

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN MEETING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is to review the concepts of library, information and information needs of the disadvantaged groups in Nigerian society. This paper x-rays the different categories of disadvantaged people and their required information needs. It tries to bring to lime light the central roles of libraries in meeting the information needs of the various groups. The paper reveals that the provision of information needs of the physically challenged/disadvantaged groups by the library will improve their intellectual and social wellbeing and contribute to the economic and sustainable development of the nation. This paper also reveals the need of information for all and including the excluded. It concluded by recommending that the Government should make adequate provisions in its annual budgetary allocations for the library to procure enough and relevant resources that would meet the information needs of these groups of people. In addition, it recommended that donor agencies, philanthropic individuals, and non-governmental organizations should come to the aid of the physically challenged/disadvantaged groups by making donations towards meeting the information needs of the disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

The central role of any library establishment is to acquire, organize, store, preserve and disseminate information resources to users. Libraries help in the provision of information materials to support teaching, learning, research and meeting the specialized information needs of the parent community. The library is therefore the major source of support both for the teacher and the student. Hence the library is an indispensable supportive documentation centre which enables a learner to acquire a solid background or grasp of whatever knowledge he wants to acquire. The library itself is a depository centre for books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and other print and non print information resources for knowledge acquisition. Denise (2004) stressed the importance of literacy and books in children and youths' development. This is reflected in their intellectual, affective, cultural and social dealings within the society that they may find themselves.. Library resources have always been seen as a source of information, comfort and

pleasure for the users. Okoro (2004) posits that apart from serving as a depository of books and other types of documentation, the library in its concept is an organized place where people are known to come and acquire/gather information for their recreational and inspiration needs. Libraries play a major role in the promotion of literacy by making reading materials available for all thereby optimizing human development through education, (Krolak, 2005). It enables individuals to mentally grow and fulfill their potential while empowering and emancipating their minds (Phillip, 2009). Libraries assist in the provision of relevant information to the different strata of the society, thus help in achieving developmental goals (Mamvoto and Mutasa, 2004).

Information is a processed data, ideas or facts which are used in decision-making. Information is a vital tool that equips man to think critically, imaginatively, reflectively, analytically, and creatively for a productive living; it helps in developing and educating the mind. Information according to Aina (2004) is a group of processed data and when well utilized can help individual deduce an inference on value judgment in making decision. Popoola (2009) posited that “information is a critical economic resource which is capable of improving the knowledge state of the individual to take rational decision”.

Information needs of people vary according to their social groups, age, gender, economic status, interest and profession. However, every individual, no matter the class, need information for survival. There is need for libraries to ensure that information is disseminated to all. This could be done by ensuring that the library “includes the excluded” by bringing information to the door steps of users, no matter the age, status or location. Libraries should endeavor to reach out to people especially those who by their conditions could not have effective access to the library. Information is therefore very crucial in the life of every individual. Access to information is very essential in today’s social, economic, industrial, political and technological development. It has been noted that no society can grow beyond its level of information awareness, acquisition and appropriation, (Oyediran,2004). In the same vein, Osuigwe (2011) maintained that “the development of any nation in the information society is dependent on its citizenry’s information acquisition ability through reading. Hence, makes a man; it is the building block for learning in any educational setting and re-building the culture of reading is central to National development. Reading adequate and relevant information in all spheres of existence is needed for a nation to develop as its availability or non-availability can dictate the wealth or poverty of a nation. Access to information is power and a sure pathway knowledge acquisition and sustainable development. Uhegbu (2007) asserts that “information is a vehicle

of national development, contributing immensely on educational enhancement, science and technology, manpower development, promotion of national objectives and increasing a nation's international cooperation".

Who are the disadvantaged groups?

