

## TOY LIBRARIES FOR THE CHILDREN OF AFRICA

### LUDOTECAS PARA LOS NIÑOS DE ÁFRICA

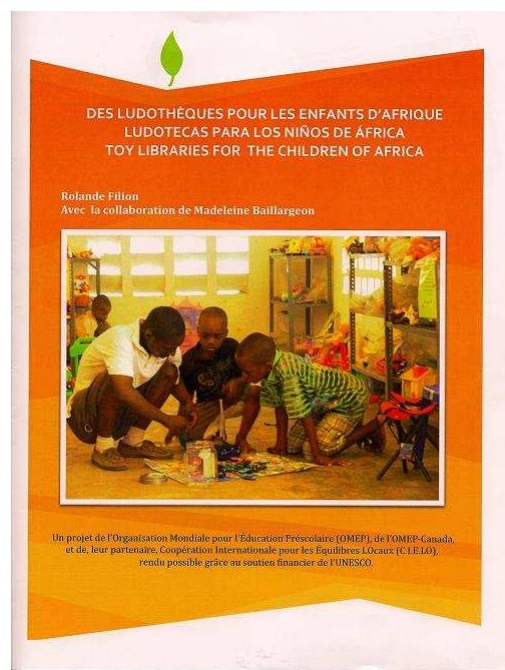
### DES LUDOTHÈQUES POUR LES ENFANTS D'AFRIQUE <sup>1</sup>

Rolande Filion, with the collaboration of Ms Madeleine Baillargeon

Since its foundation in 1948, OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education) has advocated for the education and well-being of children from 0 to 8, mainly by promoting their rights as defined in the *Convention for the Rights of the Child*. OMEP puts great emphasis on play, young children's main activity, and the most important factor in their development. Its Canadian Committee (OMEP-Canada) was actively involved in many projects in this domain, including *A Toy Library for You*, an international project for the development of toy libraries in Latin America: Brazil, Honduras, Colombia, Mexico, Panama. It also supported the establishment of toy libraries in Haiti, Romania, and Rwanda. Following these experiences, OMEP members from Africa requested its support to create toy libraries in their countries. OMEP-Canada asked one of its members, Rolande Filion, a specialist in play and toy libraries, to develop a proposal to fill this request with the support, for fund raising, of Madeleine Baillargeon, then Vice-President for North America and the Caribbean, and charged by OMEP Board of Liaison with African Partnerships.

<sup>1</sup>This article is an excerpt from a publication OMEP-Canada dedicated to toy librarians and their partners. This document is written in the three official languages of OMEP: French, English and Spanish.

Right from the beginning, contact was established with the French NGO C.I.E.LO (Coopération Internationale pour les Équilibres Locaux) because of its long experience in creating toy libraries in Latin America and Africa. Since 1995, C.I.E.LO has been progressively developing a network of neighbourhood toy libraries, located in the heart of disadvantaged areas, in community settings loaned from the neighbourhoods that are to benefit from it, and managed by trained and remunerated local inhabitants. Consequently, a partnership was formed and first resulted in creating a toy library in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. C.I.E.LO also established a toy library in Mmabatho, Ivory Coast, with the OMEP Committee of Ivory Coast. These two new toy libraries joined others already created by C.I.E.LO in various African French speaking countries.



Cover page: Toy libraries for the children of Africa

Since their early collaboration, OMEP-Canada and C.I.E.LO looked for means to ensure the sustainability of these toy libraries, once the immediate support was over. Thanks to C.I.E.LO's experience in Latin America, the idea of creating a network to give toy librarians an opportunity to share their challenges and solutions and to support each other resulted in a proposal submitted and accepted by the Participation Programme for NGOs at UNESCO.<sup>2</sup>

### **The establishment of participating toy libraries**

The seven participating toy libraries were all created according to a sustainable development model aimed at empowering the community by enabling the neighbourhood inhabitants to become responsible for it. Their goal is to provide children from disadvantaged areas, who have no or little access to education or educational recreation programs, a secure place where they can play with appropriate materials.

To achieve this, a reliable local partner, well aware of its community, is first needed to target a neighbourhood, find community premises available free of charge, and prepare a list of candidate toy librarians from the area. The trainer (or trainers) then prepares an intensive week of training hosted in collaboration with the local partner. The training includes the establishment, management and promotion of a toy library, as well as the main aspects of play and play materials connected to child development, according to the ESAR analysis system which is based on genetic

psychology and is minimally culturally bound. ESAR stands, in French, for Exercise, Symbolism, Construction and Rules of Games. ([www.systeme-esar.org](http://www.systeme-esar.org)) At the end of training, one person is chosen by the partners to get the position of toy librarian. A certificate is given to each participant who completed the training in order to enhance his/her curriculum vitae.

### **Working to put the toy libraries in a network**

The meeting held in October 2011, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, was titled *Promotion and sustainability of my toy library*. Its goal was to help the participating toy librarians to find concrete and appropriate solutions to solve the problems faced in each of their countries and neighbourhoods in order to help gradually transfer management and financing to toy libraries and their local partners.



Participants at the meeting, *Promotion and sustainability of my toy library*

Each toy librarian identified the most urgent problem to solve in order to achieve the sustainability or the promotion of his/her toy library, and, eventually, its financial

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<sup>2</sup> The publication of this document, and the project it presents, were made possible by UNESCO through its Participation Programme for NGOs.

autonomy. By means of a sharing session, all participants presented their perception of the problems of African toy libraries. Afterwards, each one had to define the project they planned to submit, describe the social framework, the activities and the expected results, and their rationale, as well as present a detailed budget. At the end of this process, a small amount was given to support the starting of each initiative.

