

# THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BOOK NUMBER (ISBN)

By

The system of book numbering by publishers and book distributors is nothing new. Individual publishers numbered their books for purposes of inventory and ordering. As a result of publication explosion, some publishers resorted to the use of the computer. It then became necessary and desirable as more computers were installed in publishing houses to standardise the numbering system to facilitate communication between computers.

A study was conducted by Professor Foster of the London School of Economics and in May 1966 he submitted a report to the British Publishers Association. The report concludes: "There is a clear need for the introduction into the book trade of standard numbering ... and substantial benefits will accrue to all parties therefrom". The report was studied by an appointed committee and a British scheme (SBN) was worked out in 1967.

During the same year, the Documentation Section of International Standards Organisation (ISO/TC46) set up a committee with the British Standard Institute as Secretariat, to work out means whereby the numbering system could be applied internationally. A meeting was held in London in September 1968 with representatives from the United States of America, United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway Denmark and UNESCO. Other countries expressed interest and corresponded their suggestions.

The report of that meeting with proposals was circulated to all member countries of the Documentation Section of ISO. Various comments received were considered at another meeting in Berlin in May 1969 and a final version of the proposals was tabled at a plenary session of the ISO in Stockholm in October 1969. The proposals were accepted and there came into being the ISO Recommendation 2108 which sets out the principles and procedures for the international standard book numbering.

## How the ISBN is Built Up.

An International Standard Book Number consists of ten digits made up of four different parts of variable lengths. The parts are follows:-

### (i) Group Identifier

The first part identifies the national, geographic, language or any other convenient group in which the book was published. The group identifier is assigned by the ISBN Agency in Germany. The group identifier for Nigeria is 978.

### (ii) Publisher Identifier

The second part is assigned internally within the group by its agency and it identifies a particular publisher within the group. The number varies in length from publisher to publisher according to the output of such publisher.

### (iii) Title Identifier.

The third part identifies a particular title or edition of a title published by a particular publisher. Its



.....Being a paper presented by Mrs. O. O. Omolayole of the Acquisition Department at a Senior Staff Seminar of the National Library of Nigeria.

length is determined by the total lengths of the group and publisher identifiers. It is normally assigned by the publishers from within the range of numbers assigned to him.

### (iv) Check Digit

The last part is always a single digit and it provides for the computer an automatic check on the correctness of the ISBN.

According to ISO recommendations, the check digit is calculated on a modulus 11 with weights 10-2, using X in lieu of 10 where ten would occur as a check digit. This is done by multiplying the first nine digits of the ISBN (excluding the check digit itself) by numbers ranging from 10-2 and the sum of the products thus obtained plus the check digit must be divisible by 11, e.g.

	Group Identifier			Publisher Identifier				Title Identifier		Check Digit	
ISBN	9	7	8	2	2	3	9	0	1	1	
Weights	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2		
90+63+64			+	14+12+15+36				+	0+2	+	1
297											

297 divided by 11 leaves no remainder therefore 978 2239-01-1 is a valid ISBN  
X is used where 10 occurs as a check digit to maintain the ten digit length of the ISBN.

## Printing of the ISBN

- The ISBN when printed must be preceded by the letters ISBN 978 - 136 - 903 - 5 or ISBN 978 136 903 5.
- The ISBN must appear in one of the following places in a book:



- (i) The reverse of the title page
  - (ii) The base of the spine
  - (iii) The back of the cover in nine-point type or larger
  - (iv) The back of the dust jacket
  - (v) Any conspicuous place in the book
- c) The ISBN should be printed in large enough type for legibility.

#### Identifier Ranges

(Identifiers are also known as 'prefixes')  
The total length of an ISBN is ten digits.

The length of the group identifier, which is allocated by the international ISBN Agency, depends on the publishing output and future projection of that group.

Thus a group with a large output is likely to get an identifier which consists of one or two digits.

In each group, the National Agency decides on the length of the publisher identifier after considering the output of each publisher (i.e. past, present and future programmes).

