

Lubuto Library Project: Bringing Knowledge to Zambian Children

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Abstract

The Lubuto Library Project's approach to meeting the needs of orphans, vulnerable children and youth in Sub-Saharan Africa is described. Lubuto Libraries address the psychosocial and educational needs of this societally-isolated population, providing education-centered programs for reconnecting marginalized youth with mainstream society. The Lubuto Library Project builds safe, accessible and welcoming facilities where culturally relevant resources, information, education and literacy services are offered, including programs to develop and increase literacy skills for children both in and out of school. Partnership between the Lubuto Library Project and the Zambian Ministry of Education, local schools, and community organizations is a model for sustainability.

Keywords

Lubuto Library Project; Zambia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Orphans; Vulnerable children; Street children; Early literacy development; Library buildings; Partnerships.

Introduction

What future lies ahead for countries where libraries, books, literacy activities for children are limited, ineffective or nonexistent? How can orphans, vulnerable children and youth (OVCY) who live on the streets or are not in school

access books and develop literacy skills? If the youth of a country are socially isolated, how do they become engaged and active in the civil society as adults? These questions prompted the development of the Lubuto Library Project (LLP), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that works with communities in African countries hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS pandemic to address the needs of these children, starting with Zambia. Lubuto Libraries directly support literacy development, leveraging existing community-based programs to create an open system of accessible and holistic services and programs serving needs of children and their caregivers.

Zambia, like most nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, is a country of children. The youth population is large and growing; 2008 data from UNICEF shows that more than half the country's population is under the age of 18. Over 16% of Zambian children have lost one or both parents, and many more are faced with the challenge of caring for younger siblings or parents living with HIV/AIDS. Some are taken in by grandparents or extended family, but many live in orphanages or in culverts, under trees or literally on the street. They suffer from hunger and lack of decent shelter, clean water and adequate sanitation, and they are vulnerable to abuse, neglect, child labor, child trafficking, prostitution, early pregnancies and marriages, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and diarrhea. In addition, the social isolation experienced by OVCY leads to:

- Trauma and emotional difficulties resulting from violence, deprivation and loss;
- Low levels of literacy;
- Withdrawal or the inability to attend school;
- Limited or no access to services;
- Limited opportunities for positive economic and social engagement; and
- Loss of cultural identity.

Educational outcomes among OVCY in Zambia are particularly troubling. There are no fees to attend primary school (through grade 9), but attendance is not without costs. The money required to buy uniforms and books, for example, is beyond the means of many. Moreover, barriers to school attendance go beyond the financial. Other factors include needing to care for younger siblings in a child-headed household or with one with very ill parents; needing to beg, work or steal during the day for subsistence; dealing with stigma (e.g., the children of sex workers); or suffering such psychological trauma that it is impossible to function in a school setting. Those who do attend school find crowded classrooms, sometimes led by teachers with minimal qualifications and lacking basic supplies such as chalk and paper. If this population of youth is to provide the leadership for the economic and social development of the country, they need real opportunities develop literacy, awareness, skills, knowledge and confidence.

In this context and to address of this need, the Lubuto Library Project was born. Lubuto is a word in the IciBemba language of the Bemba people of Central Africa that means "enlightenment, knowledge and light." LLP, founded in 2005, has as an overarching goal of linking caring people to OVCY. Its objectives are to:

- Deliver accessible, high-quality educational services to OVC, integrated with the formal education system;
- Provide psychosocial support directly or by connecting OVCY with needed services; and
- Build capacity among educators and community members to support OVCY.

To achieve these objectives, LLP provides a safe, accessible and welcoming public facility. Each Lubuto Library's design reflects indigenous culture, enhancing the pride and self-esteem of its users, and provides maximum functionality and sustainability. The comfortable, inspiring environments are places where young people feel at home and connected to their roots, and they are intrinsic to the experience and impact of library programs on individual users. Within the buildings, information, education and literacy services engage the OVCY. There is open access to high-quality collections of books for children and activities to enhance and extend literacy--art, drama, dance, music, health education, computer use and mentoring. These programs, which benefit from community connections and collaborations, provide social integration, psychosocial support, and avenues for creative expression and learning suited to the individual needs and aptitudes of the children.

The focus of this chapter is on LLP's holistic approach to literacy development which furthers the social and economic development of the communities served. LLP's origins, growth and current work; lessons learned along the way; and plans for the future are described. This living, viable project provides a model for fostering literacy, and language skills, general knowledge of the world, enjoyment of books and learning, and a sense of self-worth among disadvantaged children around the world.

The Lubuto Library Project is one model for librarians, teachers and those interested in literacy development. The model can be used to meet the needs of children in less-developed countries. There are many countries where a reading culture is absent, yet children need books with words and pictures to grow in their understanding of themselves and the world they live in. LLP's close cooperation with the national ministry of education, local schools and drop-in centers makes possible the provision of sustained library services to children. The librarians and teachers working with OVCY are rewarded with a sense of accomplishment knowing that local control will sustain the programs and literacy efforts over time, once the buildings are built and services in place. Those working with LLP are rewarded every time a child comes into the library, selects a book and wants to "read the story" to an adult. The chil-

dren are rewarded each time they come and find a teacher, a librarian or an adult volunteer who will listen to them read and in turn will read to them, introducing new words, new concepts, and new ideas. This is a model that allows children to learn, supporting those who are attending school as well as those outside formal education.

