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April 2019

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Glory Onoyeyan

Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, gloryonoye@yahoo.com

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**Provision of Library and Information Service
to the Visually Impaired
in Ogun State, Nigeria**

By

ONOEYAN, Glory O
Law Library
Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Nigeria
gloryonoye@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper reviewed literature to determine the information and library needs of the visually impaired and the kind of materials they utilize to satisfy their information needs. The paper also reviewed literature to determine the provision of special services by libraries for the visually impaired and the adequacy of library and information services provided. The review found that reading interests of persons with visual disabilities in Nigeria are varied just like those of sighted individuals. They receive information in alternative formats such as Braille, talking book/audio recording and large print. However, library materials are usually not available in quantities desirable for the visually impaired and there is an acute shortage of reading materials in alternative formats in Nigerian schools. Also, only a few institutions provide information services to the visually impaired in Nigeria. It was also found that the visually impaired prefer electronic materials and that adaptive technology facilitates their interaction with information.

It is therefore recommended that there should be establishment of more information institutions that provide visually impaired persons with information resources. Library authorities should provide clear policy statements and plans for the provision of services to the visually impaired, train staff in basic visual awareness, collaborate with other agencies for appropriate service delivery to visually impaired, acquire adaptive technology and educate visually impaired persons on information literacy skills.

Keywords: Library services, Visually impaired, Assistive technology, Ogun State

INTRODUCTION

Access to information is considered a human right. Libraries being centers of information dissemination and the nerve centers of every educational institution have the responsibility for providing a platform for equal share of information services in diversified formats to varied clientele. Libraries have a moral responsibility to make information available to all categories of users regardless of their age, gender, race, political affiliation or disability

As a special group, persons with visual impairments need special consideration in the society. It is very important that they gain access to information in a format that can be used by them. Ensuring equal access to information for all is indispensable to the establishment of the information society. Hence, libraries have moral role to play in achieving this by ensuring that the visually impaired gets the same reading opportunities and access to information as the sighted.

New technologies have opened up new opportunities for reading so much so that the visually impaired can readily access computer programs, internet and digital resources using Braille displays, screen magnifying monitors, screen magnification, scanning software with OCR, screen readers, speech synthesis and so on. These electronic technologies known as Assistive or Adaptive technology, are being helpful for the visually impaired to access needed information independently. Traditionally, the reading materials for the virtually impaired were the Braille books, talking books and large print materials. These new technological services are beginning to be supplied in public and academic libraries, not only in the visual specialized libraries (Kharamin & Siamian, 2011).

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To determine the information needs of the visually impaired in Nigeria.
- ii. To find out the kind of materials visually impaired use to satisfy their information needs.
- iii. To find out whether libraries provide special services to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

- iv. To identify the adequacy of the library and information services provided for the visually impaired in Nigeria.
- v. To find out the challenges in providing information services to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

Visual Impairment

Friend (2009) refers to the visually impaired as people who are partially-sighted or completely blind. Adetoro (2012) citing Abosi and Ozoji, (1985); Mba, (1995) divided visually impaired to three categories; the blind, partially sighted and low visioned. Ibenne (2012) citing Atinmo (2000) refers to visually impaired persons as persons who cannot use regular size print materials for purposes of reading. Obichere (2011) is of the persuasion that visually impaired persons may be categorized as those that are certified with low vision, astigmatism and those that are partially sighted.

From the various definitions, the visually impaired may in the least be described as persons who cannot read standard print with remedial lenses. The World Health Organization (2018) recognizes three levels of visual capacity as normal vision, low vision and blindness.

Globally, it is estimated that approximately 1.3 billion people live with some form of vision impairment. With regards to distance vision, 188.5 million people have mild vision impairment, 217 million have moderate to severe vision impairment, and 36 million people are blind. With regards to near vision, 826 million people live with a near vision impairment.

The WHO 2018 estimated approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide suffer from visual impairment with 39 million with complete blindness. Ninety percent of visually impaired live in the lesser-developed countries.

Available statistics show that in Nigeria, over 1,000,000 adults are blind and another 3,000,000 are visually impaired, while 42 out of every 1000 adults aged 40 and above are blind (Okon, 2014).

