essential that the rush towards some fantasy of a world in which there will be only one natural language, i.e., "English", is an absurd and self-destructive objective? How do we, operating in our respective professional capacities, assist in the "decolonisation of the mind" (Ngugi) of the billions of people who are held down by their ruling elites' de facto abandonment of the principle of equity in favour of self-enrichment and convenience? Is it possible, for example, through language planning and other interventions, to initiate or reinforce changes in the current patterns of development that will alter the dominant social relations. These are difficult questions that go to the very heart of the politics of social transformation.

We have to find an answer to the simple question: *how can we make the move from the existing situation where the languages of the former colonial powers dominate to one where the indigenous languages of Africa become dominant?* This question obviously presupposes another one, viz.: *is this a desirable scenario?* How one answers this deceptively simple question is an indication of the degree of one's commitment to the fundamental principles of a democratic polity. This is so for the simple reason that the empowerment of "the people", who are after all the beginning and the end of a democratic system, is axiomatically only possible in and through a language, or languages, in which they are proficient. Yet, it is a fact that no government in Africa today can claim that the majority of their people has a sufficient command of the so-called "official", i.e., former colonial, languages such that they can conduct their essential daily transactions in those languages without assistance. It is important to state clearly that we are not posing this question because of some narrow-minded national or ethnic chauvinist imperative. It is based firmly on the ground of (linguistic) human rights in a world where cultural diversity is slowly beginning to be seen as just as important for the survival of the human species as are biological and political diversity respectively[2].

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[2] See, e.g., Gell-Mann 1994 and Skutnabb-Kangas 2000.

Cultural diversity and multilingualism

This is not the appropriate occasion to discuss issues of biocultural diversity in detail. Elsewhere, Alexander (2003) has raised the main issues in order to further the debate initiated by Skutnabb-Kangas, Maffi and others almost a decade ago now. Suffice it to say that because of the researches and speculations of these scholars and others who work in the ecology of languages paradigm, we know that there is a systematic correlation between the density of biological species and that of languages in certain parts of the world, more especially in the equatorial belt. They postulate the probability that there is a direct causal, and not merely a correlational, link between biological and cultural-linguistic diversity. It may turn out to be very difficult to verify this hypothesis but even if it were to be disproved eventually it will not alter the fact that all languages are depositories of knowledge and that some of the endangered languages constitute the only possibility of access to valuable indigenous knowledge that reaches far back into the history of the human species. The possible link between human survival on planet earth and the nurturing of multicultural and multilingual societies is clearly fundamental in every sense of the term. It is a consideration which, like ecology in the more obvious life-sustaining context of animal and plant life, cannot be ignored by any modern state.

A time to speak and a time to act

From what has been sketched hitherto, we get a good idea of the nature and the scale of the issues that we have to address. Because it is the African middle classes from which individual leaders are most likely to emerge, Alexander (2003:12) has said, among other things, that

> Without any exaggeration, it may be said that what is demanded of the African middle classes in general, and of the African intelligentsia in particular, is no less than Amilcar Cabral's almost forgotten demand that they "commit class suicide". To put it in a nutshell: the so-called African revolution has not been consummated anywhere on the continent. … Economic and, indirectly, concrete political, independence as well as a genuine and profound cultural revolution have yet to be attained. These desirable goals have, moreover, to be arrived at in a world where for

> every state ever tighter integration into the world economy
> is projected as an inescapable imperative and where any
> move towards even a modicum of autarchy or "de-linking"
> is considered to be a kind of national suicide.

We belong to a small but growing group of people in different parts of the continent who believe that whatever one's criticism of the political and economic strategies intrinsic to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU), they have unavoidably opened up space within which the cultural revolution can be pursued. Language planning, policy evolution and policy realization are essential aspects of this process and the relationship is captured very well in the slogan: *No African Renaissance without African languages.*

Given the advantages that accrue to middle class African people who have proper command of the former colonial languages, especially English, it ought to be clear why it is not melodramatic to assert that these middle class individuals and groups are being expected to commit class suicide. At the beginning of the 1970s already**,** Pierre Alexandre (1972:86) demonstrated how, in post-colonial Africa, one's degree of proficiency in the ex-colonial language influenced one's life chances. The African elites who inherited the colonial kingdom from the colonial overlords, for reasons of convenience and in order to maintain their grip on power, made no more than nominal gestures towards equipping the indigenous languages of the continent with the wherewithal for use in powerful and high-status contexts. Very little has changed in the course of 40 years of political freedom. On 19 February 2004, Mandla Mathebula told the story in *ThisDay* newspaper about a "top black banker" who, allegedly, refused to be interviewed in his mother tongue for a radio programme in the relevant language, because "… he did not want to speak a "fanagalo" language"![3] The result is a vicious downward spiral where the fact that these languages are not used is the cause of their stagnation and of the belief that they cannot be used in these functions[4]. The failure of leadership and the

