A NEW VISTA ON LIBRARY SERVICES TO THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF ASIA: A MALAYSIAN PARADIGM*

by

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ABSTRAK

Perkhidmatan Perpustakaan kepada golongan cacat penglihatan di negara membangun di Asia adalah masih di peringkat awal atau tidak seimbang pembangunannya. Kertaskerja ini mengutarakan beberapa cabaran, kejayaan, pengalaman dan rancangan Malaysia dalam perkembangan perkhidmatan perpustakaan kepada golongan cacat penglihatan. Beberapa cabaran yang menghinder perkembangannya termasuk ketiadaan kuasa perundangan/dasar dalam penyediaan akses yang sama kepada maklumat, perkhidmatan perpustakaan yang bersepadu, "Technophobia", persekitaran yang sesuai, pengeluaran maklumat dalam bentuk lain, akses kepada INTERNET dan komunikasi satelit, peruntukan kewangan, standard dan perkongsian sumber. Penulis berharap bahawa perpustakaan di Asia akan membuat anjakan paradigma yang sesuai dan membuka peluang kepada golongan cacat penglihatan kepada dunia maklumat dan ilmu pengetahuan.

INTRODUCTION

Asia today is witnessing some of the fastest growing economies in the world, consistently outstripping that of every other region, as it strives to make a quantum leap to catch up with the rest of the developed world. Our vision is that this leapfrogging phenomenon will also be replicated in the development of library services to the visually impaired persons (VIPs) in the developing countries of Asia.

Compared to developed countries, library services to the VIPs in the developing countries of Asia are still in their infancy or very unevenly developed. Having been developed only in the mid or late 19th century, largely by missionary or non governmental organisations, these libraries have made remarkable strides, though often sidelined by the national and public library systems and plagued by seemingly insurmountable economic, social and cultural problems. (Bukbaris, 1992)

In the Malaysian context, the development of library services to the visually impaired has had its own fair share of challenges, barriers and constraints. This paper seeks to highlight and share some of our successes, experiences and plans in the hope that it would benefit those in comparative environments addressing similar problems.

Policies/Legislative Mandate For Information Equity

One of the main challenges that has hindered the
development of library services to VIPs in the
developing countries of Asia is the absence of a 
legislative mandate/policy providing equal access
to information. Adoption of positive national and 
international policies on equality of access to 
information for VIPs are crucial in the process of 
sensitizing and legitimizing the government and 
the general public. It also facilitates inclusion of the 
needs of VIPs in programmes & projects supported 
by national and international agencies.

In Malaysia, though the concept of information equity 
or equality of access to information is entrenched in 
the Malaysian Constitution, Article 8, which 
establishes the equality of all citizens, it was only 
given due credence in 1989 by the National Policy 
on Library and Information Services, which mandates 
the provision of library services in every district and 
village and to the underprivileged and handicapped 
members of society. This mandate gained further 
support in the 1990s as it was also in line with 
Malaysia’s aspirations for the future (known as 
Vision 2020) of establishing a caring, economically 
just and prosperous society which is information rich 
by the year 2020.

At the international level, this concept was given a 
boost with the issuance of the Unesco Public Library 
Manifesto (which asserts that public library services 
should be provided on the basis of equality of access 
for all, regardless of age, race, sex, and religion, 
with specific services and materials provided for 
people with disabilities) and the launch of the United 
Nations Decade of Persons with Disabilities in the 
Asia and Pacific Region (1993-2002). Finally the 
concept of equal access to information by VIPs was 
yet given further impetus by the Malaysian Government when it became signatory to the 
Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality 
of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific 
Region on 16th May 1994. (Economic, 1994) In 
Malaysia, as an on-going exercise, Public libraries 
which are considering amending or updating their 

state enactments are encouraged by the Perpustakaan 
Negara Malaysia to give due emphasis on services 
to VIPs as well as development of audio visual and 
multimedia collections.

The copyright legislation is also being carefully 
reviewed by the National Council for Blind, Malaysia 
and recommendations made to provide explicit 
exemption from copyright infringement for the 
production of materials in alternate formats, to meet 
the information needs of VIPs.

Mainstreaming of Library Services

According to ESCAP, people with disabilities 
constitute approximately one-tenth of the total 
population of the region (Economic, 1994). In 
addition, economic progress and improvements in 
health, has resulted in an increase in the number of 
children and elderly surviving with disabilities. An 
aging population implies that we will have more 
and more senior citizens with vision and hearing and 
mobility problems. As noted by Solomon, each of 
us is really temporarily able-bodied. We will all be 
tomorrow’s disabled person! (Solomon, 1988)

In the Asian context, though the disadvantaged form 
a substantial group, when it comes to the provision 
of library services, they are looked upon as a minority 
group, which should be attended to, only when all 
other services are well established and sufficient 
resources are available. As we well know, sufficient 
resources are never available and a significant 
number of people are thus marginalised and denied 
access to information. The provision of library 
services to the VIPs was mainly left to the NGOs, 
such as the Malaysian Association for the Blind, St. 
Nicholas Home for the Blind, Sabah Society for the 
Blind, Sarawak Society for the Blind etc.

