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THE DEVELOPMENT AND ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the sequential phases in the development of public libraries in Nigeria and the role of public library in national development. It recommends that government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should invest more in public libraries in view of their important roles in national development and ensure that the libraries are managed by professional librarians.

Introduction

A library is an agency, which engages in the collection, processing, preservation and dissemination of recorded information in the various formats most convenient to its target users (Olanlokun and Salisu, 1993). It can also be defined as a building established for the purpose of collecting and storing books and related materials for reading and research. According to Chamber's Encyclopedia, (1977) the word library which is from the Latin word "liber" signifies a place set aside for reading or reference and by extension, a collection of books. Thus a Library can also be described as a collection of books and other forms of records housed, organized and interpreted to meet broad and varying needs of the people such as information, knowledge, recreation and esthetic values.

People all over the world have accepted education as an essential instrument for human development, and various means (such as schools and seminars) have been put in place to extend the benefits of education to all. Another means that has attracted little or no attention is the public library. Wali (1991) describes a public library as a key source of information to citizens and to a lesser extent to politicians and businessmen. Library's Glossary Dictionary (1997) defines a public library as a library established by local, state or central government for the use of the general public. However, there are some individuals or organizations that establish library for the general use of the people. A public library is therefore a library that offers services to the public free of charge and it also provides educational, social and political information to people in a particular community. Generally, public libraries are accepted as a public good.

In the words of Olanlokun and Salisu (1993), public libraries are libraries set up to provide free but traditional "service to everyone". A public library serves the community and is generally referred to as a layman's library or university. The library is a service-oriented institution with set goals to be

achieved within the resources made available by the parent institution, usually the government.

The main thrust of this paper therefore is to examine the historical development of public libraries in Nigeria and bring into focus the roles of the libraries in national development.

Development of Public Library in Nigeria

The development of public libraries in Africa reflects the various library systems of the colonizing countries. For instance, the development in public libraries was highly influenced by the colonial masters and the level of economic viability of the countries in Africa (Olanlokun & Salisu, 1993).

Nnaji (1986) observes that before 1946, the only libraries of importance were in Lagos. According to the writer, the very notable and first subscription library in Lagos was founded from the estate of Mr. Tom Jones and the oldest libraries are the present day high court library and the Federal Ministry of Justice library both of which were launched in 1900. There was the Lagos library, which was a subscription library and which had a reference collection, and the Tom Jones Library, which was donated to the Government by a Lagos citizen. In the 1946, the Lagos public library, jointly owned by the Lagos Town council and British Council, replaced the Lagos library. A travelling library scheme was also launched in Lagos the same year.

Towards the end of the 1950s, The Federal Government at the instance of West Africa Library Association (WALA) founded a federal library advisory committee "to advise the Federal and Regional Governments and the Government of southern Cameroon on library and bibliographical policy and problems (Nnaji 1986). This committee, as well as successive British council librarians, had put forward different proposals for a national library service. The crash education programme which worked out with some degree of success, created a favourable climate for library development in Nigeria. This climate brightened up in 1976 with the introduction of Universal Primary Education Scheme in the country.

Public libraries are founded wholly with government grants in the developing countries in agreement with the UNESCO public library manifesto (1972), which states that:

a public library should be maintained by public funds, and no direct charge should be made to anyone for its services. To fulfill its purposes, the public library must be readily accessible, and its doors open for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, colour, nationality, age, sex, religion, language, status, or educational attainment. (p. 151)

Public library existed in the Western Region of Nigeria, especially Ibadan the headquarters. There were also public libraries in some major towns in the region. With creation of states within the region in 1967, many libraries were established especially in the state capitals of Oyo, Ondo, Lagos, and Ogun. Mid-Western Region (later Bendel state and now Edo and Delta states) was created out of the old Western Region in 1963. The Mid-Western Region Library Board was established in February 1971 by the Mid-Western Board edict. Since then Edo and Delta states Library Boards have been very active in the provision of library services in the two states.

The Eastern regional government established a Regional Library Board in 1955 to render library services to the people of the region. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) later became involved in a pilot project with the Eastern Regional government to establish a Library Board in the area. Some states were created out of the Eastern Region in 1967. The East central state Library Board was created in 1971 by Edict No. 17, the River State Library Board was established by Edict in 1971, and the South-Eastern state Library Board was created by an Edict in 1973. These Boards were charged with the responsibility of providing library services to the people. Since 1976, there has been further restructuring and changes in the names of the states in this area. New names are Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, Rivers, Cross-River, Akwa Abom, and Bayelsa states. All these states have library boards charged with the duty of providing library services to the citizens.

The Northern Regional government started its library services in 1952. The aim was to help the Native Authorities in the region develop the Reading Rooms established during the Second World War into public libraries. The government planned to purchase books and send them to the Reading Rooms. According to the arrangement, qualified staff would come from the headquarters in Kaduna to supervise the work that was being done in the provincial libraries.

This plan was far from being adequate, and consequently the Northern Region government appointed Mr. F.A. Sharr to look into the problems of the library needs of the region. Sharr in his report recommended that, public library should be established in each of the thirteen provincial towns of the region. These libraries later formed the nucleus of library services in the various provinces. The Northern Region was broken into six states in 1967 and subsequently into nineteen states in 1996. Each state inherited from these facilities.

In a survey of public libraries in Nigeria, Olanlokun (1993) noted that there was a substantial increase in the number of branches in some states (over the 1978 survey). For instance, over fifty per cent of the states had established library boards with Edo, Delta, Kano, Kaduna, Kwara, Imo, Anambra and Lagos maintaining a lead. Generally, public library development in Nigeria still has a long way to go before it can contribute meaningfully to education, information,

research, economy and national development.

