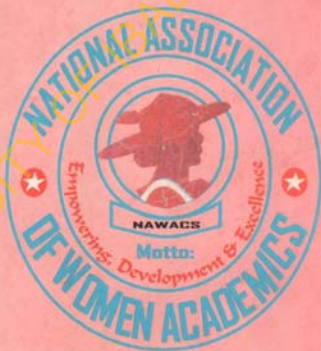


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PUBLIC LIBRARIES: THE OFTEN FORGOTTEN AGENT OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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A B S T R A C T

This paper is about the role public libraries play in national development. The paper traced the history of early libraries and the origin of public libraries in Nigeria. Various services provided by public libraries were also highlighted. Public library power, its implications for all-round development and reasons why public libraries are often forgotten in national development is the main thrust of the paper. However, the paper concluded by lamenting that, though library power is real, but sadly today it is largely ignored, virtually unexplored, and almost forgotten. The paper made recommendations on how the inherent power of the potentials of public libraries can be fully harnessed for national development.

Introduction

Preamble:

The library is a product of cultural maturation. It came into being when societies ceased to be nomadic and became urbanized and when graphic records became important to the effective operation of organized human relationship. Early libraries were essentially archival - storage places for the preservation of records that were necessary for the transaction of business or commerce, the administration of the state, and the communication of belief to succeeding generations.

In short, libraries were nothing more than a facility for extending the effective life of the written word. Thus, from the very beginning the library has been a product of social organization and a handmaiden of scholarship, and during those centuries when learning was so intensely individualistic, it was almost the sole resource of the philosophers, the literate and the probers of the unknown. The library, according to Thompson (1974) was concerned with the individual who experiments, travels, thinks and reads.

In the society today, we have different types of libraries such as school libraries, academic libraries, special libraries, national libraries and public libraries. However, this paper will be discussing the public library, which is regarded in librarianship as the "mother" of all libraries.

Public library has been variously described as the local gateway to knowledge, information storehouse, the custodian of knowledge for posterity, a repository of human heritage, the people's university, an instrument of social and political change, the principal guardian of freedom of thought, the chief instrument for accumulating and disseminating man's intellectual heritage, etc.

For the purpose of this discussion, public library is simply defined as libraries established and funded with taxpayers money for the free and unrestricted provision of books and related materials to members of the public for study, vocational, and other uses, irrespective of age, sex, colour, nationality, religious background, educational attainment, etc. (UNESCO, 1972).

Public Libraries in Nigeria:

Though, some scholars have traced the origin of public libraries in Nigeria to the UNESCO 1953 Seminar in Ibadan, Nigeria, but the first documented effort made in establishing a modern public library is the Carnegie Corporation of New York grant of \$6,000 towards the establishment of Lagos Library in 1932 (Oyegade, 2003).

This pioneer effort was followed by the establishment of Regional Library Services. The Northern Regional Library Services started in Kaduna in Lugard Hall in 1950, followed by the West Regional Library Services established at Ibadan in 1954 which was part of the Western Region Literature Committee but later became a section of the Ministry of Education. Also, the Eastern Regional Central Library which was to serve as the headquarters for

the Regional Library Services in the Eastern Region was opened at Enugu in 1959 (Olanlokun, 2003).

This marked the beginning of public libraries in Nigeria and presently, the Country can boast of thirty six (36) Library Boards, backed up with enabling laws, spread over the states of the federation and rural/communities' libraries in some of the local government areas.

Services Provided By Public Libraries

The public libraries provide the following services among others:

- * Resources lending services for adults, children, adolescents, partially sighted, old people, etc;
- * Readers' advisory services /reference services;
- * Study facilities;
- * School libraries' collection development services;
- * Housebound readers' services;
- * Hospital patients' library services;
- * Prison library extension services [including Remand Homes];
- * Handicapped groups' collection loan services;
- * Library activities for children [e.g. Book clubs, Book talks, Toy games, Poetry reading, Story hours, Drawing session, etc] to strengthen their reading habit and stimulate imagination and creativity;
- * User Education / Readers' Bibliographic instruction;
- * Exhibition services e.g. Art exhibition, Book Fair, Handicrafts displays, Art clubs, Art festivals, etc;
- * Cultural activities [e.g. Record recitals, Playlets, Musicals / Concerts / Theatres, etc.];
- * Library promotion and enlightenment crusades through Lectures, Discussion groups, Broadcasts, Press releases, Group visits / Courtesy calls, Publications, Film shows, etc;
- * Compilation of Subject bibliographies;
- * Book review;
- * Adult literacy programmes, continuing education / mass education;
- * Mobile library services for rural dwellers;
- * Book depot for sales of book at affordable prices to schools and other members of the public;
- * Provision of information services to business and industry;
- * Photocopying, photographic and filming services;
- * Accommodation for hire e.g. Conference Halls, etc;
- * Others.

Ideally, the services listed above (provided with little or no cost) are supposed to be rendered by public libraries in Nigeria (or any country for that matter) but it has been found that as a result of some constraints, which will be identified later in this paper, the services rendered by most public libraries in Nigeria are "a far cry" from those listed above.

