

Information Provision to the Visually Impaired in Alternative Formats in Nigeria: Are Public Libraries Up to the Task?

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries provide information to all persons and its users are the inhabitants of the community it serves. This may not be the reality in some cases as some category of persons may not be properly served by the public library. This study assesses the provision of information materials in alternative format, in terms of its availability, access and level of use by the visually impaired in public libraries in southwestern Nigeria. The study adopted survey research design. Four (4) public libraries in four states were purposively selected because they are the ones that provide alternative format for the use of a sizable number of the visually impaired. Complete enumeration was used to capture all the 166 registered users of the libraries through the use of observations checklist and interview schedule. Data from 69.2% of the 166 visually impaired persons that were interviewed, and the observations made were analyzed. The result reveals that alternative formats availability were inadequate and , e-resources were not available while access to formats and information desired by the users were limited. Braille is the most utilized format; audio materials and large prints were seldom used. The demand for alternative formats is high but it is not related to level of use of materials. Provision of information materials in alternative formats for the visually impaired in public libraries cannot support the needs of the visually impaired; it requires intervention from all stakeholders. The study recommends improved investment and funding for public libraries and services to persons with disabilities.

Keywords: Public Libraries, Information Provision, Visually Impaired, Alternative Format, Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

Whilst other types of libraries focus on special categories of users, the public library is not restricted to any group of clientele. It is a universal library expected to serve all groups of persons including the young, old, and persons with disabilities (Aina, 2004). They should be democratic in outlook with the mandate to provide information that is crucial to the socio-economic development of the people. They acquire, process, and disseminate information in a variety of formats to every citizen in the community where they are sited regardless of race, gender, age or physical state (Rita-Okeke & Owoeye, 2011).

In many African countries including Nigeria, one of the earliest types of libraries was the public library. The colonialists encouraged the development of public libraries in Nigeria such that public libraries were the first to be established. But what is the situation of public libraries in recent years? Aina (2004) asserts that in spite of the fact that public libraries have existed for a long period in Nigeria, they are in a state of neglect with poor collection of materials, personnel, and services.

Public library services should target all categories of persons including the visually impaired, and this is why it is essential for public libraries to scan their immediate environment to ascertain group of persons resident in the community and the information required by them. The visually impaired in Nigeria are noted for demanding information to meet their reading interests and information needs. Library services to the visually impaired in Nigeria are faced with the challenge of high demand for alternative formats (Adetoro, 2010a). Atinmo (2007) and Adetoro (2010b) have evidence to the effect that the public library system in Nigeria also provides information to the visually impaired. However, there are little or no studies yet on the state of information provision in public libraries to the visually impaired. This study hopes to fill this gap. In Nigeria, public libraries are also referred to as state libraries. They come under the auspices of each state ministry of education. The state librarian is a civil servant and is designated as director of library services.

Adetoro (2009) provide proof that some state libraries in western and eastern Nigeria offer library

services to visually impaired users. These state libraries do not produce books, but they receive Braille books and other alternative formats from donors and provide them in their libraries (Atinmo, 2007).

The consensus among Nigerians is that government libraries, especially the public library system, has not adequately catered for the information needs of citizen. For persons with disabilities such as the visually impaired, the situation is probably worse. Public libraries in Nigeria are believed to commit very little of their lean resources to serve the blind and other visually impaired persons. Invariably, they have not provided for the reading needs of the visually impaired in terms of the availability of, access to, and use of alternative formats. Alternative formats available in the public libraries are believed to be inadequate; materials are not always accessible while utilization levels in the public libraries are probably low despite the high demand for alternative formats. All these are based on consensus opinion and observations suggesting that there is need for research evidence on the provision of information materials in alternative formats to the visually impaired in public libraries due to paucity of research. Policy makers and government also need such empirical evidence on the true situation of alternative materials provision and information needs of persons with disabilities as provided for by public libraries.

