



## **Africa is Reading: The SDG Book Club**

*with*

**Michiel Kolman, Elsevier**

**Olatoun Gabi-Williams, African Chapter, UN SDG Book Club & *Borders: Literature for all Nations***

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**KENNEALLY:** In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly set a collection of Sustainable Development Goals for the year 2030. The worldwide wish list begins with no poverty and includes gender equality, clean water and sanitation, and affordable and clean energy.

Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC.

Quality education, for example, is one SDG that the International Publishers Association is expressly supporting through organizing and supporting a global children's book club. At the Bologna Children's Book Fair last month, SDG Book Club organizers celebrated completion of readings lists for all 17 SDGs.

Michiel Kolman, IPA presidential envoy for diversity and inclusion, first envisioned the SDG Book Club. In a 2019 CCC podcast, Kolman, who is a Senior VP of Information Industry Relations and Academic Ambassador at Elsevier, told me how he rallied publishers around the world to join him.

**KOLMAN:** The IPA – the International Publishers Association – and the UN has had a pretty good relationship for many, many years. So we came together, thought, what could we do together? And the best thing we thought of was a book club around the SDGs for children – so for kids around the age of six to 12. You can imagine you're a young boy in Peru, and you can read in your own language – in Spanish, for instance – about clean water and sanitation. Or you're a young girl in China, and you can read in Chinese about gender equality. So that's what we'd like to achieve.

in the meantime, we had many more partners who had joined us in this initiative. For instance, there is IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People. We're happy to have IFLA there as well, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. And then the Bologna Children's Book Fair itself was also represented. And on the booksellers side is the European and International Booksellers Federation. So all



the key players in the value chain in our industry are represented, because when they heard about the initiative, they thought, yes, this is something we would be very happy to join.

KENNEALLY: What does it mean to publishers and to publisher organizations like the IPA to be partnering with the United Nations and other international organizations?

KOLMAN: I think it's a beautiful way where publishers can show that they are engaged in what I would call the big issues that affect the planet. You could see the SDGs as a bit like a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people on the planet, and I think publishers have to play a role in that as well.

I launched this concept, at the SDG Leaders Summit at the UN in New York, just at the eve of the General Assembly. And when I talked about this concept to the other SDG leaders, they really liked it, because it's quite concrete. You have actual books in your hands for children around the SDGs. And I think that's a beautiful contribution that the publishers can make.

KENNEALLY: On Tuesday this week at the 2022 London Book Fair, Michiel Kolman will chair a special program celebrating the SDG Book Club. Joining the panel discussion on sustainability in children's literature is Olatoun Gabi-Williams, a founding organizer of the African Chapter of the UN SDG Book Club and owner of *Borders: Literature for all Nations*, an online, print, and live platform for authors and members of the book trade based in Nigeria.

KENNEALLY: Olatoun Gabi-Williams, welcome to the program.

GABI-WILLIAMS: Good to be here, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Thank you for joining me. Tell us – why did you decide to participate in creation of an African chapter of the UN SDG Book Club?

GABI-WILLIAMS: In 2015, I founded Borders. The vision was to promote African literature as far and as wide as possible. When I heard about the global UN SDG Book Club, I was so excited. But I realized that they had their rules and their systems, so I started my own SDG book club – Borders SDG Book Club, with the recognition of Michiel Kolman, the founder of the global club, and the UN. So when the conversation started about forming an African chapter of the global club – UN SDG Book Club, I was one of the most obvious people to ask to join, I guess, so I was invited to join the team.

KENNEALLY: Tell us about who's on that team. There are a number of pan-African organizations who are involved.



GABI-WILLIAMS: Yes. There's African Publishers Network – we call APNET – which is a member of the IPA. Then there's a pan-African library association, which is AfLIA – it's a mouthful – African Library & Information Associations, etc. Pan-African Writers Association, PAWA, which is an august institution. And PABA – Pan-African Booksellers Association. Have I missed anybody out? UN Namibia, our hosts, of course, yes. And Borders, a publishing platform.

KENNEALLY: The books are published primarily in the four primary African languages, which are English, Kiswahili, Arabic, and French. How are the titles selected?

GABI-WILLIAMS: APNET handles the calls for submissions, the administration of submissions.

