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### Why African Children Need Libraries.

*African children don't need libraries; they need lunch!* - Prominent International Aid Advocate

African children, like children from any other continent, need libraries. They need libraries for the same reasons that children in Europe or Asia need libraries; as a place for learning, discovery and fun. Certainly, many African children live in vulnerable circumstances where meals are hard to come by. But this paper makes the argument that the intellectual life of the African child is just as important as her physical wellbeing. The international community has committed itself to upholding children's rights without consideration of the ethnicity of the child. African children have a right to information, care and education. They have the right to an identity; they also have the right to expression of culture. While other institutions, both local and international, cater to a number of other children's rights, libraries are well positioned to promote these rights. It should be noted that libraries already exist in many African countries and all they need is support to better serve their youngest and most numerous users. What follows is a discussion of what children's rights libraries are best placed to promote.

#### **The Right to Education**

The vast majority of African countries have been peaceful for more than twenty years. In these countries, tremendous strides have been made in increasing the number of children enrolled in primary school. While a sizable number of children remain out of school, enrollment rates have been increasing at a steady pace. Children often encounter large classrooms and short school days, making learning difficult. Moreover, research tells us that children only become truly literate by freely reading outside the classroom. Libraries are the most cost effective way of making a variety of interesting books available to children. In addition to traditional literacy, libraries can provide a space for the development of media literacy. In Africa, one organization providing a space for both the development of digital literacy and traditional literacy skills is the Lubuto Library Partners. Lubuto Library Partners currently works in Zambia. A sustainable library is built and stocked with an opening day collection of 4,000 books. Local materials are added to the collection. Additionally, computers are made available for staff to transfer media literacy skills. Programming, done in partnership with local people, brings the entire collection to life. Most importantly, children can realize their right to education by reading from a balanced collection – whether they go to school or not.

African children also need libraries to deepen their in-school learning, providing them with much needed information literacy skills. In each of the public libraries supported by the Carnegie Corporation in South Africa, where 90 percent of schools do not have a library, hundreds of high school students line up after

school or on weekends to get a quiet space to study or to have access to the internet, play games or do informational and recreational reading. Trained librarians are on hand to offer readers advisory, library instruction and reference services. The huge turnout at these libraries shows that African children have curiosity to learn and will take the opportunity when it is given to them.

### **The Rights to Life and Health**

All children have the right to life. There are two ways that African libraries can promote this right. The first is by enabling socialization into language and culture by being a space that fosters early literacy development. Researchers such as Irwin et al. have identified emergent literacy skills that can be intentionally developed during library storytimes. Children's librarians working with picture books can effectively develop such skills as phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge. In the African context, libraries are a space where traditional oral story telling can be preserved and disseminated such as is the case in Malawi's public libraries. Language is a key skill we develop in life in order for us to navigate the world. African libraries can both preserve indigenous languages and promote national languages. In societies where the home language is often not the national language, such as Africa, the need for libraries to provide opportunities for language development in the second language is even greater. Studies have shown that literacy is a matter of life and death, where mothers who are literate tend to have children who live longer. These mothers are able to access health information for

their children, often written in the second language. Moreover, children and teenagers are at risk of a variety of health challenges. Libraries can provide health information in an accessible format to children, ensuring that youth are informed about diseases such as HIV/AIDS and how to protect themselves and others.

### **The Rights to Identity, Culture and Play**

Social isolation makes children feel unvalued and cut adrift. This is manifested as antisocial behavior during teenage years. In many communities in Africa, a break down in family structures occurred because of mass migration of fathers to find work in cities. Generations later, HIV/AIDS would deal a terrible blow to many countries, decimating an entire generation. For example, in Zambia today, 14.9% of Zambian children below the age of 18 have lost one or both parents. This has left many children in need of social inclusion. Libraries are a place where positive role models can impart a sense of belonging in the children by transferring values of a society and creating a space for children to express their emotions, find hope and gain friendship. Again, the Lubuto Library Partners in Zambia is exemplary in this respect. It's mentoring programming, developed with local expertise, inculcates traditional values such as love and persistence using both modern and traditional stories and trained mentors.

We all need play and children need it more than adults. It is in play that children discover themselves and learn how to associate with others. Libraries

provide a space where children can derive entertainment from reading stories, sharing poems or performing drama. Libraries can also provide an outlet for artistic expression, such as the case is in Lubuto's arts programs in Zambia. In Lubuto Library Partner's arts programs, local artists volunteer their time to teach artistic skills to children in an activities room. Children, who have few other outlets for artistic expression develop practical skills and use the form as a way to tell their own stories, channeling anger or stress away from the self or others and into their work. Some youth have gone on to take up painting as a career, thus finding a niche in a very small and competitive job market.

### **The Right to Freedom of Expression**

Libraries in Africa can also be places where freedom of expression is upheld, nurturing a democratic society. The American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights upholds intellectual freedom as a tenet of librarianship. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of the child to freedom of expression, adding that "this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice." All but one African country have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and are, thus, held up to this standard. African libraries can provide an open environment for children to learn about far away places and their cultures while also gaining a deep understanding of their own traditions. While democracy continues to develop in

Africa, libraries where children are served can become a nexus for the growth of critical thought among future citizens. Debates and discussions will naturally happen when children are valued and given a safe space and high quality resources.

*Concluding Remarks:*

As the world becomes more interconnected, we cannot afford to ignore the rights of one part of the global community. Children have rights, regardless of where they live. The argument that African children have the right to health or protection from participating in armed conflict but not the rights to education, identity, culture, play and freedom of expression is flawed. Many organizations are doing work to promote some rights of children and it is up to libraries in Africa, with support from international organizations, to uphold those rights that librarians are best placed to foster. A rights approach to why African children need libraries humanizes the African child, giving her agency and making her a participant in development rather than a passive receiver of charity.

African libraries continue to struggle to serve young people due to lack of investment in the training of children's librarians and in publishing for children. Another unfortunate trend has been that well meaning westerners donate books to African children without consideration of their needs. American librarians can partner with African librarians in identifying what sorts of donations are needed. Additionally, the American public can avoid what Nigerian author Chimamanda

Ngozi Adichie calls the danger of a single story by seeking to educate themselves on the complexities of African societies. Reading novels such as Adichie's or sharing picture books like *Galimoto*, or watching documentaries from the continent, will reveal that Africa is not just about conflict, gender based violence and famine. African people have dreams, aspirations, needs beyond food and water. Finally, the American who cares about Africa and wishes to help can donate to innovative projects like the Lubuto Library Partners or Osu Children's Library Fund, thereby contributing to the complete flourishing of Africa's children.

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