To date, the toy library located in Senegal has opened a day care centre. Its income will eventually fill the financial needs besides expanding educational opportunities for children and families. Similarly, the Ivory Coast toy library created an early childhood program. In Benin, thanks to the starting amount given, rabbit growing is already on-going, and the toy librarian counts on the income to cover the toy library expenses. In Sapouy, Burkina Faso, the persons in charge plan to grow chickens to fill the toy library's needs. The other Burkina Faso toy library, in Leo, plan to enlarge the room or build another one in order to welcome more children. The Democratic Republic of Congo toy library lends a 50-toy box mainly to preschools, and thus raises extra funds. Finally the Cameroon toy librarian formed a Support Committee to safeguard the achievements of the toy library.

### **The participation of girls in toy libraries**

The issue of girls' participation was part of the group discussion. To initiate the discussion, we checked if girls' and boys' participation was the same in the toy libraries observed. Statistics taken from of each participant's attendance book were compared, and some differences between boys and girls attendance were noted. For instance, in Ouidah, Benin, in Sapouy, south of Burkina Faso, and in Mmabatho, Ivory Coast, the vast majority of users was boys.

This was also the situation in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ainoumady, Senegal, as well as in Leo, Burkina Faso.



Little girl playing at a toy library

We will not mention all elements discussed; however, one important observation must be emphasised: the discussion was an opportunity to become aware of the unbalanced gender related attendance. Even though these are not hard data on toy library attendance of boys and girls, according to a participant, one fact remains: "The problem begins very early in our African culture because we don't give our girls enough education".

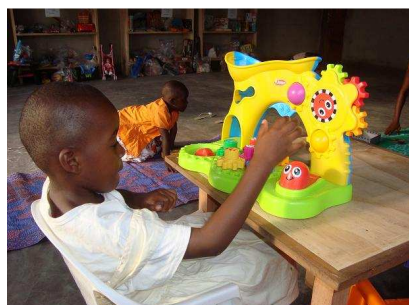
### **Nothing is lost and everything can be created...**

In these toy libraries, almost all toys are commercial and generally come from Western or Asian countries, with few cultural links with Africa. To counter the high cost of toys and games found in stores in Africa and the related cultural loss a new idea has come up, which reminded us that play materials can be made. This option is possible, if one agrees to reverse the situation and start from the children's interest rather than from the toy itself. Many everyday objects may then be transformed into less expensive toys or games with just a little imagination. In this spirit, each toy librarian had to prepare for the meeting with a toy made from salvaged

materials and everybody's ideas were shared with the group later on.

This way, neighbourhood toy libraries may become places where children play with low cost toys, made by and for themselves, toys of yesterday revived as toys of today, bearing the country's culture. A ball made from plastic bags becomes a soccer ball. A cap hanging from a rope becomes a sensory game that is fun to watch and listen to. A small car entirely built from recycled materials for pretend play and a lizard trap made by children are all simple and cheap ideas to share and remember one's own childhood culture, from one generation to the other.

Finally, to close this meeting, the importance of providing time to play and of understanding the impact of play was demonstrated. These moments of play and informal learning, toys in hand, living in instantaneous fun are often worth much more than long speeches on the pleasure of playing.



More boys than girls in toy libraries in Africa

### **Forming a network**

This first meeting of African toy librarians was an opportunity to share some of their practical experiences. These people come to this occupation in a very indirect way, and with various backgrounds. After five days of training on how to become a toy librarian, they face important challenges: promote play activity and, at the same

time, ensure the good management of the premises, develop partnerships outside the toy library, and provide flexible play opportunities to the children. These are all occupational competencies they have to learn on the job. With this in mind, toy librarians were invited, every day, to share their experience, to guide one another in looking for solutions, to support each other in finding answers to their questions

At the end of these five days of work meetings, the participants established the foundation of an African Toy Library Association. In spite of the challenges faced to create a network, this initiative to meet, initially by means of social media, might be an opportunity to break their isolation, share common projects and help keep toy librarians in their jobs as a result of mutual support and the feeling of belonging to a group.

Needless to say each of the solutions presented here is only interesting as an example, and would not necessarily fit people in other contexts. Other ways of management clearly have to be thought of. Different actions appropriate for different places, neighbourhoods and countries have to be looked at. The grant awarded by UNESCO, especially to host this meeting to work on and think about the sustainability of the toy libraries, has allowed participants to become aware of the issues and to find solutions to them. It has been an opportunity to provide themselves with means to act in an autonomous and, above all, sustainable way. Moreover, if the sum given to start these initiatives is well invested, it will benefit the entire community and hopefully, for the long term.

Financial contribution is an important link for success in such projects. But the support of local partners is also important. Their involvement and continuing collaboration are essential for toy libraries to be established and take root in the community as well as for their stability and sustainability. For instance, the situation of isolation in which African toy librarians have to work is lessened if the local partner plays a role to support, supervise, lookout for and guide. A partner closely collaborating with the toy librarian will be able to supervise the quality of actions taken in the toy library for its community.

Finally, looking for sustainable solutions requires exploring all possible resources. Joining a toy librarian's communication network, increasing local or even international partnerships, seizing opportunities for continuing education, and, lastly, believing one can be an agent and contributor for change, are the main lessons to draw from this experience.

Dedicated to toy librarians and their partners, this document is written in the three languages of OMEP: French, English, and Spanish. We hope it will help expand the experiences presented, promote the profession of toy librarianship and stimulate actions to ensure the sustainability of toy libraries in Africa and elsewhere.