Hence, the major focus of this paper is to examine the inherent power of the potentials of public library when fully developed and utilized and its implications for development, while development in this context is defined as the transformation of all aspects of the life of society leading to increasing welfare of the totality of the citizenry (Ikhizama, 2004).

Public Library Power And Its Implications For Development

Public library provides opportunities for individuals to work independently in their search for knowledge, power and self - actualization (Akindahunsi, 2004), thereby, contributing to sustaining the quality of life in all its aspects - educational, economic, industrial, scientific and cultural.

According to Ranganathan (1949) as cited by Thompson (1974), public libraries have the power to produce "material happiness, mental joy and spiritual delight" they are "social institutions charged with the duty of providing the means for the perpetual self-education of one and all" and then contribute to the circulation of ideas, the harnessing of leisure, the demands of democracy, the spread of literacy and the success of commercial and industrial enterprises (Bamijoko, 2004).

Highlighted below are the various manifestations of public library power in national development:

- Public Libraries and Cultural Development

Public libraries are the storehouses of humanistic, scientific and technological knowledge. They preserve the records of human heritage and civilizations, of mankind's achievements and discoveries which can be built on to engender further progress. If there were to be no such store of recorded knowledge, each generation would stand apart from its predecessors and successors. Each generation would need to relearn skills and processes. It would mean a lack of continuity, a situation which at best would slow down civilization processes and at worst lead to retrogression. (Nwosu, 2005).

Public libraries encouraged human civilization by the proper harnessing of human knowledge made available for use by all members of the society and by repackaged information targeted at communities and opinion leaders in societies.

- **Public Libraries and Legal / Political Development**

Not only do public libraries conserve our culture, but as agencies of free and universal communication, they play an important role in its transmission.

In the words of Shera (1972):

To the library men come seeking truth, each in his own and for his own ends. In the library, the patron is not told what to think or when to think it, but in his search, each must discover for himself the thoughts and opinions of others and try to understand them, to appreciate them for what they are, even though he may not share them.

Shera stressed that because of the fact that, the pressure on ordinary citizen to think in certain ways, from government agencies, and from commercial and political groups is awesome, the only protection for him, therefore, is exposure to the thoughts and experiences of other human beings, of all generations and in all sorts of circumstances as recorded in books and other media. As long as there are libraries everywhere, freely available, national and international brainwashing operations become more difficult (Amadi, 1981). People will be educated about their rights and responsibilities. Political activists will know what kind of information that is available and where, and how to have access to such information. The government will know what political structures are in place outside their immediate environments and how they can benefit from such systems. Public libraries stock the materials that provide such important information that will lead to knowledge and consequently, liberation and power!

Also law reports, constitution of developed countries, almanacs, information about voting, can be properly preserved, organized, and made easily retrievable by public libraries in order to guarantee continuity in governance and justice (Okojie, 1997).

- **Public Libraries and Educational Development**

One of the objectives of public library is to foster and provide means for self development of the individual / group at whatever stage of education, closing the gap between the individual and the recorded knowledge, and also providing opportunities for life-long learning (UNESCO, 1972).

The social value of the public library's role in informal / self-education can never be over-emphasized, this is because of the fact that some individuals will always be missed by the formal education net, and all other individuals will need to supplement their formal education in their own way and in their own time, especially, if the present tendency towards increased academic and professional specialization persists. Hence, public libraries become the "teachers of last resort".

However, public library power in education is much more noticeable nowadays in its connections with formal education system especially in its primary and secondary schools' library collection development activities (as stated earlier), in study facilities offered to students as they prepare for various examinations, and in the referral and holiday services rendered to undergraduate, graduate and research students of institutions of higher learning.

Also modern systems of teaching right through the educational strata to university level, tend to place more weight on the individual's own use of libraries and resource centres (i.e. Learner-centred education) a situation which, according to Akindahunsi (2004), has emphasized the importance of public libraries to the society.

- **Public Libraries and Economic Development**

Our present age is largely concerned with the utilization of applied science in the design of society. Economic development is dependent upon the successful communication of information (Chijioke, 1989). For instance, researches on how to improve locally grown crop yields, information about market prices of finished products and raw materials, job opportunities, directories of local / foreign industries listed with relevant information, information relating to the community's government like taxes and census, user profiles, information on food, on youth friendly tutorials and training, etc., are to be made available in public domains for development purposes (Nwogu and Akinde, 2006). A role public libraries can rightly play.

It has been observed that in developed countries, vital development information are repackaged and sent by public libraries to technologists, innovators / inventors and researchers, and to policy makers via Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) (Okojie, 1997). In order words, required, accurate, and problem-solving information can be brought quickly and in-depth by public libraries, particularly on topics of current concern via newspapers, indexes, abstracts, bulletins, etc.

- **Public Libraries and Social Development**

Policies on health, provision of infrastructural facilities, housing, good drinking water, etc., often fail because of lack of accurate data on population, birth and death rates, information which public libraries could have provided. Also, information about entertainment, sports, places of worship, neighborhood events, yearly destinations for family outings, information about local service organizations like day-care, orphanage, etc. are "rare" services that can be provided by public libraries.

