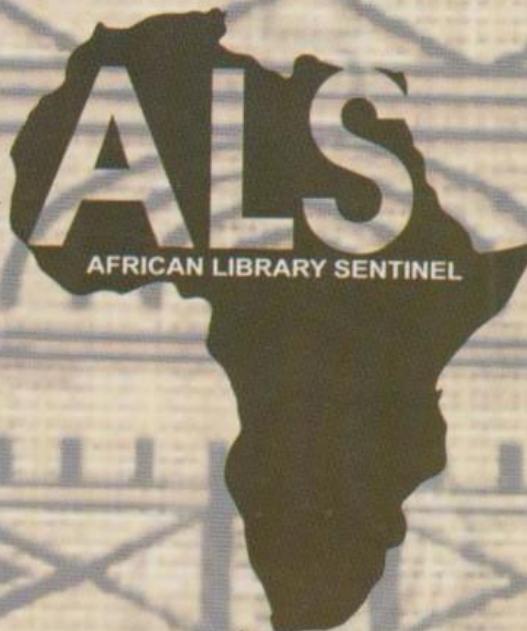


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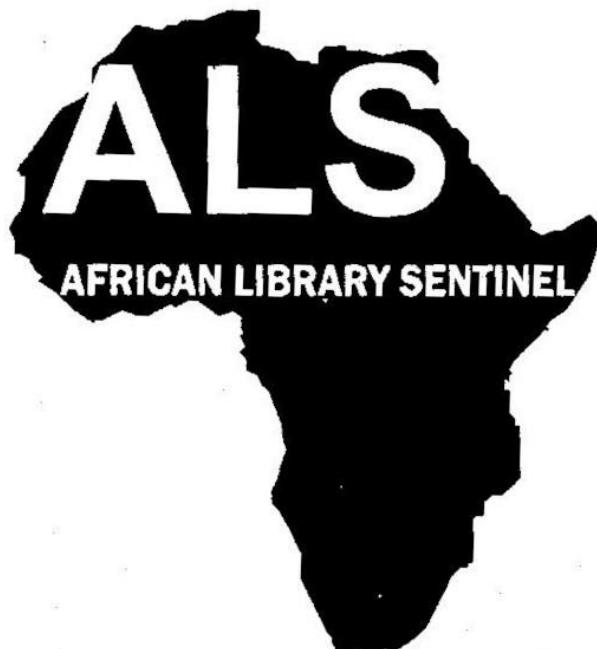


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LIBRARIES FOR ALL: ADVANCING LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THE DISADVANTAGED IN THE GLOBAL INFORMATION AGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper sought to examine how libraries in Nigeria could include the excluded in the provision of library services that will accommodate the disadvantaged persons in this global information age. The plight of the disadvantaged in the access and utilization of library and information services in this is discussed. It also highlights the strategies for advancing the information needs of disadvantaged persons in Nigeria and how a librarian can harness these resources available to provide equitable library services that will accommodate them. Factors militating against the provision of library services to the disadvantaged were enumerated and the recommendations included among other things that library management and stakeholders should provide ICT facilities to enable the disadvantaged, access to appropriate information resources and services to facilitate their inclusiveness in our society.

INTRODUCTION

The library may be seen as a necessary resource for each individual and group. It may also be termed a multipurpose service meeting different needs in different ways or academic institutions critical to the development of socio-economic well being of any nation. They acquire, process and disseminate information in a variety of formats to every citizen in the community where they are

located regardless of race, gender, age, disability, etc. Libraries also employ all kinds of services to ensure that information gets to the generality of the populace at the most convenient time and place. This is to say that libraries do not exist as an end in themselves but their services should be judged not by what they are but by what they do. There is therefore a public need for open and democratic access to the world of information, whether in written, spoken or electronic formats.

The importance of modern library services in an information age has been acknowledged globally. It is obviously impossible for any individual or nation to participate in the global conversation without having adequate information. As such, access to information is vital if an individual is to function effectively in this present day information age. Onifade and Sowole (2009) affirmed that valuable information to individuals determine to a very large extent their success and future development.

Anaechobi and Ukpoma (2011) asserted that technological advancements, especially from the middle of the twentieth century have brought the current era of this information age. Information age is characterized by fast changing global environment in which information is a vital resource for decision making at all levels of human activities. The success or failure of individual activities today depends heavily on the handling of information at all these areas which include social, political and economic development. This ultimately calls for the timely provision and use of accurate and reliable information. It is the responsibility of the library to provide and meet information needs of the various members or groups in the community including the disadvantaged group.

