

JOURNAL OF LIBRARY & INFORMATION SCIENCE (JOLIS)

A Publication of The Academic Librarians Forum, O.O.U., Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

VOL. 2 NOS. 1 & 2

DECEMBER 2005

ISSN 1597-5843



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INFORMATION LITERACY IN EDUCATIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: LIBRARIES AS AN ANCHOR

NKIKO Christopher

HEAD, READER SERVICES
CENTRE FOR LEARNING RESOURCES
COVENANT UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
COVENANT UNIVERSITY, OTA

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the information literacy function of libraries as an indispensable catalyst in educational and national development. It also discusses specific and concrete ways in which libraries facilitate such development through the skills inculcated into users. Realities and peculiarities of library services in developing countries were reviewed. It concludes that since only enlightened, creative and skilled workforce can translate to development, adequate investment in libraries becomes a sine-qua-non.

Keywords

Information literacy, national development, libraries

INTRODUCTION

The extent to which people of today will be creative, informed, knowledgeable and instrumental to national development will be determined by the availability and the content of the library services in their immediate locality (Royal Commission on National Development, 2005). Throughout the ages, libraries have been useful centers for study and investigation of all kinds of problems. It had always been, a rallying point for scholars who wanted to go into in-depth research and discoveries on various subjects. In short, a tripartite relationship had always existed among libraries, education and national development and this dates back to Egyptian civilization (Okiy, 1998).

Civilized governments are aware of the importance of education, both formal and informal, in the social and economic development of a nation. Development depends on the availability of skilled and enlightened citizenry. Libraries must

anchor the process of enlightenment. The importance of libraries in educational and national development was recognized by most of the high powered educational reports produced in Nigeria over the years. (Okiy, 1998).

Provision of library services are of paramount importance from primary school through higher institutions and afterward. The library is basic to any educational development. It inculcates in people to love reading for its own sake quite early in life, develops in them the spirit of inquiry and self-development through reading (Fayose, 2001).

Information is an essential part of a nation's resources, and access to it, is one of the basic human rights; it is not only a national resources vital or scientific and economic progress but also seen as a medium for social communication. (UNESCO, 1978). Libraries generate, organize, store and disseminate such information necessary for social, economic and industrial development.

The United States and the British Governments place high premium on libraries as a critical agent for educational and national development. British council as well as United States Information Services (USIS) establishes sophisticated and well-stocked libraries across the globe (Adegboye, 1997). Beyond information provision, they act as catalyst to perpetuating development and propagating the values of their home countries, thus boosting foreign image and investment.

Despite the indispensable role of libraries to educational and national development, governments, organization and educational institutions in developing nations have a continuously paid lip service to their importance. They clamour for development, yet the veritable tool for archiving it is neglected in the scheme of things. Thus poor reading culture and falling standard in education persist.

This paper essentially seeks to demonstrate that the information literacy role of libraries is imperative for qualitative education and national development. Other specific objectives include:

- To examine the concept of information literacy and its implication to qualitative education
- To examine the specific and concrete ways libraries facilitate development through information literacy.
- To review the realities and peculiarities of library services in developing countries and

- To highlight obstacles and prospects of libraries in national development.

CONCEPTUAL LINKAGE OF LIBRARIES, EDUCATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INFORMATION LITERACY

Development is a multi-dimensional concept with several inter-locking aspects-social (higher level of literacy and health care), economic (industrialization), political (high degree of autonomy, self rule, political stability and national cohesion) cultural (increased nationality and secularism). (Osaghee, 2004).

Analysts tend to focus on one or a few of the aspects, especially the economic aspects which most assume to be the base of development, implying that all other aspects are super-structural. The essence of development cannot be captured through such disconnected analysis. This is because development is a holistic process whose elements is interdependent and varies concomitantly. But what is common to all aspects of development are structural changes that enhance human well-being and progress.

Education is more than conveying a recognized body of knowledge but enhancing the ability of each learner to generate, access, assess, adopt and apply knowledge and information to solve complex problems (Ajayi, 2000). The purpose of education is to pass on society's values and accumulate body of knowledge to enhance meaningful living.

Wikipedia (2006) conceptualizes information literacy in terms of a set of competencies that an informed citizen of an information society ought to possess to participate intelligently and actively in that society. Library users are instructed on how information is obtained, interpreted and used for academic and productive activities. In the same vein, Goad (2002:248) rightly avers that success, both personal and organization comes from finding essential information and optimizing its effectiveness. He concludes that today's workplace demands skills for a knowledgeable and productive use of information. Information literacy enables students develops skills that help them become effective and efficient learners.