Malaysia has chosen to overcome this challenge by 
adopting a policy of mainstreaming library services, 
programmes and resources to the VIPs. As the
information needs of VIPs are much the same as those of the general public, all services provided by the public library should also be made available to people with disabilities.

Mainstreaming or integration refers to the concept that services for VIPs should be provided in the same manner as they are for others. People with visual impairments should not be segregated, excluded and provided special services in isolation. Instead they should be part of the mainstream. They should be included as participants in providing an integrated full service within the library setting. In Malaysia, the national library and the public libraries have sought to do this through the provision of multimedia/hypermedia information products and services for adults and children, (targeted at both VIP and sighted readers) and the judicious use of adaptive technology.

The Great Equalizer

For the past 500 years, print has been the primary mode of information access and dissemination in libraries. The VIPs being print handicapped were marginalised. Provision of information products and services in non-print formats for VIPs required huge financial resources that many libraries/information agencies could ill afford. Libraries erroneously believed that it was not justified to allocate enormous funds just to support the information needs of a mere 1% of the population. Further more in developing societies where the reading habit is not well established there is considerable fear and apprehension that library services will not be fully appreciated or exploited by people with disabilities (Thuraisingam, 1977). In a world of limited resources this is indeed a valid fear. Consequently these tasks were left to the philanthropic or non-government agencies to undertake. Of course it is now widely acknowledged that the VIPs in Asia constitute a significant percentage of the general populace as it includes not only the blind but also the elderly, the print handicapped and those with low vision problems as well.

With the advent of information technology limitless opportunities for information access are now open to the VIPs. Technology has broken barriers and overcome disabilities. Technology has become the great equaliser providing the VIPs equal opportunities in education, culture and employment. In the past, the VIPs were not able to access the latest information and exploit the rich resources that are found in the largely print based libraries of Malaysia, because of the high costs and time it takes either to convert into braille or talking books or engage human readers. Adaptive technology has changed all this to provide VIPs independence and equal access to information.

The list of adaptive technology designed to assist the visually impaired is long and is evergrowing, thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990. Malaysian libraries are trying to showcase as many of these devices as possible, to facilitate information access and awareness of VIPs. Technology is a powerful tool in the democratization of information access for VIPs.

Now that the enabling technologies are here, one may ask why libraries are still slow to provide services for the VIPs. The answer lies in the many barriers that exist which militate against this happening. The rest of this paper will focus on some of these barriers, and how they are being overcome in Malaysia.

Technophobia

Though there are many hardware and software solutions available they are not widely known in library circles. Consequently technophobia - the fear of technology and of the unknown, takes hold. Adaptive technology is presumed to be too technical
for adoption in libraries. This fear is actually baseless. Most libraries in Malaysia are more or less computerised. With a little adaptation, the existing facilities and equipment can be easily extended to provide services to the disabled.

To overcome technophobia familiarisation and training sessions in the use of adaptive technology, both for staff and users, needs to be conducted. With the acquisition of technological knowledge and skills, fears will be dispelled. In Malaysia a start has already been made in this direction. The past two years have seen two International Training Workshops on Braille Production being held in Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.

The major types of adaptive technology available for Malaysian VIPs are as follows:

**Reading devices.** These are used in conjunction with off the shelf personal computers and usually consist of 3 components: a screen reading software programme, a scanning device and a speech/voice synthesizer. When not in use for the VIPs these devices can also be used for the production of resources in alternate formats. At the very least they can double up as extra access points for the sighted readers. The Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia has invested in several voice synthesizers, to enable the VIPs to access the CD-ROM databases, OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogues) and the Internet. It is hoped that the Malaysian public libraries too will follow suit and thereby democratize information access throughout the country, including rural areas.

**Braille Software Translators.** These devices enable users to print high-quality Braille documents from a PC. Duxbury Braille Translator is a well-known example for materials in English Braille. In Malaysia, just last year St. Nocholas Home in Penang, a school for the visually impaired pioneered and launched the Bahasa Melayu Braille Translation Programme, which converts Malay print text to Malay Braille text. This software is invaluable in the computerised production of Bahasa Melayu Braille materials. It allows people who have no knowledge of braille to assist in the publishing of braille materials. It is particularly useful for libraries requiring to reproduce reading materials on demand. It also helps to alleviate the severe shortage of Bahasa Melayu Braille materials.