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[3] See *This Day* 19 February 2004. "Fanagalo" is a pidgin that evolved on the South African mines.
[4] Writing in the Indian context, Pattanayak (1998:25) formulates this phenomenon most elegantly:
> The argument whether a language has to be developed to be used or used to be
> developed goes on adinfinitum (sic). In the meantime English the super colonial

willingness of the elites to follow in the wake of their colonial forerunners are, naturally, reflected in the language attitudes that characterise the people in general. Since their role models overtly and repeatedly demonstrate their lack of belief in the capacity of the indigenous languages to fulfil all the functions of language in all domains of modern life, the people begin to accept as "natural" the supposed inferiority of their own languages and adopt an approach that is determined by considerations that are related only to the market and social status value of the set of languages in their multilingual societies. They fall prey to what Alexander (2002:119) dubbed a Static Maintenance Syndrome (SMS)[5]. They themselves and, more pathetically, those who ought to know better because of their access to the relevant scientific information, end up believing that their languages are intrinsically incapable of attaining the analytical shape and capacity of the more powerful languages of the world as we know it today.

What is required of the intelligentsia and of students of applied linguistics and language activists is no less than the initiation of the linguistic counterpart of a radical version of NEPAD. In other words, the language infrastructure of the continent has to be constructed as an integral component of the economic development plan and as an inseparable element of the cultural revolution and of the deepening of democracy on the continent. This is an All-African project which, in the domain of language policy and planning, involves what we have referred to as the "intellectualisation of the African languages". This implies a long-term commitment to language development (corpus planning) and to the use of African languages in all the most powerful domains of social life (status planning), among many other things. As such, it is a long-term, secular process that will test the political will and stamina of the ruling groups of the continent to the full.

Our core proposition is that we have to initiate a counter-hegemonic trend in the distribution of symbolic power and cultural capital implicit in the prevailing language

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language, goes on introducing (being introduced NA) into newer domains. Its intrusion is then cited as the reason for further support.

dispensation in Africa's education systems. And, let us have no illusions, this is a historic challenge, one which we may not be able to meet adequately. To paraphrase Sibayan: (1999:448), we are called upon to initiate the secular process by which the African languages will gradually eliminate the dominance of English in the controlling domains of language or, at the very least, share those domains with it. In this connection, we have all been heartened by the very welcome developments at the level of the AU, where the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) is due to become one of its recognised specialised agencies. This particular development will help to give direction and coherence to the myriad of language-related initiatives and projects that are being pursued in not so splendid isolation in many different parts of the continent.

The potential of early childhood

Let us turn now to the foundations of intellectual development. The intellectualization of a language begins in early childhood, with the children themselves and their caregivers. Many educationalists, psychologists and philosophers in the North and the South have argued the case for the potential benefits to societies of investing in early childhood education. The hope and the despair that those of us who work in the domain feel, still finds expression in these words of British philosopher Bertrand Russell on the potential benefits of (appropriate) pre-schooling, written as long ago as the 1920's:

> The nursery school, if it became universal, could, in one generation, remove the profound differences in education which divide the classes, could produce a population all enjoying the mental and physical development which is now confined to the most fortunate.
> (Russell p 1969: 125)

He goes on to say:

> Under the Education Act of 1918, nursery schools were to have been promoted by Government money; but when the Geddes Axe descended it was decided that it was

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[5] This means that the native speakers of the languages believe in and cherish the value of their languages, i.e., the vitality of the languages is, within certain limits, not placed in doubt. However, they do not believe that these languages can ever attain the same power and status as, for example, English or French.

> more important to build cruisers and the Singapore Dock for the purpose of
> facilitating war with the Japanese.
> (ibid)

These words resonate across the decades and strike a chord in the hearts of early childhood development workers in most of the countries on our continent. Even in South Africa, a country that now boasts one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, the plight of pre-school aged children and their caregivers continues to be, generally speaking, appalling. Ten years into our democracy, it remains the case that in this feminised domain, 88% don't have government-recognised qualifications and 44% earn under R500 a month (Porteus 2004:349).

Early literacy in the North and the South
When we consider how we introduce children to reading and writing, be they in pre-school or primary school, our challenge increases: we have to counter the mind-numbing grip of colonial and apartheid education that continues to influence early literacy learning and the related (non-) development of a body of literature for African children.

