

Effective Information Services Delivery in Nigerian Public Libraries: Panacea for Rural Development

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Abstract: As day go by, the demands on libraries keep increasing. Such also, are the expectations on public libraries in Nigeria. Today, the importance of public libraries in the worldview cannot be overemphasized as a result of the different services offered and roles played towards growth and development of the society. Regrettably, a close look at most public libraries, especially in the rural communities of Nigeria makes one to wonder what good these libraries can offer to the nation at large and the rural communities in particular. This scenario therefore, calls for urgent attention in the area of repositioning these public libraries for effective information services delivery. However, the avenue through which this effective information services delivery in Nigerian public libraries can be achieved may be through the provision of diversified information resources (both print and non-print) and further inclusion of community library services, not necessarily delivered within the walls of the library but outside. This is the thrust of this paper as it critically looked into ways of ensuring effective information services delivery in Nigerian public libraries for rural development. In handling this, the paper critically examined the historical overview of public libraries, the Nigerian public library systems in perspective, and the Nigerian public libraries and the rural community. However, before delving into the issue of repositioning public libraries for rural development, the authors tried to look at the challenges facing Nigerian public libraries in information services delivery. It was further concluded that the Nigerian public libraries can do better and live up to expectation if there is government intervention in the area of establishing public libraries across the nation, especially in Nigerian rural communities, among other recommendations.

Keywords: Effective, Public Libraries, Information Services, Delivery, Rural Development

1. Introduction

Public libraries are concerned with the collection, organization storage and dissemination of recorded information for the purpose of reading, study and consultation. To attain these functions, public libraries carry out several services, including, acquisition, processing, and lending of information materials, to meet the information need of their publics [1, 2]. According to Olowu, public libraries are devoted to improving access to information, and satisfying the user is paramount [3]. Thus, they serve as fulcrum for the social, economic, education and cultural growth of a community or a nation. Reitz (2004) opined that public libraries are now acknowledged to be an indispensable

part of community life, as promoters of literacy, providers of wide range of reading for all ages and as centres for community information services. Hence, [4] acknowledged that public libraries are library institutions established by the government to enhance independent and continuing education of people. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition that library services particularly in public libraries are an integral part of national socio-economic development and improvement of the general quality of life.

Public libraries in Nigeria are part of the government, in terms of administration and budget procedures. The establishment of public libraries in Nigeria, however, has been mostly limited to urban areas, and that has resulted in illiteracy and ignorance among people in rural areas [5]. From this scenario, one can easily observe that the public libraries have

an important role in the reduction or eradication of illiteracy and ignorance among the populace. However, this role can only be effectively carried out when the public libraries are well planned, established and enabled for effective services delivery. This is to say that public library that is equipped with the necessary facilities to deliver relevant library and information services, would serve as the props for the rural populations to effectively navigate to development in the information age. Ogbonyomi observed that public libraries should provide for the intellectual, cultural, occupational and religious information needs of all Nigerian society irrespective of their race, culture and occupation [6]. Onyenachi strongly affirmed that through public libraries, people can discover knowledge and learn new skills, get informed about personal health and well-being, find out about government and local authority services and seek information about employment and business development [7].

Nonetheless, it has been observed that public library services in Nigeria have declined dramatically over the past years, owing to both the political and economic dynamics of the country. The financial crisis has particularly affected the structure and maintenance of public library buildings, the size and content of the collections and the overall provision of services. Most public libraries in rural communities in Nigeria, where available, now serve as reading and study rooms for students and other users who, in the majority of cases, use their own materials and do not consult the library collection. To compound the situation further, not much effort seems to be coming from the various tiers of government in this regard; as necessary support ingredients from these governments, which could go a long way in ameliorating the situation, are for most lacking. This paper therefore focuses on repositioning Nigerian public libraries for effective information services delivery and rural development.

