

Community Libraries and Reading Programs for Youth in Burkina Faso

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Abstract:

This paper describes the reading-related activities oriented to young adults in Burkina Faso of Friends of African Village Libraries, a non-profit organization that supports community libraries. These activities comprise three programs. The first program is direct support for dozens of rural libraries established since 2001. The paper describes the processes and materials that FAVL has developed to offer effective support for library operations. The FAVL philosophy involves training “local librarians” who can effectively manage small community libraries. The second program is a variety of reading programs, from summer reading camps for children to extension reading programs for young adults. These reading promotion activities can be adopted as replicable programs by other library-support organizations. The paper will report on a health reading club, funded by EIFL, involving 40 young women in four village libraries. The young women use smartphones to access important health information relevant for young women in rural settings (excision, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS). The paper will also report on a reading program for young adults, where books were delivered to villages with no libraries. The third program consists of initiatives to create and distribute attractive reading material for rural readers in Burkina Faso. Several initiatives have been taken over the past decade, resulting in more than 80 books printed and distributed to libraries. These books are oriented towards youth, and have become the most widely read books in the libraries, suggesting that library services in rural areas of Africa should not overlook an important role for the production of books that will appeal to local readers. Overall, the experience of FAVL support suggests that library support programs can be effective and low-cost. The FAVL model embraces transparency and effectiveness in library activities. The presentation and paper will give detailed information on costs of each of the programs.

Keywords: Libraries, Africa, Evaluation, Books, Children.

1. Introduction

In his hallucinatory novel of the horrors of the civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone, *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Amadou Kourouma's central character carries around with him, as he experiences the war, a dictionary. It is the ten year old Birahima's only book. The dictionary serves two purposes: it enables Birahima to make sense (and sometimes nonsense) of the complex reality that buffets his life; and it enables Kourouma to foreground that the seriousness of words is related to the seriousness of war.

Kourouma's novels more generally have as broad theme the bitter irony of how words (slogans, phrases, speeches) distort the behavior of people. Confronted with massive verbal structures of acquiescence and passivity, Kourouma and the reader have to journey through fictive landscapes to make ironic those structures, in order to stand outside them and change them.

Kourouma's novels are widely known to secondary school students in West Africa. *Allah is Not Obligated* was written with the youth reader as intended audience. The novel speaks to the concerns of youth. The reality of French West Africa in the 1990s (and still to this day) is that youth have little desire to read European and American escapist fantasy and dystopian daydreams of heroic resistance. They live in a grueling world of work, and a grinding reality of limited hope. They are hopeful but somewhat cynical about promises of a better future. They want to read novels about their own lives.

While widely known, however, the vast majority youth in West Africa in 2015 are unable to read *Allah is Not Obligated*. The reason is straightforward: there are very few public or community libraries; there are very few bookstores; and the prices of books are very high relative to the low incomes of the region. Some numbers illustrate the problem of access to books. Burkina Faso has 16 million people and 8,000 villages and towns, with two large cities. Perhaps 50 villages and towns have community libraries. The first public library in the capital city of Ouagadougou was established in 2011. Only the two large cities have bookstores, and even then just three or four proper bookstores. Books are expensive: the African novels assigned in secondary school cost about 2,500 FCFA (\$5 USD) for a used copy, while in rural areas the average income is only about \$1 per day, so that a full week's wages are needed to afford a paperback novel.

In this environment of difficult access to books, replicated throughout the countries of sub-Saharan Africa with a population of almost 900 million people, a number of non-governmental organizations have begun working to ignite a public library movement and reading culture that have languished for much of the social history of African countries.

This paper documents the efforts of Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL), a small non-profit organization based in San Jose, California, that was established in 2001 to promote reading and access to books. The focus is on library and reading programs in Burkina Faso, although FAVL also supports libraries and reading in northern Ghana and in Uganda.

The detailed review of FAVL programs suggests some important conclusions: (1) children, youth and other audiences can have access to books and information through community libraries at fairly modest cost; (2) there are many avid readers among youth and children in villages, and enabling access to books for these readers is likely to

expand opportunities for them to be more productive as adults and more engaged as citizens; (3) little is known about just how productive or engaged children and youth who have access to books will become, through reading, and this remains an important research agenda.

2. FAVL libraries

The core FAVL program is to support community libraries. In the period 2001-2014, donors enabled FAVL to help communities establish and sustain operations in 14 libraries in Burkina Faso. Starting in January 2015, FAVL has begun work to establish 20 community libraries in northern Burkina Faso. The work is funded through a sub-grant award from United States Department of Agriculture and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) as part of their Beoog-Biiga II project to.