#### Range Distribution of Group Identifiers

0	—	7
80	—	94
950	—	997
9980	—	99899
99900	—	999999

#### Publisher Identifiers

100	—	199	One hundred publisher identifiers are available. Total title identifiers available is 1000.
2000	—	2999	One thousand publisher identifiers are available. Total title identifiers available is 100.
30000	—	34999	Five thousand publisher identifiers are available. Total title identifiers available is 10.

The above is the range distribution of publisher identifiers available to Nigerian publishers.

#### Application of ISBN

- (a) Materials which should be given ISBN
  - (i) Printed books and pamphlets
  - (ii) Micro-form publications
  - (iii) Braille publications
  - (iv) Mixed media publications
  - (v) Machine readable tapes designed to produce readable print-out
- (b) Materials not to be given ISBN
  - (i) Diaries
  - (ii) Calendars
  - (iii) Advertising matter
  - (iv) Art prints

- (v) Sound recording
- (vi) Serial publications

#### (c) General

A separate ISBN must be assigned to every different edition of a book but not an unchanged impression or reprint of the same book by the same publisher.

A change in price does not require a change of ISBN.

#### (d) Format

A separate ISBN must be assigned to the different format in which a particular title is published e.g.

A hard back edition and a paper back edition of the same title must be given different ISBNs. In the same way, a microform edition should receive a separate ISBN.

#### (e) Reprints

Only a facsimile reprint of a title issued by a different publisher should be given a separate ISBN. Otherwise a reprint in the same format by the same publisher must retain its original ISBN.

#### (f) Multi-volume Works

An ISBN must be assigned to the set of volumes as a whole. In addition, each volume in the set should be given a separate ISBN.

#### (g) Collaborative Publications

A book published under the imprint of more than one publisher should be assigned an ISBN by the distributing publisher if only one of them does this. If, however, the book is available from more than one of the publishers, then it should carry an ISBN assigned by each of the publishers from whom it is available. Each ISBN should be preceded by the name of the publisher concerned.

#### (h) Publishers with more than one place of publication

Each book produced by a publisher operating separate and distinct offices or branches in many places must be assigned only one ISBN by the office or branch responsible for the publication.

- (i) An ISBN, once allocated, must not be re-used. If, by any error, a number is found to be incorrect, the number should be deleted from the list and must not be re-used. The National Agency must be informed about such deletions and the affected titles.

#### Administration of the ISBN System

The administration of the ISBN System is carried out at three levels, namely 'The International Agency, the Group or National Agency and the Publisher levels.

#### (a) Responsibility and Services of the International Agency

- (i) To promote the world-wide use of the system.
- (ii) To advise groups on the setting up and functioning of the group vis-a-vis definition and structure.
- (iii) To allocate group identifiers.
- (iv) To supervise the use of the system.



- (v) To advise group agencies on the allocation of publisher identifiers.
  - (vi) To provide a computer print-out lists of ISBN for the use of publishers in a group which has no facility for computer operation.
  - (vii) To provide from information supplied by group agencies, a computer print-out of lists of publisher identifiers, names and locations.
  - (viii) To provide from information supplied by group agencies, a computer print-out of invalid or duplicate ISBN.
- (b) Responsibilities and Services of the Group ISBN Agency.
- (i) To manage and take charge of the administration of the agency.
  - (ii) To handle relations with the International ISBN Agency on behalf of all the publishers in the group.
  - (iii) To allocate publisher identifiers to publishers.
  - (iv) To maintain a register of publisher identifiers, names and locations.
  - (v) To provide technical advice and assistance to publishers.
  - (vi) To ensure that standards and approved procedures are observed in the group.
  - (vii) To provide manual instruction for the publishers.
  - (viii) To provide computer print out of ISBN to publishers.
  - (ix) To publish invalid or duplicate ISBNs.
  - (x) To arrange with publishers for the numbering or their back lists.
  - (xi) To liaise with all elements of the book trade and introduce new publishers to the system thereby promoting total numbering in the group.
  - (xii) To keep a register of all ISBNs assigned in the group.
- (c) Responsibilities of the Publisher
- (i) To apply for the ISBN, informing the National Agency about back list of books, present and future publication programme.
  - (ii) To obtain print-out of list of numbers from the National Agency.
  - (iii) To ensure that a competent person is responsible for the assignment of ISBN and the application of pertinent regulations.
  - (iv) To administer the numbering of own books.
  - (v) To maintain a register of ISBN that have been assigned to published and forth-coming books. This register should be kept in numerical sequence giving ISBN, author, title, edition statements.
  - (vi) To forward lists of publications with their ISBN (compiled as in (v) above to the National Agency.

