

# Equal Access to Information: Serving the Needs Of Visually Impaired in Zambia

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*The lack of accessible information designed specifically for visually impaired communities is a barrier which profoundly affects the democratic rights within these communities. This barrier can have significant impact on their ability to participate in social activities. This paper will highlight the challenges being faced by the visually impaired persons when accessing the information services needed to make them active members of a democratic society. Information and education, which are major ingredients in true democracy, are not adequately reaching visually impaired communities, creating underserved populations in the nation. The authors wish to examine challenges being faced by VIPs in Zambia and hopefully bring to the attention of society the need to provide information to these members of our society.*

**Keywords:** *Visually Impaired Persons, Information services, Persons with disabilities, Braille, Libraries for the Blind*

## 1. Introduction

We are greatly thankful and happy to be given the wonderful opportunity to participate in the SCECSAL and to present our paper on *Equal Access to information: Serving the needs of Visually Impaired in Zambia*. We have faith that this Conference provides us an opportunity to bring to the attention of the library fraternity the information needs and services of visually impaired persons.

## 2. Background

The 2000 census indicates that out of the total population of Zambia (9.9million), 256, 690 (2.7%) is disabled. The blind form 5.8% of this number. Approximately 900,000 people (or 1.2 % of the total population) have some form of visual impairment, including 60,000 people who are totally blind. Despite the universal availability of basic education in Zambia, only 6% of visually impaired people (VIPs) graduate from high school, and 20% achieve some form of basic education. Approximately 30% are in regular income-earning employment. Most of blind children in Zambia are generally educated either in schools for the blind or in integrated schools (schools for both the able bodied and handicapped pupils). After graduating from school, some of these people may be employed in the civil service mostly as telephone operators, and recently as teachers but the majority are unemployed. A number of vocational and rehabilitation centres have been established by the Government under the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS). These centres provide basic skills in craft, such as basketry, and secretarial services. Since these centres are not adequate to accommodate all the training needs of VIPs, some of them get enrolled in institutions for able bodied persons.

The welfare for the VIPs has taken a slow movement compared to other fields of welfare of people with disabilities. Since 1964, the visually impaired persons started becoming more active, establishing their own associations and NGO to look into their welfare, and by so doing actively participate in the social and political development of the nation.

### 3. Current Situation

There have been a number of Zambian 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 has legislated to ensure that all enterprises employ visually impaired people at a minimum of 2% of their workforce. Legislation has been put in place since 2002 to ensure that all of buildings being constructed have access needs of disabled people addressed.

### 4. Governmental support for people with disabilities

The Government of Zambia has adopted a number of laws and policies pertaining to people with disabilities, including their right to productive and decent work and to basic services, workers' compensation, social security, and entrepreneurship development. The main ones are listed below:

**The 1991 Zambian Constitution, amended in 1996**, contains one provision on disability relating to the provision of just and equitable social benefits and amenities suitable to the needs of disabled people. Currently the country's Constitution is under review and the draft constitution has been transcribed into Braille; we hope the final constitution will be transcribed into Braille.

**The Persons with Disabilities Act 1996**, prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability and establishes a state agency-the Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities - to promote, coordinate and provide services for disabled persons.

**Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training (TEVET) Act, 1998**, states that the "special needs of people with disabilities will be taken into consideration."

**Workers' Compensation Act (No. 10 of 1999)**, revises the law relating to the compensation of workers for disabilities suffered or diseases contracted during the course of employment.

**The National Policy on Education, 1996**, recognizes the right to education for each individual, regardless of personal circumstances or capacity. The Ministry of Education has overall responsibility for education, including special education.

**The National Employment and Labour Market Policy (NELP), 2005**, demonstrates the government's intentions to provide for improved care and support services to vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities.

**The National Long-Term Vision 2030** articulates the country's development agenda for the next twenty-five years. One of the objectives is to make Zambia a middle-income country by 2030 in which all people will be provided with opportunities to improve their well-being.

**The Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP) 2006 to 2010**, among other objectives, aims to attain the full participation, equality and empowerment of persons with

disabilities. It seeks to provide enhanced support to disabled persons through increased government spending on disability; developing inclusive mainstream policies; review of existing pieces of legislation; and the establishment and/or strengthening of institutions and systems that cater for people with disabilities. This has been transcribed into Braille.