The disadvantaged groups in this context are those people who are not physically fit to get access to library resources or who may not because of their nature/situation read the conventional information resources like every other library user. This includes the physically challenged with one disability or the other like the lame, the dumb, the blind, the deaf, the hospital patients, the prisoners, the aged, etc. This group of people needs specialized information in order to effectively manage their lives and survive in the society. These groups of people in most cases are blessed with innate abilities, talents and dexterity which need to be harnessed, encouraged and developed by meeting their information needs. By their nature, they need motivation, specialized information and special equipment to have access to their needed information. This will help to bring out their full potential and abilities through the provision of required information resources for self-development. Hence, they need special kind of education in order to survive. Special education according to Firestone (2018) is "the education that is designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities so that they can learn the same skills and information as other children in schools". These group have learning difficulties because they are handicapped in different ways Such group are the following: blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hardness of hearing, mental retardation, social maladjustment, physical handicap etc. due to circumstances of birth, inheritance, social position, mental and physical health pattern or accidents in later life. Notwithstanding the physical disabilities of individuals, there is need for everyone to have access to information in order to survive in the society and contribute positively for national development. No matter the condition of any individual, people should not be denied the right to have access to information.

Equity of access is now the growing principle for the use of recorded information (Pugh, 2004). Equity of access to information can be defined as people having the right to unlimited library services and materials no matter their age, ethnicity, physical ability, income, language, geographic location, or the type of library they are using. Betty (2010.). In line with the above, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on human rights grants the right to access information. This is further elaborated by the Act of parliament of the Nigerian National Assembly (2011) which enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FIOA) and was signed into law by the former President of

the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan on 28th May, 2011. Some of these disadvantaged groups have been identified as follows:

Visually impaired/the blind

The visually impaired persons in Nigeria have been classified into the blind, partially sighted and low versioned (Abosi and Osuji, 1985, Mba, 1995 in Adetoro, 2011). The blind and partially sighted people have the same information needs as everyone else. But many people with sight problems will not be able to understand recorded information unless it is made available to them in a suitable format. Some people are not totally blind but are partially blind. In order to accommodate and meet the information needs of such group of people, libraries can acquire information materials such as audio resources. Most people who are blind or visually impaired cannot read the standard or conventional print materials. They need textbooks and other written materials in accessible formats, such as audio/talking books, Braille, electronic text, and audio tapes.

Hearing impaired/the deaf

These are the group of people with hearing problem. The term hearing-impaired covers the broad spectrum of any individual with a less-than-average hearing level. The term deaf is generally used to describe those who are unable to benefit from a hearing aid due to the severity of their hearing loss. Most deaf individuals are faced with the problems of *availability* and *accessibility* of their information needs. Some of the materials which could be used to assist in the provision of services to the deaf as identified by Madu (2008) include: finger alphabet, video, films, text telephones where messages appear in prints and Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD). Several magazines, hearing aids and popular books for this category of people are kept in the library for their use. The library procures visual resources which could help in the learning process of the deaf. So many comprehensive resources that meet the information and social needs of the deaf people and culture abide not only in Nigeria but in the world at large.

Through the sign language (manual communication) they use oral communication when others are talking and express themselves orally. In their quest for education, some of the materials that could help in their learning process include overhead projector, computers, films, videos, pictures, text books etc. These materials should be made available in the library as it will go a long way to meeting the information needs of the deaf.

Speech Impaired/the Dumb

Language is the foundation for success at school or in life activities. Language is a rule-based system of communication involving the comprehension and use of signs and symbols by which ideas, thoughts and messages are represented. Language is the basics of communication. Communication is the process of exchanging knowledge, ideas, opinions and feelings through the use of verbal or non verbal (e.g a gesture) language. Libraries in developing countries are beginning to provide assistive technologies as well as reading materials to people with disabilities (Nassinbeni & De Jager 2014, Majinge & Stiwell 2013). Most notably, libraries have put in place working lifts and ramps to assist with the mobility of people with disabilities (Majinge & Stiwell 2013). Furthermore, information resources in braille and large print are being procured to enable people with disabilities to access information more easily. Nassinbeni & De Jager (2014) averred that libraries are training selected members of staff on how best to serve people with disabilities. These library staff are para-professionals who work under the supervision of librarians, specially trained for this disabled/disadvantaged group. The para-professionals assist especially those who are impaired in one form or the other to gain access to visual and auditory information, develop the use of receptive and expressive communication, promote social and emotional well being. He equally states that the educational/library needs of this physically challenged group are multifaceted. Hence, there is the need to provide not only special equipment but also specialized and skilled personnel that will assist them in making use of the equipment.

