# Public Library Services in Nigeria: Challenges and Strategies

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## Abstract

Public libraries are established in Nigeria to provide resources and services free of charge to meet the information needs of the citizenry. This paper highlights the public library services which make it necessary to be established in every community. Such services include educational services, information awareness services, children's library services and others. However, numerous problems are bedevilling public libraries in Nigeria in their bid to provide effective services to the users. Some of the challenges identified in this paper include inadequate funding, poor conditions of service and prospects for the staff, insufficient ICT infrastructure and staff with ICT skills. The study recommends that non-governmental organizations should be encouraged to support public libraries in Nigeria. It also recommends that staff conditions of service, salaries, allowances, employment process, retirement and others should be upwardly reviewed to motivate the staff and also make public library job more attractive.

*Keyword:* *Public Libraries, Public Library Services,* Public Library Resources, ICT, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Public library is a library established to provide unrestricted access to information resources free of charge to all the residents of a given community. Akanwa (2013) citing Emenalor defined the public library as a library that provides information resources, services and recreational outlets for the generality of the citizenry, namely, the young, old, literate and non-literate. Unlike other types of library, the public library is not restricted to any group of users and the collections are developed to reflect the diversity of their clientele. Its services, resources and facilities should suit the local needs of its communities and users.

Public libraries are established by the state government and supported by the tax-payers money (Ekpong in Ezekwe & Muokebe, 2011). They provide access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services which are equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment (IFLA/UNESCO, 2001). Public

libraries are also supported and funded by the community through the local, regional or national government and other forms of community organization.

Public library can be said to be an "ordinary man's school", "a university of the people" and "a library for all". Aiyebelehin, Onyam, & Akpom, (2018) in contribution opine that public libraries are agencies that promote education and eliminate illiteracy among the people by providing educational, social and political information to people in a particular community. Hence, it is the local information centre; making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users.

According to Nwofor & Ilorah (2015), public library development in Nigeria originated from its humble beginning of the Tom Jones Library in Lagos in 1910. However, the major turning point in the history of public libraries in Nigeria came from the UNESCO Seminar on Public Library Development in Africa, which took place at the then University College (now University of Ibadan) Ibadan between 27th July and 21st August 1953 (Abubakar, 2017). The seminar recommended, among others, the need for the establishment of public libraries in Africa (Opara, 2008).Nwegbu, Echezona & Okafor cited in Nwofor, *et al,* (2015) reported that from 1940s rural library services of the public libraries included extension services to rural areas through mobile library services, book box services and libraries on boats. In Nigeria, public libraries are known as State libraries with branches known as Divisional libraries. Public libraries are managed by State Library Boards and run on a daily basis by the Director of Library Services. The Supervisory Ministry is the Ministry of Information (Onwuka, 2016). The primary purpose of the public library in Nigeria is to provide facilities, resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for information and development.

**Functions of Public Library**

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1995) states that "the public library shall in principle be free of charge and services should be provided based on equality of access for all regardless of age, race, gender religion, nationality, language or social status". To provide equality of access to users, specific services and materials must be provided for those users who for whatever reason cannot use the regular services and materials e.g. linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, in hospital or prison (Nwofor *et al*, 2015).

The primary purpose of the public library is to provide facilities, resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for information and development. Public library is charged with the responsibility of providing timely, accurate, pertinent and reliable information in all subjects to their users through materials that communicate experience and ideas from one person to another making them easily and freely available to all people. Generally, researchers highlighted the followings as the functions of public libraries:

a)  Provision of comfortable places physical and virtual spaces (Onwuka, 2016);

b) Provision of access to all kinds of information to ensure intellectual freedom; cultural and personal development (LRCN, 2015);

c) Preservation and development of cultural and antiquarian heritage of the community which contributes to socio-economic development and improvement of the general quality of life of people (Laspinas, 2014);

d) Provision of services, resources and facilities to reflect positive outcomes on the rapidly escalating changes of the intellectual outlook and whole personality of the end-users free of charge or at nominal rates without discrimination;

e) Special responsibility of meeting the needs of children and young people to encourage and strengthen the formation of reading habit through the provision of excellent fiction and general-interest material;

f) Making fundamental contribution to daily survival and social development by providing information to people in rural communities such as basic life skills, adult basic education and awareness programme;

g) Provision of facilities for leisure which engenders communal life;

h) Provision of free access to a myriad of information sources which makes for a liberal and knowledgeable mind required for democracy (Nwofor *et al*, 2015).

