

# THE Lubuto

## LIBRARY PROJECT AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR YOUTH

**DENISE E. AGOSTO** is an Associate Professor in the College of Information Science and Technology at Drexel University in Philadelphia; denise.agosto@ischool.drexel.edu. Denise is reading *My One Hundred Adventures* by Polly Horvath.

**T**he Lubuto Library Project provides library services to street kids, orphans, and other vulnerable children and adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom have been orphaned by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Although the first Lubuto library opened in the fall of 2007, the seeds of Lubuto were planted in the late 1990s when Lubuto founder and president Jane Meyers was living in Lusaka, Zambia. After unexpectedly receiving a shipment of books that had been weeded from UK school libraries, Meyers used a large shipping container to create a makeshift library at the Fountain of Hope drop-in center for street children in central Lusaka.

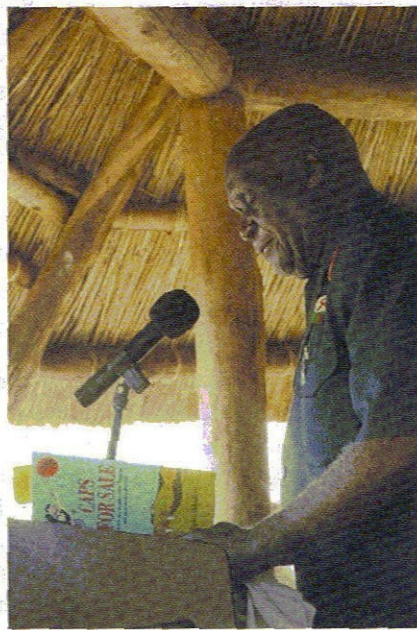
According to the World Bank, the 2006 per-capita gross national income of Zambia was \$630. The U.S. per-capita gross national income was \$44,970, or more than 71 times higher.<sup>1</sup> This means that there is not enough money to provide library and educational services to Zambia that are comparable to those of the United States. Prior to the creation of the makeshift library, youth at the Fountain of Hope shelter had no access to library services.

Meyers soon saw dramatic social and educational benefits among the street kids who used the makeshift library.<sup>2</sup> This inspired a plan to build full-service public libraries for street kids, orphans, and other vulnerable youth. Work toward founding Lubuto began in earnest in 2003. The organization became incorporated in January 2005, and it became an officially registered nonprofit in Zambia later that year, with an inaugural fundraising event in November 2005. *Lubuto* means "enlightenment, knowledge, and light" in the language spoken by the Bemba people of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it reflects Lubuto's overriding goal of promoting education and self-improvement for vulnerable African youth.<sup>3</sup>

Construction on the first Lubuto library began in July 2006. The grand opening celebration took place on September 21, 2007. It featured the first president of Zambia, Kenneth David Kaunda, reading the book *Caps for Sale* as the Barefeet Theatre drama and acrobatic troupe, comprised of local street kids, acted out the



The Lubuto Library in Lusaka, Zambia.



First President of Zambia Kaunda reads *Caps for Sale* at the opening of the first Lubuto Library.

story.<sup>4</sup> President Kaunda also gave a keynote address, during which he stressed the importance of literacy to Zambia's future success.<sup>5</sup>

Designed by architect Eleni Coromvli, a resident of Zambia, each Lubuto library is a three-building complex featuring traditional thatched roofs, an entrance structure with a sink, a sunken African "talking circle" for read-alouds and traditional storytelling events, collection space, and an arts and activities center. Local youth take part in building construction, learning useful construction skills, and fostering community ownership of the libraries.

There are a number of other programs that provide books to African schools, but they do not reach the most severely disadvantaged youth. Lubuto is creating a whole new type of institution to reach school-aged children who cannot attend school.<sup>6</sup> Lubuto libraries are much more than just book provision services. They are fully featured community libraries with a complete range of library programs and services.

