

**CONTEXTUALISING INFORMATION SERVICES FOR PEOPLE
WITH DISABILITIES IN MALAWI**

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Abstract

This paper seeks to establish the extent to which the Malawi Government has contextualised the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) with regards to provision of information for people with disabilities, with a special focus on public university libraries. The role of academic libraries in students' academic achievement cannot be overemphasized. The UNCRPD emphasises on legal and human rights for people with disabilities. Malawi Government ratified the UNCRPD in 2009, thereby guaranteeing people with disabilities their fundamental human rights, one of which is access to information. By ratifying the UNCRP, Malawi recognizes that it is a legal requirement to make information accessible to people with disabilities. This requirement applies to all public institutions too. Thus by their nature, public universities in Malawi are required to offer inclusive information services for students with disabilities. However, searching through literature, it is evident that people with disabilities are excluded in most information services. This paper gives an overview of the UNCRPD and what it provides for people with disabilities in terms of access to information. By reviewing literature on disability studies and disability related policies in Malawi, the gap between the UNCRPD framework and the actual practice is established and recommendations on how to narrow the gap are drawn, by referring to international best practices. These recommendations provide a bedrock for

designing information services for people with disabilities in all types of libraries in Malawi that will ensure adherence to the UNCRPD framework. The paper focuses on information provision alone, leaving out other provisions outlined in the UNCRPD whose pursuance may give different results.

Key words: *People with disabilities, United Nations Convention on Rights for People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), academic libraries*

Introduction

Libraries, academic or otherwise, are integral to the communities they serve. Academic libraries contain information that aim to complement the teaching, learning and research activities of the parent institutions. Kenyon (2009) posits that the university library is a very important repository of scholarly information. Academic libraries, owing to their function of complementing the academic activities of the parent institution, must be accessible to all students as they seek to achieve their academic goals. Throughout history libraries have been known for opening up to even the most disadvantaged in society.

The American Library Association (ALA) (2001), the world's oldest and largest library association, stresses the need for libraries to create a non-discriminating environment that promotes equal access to library resources to persons with disabilities. Considering challenges faced by people with disabilities in accessing library services and facilities, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) developed a checklist for all types of libraries as a tool for facilitating access to all types of libraries, including academic libraries (Irvall & Nielsen, 2005). The checklist provides guidelines for exterior library facilities, interior facilities that will enable entry into the library for all people with disabilities, library shelving and information formats and media that facilitate information access to different categories of disability. UNESCO (1999) emphasized that failure by academic libraries to provide accessible information to students with disabilities is equivalent to depriving them of higher education - a fundamental right. The contribution of academic libraries to student achievement, including those with disabilities has been underscored by Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2016:16), Thorpe et al. (2016) and Bell (2008).

Statement of the problem

Malawi is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). As per the obligations set out in the convention, Malawi Government is required to implement the convention by ensuring access to all services and facilities by people with disabilities. Being publicly funded institutions, libraries in public universities need to implement the UNCRPD by ensuring that their services and facilities are accessible to students with disabilities. However, little is known of how public universities in Malawi contextualize the CRPD in their information service provision.

Public university libraries in Malawi

There are four public universities in Malawi, namely; University of Malawi (UNIMA), Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST), Mzuzu University and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) and Mzuzu University (MZUNI). University of Malawi comprises of four constituent colleges, namely; Chancellor College, College of Medicine, Kamuzu College of Nursing and The Polytechnic. Each of the colleges is serviced by a library headed by a College Librarian. The libraries in the other three universities are headed by a University Librarian.

Bunda campus, the largest campus of Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, used to be a constituent college of UNIMA until 2012 when it was delinked and merged with the Natural Resources College (NRC) to form a separate university. Mzuzu University was formed in 1997 by an act of parliament and occupies what used to be Mzuzu Teachers Training College. MUST is the newest university having been opened in 2014.

University of Malawi College libraries make up the University of Malawi library system. These libraries were coordinated by the University Librarian, a position which was phased out in 2010. Since then the college libraries operate in a decentralized system, which has led to disparities in ICT utilization and funding.

The libraries are funded through the parent institutions, which poses a challenge because in times of budget cuts, as the current situation facing public universities in Malawi (Mambo, Meki, Tanaka, & Salmi, 2016; World Bank, 2010), libraries are usually an easy target, forcing them to solely depend on donations (A. Chaputula & Boadi, 2010) and unable to maintain equipment and renew software licenses (Eneya, 2008, p. 78).

