Storybooks by and for Children

The Experience of Soma Book Café in Facilitating Children's Creativity

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Story-writing workshop, HK Learning Centre

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CC	Creative Commons
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
FRWCC	Field Research and Writing with Children Coordinator
HR	Human Resources
IT	Information Technology
MA	Master of Arts
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PI	Principal Investigator
TIE	Tanzania Institute of Education
TLS	Tanganyika Library Services
ToR	Terms of Reference

Background, context, objectives, and scope of project

Background of **Soma** Book Café and Watoto na Vitabu

Founded in 2008 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Soma Book Café is a readership promotion space and innovative co-creation hub for literary expression and multimedia storytelling approaches. It provides different arenas for literary expression and discourse; promotes reading for pleasure and encourages independent pursuit of knowledge. **Soma**, which means read or learn in Kiswahili, is an apt name for an organization that strongly encourages both.

Since its inception, **Soma** Book Cafe has grown to be the face of **Soma,** encapsulating its mandate and identity to the extent that to the public, **Soma** Book Café represents both the space and the organisation. **Soma** was initially registered as the E&D Readership and Development Agency, but due to changes in the Tanzanian law governing not for profits, it changed its name to Readership for Learning and Development in November 2011.

Reflective of **Soma**'s aspiration to contribute to the creation of a reading culture by promoting reading for pleasure and literary expression, we have become a hub for readership-related information and a centre of literary activities. We host and co-create many platforms, with storytellers, readers, literary critics, and thinkers of different age groups and demographic diversity. These include:

- Reading and storytelling sessions and activities with children; street reading clubs and community libraries, children's book fairs and public events; research and writing facilitation and mentorship; multimedia content production.
- Book talks, public dialogues, poetry recitations, theatre performances, conferences, and symposia.
- Literary reviews; book exhibitions; creative writing/translation training, production workshops, residences, and mentorship; and
- An online information exchange platform and outreach.

Soma uses both mainstream and electronic media to create a wide virtual space where those who cannot physically access its processes can be informed about its activities and, experience and partake in them.

Soma Book Café also runs a bookshop with trade books, especially those that foster creative imagination. Our focus is to promote Tanzanian and Kiswahili literary traditions by stocking locally published titles, both fiction and non-fiction, supplemented by East African and well-balanced world literature to stimulate and promote pan-Africanism and cultural diversity. Special attention is paid to stocking children books.

Other **Soma** Book Café facilities include a coffee bar facing a lawn with sheds and a podium for public talks, poetry, and other small cast performances; an open air space for tented events; a multimedia recording studio; a container that is not yet operational, but is intended to house the multimedia children's storytelling hub consisting of a multimedia library, recording studio, and an adjacent playground. **Soma** Book Café is already a safe place for children, but the storytelling hub will do this better by carving out an autonomous space for them.[1] It will be the home to _Watoto na Vitabu_ (Kiswahili for children and/with books); and a production facility for the _Kalamu Ndogo_ (little scribes) book series and

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[1] Different sections of the **Soma** Book Café spaces are a work in progress. Some areas are yet to be completed. Some are changing usage, and some are in need of refurbishment.

other multimedia products they create, including adaptation of published storybooks. In the meantime, we are using extra rooms within the **Soma** Book Café complex for children's activities.

Soma Book Café's philosophy, operations, and activities were acknowledged and reaffirmed by **Soma** stakeholders during its ten-year commemoration in June 2018 and even earlier during a participatory planning process that led to the current Strategic Plan (2016-2020). *Watoto na Vitabu*, a brand name **for Soma's** Multimedia Children's Storytelling Programme is one of these initiatives, cutting across **Soma**'s three outcome areas: Space, Skills and Enterprise. The Programme started at the inception of **Soma** Book Café and has remained consistent ever since, changing strategies whenever it hit a snag, such as human and financial resource crunches. It seeks to cultivate creativity, love of reading, communication, and critical consciousness among children through interactive reading and storytelling.

One of the ambitions of *Watoto na Vitabu* and the Multimedia Children's Storytelling Hub is to steer an ongoing process whereby children originate stories and actively follow through with them to the end product, using oral, visual, textual, audio, and digital media. The second ambition is for the Hub to function as a resource for multimedia content creation with and for children. It is within this backdrop that in February 2019, **Soma** received US$15,000/- from Neil Butcher & Associates (NBA) to undertake a research and writing process with children on a pilot basis. Its purpose was to generate insights and data on early literacy content creation with and for children. These funds also provided a budget for equipping the *Watoto na Vitabu* multimedia recording studio with basic recording hardware and software. Through this project, **Soma** intended to systematically test and document its methodological approach as a replicable model, with tangible outputs to show for it. Book titles produced out of this project have contributed to **Soma**'s debut *Kalamu Ndogo* series.

Project context

The **Millennium Development Goals** led to increased school enrolment at the global level, as well as in Africa, East Africa and Tanzania through education policy shifts, including reintroduction of universal basic education in several African countries. In Tanzania, for example, basic education now extends to secondary level. Pressure over resources to meet curriculum requirements, however, still poses learning outcome challenges (Languille, 2014; DFID, 2010; United Nations, 2015 and URT, 2014). Consequently, storybooks receive the least attention, notwithstanding their contribution to stimulating students' interest and broadening their scope of learning beyond classroom requirements. Storybooks also cultivate critical thinking and creative imagination. These are intangible assets needed by children who grow up in a highly competitive environment. Tanzanian children live in a resource- rich country and continent that lag economically and technologically. Storybooks provide necessary skills that complement textbooks to broaden learning and accelerate development.

This project is a sub-activity of **Soma**'s out/after-school programme and fulfils its organisational purpose of creating an inclusive co-creation space for children to engage with contemporary social issues at their level and interest in a process that actualises their agency and validates their storytelling prowess. Our approach is designed within a national context with limited appreciation of children's ability to take charge of their learning, organise their thoughts, and produce new knowledge. For example; the Tanzanian education system lacks facilities and a support structure to stimulate children's curiosity and creative imagination. Neither school, nor home, not other socialising institutions provide children with sufficient

stimulation to develop necessary skills for independent thinking and expression. At the time this project was designed, Tanzania (according to the CIA Factbook) had a population of approximately 60 million people, of whom an estimated 60% were under 24 years. Yet the number of public libraries was fewer than its years of independence—different sources vary slightly on the numbers, i.e., 49 (21 regional, 18 district, and one divisional) and 45 respectively.[2] The country had a near absence of school libraries at primary level (according to the *Tusome Vitabu* project baseline survey conducted by this researcher in 1999),[3] and teaching and learning practice was by rote, dependent on a single textbook with a copy shared by between five to 25 pupils.[4] Even so, despite their limited number and reach, some public libraries have multimedia sections for children, with some running Saturday storytelling programmes (the National Library is a case in point).

On a positive note, several NGOs in support of learning, readership, and creativity have sprouted up alongside *Watoto na Vitabu*; signalling the potential for a growing ecosystem to support innovation. These include privately initiated community libraries and resource centres with children's reading and storytelling as an objective, such as two rural-based initiatives—Makongoro Nyerere Library and Community Resource Centre in the Mara region and Cheche Community Library in the Arusha region; the Children's Art Programme at Nafasi Art Space in Dar es Salaam; the Children Books Organisation[5] and Ubongo, located in Dar es salaam, with a pan-African perspective on learning and programming in several African languages. In addition, the Early Learning Research Centre of the Aga Khan University in Dar es Salaam is testing an approach whereby it collaborates with communities with little or no education to develop children's storybooks that are then used for structured learning.

Soma contributes to this evolving ecosystem, through working with children, experimenting with innovative storytelling approaches, hosting and training creative writers, and creating spaces for literary discourse and mutual learning. Specifically, on children's creativity, **Soma** positions itself as a change agent when it nurtures young scribes to imagine stories yet to be written; connect them to a story worth reading; and curate platforms where storytellers, readers and activists connect and come together to ideate. **Soma** prides itself as an inclusive and nurturing space with an approach informed by pan-African eco-feminism.

Project objectives

The project had a two-pronged purpose: firstly, to support **Soma** in its endeavour to grow a children's multimedia storytelling hub by consolidating its approach to multimedia storytelling with children into a documented and replicable model with tangible outputs of standard quality.

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[2] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0955749016649107 and https://bookaid.org/countries/tanzania/

[3] https://www.somabookcafe.com/on-our-reading-culture-or-not-in-tz/; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260354136_African_Innovations_in_Literacy_Education_The_Third_Pan_African_Conference_on_Reading_for_All_August_22-28_2003; http://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/evaluations/ete-tusome-vitabu-proejct-january-2007.pdf (at the beginning of the *Tusome Vitabu* project, only ten percent of Tanzania's primary schools had a school library; at the completion, all of them did.)

[4] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336117384_Teacher-Centered_vs_Student-Centered

[5] Formerly the Children's Book Project in existence for over 25 years, which received support from CODE until 2018. The Childrens Book Project spearheaded the use of storybooks in classroom teaching.

Secondly, the project was intended to 'contribute to achieving a local early reading eco-system that harnesses open licences and innovations arising from digital disruption in ways that ensure meaningful access to affordable, high quality reading materials in mother-tongue languages to all children in developing countries.' To that effect, this is one among several initiatives supported by NBA whose outcomes demonstrate 'successful experimentation with and documentation of projects on content creation, use, and quality of open licensed storybooks in Africa, to develop and test innovative creation and usage models in early literacy.'[6] We wanted to learn and document how children interact with stories, as consumers and producers of narratives and expressions.

