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Key players at 'Library Summit' to help Kenya draft an official policy

It is expected that libraries would boost academic excellence

By A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
The EastAfrican

Kenya faces a deficit of libraries, with the majority of schools lacking the facility, despite research stressing the importance of a reading culture.

To make matters worse, the Kenyan government lacks an official policy on library services that would make it mandatory for learning institutions to put up the needed facilities.

In 2008, the World Bank described the scarcity of libraries as a serious issue for secondary education. In 2012, a taskforce from Kenya's Ministry of Education noted that well-equipped libraries were essential if the education sector was to align itself with Kenya's Constitution. But to date, the status quo remains.

A report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) notes that a school library is essential to every long-term strategy for literacy, education, information provision and economic, social and cultural development.

"It has been demonstrated that when librarians and teachers work together, students achieve higher levels of literacy, reading, learning, problem solving and ICT skills," notes the Unesco report.

To help Kenya draft a policy on library services, Knowledge Empowering Youth (KEY) recently brought together 15 education stakeholders including the World Bank. KEY is an initiative of the Charles and Rita Field-Marsham Foundation that has established 20 libraries across Kenya and in a gold mining village in Tanzania, in a span of six years.

The "Library Summit" was organised with the support of the Kenya Law Reform Commission, Ministry of Education, Kenya National Library Services, Kenya National Library Association and the Goethe Institut.

Eliphas Nyamogo, the head of information and library services at the Goethe Institut said that the lack of a policy was one of the key reasons most Kenyan public schools lacked libraries.

"A few schools have poorly equipped reading rooms that do not provide a conducive learning atmosphere," said Mr Nyamogo. "We hope that the enactment of a national legislation will promote excellence at these schools



Kenya Fluorspar Company library. Picture: File

and put the learners at par with their counterparts in private schools."

South Africa is the only country in sub-Saharan Africa that has a national school library policy, which according to Key, has helped to roll out libraries nationwide.

"We have found that a library with up-to-date resources, combined with good leadership in schools sets students apart in literacy and technological proficiency, open-mindedness and world awareness," said KEY chief executive, Rita Field-Marsham.

She added: "Five out of nine primary schools with a Key library, dedicated teachers and reading programmes showed a cumulative range increase in scores of 7.5 per cent since their libraries were established. In three secondary schools surveyed, students scored a cumulative average increase of 15.5 per cent in their Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education national exams."

Ms Field-Marsham gave the example of a pupil at Precious Blood Secondary School in Nairobi who found inspiration for a poem she wrote from the books she read in the KEY library.

"She entered it in a competition organised by Amnesty International and won a trip to New York," she said.

Ms Field-Marsham also cited the case of St Patrick's Iten Boys in Kenya's Rift Valley, which won the National Science Fair prize two years in a row, and represented the country at an international science convention in South Africa.

"They came up with their winning idea — a home made ma-

LITERACY LEVELS IN EA

According to the latest Uwezo East Africa report on Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, released in 2014:

Less than a third of children enrolled in Grade 3 have basic Grade 2 level literacy and numeracy skills;

A significant number of children do not have foundational Grade 2 level skills even as they approach the end of the primary school;

There are large differences in learner achievement among the three East African countries, with Kenya performing best and Uganda worst;

Tanzania has sizeable differences

in literacy and numeracy skills. The skills gaps in Kenya and Uganda are much smaller;

Within countries there are large disparities; for example, the best and worst performing districts in East Africa are all in Kenya;

Children from poorer households consistently achieve lower competency levels on all tests and across all ages;

Out of every 10 teachers, at least one is absent from school on any given day in Kenya and Uganda, and two are absent in Tanzania.

Uwezo is a citizen-led household-based assessment that seeks to establish children's actual learning proficiencies.

chine that makes it easier to generate animal feeds — after reading a book on the subject in the library," she said.

Research has shown that an effective use of online resources and web-based information is dependent on an existing level of literacy — meaning that without a proficient ability to read, online resources will have little positive effect on students or teachers. Reading for pleasure has been shown to produce students who academically outperform their peers across all subjects, including maths.

A study by American think tank Pew released in early 2014 suggested that library users tend to be pillars of their community with good ties to their neighbours and positive lives.

According to Key, as well as benefiting the pupils in remote areas, libraries develop into community hubs, meeting places

and engines of engagement. And because they are sources of relevant information, they provide support for community and religious leaders, local healthcare workers, families, professionals and members of the wider community, it notes.

Among the organisations KEY has partnered with are M-Pesa Foundation, Airtel Kenya, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust. Recently the initiative extended its activities to Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwestern Kenya, near the South Sudan border.

"It is our hope that our students' success attracts even more support so that thousands more libraries can be built and stocked and every school-aged child in East Africa can have access to the knowledge that they need to shape their destiny," said Mrs Field-Marsham.

British Army team now arrives in Somalia

By A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BBC

A BRITISH Army team has arrived in Somalia as part of a United Nations mission to counter Islamist militants.

An advance party of about 10 soldiers will support African Union peacekeeping efforts against the al-Shabaab group. About 70 personnel will eventually be in Somalia carrying out medical, logistical and engineering duties.

Around 300 troops are also to be deployed to South Sudan.

Al Shabaab — the Islamist militant group allied to Al Qaeda — is battling Somalia's government for control of the country. The group has carried out a string of attacks — including in neighbouring Kenya — and is believed to have between 7,000 and 9,000 fighters.

In South Sudan, conflict between government and rebel forces has seen more than 2.2 million people flee from their homes. The British troops being sent to South Sudan will also carry out engineering works to strengthen infrastructure.

Flexible force

The African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom) was launched in 2007, and is mainly comprised of troops from Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia.

Announcing the arrival of the British team in Somalia, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said: "This deployment is another demonstration of the flexibility and global reach of our armed forces."

It shows the UK's "determination to tackle terrorism wherever it rears its head," he added.

Britain has long been a large financial contributor to UN peacekeeping missions and is the fifth highest provider of funds. But its troop commitment has been relatively small — focused mainly on 250 soldiers based in Cyprus.



Amisom troops in Somalia. Pic: AFP

“A library with up-to-date resources plus good leadership in schools always sets students apart.”

Rita Field-Marsham, KEY chief executive