Prevalence of disability in Malawi

The National Statistics Office in Malawi is responsible for population census in Malawi. Before independence census was conducted in 1911, 1921, 1926, 1931 and 1945. The first post-independence census was conducted in 1966. Subsequent censuses followed in 1977, 1987, 1998 and 2008. The 2008 census was the first to include information on people with disabilities (NSO 2010:3). According to the 2008 census, 3.8% of the population is disabled with 2.8% of the disabled population being children (under the age of 18). Disability prevalence was found to be higher in males (2.5%) than females (2.2%) and 4.1% of the disabled population lives in rural areas and 2.5% in urban areas. Table 1 below shows the disability prevalence by type in Malawi:

Table 1. Prevalence of disability by type in Malawi

Disability Type	Percentage
Seeing	26.5
Hearing	16.4
Speaking	6.1
Walking	22.0
Other	29

Source: National Statistical Office Disability Census, 2010.

As shown in Table 1, the highest disability in Malawi is visual impairment at 26.5%; followed by mobility at 22.0% and hearing impairment at 16.4%. Speech impairment has the lowest occurrence at 6.1%. It is imperative therefore, that these disabilities should be taken into account when planning for public services and infrastructure such as library services.

Education for people with disabilities in Malawi

Malawi is implementing inclusive education having signed the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education is a system of educating children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms together with their non-disabled peers (Chimwaza, 2015), as opposed to special schools. This system is hailed for its ability to enhance social skills in children with disabilities and increasing awareness to disability issues among teachers and the other students without disabilities (Chilemba, 2013; Chimwaza, 2015). For inclusive education to be successful, regular schools must be transformed in order to accommodate all students, whether disabled or not. This transformation must continue to universities where students with disabilities are also taught in mainstream classrooms. Library services and facilities too must be transformed to ensure access by students with disabilities owing to the critical role played by libraries in the academic success of students (Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), 2016; Thorpe et al., 2016). It has been established that all students have the same academic goals regardless of disability. According to Chimwaza (2015), inclusive education has its roots from the social model of disability, which blames the unaccommodating society for the exclusion of people with disabilities (Oliver, 1990). The social model enforces equality of all students, whether disabled or not (Hernon & Calvert, 2006). By viewing people with disabilities as victims of an oppressive society (Hanley 2014:19), the social model demands removal of barriers by academic libraries in order to ease access to services and facilities by students with disabilities. Therefore, this paper adopts the social model of disability to illuminate the extent to which academic libraries in Malawi have contextualized the CRPD as regards to services and facilities for students with disabilities. According to Mambo, Meko, Tanaka, and Salmi, (2016), the higher education system in Malawi absorbs only a small fraction all students with disabilities that

graduated from secondary school due to lack of infrastructure, teaching and learning materials and equipment appropriate for students with disabilities.

The Government of Malawi has put in place a number of interventions for education of people with disabilities, i.e. The National Policy on Special Needs Education (Malawi Government, 2007), National Education Sector Plan 2008-2017 (Ministry of Education 2008), and National Policy on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (Ministry of Social Development and People with Disabilities 2006). All these policies are linked to the national constitution. The 2012 Disability Act prohibits any form of discrimination against people with disabilities in all sectors including education.

Although these policies exist, they emphasize more on the following sub-sectors of education: Early Childhood Development, Primary Education, Secondary Education, Non-formal Education (Research for Inclusive Education in International Cooperation 2014).

In addition, most of the research done in Malawi on the challenges faced by learners with disabilities focuses on those education sub sectors. Munthali, Tsoka, Milner, and Mvula (2013) carried out a situational analysis of children with disabilities in Malawi. The report focuses only on children with disabilities. Research for Inclusive Education in International Cooperation (2014) analysed documents relating to disability issues in Malawi. From the analysis the sub-sectors of education where barriers to learners were identified, higher education is missing. The report mentions pre-school, primary, secondary and non-formal sector only. In addition to this, Lang (2008) undertook a disability audit for Namibia, Swaziland, Malawi and Mozambique. In the report there is no mention of higher education. Norwegian Federation of Organisations of Disabled People (2004), Chavuta, Itimu-Phiri, Chiwaya, Sikero, and Alindiamao (2008) carried out a situational analysis of mainstream education system for inclusion of learners with special needs. This study focused on primary schools in the Shire Highlands Education Division. This shows that disability in higher education in Malawi is underexploited and the magnitude of the challenges students with disabilities face in their pursuit of higher education are not exposed.

