

ACCESSIBILITY AND UTILIZATION OF LIBRARY SERVICES AMONG THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED PERSONS (VIPS) IN KENYA AND BEYOND

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CITATION: Yungungu, A. & Ogolla, O. B. (2014). Accessibility and utilization of library services among the visually impaired persons (VIPS) in Kenya and beyond. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Entrepreneurship*, 1 (12), 380-392.

ABSTRACT

The real problem of blindness is not the loss of sight but it is the misunderstanding and lack of information which exists. If a visually impaired person (VIP) has proper training and opportunity, blindness is just but a public nuisance. The VIPs experience widespread social exclusion due to a combination of social, economic, technological and legal barriers that exist. One cause is the heightened shortage of books and other published materials in formats that are accessible to them. Libraries for the VIPs play an important role in alleviating the book deficiency experienced by so many VIPs, especially in developing countries like Kenya due to insufficient resources. In this era of information explosion, it is prudent to ensure that everybody has access to relevant and timely information to enable them get actively involved both in individual and national development irrespective of their social, physical, economic and political status. This is in appreciation of the fact that the world today is moving towards knowledge economy which interprets information as the driving force for economic development. Inadequate training of the VIPs denies millions of people a chance to engage with others, participate as productive workers and feel that they are valuable members of the society. If given the tools and support to receive education and gain useful skills, the VIPs could live a fully realized life and become very productive members of the society. As a matter of fact, it would be elusive to acquire the level of education and training that will enhance their productivity without appropriate library services. It is in the light of these that this paper seeks to explore how accessible library services are, to what extent they are utilized by the VIPs, the challenges faced in library service provision and the possible solutions to the challenges.

Key Words: library, library services, visually impaired persons

Introduction

The real problem of blindness is not the loss of sight but it is the misunderstanding and lack of information which exists. If a visually impaired person (VIP) has proper training and opportunity, blindness is just but a public nuisance. The VIPs experience widespread social exclusion due to a combination of social, economic, technological and legal barriers that exist. One cause is the heightened shortage of books and other published materials in formats that are accessible to them. Libraries for the VIPs play an important role in alleviating the book deficiency experienced by so many VIPs, especially in developing countries like Kenya due to insufficient resources. In this era of information explosion, it is prudent to ensure that everybody has access to relevant and timely information to enable them get actively involved both in individual and national development irrespective of their social, physical, economic and political status. This is in appreciation of the fact that the world today is moving towards knowledge economy which interprets information as the driving force for economic development. Inadequate training of the VIPs denies millions of people a chance to engage with others, participate as productive workers and feel that they are valuable members of the society. If given the tools and support to receive education and gain useful skills, the VIPs could live a fully realized life and become very productive members of the society. As a matter of fact, it would be elusive to acquire the level of education and training that will enhance their productivity without appropriate library services.

In Kenya, it is estimated that about 370,000 people (both children and adults) suffer from various eye impairments according to a 2006 World Health Organization (WHO) estimates in collaboration with African Union for the Blind (AFUB). Low vision people form the bigger majority and the number is on the increase due to the aging population, diseases and accidents. Majority of these people are in institutions of learning in workplaces while others are homebound. It is estimated that 80% of these people live in rural areas where they access limited education and library services. Apart from the VIPs, the Braille corners also targets resources/tutors of the learning institutions for the blind and rehabilitation officers serving the VIPs.

From the survey undertaken, there was evidence that public library services needed to focus more clearly on meeting the needs of visually impaired people despite the undoubted progress since 970s. Inconsistency of provision of library services was major issues. The 1997 RNIB survey confirmed the findings of previous work particularly with regard to the lack of consistent policy making, separate budget allocation, and specialist staff and training in visual awareness. In their recommendation to managers, monitoring the use of the services, marketing research, promotion policy development and standardization and the need to strengthen relationships with social services departments were highlighted. There was concern that housebound services, which were provided by over 90% of the library authorities, were not meeting the needs of some visually impaired people. Not all those with impairment were registering with social services or

indeed with their GP and supporting those who for whatever reason were not being identified was a particular challenge.

The redefinition of educational options for Blind and Visually Impaired (BVI) students is a work-in-process that continues today. Visual impairments in infants and young children limit the range and variety of learning experiences in three areas. Interactions with the physical environment, interpersonal interactions and learning through observation modeling of others. These restrictions often leading to developmental delays in motor, social, cognitive, orientation and mobility and self-care skill

Library Services available for the VIPS

VIP library services in Kenya

Recognition of the needs of visually impaired people in Kenya was given a significant boost when a librarian in Kenya went blind in the late 1990s. He remained in employment after receiving rehabilitation training but more significantly, the needs of visually impaired people unable to read the printed word were subsequently considered at a national level. He is now about to graduate with a master's degree in the library and information from Kenyatta university.

