

16 November, 2010

Dear Friends,

We are spending this week with a fellow grantee-partner from *Les Enfants de Dieu* in Rwanda. We are pleased to learn from him and introduce him to our friends in Santa Cruz. Please enjoy this week's episode of the Newsflash! And as always, please spread to others you think will find it useful.

Sincerely,

Firelight Team

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Truth, myth and Malawi's reading culture  
By Steve Sharra  
2010-11-03, Issue 503

You have probably heard a friend say it, or at least seen it forwarded in emails: 'If you want to hide important information from an African, put it in a book.' Another less insulting but blunt expression says when you see a white person riding in a bus or on a train, or waiting to catch a flight at an airport, they are always reading something. When you see a black person, they are mostly scratching their ankles and staring blankly, not reading anything. Both statements are made as proof that as Africans, we don't have a reading culture.

Generalisations are always dangerous because they are mostly untrue, lumping entire groups into crude and inaccurate stereotypes. Most of the people I find myself in the company of, going back to my school days, have been voracious readers. I grew up in a healthy reading culture, surrounded by books, right here in Malawi. One English teacher in secondary school not only encouraged reading, he also gave me books to read that were not on the examination syllabus.

Conversely, I have also seen white people staring into space and yawning, waiting in line, while in the same space black Africans read books, newspapers,

magazines, and other materials. All of this is to say neither of the above stereotypical statements is an accurate description of entire groups of people, whether white, black, yellow, turquoise or magenta.

Britain and the United States are also expressing similar worries about their reading culture. Consider these recent developments:

- The British newspaper The Telegraph recently carried a story that said a whopping two thirds of British people did not visit a library in 2009.
- In the United States, New York Times columnist Timothy Egan on 25 August expressed concern over the percentages of Americans who are misinformed about President Obama's religion, his birth and citizenship; the bailout of banks; and the scientific evidence on climate change. The title of Egan's column was telling: 'Building a Nation of Know-Nothings.'

Not long ago retired secretary of state and army general Colin Powell countered the 'Obama is a Muslim' myth by pointing out that there would be nothing wrong if Obama were indeed a Muslim. Many American Muslims were decent, peace loving people who contributed to America's economy, culture and democracy. But that belief, together with much other misinformation, persists and grows in a society that sees itself as a model of high literacy.

In his 7 August column in the New York Times, titled 'Putting Our Brains on Hold', Bob Hebert wrote about a report released by the College Board that showed how America's educational standards were declining. Not long ago America led the world in the numbers of 25 - 34 year olds with first degrees. Today, America is at number 12. Hebert said America was a society that held 'intellectual achievement in contempt' and paid more attention to Lindsay Lohan, Lady Gaga and Snooki than to important matters of the day. The blame, he said, lay with parents, students, the educational system, government, and the news media. 'What is the matter with us,' he asked. 'What have we been drinking?' he pleaded, stopping just short of accusing Americans of having been imbibing at Bwandilo and missing important national debates in the media (Malawi's president has recently accused his critics of spending too much time at a famous drinking joint called Bwandilo, in the capital city Lilongwe, and missing out on important matters). Hebert implied that America's reading culture was being affected by these problems, saying, 'We read less and less and write like barbarians.'

In the United States booksellers are closing stores, and libraries are shutting down. A sidewalk book vendor told a New York Times reporter recently, 'It is apparent that we have a real serious issue, that the life of the mind has been in decline for some time now.' As if that is not worrying enough, several newspapers have folded over the past few years.

But dismissing and getting rid of unfair stereotypes and generalisations should not lull us into a false sense of satisfaction that we have a thriving reading culture. A lot of Malawians hardly read anything and the number of those that do not know how to read at all is said to be at 37 per cent of the population.

The other day I crossed the wobbly bridge that vendors have constructed along Lilongwe River. At the end of the bridge I asked the young man collecting the K10 fee (approximately US\$0.06) how many hours he spent at that bridge. Morning till sunset, he told me. I observed that he was not carrying any reading material. A little further away I stopped and asked a similar question to a woman selling airtime. Her answer was the same - morning till sunset. Did she have anything to read when there were no customers? She couldn't afford newspapers, she said. Had she thought of visiting the library and borrowing a book? Nope, she had not thought of that.

The Malawian 'Jua Kali' sector - Jua Kali being what Kenyans call vendors who sell wares in the scorching sun - has lots of people who spend hours sitting and waiting for customers. In my next life I would like to come back as a driver. Or a security guard. I envy the hours these and others in similar types of jobs spend mostly sitting and just waiting. Drivers spend hours waiting on their bosses attending workshops and meetings. Many of them do not have anything to read in between. Next time you are waiting in line at the bank, count how many people are carrying and reading a book, magazine or a newspaper.