Information Needs of the Crippled/the Lame

Physically challenged people who may be on wheelchair or bed ridden, read a lot of resources on some aspects of human endeavours. This is to enable them compete with those that are not physically challenged. These groups of people could be better managers and administrators since they have more time to consult books, journal and other resources as they may be well informed. Examples of such are medical surgeons (Dr. Ola Okin of Ola Okin Hospital, Badagry Lagos), Barristers (Son of the late GaniFawehimi who is a barrister) and lots more. Some who became crippled by accident resolved to take a decision on the type of information needs that will soothe their new status. Most people that are crippled are very intelligent, talented, innovative and can engage in so many meaningful economic productivities like handcrafts. This group of people needs information for their survival in the society. The library should be built in such a way to accommodate this group of users by making

the entrance wide and building it in a way that wheelchairs can enter. In some cases, lift should also be provided.

Information Needs of the Hospitalized/Hospital Patients

These are people with one form of ailment or the other who are at the hospital bed or at the confinement of hospital environment. This group of people constitutes a special class of people with apparent barriers in accessing information. Some hospital patients suffer psychological problems which can better be taken care of by using interesting information materials that meet their needs to cheer them up. This service is generally known as *Bibliotherapy*. This is the use of books to heal people's psychological trauma, emotional stress, and mentally deranged. This group of people is disadvantaged because of their health-related problems. Abolaji (2009) posits that "libraries cannot directly restore health to the sick, but there are ways it could help these people". This could be done by identifying the information needs of the various patients and supplying interesting and suitable materials that can make them psychologically better and give them suiting effect. Such materials will in no small measure help to relieve their pains. In other to meet the information needs of the hospitalized, the medical library or libraries of tertiary institutions where the hospitals exist, should engage in library extension services to carry books that could have therapeutic effect on the patients to hospital wards so that individual patients could use them.

Information Needs of Prisoners

Macmillan Dictionary for Advance Learners (2007) defines a prisoner as "someone who is held in prison as punishment for a crime". It is equally referred to person who has no freedom because his life is controlled. A prisoner is therefore someone who has been found guilty to have committed a crime by a court of law of competent jurisprudent. Prisoners should therefore be classified as special readers as they are disabled because of their confinement they cannot use the library service like others (Aina, 2004).

Prisons are reformatory institutions established by the government agencies to rehabilitate criminals in order that they could be useful to themselves and the society at large after serving their various jail terms. In other to achieve this aim, prisoners deserve unrestricted access and utilization of useful information like every other citizen during their jail terms.

A prison library is a special kind of library purposely established in prison environment to meet the information needs of the inmates. Information needs of the prisoner can mean their information requirements on a particular subject and it differs from individual prisoner. It could range from trying to

know the environment of the prison, how he/she could cope with current challenges of life and mind adjustment to situational problems and vocational skill acquisition. Popoola (2003) is of the view that information utilization leads to users' liberation from ignorance. Accessibility to information leads to information utilization which helps individual to behave or act in an informed manner (Uheghu 2007). Libraries are veritable instrument for exposing the prisoners to valuable information needs that are required to transform them to be useful to themselves and the society at large after their release from prison. This will make them to be refined, reformed and become better citizens. Some well educated and notable scholars who found their way into the prison for one reason or the other have written interesting and fast selling books when they were in prison. A typical example is the noble laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka who wrote the book titled "The man died" while in prison (Abolaji 2009).

