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# Information Provision to the Disadvantaged: A Proposal for Extension of Library and Information Services to Refugees in Oru Camp, Ogun State, Nigeria

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**Abstract** - Information is a public good which must not be denied anyone regardless of socio-economic status or political affiliation. However, some groups of individuals such as political refugees are underserved with this essential commodity. This paper presents an assessment of information need and information provision to refugees in Oru camp, Ogun state, Nigeria. The paper includes a review of some library and information services to refugees in Myanmar and Zambia and concludes with proposal for library and information services to the refugees.

**Keywords** : Refugees, Information, Information provision, Library and information services, Disadvantaged, Oru, Nigeria.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As the contemporary society gradually transforms into an information economy, our dependence on information becomes increasingly pronounced. Information has become a critical factor for political participation and social inclusion and the basis for competitiveness at the individual, organizational and national levels. Access to information has greatly improved with the convergence of information and telecommunication technology and the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. More recently, the open access initiative has increased individuals capacity to access information from various media and in different formats.

One of the cardinal principles of practice for librarians and other information professionals is to ensure that everyone regardless of his 'age, race, gender, religion, disability, cultural identity, language, socioeconomic status, lifestyle choice, political allegiance or social viewpoint' has equal access to information (ALIA, 2001). Nevertheless, billions of people across the world still experience information poverty despite the richness of the current information environment. According to Britz (2007), information poverty is:

*'that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite*

*skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately. It is further characterized by a lack of essential information and a poorly developed information infrastructure*

Thus in Britz's opinion, the gap that exists between the information haves and the information have-nots, goes beyond digital divide rather, it is a complex phenomenon that could be caused by political, cultural, economical, educational, moral, geographical, technological and technical factors (Britz, 2007).

Among those who can be described as information poor include the poor, the handicapped, the prisoners, the aged, the illiterate, children, rural dwellers, new immigrants and the refugees. According to the United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees, refugees are people who left the country of their nationality to seek for protection in another country due to the fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. The number of refugees worldwide is over 20 million with Africa having the second largest population of about 5.1 million (Kayengo & Kayengo, Tribe, 2002). This is a considerable number that cannot be easily ignored especially when one considers the fact that there are professionals and highly talented people among refugees and some of them have made significant contributions to knowledge in various fields across the world. For example, the inventor of the contraceptive pill and the first governor of the Bank of England were refugees (Tribe, 2002).

Undoubtedly, refugees could be assets rather than burden to their host community if provided with essential information that can help them to not only meet their basic needs but also aid capital generation and self-development (Blitz, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to report an assessment of information need and information provision to refugees in Oru camp, Ogun state, Nigeria with a view to making recommendations for policy action.

## II. INFORMATION NEEDS OF REFUGEES

Adler (1977) used Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to describe the information needs of

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immigrants in the process of adjusting to their new environment. Immigrants are people who made a positive choice to relocate to another country in hope of finding better opportunities. Adler posits that upon arrival in the new country, immigrants need information that would help them meet their physiological or basic needs such as food and other basic resources; then the need for information on how to find shelter which is part of meeting safety or security need becomes apparent.

The immigrant progressively meets his social, esteem and self-actualization needs by seeking relevant information. As he meets his needs, the immigrant begins the process of social adjustment and recovery from the initial culture shock. Shoham and Strauss (2008) also captured this link between satisfaction of information needs and absorption of immigrants into their new society with the model below.



Figure 1: showing the relationship between satisfaction of information needs, human needs successful absorption of immigrants. (Shoham and Strauss, 2008)

Unlike immigrants who chose to relocate to another country and had enough time to plan their movement, refugees were forced to flee their countries out of fear and without any plan of where they are going. They are usually victims of war and human rights abuse and have probably lost their possessions and loved ones through traumatic experiences (Tribe, 2002). A refugee population is an heterogeneous one with highly educated professionals, illiterates, youths, children, women and the physically challenged. Without a political identity and faced with the challenge of learning new language and adjusting to new culture, refugees have a lot of physical, psychological, medical and emotional challenges that could be addressed by providing them with information that meets their specific needs.

### III. INFORMATION SERVICES TO REFUGEES: A REVIEW OF CASES

There is considerable literature on aid and health services to refugees but very little that emphasized meeting the information needs of refugees. This section reviews two of such programs and initiatives that focus on information provision to refugees in different parts of the world.

#### a) Myanmar and Thailand Refugee Camps

The Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) is a Japanese Non Governmental Organization established in 1980 to provide relief and health care services to the Cambodian refugees in Thailand and Myanmar. However, unlike most other NGOs, SVA, also emphasized provision of library services in addition to relief because it believes that using the library will provide mental stimulation for the refugees, help them break the endless cycle of boredom and help preserve their human dignity. A public library was set up to cater for the needs of the different age groups and interest

and to facilitate social interactions among them. In order to help preserve and promote the culture and the Karen language of the refugees which they feared were being eroded, the volunteers translated picture books to the local language. Picture books that project themes like friendship, peace in the community and the world, health and public hygiene were purposely selected for translation.