Then there is the price of books. The other day I walked into Nyabufu Bookshop in Sunbird Capital Hotel in Lilongwe and saw Professor Brown Chimphamba's autobiography, 'Born in Ntengela: The Story of My Early Life'. Price? K4,000 (approximately US\$27). I know Malawians for whom that is their entire monthly earnings. The problem of the prohibitive cost of books is a chicken and egg one. Without a huge market for books, the cost is going to be high, and publishers will produce just a few copies. And the cycle repeats itself, with implications for literacy rates and a society's reading culture.

It is common for us in Malawi to have a national conversation on events that grip the nation, such as worshippers committing suicide by jumping into a raging fire, or two men conducting an engagement ceremony and planning to marry each other. But when is the last time we had a national conversation based on an important book published by a Malawian scholar or novelist? How often do Malawian columnists cite books and other informed sources?

Apart from former president Dr Bakili Muluzi and the current president Professor Bingu wa Mutharika, most of our politicians and other leaders never write books about their time in office, or about their lives. Our journalists write volumes and

volumes about current events and trends over long periods of time, but never think of developing these topics into book-length projects.

Recently Dr Pascal Mwale, lecturer in philosophy at Chancellor College and Dr Linje Manyozo, lecturer in media studies at the London School of Economics, wrote a lengthy and charged article in the online newspaper NyasaTimes Online about how most lecturers in the University of Malawi get promotions without having to publish a book.

We cannot expect an abundance of books from a society that does not read as many books. The self-perpetuating cycle has to break at some point if we are to learn from our best practices and embark on a process of intellectual renewal. The teacher training colleges are the best place to start, together with classroom teachers and their advisers. The National Library Service is setting up libraries and training librarians in Malawian schools. The Malawi Writers Union has recently been on a nationwide tour visiting schools and encouraging young Malawians to take writing seriously. The Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) this week launched the Read Malawi project, a project being piloted by MIE and the University of Texas at San Antonio aimed at providing supplementary and complementary books for children in primary schools.

These and other efforts by government and civil society ought to be integrated into the teacher education and professional development system, if we are to rebuild the much-lamented reading culture. The United Nations designated the decade from 2003 to 2012 as the Literacy Decade, but obviously the importance of the idea continues from generation to generation. Not only should we be encouraging reading, we should go a step further and encourage book writing as well, giving the world a much-needed progressive African perspective on local and global issues.

For the article, go here: <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/68362>

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Catholics for Choice report questions the funding and activities of faith-based HIV/AIDS organizations

A new report released on the eve of XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna calls for clarity regarding the funding and activities of faith-based organizations that are involved in HIV/AIDS work

The report, "Seeing Is Believing: Questions about Faith-Based Organizations That Are Involved in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Treatment," was commissioned by Catholics for Choice.

Faith-based organizations have long been on the front lines of healthcare provision, and they receive enormous amounts of public money to do so. Since HIV was first identified, they have provided critical care to people living with HIV and AIDS. Unfortunately, many of these providers do not provide a full range of preventative care, especially advice on the use of and access to condoms to prevent the spread of HIV. Too few people have questioned whether the faith-based groups' use of those funds is as effective as it might be. This report raises some important questions and provides some proposals for how we might move forward towards more transparency and, as a result, more comprehensive prevention efforts—especially for higher risk populations.

Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice, said, "We do see a positive role for faith-based organizations in the provision of healthcare services. In many cases, FBOs are the only ones who operate in poorly resourced or rural areas. They have an immense amount of local goodwill, built up over decades working with people when others wouldn't. Many workers have shown tremendous resilience and bravery in their commitment to the provision of healthcare to those who are the least-served. We cannot afford to lose this legacy.

"However, the recommendations in our report highlight some improvements that can be made to ensure that adequate codes of conduct and transparency are developed for all organizations that receive public funds to fight the spread of and treat the HIV/AIDS epidemic."

The recommendations include:

- \* We believe that there should be complete transparency about the funding that faith-based organizations receive from local, state, national and transnational institutions. At present, it is unreasonably difficult to find out how much taxpayer money goes to fund organizations working on HIV and AIDS. It is also very difficult to review the criteria by which public funders judge whether any organization may or may not receive funds for their HIV/AIDS work and whether there are special criteria for FBOs.

- \* We believe that public funds going towards preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and treating those living with HIV/AIDS should be subject to the same strictures as are public funds in other spheres.

- \* All public funding agencies should publish annually a list of the organizations they have funded and how much money each received.

- \* All funding agencies should develop and publish a list of criteria by which they judge whether to fund an organization. If there are special criteria for FBOs, the reason for their existence needs to be made clear, along with the differences from the general criteria.

- \* Finally, funding agencies must ensure that public funding is not used to allow any organization to discriminate in hiring, to refuse to provide or find reasonable

alternatives for the provision of basic treatment or prevention options, or for the use of proselytizing.

Catholics for Choice will send this report to and seek answers to these questions from donor agencies around the world.