FAVL's philosophy is to focus on low-cost conversions of existing buildings and hiring of local librarians. Village communities are expected to donate an existing (unused) building for the library, while FAVL donors contribute to the refurbishment, furniture and books. Libraries are usually simple one room buildings, with bookshelves, chairs and tables that have been manufactured locally by carpenters. The libraries have tin roofs and mud brick or quarried earthen brick walls, and consequently get very hot during the day (temperature is regularly above 35 centigrade). Book stock consists almost 95% of books in French, the language of instruction in the national school system, some books in English, which is taught in the secondary school system, and a small selection of pamphlets and manuals written in local languages (Dioula, Moré and Ffulfulde are the three official written national languages; the country also has more than 60 other languages which are not written and have no standard orthography). Books are usually grouped into African-authored children's books and novels, donated children's books, donated second-hand European and translated American novels and non-fiction, books from the school program, and non-fiction.

The typical budget for establishing a library is has three components: 2.000.000 FCFA (\$4,000 USD), for refurbishment of a building; 1.500.000 FCFA (\$3,000 USD) for 500 new books at a cost of about \$6 per book; and 1.000.000 FCFA (\$2,000 USD) for furniture (shelves, tables, chairs). Thus establishing a library costs about \$9,000 USD. Most libraries eventually find other donors for used books through teachers or migrants from the village who live in France.

Librarians then pursue two weeks of practical training at the community library of Béréba, where FAVL also maintains a guest house. During training, librarians learn the following essential library management practices:

- Enter books into a book register, number books, create a checkout card for each book (similar to old non-computerized book tracking system)
- Register subscribers who are able to check out books
- Check out books
- Organize library (dusting, arranging, classifying, placing books back on shelves)
- Conduct inventory of books in the library
- Maintain proper petty cash accounts
- Write monthly reports including statistics of library visits, books checked out, and subscribers
- Animate reading sessions

- Plan and implement summer reading camps
- Promote library and reading in village schools

FAVL signs a convention or agreement with the rural commune to assure local participation in the management of the library. The librarian is officially an employee of the commune, and FA VL agrees to a sliding scale of contributions for the library, starting at 100% of the salary (typically about 40.000 FCFA for a 20 hour a week local librarian), then 75% in the second year, then 50% in the third year, so that by the fifth year the commune is paying all of the librarian salary. In practice it has proven difficult for communes to assume the responsibility that they agree to: some communes are able to pay the salaries, other communes agree and then do not pay the salaries after some time.

With some reasonable assumptions, estimates of the impact of libraries on reading in villages in Burkina Faso matched to the costs of operating libraries suggest that the cost of an extra book read a year varies from \$.74 to \$1.30 (Kevane & Sissao, 2006, 2007, 2008). Basically, it costs approximately \$2,000 USD to operate a library in a year, and this generates about 2,000 or more extra books read by the village population compared with control villages, based on a comparison of villages with libraries and villages without libraries. The typical village has maybe 500 readers (mostly youth and children, as schooling rates for youth are now about 70%, while literacy rates for adults are only about 25%). Surveys find that people claim to read about one book a month (of course, many of these books are short pamphlets, or people are re-reading the same limited number of books). Libraries increase the amount of books read about 50%, which would be 3,000 extra books read in a year.

3. FAVL reading promotion programs

Over the past decade FAVL has experimented with a variety of reading programs, from summer reading camps for children to extension reading programs for young adults. These reading promotion activities can be adopted as replicable programs by other library-support organizations.

a. Smartphones for health

A very recent FAVL reading program, implemented with a grant from Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), is a health reading club program involving 40 young women in four village libraries. The young women use smartphones to access important health information relevant for young women in rural settings. Ten lesson plans were created by FAVL and technical partner local NGO Yam Pukri: gender relations in the household, sexual violence, malaria, HIV/AIDS, female circumcision (excision), puberty and female menstrual cycle, pregnancy, child nutrition, family planning and contraception). Lessons were loaded onto smartphones. Each library has five smartphones. Ten young women in each library participate, along with the librarian and the health agent of the community. The young women meet once a week and form groups of two persons, each pair with a smartphone. They read the lesson on the phone then as a group they discuss. The village health agent attends the sessions and responds to questions. The young women use Facebook to communicate with each other and the participants are also encouraged to browse the Internet. Each library has a local wifi net using a cellphone connection.