Meyers plans to build at least one hundred Lubuto libraries across Africa over the coming decades.<sup>7</sup> Each library will be run by staff who will be trained to "oversee the library collection, provide library programs and services, identify and purchase local language materials, and collect quantitative and qualitative data about library use and impact."<sup>8</sup> Recognizing the educational benefits for children not

adequately served by the Zambia educational system, the Zambian government has requested that Lubuto build libraries in regional education zones throughout the country. These locations will help to advance Lubuto's goals. As Meyers explains, "A critical factor in the project's success is accessibility to vulnerable children, especially street children. Libraries must be located within walking distance" of where these youth live.<sup>9</sup> Expansion plans are contingent on fundraising, partnerships with other organizations, and support from aid agencies and companies such as Brodart Co. ([www.brodart.com](http://www.brodart.com)). As a Lubuto partner, Brodart provides label protectors and other supplies for the collections.<sup>10</sup>

Although much of the funding for Lubuto comes from the United States and other developed nations, Lubuto libraries are African organizations, designed, staffed, and frequented mainly by members of the African communities in which they are situated. This article will compare the roles that Lubuto libraries play in African youths' lives to the roles that public libraries play for youth in the United States to test the idea that the core roles of libraries are largely universal, surpassing both cultural and contextual boundaries. The comparison will be based on analysis of two semi-structured interviews with Meyers and on analysis of the Lubuto website and selected organizational documents, including press releases, speech transcripts, and newsletters.

## Public Libraries and U.S. Youth

What roles do libraries play in the lives of youth in the United States? Information provision is obviously one important role, but is it the only significant role? This author surveyed U.S. teen public library users about the reasons why they use libraries.<sup>11</sup> I found many more reasons than just information seeking. Based on the study findings, I developed a model of adolescent public library use. The model includes three main roles of libraries in U.S. teens' lives: (1) the library as information gateway, (2) the library as social interaction/entertainment space, and (3) the library as beneficial physical environment.

A close look at Lubuto library services and programs shows that Lubuto libraries play all three of these roles for vulnerable African children and teens, and that these three roles are embedded in Lubuto's organizational goals. For impoverished and otherwise vulnerable children and adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, Lubuto seeks to "improve literacy, expand English-language skills, increase general knowledge, promote the enjoyment of books and learning, and provide a safe haven and connection with adults who care."<sup>12</sup>

## Lubuto Libraries as Information Gateways

The library as information gateway refers to the library as provider of information and information access, from book circulation, to Internet and database access, to reference services, and so on. Teens that use libraries in this capacity search for information for personal, school, and other needs.<sup>13</sup>

Lubuto libraries are first and foremost information gateways. A main goal of Lubuto is to provide educational services to disadvantaged youth who cannot attend regular schools.<sup>14</sup>

Lubuto library users learn general literacy skills and knowledge of a wide variety of topics. A number of users of the precursor library at the Fountain of Hope drop-in shelter have gone on to pass secondary-school entrance exams and to win scholarships to enter formal education systems. The library materials are primarily in English, Zambia's official language, so youth who speak languages other than English at home also gain increased English proficiency. This is particularly important for success in the Zambian workforce.

At this point, Lubuto collections are limited to books. While the target population is also badly in need of computer resources, Meyers points out that books and basic literacy are the first need, and that

youth must acquire basic literacy skills before they can use computers. Similarly, Sisulu has suggested that:

Without a high standard of literacy, it won't matter how many computers sit in our [African] schools. A culture of reading and literacy is inextricably intertwined with the availability of books, yet the majority of children in Africa have little access to reading materials. Too many of our schools do not even have libraries, to say nothing of computers.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, there are future plans for stocking the libraries with XO laptops through the One Laptop per Child Program, which provides disadvantaged children in developing countries with inexpensive learning laptops. (Visit <http://laptop.org/en/index.shtml> for more information.)