2. Historical Overview of Public Libraries

What is today, referred to as public libraries existed between 39 and 28 B.C in Ancient Rome [8]. In Nigeria, the need for public libraries was realized in the 1930s. Indeed, the first public library in Nigeria was established in Lagos as far back as 1932, being the result of a generous grant of \$6,000 from the Carnegie Corporation. This library, founded with the efforts of Sir Alan Burns, was largely under European influence and control. Moreover, its location within the premises of the Government House made it very much inaccessible to the majority of Nigerian people, which consequently minimized the impact of library development consciousness among the people [8].

The Second World War, however, created the much-desired forum for the actual growth and development of public libraries in Nigeria, because, an urgent need arose for information/propaganda to be made freely available and easily accessible to the colonized. The need therefore arose

for an agency that can effectively carry out this onerous task. It was this need, which brought to focus the issue of public library provision in Nigeria [9]. The need to keep people informed about the war and to disseminate information as widely as possible led to the setting up of “reading rooms” or “public libraries” or better still, “public reading rooms” as they were then variously referred to. These public reading rooms were established as a fall-out of the war, and continued to be funded and maintained, until after independence. In other words, in the years, immediately after independence, public libraries, undoubtedly, enjoyed government support, especially in terms of good funding, and were also provided with international support with particular regard to funding, book and equipment donations and human resources [9]. Mchombu contended that libraries received as much priority as other essential services like hospitals and schools, as they were developed purposely to educate people on the importance of independence and how to maintain it, due to the growing nationalistic tendencies [10]. Left with no better choice as at that time, both governments and former colonial powers could not but offer significant supports to these public libraries [9].

It is also important to note that government’s assistance was made possible then by the fact that, at the time of independence, the country had enough resources to establish and maintain its numerous emerging institutions, including libraries. The metamorphosis of public libraries and their branches throughout the country was a clear pointer of a developmental trend. Furthermore, Mchombu postulated that at independence, there was hope that libraries would help to spread information and advance the pace of development. It was also believed that libraries would help to achieve the best education, as it was the only hope for Africa [10]. All these have however, changed considerably over time. Regrettably, Mambo noted that given the circumstances such as economic crises, deterioration of donor support etc., since independence, the situation has changed greatly and in a negative direction, so much that after many years of public library existence in Nigeria, most of its objectives are yet to be achieved [9]. Anyalebechi and Udo-Anyanwu identify government negligence as one of the problems militating against the development of public libraries [2]. This has resulted in their inability to deliver effective services to their users and the society at large. It is evident, that post-independence public libraries in Nigeria then were characterized by poor status in collection, facilities, human resources, modern information facilities like information and communication technology (ICT), and poor quality services followed by poor ICT skills among library staff [11]. Most of these challenges were as a result of poor funding of these libraries in Nigeria.

3. Nigerian Public Library System in Perspective

Central to most of the definitions of public library is the

fact that it is “a collection of books and other forms of records housed, organized and interpreted to meet broad and varying needs of the publics for information, knowledge, recreation and aesthetic [12]. Reitz defined public library as a public institution supported by taxation, one that opens its collection, facilities and services without distinction to all citizens [13]. In a more technical sense, Harrod (as cited in [4]) holds that it is a library provided wholly or partly from public funds, and the use of which is not restricted to any class of persons in the community, but is freely available to all. He stressed further that the public library is a major agency of enlightenment of adults, provided wholly or partly from public funds, and the use of which is not restricted to any class of persons in the community, but is a major agency of enlightenment of adults, providing also for children, the recorded experience of others, which will help them to grow into adulthood.

UNESCO (as cited in [8]) referred to public library as one which serves the population of a community or region free of charge or for a nominal fee, noting also that it may serve the general public or special categories of the public such as children, members of the armed forces, hospital patients, employees etc. According to Anyalebechi and Udo-Anyanwu, users of public libraries include children, young adults, adults, and people with special needs such as those who have hearing problems and even the blind and the visually impaired [2]. Others are prisoners, the aged, nursing mothers, organisations and people in government. Achebe emphasized that public libraries are also referred to as centres for acquisition of knowledge and information [14]. They satisfy people's quest for education and specific information as a solution to problems since all age group must find materials relevant to their needs [8]. Agodi and Obasi believed that a public library is one that is accessible by the public and is generally funded from public sources and operated by civil servants [15].

