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Why deliver services to print handicapped people through public libraries: the Kenyan experience

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, it is estimated that the Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs) comprise 10% of the six billion plus world population. In Kenya estimates indicate that there are about 860,000 Visually Impaired Persons out of which 210,000 are totally blind while 650,000 have low vision. KNLS, the largest public library network in Kenya established library and information services for the Visually Impaired Persons in 1996, to enhance Visually Impaired Persons access to information in conformity with the UNESCO public Library Manifesto.

This presentation highlights the various library and information services offered

- *Lending of books;*
- *Bulk lending to institutions;*
- *Transcription of information materials into Braille*
- *Inter-library lending;*

It also highlights the challenges experienced:

- *Inadequate information materials in Braille;*
- *Inadequate equipment;*
- *Inadequate trained manpower to handle the visually impaired library users.*

Lastly it suggests way forward not only in KNLS but in public libraries world wide, including:

- *Strengthening networking and partnership*
- *Soliciting for assistance to stock and equip KNLS Braille sections*
- *Strengthening capacity building;*
- *Construct a purposely built National Resource Centre for the Visually Impaired Persons.*

1.0 Introduction

Library and information services for visually impaired persons is a recent phenomenon in most libraries especially in developing countries. In Kenya, for example, library services for the visually impaired persons are still mainly provided by educational institutions serving the blind. However, these are on a modest scale and are limited to provision of Braille and a few talking books. This means that the visually impaired persons outside the learning institutions have no access to information. As a result of this, those who leave educational institutions lapse back to illiteracy.

To arrest this situation, public libraries therefore form an integral part in enhancing literacy among the visually impaired persons outside the classrooms. Unfortunately, the intervention of public libraries in Kenya came rather late. Kenya National Library Service as the leading public library network was the first to establish services for the visually impaired persons in 1996, 31 years later since its establishment.

2.0 Why the Visually Impaired Persons Need Information

According to Human Rights International (1997)³, the most powerful weapon in the human rights arsenal is information. Armed with information, citizens are able to participate effectively in the national development of a country. Information is crucial for knowledge development which is necessary for maximum utilization of economic opportunities. It is necessary for the general awareness of an individual, i.e., self – development. With information the citizens are empowered to understand their environment and be able to interact with it effectively. Those who have access to adequate, relevant and timely information are in a position to make appropriate informed choices and decision in various aspects of their lives.

The Visually Impaired Persons, being the minority are inadequately represented both in public and private realms of society. They are seldom considered as full citizens and participants in the national, political and economic life. This trend can only change if this group of people have access to information. Access to information means access to libraries especially the public libraries which can play a crucial role in the provision of library and information services to the Visually Impaired Persons. This is in line with the UNESCO public library manifesto which proclaims that...”specific services and materials must be provided for those who cannot for whatever reason use the regular services and materials for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospitals or prisons”⁴.

3.0 The Kenya National Library (KNLS) Initiative

As alluded to earlier, KNLS established library and information services to the Visually Impaired Persons in Kenya in 1996. The services are offered in all the 34 KNLS branches countrywide. The network has a stock of:

- ❖ 3,265 books in Braille.
- ❖ 520 talking books in English, French, Spanish and German languages.
- ❖ 1,255 books in large print.

The network also has an additional 110 titles on primary health eye care and preventive medicine. The network has a readership of 6,396 Visually Impaired Readers visiting the network annually and 2,325 registered individual members and 5 institutional members.

To facilitate easy access to information, KNLS has acquired several equipment which includes:

3.1 Multi-media computer

This computer is fitted with the JAWS software which reads the information on the screen to the visually impaired user. The Duxbury Braille Translator Software is also resident in this computer. It is used to convert ordinary print into Braille.

3.2 The Braille Embosser

This is like an ordinary printer but it embosses Braille on paper to allow the user to carry a hard copy home for reference or record purposes.

3.3 Radio/Cassette Player

It is used with ear phones to play back books on compact cassettes (talking books).

3.4 Compact Cassette Recorders

The equipment is used to record topical issues on audio tapes for wider circulation.

3.5 Perkins Brailler Machines

The brailler is the pen for the Visually Impaired Persons. The library provides stationery which allows the blind to take down notes, write letters to friends, and engage in exchange of views and contribute to debates through writing.

3.6 Reading Lamp and Smart view low vision equipment (CCTV Devices)

These are used by low vision library users. The CCTV enlarges print fonts to desired sizes and the reading lamp enhances lighting to improve visibility of the user.

4.0 Services Offered

The KNLS network offers a wide range of services to the visually impaired persons which include:

4.1 Lending of books

Two books are loaned out to registered library users for a period of two weeks. Since some users are slow Braille readers, there is no penalty on overdue.

4.2 Bulk Lending to Institutions

Institutional members borrow many titles on behalf of users in their institutions. The person in charge takes care of the books and ensures that they are returned in good condition when they are due.

4.3 Reading of Stories and Newspapers to the Blind

This is done by library staff on request. It involves reading loudly to the visually impaired library user in designated rooms.

4.4 Document Delivery to the Home Bound, Elderly, etc

This service is specifically meant for those who for whatever reason are not able to visit the library. This involves the librarian carrying various titles and a list of all titles from which the users can choose what they want. The service is offered on monthly basis.

4.5 Transcription of popular local information materials such as HIV/AIDS materials, popular fiction, drug abuse, road safety, etc into Braille.

This activity is carried in collaboration with our partners such as African Braille Centre. It is made possible through arrangement with authors and publishers who have given KNLS their copyrights to facilitate transcription into Braille.

4.6 Production of Braille materials on a limited scale

KNLS produces information materials in Braille using the computer and the embosser. This is made possible by the Duxbury Braille translator software.