The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

People's rights are universally guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (UNDHR) (United Nations, 1948). However it was noted that disabilities are not explicitly mentioned in this declaration, neither are they mentioned in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which together with the UNDHR make up the International Bill of Rights (Schulze, 2009). This led to negative perception of disability whereby people with disabilities were viewed as underserving of any rights.

The CRPD was therefore introduced to ensure equal rights of people with disabilities. With special interest to this paper is Article 9 of the convention which states:

To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to, inter alia:

- (a) Buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing, medical facilities and workplaces;
- (b) Information, communications and electronic services and emergency services. (United Nations, 2006, p. 9).

This article gives prominence to accessibility as a prerequisite to various provisions and ensuring equality as full and equal access to the enjoyment of all human rights. According to Schulze (2009), perceiving human rights in the accessibility lens offers an opportunity to remove all barriers that impede full and effective enjoyment of human rights by people with disabilities. It is disheartening to learning that students with print disabilities only access less than 5% of what is available to their fellow sighted colleagues. The situation is worse in developing countries like Malawi where the fraction is as low as less than 1% (Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), 2017). Article 29 Of the CRPD is very critical to libraries as it provides a tool to identify obstacles faced by people with disabilities in accessing information, bearing in mind that information is a human right. Furthermore, Article 21 of the CRPD requires state parties to provide information in appropriate formats for people with disabilities to ensure equal access.

Thus, the CRPD recognizes the inherent dignity of people with disabilities and it serves as a key to unlock numerous social concepts which increase marginalization of people with disabilities and impediment of their rights. Public university libraries have an obligation to grant access to their facilities and services to people with disabilities as stipulated by the above mentioned article.

Another international instrument that promotes the right to access to information for people with disabilities is the Marrakesh Treaty (Lewis, 2013). According to Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) (EIFL, 2016), the Treaty is a remarkable progress to information access for blind and visually impaired people. For countries that have ratified the treaty, it gives libraries the right to transcribe printed works into alternate formats such as braille and audio whose copies can

also be shared across borders. Ocholla (2006) notes that some sections of society, which includes people with disabilities, are segregated in information provision despite libraries being historically inclusive societies. Ocholla attributes this to lack of skills by library personnel and lack of resources for libraries to provide such services.

The Malawi government acknowledges the challenges encountered by people with disabilities as stated in government policy documents. For instance, the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (Government of Malawi, 2008), the country's national framework for education, acknowledges the challenge of low enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education and devises mechanisms of mitigating against this challenge. Vision 2020 (Government of Malawi, 1998), the long term national development framework, has a strategic aim of formulating a comprehensible national policy that would explicitly address issues regarding people with disabilities.

Malawi is also a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, demonstrating its commitment to education of children with disabilities.

In terms of legal framework, the Education Act is a principle education legislation in Malawi. However, Chilemba (2013) noted that the act does not make any reference to education of people with disabilities or inclusive education.

Following the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2009, the Malawi government passed the Disability Act (DA) (Government of Malawi, 2012) in 2012 in order to domesticate the UNCRPD. The Disability Act compels government "to make provision for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities through the promotion and protection of their rights." The 2012 Disability Act replaced the Handicapped Persons Act (Government of Malawi, 1971). Unlike the Handicapped Persons Act, The Disability Act places much emphasis on social and environmental barriers reflecting the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) which is an underpinning theory for the UNCRPD. For instance, in Section 8 of the Disability Act, government commits to ensure removal of barriers in the physical environment, transportation, information and communications for accessibility by people with disabilities.

To achieve this, government commits to develop, publicize and monitor the implementation of universal standards and guidelines for accessibility of all public facilities and services (Government of Malawi, 2012). Furthermore, segregation or denial of services or benefits to people with disabilities is prohibited in section 24 of the Disability Act.