Libraries play a critical role in the lives of people with disabilities by facilitating their full participation in the society. This therefore means that libraries should use strategies based on the principle of "universal design" to ensure that library policies, resources and services meet the needs of all categories of people. It is also imperative for libraries to support the users (normal or disadvantaged) with information resources and services available which are capable of supporting all levels of human activities for development because the disadvantaged users will require assistance while in the library but the normal users may require very little. Therefore, this paper attempts to look at the advancement of library services to the disadvantaged in this global information age, their accessibility to the library and problems they encounter in their quest for library resources and services.

Who are the Disadvantaged in this Global Information Age?

There is no single definition appropriate to all people with disabilities. Definitions are only useful in that they indicate how different disabilities affect the use of facilities in libraries. Disability may be seen as any restriction or lack of ability

to perform any activity in the manner within the range considered normal for a normal human being. This implies that a disabled person is he that is unable to perform some or all the tasks of daily life or a medically diagnosed condition that makes it difficult to engage in the activities of daily life. Some disabilities come with birth while others develop them later in life. There are however, many types of challenges or disabilities; both physical and mental, and they vary greatly in causes, degrees and treatments. Common disabilities include blindness, deafness, deformity, and loss of limbs, mental illness, and mental retardation, muscular, nervous and sensory disorders. Disability may be used generally to refer to persons with physical, sensory or mental impairment that can make performing everyday task more difficult.

This therefore causes restricted capability of persons with disabilities to perform particular activities, or inability to perform some or all of the tasks of daily life (Punong-ong 1999). The American Library Association (1997) recognizes that people with disabilities are a large and neglected minority in the community and are severally underrepresented in the library operation. Disabilities cause many personal challenges. In addition, many people with disabilities face economic inequality, illiteracy, cultural isolation and discrimination in education, employment and the broad range of societal activities.

Nigeria and the Disadvantaged

Lawal -Solarin, (2012) quoting the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are approximately 19 million disabled people in Nigeria. Furthermore, Yeo (2005) affirms that disabled people constitute one of the poorest, socially excluded and marginalized groups within the Nigerian society. On 30th March 2007, the government of Nigeria signed the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities yet, no disability discrimination legislation has been enacted within Nigeria despite the fact that two bills have been introduced into the national assembly (Lawal-Solarin 2010). Also the common new view, held by policy makers and the public at large is that disabled people and disabilities are charity and welfare mates and not human rights (DFID 2008). Findings by Okoli (2010) also corroborated this as he revealed that disabled people in Nigeria are living in an environment that is hostile to their yearnings and aspirations. This can also be seen in the national policy on education law on special education (Section 8) which does not adequately accommodate the provision of library services to disadvantaged students (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004). The exclusion is also evident in the construction of libraries without putting into consideration the disadvantaged people, especially the lame and visually impaired.

Information Needs of the Disadvantaged in Nigeria

The information needs of individuals vary because of their different circumstances. On the issues of coping with disabilities and relevance of information to the disabled, Adesina (2003) itemised the under listed as the information needs of the disabled.

- i. Information for educational development which is of paramount importance. As a student, additional information would be needed to build on what was taught in the classroom.
- ii. Information for social and personal development i.e. information needed on assistance devices that could aid mobility.
- iii. Information for recreational purpose which may include materials for light reading.

Other information needs of the disadvantaged in Nigeria may include:

1. (a) Braille books for the blind. This is more feasible in a developing country like Nigeria.
(b) Talking books which are recorded information on audio-tapes, computer diskette or CD-ROM. This is an alternative means of providing information on literature to the blind especially the elderly in developed countries who find it difficult to learn because of age or sensitivity to the finger tips in the use of Braille.
(c) Tactile materials: these are real objects, specimen, tactile picture, books, toys and games. With this, the blind can learn texture, size and spatial relationship by feeling the shape, surface and size of an object. This may be termed perception by touch.
(d) Computers with versa Braille system which translates what is on a computer screen into Braille characters. Examples include;

-Optacon
-The kurzweil reading machine which reads magazines and printed materials
-The reading edge scanner which can convert printed text into speech
-Braille printers which allows the blind to make Braille copies of computer generated materials

2. For the deaf, the disability may be categorized as follows:
-Pre Lingual: deafness before language acquisition
-Post Lingual: deafness after language acquisition
-Pre Literate: deafness before speaking and writing
-Post Literate: deafness after speaking and writing

Materials could be presented as follows depending on the category of deafness and include; Text Telephones (TTS), Telecom Devices for the Deaf (TDD), Tele Typewriters (TTYS), interesting materials, low reading materials, easy to read and heavily illustrated books.

