

Executive summary

# Publishing Futures

A study of the publishing  
landscapes in Ghana, Kenya,  
Nigeria, South Africa,  
Uganda and Zimbabwe

October 2024

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This report was commissioned by British Council and conducted by Umbrella Thorn.

Citation:

Isong, A., Murua, J., Chideme, M., Nene, N., Kizza, R., & South, R. (2024). *Publishing Futures: A study of the publishing landscapes in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe*. British Council.  
<https://doi.org/10.57884/mvn6-hz12>

Design: Twelve

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# Introduction

This report explores the trade publishing and literature sectors in the following Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. It identifies innovative practices, opportunities for collaboration and challenges faced by publishers working in each country. The study aims to bring forward new knowledge on the development of publishing in fiction and non-fiction for adult leisure readers, providing market insights, highlights of innovative practices, and the economic impact of the sector.

The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the publishing landscape?
2. How has publishing driven innovation?
3. How has publishing provided space and capacity for connections?
4. How does publishing contribute to the creative economy?



## Scope and methodology

The study looks at the entire book publishing ecosystem, which has historically included printing, bookselling and distribution, and in more recent times has expanded to cover digital platforms and channels. It also includes the literature and broader creative sectors, including festivals, prizes and libraries.

The scope of the study also includes a few entrepreneurs who live outside of Africa, because of the increasing global connections with publishing on the continent.

A mixed methodology approach was adopted for this study, comprising document analysis and in-depth interviews.

The research was conducted between January and June 2024.

# Summary of key findings

Multinational publishing corporations dominated Sub-Saharan Africa's traditional publishing scene from the 1960s to the 1990s. However the majority of these publishing companies – which often started as offices or subsidiaries of multinationals – have either closed or transitioned into indigenous ownership or control.

Yet local publishers have also existed in the region for decades, and have enjoyed a surge in activity since the turn of the 21st century. There are many African-owned/managed publishing houses operating in each of the six countries this study focuses on. Despite the economic hardships that have curtailed people's buying habits, these independent publishers have continued to evolve. And some local players have expanded their business into other countries.

Throughout the region, there is a growing market for non-traditional publishing, including self-publishing and digital books. In fact this has become a rapidly expanding and accessible option for many writers. Previously, self-publishing required a lot of money, but today, with access to a computer, the internet connection and a small amount of funds, it has become easier to explore e-publishing and other non-traditional routes. Across the six countries, the opportunities for authors who wish to invest in the publishing of their work without involving an established publishing house have grown tremendously.

Also, debut authors first published in the region tend to grant their publishers world rights, in the hope that these publishers will then sell the various regional and subsidiary rights. This is done in the absence of a more traditional agenting structure, and SSA publishers have also started trading rights among themselves, resulting in books being published across multiple countries.

There is a lack of distribution infrastructure between these six countries to other parts of Africa, especially a way of sending books across borders, into other African countries. The pathways for distribution into the UK and the US, however, are much more tried and tested. Rising costs of raw materials and printing also pose challenges across the region. Piracy continues to be a problem, even with copyright laws in the six countries. Finally, the sector suffers from a lack of adequate investment from subsidies, grants, and other types of financial support.





Publishing in SSA has shifted due to innovation and changing consumer behaviour. While the sector is not shifting completely to digital media, there is a correlation between innovation in this area and business growth. Following the introduction of mobile banking and payments, there is now also an opportunity for book distribution on mobile phones, allowing publishers to diversify their sources of revenue. In order to capitalise on innovation, a conducive policy environment is necessary to boost the e-commerce ecosystem.

Across the region, literary festivals and book fairs have been growing at a considerable rate and these provide further opportunities for both physical and digital engagement. They also play a role in promoting social cohesion in the communities in which they are hosted. Festivals help create a sense of community involvement through volunteering, and digital marketing helps them reach even larger audiences. This complementing of physical events with online marketing is helping to deepen publishers' engagement with a larger audience, and it is increasingly common for event organisers to use relevant hashtags on social media to increase the visibility of their festivals.

