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Nigeria Public Library Service to Rural Areas: Libraries in Niger Delta States

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Introduction

The fundamental aim of libraries is to provide timely, accurate, pertinent, and reliable information for their users. According to Olowu (2004), librarians are devoted to improving access to information, and satisfying the user is paramount. There is a growing recognition that library services, particularly in public libraries, are an integral part of national socioeconomic development and improvement of the general quality of life (Kibat, 1990). Public libraries in Nigeria 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. That has resulted in illiteracy and ignorance among young people in rural areas. In Nigeria, a majority of the population lives in remote areas. Some of these areas are only accessible by boat, donkey, or bicycle. The inhabitants of these rural areas are without education. The library can have an important role in the advancement of knowledge. This role can be effectively carried out with well-structured and well-planned library services. Library services, including the packaging and repackaging of information, have been provided in Nigeria for many decades (Iwhiwhu, 2008). Unfortunately, a number of problems inhibit the provision of efficient library services in rural areas of the Niger Delta and other parts of the country. These include lack of physical infrastructure, lack of information and communication technologies (ICT), illiteracy, language barriers, poverty, etc.

Library Services in Rural Areas

Library services in the former Bendel state, which is the present day Delta and Edo states, was very important in the history of public libraries in Nigeria. It set the pace for many public libraries in Nigeria. The former Eastern region, which was part of the Niger Delta, also provided library services for adults, children, and schools. Through grants from UNESCO, mobile library service was provided to serve primary and secondary schools and reading rooms. In 1967, the region was split into seven states (Abia, Anambra, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Imo, Enugu, and Rivers states, and in 1996, Ebonyi and Bayelsa). Despite high expectations, library services did not develop widely in these areas.

Bookmobile Service

Bookmobile service was introduced in Nigeria by the regional governments in the 1960s and 1970s. The level of success varied. According to Okiy (2004), mobile library service was launched in order to extend library services to everyone in 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 service 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. Research conducted in rural areas of

Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland, Canada by Friese (2008) shows that bookmobile services have the potential for a greater variety and quality of service. According to Kibat (1990), mobile services have reached segments of the rural population that would not otherwise have any library facilities at all. The bookmobile and its counterparts in the Philippines have brought improvements to rural areas, stimulated reading interest, and have increased general awareness on health, nutrition, child care, family planning, etc.

Information and Referral Services

Information and referral services guide people to sources of information and to agencies capable of handling problems or questions. Libraries participating in information and referral services generally have a referral network and a calendar of community events. Libraries are at the forefront in providing information and referral services in rural areas in developed nations, but, unfortunately, little or nothing of this service is known in Niger Delta rural areas.

Outreach Programmes

These are organized to meet the information needs of the rural population. The objectives are awareness of library and information resources, and the creation of a reading habit among rural dwellers. According to Boyce and Boyce (1995), library outreach programmes are a way to distribute library services across a large and sparsely-populated rural area. Distance learning and other educational programmes can also be extended to rural areas. A well-planned library outreach programme can improve the quality of life in rural areas.

Current Awareness Programmes

In spite of the establishment of state library boards and the considerable resources spent by state governments, library service and public libraries still remain inaccessible to the rural population in Niger Delta. Public libraries in developed nations function as social development agents by extending services, sharing books, lectures on topics such as child labour, AIDS/HIV, epidemic diseases, reading habits, environmental protection, etc.

The Niger Delta rural population is predominantly peasant farmers and fishermen. Libraries in these areas can plan current awareness programmes based on farming seasons, pond management, agricultural marketing authorities, market prices, etc., as well as general information on health and nutrition, infant care, loans and financial aid. Current awareness services keep the users up-to-date, saves time, helps create new ideas, saves time and money spent on journals, and reduces paperwork (Oghuvwu, 2007).

Library Services to Children

Children need the library for lifelong education in consonance with the national education policy. In some parts of Nigeria, children (especially those from rural areas or economically disadvantaged backgrounds) first meet books in school, and have limited access to books in the home and community (Usoro and Usanga, 2007). Extending library services to children is essential for universal basic education to succeed. Public libraries in Niger Delta are expected to extend library services to nomadic populations, remote communities, rural primary schools, and daycare centers. According to Correa (1997) the library is "the place where teachers and pupils come into contact with 'the world,' that is, where they acquire the general knowledge which forms the basis for all further learning." If we want children, and all citizens, to acquire literacy, we must provide reading materials (Unagha, 2008).

Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI)

To effectively render SDI service, the librarian must have a profile of the client. When the information needs of the rural population are identified, such service will be relevant to them. Nigeria is a developing country where the majority of the population lives in rural areas. The majority of these rural dwellers are either non-literate or semi-literate. Libraries exist to serve as many people as possible, disseminating information, preserving culture, and contributing to intellectual and social life. Therefore, information pertaining to fishing and farming activities of rural areas needs to be repackaged in local languages and disseminated to all of categories of users.

Factors Militating Against Library Services in Niger Delta Rural Areas

Public libraries in the Niger Delta have declined dramatically over the past twenty years, reflecting both the political and economic situation of the country. Library service is inhibited by poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, lack of human resources, and so on. Libraries must serve all sectors of the population: urban and rural, literate and illiterate. It is the responsibility of all to address these and other problems affecting Niger Delta library systems. These include:

Poor Infrastructure

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 (Oduwole, 2005; Adedoyin 2005). The culture of infrastructure development and maintenance is not widespread in Nigeria. Infrastructure is essential for 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. In developed nations public libraries provide ICTs that aid timely delivery of information to the rural population. A majority of Nigeria's rural population still lacks the most basic telecommunications.

Inadequate Funding

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 libraries in Nigeria cannot afford to purchase and install computers and establish an Internet connection, especially in rural areas. Lack of funds is the greatest problem libraries face. Inadequate funding is hindering the development of public libraries in Nigeria (Nwokocha, 2002). Ajibero (2000) attributes this to economic conditions, government attitude, and particularly information infrastructure.

Inadequate Human Resources

We are at a point of change in the information economy of which libraries are a part (Chad 2008, cited by Harris 2009). Change is focused on innovation, technology, user experience, resource management, and service delivery. These changes call for education and training of librarians and other library staff. The shortage of adequately trained staff in libraries is obvious. Education and training for librarianship in Nigeria is inadequate, and need radical restructuring to produce librarians suited to service in a knowledge-based society. At present, many rural libraries have inadequate numbers of staff, and many others have staff who are seriously undereducated. If libraries in Nigeria are to survive, they must invest in the intellectual capital of their employees. Technology used to access information can be a way to educate library staff, to provide resources and services required in rural areas, and to bridge the information gap between urban and rural.

Conclusion

Library services are essential to the educational, political, and social development of the rural population. The information gap between the urban and rural areas can be bridged by effective library services. The federal, state, and local governments have the responsibility to better the lives of rural people by reaching rural communities through effective library services. The failure of libraries in the urban and rural areas in the Niger Delta states may be due to lack political will, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, and inadequate human resources.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are important to library services in rural areas.

- Adequate funds should be made available for the acquisition of information resources and the provision of quality library services to the rural population.
- Training and retraining of staff in ICT and related areas should be a continuous exercise in our libraries.
- The government should make a deliberate policy that ensures that libraries in rural areas have Internet connectivity.
- Information and communication infrastructure should be given urgent attention as appropriate to the present global information economy.

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