

## **Government apathy forces National Book Week organisers South African Book Development Council to close down**

**Cape Town, South Africa: 07 September 2021:** The South African Book Development Council (SABDC), the organisation behind the annual National Book Week (NBW) which actively celebrated books through indigenous language reading festivals has shut down. Held every year in September, NBW, ran for over a decade and was the country's most cherished reading awareness week dedicated to encouraging reading and promoting books.

The demise of SABDC leaves Ghana Book Development Council, fully funded by the Ghanaian government as the only surviving functional book development council on the continent. While they share much in common, SABDC has languished in a holding pattern since 2007, waiting to be formalised and funded by the State.

Despite this significant drawback, the SABDC's Council, consisting of an impressive cross-section of voluntary national book-sector member associations, has remained committed to increasing access to books in South Africa, and to showcasing, strengthening and diversifying the South African book industry and its many-linked supply chain.

The SABDC's ground breaking and frequently quoted research, conducted in 2006 and 2016, has demonstrated how necessary the sector is to our well-being as South Africans; and how impressive sectoral growth could be if its highly skilled, entrepreneurial and uniquely motivated cultural, nation-building, educational, industrial and commercial sub-sectors were provided with well-informed and aptly focused support.

Starved as it has been of the necessary resources, the SABDC has nevertheless punched well above its weight. Its Council members and its Board of directors have served as dedicated volunteers throughout its history. The Council itself got by on a very small complement of dedicated staff, which consisted of only two employees over its first of 15 years, with one or two ad-hoc project staff taken on as funds allowed. Despite these severe limitations, the SABDC continued to implement pioneering and innovative work over the years.

Among the seminal efforts driven with dedication and delivered with passion were the Draft National Book Policy; the National Reading Survey; the Draft National Book Development Plan; authoritative and independent fact-based research into the factors influencing the cost of books in South Africa; a revisioned, more inclusive and relevant National Book Fair; and National Book Week, the country's annual reading awareness campaign, which now sits proudly in the State calendar in September every year.

Over the years it became increasingly difficult for the SABDC to continue operating. The main reason for this has been that the organisation was never set up to implement ad-hoc projects or to solicit funds for these on an annual basis. Its modest office and its running costs have never been properly covered, which has meant that a great deal of time has had to be spent on fundraising. As a result, the SABDC has been operating only through project-based funding for too long. While this type of funding was successfully secured in some years, it could not be assured, either reliably or at all, in other years.

In 2020, already hard hit by Covid-19, the SABDC implemented National Book Week (NBW) in September, but without being paid any of the funds previously promised by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC). Not only was NBW's budget cut by 50%, but the reduced amount was also not forthcoming. At the time, the SABDC was told that the funds had 'disappeared' and were no longer available.

The Department nevertheless gave the SABDC verbal assurances that it would find alternative funds for NBW. The delay in funds, however, had devastating effects on the future of the SABDC, which was operating as a fully functional book development council within the habitual context of severely constrained funding described above. It became clear to the Board that the SABDC could not withstand the effects of this non-payment, which would amount to bankruptcy for the Council.

At this point, the SABDC proceeded to serve a notice on Government of its intention to sue the latter in January 2021. Not only was the organisation out of pocket and unable to pay for basic expenses such as rent, but it also owed many service providers for the services they had delivered in September 2020. This was particularly difficult for the SABDC to cope with, not only because it had always operated with the utmost integrity and was acutely aware of the difficult financial conditions its suppliers were labouring under as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because of the inevitable resultant damage to its reputation and the longstanding beneficial relationships it had always relied on to thrive.

The SABDC finally received DSAC's payment for NBW 2020 on 7 April 2021, seven months after the implementation of the reading awareness campaign. By this time its infrastructure was no longer intact, and it was too late to save it.

Fortunately, all National Book Week and South African Book Fair service providers were eventually paid the full amounts owing to them.

The SABDC would like to thank the thousands of patriotic South Africans and the many international visitors who interacted with and supported the organisation over the past 19 years.

The gap left by the demise of the SABDC will no doubt affect the most vulnerable members of our society, this during a time in which President Cyril Ramaphosa has been championing reading as a vehicle for improved growth and leadership.

(Ends)

Statement issued by the Board, SABDC: ELITHA MICHELLE VAN DER SANDT (Member and outgoing CEO) NICOLETTE ANTONINIA CROWSTER (Chairperson) MPUKA ERIC RADINKU (Vice Chairperson) ISABELLE GEORGETTE DELVARE (Secretary) PROF. SIHAWUKELE EMMANUEL NGUBANE (Member) DR ABDOOL MAJID MAHOMED (Member)