Information literacy is primarily rooted in the concepts of library user education and bibliographic instruction. It is the ability to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information (Carpenter, 1989:1). He further opined that information literacy is the basis for life-long learning, and an information literate person is

one who:

- Recognizes that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision making
- Recognizes the need for information
- Knows how to locate needed information
- Formulates questions based on information needs
- Identifies potential sources of information
- Develops successful search strategies
- Access sources of information including computer-based and other technologies
- Evaluates information no matter what the source
- Organizes information for practical application
- Integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge
- Uses information in critical thinking and problem solving
- Uses information ethically and legally.

Education is both formal and informal. The former takes place under regimented setting with specific methodology and fixated curriculum whereas the latter is more relaxed, continues throughout life, and involves all of life's activities. Education inculcates knowledge and skills, which raise productivity. It confers a sense of confidence, self-reliance, creativity and balanced judgment. No country can be regarded as fully developed, if it does not have the power to conduct relations on equal terms. Developing countries seek development for self-esteem and to eradicate the feeling of dominance and dependence that is associated with inferior economic status. A major objective of national development must be to raise people out of primary poverty and provide basic needs (Thirwall, 1999).

Library is an organized collection of published books and periodicals, other reading and audio-visual materials and services of staff to provide and interpret such materials as are required to meet the informational, research, educational or recreational needs of the users. (UNESCO, 1994). It is a collection of records of human culture in different languages and formats. Libraries may be categorized

according to their objectives, contents and patterns of service. The various types include public, academic, special and school, provision of essential support to the realization of the educational objectives of any country is a central function of libraries. In countries where the educational quality is fairly high, it has been found indispensable to have good libraries to support formal classroom teaching. It makes it possible for students to discover facts and think for themselves. This situation is such that lecture notes are no longer the last word on a subject.

The library develops in people good reading skills and encourages long-term learning habits through listening, reading and viewing a wide variety of learning resources (Fayose, 2001). These habits form key success in academics and personal enrichment of leisure time throughout life. People relapse into secondary illiteracy for lack of available opportunities to consolidate skills acquired in the classroom. The library provides technical knowledge for the newly emergent class of skilled workers in industries. Modern technological advances depend very much on research and immediate availability of accurate data. The library readily fulfils this needed service in the community and affords those engaged in commerce and industries opportunities not only of keeping up with the latest developments in their field but also of improving their knowledge and skills. Through the dissemination of information to the educated as well as the illiterate, libraries help to improve efficiency thereby promoting the acceleration of educational and national development.

INFORMATION LITERACY FUNCTION OF LIBRARIES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This information literacy function of libraries imbues in user the ability to locate, manage and use information effectively for a range of purposes (Christine Bruce, 1997:1). It is thus, an important skill which allows people to engage in effective decision-making, problem solving and research. It also enables them to take responsibility for their own continued learning in areas of personal or professional interest. Through its gamut of information literacy activities therefore, libraries foster and sustain national development in the following concrete ways:

- Investment in people as the productive creative force of the economy: National development implies a highly skilled, productive, creative and competitive workforce. Information literacy is a basic requirement for

the crystallization of such group. Libraries embody and promote the values of a culture of learning, information use and information literacy.

- Acts as engine for sectoral growth: Libraries collect, organize and provide access to information for research and development in science, technology, medicine, engineering, life sciences, art and agriculture. They make available social, economic and business intelligence to government, commercial firms, trade unions and other participants in the economy. Every great breakthrough in all sectors of the economy acknowledges libraries attached to them as powerhouse for each great feat.
- Acts as an agent of social change: Reading materials which have the force of inspiration and capable of positive mental reconstructions of the readers are made accessible by the libraries. These materials contain great ideas about life and conduct. They become standard reference for society. The presence of these materials in the libraries is calculated to provoke thought and action. Reading them is aimed at absorption of new and modern attribute of civilization. Nnamdi Azikiwe confessed in his book 'My Odyssey' that his imagination was fired up by merely reading biographies of great Aggrey and Garfield in a library (Azikiwe 2001). The perspective and a culture of a people can be altered by the activities of the libraries.
- Crime prevention and security strategy: Libraries help to combat crime by improving the quality of life of individuals. They offer stimulating activities; media and reading materials that help keep growing people off the streets. Opportunities are provided for community members to improve their skills and employability, thus expanding the alternatives to criminal activity. Moreover, law libraries are essential facilities for the efficient and fair administration of justice.
- National Unity and Stability: Libraries acquire and circulate materials that seek to promote national unity. People read culture and sociology of other ethnic groups. This enables more citizens to understand themselves better and to interact more effectively with one another. Ethnic distrust will diminish and a more virile nation will endure.
- Serves as catalyst for continuing education: There are people who for one reason or the other drop out of school at various stages, but continue

