

IPA in Conversation with ...
Samuel Kolawole
Chairman, African Publishers Network
African Publishing during the COVID-19 Pandemic
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Transcript

Bodour Al Qasimi: Greetings everyone. My name is Bodour al Qasimi, I am the vice president of the International Publishers Association. I have the honour and privilege to be conducting this interview with one of the most prominent people in publishing in Africa. We are hosting the IPA in conversation with series, you can find more information on this on our website and on our Youtube and Vimeo channels. Today I have a special guest, Samuel Kolawole, from Nigeria. Welcome, Samuel.

Samuel Kolawole: Thank you, Bodour, Nice to be here.

Bodour Al Qasimi: I feel very special to be conducting this interview with you. Before we start, I want to give a brief introduction about Samuel. Samuel Kolawole is the chairman of the African Publishers Network (APNET) and he is the managing director of University Press, PLC, in Nigeria. He is a seasoned publisher with years experience in the industry. He is the past president of the Nigerian Publishers Association. He is the past chairman of the Nigeria Bookfair Trust and the immediate past president of the Institute of chartered secretaries and administrators of Nigeria. He was voted as one of the top 25 CEOs of Nigeria in 2015 by Business Day Newspaper. He is the current chairman of OOE branch of manufacturers association of Nigeria. Kolawole holds a first degree in law and was called to the bar in 1991. He also holds an MBA with distinction from University of Liverpool and is a fellow of the the Institute of chartered secretaries and administrators of Nigeria, national Institute of marketing of Nigeria and Institute of directors Nigeria amongst many other professional organizations. With an early career background in legal practice and banking, he was company secretary, legal advisor of University Press, PLC, before his appointment as managing director and CEO. Welcome, Samuel.

Samuel Kolawole: Thank you so much. It is a privilege to be here, thank you for the opportunity.

Bodour Al Qasimi: We have been working together closely in the past years. IPA was very honored to have signed an MoU with APNET and you are the driving force behind that. And we discussed many projects together, including the African regional seminar series which took place in both Nairobi and Lagos. I have a set of questions here for you for our audience to get to know you a little better. Before we start, maybe you can tell us a little about how the situation is like in Africa in general. How was the pandemic affected the situation in Africa, what is the update on that, specifically in the publishing sector? Was the lockdown

everywhere or in certain regions? Were the book stores closed or were there home deliveries allowed? Give us a snapshot about how the pandemic was like in Africa and specifically in Nigeria.

Samuel Kolawole: Well, the pandemic has affected publishing in Nigeria and the rest of Africa in a very serious way. When the pandemic broke out, as the countries started getting cases, schools were locked down all across Africa. Because African publishing is focused more on schools, even in cases where publishing activities were not in lockdown – because the schools were not there for the publishers, voluntary lockdown also did this. In some countries, the lockdown was throughout, in others in specific regions. But generally, it affected publishing across Africa and most of the publishers were unable to operate or are still unable to operate as we are today.

Bodour Al Qasimi: What about book stores? How has it affected book stores in terms of access to books, were home deliveries still allowed, were people still ordering – be it on Whatsapp or online?

Samuel Kolawole: In a few countries developed e-books marketing, business was still on and there was home delivery. But most parts of Africa, what we have are educational publishers, who publish school curriculum based books. For those who are in this line of business, it's very difficult, they had to close down. For the book shops, a number of book shops were open, but not being used to that kind of ordering for a long time. When you look at the fact that the biggest sales are coming from text books, you find out that most people are not interested in ordering that much for leisure, unlike what we have in developed countries. Most people were so preoccupied with surviving the pandemic. The fact that their sources of income have been affected, so the consumers were not really ordering that much in terms of books. In developed countries, governments made efforts to cushion the effects financially. But in most parts of Africa, the buying power was not actually there for people to buy and order for home delivery. Home delivery was for food and other essentials.

Bodour Al Qasimi: I see. And what about the government? Did governments do anything to support this crisis and what is happening in terms of education, publishing, creative industries? Were there any initiatives launched by governments in Africa that you could share with us?

Samuel Kolawole: Well, across Africa, the efforts that were made were not really to support publishing industry, as a specific industry. There were measures taken to support small businesses and other business owners. And the publishers would fit into whichever category they belong. For small and medium enterprises, we have in that category, they were able to benefit from some of the low-cost loans governments were giving. In some countries like Kenya, the government also tried by paying arrears to businesses that they have worked with. So, where publishers were being owed, payments were made and there were tax reliefs. But this is quite general, not specifically targeted at the publishing industry. But in terms of getting education, a number of countries in Africa also set up online libraries and

also went on air and had online classes for students, private institutions also went online. But the session for publishers was at a particular time when books are not being purchased, because we are right in the middle of this session. Even with schools online, they were using books they had already purchased, so there was not a lot going on for publishers in that respect. So that is what we've had, and governments efforts were not specifically for publishers, because publishing has not been as an essential service. And that is really a problem.