Information Needs of the Visually Impaired

There is no human activity where information is not a factor. Whether for business, for education, for research, for development, information has to be acquired, organized, preserved,

and disseminated for use. The effectiveness and efficiency of optimum performance in all spheres of human endeavor depends on the availability of information at the right time, and in the right format.

Information need is the desire to locate and obtain information to meet a necessity. An understanding of information needs of users is fundamental to the provision of efficient information services to them. Lucky & Achebe (2013) aver that visually impaired persons have information needs like any other information user; and these needs are worthy of satisfying in their own right. Rayini (2017) also asserted to the position that visually impaired people have the same information needs as sighted people. People who are visually impaired need to be provided with a range of ways of meeting information needs as are available for people with normal sight. Adetoro (2010) believes that because persons with visual impairment have the same human composition as sighted people; their reading interest and information needs are likely to be similar. Hence, the visual impaired have the same library and information needs as everyone else except that they may require some adaptations.

Information services to persons with visual impairment require adaptations in order to satisfy their needs. Moore (2000) reports that in the case of visually impaired people, research has suggested that the key factors that affected the range and nature of needs were age; the degree of impairment; the elapsed time since the onset of visual impairment; ethnic origin and the incidence of other disabilities. Lucky & Achebe (2013) citing Shon (1999) points out that visually impaired persons exhibit a spectrum of special needs as a result of their sensory limitations. The range of such needs is manifested in the series of differences demonstrated by the person's abilities, attitudes, learning styles and motivation. Adetoro (2010) reports that persons with visual impairment need factual and recreational reading, educational materials,

encyclopedias, directories and other kinds of publication used by sighted people, but unlike the sighted, they need appropriate formats or auxiliary aids to help them access their reading interests. Šehić & Tanacković (2014) study of visually impaired undergraduate and postgraduate students in Croatia revealed that academic libraries used by the visually impaired students only sporadically respond to their needs. Hence, they rely most often on interpersonal sources and the Internet for information materials for academic purposes. The preferred format for this specific user group is not the Braille, but electronic documents. Therefore, assistive technologies play major role in their educational experiences.

It is important that in meeting the needs of the visually impaired persons, services should be provided that will be appropriate for the type of disability. Information needs studies will assist in determining resources and services that will meet users' needs aptly.

Role of Library in Provision of Information to the Visually Impaired

Wei, Lirong, Chunmin & Yuanyuan (2012) assert that as a special group, people with disabilities should be paid special attention because of their physical limitations, which affect their studying, their living and their information access. They insist that libraries being knowledge dissemination centers, should assume the responsibilities of knowledge services, providing a platform for equal share of public cultural services in various manners. Ibinne (2012) citing Ogba (2000) contends that library services to the visually handicapped and other handicapped persons is a very important aspect of information services. He argues that the visually handicapped have long been denied opportunity in library service which would have been of immense help in their everyday living.

In the present information society, where high exceptional regard is placed on information as a veritable resource ranking with air, water, food, and shelter, access to the right information at the right time is access to power to propel the direction of man's activities to development. The library is a key player in the provision of information to meet varied needs of society. Libraries as an educational agency is poised to ensure that knowledge is acquired and disseminated and to

ensure that equal access to information is enjoyed by all. Libraries must therefore ensure that visually impaired persons access the information resources that they need for their studies in the context of their disability.

Kharamin & Siamian (2011) citing Machell (1996) stated that the ideal library service is one where each individual, regardless of the degree of their visual impairment or other disabilities has access to the materials and information at the time they are required, in a format that can be used, in the quantities that are needed, and where the needs of the user are understood by the staff. Katz (1982) posits that there is need for a new kind of librarian or information manager who is able to secure, process, and make information available for a specialized audience; in this regard, the visually impaired.

Information and Library Services for the Visually Impaired

Relevant and reliable information adds value to the quality of life and ranks after air, water, food, and shelter as a basic human need (Kemp, 1973). Access to information is a human right that should not be ignored. Kharamin & Siamian (2011) is of the persuasion that this right has not been achieved in practice because the visually impaired are only exposed to less than 5% of what sighted persons have available to them. Obichere (2011) argues that visually impaired persons need all types of information just like normal people because they are an integral part of the society. They need information on politics, agriculture, health, commerce, culture, education etc. Adetoro (2012) argues that unlike sighted persons, the visually impaired receive information in alternative formats such as Braille, talking book/audio recording and large print. These materials provide the opportunity for visually impaired students to read and communicate like sighted students.