The project also showcases children-authored original works as testament of their creative potential and **Soma**'s multimedia storytelling co-creation hub as a resource for content creation with and for children. With these broad objectives the project intended to produce the following results:

- At least three e-books written by children. In the final phase, professional authors, illustrators, and designers would work with the children to publish their stories. The stories were to be in print form for sale and produced digitally on an online platform that uses open licensing.
- A documented methodological approach on how to research and craft children's stories with children.
- A multimedia studio in place with (equipment and human) capacity to process (and archive) stories into e-books and audiobooks.
- At least three published junior storytellers.

As a part of its objectives, **Soma**'s intention was to follow up with the children to ascertain the programme's impact, but circumstances pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic and partial lockdown resulted in lost momentum. Phone contacts with parents have been unsuccessful; home visits are being planned.

Ultimately the project aimed to generate outputs:
1. Demonstrate to policy makers what children are able to do and what it takes for them to unleash their creativity;
2. Instil confidence in the participating children and their peers in their writing ability, while simultaneously encouraging them to read
3. Show parents to 'look at the sheer beauty of what your child has just given to our literary heritage and to the corpus of knowledge!'
4. Show peer programmes that 'this, too is possible. You may wish to try it.'

Project scope

The conception, process, and outcomes of this project focused on testing an approach to researching and writing contemporary stories centred around a child's imagination, experience, and creative enterprise with the child at the centre. The project was designed to test the **Soma** approach to working creatively with children and package their stories as a multimedia finished product (initially three titles with four by-products). We aimed to evolve a methodological approach and map out a step- by-step process to crafting

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[6] '*Watoto na Vitabu*: Children's Storytelling Hub Project Proposal', submitted to Neil Butcher & Associates by E&D Readership and Development Agency—**Soma** on 29th October 2018

original stories with children that builds on **Soma**'s previous experience in originating and workshopping. This project was a way to celebrate the story-writing capacity of children.

Contrary to the general notion that adults are the knowers who hand down knowledge to children; children can be producers of knowledge from their own perspectives and experiences.[7] As social enquirers and storytellers, a child's perspective is key to the **Soma** approach. Adult educators, storytellers and other creatives in the book production chain are facilitators whose role is to create an environment with ample stimuli for children. These adult facilitators can provide the children with the appropriate tools to observe, inquire, reflect, remember, imagine, articulate their thoughts, and create a final product. Various prompts were designed to be used to stimulate and guide children to dive deep into their oral storytelling traditions to savour their mystical tales, storylines, and characters; from these exercises, the children were asked to produce original stories inspired by their communities' cultural repositories, coupled with their own experience in navigating a dynamic and complex social environment, their aspirations for the future, and their imagination beyond the here and now. **Soma**'s approach, project implementation, and its outcomes are discussed in detail below.

Equipment challenges

Alongside the project objectives and scope above, **Soma** tried to mobilise additional funds to complete the physical structure dedicated to its container-based *Watoto na Vitabu* multimedia children's storytelling hub for which some equipment was acquired as part of this project. **Sadaka Network**, an NGO that mobilises resources from faith-based institutions for a cause, had shown interest in supporting this component of the project. Funding did not materialise, however, due to changes in Sadaka Network's strategic focus. Concurrently, **Soma** also submitted a funding proposal for implementation of a multimedia feminist storytelling, documentation and archiving project to **Women Fund Tanzania**, which was approved. Integral to this proposal a feminist concept hub was budgeted for an online TV talk show. In the interim, the *Watoto na Vitabu* shares a corner in this studio; whereby equipment and human resources (HR) are shared between the two projects. Fund solicitation for a follow up phase of this project and finalisation of the Hub is ongoing with one multilateral and two bilateral donors.

Site research, location, language, and children

Initially, we planned to conduct the research and writing process with children from two out of five districts in the Dar es Salaam region, with a cascading sample of eight to ten children in four centres selected for the research and writing round; out of which two children per centre would be selected to participate in the editing and revision round aimed to produce the final three best stories. The diversity anticipated was to encompass schools and out-of-school centres with gender parity and proportional representation of age set/reading levels and socio-economic background. This included inner city (including *Kijiwe cha Usomaji Michenzani* an outreach street library and reading club we initiated) and middle-class neighbourhoods, private English-medium and public Kiswahili-medium schools; and a street children's facility and/or an orphanage.

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[7] See, for example: Graham, T. (2019, May 11). *Three TED Talks Positioning Kids as Knowledge Creators*. Knowledge Producing Schools. **http://knowledgeproducingschools.com/three-ted-talks-positioning-kids-as-knowledge-creators/**

As detailed elsewhere in the report, implementation was not as planned due to unanticipated hurdles that hindered access to schools. After several unsuccessful mitigation attempts, we eventually worked with three after/out of school centres: HK Learning Centre in Ubungo district (36 children), Sanje Academy in Mwenge, Kinondoni district (four children) and *Watoto na Vitabu* the Saturday platform hosted at **Soma** Book Café, Kinondoni district (six children). We thus involved 46 rather than the planned 32 to 40 children. Most of the children attending the first two centres are enrolled in public and Kiswahili-medium schools, while those at **Soma** Book Café attend private and English-medium schools.[8]

Language emerged as a significant issue. We had intended the research and writing process to be conducted in Kiswahili, the language spoken by all Tanzanians in out-of-class communication and used as the medium of instruction in all Tanzanian public primary schools. For this reason, we Initially decided to leave out *Watoto na Vitabu* from the project after pre-test feedback showed that many of them have poor Kiswahili proficiency. This is because parents sending children to the type of schools *Watoto na Vitabu* children attend and their teachers encourage exclusive use of English at home and in school. As a result, these children start rejecting Kiswahili as soon as they gain sufficient English proficiency. At *Watoto na Vitabu* we use both languages to foster a cultural appreciation of where they come from and their surroundings. Initially some parents had difficulty with our language decisions, but after structured conversations with them about our purpose and approach, the majority appreciated our reasoning. We ultimately decided to invite the *Watoto na Vitabu* children to join the project to add to its diversity. This was motivated by two factors: Children from Sanje were too few and they joined the HK Learning Centre for the research and writing workshop. The second is that selected stories from this process were too similar. *Watoto na Vitabu* children had the freedom to write in Kiswahili or English, a departure from our original plan (two out of six chose to write in Kiswahili).

Participating children from HK Learning Centre and Sanje attend Makuburi Primary School (a public school), Atlas and L.T.S. (private schools), located in Ubungo and Mwenge. Those from *Watoto na Vitabu* attend DIS, Academic International and Liberman (all private schools) located in Mikocheni.

In summary, the research and writing process was conducted in three out-of-school literacy and learning centres, located in two districts with mixed demographic characteristics, but drawing children from diverse economic backgrounds and social milieu. Demographic diversity was displayed most by participants from HK Learning Centre. **Soma** Book Café was also used as venue for review and editorial processes where all the shortlisted authors interacted with each other; facilitated by children's book authors, illustrators, and editors to further develop and refine their works.

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[8] *Watoto na Vitabu* Saturday programme is run on a cost-recovery basis with a marginal surplus to support Kijiwe cha Usomaji street library. Because of the Saturday programme fees, many parents do not bring their children (most send their children in centers where they can get extra tuition).

The children and their stories are fully discussed in other sections of this report, but below are details on the winning stories, who won them, the language the children used, and the centres they attend. Three stories can be downloaded in PDF format from the <u>Kalamu Ndogo</u> page of the **Soma** Book Café site. They will also be uploaded to Storyweaver, Digitisation is discussed further in this report.

- Nakiete Mlaki came in first during the assessment for *The Lonely Frog*. She wrote in English and attends *Watoto na Vitabu*. She signed up for the initiative on her first visit. Her story is published in English, with a Kiswahili translation.
- Farida Chacha[9] came in second. She wrote her story, *Chungu cha Ajabu,* in Kiswahili and attends the HK Learning Centre. Unfortunately, we could not publish her story because her mother withdrew permission. This problem is discussed in more detail below.
- Larry Semiono came in third. He wrote his story, *The Poor Lady,* in English and attends *Watoto na Vitabu*, where he is a veteran participant.
- Sharifa Shemputa, came in fourth. She wrote her story, *Mbuguma na Nasiru*, in Kiswahili and attends HK Learning Centre.

Research design

Desk research

This was an experimental and non-conventional research activity, taking place in a context characterised by top-down socialisation and learning processes in which children are at the bottom rung. The curriculum is examination oriented. There are low educational outcomes evidenced by a large proportion of primary graduates failing to read a simple Kiswahili and English text or perform simple numerical operations (Joshi

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[9] We are not using her real name because she dropped out of the programme.

& Gaddis, 2015). They grow up in a society in which contestation is more of an anomaly than a norm. We intended the project to be child-centred, using multimodality and critical literacy approaches, believing that children learn better when they interact with different sources of learning material presented in different modes (Kendrick, Jones, Mutonyi, & Norton, 2006); and profit from a combination of media and expressions to interpret and express meaning (Godhe & Magnusson 2017). Creative expression was the target and use of the five senses was to serve as a catalyst.

Because this initiative was so novel and unconventional, we relied heavily on anecdotal references from a few small-scale initiatives that shared some similarities with what we had set out to do. There was little academic research to help us. We also drew on our own experience from past collaborations and current contacts, namely with Cambridge University Press, South Africa, Aga Khan University in Dar es Salaam, Ubongo, and the Cheche Community Library.

Cambridge published 20 stories, co-authored by children and their adult family members, through workshopping. The stories focused on an outstanding family incident remembered by the adults and by the child. Demere Kitunga, the principal investigator (PI), facilitated the adaptation of ten of these titles into Kiswahili. These titles were popular with children who participated in *Watoto na Vitabu* and other programmes that **Soma** facilitated between 2009 and 2019.

