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## Expansion and Redefinition of Disadvantaged User Groups in Librarianship

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*Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:*



# Expansion and Redefinition of Disadvantaged User Groups in Librarianship

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A research work I did in a postgraduate course made me to understand that peoples understanding of "Disadvantaged User Group" is limited. It took me an ample time to convince my lecturer that the group I wanted to research on should be regarded as a disadvantaged group. Who should be classified as disadvantaged? What are the criteria to use in determining who is disadvantaged? Use of information depends on its availability and the effort put in acquiring it. People's knowledge depends on the amount of information acquired and processed. So people limit their comprehension of disadvantaged group to the limited literature they have searched or available in the subject. For instance anyone who does not know about or does not have a computer or handset cannot use the World Wide Web.

Many people are excluded from the group where they actually belong because of ignorance and limited understanding. The benefit to be derived from such grouping is thereby denied them. Knowledge is not stagnant; belief of two decades ago might have changed while many who are not following the trend of development still live in the past. Change is not easy to embrace, many people who are used to the "old ways" find it very difficult to adapt. Conviction, persuasion, exposure, and tact are needed to get such people on the bandwagon. What You See Is What You Get

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(WYSWYG); in the same vein, in lineal perspective, what you read is what you know.

Exclusion of many groups in the definition of "Disadvantaged User Groups" should be a concern to people. But, how would other people know the concern of others about an issue if none of those concerned is outspoken? This is the reason for this paper. Academically it is difficult to have a definition that captures every meaning of a word or an idea or a phenomenon, but it is beneficial to say all that one knows about an issue in one compendium. That is wisdom.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOURSE

The main objective of this paper is to redefine "Disadvantaged Group" so that the definition will be more accommodating and embracing. Effort was made through elaborate literature review to make an inclusive and clearer definition of the term disadvantaged user group

The specific objectives are to:

1. Broaden the definition of disadvantaged user group to include the neglected ones.
2. Proffer reasons why the forgotten disadvantaged groups should be included.
3. Garner information from literature that support the inclusion of the added groups as disadvantaged groups also.
4. Solicit the public and private organizations, including UNESCO, to embrace the new definition of disadvantaged user group as suggested by this paper.

## III. REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS OF DISADVANTAGED GROUP

Talking about disadvantaged group in a society that is looking for special assistance, the tendency is to focus almost only on the physically and mentally impaired and on those who are confined to a place either legally (prisons) or politically (refugees) or by natural disaster (earth upheaval). There are other classifications of disadvantaged groups. The "user" in the group means someone having one inclination, one hope, one focus, one need. So a "Disadvantaged User Group" means a set of individuals having something in common that causes neglect or reject or denial to them.

### a) *Illiterates as Disadvantaged User Groups*

A BBC broadcast of 9<sup>th</sup> November 2005 states "not only is one-fifth of the world adult population illiterate, but 100 million children are not attending primary school, the UNESCO report says." This is a violation of UNESCO Fourth Education for ALL report. For anyone to effectively participate in economic, social, and political life, literacy is crucial. So anyone who is not literate is disadvantaged. More so when it is the wish of the individual to be educated but government's unconcern deprived him/her of it. Literacy is an ingredient for eradicating poverty. Commenting in the same BBC broadcast, the broadcaster quoting David Archer (2005) from Global Campaign for Education (GCE) said: "Literacy is the fertilizer needed for development and democracy to take root and grow. It is the invisible ingredient in any successful strategy for eradicating poverty".

Professor J. A. Akinpelu (1994) contributing on education policy in Nigeria particularly for special groups, highlighted five groups but at the end included a neglected group. "The long neglected and forgotten minorities like the women, the nomads and riverine fisher folks, and the invisible groups like the handicapped – traditionally hidden from sight in our culture – and the drop-outs have to be reached and brought into the main stream of participative development" p. 159. Primary school drop-outs are disadvantaged groups in a society where education is not free. Poverty leading to inability to pay the children's school fees may be part of the cause.

Badawi (2007) making a case for prostitutes in Kano, Nigeria, included the prostitutes as being disadvantaged because 90% of them were not educated. They were not aware and do not use protection against sexually transmitted diseases.

### b) *Dictionary Definitions of "Disadvantaged Group"*

A dictionary definition of "disadvantaged" is "people who do not have good living conditions, a good standard of education, etc., considered as a group" (Cambridge.org, 2012).

It went on to use its adjective form which included "deprived, impoverished, discriminated against, and underprivileged" (thefreedictionary.com, 2012). The American Heritage Dictionary (2009) defined disadvantaged group as those "deprived of some of the basic necessities or advantages of life, such as adequate housing, medical care, or educational facilities".

From the foregoing definitions, once disadvantaged does not mean always disadvantaged. One could come out from a condition or situation that grouped him as a disadvantaged person or group. So, disadvantaged user group is not a permanent condition or group. Disadvantagedness could be revised.

### c) *Disadvantaged Group From Economic Perspective*

In California a case study was done on disadvantaged group from the perspective of economics. Disadvantaged group in that study are those whose income are 80% below the county's median household income, (California, www.fhwa.dot.gov). The study also said that socio-economic characteristics and mobility limitations could be used to determine a disadvantaged group.