The Kenyan society for the blind and KNLS discussed the possibility of developing Braille corners in public libraries in Kenya. As a result of a grant from the department for international development in the UK Royal National Institute for the Blind was able to run workshops in Kenya to familiarize KNLS management and libraries with the needs and requirements of visually impaired people. Then Braille corners housed in public libraries at provincials and the district level across Kenya began to be rolled out. Africa Braille services, FORCE foundation and sight savers have thereafter partnered with KNLS in various trainings and workshops. The UK Rotary club in collaboration with its Thika branch donated 100 audio book navigators and two laptops so that visually impaired person's users can now borrow leisure realizing materials as well as informational material to read at home.

At the present there are 42 braille corners serving over 10000 registered users. The library provides other facilities for the blind users in particular Perkins Braille's. Where a registered user is unable to visit the library a family members can present the registered membership card. The Nairobi main library has 900 titles available in Braille, large print and audio and the stock increases each year. This library has developed additional services for schools. There are 15 schools within 200km of the library that benefit from an outreach services to each school each month and the old ones are restricted and recycled to other schools where there are visually impaired children. Other departments/ institutions such as the Kenyatta University and Daystar University provide service for the blind users. The latter is closely working with KNLS for inclusion of visually impaired persons in the university life. The World Bank public information

center has a major role in the provision of information and communications technology services for the blind including internet access and research tools.

Library Services available to the VIPs

There are a number of services which can facilitate library service provision to the visually impaired persons. Some of the many services include large print books with a variety of titles to suit every taste and interest of the VIPs. The Kenya National library and other library service providers can stock a wide variety of large print books for the VIPs. Audio books on Compact Disks (CDs) are another library facility offered to the visually impaired and are made available in all libraries. Library service providers try to ensure titles can be requested free of charge through any library by telephone or from their website to increase efficiency in their service provision. A Play-away is a pre-recorded digital audio book and player rolled into one. It's a small, about the size of a pack of cards, so you can take a whole audio book with you wherever you go. Play-away features are easy to use, control and have a superb sound quality. Library service providers can also make these facilities available to the visually impaired. E-Audio books is another facility that can facilitate the provision of library services to visually impaired, by using the free override service anyone can download up to ten fiction and non-fiction titles for three weeks on to their computer, laptops, Mp3 player or mobile device. Some library service providers need a current library ticket to sign up and a pin for such services.

The advent of computers and the internet has drastically changed the way things are done. Library service providers can therefore ensure libraries offer free access to computers and the internet to enhance their service provision to the VIPs. The computers can have installed software that will address the needs of the VIPs. Supernova is a full two-screen reader offering magnification speech on its entire people's network Personal Computers, library service providers can make these facilities available to VIPs. They can also offer supernova pens (USB memory sticks with software already installed). These can be used on most windows based Personal Computers. A user is able to save their settings on the pen and then use them on another computer. The pens can be loaned for a specified period of time to the VIPs.

The Royal National Institute of the Blind people (RNIB) based in the UK provides a digital CD and a talking book service which offers thousands of titles delivered through the post direct to users. An easy to play or use digital player is also provided as part of the service and the machine will also play library music and audio book CDs. It's easy to register for the service; a member of the library staff will record user details on a form which will be sent to the RNIB who will then contact the user about the reading requirements. Clear-Vision is a UK postal lending library of mainstream children books with added Braille. The books all have Braille (or moon), print and pictures, making them suitable for visually impaired and sighted children and adults to share available in the library. Social talking newspapers also offer free audio versions of the news; the National talking newspaper service also provides over 200 national newspapers and magazines on cassettes and CD and on electronic service using e-mail and the internet. Big print is a weekly

large print Newspaper with a TV and radio listing. The caliber audio library provides a free nationwide postal library of unabridged recorded audio books. Available in two formats, standard cassettes and mp3 format CDs. A wide range of children titles are also available.

Audio described DVDs contain extra commentary describing body languages, scenery and actions to help visually impaired people enjoy films. The RNIB also provide a catalogue of audio described titles in large print, cassettes and a disk or by e-mail. Other services to the VIPs include visiting services providing help, advice and specialized equipment, a hospital information service based at four local hospitals in the UK and a resource center displaying a wide range of specially adapted equipment which can be purchased or tastes out grants to blinds clues around the country. Brailing services also include a regular newsletter, Information on local blind clubs around the country, Computer training - specifically adapted training courses and courses for newly registered visually impaired people, Reader at home – deliver books to you in your own home fortnightly or monthly. RAHS has a large selection of talking books and publishes lists of titles available for people using the service. Talking books can be delivered from their vans and can also be posted out to visually impaired readers. RAHS also provide books.