At Aga Khan University, lecturers and students collaborated with semi-illiterate adults to explore, select and recreate/reimagine folkloric stories. Ubongo, on the other hand, has developed extensive TV and other video content popular with children and their parents. After an interview with Ubongo staff, we learned that content was developed in adult ideation workshops but was tested with children before production. The narrators are sometimes children. Cheche engages children in collecting and retelling stories from or about their relationships with adult relatives.

Although we were familiar with the end products of these initiatives none provided written information with data, methodological tools, and conclusions about the processes employed. With the exception of Ubongo, which can demonstrate utilisation and impact through research and data analytics, the other activities described above are unknown to researchers and we know of no attempt to gather data.

We wrote our own research guide to give general guidance to the team, for example, how to generate prompts and use them to moderate one-on-one and group reflection processes with children; what to look for in a story; and tips on how to analyse the story's context and make adaptations. We also drafted and revised tools that were meant to probe:
1. With what kinds of stories do children engage?
2. How does storytelling fit in the repertoire of their daily lives?
3. Who initiates them into storytelling and how?
4. Which prompts stimulate them to create mental images and ideas for a story?
5. How do they relate stories with their lived realities?
6. How does school, home, and their own created spaces and routines contribute to their storytelling experience?

Lessons generated from these questions are meant to inform and equip literacy programmes, such as *Watoto na Vitabu,* and educators willing to improvise and support children to fulfil their image of themselves.

In terms of this specific initiative, we can report back only anecdotal evidence because of the various administrative, human resource, and other problems described in this report. For example, because many of the children were not able to conduct their own research and reflect on it, the question of 'With what kinds of stories do children engage?' could only be answered by assessing the stories they submitted, which were predominantly folklore. The second and third questions were not explored. For the fourth-sixth questions, we can look to Larry, Nakiete, and Farida, the three prize-winning authors. Their experience is described throughout this report.

We used a two-pronged research approach. Children gathered and used the information they found to create stories. Facilitators, through observation and interaction with the children, learned to interpret the children's observational and thought processes, even though they had no previous experience with this kind of approach.

The children learned by doing. The adult facilitators learned by observation—the 'how' and 'where from' of storytelling, typical of the Kiswahili storytelling tradition which opens with the refrain, 'Paukwa, Pakawa' (literally 'willed into life, it sprang (into life)').[10] This storytelling tradition is a testament of trust, that gives freedom to explore and wonder—to the story teller and the listener. Following this tradition, the children had the power to create original stories with universal appeal, speaking from their lived experiences, cultural heritage, and untethered imagination from which they could bring their stories to life. While different sets of questions and stimuli were employed to cajole the first draft, the key follow-up question was 'Why?' (with an occasional How? Where? With whom? What did it/they look like? What did they do next?). It was an open-ended soft nudge to let the children speak uninterrupted and explore further what they were trying to depict and what they meant to communicate. When verbal communication fell short, they were invited to demonstrate through visual and performative expressions what it is they were seeing in their mind's eye.

As with the participant selection, the intention was to put in place a gender-balanced research and writing facilitation team, an aspiration that was not fully attained, but gender and child centredness were jealously guarded ideals throughout the research and writing processes to minimise age hierarchy and unintended gender dynamics. Ultimately, the last word rested with the child author (after exhausting the facilitators' whys; there was a final 'what does this mean to you and other children your age?'). Ethical protocols for doing research with children were built in and observed, including the imperative for

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[10] This is deeper interpretation of what Penina Muhando Mlama and Amandina Lihamba wrote in the *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Africa,* pages 305-306 about how storytelling begins:

> In many Tanzanian communities, storytelling is structured so that the audience has to utter a certain response. For example, there are set ways of starting a narration where the audience has to respond before the story can even begin. Among the coastal people, for example, stories begin this way:
> STORYTELLER: Paukwa (Once upon a time…)
> AUDIENCE: Pakawa (There was)

informed consent from the child and their parents on all aspects of research; including freedom to opt out at any stage the child or parent felt uncomfortable.

Selection of research sites, which is discussed above, was meant to attain an in-and-out of school balance and diverse demographic characteristics. This aspiration was also not met for reasons explained elsewhere in the report. Selection of participating children was done in collaboration with centre managers after being briefed on the purpose and approach of the research. However, notwithstanding mitigating efforts, the context dictated the variance between the planned and actual demographic pattern of participating children.

The PI developed the research and writing concept note that provided the framework for the recruitment of the Field Research and Writing with Children Coordinator (FRWCC) and developing his ToRs. She guided the research design, assisted in developing selection criteria, reviewed ToRs for field researchers, and conducted a participatory inception workshop in which research protocols were reviewed and research tools developed, which included sampling and ethical considerations—research team members, whose qualifications are discussed below, were required to sign contracts with ethical confidentiality and child protection clauses, after a background check.

The research process

A step-by-step process

The research process was designed to have the following flexible steps, to be adjusted as necessary:

1. *Research lore and characters:* using hints and prompts to facilitate children to research and write folkloric stories and generate a list of mythical characters found in the 120 ethnicities existing in the Tanzanian cultural landscape. The facilitators stimulated the children to think about where a story comes from; how to bring it to life; and share their storytelling experiences—where it is done, how it makes them feel, with whom they share it, what circumstances compels them to tell a story, and what kind of stories they love to listen to.

2. *Develop a framework* for contemporary storytelling, integrating myth and scientific innovation to be used to challenge children to further evolve their story lines with a contemporary edge.

3. *Use the framework to facilitate* a workshop with the best writers (no more than five) to create additional characters, scenery, and quests, using mythical characters and storylines the children generated during the research phase. Workshop objectives were to:

    a) facilitate brainstorming on what the children could do if they were junior scientists/or what a current junior scientist could do with their help.[11] The next step was to visualise the answers for all to see.

    b) facilitate generation of a list of words (and visual representations) to describe/portray the characteristics of mythical characters in different moods and a variety of contexts. We used the

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[11] The intention was to fuse folklore and contemporary imagination to create fantasy. Prompts were to be folkloric tales and characters such as Zimwi (Ogre), Chunusi (sea monster), Nguva (mermaid) etc. The traditional story was then joined to the children's own experiences and futuristic imaginations, with a prompt to help them imagine how these supernatural characters can help them solve a problem they experience and/or in their quest. Larry's story is a case in point: he took space exploration and aviation and turned it into a story about poor lady who wanted to fly. Farida's story which we could not publish, employs a digital device to clone.

five senses to brainstorm and tease out moods, feelings, actions, hues, colours, sizes, shapes, and sounds, etc.

c) facilitate the children to imagine a child aged five to seven who meets a mythical character of their choice and use the words generated in the workshop to retell their stories in text or visually and present them orally (storyline and character development), individually or in pairs. The storytelling was meant to capture and visualise key words and phrases—capitalising on peer commentary, after which they filled in actions and teased out character traits.

4. Give *children time to develop their stories* (individually) taking a cue from ideas generated in the workshop. *Review the stories based on pre-set criteria*—quest; flow; a plot that had the potential to grow into a complete story; characters that are interesting and relatable to children; and a setting that was tangible and relatable. The focus was on fantasy but any story with potential was considered in the first round in which the teachers and field research facilitators did the selection. The final round was done by children who read the stories in pairs and swapped stories to ensure each group was reading stories their members did not write. They were then asked to select the story that appealed to them the most. Later the facilitators made their own selections. The stories chosen are the ones that received the most votes from the children and facilitators combined.[12]

5. *Single out the three best-developed stories* for publishing—layout, illustration and production as e-books, of which the overall best story would also be translated into English and its original Kiswahili version would be produced with voice-over narration and sound effects. The first-place story would also be printed to test an online and print publishing interface. All three winning stories were to be mounted online with a CC BY[13] license. The publishing process was revised and is discussed in detail below.

The actual research process took many twists and turns. Starting with mobilising human and material resources, it involved scouting for and working with the FRWCC to translate the concept into operational guidelines, a month-long process during which the child's perspective as a researcher and storyteller needed to be clearly articulated as the key element to consider when formulating the research question and delineating the methodological approach. We did not want to discourage, interfere with, and/or 'correct' the child's way of 'seeing' and expression to align with what an adult thinks is best and/or 'right.'

Putting together the team

Subsequent actions included putting together a core team of action research-cum storytelling with children facilitators. Finding people with hands-on experience of working with children around reading and writing was not easy within our process, which turned out to be fluid and spiralling; each step generating lessons to improve on the next.

Godfrey Mishomari was selected as the FRWCC from a list of recommended names of young and upcoming authors who had just completed a creative writing workshop organised by the then Children's Book Programme. Godfrey's CV and interview indicated his ability—three people were interviewed. He was then invited to help scout for his team members. The combined team had the following combined

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[12] Interestingly, children's choices were not different from those of the adults.

[13] CC BY is a Creative Commons license that permits users to copy, redistribute, and adapt content without requesting permission.

attributes: Godfrey had just completed an MA in Literacies in Education; has participated in Room to Read graded writing training; and has written a book in use in the programme. He also has working experience as a publisher's editor. The first team of assistants were: Grace Mahumbuga, a former (class one and two) teacher and currently managing a Teacher Resource Centre and working with early childhood educators. She has an MA in Early Childhood Education. The second research assistant, Gonzalves Mpili, is a group-process facilitator who helped facilitate a world children poetry day hosted at **Soma** Book Café. Unfortunately, Grace transitioned from the project, during the extended permit 'hunt', and was replaced by Maria Mrindoko, a committed child facilitator, but less experienced. Latifa Miraji, facilitator of *Watoto na Vitabu* Saturday sessions, also participated in the processes that took place within **Soma** Book Café.

