

From London to Lusaka: experiences of a VSO volunteer librarian working with the Lubuto Library Project in Zambia

by Nicola Packer*

In February 2012 I left my post as College Librarian at Queen's College, London to begin a 2 year voluntary placement working for the Lubuto Library Project in Lusaka, Zambia, as a VSO volunteer. This article is about my personal experience of working as a Librarian in Zambia.

The Lubuto Library Project currently has two libraries in Lusaka: one hosted by Ngwerere Basic School in the north of the city; and one hosted by Fountain of Hope, a facility for orphans and vulnerable children in the South of the city. It is here that I have been based for the last 11 months. Fountain of Hope is a residential centre for boys who have recently come out of living on the streets, and it also has a Community School for children who live locally but can't afford to pay the school fees to attend a government school. Fountain of Hope offers a hot meal for anybody who needs one, sports programmes, the opportunity to learn skills, and several programmes based in the library. Lubuto runs several formal programmes, some led by me and some by other specialists; *LubutoMentoring*; *LubutoDrama*; *LubutoLiteracy*; *LubutoStorytime*; *LubutoArts*; *LubutoLaptops* (from *One Laptop per Child*) as well as all the other things that go on in the library on a daily basis.

During my time at Fountain of Hope I have been privileged to work with youngsters on or off the street. I have accompanied the outreach workers when they have done street visits, and we invite the kids to come to the library and participate in our programmes.

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Children using the Talking Circle in the middle of the Reading Room

As a result, those who stay on the streets near the Centre all know me by name and I often get odd looks from strangers when I am walking home from work and have to stop and greet the youngsters who are begging at the traffic lights! It is humbling and often upsetting working with these young people though, and their stories are traumatic. The first time I was taken into the local Compound (informal housing settlement) I kept thinking of the documentaries that I had seen on the TV, where a celebrity is taken around a slum, and suddenly realised with a jolt that it wasn't just something on the telly, it was real life.

Lubuto is a very young organisation and still developing, although its work is informed by many years' experience of working in Africa and the inputs of several experts in relevant fields. We have therefore spent a lot of time trying to clarify how I can best have an input into Lubuto's work. It has felt at times as if I am more of a mother figure to 50+ kids than a chartered librarian, and this has been difficult for me (not that being a mother figure is not important!). However, I realise, looking back over the year, that I have perhaps been too hard on myself in this respect. Coming

from working in a very well respected public school in London, I had several cultural lessons to learn, and as we know, we cannot offer library services without knowing what people want/need. Sitting having my hair plaited by a group of boys and girls may not have been something I would ever have done in the UK but in Zambia it seems to be an important bonding process and it makes them feel more confident around me, which can only be a good thing.

Things I took for granted in the UK have been challenged since I arrived in Zambia: collecting data on library use/book borrowing without a circulation system (books are reference only and we don't have library access to the online library management system yet); assumptions about how and why the library is used (young children do not arrive with their parents, they come alone; girls cannot always come to the library after school because they have to go straight home, while boys have more freedom); the way that programmes and activities take place (the Zambian sense of time means that programmes running in the library can take place at pretty much any time on the day they are scheduled, and sometimes on a



A group of 8-9 year old boys who visit the library every day



Red Linso, a popular musician, reads to the young people who stay on the streets at the City Market

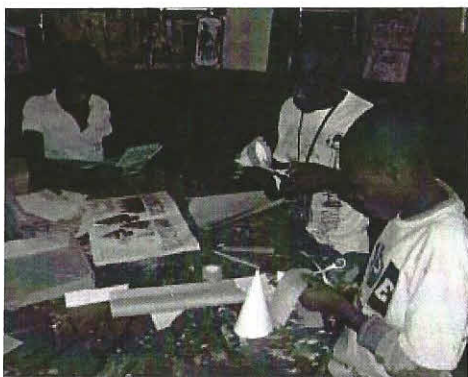
different day!). Even things like general security (I now have a bunch of keys for each cupboard that makes me feel like a jailor) and going to the toilet (yes, a key for that too!) took a little bit of getting used to. Lubuto encourages us to question every assumption that we make about Western libraries so that we can understand our unique clientele and focus on the most vulnerable children. So in some respects I feel like a toddler who is learning to walk for the first time, but I am starting to be able to utilise my skills.

As every good librarian knows, a major part of our job is all about 'getting them in and keeping them in'. As well as the important programmes run by Lubuto (see above), I have introduced board games to the library at Fountain of Hope and they are very popular, although I have yet to find a method of stopping the counters from disappearing! Crafts are also well-liked, and it provides an interesting challenge to find materials which don't cost the earth, won't run out in the blink of an eye, and yet can be used for various things with great success (hooray for paper plates). We like to sing: when I first arrived it was not uncommon for me to finish a particularly energetic rendition of *Down*

in the Jungle, only to turn around and see an audience of adult Fountain of Hope staff members peering through the library door in amusement! I have a group of girls who come into the library very irregularly (whenever they are let out early from school they run in for half an hour before they have to go home and start chores) but whenever they do, they demand to sing with me! Alongside this we have 'muzungu dancing' ('muzungu' means 'white man') - I teach them the routines to such classics as *Saturday Night* and *YMCA* amidst much merriment.

