



Looking back over the last 10 years since our first Container Library & Learning Centre: Story 5

Pirates, Pandemic & New President

The Horn of Africa is notorious for pirates and shipping lines are prepared for the ongoing battle but when the Yemeni jumped on the rather lucrative wagon, the shipping lines had to rethink their strategy. The fastest and safest way to ship from Europe to Africa or the Middle East was no longer viable. The Yemeni had learnt from the Somalis and up their game. They attacked anything that shipped through the Suez Canal. They used high powered guns and rocket launchers (Imagine their faces if they did get hold of our container packed with 30,000 books. They would become the most educated pirates in history or the most disappointed...). And so the shipping lines had no choice, but change their route. We suddenly went from a four to six weeks shipment via Jeddah to eight to 10 weeks sailing the long way round (around South Africa and back up the Indian Ocean). Besides time this added cost to already post-Covid inflated rates. We went from paying £1,200 per shipment to £3,500 per shipment.

Covid - no one is going to forget 2019 are they? It was a few years of testing us, as individuals and society, to the limit. For us though, Covid showed us how much our Container Libraries and Learning Centres changed our community partners. Pregnancy soared in Kenya. Teenage motherhood increased by 400% in some places. Suicide rates among young men rose by 230%, higher in the more populated areas like Nairobi. Unemployment rose by 600% in the South Coast alone, due to band on travel. Three out of every 10 community projects were closed down for good. Not a pretty picture.

And yet, JBAC discovered our strengths. We have taken the time to build our sorting depot in Stevenage. Volunteers turned up in huge numbers when they could. We have replenished our books stock and faced the next few shipments with more books than we could ever ask for. In Kenya, though, well, we were impressed. Our communities had no suicides, their crime rates remained the lowest they have ever been and 17 teenage pregnancies were reported (less than the national average in normal years). What's more, our librarians found ingenious ways of keeping the libraries going. They used shops, drop offs points and mobile book ordering. They held classes outdoors to ensure the children still received education (Kenya had one of the longest school closures). They organised public outreach where they not only educated individuals on how to deal with Covid, but they also supported each other with food donations, shopping for the elderly and making

hygiene products available to those who needed them. How can we not be proud?! As for us, we have built two libraries in 2019 alone.

Times were changing though. Kenya grew restless with the old president and they called for election. In August 2022 new president came to 'rule' the beautiful, but fractured republic of Kenya. He made some strong proclamations on the day he took on of his challenged presidency. He was going to return all shipping powers to Mombasa. Good! We don't want to waste travelling to Nairobi to argue our case. The main customs remain in Nairobi till this day. "I will make charitable organisations more welcome." he said. "I recognise Kenya needs foreign aid, and I am prepared to leave the old fight with NGOs behind" he went on.

Because his presidency was challenged by the opposition Ruto didn't take office till 13th of September, on the day we discovered we were being charged £4,000 for import taxes. In the past we've paid around £500 for identical shipments. I was mad. I was disappointed. I was furious. I was disheartened. But more than anything I was done. Importing became too expensive anyway. Containers doubled in price almost over night. Shipping rose so steeply we were struggling to comprehend it. Now the unreasonable and inexplicable action of a custom officer (I was privately informed that this person no longer works at the Customs and Boarder Control Department). That was the end of JBAC's involvement in Kenya, because how can you budget for such massive increase in charges? And what if the tax bill is even higher next year?

I was still processing the experience - the sad thing was, I wasn't against paying import tax, because I saw first hand how much charities abused their status importing undeclared and personal items under the name of Charity, but this was just too much - when a friend got in touch. He too shipped some books JBAC gave him a few weeks into our shipment. I was describing my encounter with bureaucracy and plain old human stupidity and noticed he is quiet. Not saying much. He ended the call rather abruptly and I thought that perhaps I had upset him. But he called me soon after I returned to the UK and said "We will ship your ISO". Now it was my time to be quiet. I wasn't 100% sure what ISO is but I guessed it was a container, but my brain just wouldn't comprehend what I heard. "Can you repeat that?" and so he did. "Please tell me it's not a joke!" I begged.

Well, it wasn't a joke. We are now enjoying the perks of an amazing partnership. The organisation chooses to remain anonymous and I completely understand why. But because of them, we still ship to Kenya. More books and more times than ever before. They saved the project, they restored my faith in the system and they make my life so so much simpler.