



## Library services for impaired users in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Librarians are expected to ensure the availability of information to all categories of people without any form of hindrance that may be based on gender, race or any type of impairment. This paper examines library services as they are connected to impaired users. An impaired user here means an individual that has decreased strength or quality. This category of people could be the visually, hearing, speech impaired or any other form of impairment. The ability to be able to render services to individuals that are visually impaired, physically impaired, deaf and dumb through assistive technologies such as Screen reader, Braille translation software, Braille writing equipment, Closed-circuit television (CCTV), Wheel chair, large print, talking/audio books and Braille embosser and scanners has been faced with a number of challenges. It is recommended that libraries, special education teachers, university authorities and stakeholders should endeavour to provide adequate facilities for impaired users.

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### Introduction

In many developing countries all over the world, services being rendered to the impaired users are limited due to inadequate fund and provision of adequate facilities. The library and all parts such as; restrooms, stairs, elevators and special rooms should be accessible for persons with different kinds of impairment. A person in a wheelchair should be able to reach all departments, a visually impaired person should be able to walk with a cane or a guide dog and find his or her way without bumping into obstacles. The deaf should be able to communicate with library staff. A person with an intellectual impairment should be able to easily find books and other materials. A person with dyslexia should be able to find his or her way around. This paper examines some library services that can be suitable for impaired users.

### Library and Information Services for Impaired Users in Nigerian Situation

Libraries play an important role as vehicles of formal and informal education. Specifically, libraries are established to support individual's drive for self-development and lifelong learning. They help to preserve people's right to information by providing access to a collection that is wide enough to accommodate the interests of their heterogeneous users. Unfortunately, library and information services to the impaired users are almost non-existent in developing countries (Anaba, n.d.). Rowland (2008) noted that of all the countries in Africa, only South Africa has a well-developed, functional library for the visually impaired despite the fact that there are nearly 7 million blind people on the continent. The state or public libraries in Nigeria are too underfunded to be relevant to the visually impaired who are subsequently left out of whatever form of services available in these libraries. Atinmo (2007) observed that only three out of the 36 state libraries in the federation have library and information services to the blind.

Atinmo, (2007) stated that in Nigeria, library and information services to the visually impaired are largely

undertaken by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Government intervention on the other hand is very minimal and focuses more on establishment of special education schools where teachers of physically handicapped children are trained rather than in provision of library materials for the visually impaired (Atinmo, 2007). The NGOs are highly committed to the education and empowerment of the impaired students. They produce textbooks in Braille and sell them to blind secondary school students at cost price of the printed copies. In spite of their efforts, the NGOs are unable to meet the growing demand for Braille books due to inadequate funding, most of them depend on donations and Braille production is cost intensive, requiring about three times the cost of conventional print.

Atinmo's survey of Braille reading facilities available in the special schools also revealed that the library and information needs of the students cannot be adequately met with the few facilities available there. In a study carried out on library and information services available to the visually impaired in academic libraries in Nigeria by Babalola and Haliso, (2011), revealed that none of the libraries surveyed has Braille book, talking books, talking newspaper and assistive technologies. The only materials that were available were audio books which according to the librarians were not acquired to serve the visually impaired. It was also revealed that most of the audio materials came with textbooks and encyclopaedia that the libraries acquired. In essence, the academic libraries lack most of the materials that can be accessed by impaired users. The reason for this was that the libraries have never had to face the challenge of serving blind students. Apparently, there is an urgent need to improve the current level of library and information services available to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

A study was carried out on library and information services available to the visually impaired in University of Nigeria, Nsukka by Eskay and Chima (2013).

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The study revealed that the library surveyed had no Braille books, talking books, talking newspapers and assistive technologies. The only materials that were available were audio books which, according to the librarians, were not acquired to serve the visually impaired. As a matter of fact, most of the audio materials came with textbooks and encyclopaedia that the libraries acquired. In essence, the library lacks most of the materials that can be accessed by visually impaired users. The reason for this was that the library has never had to face the challenge of serving blind students. Apparently, there is an urgent need to improve the current level of library and information services available to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

#### **Library and Information Services for Impaired users**

Friend (2009), defined visually impaired as a concept used to describe people who are partially-sighted or completely blind. According to World Health Organization (WHO) (2009) statistics, there are about 314 million visually impaired people globally, with 45 million totally blind, 87percent of the visually impaired live in developing countries and women and people above 50 years of age are at higher risk. Although visually impaired people cannot read the conventional print, they have the right to information and the right to read information in formats that are accessible to them. The onus is on librarians to make information available in alternative formats like audio, Braille or large prints that can be easily accessed by the visually impaired. Due to advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), information is now available in different formats that can be accessed through various media. Nevertheless, Friend (2009) asserted that less than 5% of the information materials available to sighted library users are accessible to the visually impaired. The impaired users tend to suffer social discrimination and cultural bias which leads to a negative impact. They are generally viewed as abnormal, physically challenged individuals and also excluded from public services in which library and information study provision is not left out (Rowland 2008).

Providing quality library services to people who cannot read standard print with corrective lenses or who cannot handle printed materials has endured many advances, twists and setbacks. Library services delivery for the impaired users is an ever-expanding phenomenon precipitated by both the innovative spirit of the community and the advances of technology. Libraries and librarians provide access to essential information that people need to participate in the emerging information society. Therefore, they have a moral obligation to make information available to all categories of users regardless of their gender, age, race, political affiliation or disability.