In addition, SVA started a project to write down Karen folktales and peoples' stories and publish them as books. This gave former art teachers and painters among the refugees opportunity to utilize their skills by providing illustrations for the books. It also helped to combat the problem of getting books that teach the culture and language of the Karens. Some of the refugees were trained to serve as librarians and to read stories from the picture books to children. The library also started producing a local newspaper that report activities in the camps and advertised special events.

#### b) Zambian Case Study

According to Kayengo & Kayengo (n.d.), Zambia has over 8 refugee camps run by the Zambian government, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) with support from Non Governmental Organizations. Among the services offered to refugees are:

- Access to primary and secondary education and financial support for those who wish to go on to higher institutions.
- Braille classes for blind students
- English classes for both the handicapped and the able bodied.
- Empowerment programs such as sewing classes
- Health Care Services
- Adult literacy classes, religion classes and Library services

One of the secondary schools in the refugee camps, Meheba Refugee camp has a library with over 25, 000 books and internet connection while each of the others have a smaller library and a resource center.. The library service is a collaborative effort between the Zambian Library Service and the Jesuit Refugee Services. In addition to providing library services, the Zambian refugee camps also employed certain strategies to disseminate information to the refugees. These include:

- *Peer education*- this involves training members of a group so that they can train or influence other members. This method was noted to be very effective in disseminating information to the youths.
- *Social clubs*- this is especially used for anti HIV/AIDS campaigns. Organizing refugees into clubs allow them to share information themselves and with others outside the group.
- *Meetings, workshops and field visits*- this method is used to disseminate agricultural information to refugees under the resettlement policy
- *Other mechanisms*- Posters, pamphlets, books, video shows, cultural dance and drama. The last three are especially favoured among the refugees and they are mostly used to communicate with the illiterates and semi-illiterates.

#### IV. A PROPOSAL FOR INFORMATION SERVICES TO REFUGEES IN NIGERIA

Since the 1990s, Nigeria has played host to about 6000 refugees from war torn countries in West Africa including Sierra Leone, Togo, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Republic of Benin etc. The refugee camp located at Oru in Ogun state was established to shelter the refugees. The camp was jointly managed by the Nigerian government, through the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the National Commission for Refugees (NCR), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Nigerian Red Cross Society with support from Non Governmental Organizations and religious bodies.



Fig 1: Entrance into Oru Refugee Camp



Fig 2 : Cross section view of Oru Camp Pry Sch

Recently, the federal government adopted the resettlement policy which means that it would no longer operate a refugee camp but allow refugees who wish to return to their respective countries to do so while those who wish to remain will be integrated into the Nigerian society. Refugees who are integrated will be able to enjoy all the rights and privileges of a Nigerian citizen except that of the voting right while retaining their original nationality. With this arrangement, the refugees will be able to live and work in the community.

The federal government therefore declared the camp officially closed in 2008 and most of the refugees returned to their countries. However, when the researchers visited the camp on June 11 2010, it was discovered that about 2000 refugees are still resident on the camp. These refugees are not willing to return to their countries because some of them came in as widows and orphans and do not remember anything of their backgrounds nor families to return to. To them, leaving Nigeria for a country where they had lost everything including human dignity is like leaving certainty for uncertainty. At the same time, they are not ready to accept the government's offer of integration. Apparently, they feel more secured among themselves where though they are somehow isolated, they are protected from the community who often stigmatize them and is ready to exploit them. According to them, the challenge of learning Nigerian language or languages and culture will be quite challenging. Furthermore, the process of integration will only open up fresh wounds; it will remind them of the experiences they had struggled to forget.

Also, the official declaration by the federal government has negatively impacted on the welfare of the refugees. A tour of the camp facilities showed that the refugees had once been provided with basic facilities like medical clinic, a recreation center, a primary school and a common room where people could relax to watch television, read novels or newspaper and interact. The only facility that is still functional out of all these facilities is the primary school; all others are dilapidated. According to Mr. Amos Toah, a Liberian refugee who has been living in Oru camp since the 1990s, all government and non governmental agencies that had been supplying aids and relief to the

camp had since stopped. The refugees live in constant fear of being forcefully ejected by the Nigerian government. Meanwhile, some of them are widows with children and without stable jobs or marketable skills.

While it is encouraging that the West African sub-region is relatively peaceful at present and that political refugees can return to their countries of nationality, those who decided otherwise cannot be forced against their will. They are protected by an international refugee law called *refoulement*. Therefore, it is the responsibility of Nigerian government to provide opportunities for the over 2000 men and women residing in Oru camp to be empowered so they can participate fully in our information intensive global community. Consequently, this paper recommends the provision of the following:

- A public library with internet access
- A school library to meet the needs of the pupils in the primary school
- A computer training center
- Informative and enlightenment programs on health and sanitation and reproductive health facilities. The reproductive health program will be of immense benefit to the growing population of young adults among the refugees.
- Adult literacy skill acquisition programs and vocational training opportunities

## V. CONCLUSION

Information creates a new form of power relation such that the information 'have nots' are completely subjugated by the information 'haves'. This is because information creates awareness of opportunities which people who have no intellectual, technical or technological access to information lack. Refugees are people with great potentials and will contribute to the development of their host communities. Provision of essential information to them is therefore imperative. It is a matter of social justice and a fundamental human right.

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