3. For the physically handicapped, we can have toys library for children, recreational electronic books, media centre voice recordings with accompanying booklets, television and audio tapes/ machines and audio-visual materials.

Strategies for Advancing the Information Needs of the Disadvantaged in Nigeria

There is need to eradicate inequalities and improve services and opportunities for people with disabilities by providing equitable access to library facilities and services especially in the use of modern technology. The library no matter its type has the primary function of providing its patrons with information needs for development and personal growth. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is the civil rights law affecting persons with disabilities in America. It was created to eliminate discrimination in many areas including access to private and public services. The same law affecting persons with disabilities should be enacted in Nigeria to protect the rights of the disabled. This is to say that libraries should include persons with disabilities as active participants in the planning, implementation and evaluation of services rendered, programme of activities and facilities maintenance.

Most disabled persons have varied intellectual potentials to become useful and successful members of the society. They as such have their individual needs and desires, reactions and differences. This invariably means that each of their capabilities, possibilities, needs and desires must be re-inforced by the library. Libraries can play a catalytic role in the lives of people with disabilities by facilitating their full participation in the society. Therefore, libraries should use strategies based on principles of universal design to ensure that library policies, resources and services meet the needs of all people (Mba, 1998)

Strategies for Advancing Library Services to the Disadvantaged in Nigeria

There are different types of library and Information services in Nigeria. They are as diverse as their aims and functions which are influenced by the information needs and circumstances of their users. School libraries, public libraries, academic libraries and special libraries are all supposed to provide library services to their disadvantaged clientele. Libraries are often in the unique position of being a community's sole source of impartial information. They have a responsibility to collect and provide information for the disabled clientele also, irrespective of the

extent of disability. Wright (1979) posited that all Library and Information Services available to other persons should be made available to the physically challenged individuals in a manner which does not stress the individual, information should also be in a format that they can use and one readily available to such individuals. He suggested that the construction of ramp for the handicapped to have access into a room or building or an isolated ramp attached to one side of it with special sign to indicate where the physically challenged should go through. Library services for the physically challenged must enable them have access to equipment and information resources that best suits a particular physical challenge.

Different types of disabilities require different types of specialized services such as Library and Information Services. Anjiode (2010) citing Pulman, categorized services to be provided by libraries for the physically challenged in general into four main areas.

- a. Physical access to buildings, services, counters, workstations, reading rooms and shelves where possible.
- b. Intellectual access to the content of information carriers, including the availability of alternative format materials, adequate workstation materials including Braille, large print, talking books/audio recording and digital files are part of the solutions.
- c. Training of library staff (members) in helping the physically disabled. All staff, regardless of where in the library they work should be sensitive to and have a basic knowledge of the different forms of impairment.
- d. Virtual access to library services for those not able to visit the actual building. People who are prevented from getting to a library because of disability should not be denied access to any of the library's services. The services offered should provide some quality of access to information about stock and the services offered in the actual library building, and the same opportunities for reserving or requesting books.

Similarly, to accommodate the information needs of the disadvantaged through specialized services, IFLA Standing Committee developed a check-list of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons (LSDP). This was designed as a practical tool for all types of libraries to assess existing levels of accessibility to buildings, services, materials and programs and to enhance accessibility when needed. Information from Denmark, Sweden, USA and Great Britain had been used in the process of writing the list. The Checklist therefore has three main parts; **Physical access, Media formats and Service and communication** (Nielsen and Irval, 2005). Other services may also include the following;

Individualised Library Services (ILS): Librarians can plan individually tailored

library services for each disadvantaged person who qualifies for special library services. An ILS determines the benchmarks, goals and objectives, the placement and the evaluation procedures for persons whose disabilities impede their educational progress.

Operation Zero Reject: The disadvantaged must never be rejected or refused an appropriate service in all libraries. A Free and Appropriate Library Service (FRALS) should be provided for every disadvantaged person regardless of extent of need.

Referral Services: Librarians may refer disadvantaged who do not seem to cope with the services offered them over a prolonged period of time. They can promptly be referred to hospitals, community health centres, school clinics and clinical psychologists who can diagnose their problems. There must be a follow up to such referral services.

Library Intervention Programmes: This involves providing access to resources and services in the library to cater for the needs of the disadvantaged. Such programmes include extension services which will involve reaching out to the disadvantaged in rural communities through mobile library services.