This study therefore investigates the provisions of information in alternative format to the visually impaired by public libraries in Nigeria.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- Determine alternative format availability for reading and study to the visually impaired in the public libraries.
- Find out whether alternative formats are accessible to the visually impaired in the public libraries.
- Determine the level of utilization of alternative formats by the visually impaired in the public libraries.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Libraries have to play key roles in building inclusive societies by serving all kinds of users including the visually impaired. Indeed, the International Federation of Library Association and institutions IFLA guidelines for development of the public library service (2001:2) state that “the development of collections should be based on the principle of access for all and include access to formats appropriate to specific client groups, for example Braille and talking books for blind people.”

This guideline certainly underscore the significance of provision of information services to the visually impaired through public libraries. According to Bernardi (2004), provision of information services to the visually impaired does not only come from specialized libraries but is also growing in public and other libraries. However, access to printed materials has received considerable recognition, serving as a barrier towards the integration of the visually impaired into schools and work environments (Edward & Lewis, 1998).

According to the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994), “public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups,” and thus the local library should be the primary service point for access to information for the visually impaired also. So in literature we can meet a growing presence of recommendations and projects based on the cooperation between public libraries and services for the blind.

A number of experiences seem to demonstrate that partnership and decentralization of library services for the blind and print-handicapped people is a necessary element of the equality of service. The VISUNET CANADA Partners Programme is a partnership between public libraries and library services for the blind (Griebel, 2000). It is a model based not only on cooperation but, more importantly, on the integration of service to the blind into the mainstream of library service. Through VISUNET the local library has access to an online catalogue of the collection and to a number of digital resources such as full-text Canadian newspapers and magazines and

publications available in electronic format. There is also a training of staff in the local library. Other examples of cooperation are found in Owen (2001), Tank (2000), Kavanagh (2005), and Nguyen (2005). In Vietnam information services are now available to visually impaired through public libraries and the leadership role of the National Public Library, General Science Library of Ho Chi Min City. The formation of strategic alliances and collaboration between ministry, funders, public libraries, and other organizations providing services to the blind has been a fundamental step in delivering and maintaining these services (Nguyen, 2005).

Also, Share the Vision (STV) is a partnership agency in the UK promoting library and information services for visually impaired people and others who have difficulties in reading print. It is working closely with public library services and the major national providers of reading and information services in the voluntary sector, above all the Royal National Library for the Blind. Local public libraries are a primary point of access to the range of services available, both local and national. A principal of its aims is mainstreaming a national union catalogue of alternative formats to provide local access to the reading materials available for visually impaired readers (STV, 1996). Share the Vision has proved an effective mechanism of coordination but Scandinavian models demonstrate that coordination is most effective where central government has helped development by the provision of funding, legislation, and policies.

Balini (2000) revealed that over 5% of a focus group in Canada used their public libraries and that they love personal services which allow them to search for information with librarians, leaving the library with a book in hand. The importance of making the public library a key force in providing access to and use of information by the visually impaired has been reported in Roth (1991) and Morgan (2003) in a study of library services to the blind in New Zealand.

Some other studies (Griebel, 2000; Kavanagh, 2005; Nguyen, 2005) have emphasized the need for partnership and the integration of services to the visually impaired by public libraries and specialized libraries for the blind in order to widen access to alternative formats and improve utilization of

materials. In these studies, the local public libraries are a point of access to alternative formats available for use by the visually impaired. To underscore the importance of library collaborations in serving the visually impaired, IFLA (2005) stressed that all libraries serving the visually impaired should ensure that their collections and services complement and integrate with national agencies to provide access to as wide a range of alternative formats and services as possible.

There is ample evidence in literature about the role of libraries for the blind and public libraries in serving the visually disabled and the importance of the cooperation. A British library survey (Craddock, 1996) revealed that many public libraries thought that blind people were adequately served by external agencies such as the Royal National Library for the Blind. The survey also revealed that they did not identify blind people as a target group. Craddock argue that these people are members of the public and taxpayers and they must have the same services from the local library as sighted users.