We get together every two months, and we come up with a final list from our own individual shortlists. For instance, in the English selection committee, there's, I think, five or six members. They all shortlist. And then we get together by Zoom to whittle it down to a final list sent to the UN to publish.

KENNEALLY: That's a big enough project, but you have also included indigenous languages, and there are many dozens, probably hundreds, of indigenous languages across Africa.

GABI-WILLIAMS: A dizzying number – countless numbers of indigenous languages. It's a symbolic project – the honorary indigenous African language book. It's honorary. It's non-competitive. We call for them as well. And those that come in, we have a roster, and there's a selector – one man or one woman selects for the relevant SDG. So we're hoping for a really nice representation of African languages when the club really, really gets going.

KENNEALLY: Give us an idea of the kinds of titles, though, that are published in indigenous languages and where they're from.

GABI-WILLIAMS: We have a book in Akan, which is a Ghanaian language. It's one of the Anansi folk stories – very famous folk stories. That's the zero hunger pick, I think. We have a Yoruba book. That's my language – southwest Nigeria. And Cuba and Brazil and parts of Togo speak Yoruba. That's called (title in Yoruba) – “The Cold Water Seller.” Well, a literal translation – yeah, “The Cold Water Seller,” because that's a very familiar thing on our landscape, the urban landscape, young children carrying trays with sachets of cold water. And I think another one is Sesotho – yes, we have a Sesotho book. I cannot pronounce the name. But that talks about the culture of the peoples of the Sesotho – South Africa.



KENNEALLY: In which countries are the SDG book clubs most popular, and how do you promote something like the SDG Book Club reading list across all of Africa?

GABI-WILLIAMS: The routine promotion is obviously social media, newsletters. But we have a cluster of ambassador schools we're growing, and hopefully it will continue to grow and hopefully reach the continent at some stage. And also SDG book clubs outside schools as well within the framework of the African chapter – we're going to be promoting them as well.

KENNEALLY: Of all the SDGs – you've published, as you say, five sets of reading lists for SDG 1 through 5, and the next one, SDG 6, on clean water and sanitation, is coming soon. But of those topics and the others that are covered throughout the 17 SDGs, which are the ones that you're most passionate about? What gets you most excited about the SDGs?

GABI-WILLIAMS: As you said, we've published reading lists for SDG 1 to 5. And even though gender empowerment and gender equity and the empowerment of women and girls is not the one I find most exciting, it's very important – all of them are. But I love that list the most. We have represented on that list Chigozie Anuli Mbadugha with her book *Rude Awakening*, which is about Igbo inheritance rights. The Igbo culture traditionally denies women the right to inherit from the deceased, but the Supreme Court of Nigeria in 2014 overturned that and upheld the right of women to inherit. So she writes a fantastic novella about that topic. And that book, *Rude Awakening*, is part of a trilogy which deals – the unifying theme is women's empowerment. One of the books centers teenage pregnancy and peer pressure. Another book centers domestic violence.

Another book on the SDG 5 list I love is by Lorato Trok, South Africa, and that's a biography of Rosina Sedibane Modiba, who's a very famous athlete in South Africa, and we want to make her famous globally. Her story's phenomenal. She was running against white people in South Africa when it was illegal. So her story mirrors the story of apartheid – you know, her parents coming to watch her in the stadium, and they have to come in through a separate gate. Of course, she wins. So it's quite the juxtaposition of lowly but exalted. It's beautiful to me. It was just an amazing book.

And yes, *Chubot, the Cursed One* – another wonderful story by a Kenyan writer, Christopher Okemwa. Real heavy hitters on that list. And that covers a whole host of social concerns, including political violence in Kenya, which is a big thing. It's a scourge of Kenyan politics, political violence. So he does a wonderful thing. But underscoring all those stories is the empowerment of women.



But my very favorite SDG, the one that really resonates with me, I think is SDG 11 – safe, resilient, sustainable cities and communities, human settlements – because it just cuts across so many important – poverty, safety, justice, discrimination. Gosh, I think of transport systems. I think of road safety. It covers well-being, health. It’s just one that I love, that I look forward to seeing the list. But we have a long way to go before we reach SDG 11. I’m looking forward to see what we’re going to have for the cities and communities.