**National Youth Policy, 2006**, aims at integrating disabled youth in mainstream programmes and projects targeting the youth.

**Citizen Economic Empowerment Commission Act, 2008**, which is also in Braille, aims at empowering people with disabilities economically through start-up businesses that will employ others.

## **5. Key ministries and agencies responsible for disability issues**

- The Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) is entrusted with formulating policy for people with disabilities.
- The Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities has the responsibility to coordinate the implementation of the National Policy on Disability and acts as an advisory body to the Ministry.
- Ministry of Education has overall responsibility for education, including special education.
- Ministry of Science, Technology and Vocational Training has responsibility for developing science and technology and for the provision of technical education and vocational training.

### **5.1 Other important institutions:**

- National Vocational Rehabilitation Centre run by MCDSS
- National Trust for the Disabled under MCDSS
- Zambia Agency for People with Disabilities (ZAPD)
- Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training Authority

### **5.2 Key international standards on disability and their status**

- International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention Concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation, 1958, (No. 111). Status: ratified by the Zambian government, Oct 23, 1979.
- ILO Convention Concerning Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons), 1983, (No. 159). Status: ratified by the Zambian government, January 5, 1989.
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and Optional Protocol. Status: signed by the Zambian government on May 5, 2008, not yet ratified.
- Zambia works to implement the Action Plan established for the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities, extended to December 2019.

### **5.3 Organizations for persons with disabilities**

At the federal level, the Zambia Federation of the Disabled (ZAFOD) is an umbrella organization representing several disabled persons organizations. Its main activities include advocacy and awareness-raising. It also provides small loans to people with disabilities and training in small-scale business management.

- Zambia National Association of Disabled Women
- Zambia National Association of the Deaf
- Zambian National Association of the Hearing Impaired
- Zambian National Association of the Partially Sighted
- Zambian National Association of the Physically Handicapped
- Zambian Association of Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities
- Zambian National Federation of the Blind
- National Vocational and Rehabilitation Centre
- Zambia Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities
- Disability Initiatives Foundation
- Disacare Wheelchair Centre
- Zambia National Library and Cultural Centre for the Blind
- Zambia Association on the Employment for Persons with Disabilities

#### **5.4 Difficulties of the visually impaired persons**

What is so difficult to live with blindness? What can be done for blind people so that they do not feel the inconvenience throughout their lives? Needless to say, visually impaired persons are not able to see completely or have a very low vision, and at times cannot hear completely or are hard-of-hearing. In cases where both ears and eyes, which are important organs for transmitting information, are damaged at the same time, it is difficult to gain access to information. Consequently, VIPs are people with serious information disability. They cannot receive visual information such as characters, visual image and landscapes through their eyes. In addition to lack of information, blind people who cannot communicate with the world outside may fall into mental loneliness, which may accumulate stress and in some cases result in serious mental crisis. Of course, overwhelming flood of information might be a problem. However, blind people are hardly exposed to the 'air' of information. Human beings should not live without 'air'. Therefore, overcoming the information disability is an important issue for the visually impaired persons to live an active independent life in the society. A variety of communication manners is exercised amongst the blind community such as typing with Braille directly on their fingers (finger Braille), using mobile phones, etc. Some blind people are able to articulate several communication manners, depending upon their audiences.

#### **5.5 Information Media for Blind People**

A variety of information/telecommunication media such as television, radio, newspaper, telephone, fax machine, personal computer, etc. are available. Lately, portable telecommunication equipments including cellular phone have spread out quickly and widely. However, most of these media are not easily accessible to VIPs. In addition some of this equipment carries only visual information, rendering them useless or meaningless for the VIPs. As noted earlier, there is a variety of information media and the world is filled with transmission of information. For example, there are increasing numbers of TV channels including satellite broadcasting. The competition among TV programs is also increasing. However, for the blind people sitting in front of a TV unit, the unit itself is only a useless box. On the other hand most of the available information is in print format. Consequently the VIPs heavily depend on the goodwill of friends or relatives to read print information for them. This limits their participation in national issues. Therefore challenges faced by visually impaired have implications on how service providers should meet the needs of these people.

