
Library and Resource Center Facilities for Visually and Print Impaired People in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

The notion of developing countries needs definition, as do the concepts of visual and print impairment. The article looks at the situation of print impaired people in various countries and proposes possible activities to meet their needs based on existing projects and experience.

THE NEED FOR DEFINITIONS

In order to make any sensible comparisons between countries and their libraries serving the print impaired, it is necessary to establish several definitions. It is easy to talk about developing countries and visually impaired readers as though they were all the same. In reality there are radical differences between conditions in different countries, as there are between the different people who, for one reason or another, cannot read a conventionally printed book and need special support.

Any categorizing of countries will be an oversimplification. It will ignore the cultural and political history that makes the country what it is today and may differentiate it from its neighbor, which though similar in geography, climate, and peoples, may yet be different in the services that it provides. For the purposes of this article we have to work with these simplifications.

The differences between countries emerge in the way that each project is set up and carried out. In order to group the descriptions of projects this article will group countries that have sufficient common characteristics. The first group to be considered is those that are poor by any criterion. In many parts of the world there are countries in which there is little social support and in which the average earning power is too low to provide the

requisites of education even though there may officially be schools for all. Low wages and a high level of unemployment in a context where the government may not actually know how many citizens it has or where they are is not a recipe for tax-based development. In such countries there is little or no support for the visually impaired, other than that provided by the local organizations of the blind and foreign charities. The chances of a visually impaired child going to school are small, and the chances of the visually impaired having any professional support even smaller.

The second group is those countries that are recognized as being developing countries even though visibly prosperous. There may be banks and all the signs of a high-tech invasion, but next to these there are large parts of the population that live in poverty. There may be schools for the blind but the reality is that only a fraction of visually impaired people receives any help at all. Few get any schooling, and as a result there is rarely any work other than begging.

The third group of countries that will be considered in this article is those that are better developed, or in some cases have been better developed in the past and have lost some of the supporting infrastructure. Such countries will probably have national and local libraries. There will be schools and a reasonable level of social support; however, this support may not extend to all handicapped people. It may mean that visually impaired people have to rely on their own organizations rather than on the state. They may not have the means to develop technical and organizational changes that would enable them to provide effective services to their constituency.

This somewhat arbitrary grouping has emphasized the presence or absence of education, especially for handicapped people. Where there is little education, literacy levels are low and the demand for facilities such as libraries is equally low. In developing countries there is a hard logic. Where there are only a few libraries these are for the educated elite. A broader public library service follows from a policy of universal education. Much of the charitable support, therefore, is connected with books, and reading is focussed on primary and secondary education.

Figures quoted in newspapers at the end of 2005 show that while literacy is slowly increasing in Asia and Latin America, with about a third of the population functionally illiterate, an increasing proportion of its population in Africa has not learned to read or write. When the average across the continent is quoted at nearly 50 percent, and there are countries with successful education programs (think of South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya), then the plight of children in the less-developed countries is serious. If the able children are not being educated, then the disabled have less of a chance. Without education the climb out of poverty will be long and difficult.

WHAT IS PRINT IMPAIRMENT?

People often refer to "the blind" as though they were a lumpen mass rather than a collection of individuals. In order to understand some of the library projects that will be described below, it is worth reminding ourselves what is meant by terms like "blindness," "visual impairment," and "print handicap." The definitions matter since they affect the types of projects and the target groups. Blindness is a scale of measures from seeing absolutely nothing to having partial sight up to the level that the government sets as the limit to be registered as blind.

Research suggests that the percentage of visually impaired people is about the same in all countries (Bruce, McKennell, & Walker, 1989; Gorter & Melief, 1998). The difference is that the developed countries have an increasingly ageing population who acquire visual impairment, while developing countries have far more young blind and fewer elderly people.

RESOURCES

The resources considered here are those that are provided for visually impaired people, such as Braille, large print, audio, and digital files. These are normally produced in institutions serving the needs of the blind and visually impaired people, rather than in libraries although, as will be seen there are some libraries that incorporate production services. These institutions are necessary to provide an alternative format of the book in question for the simple reason that the client cannot read the book in its original form.