KENNEALLY: Olatoun Gabi-Williams, when we think of children’s book clubs, we think of titles that are safe and soothing. But the titles that you’re telling us about are really boundary-pushing and challenging. That seems to me to be very important, especially for Africa.

GABI-WILLIAMS: I have to stress, and I didn’t, the target age range is six to 12-plus. So we do boundary young adults as well. For me, young adults is 12 to 18, although some people say it’s 12 to 24 – but 12 to 18. So we do have those books that do, as you said, push boundaries and challenge and provoke. And I find that children are pretty advanced these days. They’re still fairly sanitized, these books, but they do introduce important principles.

KENNEALLY: It also underscores another interesting part of literature, which is it can change lives.

GABI-WILLIAMS: Oh, gosh, yes. Yes. Especially books chosen to represent principles of the Sustainable Development Goals. I love the way the SDGs undergird the human rights, and children have to grow up knowing their rights, and the human rights undergird what we’re trying to do with the SDGs to make the world a better place from the perspective of people, the planet. We want peace. And the interaction between people and the planet is so important. Yes, it does improve lives.

KENNEALLY: Well, changing lives and improving living conditions is a family tradition for you, because your father, Dr. Gabi Williams, he was a distinguished public health policy executive in Nigeria for many years. He represented the country at a variety of meetings, including executive boards of WHO and UNICEF. So I imagine it must be very important to you to carry on that kind of work through the UN SDG Book Club.

GABI-WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Yes, it’s lovely. When, for instance, we were publishing the SDG 3 list, we had a book for the very youngest children – that’s really 6-minus – on COVID. That’s *Nursery Corona Tales*. That’s minus, really. And then publishing a book on *AIDS: The Wicked Disease*. I think we published a book, *The Cholera Scare*. Of course, these are all the areas of my father’s work. Yes, it’s poignant being in a position to do that and



know that he would champion what I'm doing with the SDG Book Club. Yes, yes.  
(laughter)

KENNEALLY: Well, Olatoun Gabi-Williams, thank you so much for joining me on the program today.

GABI-WILLIAMS: Thank you so much, Chris, for having me.

KENNEALLY: At the Bologna Book Fair in March, the International Publishers Association announced a partnership with Simbi, an online reading platform, to make books in the SDG Book Club available to young readers worldwide. Aaron Friedland is CEO and co-founder of Simbi. Welcome to the program.

FRIEDLAND: Thanks for having me. Real pleasure to be here.

KENNEALLY: It's a pleasure to have you join us, Aaron. Tell us about how Simbi is making SDG Book Club titles available.

FRIEDLAND: Yeah, that's a great question, Chris. Simbi is working with publishers from around the world who we're able to license their titles from and put them on the Simbi platform, which is a reading platform. And what happens from there is once the books are uploaded, students around the world and all kids are able to select any book that they're interested in reading.

But the other thing that students are able to do is they're able to narrate books. So they're able to click on any book, press record, and actually start narrating or reading it out loud, knowing that after they've narrated, their voice and text are teaching hundreds of thousands of students around the world as they read and listen to it. What's really unique about that approach is that Simbi also captures their location information, their accent information. So whether you're a child in rural Uganda or whether you're a child in the UK, you can actually click on a narrator who sounds like you, or you can explore a diverse set of accents, which is really empowering for students to hear a diverse group of accents and also significantly increases learner comprehension when they're reading and listening to a narration that they're motivated by or that they identify with.

And then the last item that I'll mention is we also make these books available with our partner charity, Simbi Foundation. Simbi Foundation is a nonprofit that builds solar-powered classrooms out of shipping containers in remote and refugee communities. After these titles are on Simbi, if the publisher have donated or opted to donate these to Simbi Foundation, they're then made available offline through these BrightBox solar-powered classrooms.



KENNEALLY: Why do you think the SDG Book Club titles are important to add to your catalog? You think they will interest children?

FRIEDLAND: Absolutely. What we see with Simbi is there is so much content out there to choose from, and when we're able to focus on content that really motivates children and that really inspires people to be the next generation of leaders that we want to see in the world, we see an amazing outcome. And it just so happens that by being really thoughtful and very deliberate in the content that we're uploading and the content that we choose, we're able to offer that as a unique value proposition. We're able to ensure that teachers and parents around the world know that Simbi's a great place to go to for quality, meaningful content.

