Research Paper

Access and Use of Public Libraries by Disabled Persons In Nigeria

MARCUS L. ISEBE
Library Department, Delta State University Abraka

And

EFE FRANCIS EJEDAFIRU
Department of Library and Information Sciences, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract
This study surveyed the access and use of public libraries by disabled persons in Nigeria. The role of public libraries in providing services to all irrespective of disability has been a daunting task for public libraries as a result of government's negligence. The methodology adopted for the study is the survey design in which questionnaire was use for obtaining data. The target population was public library staff in some selected states in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. However, public libraries in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo and River States were used for the study. The sample size of the study was 86 librarians drawn from study population of 126. Data were analysed using descriptive statistic. Among the findings were, that library building were not design to take care of people with special needs, coupled with the poor state of public library services in general. The need for public libraries to embrace the use of ICTs was recommended. Government should ensure that public library policy statements are translated into reality through proper funding.
Key Words: Access, Use, Public, Library, Disabled, Persons, Nigeria.

I.   INTRODUCTION

According to legislation and policies, public libraries are considered to be amongst the basic public services in Nigeria. Public libraries are purveyors of knowledge, citadels heritage, and also serve as an epitome of a democratic system where minds can be shaped as needed by the citizenry irrespective of age, sex, educational level, religion, and disability. Public library is establish under state enabling laws or regulatory to serve a community, district, region, and provides at least the following; an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof, paid staff, an establish schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public, the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule, and is supported in whole or in part with public funds.

(htt;//harvester.census.gov/iml/public: asp).
The IFLA Guidelines for Development of the public library service (2001) assert that:

- The development of collections should be based on the principle of access for all and include access to formats appropriate to specific client groups, for example Braille and talking books for blind people"

The major objectives of public libraries are the provision of reading materials to meet the requirements of the user; public library should provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities to have access to quality education, (one of the basic goals of the Nigeria Educational Reform). The Educational Reforms Act of 2007 (FME, 2007) clearly highlighted the need to improve the quality of instruction in Nigeria schools, provide enriched learning environment, provide more access to education, and provide the students with knowledge and skills necessary for the 21st century workplace, among others, as the motivating factor for the educational reforms.

In specific terms, public library have tremendous roles to play and will continue to be used as tools for effective education of the nation, for this to succeed Nigerian needs to revisit her libraries to ensure the equality of access for all persons regardless of disabilities. The changing nature of the public library services seeks to meet the diverse needs of current and potential library users. However, the fulfilment or otherwise of it's objective depends, to a very large extent on a number of factors, ranging from poor financial support, commitment of library staff, availability of competent professional staff and a host of other variables.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 defines a disable person as someone with: ".a physically or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities." However, public libraries own it as a duty to provide facilities and library services to these set of physically challenged citizens. Custom built libraries with ramps and special lifts, Braille materials, tape recorders for the blind, computers with embossed letters and symbols for the use of the blind. Empirical evidences have shown that public libraries in Nigeria often neglect these groups of people in their service. Nielsen and Irval (2005) observed that in many countries all over the world, disabled persons are not able to use libraries because the library authorities are not aware of the need for disabled persons to use the library on equal terms with all other citizens. They further buttressed that manly libraries, both old and new, are constructed in a way that makes it difficult or impossible for disabled persons to enter them.

The Needs for Library Access to Disabled Persons in Nigeria
Improved library services to disabled persons are essential to the creation of effective human capital in any country. The need to enhance access to public library services to disabled persons in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized in this 21st century; everyone irrespective of disability needs information competence of survive. A deaf person is not disabled in an environment where people use sign language, and a person unable to read will be less disabled in an environment using signs with pictograms instead of (or in addition to) words (Moseid, 2006). However, a visually impaired person should be able to walk with a cane and find his/her way without bumping into obstacles, a person in a wheelchair should be able to reach all divisions of the library. A person with an intellectual impairment should be able to fine books and other materials easily etc.

Public libraries need to move beyond traditional library services and draw on all resources they can access including their own abilities. Traditional library services have consequently been displace by new approach to ICT services. Indeed, the availability and use of ICT could provide people irrespective of disability the opportunities to bridge the knowledge gap between them and their counterparts in developed countries.

Fourie (2007) observed that efforts by public libraries have sometimes been referred to as weak voluntary and "take, it or leave" it approaches; Libraries should not just be superficially open to all. They should really address all primary needs that can be linked to information needs and access to information. The inabilities of public libraries to provide services to disable persons are not inherently caused by the impairment of given individual, such as the inability to see. Rather, Pescod (2009) noted that they are social problems; society has failed to remove barriers to disable people even though the means exist to do so. (The most well-known example) of this is the failure to provide a ramp for wheelchair to allow access to a building. He reiterated that since these barriers reside within societies, societies can remove them.

Library access focuses on the reasonable accommodation of people with disabilities in public libraries and aims to:

• Support planned and systematic approaches to the reasonable accommodation of people with disabilities.