In addition, festival directors and curators have been able to establish strong partnerships with various industry stakeholders with whom they can share resources and ideas. Bookshops are becoming creative spaces in which publishers and writers can connect and collaborate. Beyond their retail purpose, shops support local writers by hosting book readings and launches. And in turn, various book clubs have been created, offering even more opportunities for readers to engage with books. For those unable to attend in person, such meetings and events have been live-streamed online.

Small publishers play an increasingly significant role in SSA's publishing and literature sectors. Their size distinguishes them from their larger, more established counterparts and requires different management approaches. Yet these businesses continue to support a range of direct and indirect jobs, including writers, editors, translators, and illustrators. And while they often lack the financial resources to cover overheads, publish more authors or expand, many are able to thrive and are adapting to make their businesses more sustainable to market challenges.

# Country summaries

## Ghana

Accra was UNESCO World Book Capital in 2023, the 23rd city to hold that title since the World Book Capital programme was established in 2001. More than 100 publishers in the country are recognised by the Ghana Book Development Council (GBDC), which operates as part of Ghana's Ministry of Education and Culture. More than 90 per cent of these publishers focus on the educational market.

There are relatively few literary agents in Ghana as is the case in much of Africa. This has had a limiting impact on rights sales and the greater access to international markets that is needed to grow the country's publishing sector. However, some Africa-focused agencies based in Europe continue to serve authors from Ghana, particularly those writing for younger readers.

For many publishers, revenue from content sales is the primary source of income. A few also actively pursue grants from funding organisations whose mission is to promote diverse storytelling and creativity. Crowdfunding is another avenue that has been explored.

Many challenges faced by Ghana's publishing sector are linked to economic constraints in the country, such as the cost of living or doing business, and high taxation, especially on the imported materials which are needed for book production. Publishers and other stakeholders often have limited access to finance. The Covid-19 pandemic further complicated these fiscal difficulties.

Book events, mostly which take place in Accra, provide an opportunity for entrepreneurs to engage and connect with one another. And along with literary festivals they can bring many benefits for publishers, including increased sales, expanded networks and new audiences.

Ghana's publishing sector has also been exploring innovation. For example, at the 20th edition of the Ghana International Book Fair a workshop was held, focusing on e-book publishing. And publishers have enthusiastically embraced the opportunities new technologies can offer, such as the ability to experiment with different storytelling formats. Feedback from readers has been overwhelmingly positive about these new formats.

Overall, many entrepreneurs believe that the future of publishing in Ghana lies, to a significant extent, in the embracing digital platforms and immersive and interactive storytelling.

The social and economic benefits of publishing are also becoming widely recognised, and these enterprises are coming to be seen as an engine for economic growth and employment. Also, certain skills are seen as crucial to unlocking the sector's potential, from publishing expertise and general business, administration and logistical skills, to soft skills such as storytelling. There is also a view that knowledge of rights buying and selling, as well as of intellectual property, need to be broadened and deepened if the sector is to reach its full potential.

# Kenya

Few established Kenyan publishers focus on fiction, and it is not considered as commercially viable as other genres or academic and educational publishing. Therefore, self-publishing has become one of the most active routes to publishing literary works in the country with writers funding the entire book production process themselves – from editing to cover design. In fact, it is rare to find an entrepreneur performing only one role in the publishing supply chain. Some publishers have been involved in organising literary festivals or book fairs. And a few trade publishers also moonlight as booksellers.

Bookshops are a key part of the Kenyan publishing landscape, some of which have become a haven for self-published authors. Previously, older and more established bookshops rejected self-published books, which led to authors selling their books from their car boots.

Some publishers in Kenya work with distributors across the country who hold stock and collect payments on their behalf. E-books are typically distributed through specialist businesses such as eKitabu, Snapplify and other online retailers. And social media has emerged as a popular medium for the promotion of books. Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) are the two most common social media tools used by publishers and authors in Kenya.