The total budget for the project was a modest \$20,000, of which about \$5,000 was spent on the smartphones, formatting the health lessons for readability on Android devices, testing and equipping the libraries with wifi connections, small solar panels and batteries for charging the phones and router. Then stipends are paid to the librarians and health agents for their work each week in organizing and leading the sessions. As the project draws to a close April 2015, the young women are being encouraged to create reading materials (in the form of illustrated pamphlets) that will be printed in the Houndé multimedia center (see below). The project continues through June 2015, so there is as yet no evaluation. Attendance in four of the libraries has been good; one library has not seen good attendance and staff is trying to troubleshoot the problem. Feedback from participants has been excellent. One young woman remarked in February 2015, "Without lying to you, I really liked this project because since the beginning until today, I saw a big change in myself, a lot of thing I doubted have become much clearer thanks to the programs of the project EIFL."

b. Youth of Tuy read

In April 2013, Friends of African Village Libraries initiated a project to promote reading among youth (aged 15-24) of Tuy province in southwestern Burkina Faso (Kevane, 2014b). The goal was to provide appropriate reading materials (novels and *bande dessinées*) to youth who had in the past had very little access to reading materials. Flyers describing the project were distributed in 40 villages. Youth who had completed the CM1 level (5th grade) and who were interested in reading were invited to participate in the project. There was a very positive response of 696 applications submitted completed applications. Of these, 295 were selected to participate in the program, and 262 were selected to be in a control group. The selection was random. The first distribution of books was in May 2013 and the program continued through June 2014. In total, about 30 titles were distributed over the course of the year to each participant.

The short young adult novels and graphic novels were selected by FAVL staff based on experiences with young readers in community libraries in the region. For example, *Le Devoir de Classe* by the author team of Missa Hebie, Noraogo Sawadogo and Sophie Heidi Kam is a youth-oriented novel based on a television series produced for Burkinabè television. A young student, Ismael, is the son of a gardener. His father's employer helps pay for Ismael to attend an elite private school. Ismael is studious and honest, but is gullible and so is tricked into cheating by the selfish son of a government minister, and is expelled from school. His friends stand by him, and in the end he is vindicated and the government minister's son is expelled. The message of the book is that honesty and effort are important virtues, but perhaps more importantly that friends help each other in times of need. Ismael inspires trust amongst his friends. That trust is what enables them to outsmart the devious son of the minister. The minister's son, on the other hand, has no trust, and no one trusts him. That is his downfall.

Prior to the beginning of the program, all applicants received a free copy of a short graphic novel, *Kouka: Le Rancon de la Corruption*, about corruption in Burkina Faso. The graphic novel was produced by an NGO called RENLAC that promotes awareness of corruption and investigates specific instances of alleged corruption. The graphic novel series *Kouka* now comprises ten different short stories, and is written and illustrated

each year by a local Burkinabè illustrator selected through an open competition. Two other issues of *Kouka* were included in the program.

Satisfaction and participation in the program was high, as indicated by this reflection from one program participant.

My name is RABO Ladifatou. I am from BALA village. Currently I am in secondary specifically the fourth year. My book that I have taken this week is interesting. The novel is a comic book by Mady KAFANDO. Mady tells the story of Samori and Tiefo Amoro. Thanks to this comic I could add some knowledge about the resistance of Tiefo Amoro. The JTL showed me what is a novel and a comic book. Since my primary school, it is only this year I knew books other than my textbooks. Since I started reading I felt I already improved the way I speak French with my friends. My vocabulary has improved little by little. My favorite novel is *The Secret of Mr. Clodomir*. He's my hero at the moment. At home my father has sent only girls in school. Boys, none go to school. I do not know why, but often he says men can take care of themselves yet the woman needs help. So I can say that I have a chance that I should use to succeed as much my father wants. Forgive us and continue to give us books or help make a library in Bala. This library will help my other friends who do not have access to books. My father gives me enough time to read books and to share my games. When he sees me reading aloud he hides himself and smiles. I want to be a teacher when I grow up.

When evaluating the program, participants were asked to write the titles of up to three books they had read in the previous months and also name and briefly identify a character in each of the books. Program participants were far more likely to list titles and characters in these questions, compared with those in the control group. About 55% listed two or three titles, 10% listed only one title, and only 35% listed no titles. By contrast, 82% of youth in the control group listed no titles, and only 13% listed two or three titles. Program participants on average listed 1.2 more titles than non-participants in the control group. The differences were very similar for characters in the books: program participants could name characters more often than control group youth. The program was very effective, then at exposing individuals to books and inducing them to read.