Fortunately, the existence of Braille and magnified characters has made it possible for VIPs to access information without the assistance of someone else. Visually impaired persons can read

and write with either Braille or enlarged letters. Through reading and writing, VIPs may have access to information around them. Thus Braille, for the blind who have already acquired Braille literacy, and magnified characters, for partially sighted people, are acting as the most important bridge to information. We believe that, if a VIP is able to read and write either Braille or enlarged characters, he or she may have access to information even though it is not sufficient. Information sources other than Braille, such as radio, Internet specifically catering for the blind are necessary and vital to the community and as such need to be maintained at their current levels. Although Internet has certainly improved the availability of public information, very few VIPs in Zambia can afford access to quality computer technology.

### **5.6 The Role of the Zambia National Library and Cultural Centre for the Blind**

The Zambia National and Cultural Centre for the Blind (ZNLCCB) was established in 1993 by the Finnish Federation of Visually Impaired (FFVI) and given as a gift to the Zambia National Federation of the Blind. The Library is the first of its kind in the country and no other library provides the services it offers. The mission of the Library is to promote literacy and reading among the visually impaired persons for self-sustenance and national development. In 2002 FFVI stopped providing financial support to ZNLCCB and the Zambian government took over the funding responsibility. Since then, the Centre has been receiving a monthly grant from the government through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services.

The primary objectives of the Library are:

1. to produce and provide education materials and other reading and information materials for the visually impaired, whether they be in Braille, audio, large print or electronic
2. to offer Braille literacy courses to the newly visually impaired
3. to provide and promote cultural activities such as music, literature, theatre, and handcrafts among the visually impaired
4. to network with other libraries and related institutions at national and international levels in order to maximize exchange of information and other resources
5. to advocate and lobby to the government and other related organizations to enable the visually impaired access information

The centre is a multi purpose library with lending and borrowing facilities, a recording studio and a transcription service. It has 35 corresponding centres countrywide that are either housed by city councils or are attached to schools and colleges. (Kanyengo, 2008). Services range from providing Braille books, video cassettes, and repackaging of information for the targeted users. Thus ZNLCCB was established to provide the activities and service for visually impaired persons throughout the nation. The Centre also provides training in ICT to VIPs. In order to achieve these objectives the Library intended to establish branches throughout the country and to work with other libraries in institutions dealing with visually impaired persons. New services have been introduced such as psych-social counselling of newly blinded adult persons, mobility and orientation training, personal management skills training, and computer literacy.

The Library has four departments, namely: the Transcription Department, the Library, and the Studio. The Transcription department transcribes print materials into Braille. Most of these print materials come from the Government, NGOs, and institutions of learning (mainly basic schools, high schools and colleges). The department has transcribed the National Constitution Review Committee proceedings, several publications on HIV/AIDS, and other government documents. ZNLCCB also has a studio for production of talking books on CDs and cassettes. However, the equipment is obsolete and requires replacement. Other problems are lack of maintenance and lack of spare parts for the equipment.

ZNLCCB is expected to disseminate these materials to various information centres such as public libraries. ZNLCCB has 35 centres in the country where Braille materials are distributed. These

centres include schools, rehabilitation centres for the blind, and public libraries. Some of the centres are: Kangonga-Ndola, Fisenge-Luanshya, Kambowa-Ndola, Masaiti-Ndola Rural, and Zambia Council for the Handicapped HQ. However, most of these centres are no longer active.

The Library provides information services to VIP mainly in Braille, talking books, and cassettes. The library stocks materials in formats accessible to VIPs. It has 671 large materials, 235 sound recordings, 175 cassettes, 3, 501 Braille materials in its collection. The Library used to own a bus which used to go round the residential areas in Lusaka to pick the blind and bring them to the Library. The major collections points were Ng'ombe, Misisi, Munali Secondary School, Chawama, Kanyama, George, Zingalume, and Matero. However, this service is no longer being provided since the old bus was disposed off and there has been no replacement.

There also used to be a Literature Club whose main objective was to promote reading culture among the blind through exchange of Braille materials. This club is now defunct, resulting into declining reading culture among the blind.

The Library has acquired software called JAWS which enables the VIPs to access information on the Internet. The software is very expensive and the Library has only acquired a demonstration copy which allows users to use it for 40 minutes at a time. The software costs K11 million (\$2400) and is therefore not affordable to charitable organizations like ZNLCB.