Consider that during the early to mid 20th century, the dominant (literacy) research concentration in Europe was on reading as a psychological perceptual activity that focused on the relationships between sounds and symbols. Strongly behaviourist skills-based approaches to literacy teaching which included the notion of 'reading readiness' were promoted and widely accepted. This view had some important effects in Europe. An industry promoting and selling 'reading readiness' with non-print related activities and materials developed and a limited definition of reading which promoted the view that learning to read was an associative activity focused on perceptual identification and matching took hold. Gillen and Hall (2003:4)

The second half of the 20th Century brought enormous shifts in emphasis and understandings about literacy in the North, with its many print-saturated environments. At a general level, the notion of literacy as autonomous sets of skills that can be broken

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down, learned and then later applied has been challenged. It is now widely accepted that reading and writing form part of social and cultural practices in societies and that many different literacies come into existence for various reasons. (Street 1984, Barton 1994). Learning the mechanical skills is obviously essential, but these skills are best learned at the same time as the learner is apprenticed into use reading and writing in meaningful ways.

A large body of interdisciplinary research has given rise to deeper understandings and altered perspectives about the complexities of early literacy learning. A key insight was recognizing the significance for written language learning of the way early oral language develops

> There is no more successful example of language learning than that provided by mastery of native language during infancy. Since time before history, regardless of race, class, or educational background, families have succeeded in transmitting their native language to their infants - or their infants have succeeded in learning the language within a natural environment of language use (Holdaway 1979:19).

It became increasingly apparent that despite there being obvious differences between oral and written language, young children growing up in literate settings apply similar strategies for making sense of learning to read and write as they use for oral language learning. Children are active meaning-makers (Wells 1986) who construct their own knowledge as part of social interaction (Vygotsky 1978). Writing develops gradually from scribbles, through using invented spellings (Bissex 1980) to conventional writing as children hypothesise and test what they have done against the evidence of more mature writing done by others (Ferreiro & Teberosky 1983).

The role of stories and play in early literacy learning came to be seen as fundamental. The ability to manipulate symbols that develops with imaginative play underpins literacy learning because literacy is a symbolic system (Vygotsky 1978). The connection between imaginative play and stories has been made clear. Vivian Gussin Paley noticed how

> Amazingly, children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form…it is play of course, but it is also story in action, just as storytelling is play put in narrative form (Gussin Paley 1990:4).

Telling and listening to stories are highly valued because through stories children are exposed to rich and complex forms of language. Gordon Wells describes how

> Because stories are self-contextualising, sustained symbolic representations of possible worlds, they provide the child with the opportunity to learn some of the essential characteristics of written language. Reading and discussing stories helps the child to cope with the more disembedded uses of spoken language that the school curriculum demands (Wells 1985:253).

The widely used phrases we 'learn to read by reading' and to 'write by writing' (Smith 1978) have captured the sense that the mechanical skills of reading and writing could be taught as part of a meaningful whole. Reading for enjoyment (Free Voluntary Reading) is claimed to be the most effective way to improve reading and related aspects like vocabulary, spelling and grammar (Krashen 1993)**.**

Teaching approaches based on 'whole language' in the USA (Goodman, 1986) and 'emergent literacy' in the UK (Hall 1987) include the view that reading and writing behaviour emerges slowly over time as children engage in personally meaningful activities that include print. Phonics and other skills are taught and learned from complete and meaningful texts.

Many studies have taken into account the impact of literacy practices across generations, among family members and in different linguistic, class and cultural contexts (Taylor 1983, Taylor & Dorsey Gaines 1988, Brice Heath 1983, Purcell Gates 1995). By way of stark contrast, in the many print – scarce environments of the South, we are still gripped by the erroneous belief that we can teach reading and writing in social and cultural vacuums, as sets of skills which will constitute the 'tools' for reading and writing (Bloch 2002). This fact has devastating consequences for learning and creativity. In classrooms across Africa, children are still forced to begin Grade 1 with reading and writing 'readiness' activities that prolong even further the time when they will actually start

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engaging with print and finding out about literacy. On this continent, replete with oral wisdom and stories, we continue to favour textbooks, full of decontextualised low-level skills and drills, often in a foreign language. At best, those who can afford them, use 'readers' with restricted, unnatural language. Storybooks and other meaningful texts are effectively discarded as supplementary 'extra' material, the luxury that we all know African children generally don't get. Our youngsters continue to be denied opportunities to experience the richness of stories in their own languages in print.

Transmitting a tedious and alien literacy curriculum, often in a poorly understood language, has also hindered the literacy development and creativity of teacher trainers and teachers. It helps if adults, who have the task to motivate children to read and write, are people who have a vibrant relationship with reading and writing themselves. What chances have our teachers had to engage with print in their own languages, either as children, or adults? It is not too harsh to say that holding back the development of written children's literature in African languages has contributed to crippling the development of effective literacy teachers.

