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# Article

# ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE PROVISION OF RURAL LIBRARY SERVICES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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#### Abstract

The specific purpose of any library is to obtain, preserve and make available the recorded knowledge of man. In performing these functions, the library promotes the spread of knowledge, education and culture to all categories of the population. In Nigeria, most library services to the rural populace are provided by various states' government library boards. However, in spite of the efforts towards achieving this, some studies indicate that inadequate funding of library boards and misconception of the importance of rural services, inter alia, are the issues that hinder rural library spread. The paper examines past efforts at meeting the rural library services, identify the existing challenges and recommends strategies for interventions such as resuscitating book-mobile services and spread of community-based information services. It also recommends linkages and collaborations with multinational corporations by the library boards as an option for generating extra funds to augment their statutory subventions. This paper therefore, concludes by stating that Nigeria could emulate the United States of America by way of use of indigenous literature that instill national consciousness and patriotism, through the medium of rural libraries and community-based information services.

# **INTRODUCTION**

In recent times, a great deal of attention by both the federal and states' government in Nigeria has been focused on the rural areas. In spite of the provision of some infrastructures such as good road networks, health facilities, etc, no attention is being given to rural library development, the high rate of illiteracy of rural dwellers, notwithstanding. Ekere (2006) asserts that, "no meaningful development can really take place in the rural areas until their illiteracy level is reduced to a minimum". It should be

noted that the important function of the library is that it helps to make a man an active builder of a new society. Nigeria is trying to build a new society in the areas of economic and political development, so, she needs a wide spread of libraries, especially in the rural areas. Abolaji (2009) states that "libraries serve other purposes like social and recreational changes because they contain the written history, culture and knowledge of the human race". In Nigeria and other developing countries of Africa, government objectives include:

- Life-long education for the citizens as the basis for the nation's educational policy,
- Emphasis on the use and improvement of modern educational techniques at all levels of the educational system,
- The structuring of education system to develop the practice of self learning,
- Making the people to become actively literate and generally well- informed, and
- The introduction of universal basic and compulsory education for all citizens (Abolaji, 2009).

Abolaji further contends that these objectives can be easily achieved with the aid of well-stocked libraries in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, in addition to the maintenance of public, rural and mobile libraries across the country.

"Olanrewaju (2009) reports that, "The African Network Campaign for Education for all (ANCEA) stressed the need for serious focus on and investments in formal and non-formal education like adult literacy programmes to tackle the illiteracy crisis".

The provision of rural library services in Nigeria is mostly undertaken by the various states' governments through the public libraries which is controlled by the library boards. According to Ebiwolate (2010), public libraries in the country 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, in spite of the fact that majority of the population live in rural areas. Some of these areas are barely accessible by boats, motor-cycles, donkeys, etc, due to neglect by governments. The library can have an important role in enhancing literacy and advancement of knowledge among these rural dwellers. This role can be effectively carried out with well-structured and well-planned library services. Unfortunately, a number of issues inhibit the provision of efficient library services in rural areas in the country. This paper attempts to address these issues and to make recommendations as the way forward.

#### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The general poor attitude of the Nigerian government towards development of libraries has also adversely affected the development of public library services in Nigeria. Enough funding is not made available to the public libraries to be stocked with the necessary information materials or provide adequate services to their clientele (Okiy, 2008). Ehigiator (1997) reveals that there is this general practice by governments for releasing money far less than what was approved for a given year to the public library boards. The statutory annual approvals do not always reflect the actual needs of the boards. The effect being that the quality and quantity of materials acquired and the levels of services rendered are adversely affected. For instance, the poor state of funding compelled the Edo State Library Board and Anambra State Library Board to abandon their mobile library services. This is unfortunate. The general poor state of funding for public libraries has forced many heads of the libraries to reduce library services being rendered to their clientele, which include, reduction in book budgets, reduction in the number of programmes and services rendered, etc.

Abolaji (2009) observes that, the Badeku library in Oyo state built through the efforts of the village women is an eye-opener to the role of the library in the rural areas as the villagers use the library in their work- free days. In the place, the project has shown that the information needs of rural dwellers are many and diverse. These include the interest of knowing more about farming, concern with cultural matters, public affairs and entertainment. Secondly, it has shown that the library can assist even rural dwellers in a country where the majority of the population are illiterates, but not unintelligent, to realize their aspirations quickly. Thirdly, it has been realized that nonliterate rural dwellers can make effective use of sophisticated institutions like the library, when it is tailored to their own structure of information demand. For example, the pilot project gave the people an opportunity to voice out their information needs. Aboyade (1987) states that, "Sitting down in a relaxed atmosphere and listening to someone read to them was a completely new and pleasing experience to nearly all the patrons. In the traditional mode, they were the ones required to re-tell folktales to children by moonlight.