Bodour Al Qasimi: I hear you Samuel. From this interview series we have also noted that a lot of people from different countries have said the same thing, so we can really notice a pattern there. Unfortunately, if publishers are not getting much support, it is really difficult for them to actually do anything. But have there been any cases where publishers have actually stepped up and taken on initiatives to support distance learning, for example?

Samuel Kolawole: Yes, we have seen quite a number. The challenge is the same challenge we've had all this while – the reason why the pandemic is affecting African publishers probably more than publishers in most other countries and continents. The fact that most of our books are print-based, even before the pandemic. Even if you want to support online, it's now difficult to start putting e-books together. Only those publishers who had the opportunity to do e-books are those that have been able to really support online learning, because some of them have donated e-books towards some the online libraries some of the countries have set up. That notwithstanding, there are some other companies that I know, for example in Nigeria, that have done revision classes, video tutorials sent free of charge, for students, especially those who are preparing for external examinations, for them to get ready at home. A lot of that is going on. I also know that publishers for example in Ghana, the Ghana book publishers association, made donations of books to COVID patients that were in isolation. They also donated PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) to the governments to support the fight, hand sanitizers, face masks, and all those. In Nigeria, I am aware of publishers donating money to COVID-19 funds of different states governments. Quite a lot of this is going on across Africa. Publishers have tried to reach out because we had an online meeting of publishers association's chair men, and one of the things we talked about is that this is the time to step up. If you want to be there, you have to show that it is not only about the money, but that you really care, so that when all this is over, the government will note that you stepped up when there was a need. So it is very important and quite a number of publishers are doing that across Africa

Bodour Al Qasimi: That's wonderful to hear, Samuel. And early on in the pandemic, APNET produced a very good report on the situation which you shared with IPA. Can you talk a bit more about that and let us know if this has been updated recently and what APNET is doing currently to support its members?

Samuel Kolawole: Well, the report was part of the action of APNET to try to look at the situation and see what is going on. We've also been trying and have been making efforts to update, because quite a number of things are changing across the countries, different from



what we had in the initial report. The effort to update is going on, and we are hoping that within a short time, we will be able to produce an updated version. Based on what we have seen, the focus is on encouraging our members and members across Africa to talk. One of the efforts APNET is making to support African publishers is the fact that when we look at the report, one thing that was common to all countries is that African publishing has not been prepared for digital publishing. A lot has been said, seminars have been held, to say: that is the next level but nothing has happened to date. People know that this is the next thing, the future, but they don't know what steps to take. What we are trying to do is to encourage publishers. I want to do a webinar on digital editions. I want to do that on two levels. For decision makers in publishing houses: how do you set up a digital publishing program? We also want to train those down the ladder, on how to actually take the steps. Initially, we are discussing with WIPO, they have offered to support in organizing a webinar in that respect. But we have also been looking at IPA, whether we can work together. We can have experts from all across the world that can talk to African publishers, on the actual steps to be taken, and not on how important digital publishing is – we all know that now. We want to take steps but people don't know what steps to take. That is what we are trying to do to support our members. We also have asked from our members what they would want us to do, because governments are different in different countries. What do you want us to talk to your government about? How to make them see that books are essential for culture and for education? And how they need to support publishers. What specific message do you want us to give to your government? We are putting all those together in support of publishers across Africa. We have planned some trainings for publishers in Africa before now. We were supposed to have one in Cote d'Ivoire, with the support of the Sharjah Book Authority. We were supposed to have one in Tanzania which has also been suspended. We need to look at the future now and to see if we can have an online kind of training. But IPA can also support us in that respect. We always said: we are not looking really for the money but the expertise, but to organize things together, so we can have experts from all across the world to tell us the specific steps, trainings to get us there. We want the action now, it is not about the theory anymore.

Bodour Al Qasimi: Of course. I think those words are really important right now. It's about action, getting publishers to take that step and explore digital. It's not going to be easy to make that change, so much guidance and support is needed. IPA is happy to collaborate on that, I am sure. This leads me to my last question. As you know, we launched the Africa Publishing Innovation Fund last year, in Nairobi. We had finalists announced who were focusing projects on indigenous language publishing and literacy. This year, we announced the new theme for Africa Publishing Innovation Fund, sponsored by Dubai Cares, focusing on remote learning challenges and digital education. What do you see as the main challenges in this area, what do you think of this focus? We have opened the nominations now and we're receiving quite a few nominations already, we have a website too, www.api.fund. And we've been getting quite a few submissions on our website. What do you think the main challenges are in remote learning education and what do you think of this new focus that IPA has decided on?

