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Achieving inclusion through partnership

Services for the blind in the public libraries of Vietnam: making Vietnamese public libraries more accessible to visually impaired people

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Abstract:

This paper reviews the current state of information services made available to visually impaired people through the public libraries of Vietnam. Through the support of the Vietnamese government Ministry of Culture and Information, and the active assistance of organizations such as the Force Foundation, the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City has taken a leadership role in the provision of services to the visually impaired. Although for some time limited to Ha noi and Ho Chi Minh City, these services are now being expanded and delivered throughout the public library system of Vietnam. The paper discusses the practical implementation of these through collaboration with philanthropic organizations and other organizations providing support to the visually impaired in Vietnam.

Introduction

Vietnamese people traditionally hold a reverence for all forms of education through both a long history of scholarship, and on account of the contribution that education is seen to make to the long-term economic development of the nation. The country strives to provide education to all, and public library services play a key role in supporting the needs of the population for education and learning as much as for recreation.

While heavily used, Vietnamese public libraries are typically under-resourced and struggle with limited budget, facilities and resources to provide comprehensive information services to the community. While maintaining “mainstream” services within these constraints, public libraries have been challenged by the need to extend these services to meet the needs of members of the community disadvantaged through some form of physical disability.

This paper reviews the initiatives taken to date in the Vietnamese public library sector to improve the standard of library services to visually impaired people. It looks at the level of service currently available and the challenges confronting library services in a developing nation to meet the special needs of a section of the community.

Visual Impairment in Vietnam

According to statistics issued by the Vietnamese Government Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Welfare, there are an estimated 5.1 million people in Vietnam with some form of physical disability. This represents 6% of the total population, and includes approximately 1 million people who are affected by multiple disabilities.

Approximately 900,000 people (or 1.2 % of the population) have some form of visual impairment, including 60,000 people who are totally blind. Of some 70,000 disabled people in Ho Chi Minh City, 4,000 have some form of visual impairment. Only 40,000 of all visually impaired people in the country take advantage of support services by registering with the Vietnamese Blind Association.

Despite the universal availability of secondary education in Vietnam, only 6% of visually impaired people graduate from upper secondary school, and 20% achieve some form of lower secondary qualification. Approximately 30% are in regular income-earning employment.

Government Policy in support of visually impaired people

There have been a number of Vietnamese Government initiatives and policy measures taken to support visually impaired people, improve their standard of living and to promote their integration into society. In particular the Government of Vietnam has legislated to ensure that all enterprises employ visually impaired people at a minimum of 2% of their workforce. It has also been active in establishing over 400 businesses, which

in turn employ 20,000 disabled people. Standards have been in place since 2002 for the construction of buildings to ensure the access needs of disabled people are addressed.

The Vietnamese Government Ministry of Education and Training aims to have all disabled children attending school, and offers choices for the visually impaired in fully integrated, semi-integrated and specialist educational programs and facilities. It has also declared Braille an official written language in schools, and has developed an official format for Braille textbook publishing.

Establishment of library services for visually impaired people

In Vietnam there is limited access to written information for visually impaired people. Although a range of Braille textbooks exist, and are distributed to schools and other institutions, virtually no reference or leisure reading material is available, and there is little in the way of large print material, tactile graphic materials and access to assistive technologies for reading. In addition to this, there is only one Braille periodical – “New Life” – which has been in circulation since 1961. With the recent establishment of the audio book library there is a small but growing number of audio book titles available.

Prior to 1998 the paucity of information resources was also reflected by the lack of public library services specifically addressing the needs of visually impaired people. Library managers and staff had little awareness or understanding of the needs of clientele with any form of visual impairment, and had no access to adaptive technologies, training or materials in alternative formats to be able to offer a meaningful service.

This situation began to improve in Vietnam with the opening of a reading room for the blind at the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City in April 1998, and the establishment of another reading room at the Hanoi Public Library in November 1998. These developments were funded by the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City and the Ministry of Culture and Information respectively, and provided a basis for further services to be developed.

Philanthropic Support

The General Sciences Library began using computers for the generation of Braille materials and also began to receive support from the Force Foundation in particular for a range of development projects, with a dual focus on provision of assistive technologies and on capacity building. Since 2001, the Force Foundation has been instrumental in providing libraries in Vietnam with both production facilities for Braille and talking books, and a range of assistive technology such as CCTV, Victor readers for talking books, Heater machines, and Braille music keyboards.

