



## **Looking back over the last 10 years since our first Container Library & Learning Centre: Story 8**

# **Arts: Who Would Have Thought?**

A group of Kenyan volunteers and I are sitting under the most gorgeous mango tree near our Dzunga library. Dzunga library, at this point, have been running for three years. The books were a real hit, but the interest among children was beginning to lessen. We had to think of what else we can do to ensure continued engagement. It had to be something, we could fund, the volunteers could manage, was sustainable, but also exciting. Something that was either available to buy in Kenya or easily transportable from the UK.

Chidzangoni's volunteers joined our discussion and their two years involvement was a real eye opener too. Dzunga is a very much mixed community. There is almost even split between christians and muslims, but Chidzangoni is entirely islamic community. They have different constrains on their volunteering and participation. The children had to attend Madrasa (islamic school at weekends) for one. So, what can we do that we have access to in the UK and that would help children develop their skills and keep their interest in the library?

Arts and crafts of course! By this time we have four fully operational libraries, so this has to be well thought out. I should explain here, that the libraries do not have to take our projects on. They can pick and choose. And they do, but arts are likely to be popular. Back in the UK and I am explaining the idea to our wonderful Trustees. "We need to trial it first" I say cautiously. And we do. We send arts stuff to the two first libraries. Just some paper, pens and scissors. That was it. The feedback came almost immediately. "It is nice for children to have something to draw on, but we don't really know how to help them." the librarians reported.

Back to the drawing board for us. "What if we create a portfolio of activities, say 15 and we provide a step-by-step guide as well as all the material they need?" I asked. "We could give them examples of what it should look like too" Lynn added. Perfect. It's 2018 and we will soon have five libraries. We are talking a huge number of children. "Each activity should be for 25 children" I pluck a number from a thin air. "I think that should do" I said naively.

Fifteen activities for 25 children at five locations, that is a lot of cutting out. Who exactly is going to cut all that out? How will we fund this? The first question was easily answered. UK volunteers rose to the challenge. And they still do. The young, the keen and the elderly. School children, church groups, Scouts, Duke of Edinburgh, staff under their CSR policies and our own grandchildren. Basically anyone who can use scissors, has some ideas and doesn't mind repetition.

And so the Crafts Club grew. We not only have more and more members in the UK, but the interest in Kenya exploded. We now produce 25 activities for 100 children at five libraries. We send 'communal' supplies like massive size PVA, scissors, kilos of glitter, pencils and brushes. Basically items that is needed for more than one activity. We then send individual activity packs - pre-cut out shapes, wobbly eyes, pipe cleaners, stickers, pom poms and gems. And of course the step-by-step guide and examples (two per library, because we have two tables that are used).

The librarians manage their activities in smaller groups as we can't fit 100 children into a 40ft container. But they do so with efficiency and professionalism we could only be proud of. The downside of this success? We resulted to providing more activities for more children and finally, the day we have been waiting for: "They are now experts in art and craft sessions. They are creating their own designs different from the ones in JBAC manual." reports Rama from Chidzangoni.

We continue to buy cards in thousands, glitter in trucks, wobbly eyes of all sorts of sizes and I can't tell you how many toilet inserts we've sent over. Probably enough to fill in a 20ft container. For those libraries that don't have Rama to guide the arts we sent colouring in books and just plain old paper and pencils. Any outlets for art-ing and craft-ing is great as far as we are concerned.

We are now considering arts as one of our most successful projects that is receiving equal support, attention and funding in both countries.