Nevertheless, Chilemba's (2013) analysis of the Disability Act shows that it is not in synch with the CRPD. Section 10 (b) of the Act states that ..."taking into consideration the special requirements of persons with disabilities in the formulation of educational policies and programmes, including the provision of

assistive devices, teaching aids and learning support assistants.” Chilemba noted that this list could be limiting, making the Act miss out on the CRPD’s provisions on education and obligations of state parties.

Secondly, Chilemba noted that although the Act defines the concept of reasonable accommodation in Section 2, there is no further implication of the concept on people with disabilities. There is no mention of the concept even in Sections 10 and 11 where non-discrimination in education is recommended. This leaves people with disabilities with no legal basis to claim entitlement to the provision of reasonable accommodation, which is an element of the right to non-discrimination.

Chilemba stated that this is incongruent to the CRPD and recommends that the DA should be reviewed to amend sections on education to impose reasonable accommodation. It is very important that national legislation and policies should concretise the framework of rights and obligations for actors in the country. As stated by Emong and Eron (2016), reasonable accommodation is critical to achieving substantive equality for people with disabilities as stipulated by the CRPD. It is also noteworthy that the standards and guidelines referred to in section 8 (a) have not been developed to date. The lack of standards and guidelines is reflected in the haphazard service provision in institutions without any standard of access (Chaputula & Mapulanga, 2017).

Library services for students with disabilities in higher education in Malawi

The few studies that tackle disability in higher education in Malawi show serious marginalization of students with disabilities (Mambo et al., 2016; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1988, 1999). There are no reliable statistics for students with disabilities enrolled in Malawi’s public universities (Mambo et al., 2016). This can be attributed to the higher emphasis for education of children with disabilities in primary and secondary levels than tertiary levels (Braathen & Loeb, 2011). Enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education in Malawi remains very low as compared to the total population of people with disabilities (Mambo et al., 2016). Being such a minority group, students with disabilities in Malawi’s public universities are vulnerable to numerous inequalities as their needs are likely to be overlooked. A study by Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017) on library services provision for people with disabilities in colleges and universities in Malawi revealed that some libraries have never considered services for people with disabilities because they do not anticipate any such users in their libraries. As a result there was serious lack of information resources for people with disabilities in addition to inaccessible library infrastructure. This lack of services and resources compounds the educational disadvantages suffered by people with disabilities (Amstrong & Barton, 1999).

Mambo et al. (2016) observes that inaccessible library facilities and services are among the factors that keep students with disabilities away from universities in Malawi.

Another study by Kamchedzera (2017) on the response of Christian organizations to the needs of people with disabilities, students with disabilities lamented the lack of library resources in appropriate format for their use as one of the challenges they encounter.

Libraries find themselves squeezed between a rock and a hard place as they operate under minimal budgets (Chaputula & Boadi, 2010; Mapulanga, 2012; World Bank, 2010), while at the same time they must provide high quality services for all users.

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), a body responsible for accreditation of higher education institutions in Malawi, set the following minimum standards for academic libraries (National Council for Higher Education, 2015):

- i. All buildings shall provide for special needs access
- ii. Design and construction shall accommodate universal access
- iii. Entrance doors and corridors shall allow for turning of a wheel chair
- iv. Toilets should have special facilities for wheel chairs and their doors open outside
- v. Library and learning resource centre shall have facilities that guarantee means to access library resources by all learners, including materials suitable for people with special needs

(National Council for Higher Education, 2015, p. 23).

As it may be observed, NCHE's requirements are not exhaustive and can be limiting as compared to the accessibility obligations outlined by the CRPD. However, it gives a starting point for academic libraries in Malawi to start thinking about accessibility issues. Standard (v) above empowers librarians to source accessible content for students with disabilities. This is in cognizance with the Marrakesh Treaty (Lewis, 2013), a World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) initiative to increase availability of information resources for people with disabilities in developing countries, where only less than 1% of globally published content is available in alternative format (EIFL, 2017). However, librarians in Malawi will have an uphill task in implementing the CRPD's accessibility requirements due to the newly adopted copyright law which has introduced commercial availability test, which requires ascertaining the commercial availability before creating an alternative format copy (EIFL, AfLIA, & IFLA, 2017). This has been condemned by organisations such as Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) as it contradicts the aim of the Marrakesh Treaty which Malawi herself signed in July 2017 (EIFL et al., 2017).