In summary, some of the historical circumstances that led to the establishment of public library services in Nigeria include:

- (a) efforts of some individual who donated buildings and collections which later formed the nucleus of public services in Nigeria;
- (b) establishment of regional reading rooms by colonial master which later transformed to public libraries;
- (c) second world war which necessitated the establishment of libraries to disseminate (war) information;
- (d) establishment of regional government and subsequent creation of states; and
- (e) increase in number of students enrolment in schools.

The Role of Public Libraries in Nigeria

Seymour (1980), says responsive library service is not simply a product of the Dewey Decimal system but it also requires intelligent planning, ability to learn from experiences, and sensitivity to human needs. Concerned library personnel who want to provide responsive service must keep themselves constantly alert to changing library roles and ensure that library users derive maximum benefits from the services provided.

The public library is essentially a medium of education. In fact, the various roles, which the public library could play to ensure the realization of national development in Nigeria, include the following:

- i. Provision of information for planning.
- ii. Provision of educational, information and facilities.
- iii. Provision of political information.
- iv. Undertaking Researches
- v. Provision of economic documents
- vi. Organisation of enlightenment programmes

Information Role of Public Library

Adeyemi (1977) describes information as a basis to the life of man just as air, water, food, and shelter. Also, Stoakley (1982) notes that communication is a vital part of human life. According to him as a man develops, and his mental powers grows, the need for him to communicate complex ideas and feelings also develops. Therefore the provision of adequate and timely information is vital to the successful completion of every human endeavour, especially educational programme. With the development of civilization there is a need to transmit concepts more widely than is possible through the medium of the human voice and memory. Information on various aspects of literacy programmes in Nigeria abounds in journal publications and such is in form of research reports and bulletins. Libraries have the capabilities to identify and acquire library materials through purchase and exchanges. This type of information is needed by adult

educators, community workers, researchers, politicians, educational planners, teachers, supervisors, evaluators, and civil servants who are involved in the educational development programmes. These resources should not only be acquired and made available, they should be professionally organised so that library users spend less time trying to locate relevant information from them.

Educational Role of Public Library

Investment in education is everywhere under scrutiny. The days are long past when a simple and direct connection was assumed between investment in education and national development (Wali, 1991 p. 116). If educators are to re-affirm their commitment to education and national development, they must be able to justify their belief that education is today not only a basic human right but also an essential tool for national development. The role of public library in this regard cannot be over-emphasized.

The public library acquires books and other relevant educational materials in line with the demands and the needs of different categories of users. It makes the materials available and accessible to the users at minimal convenience. Therefore, the public library is an information agency that assists and guides its clientele in their choice of reading materials. It affords the public especially the students the opportunity to acquire learning experiences at little or no cost. Public library also links the immediate community to the outside world as regards acquisition of knowledge. It also enriches the educational development programmes of the society by supporting continuous education programme, such as adult education programme.

Political Role of Public Library

Doctor (1985) defines politics as listening to various groups, reconciling conflicting interests as far as possible, and thus creating a sense of security and participation among members of the society.

The public library disseminates information on the various political programmes in the society. It is regarded as a public relation institution. Political information is an essential component of national development. Public library is next to the radio and the television stations where government passes information to the general public in various forms. It also provides political orientation and culture through the provision of information on government's policies. It is generally accepted as a public good in terms of political information.

Economic Role of Public Library

Cassel (1994) defines economics as the science of the production and distribution of wealth, the condition of a country, community or individual, with regard to material prosperity. In economic classification, the establishment of a library is regarded as a social service. This is an investment, which does not

produce a tangible good. However, public libraries play important role in the economic well being of the society as it provides information on goods and services. It also distributes books and film within the state. Public library at this level is making its contributions to the economic development of the modern society. Public libraries could also develop local economic capabilities by making available necessary information on income generating projects, self-employment activities, credit facilities, state assistance schemes, schemes, etc.. Therefore public library closely identifies itself with the aspiration of economic development of a nation.

Research Role of Public Library

Research is seen as a diligent and careful inquiry or investigation, systematic study of phenomena, and a scientific investigation (Cassel, 1994). It encourages the habit of personal and individual investigation and research, develops skills and resourcefulness in the use of books and other library materials. According to Dorothy (1977), public library facilitates scientific studies, teaching and self-learning process. It also acts as a repository of knowledge and thereby stores and disseminates materials of research values in the modern society. Public library serves as a stock to the society and it compiles bibliographies, on various aspects such as subjects, authors, and title.

Other Roles of Public Library

Public libraries have been designed to hold the reading interest of the readers. This is done through special exhibition of materials that serve as reading resources both print and electronic (Wall, 1991). Public library also serves as an avenue for in-house story telling hours and other extension services such as the establishment of book clubs, book services, organized debates, symposia, drama, and poetry. Public libraries are also established to improve literacy and enhance effective utilization of leisure by children and adults in the society.

Conclusion

If the library is to occupy its proper place in the society, government and non-governmental organizations should invest more in public libraries and ensure that competent hands are employed to manage public libraries. Thus, qualified librarians should be more involved in the planning and implementation of public library programmes so that they would have input into the programme and ensure that public libraries are structured in a way that national development will be promoted.

Public librarians should also draw attention or the members or the society to the values of libraries especially how it contributes to the well being of the individuals and the enrichment of the quality of life through encouragement of self-education and assistance in formal education. They

should educate people on the supportive roles of public libraries particularly to sectors such as education, information, economic, politics, and cultural practices.

Public libraries have vital roles to play in ensuring national growth, they are not part of the state propaganda machines per se but national infrastructural institutions which are established to facilitate national development.

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