Initially, a core team of five members was put together and invited for the inception workshop. The PI and the FRWCC agreed on the key orientation elements, which was facilitated by the PI. Orientation focused on:

- Reviewing project concept, with a proposed research and writing plan, expected outcomes, milestones, and approach.
- Generating ideas to be used to develop a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework and documentation briefs.
- Conceptualising key elements expected to be teased out from history, culture, and real life.
- Agreeing on actions and prompts to be used as methodological tools for the children's enquiry, reflections and imagination.
- Teasing out meaning and expressions from the stories, experiences, and everyone's imagination to generate building blocks for their original creations.

The orientation session resulted in detailed inputs to the final field research plan, which included testing tools as well as methodology for liaison with research sites where tools were to be pretested prior to field research.

Pre-testing phase

After the orientation during which research questions and tools were reviewed, the research and writing facilitation team was tasked to pre-test the tools and prompts at two sites. The PI did not directly participate in the pretesting of tools, but was an observer at one of the sites, which gave her insight during the feedback session and review of tools. During this phase, Grace Mahumbuga, who was also the liaison to the education authorities from which we needed permits to work in schools, dropped out for unforeseen reasons relating to her permanent place of work.

Fieldwork research preparation, challenges with educational authorities, and how these challenges were met

Fieldwork research preparation was preceded by a review of the draft tools, based on feedback from pre-testing and plan revisions after consensus-building with research site hosts/managers and ratification by the team. Preparation also included refining the MEL framework, including results tracking and documentation tools. In the meantime, the FRWCC was overwhelmed by what seemed to be a never-ending back and forth with authorities to get permits to work with children through the schools.

Our Initial assumption was that since ours was a micro-project seeking to interact with only a few children in a few sites, **Soma** could use the approach it had employed on previous occasions during which approval was sought for and granted at the street level of the local government, the school or centre, parent(s) and children. In this instance, we failed to get positive cooperation from government officials for permits to work in schools. Each authority advised and gave us different instructions on procedures and the chain of command we needed to follow to reach the relevant authority. This meant a back-and-forth between different levels, only to be told to start again and address a different authority. It was a month-long process. Eventually we were advised to apply to the prime minister's office in Dodoma.[14]

Considering the cumbersomeness of the procedure, budget implications, time spent already and the uncertainty of a positive outcome, we decided to use informal networks to reach out to privately run centres where access to children and their parents could be mediated through informal channels, i.e., identifying privately owned learning centres whose leaders were already known to someone in the research and writing facilitating team.

The FRWCC approached independent out-of-school centres (which offer extra tuition to children—a common practice because parents fear that their children are not learning enough to pass exams in a normal school setting). It turned out, however, that, even after crossing the first hurdle, some parents became suspicious of the process for lack of a letter from local government or education authority to assure them that ours was an authorised and therefore legitimate activity. As a result, only four children enrolled from Sanje Academy. At HK centre, some parents feared that the activity had a religious indoctrination motive because the centre has a church-affiliated school in one of its catchment areas. Upon this second stalemate, **Soma** decided to write letters directly to parents to explain the purpose and significance of the project; what it entailed and how it related to child development and learning in a broader sense. We also told the parents that if they did not feel confident to let their children participate, they were free to withhold consent. As is further explained below, engaging with parents at different stages of the process is essential.

Field action research and writing with children

There were 40 children who participated at the start from whom ten stories were selected and their authors qualified to go on to the next step of the research and writing process. The recurring themes were social life/relationship between family members either the nuclear family or an extended family, love, and witchcraft mostly from folktales. Most, if not all, retold stories were already published by others—something field researchers and centre heads missed during their selection process. Our requirement to have the children first select outstanding iconic/mythical characters; deeds and scenes and then talk about their stories, together with the experience of collecting them, in a workshop prior to writing an original story was meant to create distance and a point of departure from the stories children collected and those they wrote. Some of these steps were skipped due to the limited time facilitators had to interact with the children resulting in the preparatory work with the children being rushed.

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[14] Research clearance follows a cumbersome procedure decided by two authorities—Bureau of Statistics and Commission for Science and Technology. To do research with children, a further approval must be obtained from the ministry responsible for local government an application for which must be endorsed by the local, district and regional levels.

The children's workshop was also meant to help the children explore how the process made them feel; what made their choices important to them; and explore avenues they use to tell each other stories in their daily routines—enlisting the people involved, the mood, the surroundings and other things that make them want to tell or listen to stories. Facilitators would then visualise key words and phrases children produce and eventually ask them to recreate stories inspired by ones they collected, and ideas generated during the brainstorming.

The field research report[15] explains that the children were given time to tell and share their stories (mainly folktales and stories they remembered, have read at school, or told to them by family members). Guided by the research team, the children were oriented to story basics, after which a storyline was developed for the children to imagine their own stories. The team also used a chalkboard and paper sheets pasted on the walls to make the environment creative and friendly for the children to refer to whenever they needed to do so. However, the impact of this approach was low and did not come up with the expected outcome. It seems rather than steer an experiential process, the process was prescriptive. Rather than a facilitated child-centred approach, the team reverted to a theoretical teaching mode—contrary to what was generated during the inception workshop and pretesting—probably because of the delay in actually starting the fieldwork and replacement of the researcher with the most experience working with children. As a result, children found the process cumbersome and some of them dropped out. We mitigated this in the second workshop, in which the facilitators helped the children who remained rewrite their stories.

The PI did not participate in the field research and writing (first phase) either, which was, in hindsight, an oversight. Instead, she received feedback on what worked and what did not and reviewed the feedback with the field researchers, at times reaching out to field interlocutors and hosts, parents, and children. During the period, she also helped the team search for and build consensus on a mitigation plan and approaches. It turned out, however, that the field researchers had no immediate solutions to the many contextual and methodological hurdles with which they were confronted. As a result, mitigation did not often happen organically. The PI also learned that because everything dragged on for too long without additional compensation, some of the team members' morale ebbed before they completed the first phase. That may also have affected the outcome.

Review and writing workshop

Following the first phase of field research, the PI and the FRWCC reviewed the deliverables against the expected outcomes. Because time and budget would not allow returning to the field, a mitigation plan was formulated to combine some aspects of points three and four, as outlined above, in this phase. In consultation with the FRWCC, the PI invited people with the requisite skills to serve as resource persons and/or co-facilitators and asked all team members to search for additional prompts, i.e., books and images with diverse content and approaches, inspired by contexts other than what prevails in the day-to day-lives of the children. Prompts collected and used include more children's books, including comic books, cuttings from magazines (Larry's story was partly inspired by one with a picture of a helicopter), sketches of a fully illustrated children's book (Nakiete's main character was inspired by these images), and a number of

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[15] The field research report by Godfrey Mishomari is an internal document used by the PI and research team. Key points are discussed throughout this case study.

objects like a ball, board games, found objects in the natural environment like twigs, leaves, etc. The intent was to provide the kind of participatory and experiential learning approach for both sets of learners (children and researchers/facilitators) that had initially been lacking. We also aimed to create a conducive environment for the children to internalise, reflect, imagine, and create new narratives. The adult research and writing facilitators could then turn what they knew theoretically into participatory action. This approach unlocked the children's potential and that of their facilitators. Stories children were working with underwent a dramatic transformation, while a few started new stories. It is, however, those revised stories that made it to the top list. Overall, we learned that the process could be shortened into a one-day workshop for research and writing, with another day for a review and an editorial workshop. After that, the authors of the selected manuscripts could work with professional editors and illustrators to answer queries and approve proofs, the same way that adult authors do.

The shortlisted stories were re-examined, with a focus on language skills, creativity, and originality, regardless of whether or not the story originated from a book. The *Watoto na Vitabu* programme facilitator invited children participating in her programme to take part in *Kalamu Ndogo*, with an intent to broaden the scope by adding to the diversity of participants (as explained in the section on site research). Interested children were to create stories, following the same process used in the other centres with the same selection criteria. Six *Watoto na Vitabu* programme children were interested, out of whom four were selected to participate in the final phase from which a total of four stories were selected for publication.

Selected children from all the three programmes were invited to brainstorm each other's stories during the workshop, using whatever thoughts came to mind through word painting and association of ideas. Prompts and imagination teasers as outlined above littered the walls and mats on the floor of the workshop room. Children were also asked to go outside and describe what they saw to reinforce their ability to observe and describe their surroundings. The children worked by themselves, with expert guidance from the facilitators to help them review their stories individually and in pairs, flesh them out, or start afresh. Facilitators asked questions to help the children further express their thoughts in words, physical demonstration, or drawings. Once the children were certain that they wanted their elaborations to be part of their stories, they were asked to insert them. Thus, the children themselves strengthened their plots, further developed their characters, and made the setting vivid. The process involved as many adult facilitators and resource people as there were children. The adults sat still and listened as the children shared stories and received feedback from each other. The facilitators only interjected in the conversations to prompt further clarity. This was done in rotation for part of the morning. Afterwards, the children were given time to rewrite their stories or write new stories if they so wished. The process was captured in photographs and audio recordings.

Next, children participated in the initial judging process by listening to each other read their stories aloud, in three groups; after which they commented on and rated them according to comprehension and appeal. After this process, each facilitator selected the top stories, based on the same selection criteria used at field level. The facilitators also identified gaps to be further worked through in a one-on-one interaction with the authors of selected manuscripts during the remaining cycles of the editorial and illustrating process. At the end of this process, four manuscripts were selected, rather than the three originally anticipated and budgeted for, because there was a manuscript that came fourth, but its author was from

a background that made it less likely for her to get another opportunity like this one. The challenge was to pull this story through with no additional cost, and we succeeded.