Libraries and information centres all over the world have developed specialized information services to meet the library and information needs of impaired users. Babalola and Haliso (2011) identified these to include:

- Braille is a system of reading and writing whereby raised dots are used to represent letters which are read by touch. Braille books are appropriate for users who have both visual and hearing impairment.
- Talking books are audio versions of books that could be recorded on cassettes, CD-ROM, DVD and on the internet as e-books. Talking books are preferred by the majority of the visually impaired.
- Talking newspapers are audio recordings of news articles in the dailies.

- Large printed materials; large prints books currently account for more than half of the total collection of alternative access stock. The two largest collections of large print books are held in Millington Central Library and in Bretforton. They are documents printed in large fonts for use by partially sighted users. Libraries are also taking advantage of advances in ICTs to increase information access for the visually impaired.

- Collection development for impaired users entails and ensures that the collection matches the needs of the library user who might have trouble accessing the traditional stacks.

- Impaired service librarians will act as educators in schools to bring more awareness to users (Wright and Davie, 1990).

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. There are also provisions of inexpensive keyboard and mouse alternatives for those with mobility impairments. These innovative technologies include:

- Screen magnifier software allows text or graphics on computer screen to be magnified up to sixteen times the original.

- Screen reader software reads out the content of a document to the reader for those who are severely visually impaired, screen readers with speech synthesizers can be provided which will allow users to navigate through the browser using sound and home key makers via the keyboard. A large part of the new software and equipment that can be acquired will require impaired service staff to be trained in order to aid in educating the user.

- Voice recognition software allows the user to input data into the computer by voice.

- Adequate numbers of well-trained impaired service staff could be used as aid in educating the impaired users.

Atinmo (2000) observed that only three out of the 36 state libraries in the Federation have library and information services to the blind. In Nigeria, library and information services to the impaired are largely undertaken by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Government intervention, on the other hand, is very minimal and focuses more on establishment of special education schools where teachers of physically handicapped children are trained but there is no provision for library materials for the impaired (Atinmo 2000). The NGOs are highly committed to the education and empowerment of the visually impaired students. They produce textbooks in Braille and sell them to blind secondary school students at cost price of the printed copies.

#### **Challenges Militating against Library Services for all Categories of Impaired Users.**

1. Inadequate trained library personnel to cater for the need of impaired users. Many of the services depend on having competent staffs, achieving proper staff development and skills is a challenge (Corrall & Brewerton, 1999).

2. Lack of reliable and authentic figures for the number, age, sex, and educational level of the impaired users to be able to cater for their needs.

3. Inadequate fund and human resources in library services.

4. Lack of production and distribution facilities for reading materials.

5. Architectural or building barriers, such as unequal access to the library with other counterparts in terms of facilities and services rendered.

6. Inadequate reading materials in the right format for impaired users.

### Strategies towards obtaining Library Services for Impaired users

The followings are the strategies according to Bryson (2006)

1. Ensuring the needs of the public, different formats and types of access to materials for different categories of impaired users are met.
2. Updating the talking/audio books collection to a digital format to ensure accessibility through technological compatibility in the 21st century
3. Creating a community care library all over the states in Nigeria, through the sharing of equipment and resources throughout the country to provide access to all areas.

### Way forward to Improving Library Services for Impaired Users in Nigeria

Babalola and Haliso (2011) asserted that the challenge of providing equitable library and information services to the impaired users is one that can only be tackled with the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders. Government, State and academic libraries, NGOs and other agencies serving impaired people must work together on the following strategies to improve library and information services for the impaired users. These strategies are:

1. Provision of adequate funding for state and local libraries
2. Periodical review of policies guiding the implementation of funding for the libraries
3. Networking
4. Training and retraining of librarians, that is staff development in order to improve their skills, competencies and services rendered. Impaired service librarians should undergo sensitivity development that does not promote isolation of the disabled community.
5. Production of talking books
6. Investment in assistive technology for instance, Users on wheelchairs need tables set at a different height in order to access computer stations effectively. Computer monitors should be adjustable to different heights to enable ease.
7. The impaired service should follow a resource-based view of human resources management will be followed in order to ensure that staff is well equipped with skills to provide the services needed when dealing with accessibility issues. In accordance with Armstrong's (2012) definition of resource-based view of strategic human resource management, the impaired service department subscribes to the philosophy that investing in the intellectual capital of the firm's key to success. That is a participative management style should be implemented as staff will be more aware of the skills set needed to deal with the community, patrons and other less-trained staff members.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Impaired individuals have special needs because they are special people. However, they are not to be separated, excluded from others and must not be treated differently either. They also have varieties of needs just as other individuals that are not impaired. History of the library and information services delivery for blind and physically challenged has revealed that in developed countries, it has been a normal practice to integrate all people together. But it appears the education system in the developing countries including Nigeria has neither fully embraced nor adopted the technology associated with this special library service. It is necessary for the library profession in Nigeria to give attention to these individuals, make provisions for their needs and

welcome them into the regular library community. The study recommends the followings;

1. Those in the practice of Special Education and stake holders should urgently consider impaired users in the library and information service delivery which will create encouraging environment to perform competitively with their counterparts.
2. Adequate number of librarians should be trained in other to be able to render ideal services to the impaired users.
3. Adequate fund should be provided by Federal Government for efficient and effective procurement, installation and maintenance of library services.
4. There should be provision of updated equipment to meet with different physical and learning disabilities through adaptive technology.
5. Updating the current collections for impaired users should be undertaken.

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