Through the donations of the Force Foundation, services using CCTV were introduced into all the reading rooms of the General Sciences Library in 2002, and were followed up with similar services at the National Library of Vietnam in Hanoi the following year. Tactile graphic facilities and talking book machines were made available in these

libraries in 2003, and these services have since been gradually introduced into other public libraries throughout Vietnam. On the production side, a studio for the production of DAISY talking books was established at the General Sciences Library in 2003

These donations have been complemented by training and development activities for public libraries, commencing with a series of training programs on computerized Braille, tactile graphics, and the production of talking books using the DAISY format. A number of workshops and seminars, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Information and organizations such as the Force Foundation, have also been conducted to raise awareness amongst public libraries about the particular needs of the visually impaired and how best to improve accessibility of services to them. The Force Foundation has also been active in Vietnam in developing partnerships and co-operative activity between the public library sector and other services for the blind, both within the country and externally.

In addition to support from the Vietnamese Government and the Force Foundation for the visually impaired, a number of projects have been sponsored by other philanthropic foundations and charities active in Vietnam. Some of the key initiatives in operation at present are as follows;

Audio-Book Library

Funded by the Association of Charity Women in Vietnam, the Audio-Book Library is located at their office in district 3, Ho Chi Minh City and commenced services in October 1998. In 2002 this project was expanded by the construction and fitting-out of a recording studio to produce “talking books”, funded by the Government of Japan through its Consulate-General in Ho Chi Minh City.

Common Vietnamese Braille System

A project to establish a common Vietnamese language Braille system was implemented by the Centre for Research on Disabled Children, Education Science Institution in Vietnam and by the Catholic Relief Agency .

Braille Library in the Centre for Rehabilitation of the Blind

A Braille Library was established in the Centre for Rehabilitation of the Blind in Hanoi with a donation 10 million Yen (approximately \$ 90.000) from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

Internet Web Browser Design for the Blind

A project was established through the Sao Mai Centre to develop a Vietnamese language internet browser suitable for use by the visually impaired. The website was launched in Ho Chi Minh City in 2004. This was made possible through a grant of USD \$ 10,000 from World Bank.

Distance information science training for the visually impaired

Through a USD 40,000 grant from the Samsung Corporation for Sao mai Center to develop distance information science training for the visually impaired in 2003.

General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City

The General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City was founded over 100 years ago as the library of the Admirals and Governors, and was established at this location in 1968. Prior to the liberation of South Vietnam in 1975 it was the National Library of South Vietnam. It was designated the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City by the decision of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City in 1978.

The General Sciences Library operates under the direction of the Department of Libraries in the Ministry of Culture and Information. Acting under the Vietnamese Government Ordinance on Libraries, the Department leads the planning and development of public libraries at a national, provincial and municipal level, and is responsible for the evaluation of their performance.

The Library is responsible for selecting and maintaining materials of all kinds published both inside and outside the country, and for organizing and providing documents and information to users. The Library is also responsible for planning and supervising 24 district libraries in Ho Chi Minh City.

In 1990, the Ministry of Culture and Information assigned the Library the responsibility for assisting the 21 provincial libraries in South Vietnam. No other public library in the country has exchange programmes, overseas acquisitions, and constant use of the collection by scholars from abroad. Although Hanoi is the political capital of the country, Ho Chi Minh City is the centre of business and commerce, and the GSL collections and staff play a major role in providing current information on world business, as well as ensuring foreign investors that there is an information infrastructure.

The GSL is not merely a library, it is a shining focal point for the community, where the blind may turn for help to become useful members of society, where children can feel that their artistic efforts are seen and appreciated, and where citizens can hope of a better future. One and all have access to great works of literature and culture.

In 1998 the Library started the construction of a Reading room for Blind & Visually Impaired People and in September 1999 opened for public.

Services to visually impaired at the General Sciences Library

While focused locally on the provision of library services to the people of Ho Chi Minh City, the General Sciences Library also has a broader responsibility for the development of public library services generally in the south of Vietnam, and the provision of training and development programs for public library managers and staff nationally. It has consequently been the focus of much of the initial development work in establishing

services to the visually impaired, and has played a pivotal role in expanding these services to provincial and municipal public libraries.

In undertaking this, the strategy of the General Sciences Library has been first to try to understand the needs of visually impaired library users in Vietnam through active engagement in and collaboration with a number of other services provided to the blind in the country. From there the General Sciences Library could begin to identify what resources, technologies and services could be provided to meet these needs.