Most of the users are pupils and students from institutions of learning. Pupils come from basic schools and high schools within Lusaka, most from Munali High School. Students come from colleges and universities e.g. UNZA, Evelyn Hone College, Malcolm Moffat Teacher Training College, and Mongu Teachers Training College. Others come with their own study materials and request the Library staff to read for them. Those who are partially blind request to use the CCTV magnifier reader. Some come with cassettes and use the library equipment to listen to them. Library staff also conducts Internet searches and retrieve information on behalf of our users.

## 6. Challenges

ZNLCB faces many challenges, some of which are:

- Lack of funding; this is the greatest constraint. Government has underestimated the importance of ZNLCB. The monthly grant that is provided by the government is too small to meet the operational costs of the Centre. Consequently the grant is used to meet on the monthly salaries of the staff at the Centre.
- Lack of government policy to compel institutions of learning to provide educational materials in Braille
- Lack of government policy to compel publishers of information to transcribe some of their publications into Braille and other formats suitable for use by VIPs
- Most of the information available is in print. The challenge of transcribing these materials into Braille is enormous. There is equipment to transcribe print materials into Braille; the challenge is funding to meet production costs. The cost of production has to be borne by the centre as most blind persons cannot afford to buy these materials.
- Production of materials in Braille is a very costly venture. The special paper has to be imported from South Africa or Europe as it is not available locally.
- The machinery is also very expensive and maintenance is a challenge as there are no spare parts in the country. Because of this there is no modern equipment for the production of talking books.

- Lack of spare parts for the equipments as these have to be obtained from abroad
- Assistive technology is not available but would be a very strategic resource that VIP can benefit from.
- Transport: most of the blind fail to access the Library due to lack of transport. Needless to say, it is a great challenge for VIP to use public transport without being aided to visit the Library.
- Most of the visually impaired persons who use the Library are men. There are few blind women using our Library.
- Low education among the VIPs, particularly among the women who do not see much value to getting educated. Very few female VIPs go to school. Most get married early and depend on begging.
- Lack of publicity of the ZNLCB facilities and services. Very few people are aware of the services being offered by ZNLCB. There is need to improve publicity through community radios, televisions, etc. so that VIPs can be aware of their existence
- Language barrier: most of the reading materials are in English, a language not understood by most VIPs.

## **7. What are the other Libraries and information centres doing for the blind in Zambia?**

An effort was made to carry out a survey on provision of information for the blind in various libraries in the country. Approximately 54 questionnaires were distributed to librarians across the Country, who work in public, academic and special libraries. Responses received were so discouraging that it was almost pointless to analyse the data as almost all of them were indicating that they were not providing services or facilities for the blind. Apart from the Zambia Library Service which has a small collection of large print books and Braille materials mainly religious and fiction, no other library had any collection catering for the VIPs. Special libraries for the blind and public libraries providing information services for the handicapped are still too few and are under-funded. Therefore, most of the blind are being excluded from the benefit of libraries.

The biggest problem is ignorance of information needs of the VIPs. Most Librarians and other information providers hardly expect VIPs to visit their libraries and use their services. Furthermore, in Library schools there are no courses aimed at information services for the disabled. "... libraries have a fundamental responsibility to Braille users, therefore, providing access to Braille books and services is an integral part of the purpose and missions of libraries" (IFLA,1998). Librarians should not be oblivious to the existence of VIP as equal partners to a democratic society. It is very unfortunate that most libraries in Zambia have neglected this sector. This situation cannot be allowed to continue unchallenged.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to highlight the challenges faced by VIPs in accessing information in Zambia. VIPs largely depend on friends and relatives, radio as sources of their information. These sources do not provide much information as compared to other print sources. Every citizen, irrespective of their physical challenge, has the right to information which is a critical resource in a democratic society. Libraries and information centres have the duty to help to overcome the communications barrier by sharing information about good governance in formats that are accessible to VIPs.

Nowadays, there is good news for the blind such as increase of talking books or screen reading software development. Librarians are urged to be more sensitive to the needs of VIP by introducing services that curter for their needs. Libraries should be willing to promote the importance of Braille and facilitate access to this resource for members of the community who are blind (IFLA, 2008). Libraries, print media and information outlets in Zambia need to rise to the occasion by utilising today's technological advancements to promote the principles of free and democratic societies through the provision of information to the visually impaired.

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