

The Lubuto Library Project

Creating Excellent and Sustainable Libraries for Vulnerable African Children and Youth

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The Lubuto Library Project was recognised as the 'gold standard' of international library projects by information session participants at the 2008 American Library Association annual conference.

LUBUTO'S DESIGN AND APPROACH is built on decades of work in and with southern African countries, inputs from top library, information and children's book professionals internationally, African legal and development experts, and extensive experience with the orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) that the programme serves. Volunteers and advisers from graduate library and information science programmes are further developing the Lubuto approach and defining it as a model of library services for disadvantaged youth in any context.¹

The mission of the Lubuto Library Project is to create excellent libraries offering critical educational services to street kids, orphans and other children in vulnerable circumstances as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.

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¹Professor Denise Agosto, an internationally recognised expert on library services to disadvantaged youth, addressed this issue in 'Lubuto Libraries as Models of Library Services for Disadvantaged Youth', which was presented in a panel on 'The Lubuto Library Project' at the American Library Association's Annual Conference, 28 June 2008. Dr Agosto has published articles further exploring Lubuto's model practices in the September/October 2008 issue of *Knowledge Quest*, the journal of the American Association of School Libraries, and in the December 2008 issue of *Public Libraries*.

Zambia's children

The country in which Lubuto is introducing its first innovative, open-access libraries is Zambia, which has the highest percentage of children aged 14 and under orphaned by AIDS and where one in five children is an orphan. Most of those children, for various reasons, are not able to attend school.

Government and traditional non-governmental organisation approaches are ill-equipped to reach and serve this marginalised population. Lubuto's challenge was to find a way to reach large numbers of Zambia's street kids, orphans and other vulnerable children and offer them an opportunity to learn, to become literate, and to be constructively re-engaged with society.

In many African states, where more than half of the national population is often below the age of 21, the constructive engagement of younger generations is vital to the progress, stability and sustainability of development efforts and a better future.

In the August 2007 edition of *Zambia Analysis*, Zambia is cited as one of the world's seven most HIV/AIDS-infected countries. It is estimated to have more than ten new HIV infections every hour, an average of 250 deaths a day, and more than one million orphans, near orphans, or persons living with HIV/AIDS.



The Lubuto Library buildings in Lusaka
(taken from a Gallery of photos at
<<http://www.lubuto.org/sets.php>>)

One important consequence of this epidemic is that more and more children are being left without caregivers, education, general support networks and a sense of connection to the greater society. Without this essential infrastructure, children often turn to the streets to generate income and even to sleep.

There are varying levels of vulnerability, and street children are not solely classified by the government as those children who sleep on the street every night. Demographic data would suggest that as many as 1,850,000 children aged 5 to 17 come from poor households and are therefore vulnerable to becoming street children. The number of children now sleeping on the streets is estimated at 13,200. Additionally, as many as 150,000 children are estimated to be without adult care.

A report commissioned by Zambia's ministries of Community Development and Social Services and of Sport, Youth and Child Development in 2006 predicts that the number of vulnerable children in Zambia will continue to grow through 2015.

Lubuto Libraries

The Lubuto Library Project is an organisation based in Washington, DC, with a regional office in Lusaka, Zambia, that designs, builds and stocks beautiful, open-access libraries with excellent collections, hosted and staffed by community-based centres working with at-risk children.

Under an agreement with the government of Zambia,² Lubuto Libraries are mandated to provide leadership in the education sector by reaching out-of-school children with targeted and culturally sensitive educational resources, creating a bridge to schools and social services, as well as mobilising Zambian professionals to offer rich programmes in visual arts, motivational mentoring, performing arts, storytelling, reading, health and the environment.

Lubuto plans to build at least 100 libraries in Zambia and Malawi, and in other countries in the area hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The first Lubuto Library was officially opened at the Fountain of Hope Drop-In Centre in Lusaka on 21 September 2007 by the First President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda.³

The Lubuto Library Project is uniquely positioned to address the needs of children and youth who are missing out on the opportunity to learn to read, to enjoy books

² Ministry of Education, Government of the Republic of Zambia and the Lubuto Library Project, Inc. Memorandum of Understanding Between the Ministry of Education and Lubuto Library Project [Pertaining to the libraries and book-based literacy programmes] [The Parties to this MoU desirous of co-operation with a view to improving literacy in Zambia and providing opportunities for non-formal education to OVC by facilitating access to libraries and book-based literacy programs.] Lusaka, Zambia, 13 November 2008.

³ A film excerpt from the opening event can be viewed at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ek6cS59QU4>>.

and enriching arts, and to feel a part of a safe community in which they can learn and grow.

Lubuto is not a book-donation programme, many of which, unfortunately, result in thousands of useless and/or inappropriate books being shipped to various institutions and sitting unused in inaccessible rooms; nor is it a means of upgrading existing collections which reside out-of-reach in schools and universities.

It is important for the library profession to distinguish the Lubuto Project from book-donation programmes that claim to be creating libraries when they send books to institutions. The Lubuto organisation has approached its work from a development perspective, rather than as a charitable one, which frequently is dependent on the largesse or 'passion' of an individual or from outside the society.

The Lubuto approach

Good and effective libraries in any context begin with a thorough understanding of the individuals to be served, their needs, and the organisational or general cultural context in which they operate. This understanding is more difficult to achieve when working internationally, but no less critical for effective, relevant and sustainable library development.

Lubuto works within the culture rather than imposing an outside perspective, with a deep understanding of the country's cultures, history and world view, as well as knowledge of current issues and standards of child protection, education, etc.