We even iced biscuits on the Independence Day holiday. The kids were completely astounded that this could be possible and all lined up carefully in order that they should all get a go. Not one biscuit was eaten before I said they were ready and not one finger was dipped into the bowl of icing (except mine...). When the time came for eating, an orderly queue formed and everything was counted out to ensure fairness - not quite what would happen in the UK!

I discovered recently that several of the younger children who come into the library



Kasela, the Librarian In Training at Fountain of Hope Lubuto Library, doing craft activities with the children



'Muzungu' Dancing

have big problems with spelling words - and even in some cases recognising letters. If I give them some letter cards and ask them to spell a word, they can do so correctly because they can see the letters; but if I ask them to verbally spell a word for me, they will get confused because they don't know the names of the letters. Finding fun ways to rectify this was a challenge - if only I had access to a colour printer and a laminator! However, when my sister visited in September she brought me the card game *Boggle Slam*, so I have been using the letter cards from that game to get the children to spell/read words, do simple anagrams, or say which letter is missing from various words. They seem to be enjoying it and I hope it is having a positive effect! These are the kinds of things which, without wishing to sound arrogant, it takes a Westerner to do; teaching and learning in Zambia is still mainly done by rote, so local teachers and librarians need be shown how to create games and activities to engage and help their children.

We took part in Zambia Literacy Week in September with great success - a stall at one of

the shopping malls in Lusaka generated lots of interest from passers-by and we were able to tell them about the work of Lubuto as well as demonstrate Lubuto's literacy programme - a programme specially designed by Lubuto and made available in the libraries on the *One Laptop per Child* laptops (but useable on any computer platform) that helps children learn to read in their mother tongue. This programme is currently being developed further to make the lessons more effective and accessible. We also took the *LubutoStorytime* out of the library and invited local celebrities to read to the youngsters who live and work on the street. Seeing these youngsters get involved in the story, and enjoy reading the books that I took with us, was a wonderful experience and one which we hope to continue in the future.

As well as training the Librarian In Training at Fountain of Hope Lubuto Library, who was himself a library user as a child and grew up participating in the Lubuto programmes, we hosted two students on work experience from the University of Zambia. This was a challenge because nowhere in the current curriculum are Library Science students taught about youth librarianship, or anything to do with a library model which involves noise, activity, and a touch of what we will call organised chaos! The students looked bemused on their first day and asked questions such as "But how do you maintain silence?" (Answer: "We don't"). However they soon learnt the value of the way we work at Lubuto.

We have been privileged to have some high profile visitors this year. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, visited on my first official day of work and HRH Princess Anne came in September as part of her Golden Jubilee tour of Zambia. She took



Presenting HRH Princess Anne with our gifts

great interest in the way that Lubuto works, asked lots of interested questions about the library and was wonderful with the children - accepting the paper flowers that they had made her graciously, and not batting an eyelid at the multi-coloured Christmas tree with which she was also presented!

Lubuto Libraries' strength lies largely in their programming, but is by no means limited to it so of course there are more technical details to consider. Book collections are built in the USA, at the Head Office in Washington DC. So by the time they arrive at the libraries, books are shelf-ready. However there will always be books which need repair or re-cataloguing for whatever reason, and although we have had problems with me accessing the library management system in Zambia, we are very much hoping that I will be able to do so in the future. One of my roles is to feed stock development information back to the Head Office, and collaborate with staff in the USA to build an 'opening day' start-up collection, which can be sent to the new Lubuto Libraries as they are built, and form a strong basis upon which to develop a more individual collection to suit the needs of each specific library.

As I head into the second year of my placement, things are changing. I will start

to work in the other Lubuto Library in the North of Lusaka for a couple of days a week with the hope that I can start to model good practice there, identify shared training needs for the library staff in both libraries, and start to collect information on stock development and library usage which can be fed back to the Head Office. I hope to create some kind of handbook of songs, games and activities, which can be used by staff in the increasing network of Lubuto Libraries (number 3 is being built in Zambia's Southern Province in 2013). And there is still a lot for me to learn about the local community and how best to serve it. I anticipate several more challenges ahead but hopefully a lot can be achieved.

If you would like to keep up to date with my adventures, my personal blog is:

worldwideweasel.blogspot.com

Visit the Lubuto Blog at: lubutoblog.wordpress.com

For more information about the Lubuto Library Project: www.lubuto.org and www.lubuto.org/inthemedial.html

For more information about Fountain of Hope: www.fountainofhope.org.uk



A finished collage

For more information about VSO: www.vso.org.uk

NB The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect those of VSO, Lubuto Library Project or Fountain of Hope.

Jane Kinney Meyers, Founder and President of the Lubuto Library Project, was awarded the ILIG International Award in 2010 and wrote the article "The Lubuto Library Project: Creating Excellent and Sustainable Libraries for Vulnerable African Children and Youth," in *Focus* v. 40, no. 1, pp. 4-8. (A letter to the editor in response to this article was published in v. 40, no. 2, along with Jane Meyers' response).