

Ending the Book Famine for the Blind

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United States

**G3ICT Forum: Accessible and Inclusive ICT Solutions: Bridging
the Gap**



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Background of the World Blind Union

- The World Blind Union represents the estimated 253 million blind and partially sighted people in the world
- Members represent consumer organizations of blind people and service providing agencies in 190 countries
- The World Blind Union works to advance the social and economic integration of blind and partially sighted people
- Blind children suffer lack of access to education leading to high levels of unemployment as adults—a lifecycle of isolation and poverty



Right to Read Campaign

- Blind people and others with print disabilities have access to fewer than 5% of published works—fewer than 1% in the developing world
- The digital revolution offers the possibility of dramatically expanding access to print, but national copyright laws do not permit the cross-border sharing of accessible works
- In response, in 2008, the WBU launched its Right to Read Campaign
- The campaign called for a treaty to address what the WBU described as a “book famine”



Adoption of Marrakesh Book Treaty

- The Marrakesh Treaty calls on countries to modify their national copyright laws to permit the production of accessible works
- The Marrakesh Treaty authorizes the cross-border exchange of accessible works
- The Marrakesh Treaty permits direct distribution of accessible materials to individuals—critical for people in very poor countries that may not have libraries or schools for the blind to manage distribution



Transforming Braille

- Refreshable Braille devices (mechanical Braille generated by computer-driven pins) allow blind people to read electronic text in Braille
- While refreshable Braille devices have been available for decades, cost has been a limiting factor—in excess of \$5,000 USD
- In 2012, WBU launched an initiative to develop a low cost refreshable Braille display (under \$500 USD, one tenth the cost of previous technology)
- The initiative was called “Transforming Braille” and resulted in the development of the Orbit Reader



The impact of the Marrakesh Treaty together with the Orbit Reader

- The Marrakesh Treaty allows countries that have ratified the treaty to exchange materials in accessible formats across national borders.
- The most cost-effective way to share accessible works is through the exchange of electronic files, but to read electronic text, the blind person must have access to technology such as the Orbit Reader
- The advent of low cost refreshable Braille devices together with the ability to share accessible materials across national borders, opens the possibility of education for the world's poorest blind children



What this can mean for the world's poorest blind children

- UNESCO estimates that 98 percent of children with disabilities who live in developing countries are not in school, but the Marrakesh Treaty together with the Orbit Reader can open the door to an education
- For the cost of a single hard copy Braille book, the Orbit Reader will give blind children and adults access to thousands of books
- Accessible books can be stored on inexpensive thumb drives, and for people who have internet access, they may be downloaded



Financing and sustainability challenges

- While \$500 is far less expensive than \$5,000, for people living in developing countries, the cost is still staggering
- Many developing countries do not have internet access or the infrastructure to insure electricity will be available to recharge refreshable Braille devices
- Developing countries are unlikely to have repair facilities to maintain refreshable Braille equipment



Marrakesh Treaty ratification

- For the Marrakesh Treaty to fulfill its potential, more countries must participate in the sharing of accessible works
- Recently, Canada shared a few hundred accessible books with Australia, but the real impact will result from thousands of books being shared
- As more countries ratify the Marrakesh Treaty, more and more books will be available for distribution
- The real impact will come when the countries that produce large numbers of accessible books ratify the Marrakesh Treaty