## Sources of Funding Public Libraries in Nigeria

In Nigeria, public libraries are funded mainly by the State government. This is usually done through the special fund and taxpayers' money. Ebiwolate (2010) notes that public libraries are part of government agencies, thus the administration and budget are their responsibilities. Other sources of fund for public library include:

i. **Gift and Private Contribution**: This comes in form of cash and book donations from corporate bodies, philanthropists and international organizations.

ii. **Endowment:** This is a kind of benefaction which is slightly different from gift. It is a support given to particular projects as some libraries grow in prominence due to services rendered.

iii. **International Aids**: This is a kind of help offered by International bodies/ Agencies such bodies include UNESCO, British Council and World Bank.

iv. **Miscellaneous**: These are internally generated revenues that come from library activities and activities of the patrons. Some of the revenue may come from sales of book, stationery, bindery services, patrons' registration fees, fine for late return of loaned library materials, photocopying and literature search.

## Public Library Resources

Public library has a wide range of resources that meet the needs of its users. These resources are both human and material.

## Human Resources

The human resources are the staff working in public libraries. They are in different

cadres such as Director, Deputy Director, Librarians, Assistant Librarian, Library officer and the support staff who are not professionals. These staff attend to the users to ensure that their information needs are met satisfactorily. Federico & Diana (2016) define human resources as the subset of persons that work in a public or private organization performing diverse tasks and assignments in accord with their abilities, talents and the daily resources that manage the use of other non-humans, physical and material resources of an organization. Human resources are the most vital resources in any public library as all other resources are dependent on the staff of the library. They are resources that facilitate and promote initiatives to satisfy the demands of the users.

## Material Resources

Public library material resources include books on all subjects, journals, magazines, newspapers, computers, DVDs, Videos/ CDs, pictures, government documents, pamphlets, selected documentary films on relevant subjects, drawings, charts, models, lectures in the vernacular, posters, audiovisuals, cassette tape of government programmes, achievements and problems and others (Nwofor *et al,* 2015). According to Onwuazo (2003), public library resources include a variety of all published and unpublished information materials in various forms, readable with naked eyes or an aid for the clientele. He notes that these information resources include journals, online databases and software programmes to ensure a good learning environment for users to achieve educational goals.

## Public Library Services

Various services are offered in public libraries. Ibe (2014) defined public library services as those jobs performed by public libraries for the benefit of the general public whom they are meant to serve. IFLA (2011) emphasized that public library services include the loaning of books and other media, provision of books and other materials for use in the library, information service including print and electronic media, readers' advisory services including reservation services. Public library services include:

I. **Educational Services**: Public libraries provide varieties of resources and services to support education at all levels. IFLA/ UNESCO (2001) pointed out that access to information is the basic human right. Today, there is so much information available than ever before in the world's history. Public libraries acquire, process, organize and disseminate information free to all citizenry.

II. **Information Awareness Services:** Public libraries provide information awareness services by spreading authentic information on current issues such as Covid-19 and other health matters. They also provide information on politics and governance. As a public service which is open to everybody, the public library has a key role of collecting, organizing and disseminating information, as well as providing access to a wide range of

information sources. The public library has a particular responsibility to collect local information and make it readily available.

III. **Children Library Services:** Public libraries expose children to information resources as early as possible. They provide picture books, storybooks, cartoons, games, poems, children's magazine, textbooks, fiction and non-fiction for children and young adults. The idea of children's library services being taken care of by the public library is an age-long phenomenon. These services are presented in colourful mode to educate the children and help them imbibe reading habit.

Other services provided by public libraries include reference services, storytelling hours, information literacy services, discussion groups/talk shows, circulation/lending services, reading promotion campaign/ competition, mobile library services, library book/week, cultural services, recreational services, public library-community centre/public enlightenment centre, exhibitions, extension services.