For more information, go here: <http://www.awid.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/Catholics-for-Choice-Report-Questions-the-Funding-and-Activities-of-Faith-Based-HIV-AIDS-Organizations>

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(Call for Applications) United Nations Democracy Fund

The United Nations Democracy Fund invites civil society organizations to apply for funding for projects to advance and support democracy. Deadline for project proposals: December 31, 2010.

For more information, go here: <http://www.un.org/democracyfund/>

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(Call for Submissions) Gender Across Borders series on "Gender, War, and Peace: Untold Experiences"

Gender Across Borders is planning a series about gendered experiences of war and peacebuilding.

The general public rarely sees a nuanced image of conflict situations. Typically, women are either labeled as victims or essentialized as peacemakers. Likewise, men are portrayed as perpetrators and power brokers. Between these one-dimensional categorizations is a more complex reality.

Gender Across Borders is soliciting articles that elucidate the untold experiences of women and men before, during, and after war. The topic of this series is intentionally broad to capture the multiplicity of roles women and men play in war and peace.

A broad range of material is welcome in this series, from personal narratives to academic essays to profiles that focus on particular people or events. Articles from around the world are encouraged.

Some topics to consider:

- Women confronting gender-based violence
- Masculinity and violence
- Men as victims
- Women in the armed forces

- Gender and the War on Terror
- Women mobilizing for peace
- Continuum of violence between conflict and post-conflict settings
- Women's participation in peace processes

Deadline to submit an article is November 29, 2010. To apply, please submit your article (300 – 1500 words) along with a résumé or short summary of interests and experience to Alicia at [alicia@genderacrossborders.com](mailto:alicia@genderacrossborders.com). Articles should include relevant links that provide additional information and an image or video to run with the entry. No prior experience with blogging or professional writing is necessary.

Gender Across Borders anticipates the series will run on December 9 – 10, 2010. All contributors must be available via email for the editing and uploading process.

For more, go here: <http://www.genderacrossborders.com/2010/11/08/call-for-writers-gender-war-and-peace-untold-experiences/>

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Prize for prevention of violence and abuse against children  
Deadline Date March 15, 2011

Commemorating the World Day for prevention of abuse and violence against children and participating in the creation of a culture of prevention of child abuse, Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF) annually awards 4 prizes for innovative prevention activities among its non-governmental organisation (NGO) coalition members. Laureate organisations are selected from coalition members' activity reports.

1. First prize: Prize for innovative prevention activities (US\$3,000): Honouring a unique and visionary activity serving as an example for annual events
2. Second prize: Prize for significant prevention activities (US\$1,000): Honouring perseverance, past accomplishments, and the facing of new challenges in working for prevention of child abuse
3. Two additional awards: For specific activities (US\$500 each): Honouring a particular pertinent activity at the grassroots level

Criteria for selection:

- \* The candidate must be an organisation or a group of organisations registered as an NGO coalition member with WWSF. Click here for information on coalition member organisations.
- \* The organisation must be active in the field of child rights.
- \* Priority will be given to creative and innovative approaches.
- \* Priority will also be given to grassroots organisations working in developing countries and countries in transition.

Materials required:

- \* Brief description of the organisation (background, mission, objective, annual programmes, and budget)
- \* Demonstration by the organisation of its commitment to prevent child abuse
- \* Description of activities organised for the World Day (report, photos, and materials)
- \* Budget of activities organised for the World Day
- \* Provisional programme for the following year activities
- \* 2 or 3 original recommendation letters from local and national authorities

For more information, go here: <https://www.comminit.com/en/node/325286/303>  
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(Request for Submissions) Participatory Learning Action journal

Several different parties are collaborating to create a special issue of the journal Participatory Learning Action (PLA) focusing on Youth and Participatory Governance in Africa. The Special Issue will capture and share experiences of the **different ways young people in African countries are engaging with government to participate in public policy, planning and budgeting processes at local, national, regional, and international levels.**

They are looking for contributions from young people or adults working in the field of youth and governance that discuss processes young people have been engaged in; innovations, achievements and challenges; lessons and ways forward. Each article should be around 2,500 words. Support will be provided to contributors throughout the drafting process, including a writing workshop (a 'writeshop') in Nairobi in March next year during which contributors will receive one-to-one support and meet with others working on participatory governance to discuss and share their experiences. Anybody interested in contributing needs to submit a 500 word summary by December 5th. Articles will be selected in December. Authors will submit a first draft of their article in February 2011 and, after further drafting, a final draft in June/July 2011.

For more information, go here: <http://www.planotes.org/>

or to download the call for submissions, go here: <http://www.box.net/shared/20ah0cj9c6>

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As part of the Firelight Foundation's Capacity Building Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused

organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. Past editions of the Firelight Newsflash can be found on our website: <http://www.firelightfoundation.org/newsflash.php>.

We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at [newsletter@firelightfoundation.org](mailto:newsletter@firelightfoundation.org).