Each Lubuto collection starts with four thousand donated volumes selected by Lubuto staff. Selection criteria include relevance and collection balance. U.S. and UK publishers, librarians, teachers, and the general public comprise the bulk of book donors. Lubuto also helps to organize book drives in U.S. schools and community organizations, and the staff acquires additional local materials for the collections. U.S. and Zambian volunteers help with materials selection, technical processing, cataloging, and preparation for shipment to Africa. Within the collections, books are organized with a home-grown classification system designed with Lubuto users' unique needs in mind.<sup>16</sup>

The collections contain both nonfiction and fiction materials. Reading for pleasure is promoted both for its educational and emotional benefits, and Lubuto staff and volunteers help their young users to learn to treasure books and learning.<sup>17</sup>

## Lubuto Libraries as Social Interaction and Entertainment Spaces

The library as social interaction/entertainment space involves using libraries to create and maintain social relationships, or simply as a source for pleasure. U.S. teens who use public libraries for this purpose attend organized library entertainment events, use libraries as places to meet with friends, and visit libraries in order to interact with librarians and other library staff.<sup>18</sup>

Lubuto libraries play this role for disadvantaged African youth, benefiting the entire community by serving as community social and entertainment spaces. The target population is children and teens, but the broader community is welcomed into the

# Reading for pleasure is promoted both for its educational and emotional benefits, and Lubuto staff and volunteers help their young users to learn to treasure books and learning.

libraries and plays a crucial role in Lubuto's campaign to advance the healthy development of vulnerable youth. Library buildings are designed with this role in mind. Each complex includes an open-air entrance building called an *insaka*, a traditional African village meeting place. Children, teens, and adults gather here for unstructured social interaction and community building within a traditional African environment. Adult volunteers reading to the children is a core service of Lubuto libraries, and children often read aloud together, promoting increased literacy while building important social bonds.

Community members of all ages go to Lubuto libraries to attend a wealth of social and entertainment programs. In one ongoing program, Lawrence Mukuka, a sociologist and motivational speaker, talks with youth about self-worth, setting life goals, and other methods for increasing self-motivation and raising self-esteem. Other established or planned programs include storytelling, plays, visual art programs, and music programs. Lubuto views these programs as an extension of the book collections and read-aloud programs, and as crucial to promoting the healthy development of Lubuto youth. As Meyers explains, "The arts programming is really central to what we're doing."<sup>19</sup>

Lubuto also plans to offer informational programs of interest to local communities, such as programs about HIV/AIDS prevention. Other future programs will focus on local culture, including programs featuring local traditional dances, displays of traditional African arts, and other traditional cultural elements. Cultural preservation will be a main goal of Lubuto's future programming. For example, when community elders tell stories in Lubuto libraries, children and teens will be encouraged to transcribe them in order to connect with their oral traditions and to preserve local cultures.<sup>20</sup>

Lubuto and the Zambia Library Association have also recently announced the creation of the Zambia Board on Books for Young People, which will work to publish bilingual children's books based on traditional Zambian stories.<sup>21</sup> Many of these stories once existed in print but are no longer available.

## Lubuto Libraries as Beneficial Physical Environments

The library as beneficial physical environment refers to youth seeking libraries as positive atmospheres, as opposed to using libraries to seek information, social interaction, or entertainment. Types of use falling under this category for U.S. teens include seeking physical refuge, volunteering in libraries as a form of community service, and working at libraries as a form of financial support.<sup>22</sup>

Lubuto libraries also play this third role in the lives of impoverished and otherwise disadvantaged African youth. Lubuto's organizational goals specify that its libraries "provide a safe haven" for vulnerable children and teens.<sup>23</sup> This is especially important for the countless African youth who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. The World Health Organization's statistics show that each year, 840 of every 100,000 Zambian citizens die of AIDS.<sup>24</sup> In the United States, just five out of every 100,000 citizens die of AIDS each year, making the Zambian AIDS death rate a stunning *168 times higher* than that of the United States. As a result of this high rate of deaths due to HIV/AIDS, many Zambian youth have been left homeless in recent years. Lubuto libraries provide a secure environment where homeless children and teens can keep off of the streets during the day:

Lubuto Libraries don't give street kids all that they need. But they are special places, out of the elements and safe. The Lubuto Library Project partners with shelters, drop-in centers, and other community centers serving children in need.<sup>25</sup>

Lubuto libraries also serve as places for community members to volunteer their time as community service. U.S. and Zambian adults and youth of all ages perform a number of volunteer roles within the organization, helping to improve the broader Lubuto communities and helping volunteers to feel pride in their community contributions. Moreover, Lubuto libraries will also serve as a source for financial support for their staffs, with plans to develop a cadre of Lubuto librarians under discussion with Zambia's Ministry of Education.