The second, and increasingly important, source of alternative access to literature is public libraries themselves. There are examples of the provision of equipment to enable the print impaired readers to access the materials held by the library. Some of these libraries have also been able to add production facilities, supplying an on-demand service for the production of alternative format materials.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Any consideration of the supply of books to visually impaired people in developing countries has to consider the question of costs against the benefits that can be provided. Access to literature has to be judged alongside other needs. Can we, for example, claim that access to literature is more important than access to clean drinking water? It can be argued that more money should be given to the restoration of sight and preventive medicine than to the provision of library services. Giving sight back to people going blind can return them as useful members of society whether or not they can read.

Education is often a rare privilege. Many of the library projects being considered here are concerned with education. In the least developed

countries education cannot be taken for granted. It may be considered a human right and in many countries it is a legal requirement, but in reality not all children receive education, and only a small percentage of handicapped children ever get to school. For example, countries in French-speaking West Africa may have populations of 10 million, but less than 100 visually impaired children are in special primary schools. For that 100 in school there are 25,000 not receiving special education. Under these circumstances concerns for broader library services have to be subordinated to the provision of accessible literature within those schools that do exist.

What value should society give to the provision of access to literature and information? Any society attempting to modernize itself has to consider the importance of education and by implication permanent education. This in turn implies access to information. The arguments, both moral and political, have already been well made in the world of libraries (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2002), and most countries are doing their best with whatever resources they have to ensure basic education at the primary school level. In developing countries, however, there are few governments that have sufficient money to provide the level of education and the number of places that they would wish. It is not surprising, therefore, that resources are given first to the sighted and physically able. As a consequence the majority of provision for blind and partially sighted children is funded by charities from developed countries rather than being part of government spending. Governments may put their names to international charters and declarations, but the reality is that where choices have to be made handicapped people usually receive fewer benefits. We cannot blame governments for this, although we can proffer arguments to show that blind and visually impaired children are just as capable of benefiting from education as sighted children and therefore of becoming useful and contributory members of society. Currently, however, development of library services for this target group and access to literature in schools falls largely on the shoulders of charitable agencies.

CATEGORIES OF SUPPORT AGENCIES

The range of support agencies is broad, and their concern for libraries, among all the other things that they do, is minimal. In order to understand the sort of support that is being given to libraries in developing countries, it is worth looking at the structure of charitable agencies. This article will focus on those agencies that are wholly or partially concerned with the problems of blindness and visual impairment, recognizing that these are a small minority within the world of charities.

International Organizations

Many of the international bodies are multipurpose. They have a broad range of activities to meet a broad range of targets. Bodies such as Oxfam, UNESCO, Medecins Sans Frontières, and agencies carrying out national development programs have developed a small number of actions directed toward blind and visually impaired people. Most of these are concerned with blindness prevention. It is rare to find even part of one of their programs concerned with the provision of literature or other means of access to literature.

Uni-Purpose International Organizations

There are some international organizations solely devoted to the problems of the blind and visually impaired. The best known are perhaps the Christofel Blinden Mission (CBM), Sight Savers International (formerly the Commonwealth Society for the Blind), Hilton Perkins, and Helen Keller International (HKI). Although these organizations have clearly defined target groups, libraries and the provision of literature are rarely central to their aims. When they do get involved with library projects, however, they usually provide good support. Notable examples are the creation of the African Braille Centre in Nairobi as part of the development by Sight Savers International and the building of a Braille center at Promhandicam in Yaoundé as part of a complex containing workshops, a rehabilitation center, and a primary school supported by CBM. The chances of having a library development project are much greater within such organizations since they already have expertise in the problems of visual impairment and an understanding of the value of education for visually impaired people.

National Organizations

Most developed countries and some of the developing countries contain small single-issue charitable organizations. Their effectiveness depends to some extent on the history of charitable donations. North America and northwest Europe, particularly Britain, have a tradition of charitable works that now continues to support development in the Third World. Such organizations vary from large-scale, often church-based, professional bodies to very small charities run by one or two people devoted to supporting a specific project in a specific country. Typical of these are family charities supporting a particular school or a particular village. Among this plethora of small organizations there are a few funding the education of blind and visually impaired children, and therefore they are to some extent concerned with access to reading. It is in the nature of these organizations that they work individually. They are often fishing for donations in the same pool as many others, and as a result there is little

communication between them. This tends to reduce the effectiveness of any single action. As will be discussed below, the grouping of interests and financial resources can result in much stronger projects. But at the same time one must recognize the importance of the link between the charitable fund and a specific project. If it were not for that obsessive devotion, many actions would never take place.