## Challenges to the Provision of Public Library Services in Nigeria

Some challenges are facing public libraries in their effort to provide services to their users. Ebiwolate (2010) in agreement revealed that numerous problems are bedevilling public libraries in Nigeria in their bid to provide effective services to the users. Some of the challenges include inadequate funding, inadequate and

outdated stock, bad location, lack of adequate and qualified staff, lack of staff motivation and insecurity of library materials.

a) **Inadequate funding**: Inadequate funding is a serious challenge affecting the activities of public libraries in Nigeria. The government does not fund the public library adequately and this has caused a lot of problems. It hinders effective and efficient service delivery. This problem, according to Ebiwolate (2010) can be likened to lack of political will. He observed that lack of political leads to negligence on the part of government to fund public library properly; non-approval of budget; and non- release or non-implementation of budget (where approved). Inadequate funding has led to poor condition of services, shortage of professional staff; poor human resource management; extreme dilapidated structures and facilities; obsolete resources; difficulty in extending services to the rural areas, inadequate ICT facilities and others. Aina (2004) posits that the services of public libraries in Nigeria are grossly inadequate with outdated collections coupled with lack of sufficient professional librarians. The level of patronage of the existing public libraries is low, less relevant materials are acquired; awareness and understanding of the public library concept by the community is poor, bureaucratic in-orderliness, poor funding, and lack of zeal to introduce new services.

Unfortunately, Internet facilities installed in some public libraries cannot be maintained. Consequently, they are no longer functional as a result of inadequate finance for sustenance and maintenance.

b) **Insufficient ICT Infrastructure &Staff with ICT Skills:** Majority of the public library staff lack ICT skills. Studies have consistently reported inadequate levels of ICT literacy as one of the major problems facing libraries in Nigeria as they move into the 21st century. ICT infrastructure development and poor funding have been identified as problems, followed by poor ICT skills among staff (Ebiwolate, 2010).

c) **Ethnicity (tribalism) and Religion:** This problem exists in different degrees globally not only in Nigeria. Today, people are not employed based on confidence and merit but on "connections". This causes drawback in action and inefficiency in any organization bearing in mind that one cannot give what he does not have.

d) **Poor Conditions of Service and Prospects:** In some public libraries, there is insufficient staff simply because of poor conditions of service. Young librarians usually prefer employment in federal government-owned establishments for the following reasons: better salary, frequent promotion and study leave with pay which is not obtainable in public libraries. Poor conditions of service lead to poor staff employment which can hinder service delivery.

e) **Library Location and Difficulty in Extending Services to the Rural Areas:** In Nigeria, public libraries are located in urban areas. As a result, their services are limited to people who live in urban areas. The rural dwellers are not benefitting from public library services hence bookmobile services. Bookmobile was established according to Bioks and Papadimitrion (2018) to serve the public and disseminate knowledge to all, especially to those who find it difficult to resort to standard libraries due to social or geographic reasons or health issues or old age. Ebiwolate (2010) reported that the government established bookmobile services in the '60s and '70s however, this was not sustained in Nigeria due to certain factors like bad roads, long distances and use of dilapidated vehicles. These services were kept in abeyance and they create negative effect in public library service delivery.

## Strategies for Enhancing the Provision of Public Library Services in Nigeria

Public library services have declined dramatically over the past years as a result of adverse effects of economic, educational and political situations in Nigeria. Poor quality of service delivery has equally led to poor perception and patronage of public libraries by the citizenry. Agodi, Eberechukwu, Obasi, & Ozoemelam (2016), in their study of strategies for enhancing provision of public library services, pointed out the following strategies for enhancing service delivery in public libraries: collaboration, service classification, staff training and user-focus.

a) **Collaboration**: By collaboration, Agodi *et al* (2016) emphasized that the Federal and State governments, international bodies and other stakeholders in the education sector should partner in a synergic manner to help change the image of public libraries in Nigeria. On the other hand, this will enhance the economic and educational status of the Nigerian citizenry. The government should provide adequate infrastructures, improve funding, conducive environment and staff motivation for greater performance and improved service delivery. Provision of ICTs for easy access to information through the Internet by users both inside and outside the library building is another strategy for enhancing service delivery in public libraries.