Šehić & Tanacković (2014) in their study found that students indicated that most often they obtain the materials needed for their studies over Internet and through their colleagues and teachers. In most cases, they visit the library only if they cannot find the materials in any other way since their academic libraries do not have adaptive technology; they almost never use them for studying purposes. Atinmo (2002) laments that materials are usually not available in quantities desirable for visually impaired students. Besides, Adetoro (2012) points out the

visually impaired students in Nigerian secondary schools depend on charities and philanthropists to provide them with information materials because most parents and families of these students are mostly poor and therefore cannot afford the facilities to help their education. Obichere (2011) posits that in view of the fact that visually impaired persons cannot obtain the required information through most of the conventional means used by normal people, it is necessary, that they should be provided with the information they need through specialized methods that are convenient for them, viz Braille, large print, talking books/audio books, radio reading service and the use of other audio facilities.

New technologies have opened up new opportunities for people with disabilities that were not available a few years back. Eskay & Chima (2013) report that libraries are also taking advantage of advances in ICTs to increase information access for the visually impaired. A broad range of ICTs otherwise called adaptive or assistive technologies are now available to provide access to information in electronic databases and on the internet, giving blind users equal opportunity as the sighted. Kharamin & Siamian (2011) assert that these services are beginning to be supplied in public and academic libraries. Eskay & Chima (2013) list some of the assistive technology to include

- (1) Screen magnifier- this is software that allows text or graphics on computer screen to be magnified up to sixteen times the original.
- (2) Screen reader: a software that reads out the content of a document to the reader.
- (3) Voice recognition software: this allows the user to input data into the computer by voice.

Kharamin & Siamian (2011) also point out that visually impaired persons can gain access to computer programs, internet and digital resources using Braille displays, screen magnifying monitors, screen magnification, scanning software with OCR, screen readers and speech synthesis and so on.

Another useful assistive technology for the visually impaired is the Closed Circuit Television (CCTV). This machine will magnify print from any source (e.g. books, papers, letters, and so on.) onto a TV screen. The user can adjust the size of the letters, ranging from just a little larger than normal to large enough to fill the screen. (California Department of Social Services, 2012).

Ibinne (2012) citing Iweha (2003) reports that service-provision to the visually impaired in libraries of the developed countries like Britain, America, Canada, Australia, Finland and

Netherlands are well established. The services rendered have been enhanced tremendously in formats of presentation. These countries have established national libraries for the blind and ensure that their information needs are adequately catered for. However, the situation is very different in Nigeria, a landscape view of available library service provision opportunities for the visually impaired reveals that it is very limited, with material providers working independently.

Challenges of Providing Information Services to the Visually Impaired

Literature highlights the poor efforts of libraries to provide visually impaired persons with information services. Bernardi (2004) found the common points in the review of literature about libraries for the blind and visually impaired people as follows:

- 1) Library services for blind and visually impaired people vary from country to country, but usually libraries for the blind have the central role in serving this type of readers.
- 2) Generally, they are developing services with low-status, low-budget and unprofessionalism.
- 3) In most countries, their services are not even a part of the local or national library system.
- 4) They have principal role in the production of accessible formats (Braille, audio, electronic texts, large print).
- 5) Few of them are well positioned to take advantage of new developments in digital library services.

Most libraries for the blind provide access to less than 5% of the materials published in their country. Adetoro (2012) reports that materials are usually not available in quantities desirable for the visually impaired students, so that visually impaired students depend on charities and philanthropists to provide them with information materials.

Visually impaired students make private and individual arrangements for study materials. According to Atinmo (2002) there is an acute shortage of reading materials in alternative formats in Nigerian schools.

Eskay & Chima (2013) highlighted the major challenges in providing information services for the visually impaired in Nigeria as

1. Lack of reliable statistical data for the number, age, sex, and educational level of the visually impaired. This makes it difficult to draw up a programme based on specific targets.
2. Limited financial and human resources in this aspect of library services.

3. Lack of production and distribution facilities for reading materials.
4. Lack of properly trained library personnel. Library staffs are therefore often unable to handle the need of the visually impaired. Library personnel also lacked skills to use adaptive technology
5. Architectural barriers. Most of the libraries (especially university libraries) are structured in ways that inconvenient for use by visually impaired.
6. Inadequacy of appropriate reading materials.

