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**PROVISION OF REFERENCE AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES
TO PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED PERSONS IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND
PROSPECTS**

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Abstract

This paper examines the provision of reference and information services to the physically challenged persons in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. The article demystifies the conceptual framework of information services and physically challenged persons, the information needs of the physically challenged as a concept was succinctly analyzed and the attention or relegation received by this group of library users discussed. The public library for instance is there to provide its services to all classes of users irrespective of age, sex, colour and disability. This paper is therefore timely as it ascertained how all libraries can help to meet up with the information needs of this set of users, challenges encountered in doing so and what a developing country stands to benefit when information services is adequately being provided for her disabled citizens otherwise known as the physically challenged persons. In the end, conclusion and recommendations were proffered.

Keywords: Information, information services, developmental strategy, physically challenged, public libraries, Nigeria.

Introduction

Ours is literally a nascent country which is still developing, funds are needed for numerous developmental facilities even in the midst of scarce resources. Nigerian libraries especially public libraries have major roles to play in supporting education, civilization, information, and transformation of the citizens. In developing countries like Nigeria, this becomes quite cumbersome because of the low attention given to all types of libraries; as this poses a setback to citizens. It constitutes a bigger threat to the section of the population that are less privileged otherwise known as the physically challenged persons (PCPs). Libraries are therefore advised to brace up in order to ensure that there is adequate and equal access to information by all and sundry. This brings to mind the concept of effective reference and information services. Ibrahim and Aliyu (2016) in Mady stated that reference and information services are the personal help and assistance that are rendered to the library users or patrons by librarians that are in the reference section of the library in pursuit of information. Reference and information services (RIS) in libraries is not only a unifying activity but also encourages effective use of libraries. This Achebe (2012) supported by saying: Reference and information services is one of the services in libraries where contact between the readers and library materials is established through professional assistance, and also matching the user with the library materials which could be in either digital or print format. As important as the concept of RIS, it is even more important to those that are physically handicapped; this is because they may not be able to access some library information unaided. It must be noted by all most especially librarians that the functions of the library is no longer confined to mere keeping of books, 21st century libraries now advocate for evolving trends like cloud computing, ICT literacy, knowledge management, maker space etc. The above listed trends can be of immense benefit to

the physically challenged categories of library users hence, Ifidon (2006) noted that reference and information services (RIS) practitioners assist users of the library in various ways for instance in consultation of sources of information or ideas on recreation discoveries and wealth creation. The client according to Ifidon may benefit on guidance on the way to search and use sources and also how to be trained to acquire skill of independent search in libraries.

There are different behavioural actions that libraries and librarians are expected to contend with when we talk about RIS. This will make RIS staff to be more proactive as Echebe (2012) noted that human behavior is complex and difficult to handle especially when there is an expressed need unmet. It can be more devastating and frustrating when it has to do with the physically challenged that are already disillusioned and have a complex in them. Providing adequate information to the disadvantaged (physically) is very vital as it will enable them have a sense of belonging, find solutions to bordering issues and live a more comfortable life. This will not be possible if libraries don't make deliberate effort to overhaul their reference and information services department. Sequel to this submission, Aina and Ajiferuke (2002) noted that all categories of library users require different services; hence librarians are to ensure that there is variety of services available. They went further to state that information services needed by public library users are not static but change regularly.

Specifically, the public library is saddled with the responsibility of providing information to all the citizens irrespective of their physical ability/disability, colour, creed, character etc. It is in connection to this fact that the right to information is seen as a basic human right which must not be trampled upon. Ojo and Shabi (2011) in Ali are of the opinion that public libraries are public institutions created with public funds for public education, literary information, culture, entertainment and recreation. In a growing nation like ours, libraries play very vital role in

making information accessible to the physically challenged and the other categories of users; this may be in digital or physical format.

As noted by Iroaganachi and Ilogho (2012), consistent access to reference and information services by all users of the public library including children and physically challenged will automatically lead to independent and creative learning which can as well make a developing nation to be productive as all actors will be given the right platform to be efficient.