Stories Across Africa

For several years, PRAESA has been involved in supporting the implementation of the South African government's Language in Education Policy (1997) which promotes additive bilingualism approaches in education. This has involved us in exploring and developing pedagogical strategies for mother tongue-based bilingual education[6], which implies that children need to become biliterate. We have tried to influence the approaches that inform classroom practice for early literacy in multilingual settings at the levels of teacher training, research and materials development (Bloch 1994; Bloch & Nkence 2000; Bloch & Alexander 2003).

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[6] This phrase refers to an educational system in which the mother tongue (or the language/s of primary socialisation of the child) is used as the language of teaching as far as possible and if it is either replaced or complemented by a language of wider, or of international, communication, is never abandoned but rather

We know that like children in the North, children in Africa learn to read and write more easily when they have access to interesting and enjoyable stories and other reading materials in their mother tongues as well as in English or another ex-colonial language. Kieran Egan says of stories:

> The story form has been one of the most powerful and effective sustainers of cultures across the world. Its great power lies in its ability to fix affective responses to the messages it contains and to bind what is to be remembered with emotional associations. Our emotions, to put it simply, are most effective at sustaining, and helping in the recall of memories of events."
> (Egan 1987:188 cited Bloch 1999)

Our vision is to regain a balance where meaning and creativity for all children are the fulcrum of education. Africa is a continent of stories, and we have to ensure that these regain their prominence and influence in various ways, not least as educational bridges between oral and written language in early childhood.

Working alongside and in collaboration with like-minded organizations and publishers, we are helping to stimulate cultures of reading and writing by initiating programmes for developing new children's literature through writers' and illustrators' workshops and developing specialised children's literature translation skills among professionals working in indigenous South African languages. We also offer courses for trainers and teachers on all aspects of early literacy. Important components are approaches to literacy and biliteracy learning in multilingual classrooms and how to enable and support reading (and writing) for enjoyment.

In particular, in the context of the ACALAN programme called *Implementing the Language Plan of Action for Africa*, we have embarked on a continent-wide project which we call *Stories Across Africa*. It will involve the collection

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sustained as a complementary language of teaching or as a subject taught by well-qualified L1language teachers.

and writing of stories which can become a core body of children's literature across the continent, beginning with the very youngest children and those adults who interact with and educate them. African children irrespective of language or social background will have the opportunity to be read to and to read for themselves versions of the same stories in their mother tongue or in the language of their choice.

This will further the objectives of:

- Establishing and promoting a culture of reading and writing in African languages
- Ensuring that universities and other higher education institutions undertake and sustain the development of African languages by these and other means
- Stimulating and supporting publishers to develop a reading market in African languages
- Helping to inspire a sense of unity and of a common African identity.

We know that many stories have been collected for children over the years. These exist in various printed forms both in and outside Africa. In particular, 'African' stories have been published in Europe and the USA for children in the North. In Africa itself, many of the collections were made in colonial languages; many are now out of print. Moreover, for very young children, 'picture books' which both entertain and support early literacy learning are almost non-existent in African languages, except perhaps for the odd translation and a few other notable exceptions.

One of the intended outcomes of this project will be to stimulate a desire by actual and latent creative African literary and visual artists to create and foster the use of children's literature. While oral literature is obviously a major influence, our aim is to offer stories in modern print form enhanced by appropriate visual material. The unique character of this project will thus be that it is a beginning of a common treasury of children's literature, with the accompanying recognition that such literature needs to be at the centre, rather than on the margins of education, formal and non-formal. Versions of all of the books will become available in English, French and Portuguese as well. This will provide a

vehicle to support effective additional language teaching and learning for Africans who learn these and other European languages.

We hope that publishers in the different regions will be able to bring together and share experience and expertise in the form of co-publications. By helping to make it possible for publishers to 'risk' publishing in African languages, this project will ultimately improve what publishers can offer to communities and to educational curricula in Africa.

Conclusion

We have entered a new phase in the history of the African continent, one where, despite the often overwhelming challenges, those of us involved in legitimating multilingualism feel that there is a meeting of minds between language workers at the South -South level and between the South and the North. Ironically perhaps, we seem to be 'speaking the same language'. The year 2006 has been proclaimed the year of African languages. We are joining forces, in a spirit of collaboration to bring our various strengths together in different and complementary projects. At a time when Soviet society looked bleakly on creativity, a well-known Russian poet, Kornei Chukovsky took it upon himself to defend and nurture what he called the 'linguistic genius' of young children. He was inspired by children's tremendous ability to imagine and play, and saw it as a privilege to write for them. We would like to conclude our input today with a challenge to the great writers and artists of Africa. Join us in demonstrating our respect and value for our children and their future. Unleash your own ' linguistic genius' to inspire the young of Africa. It would be a mark of the ultimate commitment to the development of African languages, if each and every African writer were to write just one story to add to the treasury of *Stories Across Africa* in the course of his or her normal creative work. This is our challenge.

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