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- (vii) To ask for help from the National Agency if there is any difficulty in the application of ISBN.
- (viii) To inform the National Agency about invalid (incorrect) ISBN.

#### The operation of the ISBN system in Nigeria

In 1974, The National Library of Nigeria, in its capacity as the national bibliographic centre for Nigeria, started arrangements to set up the ISBN agency in Nigeria. An application was sent to the International ISBN Agency in Germany and a group identifier 978 was assigned to Nigeria.

On the home front, contacts were made with the Nigerian Standards Organisation and the Nigerian Publishers Association. A wide publicity was mounted through advertisements in newspapers, radio and television, informing all publishers about the ISBN and the setting up of an agency at the National Library and inviting them to come forward and register. Up to date, about ninety (90) publishers have been registered.

#### Operation

The main task of the agency is to inform as many publishers as there are about the ISBN and get them registered. The agency works in close cooperation with the Legal Deposit Department of the National Library of Nigeria and are able to discover publishers that have not yet registered. Letters are sent to such publishers and the response has been satisfactory.

However, periodic advertisements in newspaper have proved to be most useful. The advertisements include a list of publishers already assigned ISBN and this serves as an encouragement for others to apply for ISBN. By this process also, new publishers get to know about the system.

The allocation of publisher identifiers is carried out by the agency. This is done by assessing both the output and the future projection of publishers. The identifiers assigned so far are of two categories, those with lengths of three digits, and those with the lengths of four digits. A thousand ISBN is provided for publishers in the first category while one hundred ISBN is provided for the other.

Publishers have been informed that their output is not limited necessarily to these numbers. It would be possible to assign them more numbers if and when they exhaust the ISBN allocated to them. At the moment, the Nigerian agency only allocates numbers to publishers and they are expected to number their own books.

None of our publishers uses the computer, therefore, computer print-outs of ISBN have to be provided for them. These are obtained from the International ISBN Agency and forwarded to the publishers by the Nigerian agency. While the print-outs are expected a few ISBNs are provided for the use of the publishers. The Check digits of these ISBNs are obtained from the P.C.A. check digit calculator. However, only a few are provided to minimise error.

Publishers are required to forward a list of their publications including the ISBNs assigned to them to the Nigerian agency every three months. These lists form the record of ISBN assigned in the country. Through such lists, the agency is able to see how the numbering is carried out and detect numbers assigned incorrectly.

Other ways of superintending the numbering by publishers are through publishers' catalogues and through the legal deposit. All books received on legal deposit pass through the agency en route to the Cataloguing department where the National Bibliography of Nigeria is compiled.

Each book is examined to find out if an ISBN is printed on it. If the book carries an ISBN, the agency verifies that the number is valid. Where invalid numbers have been detected, the relevant publishers are asked to cancel these numbers and assign new ones.

Both the invalid and valid numbers are then published in the National Library Diary. The National Library Diary is also used to publish the names of publishers who have been assigned ISBN.

#### Relations with Publishers

The agency maintains a good relationship with the publishers. They are made to feel free to either write or pay visits to the agency in order to clarify any problems they may have about the numbering of their books. Most of them have accepted the use of the ISBN without reservation.