THE FORCE FOUNDATION

Although attempting to present a general picture of support for special libraries in developing countries, this article is written from the perspective of a particular organization. The FORCE Foundation, based in The Hague, is one of the few charitable organizations specifically devoted to supporting the development of library services for print impaired readers in developing countries. While recognizing that blindness prevention, rehabilitation, mobility, and legal matters for the blind are very important, the FORCE Foundation has chosen to concentrate on library and resource services. This small charity has three project coordinators responsible for setting up and carrying out its projects around the world. A small amount of central funding allows it to run its office in The Hague, but the majority of its project budget has to be raised through appeals to other funds. Fundraising is carried out in the Netherlands and through small fundraising offices established in Germany and the UK. Since its establishment in 1998, FORCE has carried out projects in Central and South America, southeast Asia, Russia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, and in both French-speaking and English-speaking Africa.¹ Like all organizations offering any form of charitable aid, many requests for support are received through the mail and over the Internet. It is axiomatic that the number of requests will be many times more than any available budget. Hard choices have to be made, and many worthwhile proposals for the development of library resources are left with no support at all. An initial reaction might be to try to support those people and institutions that have nothing and are at the poorest end of the scale. Experience shows, however, that this is frequently a wasteful exercise. It is essential to choose institutions that have an infrastructure sufficiently well developed to guarantee the continuity of development after the period of funding that we are able to provide. There is little point in developing a center for the production of Braille and large print if, at the end of the development project, the institution is not able to support the staff and provide the necessary resources such as paper and book covers. It is a waste of other people's money to train staff to convert schoolbooks into accessible forms if, after FORCE leaves, no one pays their salaries. If possible FORCE tries to find partners for our projects in the form of other charitable organizations sharing the same objectives and wishing to sup-

port the same institutions. In this way FORCE has been able to provide facilities that would have been impossible for any one of the partners. Collectively we have been able to make major changes in several countries. A further characteristic of the projects has been the willingness of a large number of experts to give their time and knowledge to other people for the price of their travel and hotel costs. Both FORCE, as a development organization, and the people who have been trained have to be extremely grateful to these specialists from around the world, without whom the training would not have been possible.

MATCHING ACTIONS TO LOCAL NEEDS

Some countries have had libraries for the blind for many years and therefore have different needs. For instance, in the former Soviet Union there was a long tradition of libraries for the blind, and today several of these are well into their ninth decade of operation. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a system of central funding, a central production house, and distribution of alternative format books through the regional and local libraries right down to some libraries and homes for visually impaired people.

Today's decentralized structure cannot function in the same way. Although a substantial government grant goes to LOGOS, the production house in Moscow, it is nowhere near the level of support that previously existed. Bereft of that structure, with all its good and bad points, the Russian libraries for the blind have been learning to fend for themselves. Within the Russian Federation these libraries have been reorganizing themselves, gaining support from provincial and local authorities and learning to work in horizontal structures in contact with each other. Outside the Russian Federation, in the CIS countries, the libraries have fared less well. In many cases the financial support has virtually disappeared.

Within the Russian Federation the FORCE Foundation has spent the last seven years working on a long-term strategy with the collective libraries as well as a series of individual projects with specific libraries. Each year the Russian libraries hold a conference in the Crimean resort of Sudak.² Within that conference libraries for the blind hold a workshop, partially funded by the FORCE Foundation. This is an opportunity to bring together the decision makers and provide a context in which they can develop new practices and formulate new policy. The meetings have developed from merely reporting on activities in individual libraries to detailed consideration of specific themes in sessions with international experts. Recent years have seen the introduction of structured group discussions and the use of management gaming. There has been a noticeable change in the attitudes of management toward the new technologies and cooperation with other libraries. One of the early developments from these

workshops was an electronic network stretching from the Black Sea to Vladivostok. This network now reaches almost all parts of Russia and more than half the libraries are active participants.

In order to assist in the development of this network the FORCE Foundation funded the creation of a central catalog and database of alternative format books; the database is run from the Russian State Library for the Blind in Moscow. A similar project established a national Braille music catalog in St. Petersburg. For several years the foundation helped experts attend conferences and workshops to expose the Russian libraries to practices and techniques employed in Europe and North America. In recent years fewer experts have been flown in and more attention has been paid to enabling the Russians to exchange their own expertise. There have been some specific developments in the provision of computers and access equipment for certain libraries. Funding has been obtained to set up a number of permanent computer workshops for blind and visually impaired readers.