This process was an eye opener to some of the team members, as summed up by the FRWCC:

> *The team came to realize that children understand more when using child-friendly and visual representation (pictures, illustrations, audio-visual as well-multimodality), as was evidenced during our final leg workshop with the children in which pictures and illustrations were used to tease out the children's creative ability to write stories of their own.*

Editorial and illustration processes

The PI coordinated the editorial and illustration processes, working closely with the FRWCC and the *Watoto na Vitabu* facilitator, both of whom served as liaison persons between the project, children, and their parents—sometimes through centre heads and sometimes talking directly with parents. The PI solicited experienced children's book illustrators to work with the children to actualise their stories in a high-quality illustrated book format. Among them was a talented illustrator, who also runs a popular TV programme. He showed enthusiasm to participate and imagined several options to popularise the series through his TV programme, but unfortunately, his enthusiasm did not materialise into action. Three equally qualified illustrators agreed to participate; one was asked to illustrate two stories to cover the gap. Each story was assigned to an illustrator whose style best suited the story.[16] Children worked with editors and illustrators one-on-one and approved every word, phrase, and image in their stories. Editing was minimal by intention to ensure that the child's voice was not lost. With the assistance of the *Watoto na Vitabu* coordinator, the PI and the FRWCC discharged key editorial functions and translated *The Lonely Frog* into Kiswahili (*Chura Mpweke*). This trio was also responsible for quality assurance overall. Using her experience and networks, the PI also solicited pre-press expertise and PR communication input from [Ona Stories](#)[17] for communication videos and the Mauya Advertising Agency for the audio story. The video produced by Ona Stories can be streamed on the *[Kalamu Ndogo](#)* page. There were several proofs and repeated queries for each product, which paid dividends for all except the audio book, with which we are not entirely satisfied.[18]

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[16] Marco Tibasima illustrated Th*e Lonely Frog* and *The Poor Lady*. Khalid Yusuf illustrated *Mbuguma na Nasiru*. Abdul Gugu illustrated the fourth story, which was not published because the mother withdrew consent after the story had gone through the full editorial process to the final layout. It can easily be mounted online if the mother agrees to it.

[17] Still and motion pictures were taken at every stage of the research and writing process. These were presented to Ona Stories, which was commissioned to produce two video stories, one capturing the entire process in five to seven minutes and a video of three to five minutes, capturing the children's experience. The final product is from their own camera work with some footage picked from images taken earlier.

[18] Audio was the most difficult service to procure. Mauya Advertising Agency was selected out of four candidates that were invited to submit their profiles. This agency was the only one with experience working with educational content for children. The others were more experienced with adult content and mostly popular music videos.

The winning stories

The four winning stories are listed above and described in detail below.

Figure 2: The pond was grey. The frogs had frozen like statues
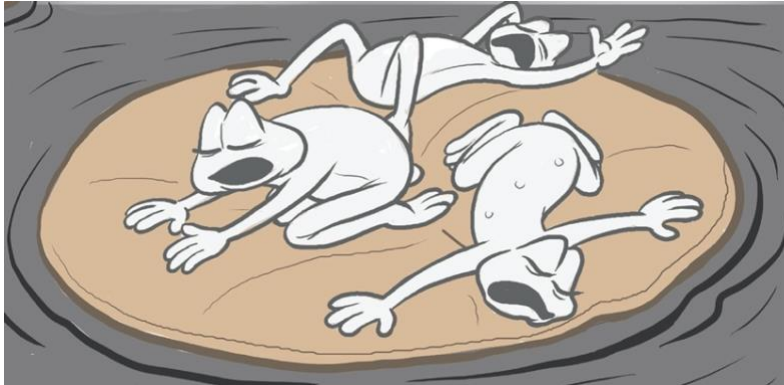
The Lonely Frog by Nakiete Mlaki, who was twelve years old at the time of writing, was written in English and translated into Kiswahili. Nakiete's story was very advanced and required little editorial prompting. It met all the selection criteria. *The Lonely Frog* was chosen by the children, the facilitators, and the resource people as the best story.

Nakiete developed well-advanced illustrations to clarify the story's setting and character traits. The illustrator preserved the main features of the original illustrations. (See figures six and seven.) The story is about a young frog who feels alienated from her peers, but who possesses an unappreciated gift that will save the community. The other frogs in this community also have special powers, but not those that can save them from a neighbouring community of humans set to destroy their habitat by turning the frogs grey and lifeless. The lonely frog is able to turn everyone back to life with her special powers. Ultimately, it is her uniqueness that saves everyone. The lonely frog's special talent leads to self-discovery and validation from the rest of the community.

Chungu cha Ajabu in Kiswahili by Farida Chacha, who was twelve years old at the time of writing, came in second. Hers is a moral fable, typical African folklore, with some Arabic influence. It had a predictable plot in a well-developed narrative with potential for further nuance. During the review workshop the story developed further. It subsequently underwent dramatic transformation during the follow up editorial process.

Chungu cha Ajabu is a story of two friends, a prince and a commoner, who played together, hunting for birds with a slingshot. The commoner found a magic pot and accidentally discovered that his slingshot could multiply when he put it in the pot. He shared his discovery with his friend, who then told his father. The king confiscated the pot, succeeded in multiplying money, and decided to clone his son, all by using the magic pot. To eliminate the clone and restore his friend to his natural unique self, the commoner discovered how to use a remote-control device to reverse the king's actions.

The Poor Lady by Larry Semiono, who was eight years old at the time of writing, the youngest author, and the only boy, is a dramatic fantasy, written in English. The story was no more than a storyline at the time of the review and writing workshop, but it had a lot of character and a sense of wonder. With prompting, Larry was able to develop the story further using single sentences to the point which, though it came third in the selection process, the story sizzled with every editorial encounter, revealing its author's outstanding

storytelling potential. Ultimately, the team could not decide whether it might not have come in first had the final judging been done after the editorial process.

Figure 3: The stick turned into a wooden tray and helped her fly


The story is about a lady, who in Larry's mind's eye was also old (about the same age as his parents) and poor, who wished she could fly. Larry helps her realise her dream by animating a stick, which promises her a flight and fulfils the promise by turning into a flying wooden tray.[19]

Figure 4: Larry refining his story

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[19] From Larry's description, the wooden tray is a winnowing tray. We retained his naming of it as a wooden tray to respect his imagination and poetic licence. Also, unlike European witches, who use broom sticks, in African folklore witches fly in winnowing trays (and Larry's story was inspired from an episode involving an alleged witch).
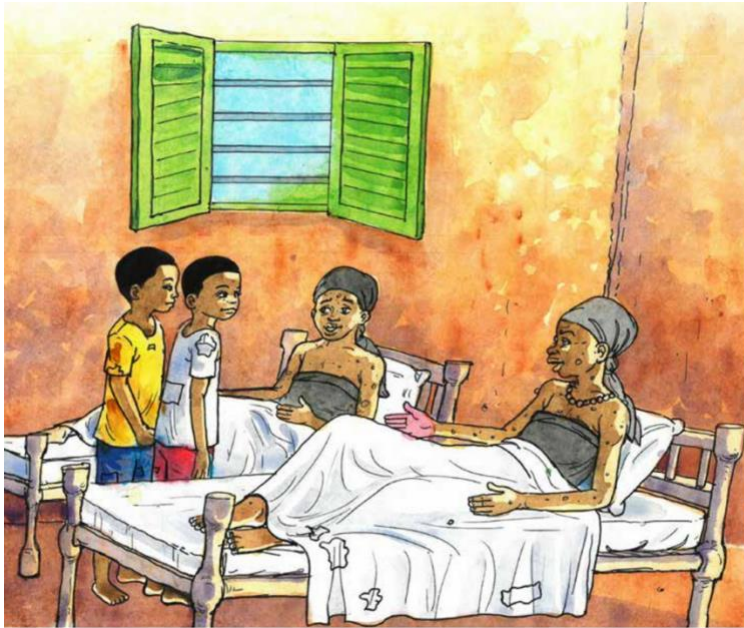
Mbuguma na Nasiru in Kiswahili, by Sharifa Shemputa, who was twelve years old at the time of writing, is folklore, which started off as a stereotypical co-wifes' conflictual relationship which rubbed off on their sons.[20] It turned into a story of two half-brothers braving a journey into the jungle to fetch medicinal plants to save their ailing mothers' lives. Their characters determine their fates. The good one fulfils the mission and later saves his brother, and the greedy one fell into abyss.

Like *Chungu cha Ajabu*, *Mbuguma na Nasiru* presented a mature level of narration, with a better developed plot than most. It also showed originality. Conversation with the author during the review workshop indicated that she was writing from experience. *Mbuguma na Nasiru* was therefore selected as a bonus story to give its author a chance that the team believed was most likely a golden opportunity for her. The story transformed during the editorial process into an adventure story but remained a moral fable.

Listen to the authors share their experiences on **You Tube**.

Storybook dissemination

Use of open licensing

We decided to publish the e-book series under a **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY)** license, which allows anyone to freely read, download, translate, print, and distribute content on condition that the copyright holders are credited. We did this to give our work, the stories, the children, the illustrators, and everyone associated with these storybooks more visibility. We hope this licensing will lead to a larger number of readers than would be the case if the stories had remained copyright protected. We would also like to see the stories translated into other languages, particularly African languages. A CC BY license permits translation without requesting permission.