And in terms of your question as to why it interests and motivates children, the SDG books are just so motivating, right? They're lessons of positive impact. They're lessons of inspiring people changing the world. And a lot of the time, they're able to see themselves in these incredibly inspiring people and are able to go be the global citizens that we hope they will eventually become.

KENNEALLY: You began to tell us, Aaron Friedland, about the Simbi digital library and how it motivates students to learn to read, and they do that by narrating books. The aim is to improve not only their own reading skills, but also those of other readers who, as you said, listen later to those narrations. What are the results you're seeing?

FRIEDLAND: Growing up, I couldn't read, and in grade four or grade five, teachers noticed, hey, there's an issue. And they approached my parents, had me diagnosed, and found out I was dyslexic. Essentially, I was performing very well in mathematics and very poorly in all things reading. The teachers told my parents, look, let's explore trade schools for your son. Let's explore other options. Realistically, he's not going to be going off to higher education.

And my parents ended up finding this amazing professor from McGill who was doing some really unique research giving students with dyslexia books and tapes so that they would listen to the tape and read the text simultaneously. This bimodal approach of reading while listening really impacted my personal fluency. And one of the main reasons that it does is ultimately to do with exposure. Your eyes and ears are both simultaneously engaged. And on top of that, the bimodality of that engagement essentially connects your temporal and occipital lobes, so there's just significantly more exposure.

Now, that approach worked really well for me, and years later, I was doing a master's degree in economics. I had also been working in Uganda for some time. And in Uganda,



what I was seeing in rural Uganda was that there were many students who weren't reading at grade level, but many of the teachers didn't speak English all that well, even though English is part of the national curriculum.

So I wanted to see, hey, I wonder if the approach that taught me to read could be applied in rural Uganda in the refugee settlements that we were working in. It was too expensive to send tapes and books, so I built a very basic version of Simbi, asked students in North America to narrate these books, so initially that students in Uganda could read and listen.

There were two initial outcomes that shocked us. One was the students in Uganda were becoming statistically significantly better readers. Whether you're in Uganda or whether you're in Canada, the act of reading while listening is just the most effective way to read. You can see up to a 2x improvement in fluency in as little as three months.

The other result that shocked us was when I returned from Uganda, the number of teachers and parents and kids that reached out to say, hey, we love narrating books for social good. How do we do more of this? That was really a moment where we thought, hey, there could be something here. There could be a way to keep motivating kids to read more books more often.

Initially, I personally thought, hey, literacy is a lower-income country problem. I never thought of it as a higher-income country problem. And then you start looking into the literature and you start looking into the data, and you quickly realize, no, actually, for the first time in human history, you have higher-income countries, like the US, with declining literacy rates. The biggest tech giants and the top-paid engineers are not thinking about, how do we motivate kids to read more books? They're thinking about, how do I distract you? How do I keep you swiping and scrolling? So very quickly realized that the company and the tech needed to motivate and inspire reading for all people in all places, not just be a lower-income country solution.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, that idea of reading as a social good and to promote a social good – that sums up the SDG Book Club.

**FRIEDLAND:** It really does, (laughter). The content is incredible. We're very excited to see what we're able to do with the SDG Book Club and to see how we're able to just make more books available to more people and to do so in multiple languages, as well.

**KENNEALLY:** You want to make this an exciting as well as an educational experience for students, so you've created this SDG Read-A-Thon working with the SDG Book Club titles. How will that work?





FRIEDLAND: The read-a-thon is a really exciting model. How it works is that students are able to join a group. We've had thousands of people in these groups in the past. And we're able to essentially see all of the different participants around the world, and there's a leaderboard that shows who's narrated the most books, who's read the most books, where these people are. It's a great way to foster community and to also foster a little friendly competition to inspire reading.

KENNEALLY: All right. Well, Aaron Friedland, CEO and co-founder of Simbi, thanks so much for joining me today.

FRIEDLAND: Chris, real pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: The UN's Sustainable Development Goals – known as SDGs – express the highest ambitions of humanity.

As the online publication Our World in Data has recognized, “the breadth of the 17 goals, their 169 targets and 232 indicators mean all countries face a significant challenge ... in delivering these commitments.”

The great hope, however, is that everyone can contribute to progress for the goals and sustainable development for all.

That's all for now.

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