## Conclusion

Based on this analysis of Lubuto, it seems that the concept and function of public libraries are largely universal, providing information access, social and entertainment spaces, and beneficial physical environments. Just as U.S. public libraries are much more than just information providers, Lubuto libraries are much more than just book providers. They provide educational opportunities for vulnerable youth, and serve as *community centers for the wider local population*. They also provide a means for artistic expression and other forms of self-expression for severely disadvantaged youth. ■

*Author's note: Librarians and others wishing to help the Lubuto Library Project can visit the Lubuto website ([www.Lubuto.org](http://www.Lubuto.org)) to find out how to donate time, supplies, or funds. Books, bookends, and book trucks are especially needed. Lubuto is also looking for schools, libraries, and Friends groups to organize book and funding drives, and for volunteer groups to process, classify, and prepare books to be sent to Africa. To date, U.S. high school students have collected more than 6,500 books for Lubuto libraries through student-run book drives. Librarians and teachers interested in involving their students can request a copy of Kids Just like You, a ten-minute informational film aimed at middle school and high school students. Book donation guidelines and other handout materials are also available. Visit [www.Lubuto.org](http://www.Lubuto.org) for more information.*

## References

1. World Bank, "GNI per capita 2006, Atlas method and PPP." <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GNIPC.pdf> (accessed Feb. 14, 2008).
2. Jane Meyers, personal interview with the author, Jan. 14, 2008.
3. ———, personal interview with the author, Nov. 20, 2007.
4. Esphry Slobodkina, *Caps for Sale: A Tale of a Peddler, Some Monkeys, and Their Monkey Business* (New York: William R. Scott Inc., 1940).
5. Masuzyo Chakwe, "KK Bemoans Lack of Reading Culture," *Saturday Post* (of Zambia) (Sept. 22, 2007): 1A.
6. Meyers, 2008.
7. Meyers, 2007.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Meyers, 2008.
11. Denise E. Agosto, "Why Do Teens Use Libraries? Results of a Public Library Use Survey," *Public Libraries* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 55–62.
12. Meyers, 2007.
13. Agosto, "Why Do Teens Use Libraries?" 59.
14. Meyers, 2008.
15. Elinor Sisulu, as quoted in "How the World Sees Us," *American Libraries* 38, no. 9 (Oct. 2007): 50.
16. Meyers, 2007.
17. ———, 2008.
18. Agosto, "Why Do Teens Use Libraries?" 59.
19. Meyers, 2008.
20. ———, 2007.
21. "Lubuto Library Project Newsletter, No. 6," (Sept./Oct. 2007), [www.lubuto.org/Lubuto\\_Library\\_Project\\_Newsletter\\_6\\_Special\\_Edition.htm](http://www.lubuto.org/Lubuto_Library_Project_Newsletter_6_Special_Edition.htm) (accessed Apr. 28, 2008).
22. Agosto, "Why Do Teens Use Libraries?" 60.
23. Meyers, 2007.
24. World Health Organization, WHOSIS (World Health Organization Statistical Information System), [www.who.int/whosis/en](http://www.who.int/whosis/en) (accessed Feb. 4, 2008).
25. Lubuto Library Project, "Out of the Elements, Safe, and Learning about the World," [www.lubuto.org/Lubuto\\_children\\_in\\_need.html](http://www.lubuto.org/Lubuto_children_in_need.html) (accessed Feb. 21, 2008).