Four *Kalamu Ndogo* e-books have been uploaded to the Soma Book Café platform. We hope that they will become a part of a growing e-book series.

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[20] In the project video, Sharifa explains that her story 'is about life where I come from. When mothers do not get along, they teach their children not to love each other. They too do not get along. When one gets something, the other sulks and vice versa. That is how we live.'

NBA wrote a blog post to advertise the release of the series titled *Little scribes with big stories: Tanzania's Soma Book Cafe introduces its youngest authors*. This case study is an output of this project, mounted on both the Soma **Book Café** and the **Early Literacy Resource Network** websites.

StoryWeaver, the award-winning children's storybook platform, reviewed the titles and agreed to make **Soma** Book Café a featured publisher. The stories will also become featured titles once they are mounted on the StoryWeaver site. With the help of Mujuni Baitani, **Soma's** newly recruited programme officer with IT expertise, and of Kirsty von Gogh of NBA, we are working to mount the e-books onto the StoryWeaver platform.

Finally, this is an experimental initiative. We hope that using CC licensing for the storybooks and for this report will give better visibility to our ideas, our work, the Multimedia Children's Storytelling Hub and **Soma** Book Café as a resource for innovative content creation.

Print storybooks

Five hundred copies of *The Lonely Frog* were printed, 45 to be distributed free and 450 for sale. The free copies went to: three copies to Nakiete, one copy each to the children whose work was published online, the Tanganyika Library Services (legal deposit), and a copy to the multimedia section of the Tanzania Institute of Education, which is responsible for approving books for the school system. We will need to mobilise funds for submission fees to have all titles in this series reviewed for use in schools.

We also plan to send a copy of the book to the child whose work is yet to be published online because her mother withdrew consent, with a letter to inform the mother where the other stories can be viewed. We will also explain that her daughter's work is ready for uploading and can be published if she changes her mind.

It is too early to predict the correlation between direct storybook print sales and online availability of openly licensed versions. Costing was done on a cost-recovery basis, with the sales price set at an affordable TSZ 5,000/= (about US$2.15) projected to recover printing and distribution costs with a five percent surplus. The assumption is that sales of 450 copies should generate enough revenue for a reprint. Once approved for use in schools, a school edition will be printed in large quantities and sold at a commercial rate. Money generated will be ploughed back to facilitate subsequent cycles of research and writing with children after deducting royalty for authors.

In the interim, we are promoting our approach to using story writing to promote the creativity of children. We are already working on a grant application to **UNICEF** for reading, research, and writing workshops with school children

Communication strategies

Other dissemination strategies will pick up steam now that we have a communications specialist in-house and are in the process of integrating the communication plan for each project in an integrated strategy for the organisation. Our plan is to ensure that **Soma** products are posted on all our social media platforms and tagged to relevant facilities, networks, and associates. We will follow up to collect comments and

conversations generated around these works and videos, analyse them, and send out follow-up articles on our platforms. We will zero in on the *Kalamu Ndogo* series and its by-products. Other than seeking to gauge public interest and use, we will follow up on interest in our approach and actively seek to solicit co-creation opportunities. We will also design a tool to corelate online information and sales of print copies by asking how they learned about the title in which visitors are interested.

Our immediate launch plans were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which also translated into a financial and staff crisis as **Soma** Book Café and all its services had to close abruptly. Alternatively, we negotiated an MoU with Boresha online radio to serialise the three titles and invite the authors for a talk show, but this is yet to take effect, partly due to safety reasons associated with COVID-19. Now that the restrictions have been lifted and schools have resumed, we are monitoring the situation in terms of safety before we invite children to venture into engagements that don't allow social distancing.

Community engagement, participation, and advocacy

At the outset, we intended to work with 36-40 students, but ended up with 46 children from three centres rather than four. We had a total of five facilitators, three of whom worked in all the centres during the research and writing process, as well as at the review workshop. The PI and the *Watoto na Vitabu* coordinator participated in all processes taking place at **Soma** Book Café, but not at the other two centres. Additionally, we brought in a number of resource people including the two learning centre heads; one children's books author, who is also a visual artist, illustrator and graphic designer; three additional illustrators, two commissioned to illustrate and design layout, and the third who only illustrated and worked with a separate layout designer. We also had two documentalists, one who came from a firm accompanied with a cameraman, and a mixed media expert who developed an audio story. Two additional **Soma** staff members assisted with logistics and one also helped with documentation.

Resources committed to the process included:
- Venue;
- Transport costs;
- Stationery, workshop prompts and other materials; and
- Meals, and refreshments during workshops; professional fees and honoraria, all of which was within the project budget.

Fees had to be reduced across the board, however, to accommodate production of the fourth book.

Children who remained to the end of the first phase were engaged and resourceful. Those selected to participate in the review workshop and those who crossed this hurdle to completion of a three-stepped editorial process attended without fail and gave a positive feedback on the process. They were facilitated with transport, refreshments, and stationery.

Parents were not actively engaged; some were more helpful and supportive than others, also serving as a go-between for the project with the children. For example, the parents of Larry, Nakiete, and Sharifa were forthright and closely followed the participation of their children. Sharifa's mother cooperated with the team of facilitators who chaperoned Farida and Sharifa to the Soma Book Café whenever there was a session. Nakiete and Larry were brought in by their parents. It was necessary to make an extra effort to

cajole Farida's mother to agree to her child's participation throughout. Eventually, at the penultimate stage, she withdrew her consent. In retrospect, we learn that lack of active engagement with the parents throughout the project cycle was a significant omission. This is discussed in more detail below.

Other activities and advocacy

Soma used its planned activities and platforms to introduce *Kalamu Ndogo* and the experience of originating the series. During the Book Bazaar event held on the 7th March 2020 that combined the International Women's Day commemoration and *Watoto na Vitabu* open day for the first quarter of the year, *Chura Mpweke* was read out aloud to the delight of children and parents.

In addition, a key component in our follow-up plan is to use the *Kalamu Ndogo* books as prompts for reading, research, and writing activities facilitated with children starting with these authors.

Findings and interpretation

What the children tell us

The project has demonstrated that, given the right environment, children are as skilled storybook authors as adults are. *Kalamu Ndogo* was predicated on producing three works in Kiswahili but ended up with four original stories—two in Kiswahili, two in English. Rather than the three authors that we had envisaged when writing our proposal to NBA, we emerged at the end with four. Farida's story may not have been published because of her mother's actions, but we must acknowledge her creative writing talent and potential to become a published author. Her enthusiasm despite various hurdles suggests that the seed has already been planted.

Until publishing consent for *Chungu cha Ajabu* is obtained, however, readers will only access three titles. We also produced a Kiswahili version of *The Lonely Frog*, which offsets the skewed balance against Kiswahili. There is an audio book for *The Lonely Frog,* but as explained above, the audio output component of the project was not ideal.

The manuscripts underwent a dramatic transformation, just as they do in any other creative process. Each story went through several drafts after they were reviewed and reread. *Kalamu Ndogo* was special, however, because the authors were fully involved in the editorial process. We also observed that these young authors fiercely guard the objects of their creation, just as adult authors do. They made sure that the editors and illustrators correctly captured the essence of what they wanted to convey in their stories. At times, they took pains to explain why this or that word, phrase, character, or image needed to be just so. Importantly, these children saw themselves as equals to the adults and could cogently argue in support of their thinking.

Figure 7: Marco Tibasima's illustration of Nakiete's drawing

Asked why the protagonist should be an old lady and not a little girl or boy, for example, Larry simply said 'because she is cool.' Upon further probing in a context outside the writing and editing process, he told us that his character is derived from a real-life news item on TV whereby an old lady was found on the roof top of a house in the city. When interviewed by a reporter, the lady said her flight vessel had had an accident. Larry learned later that the lady's vessel was a flying winnowing tray.

Likewise, when we asked Nakiete what if Zakia sat at eye level with the rest of her community members, Nakiete insisted that Zakia must be seated on a tall chair, because she was the queen.

For her part, Sharifa insisted on retaining the co-wives, even when she could not imagine an active role for them. Her reasoning of, 'this is how things are...' related to her original storyline.[21] The co-wives resurfaced when she was being interviewed for the profile video, as discussed above.

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[21] In the original story, one brother was an antagonist, the other a protagonist—mirroring the conflictual relationship of their mothers. In the revised version, they were both protagonists. But one was greedy and the other not. The former fell into temptation and was punished by mysterious forces. His brother came to redeem him after delivering medicine to the two mothers.

It was generally observed that in the large group of 46 children, girls created better developed narratives than boys, while boys surpassed girls in drawing, although there were exceptions. Nakiete and Sharifa, for example, had exercise books full of illustrations and said they liked to draw.

Like all authors, children are products of their environment. They mirror it in their writing, using their repository of knowledge and experience from conscious and unconscious memory. Children displayed this in their stories. They further explained it during and after the process. Even when prompted by images of previously read stories, the four final stories were reimagined to reflect each individual child's unique experience of the world they live in and their scope of knowledge.

This mix of tradition and imagination is demonstrated as follows:
- Farida, whose story was not published, tapped into folkloric icons like greedy and cruel kings and princesses, who populate folktales everywhere, including in East Africa, where these stories are read and recounted. These East African tales are actually a legacy of an Arabic influence in the region. She also joins tradition to sci-fi when she wills her characters to use remote technology for cloning.
- Tales about quest journeys and hunts inform Sharifa's story, together with stereotypes about co-wives.
- Nakiete's story displays her interest in science bordering on sci-fi and fantasy when she imbues her characters with all kinds of powers.
- Larry uses fantasy to fuse magic motifs from two different cultural resources and his own interest in flying to great effect. He owes his sense of wonder to typical African story telling traditions together with his own knowledge.