The Lubuto Library Project's Approach

The Lubuto Library Project's approach provides a model for:

1. ***Planning and construction of enduring public facilities based on traditional architecture.***

There are two Lubuto Libraries in the city of Lusaka, Zambia. Each consists of three round structures built in the style of village houses, with walls decorated with African motifs and with thatched roofs. Outside seating and spaces between the buildings add a forum for performances and social gathering. An entry building called the *insaka* provides a sink for children to wash their hands before proceeding into the other library buildings. The washing of hands is traditional before eating and here it is a sign of respect for the books and materials, in addition to being an important habit for staying healthy. The largest building, the "Reading Room," houses the book collection and features reading alcoves and a central, sunken "talking circle" for reading teaching, group activities and performing. The other building is for art, computer use, and other activities that require writing surfaces. All buildings are equipped with electricity used to provide light for reading and power to charge the computers. The second library also features ramps for accessibility.



Figure 1. A Lubuto Library

2. ***Providing high quality, balanced collections and reading programs***

The Lubuto Library Project is not a book donation program; it is unique in providing comprehensive, balanced library collections of high-quality children's books. The 4,000-volume initial collection is selected and cataloged by library volunteers in the United States and shipped shelf-ready to the Zambian libraries.

Following guidelines established by educators and librarians, the books selected include those that support the development of early literacy skills, i.e.



conventions of reading, phonemic awareness, print-sound code and word recognition. In addition, the collection provides users with a wide range of knowledge/concepts through non-fiction materials and an appreciation of human themes in the fiction collection. As more books become available in local Zambian languages, they are added to the collection, and relevant books from other African countries are identified and acquired.

Figure 2: Friends reading aloud.

To support literacy development, the library staff, teachers, and volunteers read aloud to and with children in groups and individually. Children read aloud among themselves too. Adults help children select books that support their classroom learning, build confidence as readers and link to their individual interests. A “story performance” program extends work with library books to more traditional African ways of storytelling through drama.

Research shows that children learn to read most effectively when they are taught in their first language. Though Lubuto identifies and includes Zambian language materials in its collections, there are an insufficient number of local-language books available to maintain and develop reading fluency. To address this, Lubuto initiated several important activities:

- Creating computer-based mother tongue literacy instruction. To extend opportunities to learn to read beyond the classroom, Zambian teachers and regular youth library users are creating computer-based programs for teaching children how to read in their mother language. Using One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) XO laptops and *Etoys* software, the teachers design letter, sound and word recognition lessons based on the government curriculum in the 7 major Zambian languages and the youth provide the programming and graphics.
- Preserving Zambian stories online (www.LubutoCollections.org) which contains stories long out of print but preserved in libraries worldwide that were identified and scanned by Lubuto volunteers.
- Teaching children’s literature and library services in Zambia. A Fulbright Scholar is a resident guest lecturer in the University of Zambia’s Department of Library & Information Studies. One of the lecturer’s goals is to create a service-learning relationship that will give students experience and knowledge of high-quality services to children and youth in Lubuto Libraries.
- Establishing the Zambian Board on Books for Young People (ZBBY) in partnership with the Zambia Library Association, to bring together writers, illustrators, publishers and educators to produce high-quality bilingual literature for children and young adults.

- Organizing and hosting workshops on making books to preserve oral literature: The U.S. Board on Books for Young People supported two workshops in October 2010 on the importance of preserving traditional stories and making cloth books for children in local languages.
3. ***Establishing effective educational programs and social support services***

Lubuto Libraries offer far more than excellent collections of books. The nearly 50,000 visits in 2009 by vulnerable children were due, in large part, to participation in the library's innovative, relevant programs designed especially for the most vulnerable children and youth. Zambian instructors with appropriate backgrounds work with the children and in many cases design the programs.

LubutoArts is a self-sustaining visual arts education program supported by a percentage of the proceeds of the sale of artworks created by participants. In 2009 Lubuto's artists exhibited their work at Lusaka's Henry Tayali Gallery, and in June 2011 they will exhibit and sell their work at the Stella Jones Gallery in New Orleans, USA.

LubutoDrama is an equally engaging, twice-weekly program of drama, improvisation, and adapting books and stories for performance. Of the important role this program plays in children's lives, actor and Lubuto supporter Danny Glover noted that it "reinforces their sense of themselves and re-establishes a different confidence in them. [I]t sets something in motion ... a way to organize the emotional life within you. To watch these young people engaging in



Figure 3: Artist at work.

that and claiming it for themselves is very special." Collaborating together children develop a script based on a book, assign parts and begin the work of producing a play. The young actors build props, collect costumes, learn lines, rehearse and finally perform for the community.