Bodaghi, Awang-Ngah & Abdulla (2014) argue that available research has shown that one of the difficulties in providing an inclusive environment is attributable to lack of librarians' awareness of the users with disabilities.

Current Situation in Provision of Library and Information Services to the Visually Impaired in Nigeria

Ajobiewe (2006) highlighted the current library service providers to the visually impaired as follows:

1. Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo.
2. Imo State Library Board
3. Abia State Library board Services
4. Oyo State Library Board Services
5. Ogun State Library Services

Other bodies and Non-Governmental Organisations that provide information services for the visually impaired in Nigeria include the following:

1. **Inlaks Library:** The Inlaks Library at the Nigeria Society for the Blind, Vocational Training Centre, Oshodi Lagos caters mainly for blind adults and secondary school students. This centre provide reading and information materials in appropriate formats i.e Braille, large print books and talking books for visually handicapped persons.
2. **Nigerwives Braille Production Centre:** Nigerwives is an association of foreign women married to Nigerian men. The association produces Braille textbooks by computer.
3. **Gindiri Materials Centre for the Visually Handicapped (GMCVH):** The centre produces Barille books in English and Hausa at all educational levels from basic literacy to University level.

4. The AngloNigerian Welfare Association for the Blind (ANWAB), Lagos: The association uses computer to produce books in Braille, they have recorded over 200 titles in different subject areas for adults, children and undergraduate students from the University of Lagos.
5. Hope for the Blind, Zaria: This organization produces reading materials for blind students. It also operates a recording studio and has a number of books on tape.

According to Atinmo (2007), a number of institutions provide information services to the visually impaired in Nigeria. At the tertiary level, the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, provides information materials in alternative formats for tertiary level students, but this is grossly limited. At the universities of Ibadan and Jos, Bayero, Calabar, and Uyo, the library makes virtually no provision for the handicapped students. Out of the thirty-six state libraries in Nigeria, only three—Oyo, Imo, and Abia—offer library services to blind and visually impaired students in secondary schools. These state libraries do not produce books; they receive Braille books from donors and make them available in their libraries. The Association of Libraries for the Visually Impaired (ALVI), a section of the Nigerian Library Association is presently striving to become a national co-ordinating centre for the provision of library services to visually impaired persons in Nigeria.

In Ogun State, apart from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) which assisted the Educational Trust Fund (ETF) to set up community resource centres for the blind and visually impaired in Abeokuta, and the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development which coordinates the A & O Institute for the Blind in Ijebu-Igbo, Ogun state as one of its rehabilitation centres, there are no visible institutes in Ogun State that cater for the information needs of the visually impaired, hence, Adetoro (2004) reports that library services have not had significant impact on the visually impaired population, hence the clamour for adequate and sustainable information services.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Persons with visual impairment are constrained from accessing very useful information, especially those available in print. When a visually impaired person is exposed to library and information sources of a well managed library with trained library personnel, they would benefit

immensely, lead normal lives, be self-supporting and reach their full potentials. Therefore, there is need for the provision of highly trained professionals, essential tools, equipment and software in the libraries for the use of persons with visual impairments.

The explosion of new information communication technology has brought about the conversion of most information available in print to speech, through voice activation device, print character have also been converted to Braille characters, which can be read. However, these information resources are usually not available To the visually impaired in Nigeria. It is therefore recommended that;

1. Library authorities should provide clear policy statements and plans for the provision of services to visually impaired people.
2. A training strategy for the library service should include targets for the training of all staff in basic visual awareness for effective delivery of service to visually impaired users.
3. The government and voluntary organizations should assist in making ICT equipments available to persons with visual impairment at subsidized rates.
4. Collaboration should be explored by libraries to improve services to users with both governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations.
5. Acquisition of adaptive technology and computers with speech unit, speech synthesizer/reader software and scanner should be made by the academic/university libraries.
6. Librarians should be given education/training of use of adaptive technology and dynamics of working with people with special needs.
7. Libraries can offer the service of scanning and adaptation of library materials for visually impaired students.
8. libraries should revise their policies and introduce special provisions for students with special needs such as extended check out periods and borrowing of non-circulating materials
9. Libraries should educate visually impaired on information literacy skills as they do the sighted.

10. More information institutions should provide visually impaired persons with information resources.

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