The improvement of information provided by agencies and specialized libraries are also emphasised by Australian research (Roth, 1991) which focused on the characteristics and needs of potential clients of information services, where visual disability was the defining criterion. The central and exclusive role of the library for the blind in serving the visually impaired is also declared in Morgan (2003) concerning the library service for the blind in New Zealand. The Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind (RNZFB) library service only serves those who are blind or vision impaired. Its key activity is the production of accessible formats. New Zealand public libraries do not act as agents for the Blind Library. RNZFB do not serve those who are print disabled for other reasons, for example through a physical disability or learning difficulty, so public libraries do strive to meet some of the reading needs of these groups who have problems in accessing written information. These efforts are insufficient considering the low availability of special resources and the high costs.

In Italy there is a centralized service for the production of alternative formats by the Library for the Blind, the "Regina Margherita," the only library that

received government funding for these activities, without cooperation with other agencies or public libraries (Bernardi, 2003).

Articles that have been written about the provision of library services for visually impaired people in the UK and elsewhere include Brophy and Craven, 1999; Kinnell et al, 2000; Stefanova, 1997; Harris and Oppenheim, 2003; and Bundy, 2002. Generally these studies have been compiled from the point of view of the information provider (Public or Specialized Libraries, Agencies, Schools, and Universities). They often posted questionnaires, such as that sent to all 208 public library authorities in the UK (Kinnell et al, 2000) in order to know the level of current service provision for visually impaired people and to examine how they matched up to national guidelines. It revealed that a significant minority of library authorities did not have a specific policy statement concerning the needs of visual impaired persons, indicating a slack in relationship with external agencies and in the provision of specialist equipment. A perspective of users was considered in Creaser et al, 2002, involving an extensive survey (user focus) of visually impaired people to determine their perception, opinions, and activities regarding library services available to them.

The Creaser survey was carried out using structured interviews as in Williamson, Schauder, and Bow (2000) and Berry (1999), face to face with visually impaired people and by telephone. The study highlighted that there was an increasing level of satisfaction with services of agencies and a high level of dissatisfaction in public libraries that are less prepared to give personal attention to their visually impaired readers. The level of satisfaction depends on a number of factors: to be personally treated with consideration; having needs and desires listened to; and availability of resources suitable for all ages and for every type of visual impairment.

Owen (2001) investigated public library provision to the visually impaired and found that provision varies widely; there is a lack of management of information and what is available as alternative formats is not properly utilized. The provision of alternative formats for the visually impaired in Kenya was hampered by librarians' negative attitudes. It was revealed that materials were not readily available in Braille

and there was inadequate availability of recorded materials in public libraries among others (Owino, 1995). Similar findings relating to poor level of availability and access to reading materials in alternative format were also reported (‘Ng’anga, 2003). The blind and partially sighted are denied access to 95% of books in the United Kingdom (UK) because they are not available in alternative format (Moore, 2000).

In Nigeria, Agbaje (1996) found that availability and access to information materials for the visually impaired students in tertiary institutions is not catered for by public libraries but by the students’ institutions and by private arrangement. Adetoro (2012) compared the availability and access to alternative formats by visually impaired adult and students in Nigeria and found that Braille materials are available but may not be accessible; talking books and large prints availability is low and not readily accessible.

Braille materials are the most frequently utilized by visually impaired students in Nigeria (Adetoro, 2011a). There is high level of Braille use by visually impaired adults in Nigeria (Adetoro, 2011b). The provision and use of alternative formats in Nigerian libraries for the visually impaired is low and there is a need for increased volunteers and transcription services to make information materials available and accessible to blind and partially sighted users (Ajobiwe, 1999).

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study deals with information provision to the visually impaired through public libraries in southwest Nigeria. The provision of information materials in alternative format to the visually impaired is a social responsibility of public libraries all over the world. In order to give this study a sound theoretical basis and to answer the questions asked, social contract theory was resorted to in order to explain the provision of information materials to the visually impaired. Locke’s social contract theory espouses that in order to live above the state of nature man gave up his natural rights and subjected himself to the authority of the state. The state is therefore expected to guarantee the greatest happiness for all and create a conducive atmosphere that leads to actualization and

fulfillment for individuals and groups. These groups include the visually impaired who need information to function as persons.