**Braille Printers/Embossers.** The Braille embossers, now available at the National Library of Malaysia enables VIPs to obtain instant braille printout from the print resources of the library. We consider it as an equivalent of what the photocopier is to a sighted reader. This Braille on demand service saves us the problem of maintaining huge duplicate collections of Braille materials.

**Screen Magnifying System/Large Print Capabilities.** These devices are particularly useful for users with low vision and for children. This large print on demand service also serves to compensate for the back of duplicate collections in large print. At the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia these devices are used to assist VIPs in accessing CD-ROM data bases as well as to handle the conventional fine print found in reference books.

**Talking books/Newspapers/Periodicals.** Unlike talking books (already discussed above) talking newspapers have yet to be produced on a commercial basis in Malaysia. In the meantime, VIPs are given access to local newspapers and magazines via Internet or other online services like Newslink, using micro computers equipped with voice synthesizers.

**VIP-friendly Environments**

Library buildings can sometime be a barrier to access. In order to make new library buildings and services more ‘VIP friendly’ strict compliance with the following Malaysian Standards is imperative: MS 1184: 1991 - Code of practice for access for disabled people to public buildings and MS 1183: Part 8:
1990 - Specification for fire precautions in the design and construction of buildings-Code of practice for means of escape for disabled people. These standards are also useful for making minor renovations to improve accessibility in existing buildings. It covers areas such as the provision of ramps, pathways, height clearance for projections and openings, vehicle parking and access for wheelchair users, specification on ramps, stairs, doors and doorways, circulation space, handrails, lifts, toilet facilities, work surfaces, shelving and wall units signage etc. Additionally, the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia is also currently drafting standards for library buildings in Malaysia which takes into account the requirements of VIP accessibility.

Availability of Alternate Formats

The dearth of talking books is another barrier to access to some categories of VIPs in Malaysia. Experience in developed countries indicate that talking books are tremendously popular with the elderly and other visually impaired person (VIPs) who have no knowledge of braille. (Vitzansky, 1994). In Asia the rural folk, the housebound, the elderly and so forth who have multiple disabilities such as low literacy levels, hearing, visual and mobility impairments may find the talking book technology more appropriate for them selves. However in Malaysia talking books are not commercially produced, nor are they funded by the public sector. The first commercially produced talking book was in fact pioneered by Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia just last year (1995) with the help of funding from the private sector. These are produced on conventional cassettes. Until considerable number of titles are produced, the potential of this technology will still remain unexploited. It is hoped that all the Malaysian public libraries would also participate and promote the production and dissemination of talking books on a decentralised basis. The talking book services needs to be supported by a strong outreach programme, such as the Postal Loan Service, for it to be really successful.

There is also general lack of information on materials available in alternate formats. As production of these materials proliferate with the aid of technology, without proper documentation and bibliographical control of braille materials, talking books etc, duplication and wastage is bound to occur. Here again the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia in cooperation with other libraries and NGOs, is initiating nationwide bibliographical projects and union catalogues, to maximise use of our limited resources prevent duplication and promote resource sharing.

Advent of the Digital Era

The advent of digital media has revolutionised the publishing industry. The next generation of talking books therefore has to focus on digital media as it offers tremendous possibilities for enhanced services to the VIPs. A new Digital Talking Book System is being developed in a project funded by the Swedish Library of Talking Book and Braille, TPB, known as DAISY - ‘Digital Audio-based Information System’. It provides direct access to the contents of the talking book through its “talking table of contents”. The system allows storage of 50 hours of recorded speech and provides browsing and skimming, as well as bookmark functions. The DAISY software also allows old talking book material stored on master tapes, to be converted to the new digital format. For the convenience of users, a CD-based Desktop Digital Reading Machine known as ‘Plex Talk’ has also been developed by Plextor Co. Ltd., a market leader on CD-ROM drives.

It is significant that in December 1995, these two agencies had pledged to work with the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, to develop it as a testbed for the production of digital talking books. When this project materializes and takes off, Malaysian
libraries will be able to leap frog into the digital era. These digital Talking Books will not only be a boon to the disadvantaged but also to the illiterate masses and busy commuters of Asia’s traffic ridden terrestrial highways.