Also, Anjiode (2010) citing Maina and Library Association of Australia on the guidelines of library standards for people with disabilities stated that librarians will need to take into consideration the following points for effective Library and Information Services to the disadvantaged:

- 1 Library services for the blind must enable them to have access to equipment such as Braille printers, Braille embossers and tape duplications.
- 2 The library facility must be barrier free to wheel chairs and other mobility devices and ensure that all devices including door handles are designed for easy manipulations.
- 3 Information resources for the deaf and hearing impaired may be provided to include collection of books caption, video assistive listening devices, specialized alerting devices, technological communication aids.
- 4 Readers services section should be made to increase the accessibility of their library collections. Documents that are not available in their technological forms like Braille or talking books, etc., are needed by these users.
- 5 Librarians who are qualified to sign language and use of Braille technology should be employed.
- 6 Sign interpreters for effective communication with the deaf should also be employed.

From the foregoing, we can say that the purpose of library facilities for the

disadvantaged is to develop their ability and encourage the individual to accept their disadvantaged condition and make the best of the situation. Above all, the approach to the disadvantaged must be personal and individual as a librarian who is used to working mainly with the advantaged group needs adequate in-service training to understand their points of view, reactions and prejudices. Intolerance and fear must be eliminated and those members of staff who develop patience and sympathy without sentimentality and perseverance should be assigned special work with the disadvantaged group.

Factors Militating against the Provision of Library Services to the Disadvantaged in Nigeria

The problem of providing library services in Nigerian is already fraught with difficulties, such as lack of equipment and materials, dearth of untrained librarians for special groups, inadequate attention and transportation. Assessing these problems, Atinmo (1979) observes that barriers to bringing appropriate books to the right readers still loom large. In Nigeria, the number of books and periodicals published in infinite small proportion is produced in formats unsuitable and inaccessible to the disadvantaged. This therefore constitutes the fundamental problem of availability and access to information materials in sufficient quantity for the disadvantaged in Nigeria.

Other problems are that of laws and regulations which discriminate against the disabled (Punang-ong, 1999). Every year, blind students apply to take university entrance examinations but are denied the right because of their disadvantaged state. Even in the institutions of higher learning where the disadvantaged should find solace, the rules and regulations which bind them pose a major challenge. Dike (2003) identified some problems militating against provision of library services to the disadvantaged. These include the following:

- 1 Negative attitudes:** disability is seen as a curse, punishment for sin, evil omen which will bring misfortune. Therefore the disabled are viewed as burdens unable to achieve anything or lead productive lives, as such, helping them is a waste.
- 2 The handicapped are hidden:** they often do not visit libraries or attend school either because their parents think it is no use or the disabled lack mobility.
- 3 The disabled are the minority:** easy to overlook, dismissed when the need of the majority are overwhelming as it is in Nigeria.
- 4 Their needs are expensive and therefore not seen as cost effective:** They

are a minority requiring much higher funding per capita than other users. The disadvantaged need special resources and equipment with specialized software and special personnel. Problems like scarcity of recreational materials are a direct result of a lack of production facilities for Braille and taped materials. Obstacles in the way services are provided create more sensitivity to the needs and potentials of the disadvantaged. Public libraries also seem to fail in their duties as they don't render specialised services to the disadvantaged. Government are yet to support legislations made towards the education and rehabilitation of the disadvantaged which would have ultimately guaranteed their right to all facilities enjoyed by other members of society. There also exists no library cooperation for resource sharing for the disadvantaged.

Conclusion and Recommendation

To holistically bridge the existing gap between normal and disadvantaged persons, we should embark on a number of initiatives that will transform our society and will ultimately guarantee level playing ground to all, regardless of age or extent of disability (Ndukwe 2009). Hence the library which is the main stock-holder in education and information dissemination needs to upgrade its services through the library to meet the needs of all. Therefore, this paper highlighted the information needs of the disadvantaged and how such needs could be made available and accessible for their actual utilisation. It also emphasized the need for librarians to provide impartial services in this global information age in cooperation with the emerging technological trends. The following recommendations were therefore made:

- 1 More financial support is required by library management.
- 2 Social awareness and equal opportunities are needed.
- 3 Proper guidelines are required to obtain maximum benefits from ICT enabled library services to the disadvantaged.
- 4 Librarians as stakeholders should be made to partake in the architectural design of every library so as to bring to mind the needs of the disadvantaged in the use of the library.
- 5 Library management should make policies that accommodate the disadvantaged.
- 6 Most of the disadvantaged persons need frequent help, so it is required that library staff must be trained to cooperate so that everyone can learn the accessibility and usability of the library.
- 7 All in all, library authorities should embrace and provide ICT facilities because access to appropriate facilities, training and support will be a key element to alienating the challenges of the disadvantaged in their pursuit of information.

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