One topic that poses specific difficulties for blind readers is that of tactile diagrams. Books are increasingly filled with illustrations of all sorts. Modern schoolbooks are presenting more of the information via images and symbols and less in words. Although there are techniques for creating raised lines on paper, the important skill is to create a tactile image that can be read by a blind person and still convey the same information as was intended by the original image. Simply creating a tactile version of what is on the page is rarely sufficient and often incomprehensible to the blind reader. Far too many tactile books are made to be admired by the sighted rather than to be read by the blind. Because of this FORCE has developed a course that was first delivered to a group of libraries in the northwest of Russia and has subsequently been repeated in Vietnam, the Philippines, Salvador, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay; the more recent workshops use local tutors.

Following support for a conference on the production of tactile books for small children, the Russian Federation decided to make the Tula Library for the Blind their center for tactile books. FORCE took the opportunity to publish a book on the topic (Ripley, 2005), which has now been made available in English, Russian, Vietnamese, and Spanish (see also König, 2004). The French version is currently in production. It is important in development work to be able to recognize an opportunity. A book produced for one course is now in use around the world.

Having a structure of libraries enabled commercial partnerships to be set up in the Russian Federation. The publisher of a multimedia encyclopaedia, accessible through the Internet, was prepared to work with the Russian State Library for the Blind in Moscow to create a version that would make this largely visual product accessible to blind people. FORCE supported the development of the new software, and in return the pub-

lisher agreed to provide free copies to twenty libraries for the blind and to supply the others at an advantageous price.

These examples show that where there is an infrastructure, good co-operation can be achieved and a lot can be changed for relatively little money. Countries with a public library structure but little or no support for visually impaired people pose a very different problem. Here the route to development is in persuading public library services that there is an important client group that is currently excluded by the lack of access technology. The underlying idea is embodied in the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) statement about access for all. It also relies on the belief that, once a sufficient number of libraries have begun providing facilities to enable blind and partially sighted people to access the materials, then there will be pressure from the readers themselves on both the government and the specialist institutions for the blind. Projects supporting this sort of development have to be relatively long term. There is little point in supplying a piece of access technology to one library without attempting to change the philosophy of the management of the library. Such projects have little chance of success if insufficient mass is created. There have to be enough libraries providing enough access to change the public perception of print impaired readers and of their right to equal access.

A couple of examples will serve to demonstrate the way in which a complex project can be built out of smaller separate components. Over recent years a team has been developed consisting of the director of Share the Vision, the chief librarian of a British metropolitan library, and a researcher from Manchester Metropolitan University. With occasional contributions from other experts, this team has provided a one-week management training course to senior library staff in Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Vietnam.

There has already been considerable spin-off in the Latin American countries, and the example of Vietnam is worth considering in more detail. In Ho Chi Minh City the National Science Library has undertaken a series of actions that have radically changed the face of public libraries in Vietnam as far as print impaired people are concerned. Following the management training course the National Science Library introduced Braille production with equipment and training being provided through the FORCE Foundation. Shortly afterwards money was found to enable the library to build recording studios and to buy equipment for the production of audio books. Because this was an entirely new activity, the library was able to start with the most up-to-date technologies and received training in DAISY production. Once the studios started producing audio books, funds were raised in Europe to provide 100 playback machines, which have been installed in the National Science Library and in a large number of municipal public libraries. Working with a manufacturer, FORCE was able to purchase 80 closed-circuit television devices (CCTV),

mainly demonstration models, which have now been placed in the public libraries to enable partially sighted people to read any book.

The developments in the National Science Library in Ho Chi Minh City are now being replicated in the National Library in Hanoi. The library system has also undertaken the challenge of providing tactile graphics and staff members have received necessary training. Having started with the provision of accessible material for Vietnamese speakers, the National Science Library is now starting production of alternative format books in the Khmer language. Khmer speakers form a sizeable minority in Vietnam and are in the majority across the border in Cambodia. Moves are being made to link up with the Cambodia library service to increase the production of these books. Because of the motivation and commitment of the senior staff in the national library, a project that started at a minimal level with the production of Braille has dramatically increased access to literature for print impaired people. In other countries the results may not have been quite as dramatic, but the provision of CCTV to national and public libraries in countries such as Kenya and Chile has provided a valuable service and, it is hoped, started a trend toward the development of more accessible library services.