The state, through its public library system, is charged with the responsibility of making sure that alternative formats are available, accessible, and utilized by persons with visual impairment. In achieving these objectives, resources are allocated by governments to cater for the wellbeing of this category of citizens. Countries that lack the sense of contract to its people pay lip service and little attention is directed towards meeting the needs of the underprivileged. The visually impaired in Nigeria expect the state to meet their information needs as a social service. The government is obliged to satisfy its citizens’ needs. However it can be said that the state has not adequately met its obligation of providing information materials in alternative formats through its public libraries.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design. The population of the study was made up of the visually impaired persons including adults and secondary school children who are registered users of some selected public libraries in southwestern Nigeria. Through a preliminary study by the author, it was discovered that four out of the six state library boards (public libraries) of southwestern Nigeria provide information services to the visually impaired. The Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, and Ondo state library boards were purposively chosen for the study. The four state library boards (public libraries) have a total population of 166 registered visually impaired users.

A complete enumeration technique was used to cover all the 166 registered users of alternative formats in the libraries. Data were collected through the use of interviews and observations. The instruments were based on a prepared interview schedule and an observation checklist which probed the availability, access to, and use of alternative formats by the users. The validity of instrument was obtained through expert advice while the reliability was achieved through a pre-test of the instruments to some visually impaired library users at the Inlaks Library for the Visu-

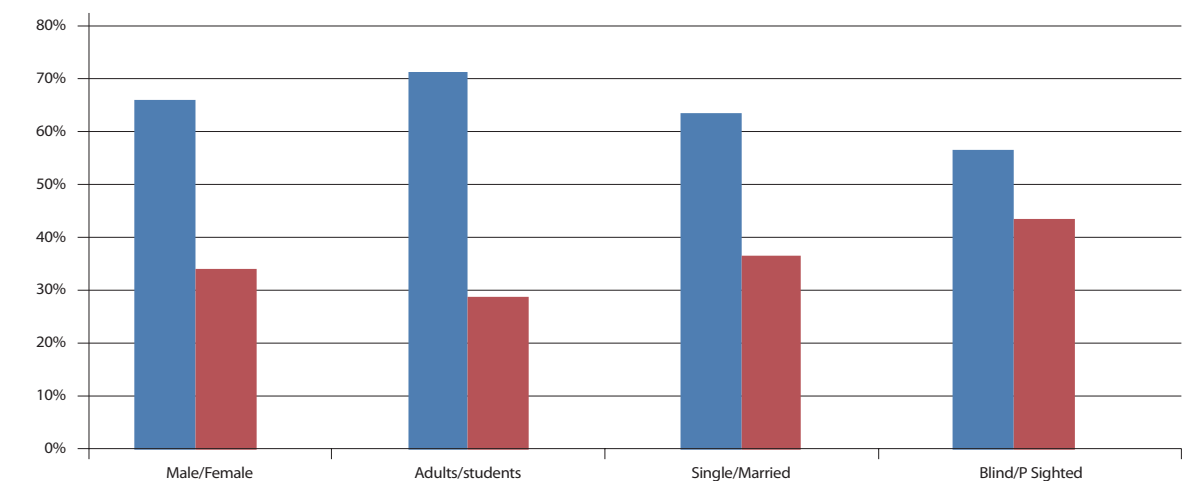
ally Handicapped, Lagos. The interview schedule and the observation checklist obtained a reliability score ($\alpha = 0.71$) and ($\alpha = 0.81$) respectively. The interview sessions were conducted with the assistance and permission of librarians in charge of the public libraries over a period of four weeks while the observations was done and recorded by the author.

The researcher and his assistants were able to interview a total of 115 respondents which represents 69.2% response rate.

6. RESULTS

Respondents Characteristics

The data collected showed that male respondents were 76 (66%) while female respondents were 39 (34%). There were 33 (28.7%) students who were visually impaired while 82 (71.3%) were adults. Those within the age range of 21-25 years constituted the highest number of respondents with 39 (34%). Those within the age bracket of 16-20 years numbered 29 (26%). Others include the age range of 26-30 years, 23 (20.4%); and 31-40 years and 40 years and above with 12 (10.5%) respondents respectively. Most of the respondents were single 73 (63.5%) while 42 (36.5%) were married. The data also revealed that 65 (56.6%) of the respondents were totally blind while 50 (43.4%) were partially sighted.



n=115 equal to 100%

Fig. 1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

Table 1. Observed Availability of Alternative Formats in the Public Libraries

Public Libraries	Braille (In Titles)	Audio Recordings (In Titles)	Large Prints (In Titles)	e-resources (In Titles)
Oyo State LB	210	15	10	–
Ekiti State LB	34	–	–	–
Osun State LB	25	–	–	–
Ondo State LB	32	12	–	–
Total	301	27	10	–

Source: Field work 2010.