Now, they themselves received similar pleasures from modern creative writings. Consequently, there were demands for more books than the project could afford. That was the major limiting factor to the new horizon that broke before the people who could not read themselves". So reading and listening play important roles in the beneficial use

of leisure, in addition to what rural people normally do to fill their work-free hours. The library in a rural setting can consciously strive to help people to cultivate a taste for books and reading.

Aboyade (1987), further observes that rural people are not benefiting enough from the results of agricultural research. Rural library can acquire and stock books and pamphlets, display posters and show films that teach modern methods of agriculture, fishing and livestock production. In doing this, it will greatly be complementing the work of the agricultural extension workers.

DeGruytes (1980), notes that until the 1940s, rural library services in the United States of America was identified with extension services. The first rural services were the travelling libraries administered by states. They were based on a conviction that the rural areas were not able to organize and support their own libraries. He further states that the travelling library in the nineteenth century United States was a collection of books lent to a community for general reading. Its purpose was to provide moral and cultural edification rather than research materials. This was in line with the purpose of small public libraries at that time. There were two types of collections then. The first type was called "fixed set" in which the original combination of books remained unchanged and were rotated among different communities. The second type referred to as "open shelf' were collections made up for a specific community from a central general collection. Most of the books were fiction, with few non-fiction titles. The idea was to encourage reading for the purpose of reading as a wholesome and upliftment recreation.

According to Orton (1980), the first recorded instance of readers borrowing books from a vehicle in England was from a horse-drawn van in Warrington in 1859. The working men in Warrington, through the offices of the Mechanics Institute, purchased the van. The van was used mainly within Warrington for the benefit of the working men who could not go to the Institute Library. It is important to note that the mobile library served varied clienteles from pre-school age to the elderly thus, catering for the information needs of all groups within the community.

Research conducted in rural areas of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland in Canada, by Friese (2008) shows that bookmobile services have the potential for a greater variety and quality of services. According to Kibat (1990), mobile

library services have reached segments of the rural population that would not otherwise have any library facilities at all. The book-mobile and its counterparts in the Philippines have brought improvements to rural areas, stimulated reading interests, and have increased general awareness on health, nutrition, child care, family planning, etc.

### **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

Based on participant observation and arising from literature review, the issues and challenges in provision of rural library services in Nigeria can be categorized into the following:

# **Inadequate Funding of Public Libraries**

Ajibero (2000) affirms that nearly all library materials are purchased from outside Nigeria, mostly from Europe and America, and due to a shortage of foreign currency and a high exchange rate, acquisitions have dropped sharply and in some states completely stopped. Many public libraries in Nigeria cannot afford to purchase and install computers or establish an internet connection, especially in rural areas. There is no gainsaying that lack of funds is the greatest problem that libraries face. Inadequate funding is hindering the development of public libraries in Nigeria. This could be attributed to economic conditions, government attitude, and particularly poor infrastructural facilities.

# Non-operation of Mobile Library Service

Ebiwolate (2010) maintains that bookmobile services were introduced in Nigeria by the regional governments in the 1960s and 1970s. The level of success varied. According to Okiy (2008), mobile library service was launched in order to extend library services to everyone in the then Bendel State, irrespective of location. By the end of 1977, this service had a fleet of five vans with a total book stock of 12,500 volumes. The vans operated 220 service points in 140 towns and villages. Other library services provided by the state library board included prison and hospital trolley services, films for children, and reference services. Unfortunately, these services are no longer in existence in the Niger Delta States. We are of the view that stoppage of mobile library is one of the greatest challenges to the provision of library services in the country in the present 21st century, taking into consideration that most rural area are now linked with all-seasonal motorable roads.

# Non-spread of Rural Libraries

Ekere (2006) remarks that adult education programmes in Nigeria, which are said to have reached the rural areas do not go with the establishment of libraries. She states that one of the most successful adult literacy campaigns in Nigeria is that of Kano State. Ekere (2006) in Boman (1987) further states that, "In August 1981, out of the 121,760 learners enrolled in the programme, 56,166 of them received literacy certificates". There is no doubt that the damage caused by lack of libraries in the rural areas is reading materials. Generally, Nigerians do not consider buying books outside school texts that are recommended. Nigerians appear to have a misplaced sense of value hence; most parents would rather buy gorgeous clothing for themselves and for their children than books.

