



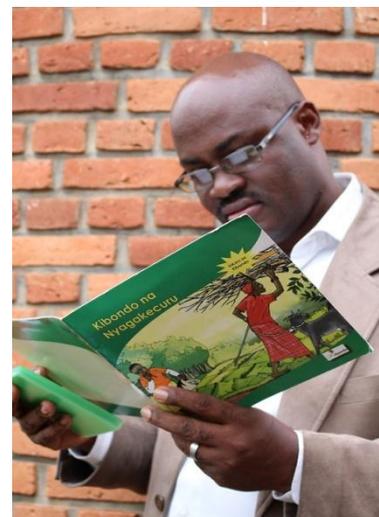
JEAN DE DIEU, OF ‘KIBONDO EDITIONS’

The Rwandan Children’s Book Initiative (RCBI), established in 2013, already works with local Rwandese publishers, authors and illustrators to increase their capacity to produce attractive, age-appropriate and quality reading material for children in Kinyarwanda, with the aim to foster a culture of reading in Rwanda. Part of the project involves Save the Children training publishers, writers and illustrators, and supporting them to develop new, quality titles for selling in the open market, whilst guaranteeing the purchase of a selected number of publications for the school-based interventions of the *Advancing the Right to Read* project.

Jean de Dieu is the owner of a young publishing house named Kibondo Editions, and has attended workshops organised by the RCBI. He has shared with us his views about the changing publishing industry, and his own aspirations for children’s literature and the project.

‘Kibondo Editions’, Jean de Dieu’s small publishing house, is named after the little boy who features prominently in the cartoon stories that Jean has been drawing for over a decade. Originally trained as an artist, Jean de Dieu has always worked in producing artistic and learning material: he worked in a national Rwandan publishing house in the 1980s and 1990s; but also as an arts teacher, as a designer for a private sector federation, and most recently as an illustrator for non-governmental organisations. It was in 2010 that he decided to open ‘Kibondo Editions’, and follow his dream of writing, editing and printing his very own books.

“I started to realize that in Rwanda, we had no books for kids, and my head was so full of ideas that I just sat down and wrote six books! (...) What we need now is high quality things that a child would love”, says Jean de Dieu – *photographed here with one of his Kibondo story books*



Smiling at the memory of his first books, he says, “*I started to realize that in Rwanda we had no books for kids, and my head was so full of ideas that I just sat down and wrote six books*”. That was back in 2009 and at the time the only publisher in Rwanda interested in children’s books was a Kenyan company; they bought up the rights for all six books straight away. In the subsequent years, Jean de Dieu also succeeded in getting three of his titles approved by the Rwandan Education Board (REB) for distribution in schools, but he is ambitious to do much more.

INJECTING CREATIVITY IN THE CHILDREN'S BOOKS SECTOR

Jean de Dieu had already received some training on the methodology for writing and illustrating books for children, but asserts that Save the Children's recent workshop for publishers and illustrators gave him new insights into the children's book market. *"They gave me another way of thinking"*, he says, recalling that previously he had a fairly traditional view of this sector: he knew about writing storybooks for children of school-going age only, with nice pictures, made out of paper, but now admits he needed new tips for more creative ways of story-telling and illustration. *"The book I am working on now is made with special resistant paper, it has almost no words, and is meant for babies who are still being breastfed! Even if this baby can't read, he can listen to his or her parents, and hear those words spoken with love and affection. It is important for parents and babies."*

Creativity also means writing from the child's point of view: when he writes now, Jean de Dieu tries to put himself in the shoes of a child to imagine what would interest a boy or girl of a certain age; and he likes writing stories where the main character is a child – like his very own Kibondo. And the flow of ideas does not stop there: Jean is also keen to use different materials for his books, such as the brightly coloured Rwandese Kitenge textile prints, which young children find attractive and interesting to touch. *"You have to change your style"*, he asserts, *"I don't want my work to be always the same; that would be boring"*. That does not come without challenges in such a small country as Rwanda: Jean de Dieu describes how he has designed a sample book made out of cloth, but became disheartened when he realized it would be too expensive to produce. *"A supplier told me I would need to buy four thousand yards of cloth, it is a huge amount! But I will not give up yet – I'm still considering all ideas"*, he says. Now, he is exploring ways for printing more cheaply, such as by outsourcing this to China.

Jean thinks he will use a collage in his next work, which he learned at the Save the Children workshop; he really liked how simple but different it looks.

SUPPORTING THE EMERGENCE OF A CULTURE OF READING

If Jean is so enthusiastic about writing and publishing children's books, it's also because the local context is rapidly evolving. *"Times are changing now"*, he says, describing how Rwandans are gradually becoming more and more interested in reading to children. *"Just think – a few years ago, a man couldn't be seen carrying a child in the street; now there are fathers everywhere picking up their children"*. He also describes how the National Public Library is now always full of children and adults. *"What we need now is high quality things that a child would love"*.

For now, Jean is working on a number of titles which he hopes will become a part of the RCBI project, and be printed in Rwanda with support from Save the Children. He is optimistic for the publishing sector in Rwanda. *"What I'm sure of is that what will be printed in the future will be better than what we were making before"*, he says, *"and children are more interested now"*. He describes how a few weeks ago a group of children who live close to his studio came round and were mesmerized by a half-finished book that had eight coloured pages and no words. He watched them in silence, as they pretended to be reading and made up all sorts of adventures to one another, excited by holding a book in their hands. *"I listened, and I was encouraged"*, he says.