### d) *Disabled, Old People, Lone Parents, and Ethnic Minority as Disadvantaged Groups*

Office for National Statistics, UK, using employment criteria, identified disabled people (which is the conventional one), as people aged 50 or over, lone parents, and ethnic minority as disadvantaged groups (statistics.gov.uk). Have you ever imagined that these set of people could be regarded as disadvantaged?

### e) *The Poor, the Homeless, and the Unemployed as Disadvantaged Groups*

Alexander (2008) writing from Virginia, U.S.A. classified the homeless, the poor, and the unemployed as disadvantaged, and questioned why the homeless' odor in a library should be of so much concern and discomfort instead of homelessness and hunger. Berman (2005) put it in a more pathetic way, "why aren't poverty, homelessness, and hunger the primary objects for our wrath, our discomfort?" In other words we should feel for the poor, the homeless and the hungry ones than being angry with them because of their odor. After all, what do we expect from them? Should they be deprived of the use of the library because of their odor thereby assigning double jeopardy to them?

### f) *Social Exclusion, Poverty, Ex-convicts as Disadvantaged Groups*

In China, social exclusion is regarded as disadvantage to the group. Included in this group "are citizens unemployed or with ill health, laborers with poor skills, teenagers in prisons, residents suffering a disaster, and peasants in remote country-side. Library Service is crucial for these vulnerable groups". (Zhaochun and Qunqing, 2008).

Supporting special privileges to the poor a blog of the American Library Association's Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force (HHPTF); (ALA Blog, www.hhptf.org) has this to say, "This 'Poor People's Policy' was developed to ensure that libraries are accessible to low-income citizens and to encourage a deeper understanding of poverty's dimensions, its causes, and ways it can be ended". (Gieskes, 2009). Continuing on policy 61 of the ALA Policy stated that the American Library Association "promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America", who are affected by limitations which included illiteracy, illness,

social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination and these hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services to them. For these reasons policy 61.1 objectives are to promote removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges. Fourteen points were listed as the objectives for the policy. Among them are promotion of publication, production, and purchase of materials which address the issues of poverty and homelessness; programs to go beyond the traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families; to promote training opportunities for librarians to teach effective techniques for generating public funding to upgrade library services to poor people; and among others to promote among library staff the collection of food and clothing donation, and money to direct anti-poverty activities.

#### g) *Working or New Definition for Disadvantaged Group*

Going by the different literature on "disadvantaged group" one may be confused. There are overwhelming evidences to believe that the former definition of disadvantaged group which capitalized on physical and mental disability, incarceration, political chase, and disaster prone conditions are too limited. A more accommodating definition for disadvantaged group would be people who are physically, mentally, socially, politically, economically, racially, culturally, religiously, and environmentally deprived of the privileges and rights due them from the government or the civil society. Anything that hampers the effectiveness of library and information services to a group makes that group to become a disadvantaged group. By this definition we have included the prisoners, the refugees, the poor, the mentally retarded, the elderly, the vision impaired, the deaf and dumb (the mute), the minority, the illiterates, the rural dwellers, the retirees, and those displaced as a result of natural disasters. Also included are those by nature of their occupation are deprived of government amenities. People living in remote areas without access to good roads and other infrastructures for good living are disadvantaged. Examples are nomadic people and riverine dwellers who are fishermen. Covered in that definition are also elementary school dropouts, those with barrier in language, people with different cultural and religious background.

In summary, a disadvantaged user group is any set of people who are denied access to any social public service because of calamity, adversity, or status.

## IV. CONCLUSION

With support from literature, this paper has been able to suggest a new definition for "disadvantaged group". Illiterates and poor people should be regarded as disadvantaged set of people like the prisoners, refugees and others.

Bearing in mind the limitations of different disadvantaged groups, library and information services should be provided in the format that will be most appreciated and helpful to them. A drastic shift from the traditional ways of servicing the public is advocated for. Library and information services should be sent to them where they are and in the format meaningful to them. The euphoria of the Internet should not lead us to neglect those who are underprivileged. Let us be our neighbours' keepers!

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Article 26 Number 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that:

Everyone has the right to education.  
Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

Based on the above premise I recommend that countries that have not implemented UNESCO's recommendation on free primary education should embrace it so as to remove illiteracy from the list of disadvantaged user groups. Free primary education should be legalized and if possible be forced on every child. Parents should be penalized if their wards are not encouraged to attend.

Literacy or education is a precursor for development and eradication of poverty. The resident community of children between 5 and 15 years should put in place a strategy to make sure that these children stay in school until they have secondary school leaving diploma/certificate.

Disadvantaged people cannot be eradicated so it is pertinent that they be accommodated and loved. Whatever help any organization or individual can render to disadvantaged people is appreciable.

Mobile library should be re-activated. Books should be sent to schools in remote places far from stagnated location of libraries. Though the Internet seems to have taken over the physical library yet there are people who are removed from this reality by poverty and illiteracy. So, mobile library is inevitable in order to reach those in the remote areas.

Governments, philanthropists, non-governmental organizations should include the added disadvantaged user groups in their record of those that deserve help.

Disadvantaged user groups should be redefined in line with this paper's submission.

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