Some entrepreneurs also provide bespoke consulting services to clients, such as by advising on the writing and publishing process. Many consultants work primarily with self-published authors.

The market for trade publishing in Kenya appears relatively small, discouraging potential investors. There is also a poor reading culture, and reading is primarily thought of as being for academic and examinations purposes, rather than pleasure. As in many SSA countries, piracy – in both print and digital formats – is another challenge.

However, Kenya is home to a thriving digital economy and has long been a leader in technological innovation. E-commerce has been greatly accelerated by the country's 96 per cent internet penetration rate with 3G or 4G coverage, as well as cutting-edge mobile payment options like MPESA. These conditions have helped Kenyan publishers advance various innovative practices, especially around digital formats.

Entrepreneurs in the sector regularly connect and collaborate with publishers and stakeholders from other parts of Africa as well as the rest of the world. They also take advantage of physical book fairs and publishing events in the region and internationally, as well as social media and other online platforms. For example, LinkedIn is a popular medium for publishers to connect, and referrals made from it are common.

Also in Kenya, the State Department for Youth Affairs and Creative Economy is in the final stages of producing a draft Creative Economy Policy and a Creative Industries Bill. Its creation acknowledges that people who work in the country's creative industries contribute to the economy by generating jobs and paying taxes. In the proposed Bill, these creative industries are classified under five categories: visual arts, audio-visual and interactive media, performing arts, design and literary arts.



# Nigeria

Trade publishing holds a lot of promise in Nigeria, a country which benefits from a diverse and literate population that is keen to read across various genres. The country has also produced a new wave of writers, whose achievements are receiving global recognition. In 2014, the Nigerian city Port Harcourt became the 14th city to be designated a UNESCO World Book Capital. This programme led to the establishment of book clubs in schools across the country.

Previous studies have explored the publishing practices in Nigeria, highlighting the influence of colonialism, Christianity and multinational companies on the development of its literary sector. This research highlights several independent publishers that have emerged in Nigeria over the past decade, and how online magazines have become a quality platform for authors to publish. Self-publishing is also providing opportunities for Nigerian authors who want to remain in control of their creations. However, a few still choose self-publishing because of limited traditional opportunities in the country.

Several entrepreneurs in Nigeria have started their businesses using personal funds. Others rely on a combination of revenue streams to generate income and support their activities, including consultancies, book sales, awards, licensing, events and partnerships.

Some publishers also work with partner bookshops in the country, ensuring that new titles are placed in more shops, with little effort. They also provide direct sales and delivery services to clients who order books online.

Some of the challenges in Nigeria's publishing sector are linked to economic constraints like inflation, currency devaluation and fluctuations in purchasing power – all of which can affect consumers' ability to afford books. Other challenges include high production costs, piracy, a poor reading culture, inadequate infrastructure and distribution, poor quality control, and limited investment.

However, Nigerian publishers are leveraging new digital technologies and integrating them into their publishing processes. Some have published several electronic anthologies and are selling a number of their books on digital publishing outlets both inside and outside the country. This allows authors to reach more readers, and expands the sectors' reach beyond more traditional markets.

Publishers in Nigeria recognise the value of face-to-face interactions and physical meetings when developing relationships and strengthening partnerships at industry events, conferences, book fairs, and literary festivals across the country. It is felt that, collectively, this supports the vitality of the Nigerian literary landscape and provides authors and publishers a platform to interact, collaborate and to discuss shared issues and ideas.

As a result, the creative economy in Nigeria is emerging as an important and expanding source of employment and prosperity. In 2023, and for the first time, the Nigerian government established a ministry specifically for this sector – the Ministry of Art, Culture, and Creative Economy. This new ministry oversees publishing and literature activities, as well as film, music and arts.



## South Africa



In South Africa, the publishing sector consists of a number of small to medium-sized publishers, in addition to multinationals. The country's small presses are often owned and managed by the same person. This 'owner-publisher' is typically someone who is very emotionally involved in the organisation and the work it creates.