LubutoMentoring is a popular and innovative program of counseling, mentoring and teaching Zambian values based on traditional stories selected for their instructive morals about life skills and positive mental attitude. Sessions conducted in Zambian languages are based on traditional ways in which values are passed down through generations, giving children a sense of connection to their roots and society. Over 500 boys and girls participate in each three-month program of weekly sessions. Most participants are street children and all come from highly vulnerable circumstances. They often become regular

readers at the library and many decide to return to school. Current and planned Lubuto programs additionally include Lubuto*Literacy*, Lubuto*Laptops*, Lubuto*Dance*, Lubuto*Health*, Lubuto*Environment*, Lubuto*Counseling* and others.

4. ***Building the capacity of local staff and volunteers to deliver services, manage resources and facilities, and monitor results and impact.***

Lubuto Libraries are established through an initial investment by LLP, made possible with support from corporate, foundation and individual donors; however, sustainability is ensured through long-term ownership by local host institutions. These hosts sign a memorandum of understanding with LLP, and commit to providing the human resources to run the libraries.

Staffing for the libraries is the responsibility of the hosting organization and LLP provides staff training. The staff is assisted in managing the libraries and serving users by volunteers who can provide story times, encourage community storytelling, and work one-on-one with children to improve literacy skills.

The second Lubuto Library in Lusaka's Garden community is hosted by a government school, in partnership between the Lubuto Library Project and Zambia's Ministry of Education. The teachers who staff the library receive salary supplements from the Ministry to work in the library. In addition, the teachers bring their classes to the library to use books that relate to units of study and for recreational reading. Both teachers and volunteers read with the students helping develop fluency in reading aloud and comprehension through discussion of the book with the child.

5. ***Working with government to identify target communities and host organizations.***

LLP maintains constant working relationships with Zambia, particularly the Ministry of Education. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between LLP and the Ministry of Education complements national plans to ensure equitable access to educational resources to OVCY throughout the nation and mandates LLP to "provide leadership in establishing standards of good library practice" in order to improve the quality of education in Zambia. The Ministry's ownership of the process extends to their liaison with host schools and community partners, site and building design and is a critical component of library sustainability. Material and logistical support is received from the Ministry of Sport, Youth and Child Development and LLP coordinates its efforts with the Chief Development Officer, the official with national oversight of services to OVCY.

6. *Monitoring and evaluation*

The continuing objective of the Lubuto Libraries is to make high-quality opportunities for literacy development, psychosocial support and social integration accessible to vulnerable children and youth. A critical element of the program planning and implementation is assessment. Practices include data collection on the use of the facilities, the collection of books, rates of participation in activities, numbers of visitors to the library etc. These data are



combined with formal and informal interviews and focus group discussions with users of the facilities and programs as well as the volunteers and staff. The insights gained from assessment are used to strengthen existing programs and provide the basis for consideration of new program development.

Figure 4: A holistic approach to literacy.

Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

There are many programs and services offered through the government and other NGOs that serve needs of vulnerable children and youth, but none of these are offered in partnership with a library. Lubuto Libraries provide an important model for dynamic, impactful library service offered in collaboration with others interested in and caring for OVCY.

Analysis of data from three years of Lubuto Library operations indicates that targeted, quality programming is essential not only for helping vulnerable and out-of-school children and youth, but also for getting them to use the libraries' books and improving literacy skills. Active outreach is also key for this hard-to-reach population. For school children who approach the library with confidence and a sense that they are entitled to such a rich resource, an excellent book collection alone attracts heavy use. The second library had over 7 thousand visits, mostly by school children, in its first month. Instituting programs and deliberate outreach will allow community OVCY to share this library.

This experience indicates that investment in Lubuto Libraries, as opposed narrow approaches to serving OVCY or simply providing library collections, will result in significant benefits to Zambian society. LLP's approach has

shown the value and impact of training school librarians and teachers to take a holistic approach to library services to scale-up this success.

There is a need for the library education program at the country's university to add courses in Collection Development and Management and Services to Youth and Children to its curriculum. One step currently in process is developing a minor course of study in school librarianship to be offered to students in the teacher education program. The goal is to prepare more teachers with basic knowledge and skills to encourage the growth of school libraries and the use of books and digital media in addition to textbooks within the classroom.

In November 2010, LLP furthered plans with the Ministry of Education to build future Lubuto Libraries in urban and rural areas of Zambia. Planning for the third library is well underway with the community of Nabukuyu in Zambia's Southern Province. In addition to providing safe physical space for many activities these additional libraries will help increase the literacy rates in rural Zambia and will serve as a model for how to develop staff, and use a multi-focus library.

Lubuto Libraries ultimately seek to empower local communities working with them to identify priority needs and build their capacity. Early on, stakeholders are involved to promote community ownership. Coordination with national plans, standards and programs ensures relevance and recognizes that government support is essential to sustainability. The facilities reflect and preserve indigenous culture, inspiring pride and community investment in running and maintaining the buildings and programs. Orphans, vulnerable children and youth are provided resources to develop and strengthen literacy skills learned in the classroom and that, in time, will lead them into productive and engaged lives as adult members of their communities.

Those interested in learning more about the Lubuto Library Project can visit its website (<http://www.lubuto.org>) or contact the organization by email at lubuto@verizon.net.

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