



A blind man at work in a community-based rehabilitation programme

Photo: Courtesy of Enablement

Zambia: The challenge of informing blind and deaf clients

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HIV and AIDS in Zambia is a major public and social health issue that demands a multifaceted approach if it is to be tackled successfully. Government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities are employing diverse but complementary strategies to mitigate the effects of the disease. This article highlights the information services the Zambia National Library and Cultural Centre for the Blind has for the disabled, specifically those with sight and hearing challenges.

The article identifies and analyses information management practices of the centre, taking cognisance of the cultural sensitivities and sundry disparities of the communities they serve as regards literacy, socio-economic status and access to information and communication technologies (ICT). The idea is to recommend successful strategies for policy and practice.

Types of disability

- **Blind** - complete loss of sight.
- **Partially-sighted** - loss of one eye or poor sight but not complete blindness.
- **Deaf/mute (speech-impaired)** - complete loss of sense of hearing/speech.
- **Hard of hearing** - partial loss of sense of hearing.
- **Mental disability** - this relates to a disturbance of the mind affecting one's functioning, emotions, feelings, thoughts and behaviour.

- **Ex-mental** - a person that suffered from mental disorder but is now rehabilitated or undergoing treatment.
- **Intellectual disability** - this refers to below average intelligence affecting one's development, functioning, socialisation and behaviour.
- **Physically-handicapped (physically-disabled)** - a person with a physical impairment relating to the loss of bodily stature. (Source: Central Statistics Office of Zambia (CSO, 2000: 131).

People with disabilities in Zambia

The 2000 population and housing census defined a disabled person as one "who is limited in the kind or amount of activities that he or she can do because of ongoing difficulties due to a long-term physical, mental or health problem." The definition fits with worldwide trends that have broadened criteria by which one is considered disabled. While the 1969 census only had four categories of

disability, the 2000 had seven. This means there were individuals who were disabled, but had been excluded from previous census categories. The 2000 census found that males constitute 52.8 of the disabled population while females form the remaining percentage. The census also found that two in five disabled persons had no education, while two in five had only completed primary schooling. Sixty-two per cent of the deaf/mute population never attended school¹.

Information for the hearing and speech-impaired

Few studies have explored the information needs of the disabled. However, one such study found that in their hierarchy of needs, information on health topped the list, followed by income and finance². Another study (1991) concluded that "information needs of individuals with disabilities are likely to include... the nature of handicapping conditions, environmental accessibility, civil rights, financial assistance and advice, research and statistics, and service delivery models³".

Jessie Daka, librarian at the cultural centre says "the visually-impaired and hearing-impaired people who come to use the

centre look for information related to the nature of their disability; information on how to access social services and information on various subjects such as HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment.”

Accessibility

Access to information is hampered by several challenges depending on the severity of the disability, their institution, the society at large, and failure to address their needs. “The information that is available is in English while the majority of them are illiterate,” Juliet Phiri, an assistant librarian at ZNLCCB, says.

The Federation of the Disabled (ZAFOD), says, “most persons with disabilities do not have access to information through the radio, television and newspapers and other literature especially the visually-impaired and the hearing-impaired people⁴.” The main problem is lack of money for carrying out effective HIV and AIDS information dissemination programmes. The lack of money hinders organisations from creating innovative programmes that could address the information needs of PWDs. Despite these challenges, ZNLCCB has forged information programmes that target partially-sighted and hearing-impaired persons.

Photo: Courtesy of Enablement



An independent blind woman in Ethiopia



Vocational training of blind people in Ethiopia

Photo: Courtesy of Enablement

Persons with disabilities are not reached through conventional HIV and AIDS outreach activities, first, because, they often lack accessible public transport and have limited

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access to health services. Secondly, information campaigns often lack a strong visual component to engage those with limited literacy skills. A major challenge in sharing information on HIV and AIDS with PWDs is the failure to understand how to communicate with them effectively.

Jessie Daka says that although there is a lot of information on the Internet, disabled people rarely access it because they lack computer skills or transport to visit the centre. She urges the State to “ensure that every document (on HIV and AIDS) that is produced in the country is available in Braille,” noting “although condoms are available; there is no writing in Braille on the condom (package) to inform the visually-impaired on how to use them.”

Role of Library and Cultural Centre

The Zambia National Library and Cultural Centre for the Blind is an affiliate of the Zambia National Federation of the Blind.

It was founded in 1993 with funding from the Finnish Federation of the Blind. The funding support was to last 10 years after which the Ministry of Education would take over the institution. However, at the time of handing over, the ministry was not ready to take over the running of the institution, which currently receives minimal support from the government through the Ministry of Culture and Social Development.

The centre has a multipurpose library with lending and borrowing facilities, a recording studio and a transcription service. It has 35 corresponding centres countrywide that are either housed in city council libraries and are run by the city councils or are attached to schools and colleges.

Innovative information management practices

The centre offers visually-impaired and hearing-impaired clients a wide range of information services, which are tailored to their needs. Its Braille printing and transcription services disseminate HIV and AIDS messages. Services range from providing Braille books, video cassettes and repackaging of information for the targeted users. However, “there is no awareness on the information at the centre and even when we know that the information we need is available here, it is difficult to access it, as there are no catalogues to guide us on what the centre has,” says Lukwesa Matapo Kalumba who is visually-impaired.

The centre does not market its services due to a lack of funds.

Transcription at the Zambia Cultural Centre

The transcription service enables the institution to transcribe books when and where needed. In the past, this has entailed transcription of books on HIV and AIDS with help from the Ministry of Education.

Transcribed materials include books in Braille, audio Braille books and audiotapes. Audio books are used by blind learners in colleges and schools. The centre also undertakes studio recordings and audio music dubbing and in-house production of Braille and audio books.

HIV and AIDS resources at the centre

The centre is stocked with different types of information targeting visually-impaired and the hearing-impaired. *Introduction to Antiretroviral therapy (ART); Antiretroviral therapy (ART): ART may help you feel strong even if your immune system is weak; Side-effects of ARV drugs; Men and HIV in Zambia and HIV and AIDS basic handbook for entrepreneurs* are among the resources available. Others include *Disability and HIV: Guidelines for IEC/BCC Resources; Patients Rights Charter; and Food for people living with HIV/AIDS*, all printed in Braille.

The centre has Braille printing and transcription facilities. Similar titles are also available in audio formats for PWDs.

Lessons learned

Finding appropriate and relevant information for PWDs is difficult. The information sometimes needs to be in local languages; at a level that can easily be understood by target readers in terms of functional literacy;

The type of disability determines the most appropriate format in which information should be delivered

be culturally-appropriate and be in the right format for the visually-impaired and hearing-impaired.

- It is imperative to involve PWDs in the design and implementation of information programmes that are meant to benefit them.
- The type of disability determines the most appropriate format in which information should be delivered.
- More work needs to be done for persons with mental disabilities such as those with intellectual disabilities as there is an acute shortage of information on HIV to address the special needs of this segment of the population.

- By working in partnership, NGOs, private sector and government can achieve more.

As Morrow (2007) aptly puts it: “(the) development and dissemination of information (and messages) in a variety of formats...are needed to enable individuals with different types of disability to achieve their basic right to health information.⁵” However, this information can only be effectively used when the disabled are part of planning and implementation so that the information that is produced is relevant to their needs. Most importantly, the information should be packaged in formats that are easier to use and accommodate specific disabilities. Of critical importance is working in collaboration and partnership with other organisations in order to maximise on the synergy. ■

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