



Reports on literary crisis must move us to urgent action

By [Mediamax Digital](#)

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This week, I revisit the issue of the literacy crisis that is steadily enveloping all sections of society from learning institutions to professions and the general public. On Friday, a local weekly newspaper had a screaming headline 'Teachers are physically in class, but their minds are outside'.

I equally came across a story doing rounds in social media ridiculing Kenyans for defiling the English language, courtesy of direct translation. Part of the article read, in 1990s there was a bus called 'Judy Smart Star' and it was carrying the Nyeri/Othaya route..." When I read the two excerpts, a new campaign to start stocked libraries in primary schools as one way of addressing the endemic literacy crisis in Kenya made sense.

The four-month project, which is dubbed '**Yetu Start a Library Campaign**', was launched last month by Dr Auma Obama with the aim of raising Sh30 million to establish 100 libraries in schools across the country, and later ensure all public primary schools have libraries.

The champion of the campaign is a 10-year-old girl, Chela, who has a big dream to start libraries and collect stories from Kenyans for the over 10 million children like her who study in schools without libraries and hence have no access to storybooks, a learning resource that has a great impact on children literacy and academic excellence.

The campaign is supported by USAid and the Aga Khan Foundation in partnership with Storymoja's Start a Library initiative, which has in the past three years started 64 libraries in different parts of the country.

The most amazing thing about the campaign is that apart from raising money through a local philanthropy platform hosted at the campaign website, Chela wants to mobilise Kenyans to write the first ever book collectively authored by a nation!

The campaign has recruited 12 local writers who will each write a 50,000-word stories for children in three months. Members of the public can also join the writers and co-author the stories by contributing words to the storylines.

For every word contributed, the guest author pays Sh10. All the 12 storybooks will be published at the end of the campaign and the names of all those who co-authored the books will be included no matter the number of words contributed, so longer as they paid for the thoughts they shared!

The campaign comes against the backdrop of several recent studies that have exposed the low literacy levels among learners in schools, colleges and even respected professions. The 2014 Uwezo report released a few months ago revealed that one of four students in Class Seven do not have Class Two-level literacy skills.

Also, only less than a third of children enrolled in Class Three have basic Class Two-level literacy skills. Furthermore, children from poorer households consistently show lower learning outcomes.

The 2014 Unesco Monitoring Global Report also confirmed these finding by revealing that millions of Kenyan children are failing to learn the basics despite much improved access to primary education.

To address this glaring literacy crisis, the Yetu Start a Library campaign intends to make storybooks accessible to children because most parents no longer buy storybooks for their children. Over the years, there has been that wrongly held notion that reading storybooks is a waste of time and that they do not add any value on the child's performance.

Instead, parents focus on buying textbooks, revision books, encyclopaedias and past examination papers so that their children can read, memorise and reproduce the contents when sitting for national exams.

The campaign is based on the trust that storybooks are textbooks, too, since they help children to learn better the language of instruction, be it English or Kiswahili.

Without proper comprehension of the instructional languages, children will not understand the contents of other subjects; therefore, they will not do well in school.

Post source : *James Momanyi*