The Kenya National Library Services offer the following services to the VIPs; Braille library services, Audio navigators provided by the Lions Club International, Laptops with books in electronic format (Nairobi and Thika), Braille lending to individuals and institutions, Reading stories and newspapers to those with visual impairments, provisions of talking books, transcription of popular books into Braille, typing services. Some of these services are mainly available at Nairobi and not in the other branches. For example, the Nairobi main library offers the talking books service, talking computers, closed circuit TV donated by FORCE (Foundation through African Braille center), Perkins Braille and Braille and large print books.

The VIPs can borrow audio books from the library courtesy of the Lions Club International 411A (Thika, Kilimambogo) who have identified KNLS as the administrator and host of the above project. The project aims at facilitating the VIPs easy access to audio books through audio navigators. An audio navigator is a small hand-operated gadget, the size of a cell phone which has a facility of hosting between 2 to 4 audio recorded books. It has simple buttons that facilitate the user to access the stored books at ease.

From a special talking laptop, users selected books of their choice which are then downloaded into the audio navigator and lent to the borrower for an agreed period of time. Audio navigators use chargeable batteries that last between 2 to 3 days. To support this project lions club international 411A (Thika-Killimambogo) donated 100 audio navigators and 2 laptops all valued at Kshs 2.5 million. This technology was developed in Australia and is just finding its way into Africa.

VIP Services at the Kenya National Library

The Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) is a corporate body of the Kenyan government established by an Act of parliament Cap 225 (1965) to provide library and information services to the Kenyan public. In its service provision, KNLS plays a dual role of (1) public library and (2) national library of Kenya. The public library services are available in all 54 branch libraries countrywide, while the national library services are available at the headquarters in Nairobi. As an equal library service provider, KNLS services are open to all persons regardless of their race, creed, gender and physical ability, social status or political status which is also in line with International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) public library manifesto (1984). KNLS board established the first VIP unit in Nairobi in 1996. This was as a result of KNLS board acknowledgement that the visually impaired persons like other people should be facilitated and given equal opportunities to actively participate in national development. Prior to the introduction of the VIP unit at KNLS, the visually impaired people in Kenya had not been carted for especially in terms of library and information services. The visually impaired students were served by special institutions like Kenya Institute for the Blind (KIB) under the sponsorship of the Salvation Army. This service was inadequate and could only be accessible to only a few people. Initially, the KNLS VIP unit was stocked with Braille books donated by the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB), but the collection has grown with time through partnership with philanthropic organizations such as Lions Club International 411A (Thika and Killimambogo), African Braille Center and Kenya Institute for the Blind. The stock has been diversified to include large prints, books on eye care and audio books. Through collaboration with Lions Club International, 411A (Thika and Kilimambogo) KNLS has initiated a talking book project comprising of audio navigators. Resources in branch VIP units include Braille books and large print books. The Nairobi branch has modern equipment and a diversified collection. These include talking computers loaded with JAWS software, audio books (accessed through audio navigators), scripts magnifiers (CCTV and SMART VIEW) talking books and radio cassette players. The unit is managed by three staff members, two of whom are visually impaired. Branch VIP units differ in size, resources content and patronage.

Challenges Hindering the Accessibility of Library Services by the VIPS

Attitude, Culture and Behavioral challenges

Discrimination has always been a large challenge for a visually impaired person to overcome. It had never been easy but with the persistence of a few came the victory for many. Changes were made in our society because a few people refused to give up on something that meant so much to them. These changes have allowed the visually impaired person to become an equal to the average citizen as opposed to a minor. It has allowed us to compete with our peers instead of being passed over for a job or a seat in a prominent college. One hundred years ago, being visually impaired meant being condemned to a life of confinement and institutionalization. It was

almost unheard of that visually impaired people undertake steps to become educated and employed. Often seen as helpless by society and as a burden by the family, they could only dream of having a family and living an independent life. As the years passed, many people have fought for our rights. They stubbornly stood up for us so that today, people like us (the blind and visually impaired) have the chance to live an independent life as freely as anyone else. The challenges of yesterday become the opportunities of today.