In 2018, Durban was selected as a UNESCO City of Literature in recognition of its thriving cultural scene and expertise in hosting vibrant festivals and book fairs. It was the first time that an African city had been chosen for the title. In 2023, Buffalo City was also designated as a City of Literature.

Some South African publishers rely on literary agents who work with authors, secure publishing opportunities and manage negotiations. Several such publishers also buy and sell book rights themselves.

Although South Africa boasts a wide range of book distributors, there are few opportunities to export books to other African countries. There is also a belief that the sector is dominated by a small number of corporate interests which skew the retail market and press in their favour. Rising costs are also a major challenge and, as with other industries, publishers are witnessing increases in the cost of raw materials such as paper and ink.

The consumption of e-books is rising in South Africa and new technologies have impacted aspects of the country's publishing sector, such as book distribution, as well as the way literary works are shared and read by the wider population. Several technology companies that support the publishing and literature sectors have operations in South Africa.

Book fairs and festivals in South Africa serve as a stepping stone to potential publishing opportunities and provide an opportunity for emerging publishers to gain insights, learn about industry trends and receive guidance on their publishing journey. Trade associations in South Africa have also helped create strong connections among professionals working in the publishing sector.

The creative economy is believed to account for 6 per cent of all employment in South Africa creating an estimated 1 million jobs. Furthermore, visual arts and crafts have the highest percentage of cultural jobs (44.5 per cent), with intangible cultural heritage coming in second (22.5 per cent), followed by design and creative services (13.4 per cent), and books and presses (12.4 per cent). Success in creative enterprises depends on having relevant skills, and in South Africa, developing these core skills has been a challenge. To address this, many publishing entrepreneurs are engaging interns in their businesses.

# Uganda

As in the rest of SSA, self-publishing has become a popular route for authors wishing to publish their own works in Uganda. In most cases, the authors also bear the cost of providing legal deposit copies.

For many years, self-publishing was seen as an indication that the writer wasn't good enough to find a traditional publisher. With few traditional publishing opportunities available even for talented authors, industry professionals have stepped in to offer guidance to self-published authors so that the quality of their works can be enhanced.

Uganda's publishing sector is relatively small, and only a couple of long-established independent companies can perform a dual role of publishing both educational and literary books. Those that do have been able to give a voice to some underrepresented groups and document the country's history.

A variety of funding sources are used by the country's publishing entrepreneurs. Sometimes, donations and grants are received in addition to profits from trading activities. Many of the respondents are self-funded, with authors tending to fund their own publications.

Respondents in Uganda listed several challenges that are posing a threat to the country's publishing sector, including poor reading culture, piracy, low investment and poor distribution.

With the help of Ugandan commercial banks, consumers can electronically transfer money to businesses or individuals using their mobile phones. Furthermore, some banks offer debit and credit cards that enable online payments. Subsequently, several publishing entrepreneurs are leveraging these digital opportunities to serve readers and writers.

A strong desire to collaborate exists among Uganda's many publishing entrepreneurs. Across the sector, a network of industry groups looks to represent the interests of members. Similarly, connecting with stakeholders in other African countries, Europe and the US is considered important in distributing physical titles to other markets. However, some respondents admit that it is a challenge to forge useful connections outside of the country.

Ugandan publishers tend to employ between 5–6 people on a full or part-time basis. Some are of the view that formal education is less of a necessity for these employees than more practical experience and a sense of motivation.

# Zimbabwe

The publishing and literature sectors in Zimbabwe have evolved substantially over the past two decades, and continue to be a vital part of the country's cultural and educational landscape. Corporate publishers dominate the country's scene, even though they focus more on educational books. Despite poor sales, there is still an interest in trade publishing and a recognition of the rich contribution that small publishers – who have a long and prestigious heritage in Zimbabwe – make to books and literature.

Self-publishing has also emerged as a viable alternative to traditional publishing in Zimbabwe. Some business have been established which provide self-published authors with affordable and professional editing, proofreading, typesetting and cover design services.