Zambian leaders and professionals provide guidance through Lubuto's boards, and Zambians are engaged in all aspects of library development and training, as well as guiding

its innovations in services and psychosocial support to OVC.⁴

In addition to their vital direct services to vulnerable children, Lubuto Libraries will also play an increasingly important role in the development of Zambian library and educational services, while helping to foster a reading and knowledge culture society-wide.

Adults and youth from intact families who are able to attend school also often come to Lubuto Libraries. The resultant interaction works to establish and strengthen ties between OVC and their communities, centred on a communal approach to learning, in addition to helping create the local associational ties needed to meet creatively the evolving long-term needs of Zambian society.

In this way it is envisioned that, beyond the current orphan crisis faced by sub-Saharan African societies, Lubuto Libraries will continue to evolve as vital community-based means of addressing local and national educational challenges, and serve as a model for the entire region.

The current plan is for Lubuto Libraries to be staffed by non-professionals who are trained and experienced in understanding the psychosocial needs of street children, orphans and other vulnerable children.

For this reason, the collections are organised by a specially developed colour-coded classification and access scheme, designed to be used and maintained by non-professional staff, and also especially to accommodate traditional African genres such as proverbs and aid in finding materials at the correct level for library users.

Library staff assigned by the host

⁴ See letter to Unicef by clinical psychologist and international OVC expert and adviser to UNICEF and USAID Dr Jonathan Brakarsh on Lubuto Library Project website, <<http://www.lubuto.org/kudos/brakarshletter.pdf>>.

organisation are trained by professional librarians to offer effective services and to build on their own experience and understanding of how best to reach out to children who are outside the fringes of society.

Each Lubuto Library houses a first-rate, balanced collection, beginning with 4,000 books whose selection adheres to careful guidelines established by expert children's librarians.

In Zambia, English is the official language, and English proficiency is necessary for success in society. Thus, for Zambia, Lubuto sends core collections built in the US in English but adds local-language materials to the collections in Zambia; in addition it is working to bring bilingual children's materials into print by establishing the Zambian Board on Books for Young People (ZBBY), a national chapter of the International Board on Books for Young People, in partnership with the Zambia Library Association.

Bi-lingual children's books produced by ZBBY will also help to preserve stories and cultural traditions in danger of dying out. As a seminal contribution to this effort, Lubuto volunteers at the Library of Congress and elsewhere are scanning traditional Zambian stories and creating a wiki on the Lubuto.org Website to make the stories available for translation and as a resource for scholars and authors.

As a result of these activities to promote reading and production of good children's literature, the Lubuto Project was nominated for the 2009 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. The object of the award, which is administered by The Swedish Arts Council, is to increase interest in children's and young people's literature, and to promote children's right to culture on a global level.

Determining and using appropriate informa-

tion technology is also critically important in contemporary library services.⁵ In June 2008 Lubuto received ten XO laptops from the One Laptop Per Child organisation. XO laptops were designed particularly for the target group that Lubuto serves, and features such as wind-up power and back-lit screens make them a viable and sustainable technology for Lubuto Libraries.

The Lubuto OLPC Development Group created training materials and an approach for introducing the machines in the first Lubuto Library in February 2009. This trial may inform Zambia's Ministry of Education of the machines' usefulness more broadly in the national educational system.

Lubuto's approach exemplifies best practices in special librarianship applied to international development, underpinned by the recognition that the most vulnerable children need and deserve the best that the library profession can offer.

The social transformation needed to ensure sustainability of Lubuto Libraries requires simultaneous planning and work from the ground up as well as from the top down.

Partnership with government authorities enables Lubuto to operate on all levels needed to create a sustainable library infrastructure to support vulnerable children. This will include the recruitment with the University of Zambia of a Fulbright Scholar who will teach children's librarianship and develop a book-based literacy programme that will make optimum use of the excellent collections of children's trade books that are in Lubuto Library collections.

The incorporation of key principles and best

⁵ I have had long experience with information technology transfer issues in sub-Saharan Africa, and did some pioneering work in the implementation of CD-ROM use in Africa in 1986: *Science* (1991), 253(5026), 1333(1).

practices of sustainable development adds a critical dimension that establishes the Lubuto model for libraries as a transformational force within societies. These principles and best practices include local factors such as:

- respect for national institutions, reflecting the specific characteristics and needs of the users and local environment, and understanding cultural factors and taking them into account;
- community factors such as building a broad and strong sense of ownership, working with local groups and institutions and involving the private sector, ensuring that marginalised groups are given a voice, and integrating with broader society;

- institutional factors like drawing on the local professional infrastructure, establishing a transparent framework with clear accountability, building capacity to support growth and stability, and supporting innovation;
- aesthetic factors, including the incorporation of cultural patterns and aesthetics in library design to promote ownership and sustainability.

These factors have been employed by the Lubuto Project to ensure sustainability, success and effectiveness in offering critical educational and social services to children whose lives have been shattered by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and make apparent the important role that libraries can play within any society.

A Tour through Italian Libraries, Culture and History in Northern Italy

25–30 May 2009

Following previous successful study tours to Europe, a tour of some of the best public libraries in Northern Italy with some sightseeing in six historic Italian cities has been organised by the Eurolis group of CILIP London members and the Head Librarians of the French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese institutes in London.

The tour will be based in Verona and will also visit Bergamo, Brescia, Trento, Bologna and Venice. The itinerary includes five nights at a four-star hotel in Verona, coach transfer to every destination, all evening meals with drinks, some free lunches at host libraries, entrance and guided tour of Avio Castle, presence of a tour guide throughout, insurance (medical, luggage, etc.) membership of ARCI 2008. Travel to and from London, and UK and airport transfers, are not included. Flights to Bergamo and Bologna with Ryanair are very reasonable, and there are direct flights to Verona.

The cost will be approximately €547 or £450.

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