to study on their own to pass different examinations. Many of them also succeed in reaching the top and they make their contribution to the high-level manpower requirements of the nation. For this category of people the library is their "University". It provides opportunity for life-long learning. With the phenomenal growth in knowledge, and the modern condition of rapid change, it is realized that it is no longer possible to give to people during their school years the information and knowledge they need throughout the adult time; no matter how up-to-date the curricula may be. What is learnt at school becomes obsolete in no time that even those who have reached the very top of their profession still have to keep up with new knowledge in their fields.

Governmental efficiency and enhanced political participation

Government departmental libraries provide the information required by public servants to function efficiently. National libraries as information backup to the government and make available official publications of foreign governments and internal organizations. Well-informed and principle participation by civil society in decision making and evaluation of government actions and performance are made possible due to information disseminated by libraries an other information centers.

REALITIES AND PECULIARITIES OF LIBRARY SERVICES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In developing countries, the literacy rate is believed to be very low. The idea of using libraries appears elitist in nature, a preserve of the educated few. Even among the educated, real reading culture is yet to crystallize. People make use of the libraries only when they are preparing for examinations or to carry out certain compulsive assignments. Someone puts it bluntly "Africans don't read" (Leach and Verbeek, 1993). This partly explains the lackadaisical attitude of third world governments towards funding of libraries.

Life in developing communities is said to be comparatively less complicated than in communities with information-driven economics. (Surges & Neil, 1990). In such developing societies, people are repositories of the information required for the survival of the group. There is heavy reliance on rumours and unconfirmed

information. The citizens can protest over hike in taxation and other essential commodities. But nobody ever murmurs over non-provision of library services in their immediate environment.

DIFFICULTIES AND PROSPECTS

Notwithstanding the fact that information has been seen as a key resource in the social and economic transformation of any society, libraries in developing nations are still handicapped, essentially by the following:

- **Lack of public appreciation of their role in the society:** An average citizen's perception of the role of libraries is that of an institutional window dressing apparatus. A luxurious venture suitable only for intellectuals. Unlike in civilized societies where libraries are treasured, there is the need to mount publicity campaign to convince the public to take advantage of library and information centers and appreciate their roles in the development of society. (Kantumoya, 1993).
- **Inadequate Funding:** Understandably, the general poverty in this part of the world has its adverse effect on the funding of libraries. Even where librarians design laudable programmes, the fund for execution becomes the stumbling block. Some cannot sustain continuous subscription for very relevant journals not to talk of automation. Many who rely on foreign grants get disappointed when these are suddenly withdrawn. (Ubogu, 2003)
- **Scarcity of Reading Materials:** Few available local publishers prefer sensational materials whose market potentials are higher. Sending the materials overseas poses foreign exchange problem and import duty when the materials are brought home (Ifidon, 1994). Following the frustrations of local authors, libraries rely heavily on importation of reading materials. Because of high cost of these items, only few selected titles are usually purchased. This situation makes library services in developing world not too effective.

There should be heightened reawakening to the fact that not substitute to information in national development exists. With the increase in democratization in the developing world, the future for libraries is bright. As these nations desperately desire to catch up with developed nations, there is no alternative than

to thread the path of effective planning and development of libraries and other information systems.

Libraries should strategize to offer high quality services comparable to that obtainable elsewhere in the world. It is only then that people can react if there is the absence of this service. Information repackaging should be encouraged to meet the special information needs of the rural populace by providing materials in their local languages.

CONCLUSION

All developing countries are faced with the need to develop information infrastructures and an information literate population, which are indispensable for continued educational and national development. It is only a well-enlightened and creative workforce that can translate to meaningful development. Information literacy therefore, becomes a non-negotiable index of capacity building and empowerment. Beyond intellectual professional discourse, librarians should constructively dialogue with policy-makers and administrators. As long as they (policy-makers) do not understand and believe in the true value of information and its role in development, they will not see the necessity for investing adequately in libraries.

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