The cost of the program was quite modest. Reaching each group of 20 youth, each week, required a set of 20 copies of a book, delivery of the books to the village and distribution, and then recovery of the books and passing them on. Since 20 books could then “circulate” to other villages, the costs of the book purchases are spread over the number of villages in the program. Suppose that there were 10 villages in a program. Then the 20 books might cost 3.000 FCFA each (\$6) but this cost is spread over ten villages so the cost per village per week is only \$12. The salary of the *animateur* and their transport costs was about \$15 per week, while the overhead cost of the program administrator was on the order of \$5 per village per week. So the cost per week was about \$32, for a cost of about \$1.5 to get a youth to read a book in a week.

c. Summer reading camps

FAVL has organized periodic summer reading camps in many of the villages where libraries are established (Compaoré, Kevane, & Sissao, 2012). Typically, all students in the CM1 class (4th grade level, aged 11-13) are invited to indicate their interest. Then a group of 20 or 25 students are randomly selected and invited to participate in

the camp. The CM1 class is targeted because in the following year (at the end of CM2) students take a national exam that determines whether they can go on to secondary school.

The summer camps are run by small teams of or two or three persons including the village librarian. FAVL has created a guidebook for camp counselors, with activities and schedules. The emphasis is on a variety of reading activities, from quiet reading, to reading partners, to reading aloud in larger groups. There are fun activities such as mask-making, drawing, singing and calisthenics in the morning to keep the children engaged. The camps offer breakfast and lunch to the schoolchildren, as well as a t-shirt with a reading slogan. Children are very eager to participate in the camps. Normally, many of them in summer months would be working in the fields with their parents. So the camps are a chance to escape the drudgery of field work. More importantly, the camps give children an opportunity to “exercise” their reading skills. In school they rarely have the opportunity to read for pleasure, and reading is often turned into a chore and the teacher is giving low grades for mistakes and usually only grades based on recitation of text and not on comprehension of meaning. Books used for the reading camp are often picture books, so children are able to construct meaning and absorb new vocabulary efficiently.

Feedback from participants and local school teachers and school directors, who often visit the camps, is uniformly positive. The camps were operated in 2008, and since then villages that continue to have camps (depend on funding) are always oversubscribed.

In 2008, FAVL conducted an impact evaluation of the effects of the summer reading camps, compared with two other reasonable alternatives (a weekly reading club that would discuss a short novel appropriate for students in CM1, and a book distribution that gave children two books to keep as their own). The effects of the summer reading programs were measured by written and oral reading assessments administered before and after the programs. Participants in the summer camps had scores on reading assessment tests that were about 5 points higher (about 8% higher, or about half the standard deviation) than those of the students in the other groups. The cost of the summer reading camp was somewhat expensive, on a per student basis. But some arithmetic suggests the equivalent to measuring the cost of an extra book read, this time with some help from a counselor. The typical camp costs about \$25 per student (or about \$500 per session for 20 students). During the camps, the students read at least two books each day, so a total of 10 books over the two-week camps. So the cost of extra books read, plus the counselling, is about \$2.5 USD. Larger-scale replication of summer reading camps and measurement of longer-term and secondary effects would seem warranted, in order to enhance and deliver effective reading instruction in rural communities.

d. Distributing solar-powered LED reading lamps

In 2011, FAVL piloted a small project to distribute solar-powered LED lamps to several hundred schoolchildren in CM1 and CM2 level of primary school (Dent, Goodman, & Kevane, 2014). These are the years before students take the national exam to pass into secondary school. The intent of the distribution of the solar-powered lamps was 5th and 6th graders in rural Burkina Faso by providing them with the means to read at night and hence improve their overall level of reading. The research project measured

reading habits (how many books did students read?) and reading capabilities (how well could students read and comprehend what they read? as measured by a reading test). Once village effects were controlled for, the lamps had statistically significant effects on reading outcomes. Students who received lamps read .30 more books in the previous 30 days and could list .22 more titles. The effect sizes (the difference in means between the two groups over the standard deviation) were modest, ranging from .15 to .25, depending on how exactly calculated. There were no effects on reading test scores. The cost per lamp was about \$19 per student at the time of the project, but prices of solar-powered LED lamps have since dropped to about \$10. We might then imagine a lamp over its lifetime leading to about an extra 10 books over the course of a year, resulting in a cost of about \$1 per extra book read. This cost is predicated on the presence of a library where students have access to books.

