



SOUTH AFRICAN BOOK DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

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ANNOUNCEMENT: CLOSURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN BOOK DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

The South African Book Development Council (SABDC) is one of only two functional book development councils on the African continent. The other is the Ghana Book Development Council. While they share much in common, there is a significant difference between them: Ghana's book development council is fully funded by that country's government, while the SABDC has been in a holding pattern since 2007, waiting to be formalised and funded by the State.

Despite this significant drawback, however, 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 groundbreaking 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 and panache 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 re-visited, 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.

As the years have gone by, it has become 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.

We believe that a short history of events in more recent years is needed here. In 2009, after launching the SABDC (previously the Print Industries Cluster Council), the then Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan,

started the process of setting up a ministerial task team to advise him on the growth and development of the book sector. As the task team started its work there was a cabinet reshuffle, and Paul Mashatile was appointed Minister of Arts and Culture in 2010. It took a while for the task team to start its work under Minister Mashatile, but this was completed in March 2012. After consultations with the book sector, the task team submitted its report – entitled *Developing a Growth Strategy for the Book Sector* – to Minister Mashatile. The report was accepted by the Minister and the internal process of preparing a Cabinet Memorandum began. Sadly, before this could be submitted, the Minister was replaced by Minister Nathi Mthethwa. It was very difficult to pick up the process after that.

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 COVID19, 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.

We thank the many thousands of patriotic South Africans and the many visitors from other countries who have interacted with, and given to, the SABDC over the past 19 years. We pay tribute to, especially:

- The many, many storytellers, poets, performers, wandering minstrels and edgy young illustrators who shared their own and others' meaning-making and artistry through the SABDC.

- The thousands of schoolchildren from rural and urban areas who came to see and hear them, and to witness the glory of their contributions.
- The provincial libraries and their staff, who made this possible in each province in South Africa.
- The small army of activists who toiled to give all of South Africa's indigenous languages their rightful place in our literature.
- All those who fought to broaden the traditional expectations around attendance at book fairs in South Africa, from the point of view of class, race and gender.
- The writers who told it like it was, and how it should be.
- The publishers, big and small, who hung in there through hard times.
- The many dedicated working groups and Council members for their valuable theoretical and practical contributions.
- Those who were happy to push discussions to their limits around the terrifying social issues we face.
- Those who rejoiced when we rejoiced; and who gave us hope in fulfilling our task of making books important and widely available in South Africa.

We are only too well aware of the gap the SABDC is leaving behind, and of how this will affect the most vulnerable members of our society. This in a period in which our President has been championing reading as a vehicle for improved growth and leadership in South Africa ...

Statement issued by the Board, SABDC, 27 August 2021

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