Persons with disabilities are found in any society on the globe. Blindness as a disease and condition are not new to most cultures of the world but the possibility of educating them looks more of a mirage than reality. Obani (20004) avers that some cultures view people with disabilities and handicaps as having been cursed. In a developing country like Kenya, where the literacy level is around the halfway mark for the visually impaired, there are still widespread primitive and superstitions beliefs about handicaps. To him, people with disabilities are very likely to be wrongly perceived and therefore treated in an unfriendly manner. This, to some extent, may form the basis of argument for the impediments in the process of making available library services to the VIPs.

Challenges related to education, training and rehabilitation

The lack of training, rehabilitation and education of the blind and the visually impaired denies millions of people a chance to engage with others, participate as productive worker and feel that they are valuable members of the society. If given the tools and support to receive the education and gain useful skills, blind or low vision people could live more fully realize their lives as well as their communities.

There are nearly 6 million pre-school and school-aged children who are blind or have low vision al over the world. 80% of these children live in developing countries where less than one out of every 10 currently has access to education. Among the causes for this inequality are severe shortage of trained teachers and appropriate materials; lack of early identification, referral and intervention, lack of awareness of rights to education by parents and countries and limited public policy and advocacy. Of the approximately 160 million individuals who are blind or have low vision worldwide, just 10% have access to rehabilitation services-a wide range of clinical therapy and non-clinical trainings to provide blind or low vision persons with the skills and tools to maintain a safe active and independent lifestyle. The unemployment rate for this group ranges from 5-9% people who are visually impaired are five times more likely to be unemployed than the general public. This high rate of unemployment is as a result of factors such as of potential employers misconceptions and in developing countries several lack of training and technological resources. Excluded from the workplace and unable to be productive citizens, people who are visually impaired become discouraged and experience social and economic isolation.

Technological challenges

Libraries are under ever-increasing pressure to enhance the technological capabilities in order to meet the academic demands and compete with alternative information providers for survival. This transition period of shifting to the modern librarianship from traditional librarianship is very crucial particularly to the librarians of the developing countries as they are experiencing severe shortages in terms of funds, technical persons and ICT experts. In addition, there is an obvious reluctance towards the technology and new information media from the part of users as well as from the part of the library staff. The main reason for this divergence is the fear of technology due to lack of confidence.

A Broadest Spectrum of Library Customers (inclusion of People with special needs) create significant differences in library service demands, with the most drastic difference between the Great Generation and the new generation of technology savvy users. This drastic difference creates a heavy demand on librarians to continue traditional library services for some 'patrons' (traditional users), while creating new technology-based services for Digital Native 'customers'. Digital Fugitive and Digital Native customers are at opposite ends of the customer service spectrum, but both deserve excellent library services. To ensure that future Kenya is capable of participating in the global economy, a major priority is to teach information literacy to young people, especially the VIPs to be able to use all the technology effectively to access and manage information. On one hand, in most cases, especially in Kenya, the visually impaired are technologically left behind and most of them do not have access to technology education. On the other hand, most librarians are technologically illiterate than their customers. The role of librarian as expert researcher handing information to a waiting patron is the antithesis to the collaborative, participative mindset of the emerging new generation customer. In order to prepare for the increasingly more information literate generation of customer, librarians need to become guides for information literate participants and their levels of technology education increased.

Further, computers are drastically replacing the librarians. This is because of the efficiency and speed of computers in information provision. "Computers are a million times faster than they were 10 to 15 years ago. We have the computing capacity now to deal with, one trillion calculations a second, what we only could have dreamed of doing when we started working on a degree program more than 30 years ago, we can do today in days or a month. It is a totally different world today." These creates the challenge of transition to Digital Content because digital media providers, like industry leader Overdrive, provide greater access to eBooks, audio books, music, and video (over 300,000 titles) than our local library can afford to offer from its own collection, traditional circulation is being overshadowed by electronic formats. For those who prefer to access it today, rather than wait for 2-3 weeks to check it out at their library when they finally get it in their catalogue (the one book for one customer model applies to eBooks also),

These technological changes seem to devalue the importance and the benefits of the library to the community. The impact is the forced lay-off of dozens of staff, and more local library closures bringing a frightening issue to the forefront of our professional concerns – the role of the library in the 21st Century! Many questions than can be answered linger in our minds, Can or should libraries try to compete with commercial information providers like Google, Netflix and Amazon? Can or should libraries try to compete with digital technologies like smartphones, tablets, and geo-social networking? How does the library retain its relevance in its local community that is a part of a global community?

Since March 2007 when the project was commenced, users have accessed over 200 different books, mainly fiction. Through the outreach programme, KNLS provide the services to the Thika, Kitui, Kajiado and several parts of Nairobi. It is hoped that this project will translate into promoting and sustenance of a reading culture among the VIPs. The navigators can be connected to earphones and can also be used by sighted people as they continue with other chores e.g. driving, kitchen worked etc. they have a clear and audible voice and are portable.