• Develop practical support as for providers of library services to make the adjustment and to provide the facilities necessary of existing and potential library users with disabilities.

• Stimulate effective change and the implementation of good practice in the provision of an inclusive public library service.

• Support compliance with the Equal Status Act. 2000 alongside a broader ambition for the inclusion of people with disabilities (An chomhairle Leabharlanna and The Equality Authority, 2000).

However, the drive for universal aces clearly has its attendant problems. More fundamentally, financial instability, a constant quest for funds and the need to charge for some access time and services hampered the project (Dutch & Muddiman, 2001). It is also worthy of note, that the most successful attempts at providing for the needs of the disabled persons by public libraries are labour intensive, require high skill and commitment levels and challenge some cherished concepts of university and equality of access. Many are conducted well outside the walls of conventional library buildings. Issues that many affect the success and failure of public library towards disabilities include:

• The policy of the government and public pressure (or lack thereof) to address disabilities.

• In adequate funding and infrastructures.

• Inadequate support for sustainability.

- Inadequate support and commitment from advocacy groups.
- Government's perception on the role libraries can play.
- Unwillingness of "excluded" groups to participate in efforts to ensure social inclusion from a library perspective (e.g not willing to accept the access to information may make a difference in their lives).
- Lack of relevant empirical research data on primary needs (e.g. housing, employment), information needs and information behaviour that can be used in efforts to address social exclusion (Fourie, 2007).

A cursory look at the above points shows that public library in Nigeria have grate task ahead of them.

Objectives of the Study
The main objective of the study is to explore the access and use of public libraries by disable persons in Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study were:
1) To know the frequency of visit to public libraries by disable people in Nigeria.
2) To know the causes of low level of access and use of public libraries by disable people.

Statement of the Problem
The study is prompted by the view of the public that the public library is supposed to serve everyone, irrespective of disability because everybody needs information competence to survive. Public libraries should be organized, and operated, as far as possible, to enable people with disabilities to use them independently without the intervention or assistance of library staff.

Empirical evidences shown that public libraries services provided for disable persons in Nigeria fall short of the expectations. For public library to live up to the expectation, there is the need for adequate provision of human and materials resources. Beside, literature has shown that many public libraries are in a poor state, without adequate funding. This also includes inadequate staffing, relevant information sources and necessary facilities.

The focus of this research is a need to investigate the present public libraries services in these selected states thoroughly with a view toward developing an improved, adequate and more equitable public library system. The specific objectives are to investigate the frequency of use and causes of poor access and use of public libraries by these categories of patrons.

The study therefore is an attempt to compare the selected public libraries on their capabilities to provide service to users irrespective of disability with a view to finding out their outstanding similar or dissimilar features so as to make reasonable suggestion where applicable.

II.   METHODOLOGY

A survey design was adopted in the study. The target population of this study consist of 126 respondents made up of librarians in 21 public libraries in selected states in Niger Delta region (Delta, Bayelsa, Edo and River) in Nigeria. However, 6 public libraries in Delta State with 24 respondents, 4 public libraries in Bayelsa with 20 respondents, 6 public libraries from River State with 22 respondents and 5 public libraries from Edo State with 20 respondents. The samples of 86 library staff were selected from the total population of 126 respondents through purposive sampling methods. Of these numbers 56 were female while 30 were male and questionnaire were use to collect data. However, data were analysed using descriptive statistic involving the use of tables showing frequency of responses and corresponding percentages.

III.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Analysis of Data and Discussion of findings
Response to the frequency of visit by disabled person

	No	%
Often	8	9.3
Once in a while	16	18.6
Frequently	6	7.0
Rarely	36	41.9
No visit	20	23.3

From the Table 1 the response to frequency of visit indicates that 36 (41.9%) of disabled persons rarely visit the public libraries for information, 20 (23.3%) of the respondents opined that disable persons do not visit the libraries. However, 16 (18.6%) of the respondents were of the view that the disable persons visit the libraries once in a while. 8 (9.3%) noted that the disable people visits often, the study also shows that only 6 (7.0%) noted that the disable people visit public libraries frequently. These poor attitudes of disable persons towards public libraries could be trace to poor state of public libraries in Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria general.

Table II: Response to Constraints to the Access and Use of Public Library by Disabled Persons.

Causes of Law Level Access and Use of Public Library by Disable Person	No	%
Inability of physically disable persons to access all parts of the library and all library-shelving, services and facilities.	71	82.6
Lack of desks and study spaces suitable for wheelchair users are not available.	56	65.1
Inability to keep the entrance wheelchair accessible well organized and kept free of obstruction.	41	47.7
Lack of aisles, doorways, corridors and spaces free of obstruction to a accommodate users.	40	46.5
Lack of wheelchair accessible toilet	38	44.1
Failure of library to establish formal advisory groups with representative from disability groups	33	38.4
Lack of parking buys suitable for people with disability	29	33.7
Entrance of the library well lit and adequately signposted	31	36.0
Inability of disabled person to leave the building quickly in the event of an emergence	13	26.7
Lack of alarm systems to alert deaf people	13	15.1
Lack of library staff to provide assistance to people with disabilities.	12	14.0
Inadequate lighting levels	8	9.3

The table reveals that "inability of physically disable persons to access all parts of the library ranks highest with 71 respondents (82.6%). Research corroborated with Frix, Pal and Nelf (2006) who opined that the community of people with disability has called upon policy makes and library administrator, to make all library in Bogota system accessible. By reconfiguring pre existing institutional services in order to reach with disabilities.