Sometimes library services emerge as a by-product of other actions. In the Philippines FORCE was able, with others, to raise funds for the establishment of a center to train visually impaired people to work in call-centers. As the trainees became proficient at using telephone technology, they needed alternative access to scripts at short notice. This required text enlargement software for those with limited vision and the production of Braille scripts for those with little or no sight. When not producing call center scripts, the resulting Braille production facility can be used for the production of educational books in Braille. This has created an additional facility to the more traditional support centers for the blind, which have themselves been assisted in developing production facilities for tactile graphics and scientific Braille.

In many countries there are institutions busy supporting the needs of visually impaired people. Often these centers have their own particular constituency, which may be defined geographically, religiously, or politically. It appears that in countries with a moderate level of development the biggest problem in the provision of the library or educational services to visually impaired people is one of fragmentation. There are often many institutions attempting to provide assistance. Few of these reach a sufficient size to make effective use of their resources, and very often there is a lack of communication between the institutions. Given the way that such institutions develop and are supported by a variety of charitable sources, it is not surprising that they have not been able or wished to cooperate with each other. All too often this fragmentation leads to an inadequate service for all. Support organizations with operatives in place or the capability

to send staff to the potential projects are sometimes able to offer neutral ground on which the various parties can meet to begin cooperation. Sometimes such organizations play a small but catalytic role.

In Indonesia FORCE has joined with other international bodies to sponsor the coordination of the Braille producing bodies. There is a need for a common Braille code to enable the exchange of materials. Once this project was well underway it was sensible to launch a second project on the development of an Indonesian Braille translator. There have been cooperative projects with the major libraries in Thailand, Chile, and Kenya. In the Ukraine FORCE has been able to join together with the cultural section of the American Embassy in Kiev to strengthen the potential of the production and library services of the National Union of the Blind. At the same time they have assisted two regional public scientific libraries to provide access facilities for visually impaired readers. It is hoped that with this combination both completely blind and visually and print handicapped readers will be able to have improved access to the books that they want to read.

These projects are illustrative of many other actions in other countries in which charitable bodies have been able to combine their resources with those of national, regional, and local libraries to change their services and to enable them to tap into an important and often underestimated part of the market. From the perspective of the print handicapped reader, this charitable input has opened up huge potential resources. In countries where it is difficult for a print impaired person to obtain a good education, this change in library services can make the difference between becoming a useful contributor to society or being excluded from it. Here the charities are adding their support to organizational structures that already exist. In most cases national or regional governments also support the libraries that the charities are helping. This gives some guarantee of continuity, providing justification for spending donors' money.

The third group of countries (or parts of countries) is those in which there is no library infrastructure and little or no support for the blind and visually impaired. Generally these are the countries near the bottom of the poverty scale, although there have been projects in relatively wealthy countries, such as the upper Amazon in Brazil where the school for the blind is as poor as anything that can be found in Africa.

In selecting institutions for development projects in poor countries certain criteria have to be applied very strictly. In all cases the needs of the blind children and adults are great. But not all apparently worthy organizations can demonstrate that they are able to continue with the production of accessible books once the project investment is completed. There are many organizations around the world that have been providing a library and resource service to visually impaired readers for many years but that are wholly dependent on charitable donations from Europe or

North America. Such charities cannot be expected to continue supplying money endlessly. They demand good results for their investment. They expect good management of the resources they provide, and they themselves are subject to the decisions of committees and the vagaries of the stock market. It is very hard for the beneficiaries of such organizations to be faced with the withdrawal of funding by a long-term donor. But donors have to be reassured of the good use of their money and have guarantees of continuity.

Under these circumstances, the FORCE Foundation has put a lot of effort into field research, visiting the applicant institutions, investigating the situation in the broader national context, and checking the relationship of the institution with its government. Regrettably this has meant that many applications for support have had to be rejected. Like all foundations, our budgets are limited and choices have to be made on the best evidence available.