Thus, a public library is more or less the information storehouse and the custodian of knowledge for posterity in its community of operation. It is not just the clearing-house for all informational, educational and recreational needs for a nation; it is more importantly, a source of power. Public libraries are primarily saddled with responsibilities bordering on conservation, preservation and of course, transmission of the people's culture. As such, they are not only significant as instrument of social and political changes, but indeed, as the principal guardians of intellectual freedom [16]. According to Agodi and Obasi, public libraries perform important functions to the development of any economy [15], which includes: rich source of information, supply of educational materials to both the young and old patrons, deliver recreational activities that instill positive values and useful information to community members, common place for cultural exercise that entertains and educates people, offers opportunities for members to read books for free, offers people the chance to experience community events such as charity drives, classes on crafts and literature and much more, open the door to education and opportunities, provide a warm,

safe, conducive environment where people can go to quietly read, do homework, etc.

Consequently, the Nigerian public library system, by its sheer nature and services provision, has come to be considered as the most easily available and the most independent of all public agencies. It is to this end that the public library was once described as an open door, a way of escape from narrow area of individual into the wisdom and experience of all mankind with its main objective being educational at first, especially for young people and adults not in school (Esterquest, as cited in Edom, 2012). It is therefore not out of tune to conceive of public library as the traditional and basic community information centre whose purpose for existence is to fulfill societal needs by accumulating information and storing knowledge and by disseminating that information and knowledge (Saka, 2019).

4. Nigerian Public Libraries and the Rural Community

There is no need to over-stress the simple fact that the public library, by its sheer nature and perhaps, orientation, is the most universal in terms of near absolute reachability and accessibility by members of its community. Indeed, it is against the backdrop of its universal philosophy that making its services available and possible to all irrespective of age, sex, race or creed, remained its cardinal principle [8, 15, 17]. In other words, regardless of their needs and circumstances, the community should enjoy beneficial access to books and other related forms of recorded knowledge. This becomes even more pertinent, since public libraries are established to serve the public and that this public is not limited to any one class of persons in the community concerned but are freely available to all.

Accordingly, public libraries could be viewed, rightly, as major agencies of education and enlightenment for adults while also providing for children, the recorded experience of others, which will assist them grow into useful adults. It is therefore no coincidence that one of the most significant developments in public librarianship has been the library's effort to reach out to the community [4]. Saka underpinned this essence in his observation that a good public library system attempts to serve the entire population with all its dimensions of needs [17]. To this end, it is necessary that the public library makes its availability and accessibility known to the entire community, thus highlighting the need for it to undertake extension services. As Oklah puts it, the value of library extension services came with the consideration of the ways the public library can perform its functions effectively, one of which is to reach out to all members of the community [18]. Certainly, this is in consonance with the American Library Association Standards for Public Libraries (as cited in [18]), which expects public libraries to assist people to contribute to the growth of knowledge, make valuable use of leisure as well as promote personal and social well-being, develop their creative and spiritual capacities, be more

capable in their daily occupation, discharge political and social obligations, become better members of home and community, keep pace with progress in all fields and educate themselves continuously.

Thus, one of the basic functions of public libraries is to provide public enlightenment in areas directly attracting the attention of the community. This is also aimed at helping to eradicate illiteracy within any human society as a step towards the attainment of growth and development in the rural areas [4]. Further still, the public libraries have the task of assisting the public in their reading skills for the development of the community since literacy is considered as the “bedrock of every development”. As such, the public library is seen as the “focal point of people’s inquiry into physical and social phenomena of their environment” or better still, “the People’s University” (Aleyideino, as cited in [2]). On his own part, Bengé remarks that the public library, in under-developed countries, should be regarded as an agency among others, that promotes mass education and eliminates illiteracy [19], underscoring further, the essence of extension services as the means by which it can become the cultural centre of the rural communities.