Nielsen and Irval (2005) also observed that most Libraries both old and new are constructed in a way that makes it difficult or impossible to disabled persons to enter them. Disable persons no doubt experienced difficulties in using Library in Nigeria.

"Lack of desks and study species suitable for disabled persons" rank second with 56 respondents (65.1 percent). In the bid to address this predicament Moseid (2006) advocates inclusive design which is to render services to groups of individuals with special needs, the library will have to supply the universally designed library and library services with special equipment and initiatives. The need to carefully develop our public library to meet up with these needs becomes of paramount importance.

Inability to keep the entrance wheelchair accessible well organized and kept free of obstruction ranks third with 41 respondents (47.7 percent) it is proper to redesign the physical condition of public library buildings, as well as library services and programmes but the reverse is the case. Hence Irual and Nielson (2005) opined that in many countries all over the world, access for patrons with disabilities to use libraries is not yet available and even expected.

Lack of aisles, doorways, corridors, spaces and wheelchair accessible to toilet ranked fourth and fifth respectively. However in Nigeria access and use of public libraries by persons with disabilities is not self evidence. This could be tied to the poor state of public libraries in Nigeria. In order to inspire and support disable persons all over the world in their efforts to improve accessibilities to their libraries serving disadvantaged persons voted to developed a checklist which is meant as a practical tool for all types of libraries to access existing levels of accessibility to buildings, services, materials and programs to enhance accessibility where needed (Nielsen and Irval, 2005). Beside, the researchers are fully aware that in order to improve access and use of public libraries for disabled persons economic resources are needed. That is to say public libraries need to be properly funded in line with the present economic reality.

It is also pertinent to observe that public libraries have failed to established formal advisory groups with representative from disabilities group. The greatest challenges facing disabled people are the failure of the Nigerian policy makers to have legislated to combat discrimination against disabled people. It is sobering to note, in a review directed at disabled people participation in the policy process in Nigeria, that the majority of respondents expressed concern about the risk of neglect and repercussions were they to be critical of their government. Hence, Dube, Hurst, Light and Malinga (2005) opined that disabled people identify the causes of this failure with reference to the fact that legislation is either not mandatory, has no-or inadequate penalties attached or has no – or ineffective – enforcement mechanisms.

Table II above reveals that public libraries are facing more challenges, concerning library services to disable persons. The ranking shows that functional parking space, adequately signposted entrance, alarm systems and adequate lighting levels are in poor state. the research have shown that public libraries have failed in all these areas coupled with the poor attitude of library staff towards providing assistance to people with disabilities. In the light of all these, the researchers recommend the universal design for public libraries in Nigeria. Moseid (2006) defines the universal design as the shaping of products and environments in such a way

that they can be used by everybody as widely as possible and without the need for further adaptation or individual design.

The aim is to adequately provide and simplify the public libraries use and access for everybody by making information resources, services, physical structure more useable for a greater number of people at little or on cost. The target group for universal design is everybody, regardless of age, size or ability. Beside, a simple example is the need for good general lighting in a public library. Moseid (2006) postulated that automatic door openers are often necessary for wheel chair users to enter the library building, but also very convenient for parents with baby prams or strollers, or people who just have trouble opening heavy doors.

As a result of all these constraints in the access and use of public libraries, disable people will continue to experience difficulty in using public libraries. This of course have greater consequences, such as inaccessible education and lack of access to information in general. As public libraries are intended to provide equal access to information for all irrespective of disability, the researchers intention was to determine to what extent public libraries in Nigeria have really ensure access and use of public library services to these disadvantageous people.

IV.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The access and use of public library service will no doubt have a positive impact on the social economic cultural development of disabled people. Despites the roles libraries can play on the all development of this group, disabled persons in Nigeria have yet to extensively welcome the use of the library. Efforts geared towards integration of the public libraries into the life of these disadvantage group, have not had much impact. Problems such as poor policy, poor architectural design of public libraries, limited or poor funding, inability of libraries to welcome ICTS and poor information infrastructure militate against these efforts. In order to ensure that disable people access and use public libraries in Nigeria. The following efforts should be taken.

- Library buildings should be design to take care of people with special needs.
- Government should ensure that public library policy statements are translated into reality. Library boards should be will funded and given power to monitor the development of such libraries.
- Public libraries should embrace the use of ICTs. They can be use to enhance or promote libraries services to people irrespective of disabilities.
- ICT infrastructure should be put in place and the right environment should be created, because the ability of these disabled persons to creatively deploy technology is not in doubt.

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