



## Librarian profile: Robinson Bwato

**Robinson Bwato is Chief Librarian of the Zambia Library Service (ZLS). He has been in post for over two years. In this interview he talks about the challenges faced by his service and some of the solutions.**

### **What is a typical day for you?**

My day is characterised by briefings, attending to policies and other communication. I respond to queries and memos from the Permanent Secretary and other senior staff in the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MoESVTEE). I meet visitors and clients from the different branch and provisional libraries, who are making enquiries about the books and general services from ZLS.

### **Do you visit your libraries very often?**

Our libraries are on the outskirts of Lusaka and in the provinces, so we cover as many libraries as possible and visit to sort out requests.

### **How long have you worked in libraries? What types of work have you done in this time?**

I have been in the field of librarianship for two years, but I have worked in the Ministry of Education for over 25 years. I have served in different portfolios, first as a science teacher, then as a Head of Department, Deputy Head and Head Teacher at a secondary school in the North West province. I have also been a careers master.

I decided I had already been a Head Teacher and wanted to do something else, where I could train to be a manager and manage an institution. I studied Library Science as a double major with

Public Administration and worked at the University of Zambia. When I was a teacher I was interested in helping someone understand something new. I read a lot of physics, chemistry and biology texts and discovered the more I was reading those text books the more knowledgeable I became. I realised the power of the book. As deputy head teacher I worked with the provincial librarian to set up a library and that was quite helpful. Pupils were able to perform better in their academic work. Education and libraries are integrated and that impacted positively on my life.

**“Libraries make such a difference in our lives, especially for the disadvantaged and vulnerable, those who didn’t have an opportunity to go into formal schooling.”**

Now, with my colleagues, I am trying to transform ZLS. When I arrived capacity was lacking and staffing was low with only three officers. Now there are 11 including six graduates with degrees in Library Science. I want to give confidence to the public that we are there.

**Do you think libraries make a difference?**

Yes, they make a difference in people’s lives. Those that use them more often become more enlightened, more civilised, more knowledgeable.

A library is an eye-opener to the world, a repository of information and of books. Libraries make such a difference in our lives, especially for the disadvantaged and vulnerable, those who didn’t have an opportunity to go into formal schooling. If you don’t have space at school, you don’t have space at home, a library is an open access, democratic institution. It is not restricted, and the doors are wide open. I call them “the poor people’s universities”. I am a strong believer that libraries are critical tools for development in human lives. We need to embrace them and enhance them as much as possible.

**What do you see as the future of libraries here in Zambia?**

There is huge potential for library development in this country. Most of our primary and secondary schools don’t have a purpose built library, and most of our libraries don’t have a lot of relevant or updated books. If we can

get up to date and relevant books we can answer the needs of people in their communities. We can transform these libraries into “knowledge and learning centres” as opposed to just buildings with libraries. The community really needs to feel they possess and own these libraries. We need to incorporate oral and indigenous content, and stock local materials in the local languages.

The other component is library legislation, which we don’t have in Zambia, and so we don’t have a legal framework for library policy. Libraries are disjointed, they are not standardised, and there is no policy to guide us. Lawyers and accountants have an Act of Parliament, ensuring that these professions progress. We haven’t got that type of a framework, so we are working together with the Zambia Library Association and all other passionate and interested librarians.

For the public, librarianship is just about packing books in a library, just about shelving. But it is so much more. We need to make the community understand that a librarian is an information provider, able to help anyone who comes to the library to get information.

**What are you most proud of in your library?**

We are trying to transform libraries and change the way we provide the service. We need to embrace ICTs so that they go side by side with the traditional library.

We are working closely with the Lubuto Libraries project. These libraries are for orphans, for vulnerable children who have lost both parents or who are on the street. There are programmes for drama, art, storytelling, reading aloud. This partnership is very exciting for us, and we are trying to go into the rural, most remote parts of the country, the chiefdoms, districts, provinces. Lubuto means light and these libraries are bringing light to those that were in the dark.

There is also the “Beyond Access” programme, which is a unique new programme supporting libraries to come up with innovations and initiatives.

**What are the biggest challenges for your library?**

The biggest challenge is funding. It is just a drop in the ocean. We can resolve some of this through legislation, so that we are autonomous, get a grant from government and make our own decisions.

**Is there one reader who has had an impact on you?**

Yes, the University of Zambia Librarian, Dr. Vitalis Chifwepa. He really inspired me. He started out as an undergraduate and now has a PhD and is really passionate about library issues and the provision of information to communities and the general public. He is the one who told me “information is power”. As long as people are not informed then they will perish. So I am an avid believer that “knowledge is power”, and that information changes people’s lives.

There is also my former director who has just retired. She would challenge us: “It is not just a matter of taking books to the school. What are these books doing to these children’s lives? Are they affecting their performance or are they just sitting on the shelves? You as ZLS take the books to the provinces, the districts, so what?” So what? is an important question to us. These books will be able to change or transform lives, and we will have done something good.

**What book has changed your life?**

Animal Farm by George Orwell. Every time I read it, it’s like I’ve never read it before, and when I look at the behaviour of politicians, you see that when they get to that position they forget where they came from. It’s like being a slave, if you become a slave owner you forget you were a slave. I first read it many years ago, and it stays very fresh in my mind.