It must be stated therefore that the reference library is supposed to be literally seen as a moving encyclopedia, always ready to provide answers to all questions raised. For instance, in ensuring that the needs of the physically challenged (PC) are adequately met to the later, the following points are considered as noted by Ifidon & Ifidon (2008):

- i. Interpersonal relationship between the library users and the librarian
- ii. Meeting the information needs of the physically challenged fully
- iii. Using all kinds of internal and external resources to satisfy users
- iv. Professional training and subject knowledge
- v. Application of empathy on the part of librarians
- vi. Currency and recency of information
- vii. Quality of information arising from the accuracy of information provided

When the above listed points are fully in practice, then the library is set to provide its reference and information services to its users irrespective of physical ability/inability. In meeting their information needs firmly, the following are the various services to encapsulate:

- a. Information service that involves either finding a required information on behalf of the customer or assisting the customer find information

- b. Instruction in the use of library resources and services
- c. Customer guidance in selecting the most appropriate information sources and services

(Ibrahim and Aliyu, 2016) in Bopp and Smith.

In dealing with the physically challenged category that from the library users, the third point is therefore valid as it is capable of helping them to access their information needs easily and timely irrespective of their condition.

Concept of Physically Challenged Persons (PCPs)

To be physically challenged means a situation when there is a limitation in a person's physical functioning, mobility, dexterity or stamina (web.archive.org., 2003). Being physically challenged can be temporal, short term or long term or may go into remission. It must be noted that a person may be born with a disability or may acquire it after been born which could be through injury, illness, accident, effects of medical treatment. There are several physically challenged situations which could emanate from:

Amputation

Spinal cord injury

Arthritis

Muscular dystrophy

Cerebral palsy

Musculoskeletal injuries (e.g. back injury)

Multiple sclerosis

The physically challenged persons are also human beings who form relatively a large population of Nigeria as according to James (2017), there are over 25 million of them having difficult challenges of moving around”. This according to James was made known by the National Coordinator of the Association of Indigenous People with Disabilities (AIPD), in the person of Dr. Josephy Ify Chikunie, who is presently a physically challenged lecturer at the University of Lagos.

Physical challenge limits the ability or capability of the person involved to function effectively like his peers as may be expected. This can normally become obvious to people through the person’s mobility or immobility of the individual, and can affect the person’s ability to carry out his or her day to day activities.

In a primary note, a physically challenged person is one who has a disability with his body and as such he is unable to do the basic/some basic things that other people do easily. The concept of physically challenged can be used interchangeably with physically disabled. For the purpose of this paper, the term physically challenged people will be used to mean the set of library patrons/users that have one form of physical deformity or the other; it could be major or minor.

Information Needs of Physically Challenged Persons in Nigeria

The physically challenged are human beings like any other person therefore; there are certain needs they long for. To Saliu, Rabiun and Alabi (2016) while quoting Adesina, the needs of physically challenged persons can be categorized as follows:

- Information for educational development
- Information needed for social and personal development. On this, information is needed in the area of assistive devices that may aid mobility.
- The physically challenged also need information for recreational purposes: This encapsulates light reading materials.

It must be noted therefore that in trying to meet the above information needs of physically challenged in the library, they are likely to need more assistance than the non-challenged users.

It is also important to note that the information needs of the physically challenged group are quite numerous some of which are available in our libraries; some of these needs according to Alia (n.d) are music collections, spoken words collections, picture books, books in enlarged print and high-interest/low-vocabulary materials.

In the writer's point of view those that are challenged physically are expected to be treated fairly and firmly by librarians in a bid to providing their information needs. To this end, some of the major information needs of the physically challenged persons are stated as follows;

- i. Educational information
- ii. Employment information

- iii. Scholarship
- iv. Local and state happenings
- v. Marital information
- vi. Health information
- vii. Recovering information
- viii. Recreational information

Both in the developed and developing countries in the world today, physically challenged people still strive to be educated/literate irrespective of their condition. Some that are focused often perform better than their colleagues that are not physically challenged. Having being educated, the next thing that comes to mind is how to get a befitting paid job, this, librarians should take cognizance of as they attend to this group of library users. This category of library users also try within their means to be productive and remarkable in whatever they do; this will no doubt make them visit the library for the way forward.

They also need to be abreast and up-to-date in different happenings both at the state and national levels otherwise they gradually become a group of citizens that are not only handicapped physically but also socially. Information materials like magazines, bulletins and newspapers should be made available to the PCPs.

Health information is also vital in the lives of the physically challenged persons (PCPs). This is hinged on the fact that they also want to stay away from any kind of sickness in order remain healthy.

The PCPs are very optimistic set of library users, they strongly believe that someday their present condition will change for the better hence they consciously often look for information that will cure or ameliorate their current predicament.

They are also most times disillusioned and downcast, therefore they should be consistently encouraged. This, librarians can do by a face to face interaction and also purchase of recreational information collections.