Similarly, public libraries have been involved in the social needs of sectors of the community with special problems. They have provided services to hospitals and to prisons; developed reading aids for the disabled; catered for the blind and the partially sighted, assembled special collection to meet the requirements of immigrants, they have a very long and worthy record of work with children and young people and have arranged delivery and mobile services for housebound and isolated readers.

- **Public Libraries in the Development of Reading Culture and Positive Use of Leisure**

Public libraries play a part in encouraging wholesome recreation and constructive use of leisure time by providing escape materials for change, relaxation and to help in the development of general interests (Aguolu, 2002). They provide suitable materials for poor or beginning readers, either of adult content in a simple form of presentation (large print, easy words), or (for the backward) of simple content in simple form.

Having seen the many roles (among others) played by public library in national development, why then is it that we so often forget this awesome library power that can be harnessed for the development of our nation, Nigeria?

Why Public Libraries Are So Often Forgotten

The following have been seen to be the factors responsible for the public libraries not taking its pride of place in national development:

- a. Lack of interest and recognition of public libraries by the governments and ignorance of the role public libraries can play in national development;
- b. Economic recession which makes policy makers put public library services at the lowest priority;
- c. The intelligentsias as well as the general populace have not been sufficiently mobilized to lend their weight to the crusade for public library development;
- d. Inadequate funding of public libraries which has led to inadequacy of resources for effective learning, study and research. The resources provided are often outdated, irrelevant and foreign;
- e. The state of literacy and educational level of our population, which is still perceived to be so small as to keep low the degree of government investment on the development of public libraries as an important social service;
- f. Poor reading culture, even among the elite and the literate in Nigeria, which has lowered the patronage of public libraries. Many only read for functional purposes and not for real / permanent knowledge acquisition;
- g. The level of the development of the publishing industry has affected library development in the Country. The industry is still bedeviled by scarcity and high cost of basic inputs like paper, ink and printing machinery. The import duties imposed on the inputs make the cost of books prohibitive and leads to acute scarcity of books;
- h. There are too few materials in our local languages to meet up with the demand for them by the "new" literates.

Conclusion And Recommendations

— Conclusion

This paper started by introducing the topic, and proceeded by highlighting various services rendered by public libraries. While the public library power and its development implications is the major issue discussed by the paper, reasons why public libraries are so often forgotten were also identified.

In conclusion, for any meaningful development to take place in Nigeria, access to relevant information has to be easy, cheap and timely (Akinde, 2006). Policy makers must know how, where and when to get relevant information and must themselves be properly informed. Governments are aware that the difference between the developed and the developing countries is that developed countries are "information rich" while developing countries are "information poor" (the so-called Digital divide) (Okojie, 1997). The only hope for the development of Nigeria, therefore, is to bridge this information gap.

Library power is real: more real than classification systems, more real than computerization, more real than the so-called management techniques. But sadly today, it is largely ignored, virtually unexplored and almost forgotten!

— **Recommendations**

In light of the above submissions, the researchers will like to make the following recommendations:

i. **Provision of adequate fund for Public Libraries:**

The governments should provide adequate fund in order to transform our public libraries to modern information / resource centres, where people can go to explore the greatest things man has done, the ideas of man in the society today, what man is now doing, with the possibility of seeing not only what is past, but also a collage of what is going on in the world at the present moment. According to Lee (1968) "We have no reason why our brain should be frozen though our pockets may be frozen".

ii. **Satisfying the Policy-Makers' information needs:**

The public libraries must be in a position to discover and satisfy the information needs of policy makers as these administrators are quite busy and they need information to function effectively. It is only through this, that more financial support can be received from these library "beneficiaries".

iii. **Embracing Information Communication Technology (ICT):**

The public library must embrace modern ICT, which has reduced the world to a global village at the press of a button. The ICT has so revolutionized the world and public libraries in Nigeria have a central role to play in moving the nation forward.

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Internet resources (electronic journals, electronic mails and electronic books, etc.), CD ROM Technology, Audio Visuals, Online & Offline databases can be harnessed and made available for use side by side with the conventional library book. Furthermore, to enable resource sharing and cooperation, the various public libraries can be networked from National to State and to the Local Governments so as to provide equal, current & relevant information opportunities to all and sundry.

iv) **Library Marketing and Promotion:**

The public libraries should sensitize the citizenry on the services available for their benefit so that there would be a clamour for library services where there is none and a heavy use where there is one.

v) **Library Accommodation and Location:**

As an English adage says "first impression lasts longer". Users should be encouraged to use the public libraries by an enhanced, clean and easily accessible environment, with adequate lighting and ventilation, preferably air-conditioned. The library building layout should be attractive and strategically located. Stack guides, stack arrangements and indexes should be user-friendly. The lending system and operational hours should be able to promote adequate use of library resources.

vi) **Public Librarians' Role Change:**

Public librarians should be able to offer on-site and remote instructions in using the library systems. In addition to such formal instructions, users should be consulted with via telephone, e-mail, etc. and librarians should be available to talk the people through their bibliographic problems.

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