b) **Location of the building:** To successfully deliver public library services, physical accessibility is essential (Salman & Mugwisi, 2014). Public libraries should be strategically located at the centre areas of community activities. They can share buildings with other services such as arts centres, museums, art galleries, community centres and sports facilities. This can help to attract users and achieve capital and operational economies.

c) **Staff training:** This involves human resource management in the public library. Brassey, Christensen and Dam (2019) noted that staff training is a good opportunity for staff to learn and develop new competencies and upgrade their skills, especially in ICT. They further explained that there should be adequate provision of training facilities, with the knowledge that the satisfaction of library users depends, not only on the space and the resources but also on the library staff. Through in-house trainings, webinars, workshops and conferences, library staff are informed about library resources and programmes and are guided on the best ways to provide and share these resources with customers through marketing techniques. Boakye as cited in Ahenkorah-Marfo and Osie-Boadu (2013), noted that the "techniques of marketing are strategies adopted to attract users or customers to use a product or service". He maintained that products or services should attract users' attention. Library users are customers to the library. By sharing their experiences with non-library users, they can attract them to the library as well. This is also known as a marketing strategy.

d) **Mobile Applications:** Public library should introduce the use of mobile applications, through which customers can connect with library services from anywhere, thus allowing them to interact with the library from any location and at all times. Examples of mobile applications are MDPLS iLibrary App, Overdrive, Freegal, Mango Languages, Blio Reader, Ask-A-Librarian, Access My Library, Axis Reader and Zinio. With all these APPs, library services can be delivered efficiently.

e) **Print Collaterals:** The Public Library System should create an internal Graphics Department and Print Shop. This allows for the creation of collaterals including fliers, posters, and brochures for promotion of library programmes and services. These collaterals are displayed and distributed within the branches and used during outreach events.

f) **Users-focus Strategy:** This involves drawing the attention of members of the society to the values of the library, especially public libraries. Library users should be allowed to participate in the planning and implementation of public library programmes. They should be allowed to express their needs so that the efforts of the libraries and librarians would be channelled towards user satisfaction. Public libraries should provide effective and efficient information services to attract library users and promote library use.

g) **Fee-based Services:** As a result of shrinking budgets, it has become necessary for public libraries to find additional sources of funding. Public library can charge fees for their services to help in fund-raising. The most common services include reprographic services, bindery, Internet browsing, sales of books, stationery and consultancy. In support, Anyalebechi & Udo - Anyanwu (2016)advised the public libraries not to depend only on government subvention but to source for other avenues to generate funds internally. Public libraries can also raise funds by making their collections available for loan to other libraries by participating in-network through union catalogue and by classifying and cataloguing their resources according to accepted international or national bibliographic standards.

## Conclusion

Public library is the peoples' information centre. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services which are equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment. Public libraries are funded by the State government, thus the administration and budget are their responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the public library to provide timely, accurate, pertinent and reliable information in all subjects to their users through materials that communicate experience and ideas from one person to another making them easily and freely available to all people.

## Recommendations

1. Public libraries in Nigeria have not been able to meet their objectives. This paper highlighted factors that hinder effective service delivery to patrons. In the light of these lapses, the following recommendations are made:

2. Public library should be established in every community both urban and

3. Mobile library services should be revitalized and redesigned as a strategy to deliver materials to homebound patrons and for reaching to the physically challenged in the Nigerian society.

4. ICTs should be installed and used in public libraries to render effective and efficient services. In this era of information overload, the application of ICTs in libraries is a necessity.

5. Non-governmental organizations and philanthropists should be encouraged to support public libraries in Nigeria. It is important to change the monopolistic method of administering the provision of public services and adopt a more pluralist approach which takes into account a large number of agents, public and private suppliers.

6. Above all, the human resource situations should be reviewed occasionally such as the staff conditions of service, salaries, allowances, employment process, retirement and others should be upwardly reviewed to motivate the staff and also make public library job more attractive.

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