5. Challenges Facing Nigerian Public Libraries in Information Services Delivery

In spite of its lofty goals and laudable aspirations as already enunciated above, the public library system in Nigeria suffers a variety of challenges, including neglect, lack of recognition, inadequate funding and personnel, all of which have adversely affected its services provision [17]. Consequently, its growth and developmental process has been largely stunted, allowing for its unabated drift towards irrelevance as attested to by Bankole (as cited in [6]), who declared that public library services in Nigeria have not recorded much growth. This could either be as a result of inadequate or total absence of electronic resources, and where these resources are available, the issue of non-literate or non-ICT complaint population of the library users, possess a challenge.

In fact, argument can also be made to the effect that a substantial part of the urban settlers also fall in this category as it is now common knowledge that other library systems like academic, school, special and research, serve only an insignificant number of the colony of users compared to that of the public library [5]. Unlike these other libraries, the public library has the responsibility, and indeed, obligation to provide for wide range of users including the artisans, roadside mechanics, school dropouts, under-graduates and doctoral degree holders as well as professors in the community. But because the non-literate segment of this community of users is in the majority, they are faced with little or no alternatives in their information seeking efforts, outside the public library [4]. Also of particular importance is that the public library system had remained the closest to them, as it is the grass-root library. However, it is a wrong

assumption for public libraries to always start on the premise that the rural populations do not need or appreciate library services when so little has been done to tailor the activities and operations towards meeting with the peculiarities of their circumstances as a people [3].

Often times, Nigerian public libraries go in pursuit of their book-oriented services as though their users are all literate in that medium of information transfer. Not only are the materials found to be obsolete in many instances; they contain information that have only slight relevance to the background and socio-cultural milieu [17]. Apart from the fact that public libraries network in Nigeria is still a far cry from the expected, the few ones obtainable have little blends with their communities such that the people hardly find any relevance in them in terms of their architectural designs, their contents (material holdings) and services provision [5]. Yet, Adimorah (as cited in [5]) remained unequivocal in his submission that the onus of getting information down to the grassroots lies with public libraries more than any other group, just as Opara maintains that public libraries are the natural resource for formal and informal students and for those seeking information and knowledge for self-improvement and other purposes [20]. Chukwukadibia (as cited in [5]) drives home the points by underscoring the issue of our historical documents found in different parts of Europe and America. He remarks that these documents could be of tremendous importance especially in tracing the historical background to some of the events taking place in this country today. He concludes that it is significant that we appreciate how important books and non-books materials are in nation-building and enlightenment of the intellect. This is missing, both on the side of the public library managers and the users of the library.

Another significant dimension to the challenges before our public library service provision to the rural community is the emerging era of information technology, which has come to transform the entire sphere of human endeavours-not exclusive of the public libraries. The fact is that for as long as information remains the *raison d’être* of librarianship, we cannot run away from those realities imposed on us by information technological advances [14]. According to Kamba (as cited in [17]), problems associated with the Nigerian public library are the infrastructural problems such as poor access roads, telecommunication, access to information as well as problem of power supply (electricity). To these authors, effective information services cannot be delivered without good access roads (especially, for mobile services), Internet services and steady power supply in rural areas.

6. Repositioning Public Libraries for Rural Development: The Way Forward

Public library activities are becoming more and more sophisticated as the sources of knowledge proliferate and the

devices for the retrieval of specific items of knowledge become increasingly complex [14]. In attendance to this development, the public library should embrace its position as a reception center for the assembly of communications of every description covering the whole spectrum of knowledge. In fact, all forms of media used in the process of recording messages which are represented in the store of printed items such as manuscripts, books, pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals etc. being the most pervasive, should be adequately provided in the public libraries. But in addition to all these, one also encounters a whole range of non-book materials including microforms like films, slides, microfiche, ultrafiche, suprafiche, microcards and audio-video tapes, maps, photographs and now Compact Disks (CDs), should be made available in the public library [14].