Brainstorming with an additional resource person, himself a writer of fantasy stories for children, pointed us to a possibility that we had not considered before. Perhaps because the children attending public schools have limited exposure to life outside their immediate environment and limited access to a variety of reading materials, it might be hard for them to imagine and to fantasise. Out of the forty stories written by children from HK and Sanje, over twenty were from published storybooks; some of them were reproduced almost verbatim. Our resource person suggested a variety of stories, pictures, and illustrations of various types and genres as prompts for the second-round workshop, including a number of sci-fi comic books as additional inputs to the prompts we had organised for the session.

About his public-school Kiswahili-medium students, Mr. Patrick Joseph Gongwe, head of HK Learning Centre commented:[22]

> We worked together to impart various skills through competitions and giving prizes. It enabled us to figure out what children are able to do without being taught. We discovered that some children in my school were talented. Ultimately, we would organise internal competitions and give prizes to winners to encourage those who found it hard or believed they were incapable. We discovered some children were good illustrators and storytellers; others were good observers. The children were improving their skills from one day to the next.

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[22] Mr. Patrick's comments in video posted on **Soma** Book Café platform.

Additional insights include the imperative to bring children on board from the very beginning of research design and tools development to gain their perspective and insights for all processes involving children as subjects. This includes their participation as research leads and peer facilitators. This approach would thus incorporate training, backstopping and feedback sessions to include both adult and child facilitators. It would further be necessary to minimise age hierarchy, which might inhibit the children's insights and freedom of expression. In this, the adult facilitators must unlearn conventional wisdom that adults are the 'knowers' and therefore the leaders and educators, while children are the learners and followers. We have learned by experience that no amount of adult insight can replace a child's own perceptions and interpretations.

Tools developed that speak to the interest of children must therefore enlist sufficient insight into a child's experience to help participating adults who might have forgotten their own childhood experiences, as we all do, to relearn and to adapt to a child's way 'seeing,' 'knowing,' and 'telling'. In this experiment, adult facilitators learned the hard way, after misinterpreting a process and the tools they developed to use with children, despite feedback received during the pre-test. It thus took them by surprise when children found the project's administration complex. Experientially, after repeated trial and error, they arrived at their own 'Aha' moment with a realisation that the absence of children on the team was a missing link.

Despite our initial difficulty in enlisting the participation of a diverse group of children representing Kiswahili public schools, the mood and concentration displayed by those we eventually found was priceless. Some wrote exceptionally long stories, while some were single-paragraph stories. Some children expressed themselves in visual and some in poetic forms. Go to our **Google Drive** site for photographs of the children at HK Learning Centre and Sanje Academy. All the children were eager to participate, but due to delays caused by various factors some dropped out. Ultimately only four children from Sanje Academy participated, a glaring contrast to HK Learning Centre, which enlisted 36 children. The field researchers

speculated that some parents were suspicious because of the project's informal approach, even though they received personal letters to explain the circumstances. In addition, some children may have lost interest because the research tools were administered in a way that did not capture their imagination. Even so, the contrast is hard to explain. Children who remained in the process were enthusiastic and positive. This enthusiasm was palpable among children whose manuscripts were selected for further development and publishing. When interviewed for the final appraisal and documentation, the manager of HK Learning Centre said the project was a learning opportunity for him and participating children. He was also proud that two of the children whose manuscripts were selected for publishing came from his centre. Regrettably, we did not capture the reaction of children whose manuscripts were not selected; nor did we retain copies.

Working with children gave us some fundamental lessons. For example, when asked to collect stories from their milieu without extra prompting to imagine beyond what they have already committed to memory, children tend to go 'blank' or regurgitate stories they read or were told to them orally rather than create from imagination. Researchers must therefore use child-friendly tools and imagination 'games' to prompt children to think beyond their immediate experience. To demonstrate to the children how research for storytelling is done, it is recommended to demonstrate and simulate. The approach should give room for children to reflect, brainstorm, and interrogate the different dimensions of 'what the story means' and 'how it came into being'. The 'why' question should give children an opportunity to think about assumptions at their own level of knowledge and experience; with a caution not to expose children to information they are not mature enough to handle. Together with the why question, exploration of how the story came into being helps children develop their stories. It helps them become aware of the context and emotions invoked by the stories, which once articulated, assists them to strengthen characters, conflicts and scenery.

Our failure to actualise this methodology during the first phase was a missed opportunity to learn how it would play out in a larger group of children. It will therefore be central when we get a chance to roll out this project. To do this, we will need time and the goodwill of formal institutions. To access many children in their regular learning environment entails obtaining a permit, which once acquired, permits us to work out a schedule with sufficient time allocated for orientation, research, and reflection sessions with children, teachers, and facilitators. As pointed out earlier, it is possible to complete a round of research and writing in a single day. The prerequisite is to implement the preliminaries in advance. These are:

- Recruiting and orienting teachers and child facilitators on purpose, approach and development and application of tools;
- Pretesting tools with a group of students; and
- Setting a date for research and writing, preferably on a Saturday when the process will not interfere with regular classes.

The importance of parents

In hindsight, the absence of parental involvement beyond a written introduction to the project and asking them to sign a consent form was an oversight. The role of parents in affirming and nurturing their children's talent is essential. In this project, the parents of the children who participated came from two different world views. Some recognised their children's gifts and appreciated the benefit of their participation in the project. They thus supported their children. Others did not show active interest and/or

saw the process as a distraction from schoolwork and withdrew their children. Initially, it took facilitators by surprise, for example, when Farida's mother removed her at the last minute, even though her story came second in the selection. Her mother said that Farida was in the final school year and needed to study. There was another undercurrent that we would not substantiate but is worth being mindful of. Farida's mother indicated earlier that she feared for her daughter's safety from sexual exploitation because some of the facilitators were male, even though they included teachers in the centre she attends regularly for extra tuition. After we gave her our guarantee and provided her child with a female escort to and from workshop sites, she relented, but later came the excuse that her daughter was preparing for her final exams. We deduce from these dynamics that our child rights protocols should be visible enough to parents who are the primary duty bearers for children's wellbeing.

Our lesson in relation to parental engagement is that, by skipping entry into community protocols, which include briefing local authorities and an inception meeting with parents, we in fact alienated our work from the extended community, especially parents and guardians. This lesson resonates with the ancient African wisdom of *Sankofa*—whatever you leave behind you will have to go back for—which is also the guiding principle for many group approaches. Furthermore, building trust is a two-way affair. Expecting parents to blindly trust an arrangement because it promises some benefit to their children will not work. The goodwill the centres have constructed with children and their parents and the difficult role the heads played in building bridges is therefore not to be underestimated. On our part, our attempt at mitigation was too little too late since we only managed to meet and establish rapport with the parents of the children whose manuscripts were selected for publication. The lines of communication between us and them remain open.

Repackaging and dissemination

We are yet to ascertain audience feedback to inform us on how the stories have been received and used. As described in the section on our communications strategy, we have posted them on our website with a comments section and tagged the NBA blog post. At the time of writing this report, publishing on the StoryWeaver site is a work in progress, as well as local dissemination of the printed copies and publicising online content. As the COVID-19 situation gradually eases more can be done to promote this work within and beyond the community.

The project has generated sufficient insights and information, however, to be compiled into a methodological kit on research and content development with children, including resources for editing, illustrating, and publishing multimedia stories. Information and literature generated during the research and writing process has been archived for internal learning and institutional memory. Regrettably, however, the *Watoto na Vitabu* programme stalled due to the lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing the coordinator, who played a key role in this project to transition from **Soma**. We remain interested in repackaging this report and our voluminous archive of information on this project to gradually streamline the information into a methodological toolkit for public use in the next phase of this project.

Unforeseen issues

Time was the most elusive variable in this study. At the time of its design, we estimated that the process would take six to eight months, but we settled on 12 months to factor in unanticipated circumstances. As it turned out, the inception alone took over two months. The project experienced several meanderings and slumps in subsequent phases. At times it completely lost direction. Key deliverables were ready for release in March 2020, two months later than originally planned. Associated products, namely translation, video stories, and audio books took much longer to finish. The videos and audio required our intensive attention, with repeated feedback to ensure quality. In the end the video outcome was satisfactory, but not so much for the audio, as explained above. Likewise, putting together the different pieces of evidence from updates and reports produced throughout this period has taken time beyond expectation. In the end, everything took longer than envisaged.

The project's novelty and its approach engendered multiple interpretations, even when there was consensus on what needed to be done and how. As a result, when the field context presented challenges, variations tended to gravitate towards traditional modes of interaction with children—by rote and chalkboard. This problem was exacerbated by the attrition of one of the more experienced child-centred facilitators and the amount of time between when the orientation took place and field research and writing began. It turns out that the remaining members of the team, including the person recruited to fill the gap created when one field researcher left had insufficient hands-on knowledge on how to work with children creatively. The FRWCC, while theoretically grounded in critical literacies, had little hands-on experience working with children at primary level, a revelation that is not matched by his written credentials and references. Report and footage from the field experience, for example, show a sitting arrangement similar to a classroom setting that does not give enough room for interaction. As pointed out earlier on, the FRWCC admitted that the process was a strong learning experience.

In hindsight, we also realised the importance of training and backstopping, which should be integral and continuous throughout in a participatory and process-oriented experimentation, such as this one. The assumption that two-months of interactive inquiry and research tools development with the FRWCC, followed by a one-day orientation and a follow-up session to review and refine tools with all researchers after pre-testing was enough for everyone to internalise the approach sufficiently to guide the first phase (with a built-in review process before the second phase) was obviously wrong. For example, the research guide states:[23]

> …researchers should be flexible in modifying the tools to suit the children's age, level of understanding as well as language used whether Kiswahili or English language….