Sometimes transnational criteria also play a part. For example, when first considering requests from the French-speaking countries of West Africa, it seemed sensible to consider the region as a whole at the same time as looking at individual national requests. Before launching the first project a conference was held with the representatives of the blindness organizations from most of the countries in the region. This sort of activity has also taken place in Latin America and southeast Asia in the early stages of project planning. In the case of West Africa, it was possible to envisage a staged provision of production facilities that would eventually become a network across the whole region. Once that had been decided, the choice of countries in which to begin was made on a different set of criteria. Those countries engaged in civil war or political instability had to be put at the bottom of the list. We began with Mali because our French collaborators were based in Angers, which has a twinning relationship with Bamako. They had already been working with the association of the blind in Mali.

Countries like Mali and Burkina Faso are typical of many poorer countries. They have strong organizations of the blind and in both cases have established schools. In Burkina Faso the union of the blind runs a six-classroom primary school, which had at that time about 70 pupils. Between them they spoke 51 languages. In a country of 10 million people it can be safely estimated that there are 25,000 blind children of primary school age. Less than 100 of these were in special education and a further hundred had graduated from the primary school and were integrated into secondary schools, where the classes have between 100 and 120 pupils. At the time of starting the project the total supply of reading materials was produced on two mechanical Braille typewriters.

The development project is in itself not complicated. First of all the support of the institution and the relevant ministries is secured. A suitable

space is identified; it is made as dust-free as possible and air conditioning is installed. Staff are selected and trainers sent from Europe to instruct them in the use of computers in the production of Braille texts. In reality the training has to be done in stages with reinforcement some time after the initial training. The institution provides the wages for the staff and pays for supplies of paper and bookbinding materials. In a relatively short time each of the centers that (have been established) has provided the children in the special schools with Braille versions of the same textbooks as are being used by their sighted colleagues in the "normal" schools. Later on books can be provided to those pupils who are integrated into ordinary secondary schools.

With the help of colleagues from the Institute Montéclair in Angers and the generous provision of tutors by the Federation of Institutions for the Deaf and Blind in France (FISAF), it has been possible to establish Braille production centers in Mali, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin. In the future we hope to extend this network to Togo and other countries in the French-speaking region. It is too early to describe these centers as libraries, but they have access through the Internet to databases in France and have already taken the first steps in coordinating their activities so that, over time, they will be able to produce, archive, and distribute Braille files throughout the Francophone world. Already some of these centers are exchanging training, thus reducing their dependence on European support. Recently there has been training across the region in mathematical and scientific Braille, which implies not only training the transcribers but also all the teaching staff, who will have to teach the children to read these new codes.

The notion of a developing regional cooperation has been part of the project development in other regions. Most of the courses in Latin America have involved specialists from neighboring countries. In this way some continuity of knowledge and policy can be spread across the region. In addition, when training does take place in another country it becomes increasingly likely that there are trained personnel there already. As in Africa, local trainers in Latin America are taking over from visiting European specialists. This reduces costs and releases more money for the projects.

In Latin America, southeast Asia, and Africa an abiding problem for education is that each country not only produces its own textbooks but also that these are changed with great regularity. Even with computers the conversion of books to Braille takes time, and because most centers have only two or three transcribers, it may take some time to convert all the books required for any school year. The frustration and waste of resources are enormous when governments announce new book lists just at the moment when the existing list is being completed. It is encouraging, therefore, to note that eight English-speaking countries in West Africa

have recently announced a common exam syllabus. This is providing a strong impetus for the libraries for the blind and the related production centers to produce common materials and avoid duplication of effort. To make such library cooperation effective requires good communication, but regrettably a reliable Internet connection is rare, making the transfer or downloading of files a long, difficult, and expensive process.

Since being established in 1998, FORCE has assisted about fifty production centers, half a dozen audio production units, run courses in graphics, music, pre-Braille tactile books for small children, computer laboratories for the visually impaired, the use of radio for the blind, management of access to literature in libraries, and many other topics. The types of project depend on local conditions and the people running the local institutions. Some projects are heavily interventionist, while others do little more than provide the resources to people who know precisely what they need. All of these actions have been directed to providing print handicapped people with access to the same content that is used by sighted readers. Any success arises out of a partnership between FORCE and the local institutions and wherever possible with other organizations working for the benefit of visually and print impaired people.

HOW CAN OTHER LIBRARIES HELP?

First of all take a little time to find out what the real conditions are in the country that you might like to support. Ask the organizations that work in these countries, such as CBM, SSI, Overbroek, HKI, and others, to provide you with up-to-date information.

