

## Is Father Christmas Feeding the Goats? Or, The Bottomless Pit: Book Donations to a Developing Country

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*Book donations to developing countries may be a nuisance rather than a help. Prior consultation with the appropriate national and local agencies is essential. If gifts do not take into account existing needs and conditions, their only use may be to feed the goats.*

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Once upon a time there was a poor little country. Albeit large in size, it had a small population, which was unevenly distributed. The majority of the population lived up in the north where the great border rivers flowed.

Except in times of drought, this majority living up north usually had enough to eat, but owing to a war that raged there for 20 years and owing to a crazy political ideology that kept them apart from their fellow countrymen and women, they lived isolated lives.

Distance also contributed to their isolation. This northern part of the country was 600 km away from the capital situated in the center of the country. A huge game reserve also created a barrier between the northern people and their brothers and sisters in the central and southern parts. In the south was a great desert and other arid areas that made certain parts almost uninhabitable. The population in these areas was therefore sparse.

People of various skin colors lived in this country, but the crazy political ideology forced upon them by a colonial master decreed that the lighter a person's skin color was, the more privileges he or she had, like better education, which of course meant better jobs, more money, nicer houses, and so forth.

Because education without books and libraries is not possible, those with the lighter skins had those in abundance, whereas those with the darker skins had almost nothing of the sort. Because no people with lighter skins lived up north, there were very few books and no book shops or libraries in those parts. In fact, the majority of the people in the north could not even read or write.

Then came a happy day in the history of the poor little country, namely, INDEPENDENCE.

Most have-nots, who were the majority of the nation, believed that heaven on earth would dawn upon them almost immediately. Everybody would be given jobs, houses, cars, schools, hospitals, books, libraries, and

many more of the things that the people with the lighter skins have always had.

Of course it could not happen, at least not overnight. The new leaders had to try to develop the deprived areas and their people as best they could with the limited resources available. It was going to take time, patience, and hard work. Fortunately, some more affluent countries on the globe, who had been using their influence for many years to achieve independence for the poor little country, were indignant about the way the majority of the people were being treated in their own country by foreign colonizers. Now that the people were ruling themselves, they felt free to extend a helping hand, to develop this little country and its people.

Governments, organizations, and even individuals started to offer help in various forms and in various fields such as health, housing, agriculture, mining, small businesses, education, and training.

As was mentioned above, education without books is impossible, so among other things books started to pour in. These books came in various ways, to various recipients, and were collected by the donors by various means.

The enthusiasm and goodwill of the donors was laudable and in some cases even touching. Some organizations and individuals with little money collected second-hand books in their countries with the help of volunteers; publishing houses came together and pooled brand new surplus stock and found finances to pay for the transport; governments made grants available for book donations.

In some cases, volunteer workers traveled to the little country first and set up libraries by writing to donors to sponsor books. Now why was it, then, that after more than five years, vast areas of the country were still without libraries and books and that a reliable foreign researcher who toured the country witnessed books being fed to the goats on three separate occasions in three different parts of the country? The list of things that were going wrong is long and certainly provides some food for thought:

- In some cases books went to schools that already had libraries, so a book cabinet full of books meant for a school without books, a library room, or furniture stood in the corner of a fully equipped school library.
- In some cases donations from two different donor agencies, unaware of each other, landed on the same school's doorstep, sometimes containing more or less the same books.
- In some cases books were processed, catalogued, and classified, but in most cases they were not and nobody in the school had the expertise to undertake this task.
- Most donor agencies did not know or care that a library service of the Ministry of Education and Culture existed, and that there was a separate School Libraries Division with a standardized processing and circulation

system in order to achieve uniformity of bibliographic description and access in all school libraries.

- Some of the already processed materials were classified and catalogued by donor agencies according to strange systems known only in the donor country and not known in the recipient country or the region.
- Schools receiving such materials were greatly confused because they were receiving differently processed materials from the School Library Service and were expected to teach the compulsory school subject Basic Information Science (information skills) to pupils with books that, on the one hand, were processed by the Service as well as books that, on the other hand, carried mysterious classification symbols. Because most teachers put in charge of these collections were not trained librarians, they did not have the background to reclassify.
- Some donor agencies even went as far as to send "experts" to train teachers how to use and apply the classification and cataloguing systems of their countries without prior notification or permission from the School or Public Library Service, who adhere to one standardized system for the whole country.
- Many schools that found consignments of books on their doorstep had no room to put them in, or shelves to put them on, or any teacher on the staff who had the slightest inkling or time to manage the stock. In such cases, usually one of two things happened:
  - a. Either the books remained in their boxes and under lock and key in some or other storeroom for fear they would get lost, that is, they were not used at all, or
  - b. They were put somewhere for use without proper control and without any system for easy retrieval, with the result that in many schools the books disappeared within months.
- Many donations consisted of old, obsolete, shabby, and even tattered books. So books nobody else wanted were considered good enough for deprived third-world children.
- In one specific case, a representative from an organization abroad arrived in the capital only to find that the books that had been dispatched by his organization by air prior to his departure were being held by customs at the airport. He needed the signature of the government officials in charge of the School Library Service for their release, but refused to relinquish the books to the Service for proper processing, classification, cataloguing, and distribution. He insisted that his organization demanded that he himself travel around, doling out unprocessed books like Father Christmas in person, to schools that in his opinion looked needy.

Book donations were not restricted to schools only. A university professor from a European country, teaching at the only university in the poor little

country, arranged a book donation to the university library while on home leave. Without prior consultation with the university librarian, he contacted an organization abroad that collects discarded scientific books from tertiary training institutions and distributes these to universities in developing countries.

When the university librarian heard of it, he requested a list of titles available for donation to enable him and his senior staff to make a selection of suitable titles. He was informed by the donor agency: "Take it or leave it. No lists exist." It was too late in any case, because the embassy had in the meantime arranged for the air force of their country to fly in the 6,000 books. A grand ceremony was organized with the national television present. Present were the cultural attaché of the embassy, the flight officer of the air force with the rank of colonel, all splendid in his uniform, and senior library and academic staff including the beaming European professor, of course. Strangely, only a small portion of the donated books were put up for display during the ceremony.

Senior librarians with feigned smiles, but inwardly grinding their teeth, explained that this was due to lack of exhibition space. The fact of the matter, however, was that most of the books were old, shabby, outdated, and dealt with subjects not offered at the university. Most of the books had to be discarded. Whether the goats were fed with these books is unknown.

This sad story ends with both bad and good news: The bad news is that in spite of a flood of books, the people in the poor little country are still eking out a book-deprived existence. The good news is that thanks to the goats happily chewing along, or the bottomless pit, nobody has actually suffocated in an avalanche of books.

### *Recommended Reading*

Klynsmith, J.T.O. (1993). School library services in Namibia: The need to establish school resource centres, to coordinate donations by local and foreign agencies and to cooperate with teachers' resource centres. In Tömeier, A.-J., Loubser, J., & Marais, A.E. (Eds.), *Coordination of information systems and services in Namibia. Papers of the seminar held in Windhoek 25 February to 5 March 1993* (pp. 172-182). Bonn and Windhoek: German Foundation for International Development.