Dike in Folorunsho (2012) reported that rule 40 of the United Nations Standard Minimum rules for the treatment of prisoner stated that "every institution (Prison) should be adequately stocked with both recreational and institutional books, and prisoners should be encouraged to make full use of them". In conformity with the above, Okwor, Ugwuanyi and Ezeji (2011) are of the view that evaluation in prison project as endorsed by the Council of Europe recommended that prison library should function adequately as the special and public library and that such libraries should as a matter of necessity be manned by a professional librarian, meet their interests and information needs of the prisoners from different backgrounds, enhance the prisoners' reading habits and make accessibility to information unhindered for the prisoners.

Information Needs of Children

Children are another set of people that need special attention to meet their information needs. Children, as future leaders of any nation need to be nurtured into positive reading culture. Cultivating reading culture at the early age in children is of supreme importance and must be purposeful, strategic, and grounded in pleasurable experiences. The use of picture books with colourful illustrations, bold prints, toys, video, games, and story books will go a long way in attracting and capturing the attention of children in developing reading habit and learning how to learn. Establishing children's libraries and providing useful and suitable information resources will help to widen their horizon and develop life-long learning abilities. The children's library should be equipped with the following resources which will satisfy their information needs.

- i. Baby books
- ii. Pictures books for the older readers including graphic novels and puzzle books.
- iii. Beginner Readers, Short chapter books, dual language books, junior fiction , teen fiction,.
- iv. Non-Fiction, for all hobby and homework needs.
- v. Barrington Stoke Books, particularly useful for children with Dyslexia
- vi. Spoken Word CDs, playways, mini MP3s plugged- in earphones.
- vii. E-books (library card and pin numbers are required)
- viii. Children's entertainment and educational DVDs .
- ix. Computers, for homework and fun.
- x. Free online resources to access from the library or home.

Information Needs of the Aged

Generally, the aged according to WHO (2015) are people who are 65 years old. These groups of people need information in all aspects of human endeavour which will be of interest to them. These are older groups, aged senior citizens, and elderly statesmen, frail and weak biologically at the time of retirement. They need information about the outside world which they lived their youthful and adult life as against the prospect of life after retirement. Some of them would like to venture into some business activities which they may not have enough knowledge but through the information that they acquired from the library, they could be well informed about them. Others could need information about their state of health and the best way to manage their lives. This will help to minimize their ailing health conditions. Ajibola (2009) is of the view that old people need information for leisure such as reading books, newspapers and magazines, audio and video cassettes which they can listen to in their various private homes.

There are some old people's homes maintained by some religious groups and private individuals where the aged are catered for. For example, there is the old people's home at Regina Mundi Catholic Church, Mushin in the Archdiocese of Lagos and some other ones in the country. In terms of sustaining their lives economically and socially, they need information resources on what they can be engaged on for meaningful productivity and to prevent boredom. This could be done through the use of newspapers, magazines and e-library resources.

The aged needs information so as to understand their health and their sources of income especially those of them who are retirees and pensioners. They also use this information to know more about government policies, projects and current trends within their environment and the country.

The Roles of the Library in meeting the information needs of the disadvantaged groups

It has been recognized that every user does not have the same level of access or opportunity to make use of library resources. Madu (2008) noted that “it is the duty of the library to identify the various disabilities and how the library can handle such problems such as those of the blind and partially sighted, mentally handicapped, physically handicapped and so on”. This type of service is called library extension services. Examples of such services are mobile library services, public lecture and orientation on how to use the library resources.

In the course of mobile library services, a vehicle will be used to move the library resources to the areas that these groups of people reside, organize a public lecture for them on the need to use library resources that could interest them. It is seen as those library programmes and services designed to cater for people that the library by their design and focus could not reach out to. Libraries can provide special services to patrons with special information needs using books-on-tape (talking books), digital talking books and special equipment, Braille materials, and reader advisory services.

Hence, the following services could be rendered in libraries in order to meet the information needs of the disadvantaged group and help in including the excluded. The Library collection should consist of titles both in print and non-print formats (Braille, cassette, digital cartridge, and large print) on a broad range of fiction and non-fiction subjects, for all ages. Byrne, (2005) asserts that:

In building the Information Society, we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of the society, including migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, unemployed and under-privileged people, minorities and nomadic people. We shall also recognize the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.