Samuel Kolawole: Thank you for that. It goes in line with my response to the last question that you asked about digital publishing. The fact that we have to begin to look at remote learning. I must commend IPA and Dubai Cares for that initiative, which a very good one. One of the major challenges we have is the vast land mass that we have in Africa. There are cities that are well developed where infrastructure is available. But there are also many people in the remote areas. If we are looking at remote learning, we are looking at it not just from the aspect of learning away from brick and mortar schools, but from taking learning to those who are in remote areas. Most people in the cities can afford, many private schools are online now, teaching is going on. But what about those in the rural areas? What about those in areas where there is no internet, the infrastructure is not good, the electricity is poor? How do we reach them? That is the major challenge that I see. The remoteness is not just in terms of distance you need to cover to get to them, it is also the remoteness from the kind of infrastructure that they need to be able to get educated. I want to recommend to IPA to look at these innovations. These are the issues that need to be looked at. There is no point in innovating remote learning for those in the cities. It needs to be for those remote from the cities. For most people living in the cities, schools are going online. But I also want to see a kind of collaboration between different stakeholders in the book chain to be able to get this done. The technology companies, they have to collaborate with publishers and others to make sure that we have something that will reach out as widely as possible for people to learn without going to school. We have seen now in Africa that online learning is not as inferior as one would think. That's a good thing. We see a lot more institutions going into this area of learning. My MBA from the University from Liverpool was done full-time, online. And you know, we used to have this image as if it was something that is not as good as what you get from a brick and mortar university. This is the narrative and it is a good thing that IPA is looking in that direction. May I also recommend to IPA if it is possible to have a kind of interaction like this for publishers across Africa – for you to talk about this. We have done some things like this, to disseminate to members the availability of this fund. But from the feedback, not many know what exactly is to be done. In the latest APNET newsletter it is there. I know this is meant to benefit Africa, but if you can have a session like this where publishers, technology companies, stakeholders in the book business can come together and talk to them about this effort. Then we would be able to get a better result in the nominations and entries. Also to encourage combinations of different stakeholders, to provide really innovative ideas on how remote learning can benefit the citizens of Africa.

Bodour al Qasimi: That is a great idea, Samuel. I will discuss that with the team of IPA. We would love to give more guidelines on the Africa Publishing Innovation Fund. Before I leave you and say goodbye, I want to ask you if you have anything to share in the term of any positive outcomes that have come from this COVID-19 pandemic lockdown? Any interesting stories to share? I know you have been spending a lot of time with your family and you have celebrated a milestone birthday. I want to know if you have any positives that you have seen come out of this situation.

Samuel Kolawole: The positive for me, for publishing generally across Africa, is the fact that we now know. We are now having to leapfrog. We have been talking about digital



publishing, about online marketing, home delivery of books, but we've not taken action. This is forcing us to take action as publishers in Africa. I think that is a positive. We are a very resilient people and I know we will take the positive from it and you will see more digital publishing coming out of Africa. At a personal level, it has helped individuals to reconnect with families. I am always on the road, I'm always traveling. We should have been in Lillehammer, I should have been in Tanzania, but I am home with family, the schools are closed, we are getting quality time together. That's also helping. And you know, for me it's a good thing but also an opportunity to rethink business models across Africa. Some tell us, at personal levels, that sometimes what we feel is the most important is not the most important. We need to live life when we have the opportunity. I look at photos of places I've been and I wish things could normalize and I could be in those places and enjoy them again. I saw your photo on Facebook, taking the view of the desert in. Those are the moments you look forward to. I will value life more than we did before. I would also use the opportunity to thank you, Bodour. You have been wonderful for Africa, we love you in Africa, we know how you have been pushing for things to come to Africa and the interest you have for African publishers. We don't take this for granted, we appreciate you so much in Africa.

Bodour al Qasimi: Thank you so much Samuel and I appreciate you too. This has been a wonderful interview. We've learned a lot about you and your vision for APNET and African publishing and what APNET is doing to support its members and publishing in Africa. We look forward to collaborating more with you in the future, thank you for your time. To our audience members, thank you for listening. Please keep up to date with our interview series that we have lined up for you. IPA in conversation with. Look out for our next guest speaker. Goodbye, everyone.