

Unanticipated Outcomes

A Fund Assignment That Led to Changing Children's Lives

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Maybe the best thing to come out of my career at the Fund had nothing to do with economics or finance. It also isn't something that I did myself. But it is an interesting story and really helps to keep life in perspective.

Being posted as a resident representative has its pluses and minuses. Unless it's a really high-profile assignment, the front office may not give much thought to you—the mission chief for the country usually has their attention—and being away from headquarters can leave you out of the loop. On the other hand, the work can be more varied, you may have more independence—both on the job and when you go home in the evening—and life can be really fascinating.

I applied for a posting to Zambia at the end of the 90s, when my children were 6 and 9. Adding up the advantages and disadvantages, the deciding factor was the sense that giving my children the opportunity to live in Lusaka and see the challenges life posed there, as well as the joys and sorrow that were the fabric of life in another place, would help open up how they viewed the world and make their lives richer.

Not long after we arrived in Lusaka, a friend of a friend introduced us to a shelter for street children that some young Zambians had started near the city center. At the time, the shelter was pretty basic. It didn't offer a place for the children to sleep when its gates closed at dusk; the children had to fend for themselves on the street. But the shelter provided food, community and a safe place for the children during the time that they were there, as well as adult supervision for kids who were doing their best to survive on their own at ages as young as 5 or 6. (Over the next couple of years, we were able to help the shelter find support for building sleeping space and class rooms for a community school. But that is another story.)

So, cutting to the chase, my wife Jane—who is a professional librarian and had established a government agricultural research library network in Malawi in the 1980s—had brought a lot of children's books to Zambia with us and started reading to the children at the shelter a few hours a week. Soon after, a few other interested acquaintances were also coming to the shelter to read. The kids loved it. There were adults paying attention to them and the stories opened up a whole new world to children whose days, otherwise, were incredibly gritty. Teenagers who were so tough that you would actively avoid them if you ran into them on the street, sat in rapt wonder as they learned that dinosaurs once roamed the earth.

By chance, groups in the U.K. and the U.S. heard about the reading program and donated a fairly large number of books to the shelter; a local company donated a surplus shipping container; an architect with whom we were friendly designed the conversion of the shipping container into a



reading room; and the local children had their own space where they could learn and enjoy books. It was a huge success. It was always packed with children who viewed it as their own, and treated the books with care. Despite the limited staffing of the reading room, the books did not disappear.

Not long after the reading room opened, my posting in Zambia ended and my family and I returned to DC. Among other emotions, there was a sense of regret that we were leaving the children that we had come to know at the shelter, and many others in similar straits, in the rear-view mirror. The sense of connection, though, was still strong.

Sometime after we were back, Jane learned from the people running the shelter that some of the kids who were regular users of the reading room had been able to pass their secondary school entrance exams, which was life changing for them. In the past they had lacked access to the general information required to be successful. The books in the reading room had made all the difference, and at least one child, who is now an adult with a family of his own, is working to help kids who are on the street!

Recognizing the impact of libraries serving children and youth, my wife contacted NGOs headquartered around Washington to take this idea forward. However, efforts to convince these NGOs didn't bear fruit for a number of reasons—organizations tend to stick with what they have done in the past and are drawn to activities for which funding is in the pipeline and already have substantial support. So, lacking an alternative, a new NGO—Lubuto Libraries (whose name was suggested by the twin sister of former IMF Executive Director, Chileshe Kapwepwe)—was established.

The three Lubuto libraries currently in operation in Zambia have been path-breaking, a fourth one is about to open, and initial steps are under way toward expanding to Malawi. It should be mentioned that Fund-related contributions have been very helpful in the growth of these libraries.



Michel Camdessus was an early contributor and, through the Fund's annual giving campaigns, many staff and retirees have been sustained contributors. Also, over the years, IMF's Civic Program Advisory Committee (CPAC) has provided grants, and Fund staff and retirees have served as board members, including as Secretary and Treasurer.

Lubuto libraries have had a spectacular impact. In terms of numbers, there have been over 1.3 million visits by nearly

150,000 children. The libraries have offered programs to: keep teenage girls in school and HIV/AIDS-free; help prevent child marriage; mentor marginalized children; sign stories for the hearing-impaired and deaf, support literacy acquisition, including for young mothers; teach computer coding, introduce early childhood learning, provide art and drama classes and lots more. Of course, there are wonderful book collections and access to computers, too.

I started out by saying that this might be the best thing to come out of my Fund career. It is no small thing and, although I have contributed to its success, it could not have grown without the support of a much wider village—a village that includes many Fund staff and retirees. To all of you, Lubuto offers many heartfelt thanks. Also, as a reminder, the road continues. You can follow Lubuto on www.Lubuto.org and can be assured your ongoing support through the Fund's annual giving campaign will continue to change the lives of children for the better.

A final word: the child and youth demographic in southern Africa—including, especially, those who are at the margins of society—is large and growing rapidly. And it is clear that if the need is going to be met, this will have to happen mostly through replication of the Lubuto model.