#### **Poor Infrastructure**

Adedoyin (2005) indentifies, among other things, that inadequate level of ICT literacy is one of the major problems facing libraries in Nigeria as they move into the 21st century. He further states that the culture of infrastructure is essential for the delivery of library services to rural communities.

According to Kibat (1990), the major obstacles inhibiting efficient information services in rural areas are poor communication infrastructure and widely- dispersed rural population. A majority of Nigeria's rural population still lacks the most basic telecommunications. Writing on access to information in rural Nigeria, Aboyade (1985) points out that among the benefits that rural library services can bring about are:

- The reinforcement of specific messages,
- Repackaging of information,
- Acquiring and organizing specialized materials, and
- Filling and identifying information transfer activities in the rural areas.

Akinbulumo (2008) notes that the coming of ICT into the library has completely changed the face of the library to more of a social networking centre.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

 No better method for alternative spread of rural libraries has yet been devised in Nigeria for reaching every nook and cranny in the rural areas. Provision of mobile library seems to be the only solution. A mobile library, no doubt, is a travelling library that brings books and library services to readers beyond the reach of the central or branch library from which it operates. The commonest type and probably the one with which most people are familiar is the motor vehicle type, usually in the form of a bus. Such a vehicle is equipped with builtin shelves and other facilities to enhance library service. The importance of mobile library cannot be over-emphasized, as some literate or educated people working in the rural areas, cut-off from the amenities of the town, deserve support and encouragement. A mobile library service can help to ease their lot by bringing them materials for leisure reading, improving their qualifications and keep them abreast of development in the country. On the other hand, a mobile library can be in the form of locomotive train or simply a coach in a train. It should be noted that the South East region of the French National Railways as far back as 1957, provided the Bibliotrain, a mobile library of nearly 10,000 volumes, to serve railway workers and their families living along its routes. As Nigeria is presently trying to revive and modernize rail system of transport to traverse many areas of the country, this should be taken into account in her planning policy. Furthermore, mobile library could be in the form of book-boats for riverine areas. In Norway, for instance, these boats carry floating libraries for readers living along the coasts and on the Island, while book-buses extend the service inland. Nigeria has a lot of communities living along the coasts and in the Niger Delta, remote from the libraries in the towns and cities.

• There is need for the establishment of community-based libraries everywhere. This is because many rural communities in Nigeria have a growing number of retired civil servants, teachers and primary/secondary school leavers. Of particular importance are the school leavers who often constitute a nuisance to their communities. Establishing libraries in the rural communities will go a long way in helping the school leavers avoid the frustration of idleness and its attendant problems by using the libraries and also attending special and extramural classes organized in community libraries. Usoro and Usanga (2007) assert that children need the library for lifelong education in consonance with the national education policy. In some parts, according to them, children (especially those from rural areas), first meet books in school, and have limited access to books in the home and community. Extending library services to children is essential for universal basic education to succeed in Nigeria. Unagha (2008) opines that if we want children, and all citizens, to acquire literacy, we must provide reading materials.

- The various states library boards in Nigeria should establish linkages and collaboration with multinational corporations as an option for generating extra funds to augment their statutory subventions.
- Adequate funds should be made available by various states' government to their library boards respectively for the provision of quality library services to the rural population.
- Information and communication infrastructure should be given urgent attention as appropriate to the present global information technology.

## **CONCLUSION**

Katunmoya (1992) maintains that public libraries in most countries in tropical Africa are stocked mainly with foreign literature that is both out-of- date and irrelevant to the information needs and interest of the people that are expected to read them. Katunmoya's assertion is still very relevant in the present day Nigeria. This is in contrast with what obtains in most developed nations of the world. For instance, Ekere (2006) remarks that Americans educate their nationals to feel every way American.

The American culture as well as prominent men and women of American origin, both dead and alive are brought to the people's attention. The books in American libraries reflect the values of the American society and mould the attitudes of Americans to work and live generally. Nigeria, in the same way, where about eighty percent of her population consists of rural dwellers, can emulate the American system and begin to use indigenous literatures that instill national consciousness and patriotism, through the medium of rural libraries.

The importance of this task arises because the development of any nation depends primarily on the mental attitude of the people. Unless the people develop their spirit and human potentialities, they cannot develop economically, politically or culturally. The basic problem facing most developing countries is not a poverty of natural resources but the underdevelopment of their human resources. Hence, the first step in the task of development is to build up the human resources in the rural areas where the bulk of the people live. Provision of rural libraries can contribute substantially to the amount and kind of information available to the people and also focus their attention on the problems and goals of development.

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