**Information Super Highway**

Another technology that is of great relevance to VIPs is access to Internet and satellite communications. These two potent technologies will transform our isolated worlds into a global village thereby highlighting that we live in an interdependent world. Presently the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia is already establishing online linkages, via Jaringan Ilmu (The knowledge network), with all the state public and government department libraries. When these linkages and networking arrangements are extended to the rural areas, then truly all barriers to equal opportunities to education, information and culture will be broken. This is especially so, with the recent launch of MEASAT (Malaysian East Asia Satellite) which will provide immediate and simultaneous point-to-point and point-to-multipoint communications and broadcasting within its footprints (Chong, 1996) MEASAT will enable public libraries to transmit directly to the satellite and down to the rural areas without the need to set up links on terrestrial networks. Public libraries will be able to set up their own information and communication network to rural communities, the housebound etc offering voice, data, facsimile, video and electronic mail services (Chong, 1996).

Most Asian countries are fortunate enough to have their own satellite systems which can be easily harnessed to reach the rural VIPs through the rural library networks. (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, 1996)

**Information Paucity and Information Needs**

Lack of information is another barrier that has greatly hindered the development of library services to VIPs. The VIPs require information on visually impairments, rehabilitation, education, employment opportunities, technical aids, adaptive equipment, self-help groups, early intervention programmes community services, access to library resources etc. Those with multiple (visual, hearing, learning) disabilities will have similar needs for information in their particular area of disability. There is a dearth of such information in Malaysian libraries. This situation is being rectified in cooperation with other professional and voluntary groups and NGOs involved in the provision of services to VIPs.

Lack of information and ignorance has also been responsible for negativism in people’s attitude towards VIPs. The general attitude towards the VIPs is that they are a burden on society and are costly to cater for. This need not be so if we can provide equal opportunities for self reliance and independence, as well as facilitate their participation and contribution to society, thereby transforming them from being a liability to becoming instead, a great asset to society.

As managers of information, librarians and libraries are in a singularly advantageous position to act as a clearinghouse and focal point of information for people with disabilities. Libraries can create databases on the various resources, facilities and programmes that are available for people with visually impairment.

Apart from making available such information as part of the community information service, endeavours to list them in a Malaysian WWW (World Wide Web) site is also being undertaken by the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia in cooperation with the Library Association of Malaysia.

Currently the Committee on Library Services for Special Groups of the Library Association of Malaysia in cooperation with the Perpustakaan
Negara Malaysia is creating a database, known as VIPIM (Very Important Persons Information Malaysia) to compile information on institutions, resources, facilities programmes and services that are available for people with disabilities. This will be accessible on the Internet.

Asian libraries need to be more than mere consumers of information. Creation of indigenous databases is vital for the preservation and dissemination of the rich intellectual and cultural heritage of our nations. Eradication of information poverty is a priority in our interdependent world.

Funding & Budgeting

It is often presumed that services for VIPs would involve high capital costs. This is not entirely true. Many of the assistive devices and software programmes cost no more than comparative hardware and software acquired to service the 'able' users.

As for the truly expensive items, assistance and funding may be secured from the corporate world or aid agencies from developed countries through cooperative ventures. For instance, the Japan Braille Library has been collaborating very actively in Malaysia and Asia in the provision of hardware, software and training in Braille production, production of digital books etc.

Within Malaysia, the programme BAKTIDESA (Bantuan KORPORAT TINGKATKAN KUALITI DESA) initiated by the Ministry of Rural Development, which enlists the support of the corporate sector in transforming the rural areas into progressive, attractive and profitable zones (Mesyuarat, 1996). This program uses the slogan ‘WE CARE' (Corporate Assistance for Rural Enhancement) and in their target groups for human resource development, the elderly and people with disabilities have been identified for the provision of adaptive equipment. Similar programmes are also operative in Thailand, known as T-BIRD (Thai Business Initiative for Rural Development) and in Indonesia it is known as ‘Tabungan Keluarga Sejahtera’.

Resource Sharing and Standardisation

Library services and VIPs are also being seriously challenged by the absence of universal standards for information products in alternate format. This seriously curtails resource sharing at both national and international levels.

At the national level Malaysia is addressing the issue by formulating national guidelines on the provision of library services to VIPs.

As for the regional level possibilities of forging strategic alliances with international and regional agencies needs to be investigated. The regional/international platform could pave the way for the establishment of universal standards and promotion of resource sharing.

Conclusion

In the rapidly developing world of Asia, library information services and consumer needs are constantly changing. Recognising the fact that the VIPs have the same right to access information as other members of society, in the format of their choice, Asian libraries should endeavour to enhance their facilities to provide equitable access to information, culture, education and life-long learning. The greatest handicap for the disabled are able persons who will not allow them equal opportunities to maximise their potential, thus depriving the world of a largely untapped resource. It is hoped that Asian libraries will change this paradigm and provide a new vista for the VIPs to the world of knowledge and information.
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