IFLA checklist for library services for people with disabilities (Irvall & Nielsen, 2005) is a good guide for all types of libraries worldwide, including academic libraries, in their endeavor to provide services for students with disabilities.

Browsing through the library websites of the four public universities under study, it is evident that disability issues are not given much thought as there are no accessibility and service statements. Herson (2006) states that apart from illuminating significant services offered to students with disabilities, accessibility statements also indicate the library's commitment to service for such students.

Furthermore, going through the strategic plans of the four public universities, only Chancellor College (Chancellor College, 2014) and the Polytechnic (The Polytechnic, 2016), both constituent colleges of the University of Malawi (UNIMA), included services for students with disabilities in their strategic plan. The word 'disability' is conspicuously missing in the strategic plans of Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2012), College of Medicine (College of Medicine, 2010), a constituent college of UNIMA, and Mzuzu University. The lack of awareness of disability issues as observed by Wazakili, Chataika, Mji, Dube, and MacLachlan's (2011) study on the social inclusion of people with disabilities in poverty reduction policies and instruments in Malawi and Uganda revealed a general lack of awareness of disability issues among civil society organisations and government. The same can be attributed to the non-coverage of disability in strategic plans for some of the universities. Failure to consider disability at the planning stage results in the creation of a hostile and unaccommodating environment for students with disabilities (Amstrong & Barton, 1999). A study by Majinge and Stilwell (2014) found that although libraries in Tanzania served people with disabilities, there were no policies addressing such services. Mostert (2001) emphasizes the role of policies in in coordinating acquisition, organization and dissemination of information. Mostert's study revealed that information policies did not exist in most African institutions. Seyama (2014) concurs with Mostert that policies are vital to ensure recognition of people with disabilities as potential and valued users of information; and their absence impedes library service provision. This concurs with Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová's (2015) assertion that institutional barriers are more disabling and segregating for students with disabilities than their disability.

Rugara, Ndinde, and Kadodo's (2016) study on library services and disability at tertiary and university libraries in Masvingo Urban in Zimbabwe, revealed that access to library stock in some libraries was through a flight of stairs, without a provision for an elevator for students with mobility problems; there was no software available for use by people with print disabilities; and neither signs nor sign language interpreter was available for those with speech and hearing impairment (Rugara, Ndinde & Kadodo, 2016, p.199). The findings are similar to those by Todaro (2005) in his study on library services for people with

disabilities in Argentina. In their study on inclusion of students with disabilities in University of Mauritius, Pudaruth et al. (2017, p. 11) note that there is more awareness of laws on social justice and higher education than enhanced support and inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. In South Africa, despite the government putting in place legal and policy frameworks to ensure participation of students in higher education, it has been found that higher education environment still poses a number of challenges for students with disabilities (Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis, 2011; Matshediso, 2007; O. Mutanga, 2017; Oliver Mutanga & Walker, 2017). In these studies, library infrastructure and services feature highly in posing accessibility challenges to students with disabilities. Seyama (2014) warns that availability of library services for students with disabilities is not enough, accessibility is the key issue. This is demonstrated by Phukubje and Ngoepe's (2016) study which revealed that students with disabilities faced challenges accessing information despite the library at University of Limpopo being built in conformance to the IFLA guidelines (Irvall & Nielsen, 2005). Students with disabilities cited challenges such as shortage of prescribed texts in accessible formats, unavailability of disability services librarian after working hours, inaccessible online catalog and lack of assistive devices. These challenges are also reflected in Chaputula and Mapulanga's (2017) study which revealed acute shortage of library services for people with disabilities in Malawi.

Countries in the west such as United States and United Kingdom have registered remarkable progress in library service delivery to people with disabilities.

Conclusion

The UNCRPD gives a beacon of hope for people with disabilities in their pursuit of higher education. Malawi government has moved a step forward in domesticating the UNCRPD by enacting the Disability Act. However, contextualization of the UNCRPD is yet to be achieved in as far as accessibility of academic library facilities and services is concerned. The standards and guidelines stated in the Disability Act must be actualized and enforced.

Librarians are duty bound to give a serious thought to accessibility of their library facilities and services. The minimum standards laid down by NCHE are a good starting point in introducing services for students with disabilities. Academic libraries services must extend to the whole student populace as denying such services to a section of the student population translates to denying them their right to education (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1988).

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