Effectively Rendering Information Services to Physically Challenged Persons (PCPs)

As stated earlier, the public library is referred to as the people's University; this implies that it can simply be accessible by everybody. If this is true as stated, it is therefore expedient for 21st century libraries and librarians to be more focused in meeting the enormous information needs of users; having the PCPs in mind also. The following points are to be taken note of in the library when dealing with the PCPs as noted by Echezona, Osadebe and Asogwa (2011);

- In establishing a library for instance, the building is to be modernized in a core flexible way having the needs of this group of users in mind. These may include ramps and lifts for easy movement in the library, lightening within the library, special parking space, special toilets, etc. it is in line with this that Carter (2002) suggested that it is important to build a library that will literally be able to accommodate all users instead of building one that will need further adjustment in the near future.
- Furniture is another key area that needs attention. This is in line with the special adaptation of the library environment to enable users effectively access library materials. Also, the shelves should be in the sizes that will enable access to all.

- In a bid to improving information services to the PCPs, there is need for information repackaging. Information repackaging is simply the addition of value to information towards making it more attractive and appealing. This may have to do with the format of information being provided which could be print or soft copy depending on the choice of the library users (PCPs).
- Procurement of headphones in the library should be encouraged to help students listen to audio book (in the case of hearing impairment) and manifest purchased for the visually impaired library users.
- Acquisition policy: This is a library written or non-written policy that states the kinds of materials to be acquired for the library. In serving the physically challenge persons, this document/policy can be made flexible to give room for the acquisition of materials for the handicapped.
- Ideally, it is important to employ medical practitioners that will offer medical attention to the PCPs. On the other hand, this point calls for a debate as the antagonists will remind us of the essence of hospitals. Nonetheless, this is paramount as it will spur users to always visit the library. To this end, the governments of developing countries must look into this.

On its part, IFLA (2005) notes that the following must be considered when planning for a physical space in the library, these are:

- a. Clear and easy to read signs
- b. Shelves reachable from a wheelchair
- c. Reading and computer tables of varying heights throughout the library
- d. Visible and audible fire alarm

- e. Staff trained to assist patrons in case of emergency
- f. Chairs with sturdy armrests.

According to IFLA (2005):

“All parts of the library should be accessible. The space should be logically arranged with clear signs and floor plan posted close to the entrance. Service desks should be located close to the entrance. Wheelchairs should be able to move around inside the whole library. There should be a lift for wheelchair ramp, if the library has more than one level. There should be no doorsteps and all doors should have automatic openers. Ideally, shelves should be reachable from a wheelchair. A certain number of tables and computer work stations should be adopted for persons in wheelchairs. There should be at least one toilet for disabled persons (IFLA, 2005).

Challenges Faced in Providing Reference and Information Services to the Physically Challenged Persons (PCPs)

Explaining this concept, it is salient to look at the challenges from two major standpoints, first being the challenges encountered by the PCPs and the challenges faced by information professionals in a bid to providing the information needs of this group of users. Some of the problems faced by the physically challenged persons are;

- i. High level of unemployment
- ii. Marginalization and discrimination of the PCPs
- iii. Very high degree of poverty among PCPs
- iv. Problem of inferiority complex among the physically challenged
- v. Lack of appropriate furniture in the library for this class of users

- vi. Library staff attitude towards the PCPs is horrible.
- vii. Lack of appropriate orientation programme to the group

On the challenges faced by librarians in providing reference and information services to the physically challenged persons, Echezona, Osadebe and Asogwa (2011) observed the following:

- There is the problem of library staff specifically and professionally trained to attend to the information needs of the challenged class. Don't forget that this class of users need librarians that have empathy, patience and vast experience because of the facilities that may be involved e.g. Braille
- Fund is a major setback in rendering effective services to the PCPs. The problem of inadequate funding in libraries is literally as old as man, it therefore becomes difficult to acquire the appropriate materials and hire the professionals required in these libraries
- Absence of inclusive library services: inclusive library services means that when planning for the library building, there is need to encapsulate the envisaged needs of the less privileged in all aspects of the public library.
- There is also the problem of inadequate skilled manpower to produce the materials needed by the physically challenged persons in the library. This could be in the area of furniture and library information resources.
- The perpetual negative mentality of librarians about the PCPs. Some librarians often see this category of library users as liability, once that mindset is nurtured, it becomes difficult to effectively attend to the information needs of library physically challenged users.

