

Chapter 19

Information Services Provision to Persons with Visual Impairment in Nigeria: The Salient Issues

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ABSTRACT

A good understanding of the issues surrounding information services provision to persons with visual impairment in Nigeria will assist providers and producers of information materials in alternative format and other stakeholders to come to terms with the gap between what exists and the expectations. This chapter delves into the critical issues involved in the provision of information services to persons with visual impairment in Nigeria. It highlights the situation of the visually impaired information users in Nigeria as well as the providers of information services to them. It also focuses on the availability and use of information materials in alternative formats while the impact of technology on information provision to persons with visual impairment was discussed. The chapter concludes that stakeholders should collaborate and increase transcription activities and that information materials should be provided to meet the reading interest of the visually impaired.

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INTRODUCTION

Persons with visual impairment in every society are people with vision loss that constitute significant limitations to visual capabilities, resulting from diseases, trauma, or a congenital or degenerative condition that cannot be corrected by conventional means (Arditi and Rosenthal, 1998). The term visual impairment is a collective term describing an aggregation of various forms and varying degrees of visual handicaps, visual dysfunction and vision loss, which ranges from slight visual and refractive errors, defect in colour blindness, partial sightedness, and low vision to blindness (Obani, 2002).

Unlike sighted people, persons with visual impairment rely on alternative formats such as braille, large prints and talking book or tape recordings to meet their reading needs. Braille is a six embossed dots tactile device used by the blind as a medium of reading and communication. Talking books are recordings on tapes and cassettes from books which the visual impairment can listen to, thereby providing the visual impaired with the opportunity of reading through listening. Large print materials have their print size enlarged such that this becomes visible to a low visioned or partially sighted person. These alternative formats present the visually impaired with the opportunity to read and communicate like sighted persons. These materials are usually not available in quantities desirable to persons with visual impairment.

An estimated 45 million people are blind and 35 million people are visually impaired worldwide (Fashina and Ajaiyeoba, 2003). Availability of Information materials to persons with visual impairment in many countries is premised on the need for equality in terms of accessibility; even though what is attainable worldwide is a far cry from the desired. In Nigeria, blind children did not enjoy formal education until 1953 when the first school for the blind was established at Gindiri, Plateau State (Olukotun, 2003). About 90% of

persons with visual impairment live in developing countries (Abiose, 1999; cited in Fashina and Ajaiyeoba, (2003). The population of persons with visual impairment in Nigeria, according to Atinmo (2002) is estimated at 3 million. Very few of these have received formal education and are capable of reading or writing in braille. Indeed, many resort to begging on the streets as a means of livelihood. Those who are educated depend on the goodness of charities and philanthropist to provide them with information materials. Parents and families of persons with visual impairment are mostly poor and therefore cannot afford the facilities to help their education.

Libraries and institutions providing information services to persons with visual impairment in Nigeria are presently faced with the problem of meeting the high demand for information material in alternative formats by persons with visual impairment. These libraries are believed to have inadequate alternative format in Braille, talking book and large prints; insufficient and obsolete facilities for the transcription and consequent provision of information materials. These inadequacies had made it difficult for the libraries and institution to meet the growing demand for information materials.

The objectives of this chapter is to reveal the general situation of information services provision to persons with visual impairment in Nigeria; the condition of the visually impaired themselves who need information as well as the availability and use of information materials with a view to providing recommendations for improvement.

BACKGROUND ON VISUALLY IMPAIRED INFORMATION USERS AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN NIGERIA

Visual impairment as a concept is often misconstrued by the larger society. According to Royal National Institute for the Blind RNIB (2006), the

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