There are no literary agencies in Zimbabwe. However, many of the country's writers have been represented by UK- or US-based agents. The majority of publishing entrepreneurs have no institutional backing. And although many publishers generate some income from their sales, there is often a need to inject additional funding.

The challenges faced by publishers in Zimbabwe are largely linked to economic issues such as persistent inflation, slow structural transformation and intermittent shocks like drought, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Book distribution is also becoming a major challenge for publishers.

Publishers in Zimbabwe are taking advantage of various technological advances to meet the needs of their market. Some of the methods they are adopting include digitising their libraries and building online ordering and selling systems for both physical and e-books. WhatsApp has also emerged as a key marketing and communications channel – and authors are using it to develop a loyal customer base. People are often invited, through email, social media, or even word of mouth, to join WhatsApp groups and engage with authors directly.

For many years, book fairs and festivals have provided a platform for Zimbabwe's writers, poets, publishers and literature enthusiasts to celebrate and promote their work. These festivals often feature readings, workshops, panel discussions and performances, showcasing not only literary talent but also opportunities for collaboration.

As the sector in Zimbabwe evolves, publishers believe it is critical for professionals to have high quality editing, marketing, sales and organisational skills. Although it is understood that some of these skills can be learnt on the job, others are more transferable from other sectors.



# Conclusion

## How Publishing Drives Innovation

Publishing has been able to survive decades of change mostly thanks to constant innovation. And in Sub-Saharan Africa one can find a constant stream of innovative practices, with publishers taking advantage of evolving technologies through to tackling issues of accessibility and affordability.

### Digital first publishing

Indigenous, digital-only publishers have emerged in SSA. Some distribute books through an online shop, taking and delivering orders for print books as well as digital content for both online and offline use (including in the open standard accessible EPUB 3.2 format).

### Online magazines

Online magazines have also become a vital component of literary culture in the region. These publications differ in terms of length, content, frequency, and focus. And along with fostering a reading culture, they offer an easily accessible platform for fresh and sometimes experimental work.

### Business models for social media

WhatsApp is one of the most popular instant messaging platforms in Africa and has fast become a part of the new literary economy. It has proven to be an incredibly helpful tool in publishers' digital marketing and distribution. WhatsApp has enabled publishers to share information about newly-available books and to sell books to one another. As an example, in Zimbabwe, many self-published authors are using WhatsApp groups to market and sell their books directly to readers.



## 1. Ghana

**Writer's Project of Ghana on CitiFM** is a weekly broadcast of literature readings, discussions and upcoming literary events.

**Booksie** is an online bookstore that also hosts books clubs, public speaking and creative writing courses for children and young adults.

## 2. Kenya

**eKitabu** is a digital platform producing and publishing quality educational content in book, audio and video formats.

## 3. Nigeria

The **Hausa International Book and Arts Festival** captures festival activities using virtual reality.

**Rovingheights** helped self-published authors distribute their books via social media before opening a physical bookstore in 2018.

## 6. Zimbabwe

**Ngano Hub Consultants** provides personalised services to help authors to self-publish and realise their publishing goals.

**Phoenix Publishing** offers various editorial and publishing services to help writers develop their work and to self-publish.

# How Publishing Creates Connections

SSA's publishing and literature sectors create and foster connections through book events, trade associations and social media. Across the six SSA countries, these connections have helped to open doors, provide opportunities and access to resources and helped to build strong networks of support. For many publishers, connecting with other like-minded entrepreneurs has helped certain businesses through difficult times.

## Festivals for growing businesses and readers

Literary festivals and book fairs also connect people, by bringing together a diverse range of industry participants including publishers, writers, literary agencies, readers, printers and policymakers. By exhibiting at a fair, publishers can draw attention to their books and roster of authors. And importantly, the fairs enable players to explore business opportunities while keeping up with changing trends within the industry.

## Networks for shared challenges

Some book festivals have also been established to create connections in the African diaspora.

Many publishing entrepreneurs are furthering these connections through trade associations and other relevant bodies. And in every country studied, we found specialist associations that bring businesses together to solve common problems — as well as to serve as a united front for lobbying and advocacy. However, we found very few trade publishers who are members of these associations.