4.7 Provision of Talking Books

These are books on compact cassettes which are played back using the radio cassette players either within the library or at home.

4.8 Inter-Library Lending

KNLS is involved in bulk borrowing from various partner institutions such as Kenya institute for the Blind on request by library users.

4.9 Other Services include:

- ❖ Lectures on topical issues such as HIV/AIDS, poverty alleviation etc;
- ❖ Reference services;
- ❖ Use of non-motorized and motorized means to deliver library services to the Visually Impaired Persons;
- ❖ E-mail and Internet services with the assistance of KNLS staff.

5.0 The Impact of the Services

Through the above services KNLS has managed to:

- (i) Integrate the visually impaired persons amongst the sighted population – a radical departure from the traditional approach of concentrating them in special institutions purposely set aside for their exclusive use. This has greatly helped to demystify visual impairment.
- (ii) Participate in reduction of poverty and ignorance by providing entrepreneurial information in Braille.
- (iii) Sustain Braille literacy and support continuing education amongst the Visually Impaired Persons.
- (iv) Promote gender equality and empowerment of the visually impaired women and the girl child.
- (v) Combat HIV/AIDS scourge by providing information materials in Braille to encourage independent access to information.
- (vi) Stimulate the Visually Impaired Person to develop interest in books and promote reading for knowledge, information, enjoyment and participation in important issues of the day, such as the constitutional review process (currently going on).
- (vii) Empower the visually impaired persons in order to empower them with information and knowledge.
- (viii) Inculcate a reading culture among the Visually Impaired Persons.
- (ix) Assist the government to implement the children Act, 2001 which provides that... “Every child shall be entitled to free basic education which shall be compulsory in accordance with article 28 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child”.⁵

- (x) Assisting the government to implement the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on achievement of universal primary education by 2015 for all boys and girls.

6.0 Challenges

In its endeavor to provide library and information services, KNLS however, is faced with several challenges that have impeded on the effectiveness of the service provision. Some of these challenges include:

- (i) The society perception of the Visually Impaired Persons who are viewed as people who require sympathy and alms rather than being empowered.
- (ii) Cultural barriers and beliefs that discriminate against the visually impaired persons who in most cases are viewed as social misfits hence most of them are hidden away in the houses from the public.
- (iii) Inadequate information materials in Braille, large print and other alternative formats. This is because there are no local materials published in Braille. In Kenya, the African Braille Centre (ABC) which is the sole transcriber in Eastern and Central Africa mainly concentrates on transcribing text books; hence denying those outside the education system sustain their literacy.
- (iv) Inadequate availability of equipment used by Visually Impaired Persons such as Perkins Braille Machines, CCTVs, etc. For example, in the KNLS network of 34 branches, there is only one ICT facility for the Visually Impaired Person at the headquarters.
- (v) The high poverty levels have greatly discouraged the visually impaired persons (especially the unemployed and school drop outs) to seek for knowledge in the library. Instead they prefer to go to the streets to beg for alms as a way of earning their livelihood.
- (vi) Lack of proficiency in Braille – Braille illiteracy especially among the Visually Impaired Persons who left school long time ago or have never been to school.
- (vii) Lack of transport for transporting information materials to the visually impaired in their homes, designated service points, etc.
- (viii) Inadequate trained manpower to handle the visually impaired library users.
- (ix) Inadequate storage space for books in Braille which comes in multiple per title.
- (x) Limited mobility by the visually impaired persons who require to be guided to visit the library.

7.0 Way Forward

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, KNLS intends to institute measures that will meet these challenges and improve on service delivery to the Visually Impaired Persons. These measures are aimed at improving on the provision of library and information services in KNLS. These measures include:

- (i) Strengthening networking and partnership with other stakeholders especially those in the private sector. Currently, KNLS is working in partnership with other stakeholders both locally and overseas. Some of these include Kenya Society for the Blind, African Braille Center, Kenya Institute for the Blind, etc at the local level and Lutheran Braille Workers, Force Foundation, Royal National Institute of the Blind, etc at the international level. KNLS intends to strengthen this partnership and open new ones with stakeholders such as the banking industry, industrial sector, civil society etc to support the service to the Visually Impaired Persons.
- (ii) Awareness creation through sensitization of the society about visual impairment – demystification of the visually impaired persons and need to accept and appreciate their role in national development. This can be done through lobbying and advocacy campaigns to the policy makers, and the general public at large.
- (iii) Seek more copyright from publishers and authors for transcription of their titles into Braille. This will ensure more information materials are available to the Visually Impaired Persons.
- (iv) Solicit for assistance to stock and equip the visually impaired services from development partners both locally and internationally.
- (v) Encourage the visually impaired persons to come to the library through sensitization campaigns in village gathering, street visits, churches etc.
- (vi) Promote and enhance Braille literacy through publicity in library science schools, teacher training colleges, adult education programmes, etc.
- (vii) Strengthen capacity building in partnership with other stakeholders.
- (viii) Acquire vans for transporting the visually impaired persons to the library and information materials to the home bound. These could be acquired through donations from well wishers.
- (ix) Construction of a purposely built national resource center for the Visually Impaired Persons. Negotiations are underway with other stakeholders such as the Desai Memorial Foundation to assist KNLS to establish this resource center. Already, the government of Kenya has set a side some funding for the project.

8.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, allow me to point out that the experience is both interesting and very challenging. It calls for concerted efforts by all – the government included to make it succeed. It also calls for total dedication and commitment by librarians who have to work selflessly. Our reward is the satisfaction of the visually impaired library user. Finally allow me to challenge IFLA – Library Section for the Blind and the librarians to put in place mechanisms to entice publishers in the world to publish in Braille, large print and sound formats for use by the Visually Impaired Persons from the developing countries.

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