Working in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Information and a range of philanthropic organizations, the second step in the strategy has been the introduction of production and access facilities within the General Sciences Library, and the launching of services which are integrated as much as possible within its mainstream library services.

A critical third step has been the formation of strategic alliances and collaborations between the Ministry, funders, public libraries and other organizations providing services to the blind, so that services can not only be implemented throughout the public library network but they are also supported by a range of capacity building programs to ensure the effective delivery and maintenance of these services. This is fundamental to the provision of these services in Vietnam, as the provincial and municipal public library service is critically under-resourced, and struggles to provide even mainstream services and resources within the limited budgets available. Services to the visually impaired have thus been introduced and developed by bringing together the support, strategic guidance and infrastructure development from the Ministry of Culture and Information with the financial, equipment and capacity building programs of various philanthropic and charitable organizations. The challenge for the General Sciences Library and the public libraries is to work within modest budgets to ensure that these services are sustained and expanded in the future.

Current Services

Based on the support it has received from the Ministry of Culture and Information and philanthropic interests, the General Sciences Library is now offering a range of services to the visually impaired. These include in-house reading using adaptive technologies and where appropriate the lending of materials for home use. In addition, users can make use of on demand personal reading programs of books and newspapers, and can also request the provision of print materials in alternative formats such as Braille or audiotope. CCTV access is available in all reading rooms of the Library, as is access to an OPAC and website and browser specifically designed for Vietnamese visually impaired users. These services are supported by orientation and training programs, to enable users to access and operate equipment independently

The Library also produces Braille, tactile graphic and talking books, with 50 Vietnamese Braille titles produced so far, in addition to 200 CD and audiotope books and the development of a database of tactile graphics. It has also established a distribution service, with in excess of 2800 CDs and audiotapes reproduced and distributed to users.

At a broader level, in addition to the various workshops, donations of facilities and training programs made available to public libraries nationally, the GSL also acts as a centre for production and distribution of materials to these 64 provincial and municipal libraries and other organizations providing support to the visually impaired. From October 2003 up to May 2005, over 4700 CDs and 99 audiotapes were distributed in this way.

Current Services for VIP in Provincial and Municipal Libraries

From 2004, great advances have been made to extend and expand services to the visually impaired through the entire system of public libraries in Vietnam. This commenced with the introduction of Victor readers for talking books and was followed up in 2005 with the installation of CCTV into the libraries.

The program of facilities development has been complemented by a series of training programs and workshops designed to encourage and facilitate the introduction of these assistive technologies into the wider community through public libraries. In addition, a couple of years ago, a Manual of best practice in library services for visually impaired people was published in England. This Manual has been translated into Vietnamese and distributed to the provincial and municipal libraries, to serve as a resource for the ongoing development of services. Feedback has also been sought from the libraries in order to enhance use of the technology as well as to identify the public's needs for expanded talking book services.

The extent and provision of services in each public library is tailored to suit the particular needs of the community in that area and the resources available in the library. This is also so that services can be fully integrated within the existing public library services.

Future Directions - Achieving inclusion through partnership

The General Sciences Library is committed to maintaining and expanding services to the visually impaired, both through the library in Ho Chi Minh City and through the public library services in Vietnam generally. The successful establishment and provision of services and facilities demonstrates this commitment, and can be used to generate further support and active collaboration with other organizations and the ongoing support of the Ministry of Culture and Information.

There is already evidence of this in the further enhancement of talking book services in the south of the country, where a significant section of the population is Khmer speaking. The public libraries in this area are now receiving Khmer language talking books, based on original Khmer written material or translated at the General Sciences Library from the original Vietnamese, to address the needs of visually impaired people who use Khmer as their first language. This is leading to greater co-operation between the General Sciences Library and several Cambodian agencies for the visually impaired, and has opened the possibility of extending this project to address similar needs for many of the 53 ethnic populations of Vietnam and the region. In other initiatives, the capacity is currently being

developed in the General Sciences Library to convert textbooks into digital talking books. The second studio for textbooks production will start in June 2005.

A proposal to the Ministry of Culture & Information to acquire Legislative document to make Studio official; to give budget for production of Master version or order to donate public libraries and budget for training their staff about services for the blind; to invest in upgrading the Studio to be a Center of Alternative Production for visually-impaired people.

Vietnam still has many challenges to overcome to create fully integrated and comprehensive library services to the visually impaired throughout Vietnam.