### 1. Ghana

**Pa Gya! A Literary Festival in Accra** is a platform for booksellers, publishers, independent writers to connect, display and market their works.

**Accra UNESCO World Book Capital (2023)**

### 5. Uganda

**African Writers Trust** seeks to create connections between African authors and publishing professionals on the continent and the diaspora.

### 2. Kenya

**Nairobi International Book Fair** offers stakeholders a platform to network, share and deliberate on issues that affect the publishing industry.

### 3. Nigeria

**Uyo Book Club** is a platform for discussion and promotion of books and expanding their distribution and interactive public events like a marathon read aloud.

**Port Harcourt UNESCO World Book Capital (2014)**

### 4. South Africa

**Buffalo City (2023) and Durban (2018) UNESCO Cities of Literature**, a global network of 53 cities across 6 continents, dedicated to promoting cultural diversity and literary richness. Durban was the first African city to receive the designation.

**Book Circle Capital** is an independent bookshop in Johannesburg that focuses on African literature both selling books and organising literary events.

### 6. Zimbabwe

**Women's Writers Support Group** provides publishing services to women writers in the country.

# How Publishing Contributes to the Creative Economy

The creative economy has become a sector of growing social and economic significance across SSA countries, with policy-makers spurring investment in a number of different ways.

Authorities also acknowledge that people who work in the creative industries can contribute to the economy by generating jobs and tax revenue.

## Transferrable and specialist skills

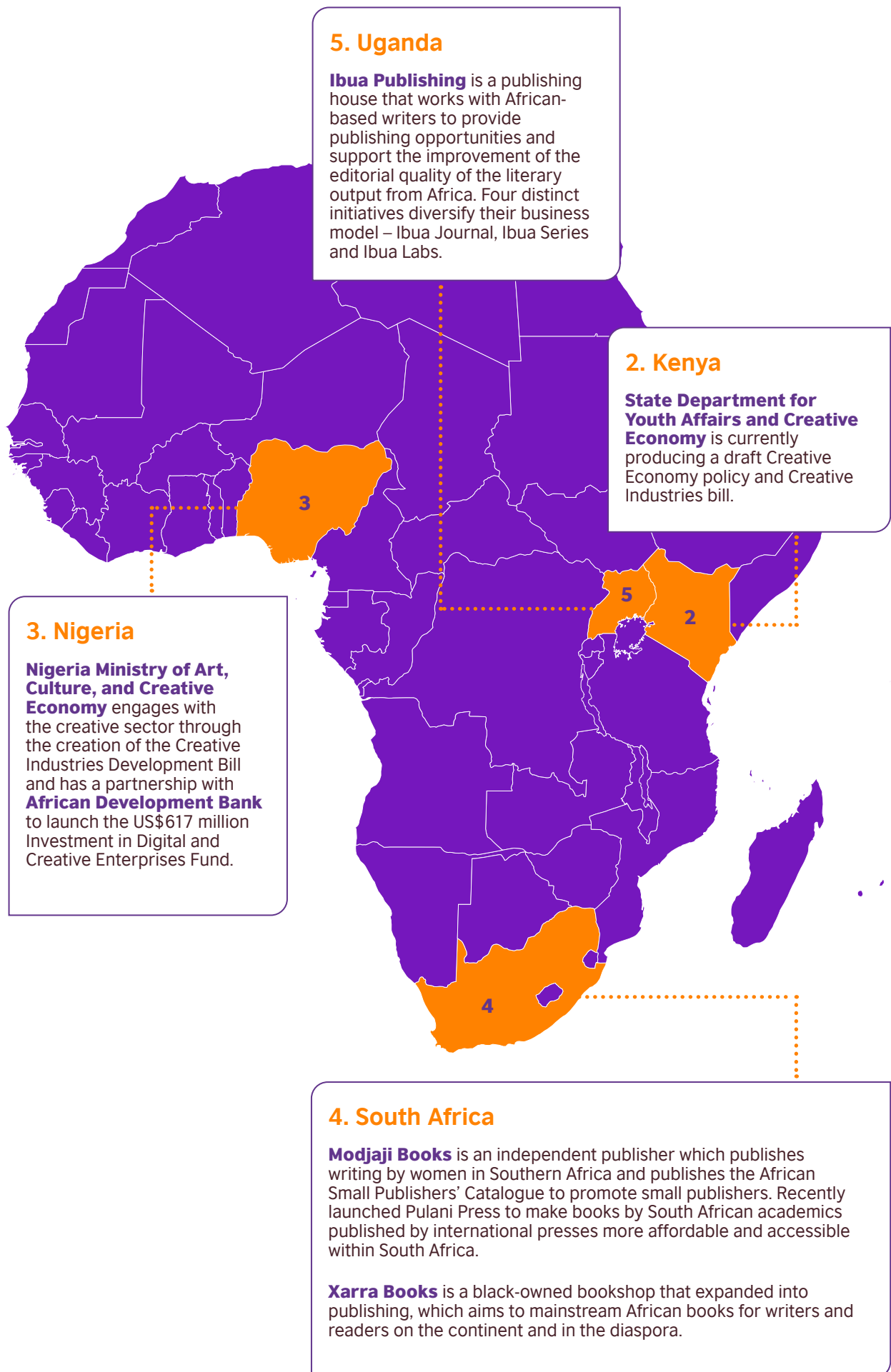
This research provides a glimpse into the difficulties publishing entrepreneurs face in Sub-Saharan Africa around skills and employment, and the solutions they are finding to address workforce development in a time of accelerating change. For example: creative writing courses are more accessible than ever before, with diverse programmes and workshops offered by African organisations. But only a few higher education institutions offer specialised courses in publishing.