Choose a Good Intermediary

My bias would lead me to suggest the FORCE Foundation as being one of the few that concentrates specifically on libraries, but there are many other national and international groups. Work through them rather than starting to invent the charity wheel again.

Do Not Donate without Asking

If you are thinking of making donations of books, whether in print or in an alternative format, please do not. Or at least do not make a donation without taking some elementary steps. It is shocking to find libraries in tropical Africa with bound copies of "The Practice of Tipping in New York, 1979" or "Vegetarian Cooking for Christmas" (17 copies) and the UK government's paper for elderly people on how to keep warm in winter. There are shelves around the world groaning under the weight of unasked for and irrelevant books that are studiously cataloged, placed in order on shelves, and then never read. The money that is wasted on dumping books that are no longer needed in the developed countries could be better used purchasing things that the libraries really need. If you have books that you can spare, please make a list and send it to your

chosen library. Let them choose any titles that might really be useful and send those. Then they will get something useful and you will not waste money.

Provide Experts

One way in which libraries can contribute to the development in other countries is by releasing its own experts for courses being run in developing countries. The transfer of skills both from special libraries and from the more traditional public libraries is essential. Currently it is difficult to find employers willing to release staff, and many agencies have to time courses to fit with the holidays of the experts. It would help if employers could see the release of their staff, on employer's time and without loss of salary, as a concrete contribution to Third World aid.

Should You Donate Equipment?

There is a sort of sexiness about donating equipment. It makes for a good photograph and is more readily recognized than donating money or worse still contributing expertise. Some equipment has such high value that it might be worth all the costs of transport and import duties. A high-capacity Braille embosser might be worth the effort. CCTVs that have been used in demonstrations and offered at a considerable discount proved to be worthwhile even after the added costs of transport. But generally old computers are rarely economic. It is arguably better to buy computers locally, thereby ensuring after-sales service, getting up-to-date machines, and injecting some finance into the local economy. Thus, unless a library is changing major items of equipment, it would be far more useful to conduct some fundraising activities and to donate the money to a library project of your choice.

Exchange Materials

As digital technologies become more central to libraries, there are new ways in which the libraries in developed countries could help their colleagues in developing countries. The transfer of a text file, or better still a text and Braille file, to meet the needs of a small production center can be enormously helpful. Because most of these centers are very small, time is of the essence. Even using scanners and computers it takes valuable time to create a file from which a Braille or large print book can be produced. This is in no way to suggest that anyone should contravene copyright or licensing regulations. However, if an established library can allow one of these new production centers to access their catalog and then request such works as they actually need and are free of copyright, then the first steps toward a global network will be taken. The Francophone countries already have the advantage of membership of the Hélène server, which permits access to many French publications for which the rights for use by special libraries have already been cleared. Moves are being made to

set up exchange mechanisms in the English-speaking countries, but in the meantime anything that libraries can do to allow their new colleagues to have texts in a convertible form would be of enormous help.

WHY BOTHER AT ALL?

Perhaps this question should have been posed at the beginning of this article, but it seemed better to lay out the issues on the assumption that providing help to libraries for visually impaired people in developing countries is worthwhile. IFLA has already made the arguments about access for all people to libraries and the freedom of each person to read what he or she chooses.

That visually and print impaired people face exclusion from education and therefore much of society in many poor countries is clear. Libraries have little significance for the illiterate, but every chance that is taken to give a visually impaired person the education she needs to be able to read an appropriate alternative format text is a step toward providing that person, young or old, with a better chance in the world. Once educated and literate they can compete for many opportunities with sighted people and become net contributors to society rather than being forced to rely on the charity of others. There are enough examples from the developing countries of blind judges, lawyers, writers, parliamentarians, administrators, and teachers to overcome any doubts about the capabilities of people who are print impaired. They are just as intelligent or stupid as the rest of society in any part of the world.

But for those of us working in the field, all the effort of raising funds, of spending long days in sometimes uncomfortable situations, of learning to be patient with bureaucracies that work to different rhythms are made worthwhile by the sight of children reading their new Braille textbooks or listening to the same books on disc. They know that they are using the same books as the other children and can compete on something approaching an equal basis. Their smiles make the work worthwhile.

NOTES

1. A list of past and present projects can be seen on the FORCE Web site: <http://www.f-force.nl>.
2. Details of the annual libraries conference can be found at <http://www.gpntb.ru/win/inter-events/crimea2006/eng/inf.php>.

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