The availability of information materials in alternative formats were observed in all the libraries. The observations showed that materials such as Braille, audio recordings, and large prints are generally not available in adequate quantities that could encourage the users to read as expected. The bulk of the alternative formats available in all the libraries are Braille materials (301 titles). Audio recordings (27 titles) and large prints (10 titles) were scarce and not available in some of the libraries while e-resources were practically non-existent in all the libraries. Talking books available were cassettes; there were no digital talking books. During the interview sessions many of the respondents (the partially sighted) complained that large prints collections were scare while the totally blind also lamented that the libraries' collections lack variety. Most of the Braille materials, for instance, are literature texts and there were few textbook materials. The respondents also revealed that they make private arrangement with non-governmental organizations serving the visually impaired for the transcription of desired material into Braille and talking books.

Interview sessions were conducted with respon-

dents in all the libraries to determine accessibility to alternative formats. The interviews showed that although Braille materials are accessible in the libraries, the majority of the users do not have access to the materials they want to read. Audio recordings and large prints are either not readily accessible or not accessible while e-resources are not accessible, according to the respondents. They generally complained of not having access to the desired information, although the alternative formats available in the libraries are easily accessible to them for use. Some of the respondents had the view that “the materials here are accessible to us, but they do not provide us with our information needs... we rely on some organizations for transcription of the materials that we really need”; “we want to listen to audio books/recordings on various subjects of interest, but here, they are scarce... we come to this library to read and listen to what we have used before.”

These statements are strong pointers that access to alternative formats for the visually impaired is limited to the materials available, which the users viewed as inadequate.

Table 2. Summary of Opinion of Respondents interviewed on Accessibility of Alternative Formats in the Public Libraries

Public Libraries	Braille	Audio Recordings	Large Prints	e-resource
Oyo State LB	Readily Accessible	Not readily accessible	Not readily accessible	Not Accessible
Ekiti State LB	Accessible	Not readily accessible	Not accessible	Not Accessible
Osun State LB	Accessible	Not Accessible	Not accessible	Not Accessible
Ondo State LB	Readily Accessible	Not readily accessible	Not readily accessible	Not Accessible

Source: Field work 2010.

Table 3. Summary of Opinion of Respondents Interviewed on level of Utilization of Alternative Formats in the Public Libraries

Public Libraries	Braille	Audio Recordings	Large Prints	e-resource
Oyo State LB	High	Low	Low	Not Utilized
Ekiti State LB	High	Low	Low	Not Utilized
Osun State LB	Low	Low	Not Utilized	Not Utilized
Ondo State LB	High	Low	Not Utilized	Not Utilized

Source: Field work 2010.

Table 4. Observation of Utilized Alternative Formats in the Public Libraries. (4 weeks)

Public Libraries	Braille (In Titles)	Audio Recordings (In Titles)	Large Prints (In Titles)	e-resources (In Titles)
Oyo State LB	35	9	4	–
Ekiti State LB	17	–	–	–
Osun State LB	10	–	–	–
Ondo State LB	15	6	–	–
Total	77	15	4	–

Source: Field work 2010.

Interview sessions also revealed that there was high demand for use of alternative formats and that the level of use of materials was not related to the level of demand for materials. It was also revealed that users brought their private materials to the libraries for use. These statements were supported by these quotes from respondents: “these public libraries have good space for us to read... despite that, we do not find materials for our use always... but we are allowed to bring our private materials provided to us by transcribers in private institutions.”

Observations made with regard to the use of alternative formats showed that Braille is the most utilized (77 titles), followed by audio recordings (15 titles) and large prints (4 titles). A Few of the users demand audio recordings and large prints; this is because they know that these resources are very few in number. Use of large prints and audio recording is very low while Braille enjoyed a high level of use when compared to others. Because e-resources are not available in the libraries, they are therefore not used.