However, it was noted that even when some multi-national publishing companies have been assigned ISBN by the Nigerian agency they still printed the ISBN from another ISBN group on their books instead of that supplied by the Nigerian agency.

On investigation it was found that such publishers were not sure of which ISBN to use since the parent organisation based in another country has already been assigned ISBN from that country. Explanations were made to such companies that where a book is published in Nigeria by that company it should carry the Nigerian ISBN.

It is only in a case where a book published by a branch of the Company in another country and the Nigerian branch is only serving as a distributor or agent that the use of a non Nigerian ISBN will be justified.

In order to further greater cooperation between the Nigerian agency and the publishers, a one day workshop was organised for publishers by National Library of Nigeria. At the workshop which took place on February 1, 1978, the ISBN system and its use was discussed.

A forum was provided for an exchange of views on the subject which was to our mutual benefit. One important point which emerged from this meeting was the desire expressed by the publishers, to give ISBN to audio visual materials produced either as accompanying materials with books or as separate entities by publishers.

A decision will have to be taken by the International ISBN Agency on whether ISBN could be applied to this category of materials or whether a different numbering system would be more suitable.

Although the response of publishers is encouraging we still do not have total cooperation. It is hoped that with increase in the number of staff, personal visits could be conducted to some of the unresponding publishers.

#### Plans

The agency will continue to publicise the ISBN system and thereby get all publishers to register for ISBN. Efforts will continue to be made to record all books that have been assigned ISBN. The agency is preparing for publications an



ISBN indexing for Nigeria. It is hoped that this would be a quarterly publication.

The project will depend largely on the publishers' cooperation which they have promised to give. Apart from individual publishers catalogues, there is no book trade index in the country. It is hoped that the proposed publication will fill this gap and supplement the National Bibliography of Nigeria.

#### Conclusion

Although the ISBN was primarily designed for the book trade, libraries and information systems can benefit from the use of the ISBN. Already, it has become one of the essential elements of bibliographic description for monographs (ISBD (M) as recommended by the IFLA UBC Office.

However, beyond mere recording, thoughts must be directed at ways of exploiting the ISBN to facilitate library processes such as ordering circulation, interlending, national and international data exchange. In the case of the National Library of Nigeria, the subject of the National Union Catalogue (NUC) comes to mind.

One of the most important responsibilities of the NLN is the production of the NUC. Although various constraints could be adduced it is a fact that after thirteen years of existence the NUC is yet to be published. The problems here are:

- (i) The size of the Union Catalogue itself. The daily increase of cards makes handling very difficult and time consuming. I understand that over 1.8 million cards have already been filed and about .5 million are waiting to be interfiled.
- (ii) Even though cataloguing rules exist, cataloguing is still subject to individual interpretation therefore,

cataloguing styles are as varied as the number of libraries contributing to the NUC. Uniform or standard cataloguing does not exist.

- (iii) In order to overcome the problems posed by (i) and (ii) above a large number of staff is required. Here again, staff is not easy to come by. What used to be the Bibliographic Services Division, responsible for the NUC, had one Senior Principal Librarian, one Higher Library Officer, One Librarian-in-Training and two Library Attendants. Obviously, that complement of staff is inadequate for the assignment and it is not surprising that the NUC has not been published.

It is being suggested that the ISBN could provide a solution to the problem of uniform cataloguing. Contributing libraries will be asked to add ISBN on all their cards as found in the books. The cards will then be sorted according to ISBN. Titles which do not carry ISBN can be processed by the conventional method.

It is assumed from the world wide acceptance of the ISBN that this category of materials will be a small percentage and will continue to decrease in number. Unit cards will consist of the ISBN and location symbols of contributing libraries.

It is true that this kind of catalogue cannot be used on its own. Therefore, it will be necessary to provide an ISBN index up-dated periodically and distributed to participating libraries.

The use of the ISBN is being recommended because it is simple while it fully identifies each title and can be processed easily by the computer. It is hoped that this will be food for thought for the Mechanised Services Division as it embarks on planning the computerization of the NUC.

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