- Poor remuneration of library staff: It is no longer hidden that librarians are deliberately neglected in terms of wages; they are poorly paid which by extension affects their level of output or productivity. This also affects the way they attend to their patrons.

What a Country Like Nigeria Stands to Gain When Effectively Rendering Library Information Services to the Physically Challenged

It is obvious that our country Nigeria is still struggling with making adequate information available to her able bodied citizens, not to talk of shifting more attention to the physically challenged. The country forgets in a hurry that some of the challenged persons are even more industrious and talented than the able bodied fellows. We shall therefore have a survey of how some of these physically challenged persons have been treated in recent time in a country like Nigeria. We shall thereafter look at what the country stands to gain if they are well attended to in meeting their information needs.

Adebayo (2018) reported that the Oyo state government under Mr. Ibikunle Amosun demolished the Music House, a building owned by a popular Juju music Icon called Yinka Ayefele. Ayefele has been confined to a wheelchair since he had an auto crash some years back. The building was said to be worth over 800 million naira located along Challenge Toll Gate Express Way Houses, Ayefele's Radio Station, Press FM, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Still on neglect to the less privileged, Kayemi (2013) reported that the then state Governor, Adams Oshiomole did the unthinkable when he told a crying widow to go and die. In the video that went viral, the Governor was heard telling the woman: you are a widow! Go and die! The widow was said to have broken the law after she was caught selling her wares in a

prohibited area. Kayemi stated that the lady's plea fell on deaf ears as her items were confiscated by the Governor's aids.

Abdullahi (2018) while stating the grievances over challenges that have to do with negligence, stigma and gender disparity of physically challenged persons in Kaduna state appealed to Governor Elrufai to: always capture the physically challenged people in the list of students to be sent on overseas scholarship. Abdullahi noted that there is need to extend a hand of fellowship to this class of people as some of them are highly intelligent, talented and highly skilled.

The story is not different in Akwa Ibom state as Onuegbu (2018) reported that the government under the watch of Emmanuel Udom terminated the scholarship scheme and impress for the disabled stating that the scholarship was stopped in 2012 and impress terminated in 2015. This according to him led to many being withdrawn from school. It is a known fact that disabled people are often neglected, but the multiplier effects of accommodating them and providing them with all necessary reference and information services in a typical library cannot be over emphasized.

- In providing equal and effective access to information in the library, this group of users is made to have a full sense of belonging, this is connected to the concept of true inclusiveness which therefore will quell any type of agitation that may have erupted from the physically challenged. Don't forget the public libraries is for all.
- By providing information readily available to the physically challenged, they are given a receptive platform to develop themselves; this they do by reading about their

- conditions, navigate treatment options and be able to locate government benefits they are eligible to.
- There is the tendency of boosting a literate society with information. Quite a number of people in Nigeria today are one way or the other disabled/physically challenged. With effective provision or access to information, there will be steady development in all facets of life. Adelaja (2009) observed that ignorance is a killer of people's destiny, some of these physically challenged persons are very talented as stated earlier, it will therefore take an effective information provision to unmask the potential which is deposited in them. This will in no small measure improve on the economy of the country.
 - A major problem with the physically challenged persons is the problem of unemployment in the developing countries like Nigeria, when an effective reference and information service is rendered to them. It is capable of unlocking some sources of funds for small scale business. This will go a long way by assisting government and the country as job opportunities are very limited.

Findings and Recommendations

1. Public libraries are for all category of people, they should be run as such
2. Over 25 million Nigerians suffer from one form of physical disability or the other.
3. The physically challenged persons have their own information needs like any other persons, their needs should be attended to by libraries and information centres.
4. Information services to the physically challenged persons in Nigerian libraries is at its low ebb, should be encouraged.

5. Challenges abound to the physically challenged people and the library in a bid to rendering information services to them. They can be remedied.
6. Nigeria as a nation can climb taller if effective information is provided to the physically disabled people, the government should take note.

Concluding Remarks

This paper concludes that there is no country where there are no physically challenged/disabled persons, it will therefore be fair that governments at all levels must not relegate this group of people as library users; their information needs and resources should be factored into the budget of the library especially the public library. In the case where these library users are not given attention by our government, the libraries and librarians are to therefore take charge by setting the pace. This will be in connection with the latin words: “Da mihi locum et teram movembo”! ... Give me a place to stand and I will move the world. Physically challenged people should be given the platform to journey to stardom.

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