7. DISCUSSION

Although the majority of the visually impaired users of the public libraries were adults, the study revealed that a sizable number of students are registered users of alternative formats. However, most of the respondents are single including many of the adult users; and there were slightly more totally blind users than the partially sighted. This is consistent with the finding in Adetoro (2010).

This study has brought to the fore the lamentable state of Nigeria’s public library services to the visually impaired. Alternative formats are not available in the adequate quantities, though one can see these materials, especially Braille books on the shelves; the truth is that they are inadequate in terms of quantity and variety. This is perhaps why many users resorted to bringing their personal materials to read in these libraries. In effect, the available materials are inadequate, fall short of users’ expectations, and cannot meet the information need of the users.

There is an acute shortage of audio recordings and large prints while e-resources are virtually non-existent in the libraries. This may be due to inability of the libraries to invest in transcription facilities such as sound proof studios with appropriate gadgets for the production of audio recording, Braille press, and a press for large prints. Government funding of public libraries in Nigeria is minimal. Aside from the payment of staff salaries, very little is committed to library facilities and infrastructure. This perhaps explains why these libraries do not have anything to show in terms of electronic resources for the visually impaired. The Braille materials available were sourced from private organizations that assist in transcribing materials into Braille. In essence, public libraries do not engage in transcription activities, which has resulted in poor collection of alternative formats.

Because of the low level of available alternative formats in the public libraries, access to materials desired by the visually impaired has become a mirage. Though accessibility to the available materials in the libraries was easy according to the users, the issue of

concern here is that users do not rely on the libraries in order to gain access to those materials which meet their reading interests and information needs. This has implications for policy and the plans of the public libraries going forward.

The study has also revealed that Braille materials are the most utilized. The visually impaired persons who use public libraries in Nigeria consistently demand materials and this corroborates earlier studies such as Adetoro (2011b) and Adetoro (2012); regrettably, the materials available cannot meet their yearnings. In essence, materials utilization has no correlation with level of demand and vice-versa. Users therefore resorted to making personal arrangements with private organizations for desired materials in alternative formats. Such materials are most often brought to the public libraries for use. Many of the users have come to see the public libraries as providers of reading and study space rather than providers of relevant information in alternative formats. Braille is the most utilized simply because it is the most available and other alternative formats have low level of use because they are grossly inadequate or not available.

8. CONCLUSION

The study clearly showed that the public library system in Nigeria is not equipped to adequately function as providers of information services to the visually impaired. All the indices point to poor information services provision in terms of availability, access to, and use of alternative formats. The findings of this study suggest that provision of information materials in alternative formats for the visually impaired in public libraries cannot support the needs of the visually impaired in Nigeria as it requires an urgent intervention from all stakeholders. This is important because the current situation of information services has little or no impact on users. Though the findings of the study appear predictable considering the overall situation of public libraries in Nigeria, it has tried to fill a gap in literature and has provided useful baseline information about visually impaired persons who use public libraries in Nigeria.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Government should adequately fund information services to all persons with disabilities through public libraries in Nigeria. There is an urgent need for acquisition of alternative formats in Braille, audio recordings, and large prints in adequate numbers for improved services. Materials acquisition should also include new formats such as e-resources and internet services to stimulate the interest of visually impaired users in modern information resources. Public libraries should ensure that materials provided are based on empirical findings and therefore meet the demands and the information needs of their visually impaired users. Access to materials should be widened to meet the needs of users in terms of quantity, variety, and quality of materials. This would stimulate increase in the utilization levels of alternative materials.

It is also suggested that users should share information among themselves, especially since many them get information materials transcribed for them by service institutions and the public libraries provides the spaces for reading and study. Public libraries providing information services to persons with visual impairment should collaborate and share resources in order to increase utilization of alternative formats. There is an urgent need for a co-operative strategy by the public libraries to bring to the knowledge of government and stakeholders their inadequacies in terms of alternative formats in order to stimulate support from local and international donors to improve provision levels of alternative formats.

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