4. Creating appropriate books attractive to readers

Inspired by the work of Kathy Knowles, of Osu Children's Library Fund, FAVL has initiated programs to create appropriate books for young readers in rural Africa (Kevane, 2014a). The availability of children's books and young adult fiction is quite limited in Burkina Faso (Sissao, 2009). In fact, there appears to be only one regularly in-print published author of illustrated children's books, Asomwin Ignace Hien, and only a dozen novels for young adults. There are, of course, a number of well-known writers and illustrators from Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal, whose books are available in Ouagadougou. The number of different titles is limited, however, and so FAVL decided to produce books directly related to the lives of young readers in rural villages. Through a variety of initiatives, FAVL has produced over 100 titles, and printed copies are available in all FAVL-supported libraries.

A first set of books are photo books with short text. International volunteers, librarians, and FAVL staff have contributed to this production, now totaling approximately 80 photo books. Each book consists of approximately 24 photographs with one or two sentences for each photograph. Since all of the photography is local, the books are tremendously relatable to young village readers who delight in seeing their own reality portrayed in a printed book. As they peruse the photographs, they are inevitably drawn to reading the text, and thus their vocabulary and reading capabilities improve. The books are printed through an online publisher *fastpencil.com* and cost approximately \$10 each to print and ship to Burkina Faso (for orders of 20 or more copies of each title).

A second set of books have been produced in a small Multimedia Center in the town of Houndé in southwestern Burkina Faso. The small office is outfitted with computers, printers, and furniture for work. Books are written and illustrated by local authors, primarily young people in the region. The books are printed on regular paper, with covers in cardstock, and they are stapled together as pamphlets. Due to the promotional efforts of the FAVL team, about 30 aspiring authors and artists have produced more than 50 original books. In 2014 the first year of operation, the Multimedia Center has published and distributed more than 1,000 copies to libraries in rural Burkina Faso. Each book costs approximately \$4 to print. Costs would be lower with greater print runs.

5. Concluding thoughts

Overall, the experience of FAVL support suggests that library support programs can be effective and low-cost. The operating costs of libraries and the five reading promotion programs all have rough costs of generating an extra book read of about \$1-2 USD. The reader might notice that this price is comparable to the cost of simply purchasing books and distributing them for free, to students in rural areas. That approach has much to commend it, but is often politically inexpedient and more open to corruption (school textbooks are supposed to be free in Burkina Faso, but in fact are rarely delivered to schools in complete amounts and instead are diverted to be sold on the private markets).

Establishing and supporting libraries, operating and evaluating reading programs, and creating content for local readers, are not activities without challenges. Securing a steady stream of funding for activities is of course one important challenge. Funders often naively want projects to be “sustainable” and apply that logic to public libraries. The idea and impetus of a public library, however, is to provide reading materials and information to a community and make that service widely accessible (without cost).

A different challenge is that FAVL as an organization has struggled with three levels of partnership. First, at the village level, FAVL has been challenged to have close working relationships with local authorities. Burkina Faso only decentralized political administration in 2006. Rural communes were established and mayors elected. But the quality and motivations of rural mayors vary widely. Funding for rural communes is insecure and non-transparent. The paper discusses a formal “convention” document that has been signed with numerous mayors, and discusses practical implementation issues. Working with rural communities has been made more difficult by the October 31, 2014 uprising that led to the ouster of the regime of former President Blaise Compaoré and his political party, the *Congrès pour la démocratie et le progrès* (CDP). The new transitional regime, a mix of civilian and military rulers, abrogated all rural communes and mayors, and gave local authority to entities they called “*délégation spéciales*” largely directed by representatives of the national government (the *préfet*). The powers of these transitional committees (especially over the budget) have not been fully decided.

Second, partnership with national library authorities has been difficult and is constantly shifting. In Burkina Faso, public libraries are supported by a division in the Ministry of Culture the *Centre National de Lecture et d'Animation Culturelle* (CENALAC). This division has been underfunded, and there are numerous allegations (including one investigation) on corruption at the senior level (RENALAC, 2014). There is little public accountability (no publication of reports or independent evaluation). FAVL continues to engage with national authorities, and personnel is renewed there is periodic hope for a genuine partnership.

Third, FAVL partners with other non-profit organizations. These outside partnerships, with EIFL, Rotary International, and Catholic Relief Services, bring different challenges, especially in terms of reporting and accounting.

Challenges notwithstanding, the experience of FAVL and other small non-profits that promote libraries and reading is largely positive. There are projects and programs that

can promote reading at fairly low cost. One can imagine the math. Getting 300 million young children in rural Africa to read an extra book every month would cost approximately \$3 billion USD per year. This can be accomplished by establishing and operating libraries, implementing reading programs, and producing more reading materials.

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