Possible Solutions to the Challenges of Accessibility to the Library Services to the VIPs

The lack of training, rehabilitation and education of the blind and the visually impaired denies millions of people a chance to engage with others, participate as productive worker and feel that they are valuable members of the society. If given the tools and support to receive the education and gain useful skills, blind or low vision people could live more fully realize their lives as well as their communities. Education for the blind children or children who have low vision provides the traditional academic experience with the additional of specialized services to aid in the development of critical life skills for adulthood. Children who are blind or have low vision can attend school in inclusive or integrated classrooms with trained teachers and most equipment and materials or in specialized schools or centers. The following needs should be addressed to work towards correcting educational inequalities affecting the VIPs:

1. Awareness – in many communities families, healthcare professionals and educators are simply not aware that blind or low vision children can successfully complete their education. Community based awareness programs can educate communities and bring key stakeholders together toward inclusion of disabled student in educational systems.
2. Teacher training and materials – the majority of children who are blind or have low vision can be educated in local schools if teachers are trained appropriately. Teachers also need equipment to prepare teaching materials and student must have access to tools and learning materials in alternative formats.
3. Facilities and equipment's – some students, especially those with multiple disabilities are enrolled in special schools or centers where additional equipment, materials and interdisciplinary teams are needed. These facilities can also serve as resource centers for integrated/inclusive schools.

4. Specialist teachers – teachers with extensive specialized training can work most effectively with visually impaired children. Training range from short courses on proper use of equipment and materials to comprehensive degree program.

In addition, rehabilitation consists of a wide range of clinical therapy and non-clinical training to provide people who are blind or have low vision with the skills and tools to maintain a safe, active and independent lifestyle. While rehabilitation cannot restore lost sight, it can help individuals maximize any remaining vision so that they as well as those who are blind can travel safely take care of their needs, meet their career goals, participate in education and enjoy leisure activities. To help the people who are blind or have low vision reach these goals, the following needs should be addressed:

1. Awareness – in many communities, family's healthcare professionals and business owners are not aware of the employment capabilities of people who are blind or have low vision. A community-based program can help increase public awareness of the employability and entrepreneurial capabilities of people who are visually impaired, change employment attitudes and practices and create a network of mentors.
2. Training – employment related rehabilitation services for the blind and visually impaired may include training with assertive technology. Braille literacy and business skills as well as customized vocational preparatory training, secondary level education courses, mentorship and provision of entrepreneurial opportunities.
3. Professional development – Transition-aged youth and adults who are blind having low vision require access to educational opportunities to increase their work-readiness. Program is offered in traditional classroom setting or with access to affordable technology, students can participate in distance or e-learning webinars and virtual coaching.

Further, students with visual impairments sometimes have fewer natural learning experiences because they are not able to observe objects and interactions. The areas of learning which are particularly affected are Concept development, Interpersonal communication skills, Life skills, Orientation or mobility skills and Academic development. Development concepts are the basis of all learning. Spatial relationships, time, body awareness and self-awareness are just a few examples of fundamental concepts individuals need to make sense of their world. These concepts may need to be specifically taught to students with visual impairments. Although the main focus will be on academic development, providing a variety of opportunities for personal development can have a profound impact on a student who is visually impaired. Encouraging a positive self-image, appropriate dress, well developed self-care skills, good interpersonal communication skills, appropriate behaviors, increased independence and productive community living can all be tremendously beneficial in the healthy growth of students with visual impairments. As with all students, relationships are important for students with visual impairments and the classroom can be a wonderful place for development and maturity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Disability is not inability, so they say. People with disability, especially the visually impaired persons have strength and capability to make significant contributions to the society. Education and training are among the key pillars to community development and library and library services are at the epicenter of educational and academic achievement. Increasing the library services and making them available to the VIPs is a great milestone towards giving the VIPs an equal chance of contributing to the development of the community. Therefore, there is need to address the challenges and bridge the gap that continues to widen among the VIPs and the community at large.

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Categories of Visually Impaired in Kenya. Heiman (2004) in International Journal of Special Education records that in Kenya, the Low Vision Project, groups students with visual impairments into five categories. Among this disadvantaged group are the visually impaired. Inaccessible information is a major barrier facing blind and partially sighted people. The challenge of providing equitable library and information services to the visually impaired requires the cooperation of all stakeholders. Williamson, Schauder and Bow (2000) state that people who are blind and sight impaired deserve to be provided with a range of ways of meeting information needs, as are available for people with normal sight so as to equitably participate in the information economy. 1.3. Aim of the Study.