It is worthy of note that some public libraries are making efforts to provide services to their clientele. The state of public library services, has become an issue of concern to library and information science practitioners. This prompted Okiy (as cited in [5]) to observe that the essence of launching mobile library service was in order to extend library services to everyone in the state, irrespective of location. Other mobile services, which are expected of all public libraries, include prison and hospital trolley services. These services provided by some libraries have become the melting point of public library services in some states [2] and should be widely encouraged. Sadly, public libraries are yet to embrace the recommendation of the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA), which revealed that the services provided by the public library should include community information services, recreational activities, reference services, loan services, storytelling, reading, career information, customer care, adult literacy education etc. By so doing, public libraries will remain relevant and keep up with the many needs and expectations of their users, they must be proactive, vibrant, and abreast of the latest developments in information dissemination as they play a crucial role in the advancement of knowledge [2].

It is a serious case looking at the nature of information resources available in most public libraries within the shores of Nigeria. To some where these materials are rightly provided, the issue of preservation is very low as most of the materials are lying waste on the library's shelves. Consequently, public libraries must not only provide the resources and services but also ensure the effective utilization of the resources by their clienteles/community. One way of ensuring this is by taking proactive approach in motivating users to use their resource collections, provide access to the Internet and offer community-based services, including literacy programs. Moreso, perceived ease of use may be an occurring factor influencing whether or not a particular information service of the public library is used. To this end, public librarians have to know whether the right materials are acquired, available and used. This can be achieved through systematic evaluation of the library's collection; there needs to be proper library orientation to users because without the knowledge of the use of the library's catalogue and the entire library, clients cannot

retrieve materials easily from the library [21]. This is why Aguolu and Aguolu believed that instruction in library use aims at developing the bibliographic skills of library users so that they can make the most effective use of the library and information resources [22]. One way to stimulate the effective use of books and other services of public libraries is to teach public library users how to obtain information from available sources or services and this is usually done through user education or provision of library guides.

7. Conclusion

Arising from the fore-going discourse are a number of issues central to achieving a reorganization of our public library system for effective information service delivery and rural development. Apparently, public libraries are more or less deficient in their present forms of operational configuration to deliver services as may be required by the teeming colony of users. To this end, there is need to properly evaluate the resources available and services delivered in these libraries. More likely, efforts need to be made to acquire more print and electronic resources in public libraries and make them readily accessible to the colony of users who are highly in need of them.

Although with all the trappings of the conventional public library system, the services being proposed here, represents a melting point for a number of information-related activities where a beehive of socio-cultural activities can be conveniently situated, it could be right to see the a repositioned public library as an engine for rural transformation. One need to bring to light the fact that public libraries are to provide timely, accurate, current, and reliable information resources and services to their users. To this end, public librarians are expected to be devoted to improving access to information and satisfying the user's information needs. This is because there is a growing recognition that library services, particularly in public libraries, are an integral part of the national socio-economic development and improvement of the general quality of life. This role can be effectively carried out with well-structured and well-planned public library resources and services, which include the packaging and repackaging of information.

8. Recommendations

Though the paper has revealed the way forward in respect of repositioning public libraries for effective information services delivery and rural development, it is also important to consider the following recommendations.

1. Government at various levels should embrace the establishment of public libraries, both in urban and rural areas. However, adequate attention should be paid to the ones at the grassroots.
2. Managements of public libraries should ensure provision of adequate facilities in different forms of information resources and services. To this end, careful analysis should be done on the users to determine the

best means of providing these resources and services.

3. There should be proper allocation of fund to public libraries.
4. Public libraries should engage in lobbying and advocacy as well as other means of internal revenue generation strategies.

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