Talking Books are audio books produced for disabled readers by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), a division of the Library of Congress. Talking Books are designed for persons unable to read standard print due to a physical or cognitive impairment. The programme was originally launched to help blind people, but has long been a vital reading resource for people with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and for those who lack the motor skills or dexterity to hold a printed book. Talking

books should be provided in libraries in order to meet the information needs of the people who have reading problem.

The National Library Service (NLS) for the blind and physically handicapped is a national programme through the Library of Congress that offers books in Braille and audio recordings for individuals who cannot comfortably read regular print because of a vision, physical or certain learning disabilities. Evans (2000) noted that “there is unwitting exclusion of a large proportion of visually impaired people from library and information provision”. Libraries should therefore endeavor to include the excluded. In response to this need, most libraries offer large print and audio books in a variety of formats such as audio tapes and audio CDs. Some of the materials needed for the provision of library services for the blind and partially sighted as identified by Madu (2008) include: Braille books, book read on tapes/cassettes or compact disks, Kurzweil reading machine, large print book, scans print, character recognition device and Talking books.

Braille is a coded language of raised dots invented by Louis Braille in 1852 which was developed for the blind people to read with their fingers. Each Braille character (or cell) is a six-dot matrix. This consists of letters, numbers, and symbols made by raising one or more characters within each cell. This is a system of embossed print used by users with visual impairment. Braille is the only language system that affords blind people true literacy: the ability to write, and read what you have written. The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) offers a service called Web Braille. Web Braille offers all of the materials produced in Braille for NLS in digital Braille format (Brf) for download. Librarians can help in downloading such materials for their users. There is a wide range of equipment which can be used by blind and partially sighted people to help them access information. These include the following:

- i. Simple hand-held magnifiers;
- ii. Speech software which can read the computer screen to the user;
- iii. Braille translation software which can translate information on a computer screen into Braille that the user reads on a specially adapted keyboard;
- iv. Screen enlargement software that enables the user to magnify the text on their screen to a suitable size;
- v. Libraries can offer Close-Circuit Television (CCT) designed for people with low vision. CCTs can enlarge text up to 50 times its normal size and can change the colour of background and print. This can be very useful for the elderly ones or people with vision problems;

- vi. The use of audio tapes can effectively be used to meet the information needs of some disadvantaged groups like the dumb, the crippled, the aged, prisoners and hospital patients;
- vii. Making library buildings accessible is quite indispensable to meeting the information needs of the disadvantaged group. Library accommodation can be built to include elevators, curb cuts that are smooth for wheelchair to travel, and Braille signs around the building.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, the role of libraries in providing the information needs for different categories of physically challenged/disadvantaged groups in Nigeria has been highlighted. Provision of information resources will enable them to improve their intellectual and social well being. If these groups of people are properly informed, they will contribute positively to the sustainable development of the nation at large. Hence, there is need for information for all and including the excluded; ensuring that people, no matter their age, position, location or social status have free access to information. By so doing, the physically challenged will no longer be a burden to the society as the case used to be but useful citizens who will positively contribute their quota to the national development.

The following are some of the recommendations put forward so as to satisfy the information needs of the physically challenged group in the Nigerian society.

- i. Government should encourage the education of these groups of individuals by making adequate annual budgetary provisions for their education;
- ii. Libraries should also be adequately funded so that they could procure in various disciplines, the necessary resources that would meet the needs of these groups of people;
- iii. Adequate attention should be given to the provision of information resources and learning aid to address the present information needs of the disadvantaged groups.
- iv. Appeals for assistance should be made by governments and institutions to donor agencies, philanthropic individuals, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for support to the aid of these groups of people in order to meet their information needs.
- v. Library personnel manning these groups of people should be adequately trained so that they could meet the challenges of service delivery.

Finally, if these recommendations are being adhered to, the physically challenged/disadvantaged groups in our society would have a sense of belonging.

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