## Informal development of skills

Our findings also show that, by itself, a publishing degree is not a preparation for the realities of publishing. Instead, the sector rewards on-the-job learning, as well as the acquisition of knowledge from colleagues, teamwork, and more experienced personnel.







# Recommendations

The following suggestions represent a mix of recommendations made by the study's respondents as well as those suggested by the research team which would support the continued growth and resilience of the publishing and wider literature sectors in the countries studied in this research.

## Organisation

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### Publishing cooperative society

Establish a cooperative society which enhances access to finance – promoting thrift, providing credit and offering members a range of financial services, enabling publishers to professionalise and grow their businesses.

### Entrepreneurship fund

Establish an entrepreneurship fund for publishing businesses, to support entrepreneurs across the six SSA countries, enabling publishers to invest in new technologies and test new business models to develop more resilient businesses.

## Policy

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### Curbing piracy

Support policy engagement that enforces the use of security features by publishers and authors to curb piracy, increasing profitability for publishers and writers.

### Statistical data on the book sector

Maintain reliable and consistent statistics, to attract resources, inform policy, allocate government resources and employ effective development strategies for the publishing sector.



# Individual/Organisation

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## Self-publishing

Formalise or support the self-publishing industry with funding, advice and campaigns, making it more accessible to writers and readers.

## Publishing course/resource

Commission and curate an independent training course on the study of publishing and writing that can be delivered in the six countries to increase employability with sector specific skills.

## Publishing/ creative writing fellowship

Introduce a tailored publishing fellowship which includes training, mentorship and exchange programmes, supporting the professional development of future publishing leaders. This could be stand-alone or accredited at an established university

## Rights catalogue

Introduce an annually produced 'rights catalogue' that promotes available rights and is launched prior to major book festivals across the region, helping small publishers to sell rights abroad for publication, translation and licensing and diversifying revenue streams.

# Individual/Organisation/Policy

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## Support for key festivals

Investment in literary festivals to support their revival and to recognise the importance of culture to the cities in which they are hosted.

## Mobility grants

Investment in small publishers to attend international trade book fairs/festivals, to encourage skill-sharing, build new connections and expand access to new markets.



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