The field research outcomes and report show, however, that the research team did not take their own advice. This does not diminish the value of their observation that training and orientation in the field is necessary 'so that both teachers, heads of children centres are aware of the process and what they are supposed to do as they participate in the project process,' rather it reinforces it. The research team also recommends that:

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[23] The research guide is an internal document that has not been published.

Researchers should be conversant with both storytelling techniques as well as research and writing techniques so as to be flexible in using any of the techniques where the need may be but the mixer of the two is necessary for getting good results…

In terms of the bureaucratic procedures necessary to gain access to children, we learned that it is possible for organisations wishing to conduct activities in and with schools to apply for and be granted an annual permit. Although this information did not serve our purpose in this project, it leaves us the wiser and at a relative advantage when designing our future storytelling with children activities. In the meantime, through trial and error, we found a workable solution that depended on the flexibility, trust, and goodwill of all concerned participants. The first adjustment was to work with children in their respective centres rather than bring them to **Soma**. The downside of this arrangement was that neither the PI nor the *Watoto na Vitabu* coordinator, who were the most familiar with our research and writing approach, were part of the field research and writing team. If either of them had been in the field, these anomalies could have been identified and mitigated during the process. The lesson is invaluable because the outcome of a research and/or experiment method should not be dependent on the presence of its designers.

Project documentation

We took photographs and captured video, using our phones and office camera for every session and with assistance from professional documentalists during the field research, writing workshop, and during two review and editing sessions that occurred at **Soma** Book Café. We also captured 'voices'/'change stories' from a segment of the participating children, facilitators, teachers and parents, which were used to produce three video stories: one for the whole project, one for a part of the process and one profiling three of the authors. Two have been uploaded on our website with links to our social media platforms and the Early Literacy Resource Network website. The third video is a raw take on the process, which is for internal circulation only.

Additionally, we are using the same material to share with our networks and are working on structuring feedback to capture public response. We also captured voices during the sessions to help with reporting and archiving. Public engagement was stalled due to the staffing crisis that we have been facing since March, but fortunately we have recruited a programme coordination team comprising two people who share the post. One is a skilled information and communications specialist. We are therefore ready to revisit our communications strategy and systematic feedback collection, learning and use.

Advocacy work

Notwithstanding challenges in enrolling the children and conducting this research, **Soma** has managed to bring together and build rapport with individuals and organisations that were hitherto not in its orbit. Relationships with the learning centres where research took place, some of the participating children and their parents, some of the illustrators and layout designers with whom we worked, and Ubongo were all new and welcome addition to our professional and co-creation network.

For advocacy purposes we also compiled a list of organisations with which we want to be in contact to introduce and promote the *Kalamu Ndogo* initiative. These include the Tanganyika Library Services (TLS); the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), which is responsible for curriculum and approval of books to be

used in schools; schools; development agencies; and literacy NGOs. Informal dialogue with strategic staff in TIE, TLS and UNICEF was initiated, but did not continue due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we are now working on a solicited proposal to be submitted to UNICEF that follows up from conversations about the project. The proposal will also be a way to share our outputs and approach more widely. We also hope to gain acceptance from public institutions due to the position UNICEF occupies in mainstream child development policies and actions in the country.

We are structuring our UNICEF proposal to include activities to popularise the **Soma** approach by compiling and refining the tools, as well as adding lessons learned during the NBA project. The goal is to produce an operational manual to be tested with larger and more diverse groups of people. We hope to work directly in schools through the direct intervention and advocacy of UNICEF, TIE, and TLS. Concurrently, we plan to build in a funding base to permit large print runs. Only then can we monitor and learn from the interplay between the e-books and print books.

Other planned activities to be conducted as soon as gatherings are safe again include reading the stories from this project as a prompt for workshopping creative writing with school children. Initially these readings will be part of *Watoto na Vitabu*. We also hope to pair this work with strategic engagement with the gatekeepers mentioned above, with a goal of gaining access to public schools and events. For a start, communication and visits to parents, centres that partner with us, schools of participating children and other institutions have started receiving complimentary copies of the printed book, an activity that will continue.

Success stories

In planning outputs, one often embarks on an uncertain journey, particularly for projects such as ours. I think I can safely say that even though our journey was not smooth or straightforward, we achieved our objectives. We also learned a lot more from it even though our way was somewhat meandering. We also generated wonderful outputs, beyond our expectation in some instances, although we also could have done better in other cases. Our results are described in detail above, but to summarise, we worked with childrens from diverse demographic backgrounds; and we ultimately produced four stories—two in English and two in Kiswahili. Three are published online. We translated one of the books, which is also published online. We also printed 500 copies and produced an audio version of the same book. We successfully produced and published two video stories: one about three children who participated and one about the project from the point of view of the originators, implementors, participating children, their parents, and one of the teachers. We also uploaded *The Lonely Frog* (*Chura Mpweke* in Kiswahili) to [YouTube](). The book is in English, but the narration is in Kiswahili. We used CC BY licensing for all digital output. Our story goals were fully met although we are disappointed that one parent withdrew her child's story from the project.

We set out to produce a documented methodological approach on how to research and craft children's stories with children. We have documented our approach in this report but cannot suggest that this is a replicable model until it is further tested and revisions made to the initial methodology, based on this experimental project. Even so, our documentation stands as testimony of what transpired and what it meant for participants.

We aimed to equip a multimedia studio with capacity to process and archive stories in PDF format and audio. We were successful in purchasing equipment, but as detailed in the section on equipment challenges, we were not able to create an autonomous space.

We wanted to showcase at least three published junior storytellers and we succeeded in this objective. The sections on children, particularly the one on what the children tell us, demonstrate how well the children took to taking charge of their own stories. We are proud of this achievement. We would love to follow up and nurture them to ensure they continue writing. We know from one of Nakiete's parents that she is continuing to write. We have also been mindful to send parents information on creative writing opportunities targeting children when we become aware of them. We believe these young authors can inspire other children to do the same as they did. For this and other reasons highlighted in this section, we are working on a follow-up strategy for this experiment to become a catalyst for fundamental change in the way we view children so that they are seen as agents of their own literacy and as accomplished storytellers.

Obstacles and strategies for overcoming them

The novelty of this child-centred experiential project, the time lapse between orientation and actual implementation, the attrition of one researcher (replaced by someone who did not participate in the orientation, development of tools and pre-testing) and age hierarchy were all inhibiting factors to the smooth implementation of this work. We mitigated these challenges by repeat phases, but in hindsight we realised we could have achieved better results had we used a child-centred peer (child-to-child) facilitation approach. If we had done so, we would not only have produced child storytellers, we would also have mentored child facilitators. We also realised that our field researchers are not sufficiently familiar with published children's books; they were therefore unable to tell which child rewrote a book they had read. This affected the first-round shortlist of best authors. As a lesson, we need to be more rigorous when profiling and interviewing the people we want to bring on board a creative writing process and be equally rigorous in our orientation curriculum and supervision protocols. We probably will need to deepen our probing to incorporate 'where did you get this story?' although a story from the book may have been told to a child by someone who read it to them.

Withdrawal of the second-best book and author at the penultimate stage was a big blow to the project and has been discussed in detail in the above sections. A good book might not see the light of day irrespective of the fact that by investing in it we consumed resources that could have been used elsewhere. Equally important, we hated to observe an enthusiastic and excited author find that the product of her creative labour was cut short at the finishing line because of her parent's decision. **Soma** believes it might still be possible to persuade the mother to change her mind because all we need now is for Farida to validate the final proofs for the book to be uploaded.

To mitigate Farida's disappointment and possibly to convince her mother to permit publication, we sent her a complimentary copy of *The Lonely Frog* and PDF copies of the e-books, including Farida's. This package and a congratulatory letter were prepared, but delivery was delayed due to contact restrictions during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The package was left at Farida's school on instruction of her mother. Through the good offices of the academic mistress, we talked to the mother on the phone and she promised to collect the package to share with her child after she sits for her national primary

school examination. She also indicated an openness to continued dialogue. In addition, the school promised to play a part. Sending Farida these copies is also a way to validate her efforts and restore her pride and sense of ownership. To the mother, it might be a way to show not tell what her daughter can do.

Obtaining permits to work with children in schools and communities proved to be formalised, with more bureaucracy than we expected, given our previous experiences. We were sent back and forth—from school, to community, to district, to regional offices, and back to community leadership. Finally, after over a month of permit hunting, we were informed that we needed to go to Dodoma, the capital city, to lodge our application with the Prime Minister's office, a process that we did not have any guarantee would succeed. The whole process is described in detail above. In the end, we circumvented the bureaucratic tangle in which we found ourselves by working with two private out-of-school learning centres, which took about two weeks to negotiate. We then also included *Watoto na Vitabu*, for a total of three centres.

Finally

Overall, we believe that this was a very successful project, despite numerous challenges. We would like to express our appreciation to NBA and all the people behind it for resources and support, without which this beautiful process would not have been undertaken in this scale and form. We appreciate all participants and we owe them a debt of gratitude for the project's success. We also acknowledge, own, and take lessons from the shortcomings and inhibiting factors that emanated from our own limitations and/or lack of foresight. We look forward to doing better in the future, a future that picks up from the outcomes, experiences, and lessons from *Watoto na Vitabu* Research and Writing, which we are happy to rename the *Kalamu Ndogo* initiative.

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