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Reading Culture and Nigeria's Quest for Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Reading is power!

Read a book today!

Reading maketh a man!

Teach a child to read ---- and you have made a king!

Reading Association of Nigeria & International Reading Association

The above assertion indicates the place of reading in the general development of man and his society. Holt (1998) remarks that a situation in which a large number of people rarely read, either because they lack the skill or simply because they do not care enough to take time to concentrate will pose serious problems in the future. Reading is essential to full participation in modern society. It adds quality to life, provides access to culture and cultural heritage, empowers and emancipates citizen as well as brings people together. In the words of Sisulu (2004), reading is one of the fundamental building blocks of learning. Becoming a skilled and adaptable reader enhances the chances of success at school and beyond. Reading is not just for school, it is for life. Reading in all its variety is vital to being better informed, have a better understanding of us as well as others. It makes man to be a thoughtful and constructive contributor to a democratic and cohesive society. Leading world nations pride themselves on their promotion of reading. They see a high level of literacy as a major source of their competitiveness and social maturity. The absence of a widespread culture of reading in the case of Nigeria acts as an effective barrier to our development and international competitiveness. The economic, social and political health of our nation today depends on building literate citizens that are able to read widely and apply it practically for development. It is therefore a necessity to making the present generation more aware of the benefits and importance of reading and ensuring that they have the literacy skills required in the modern society.

On assumption of office on May 29, 2007, President Umaru Musa

Ya'radua of Nigeria outlined his development blueprint to Nigerians in what he described as seven-point agenda, geared towards vision 2020. The aim of the vision 2020 is to make Nigeria one of the twenty top/target developed economies in the world by the year 2020. Nigeria's population is predominantly youth, with young people under 35 years accounting for about 50 percent of the country's over one hundred and forty (140) million people (Federal Ministry of Youth Development, 2008). In the year 2020 these young people will be the key drivers of the economy and will be the leaders in business and public services. The 18 year old of today will be 30 years in 2020; the 28 year olds will be 40 years in 2020 whereas the 38 year olds will be 50 years in 2020.

There is no doubt that the level of development in a country is directly proportional to the literacy level. The literacy rate of Nigeria dropped from 62 percent in 1992 to 52 percent in 2006. This implies that the illiteracy rate in the country is 48 percent. It also means that rather than improving on the literacy rating, Nigeria keeps on retrogressing (Olanrewaju, 2008). Most of the problems we have in this country are traceable to the high rate /level of illiteracy. Look at the issue of vandalisation for instance. Anyone who is knowledgeable enough to know that when he cuts an electricity wire he also suffers the consequences of lack of electricity along with others will think twice before he embarks on destroying electricity cables. The same thing goes for being healthy. If a person can read and write, he will most certainly be able to avoid certain things that can harm him. He will be able to get information from different sources on what to do to be healthy. He will know how to take care of himself to stay healthy. The nation benefits from this because it is only those who are healthy that can contribute to the development of the country. The fact remains that unless a solution is found to the dwindling reading habit of Nigerians, the country will continue to battle with underdevelopment. Nigeria needs to improve its literacy level because literacy is the forerunner of development. That is why Osundare (2009) emphatically remarks that a country's level of development is a function of its level of mental and cultural evolution as well as the state of its educational advancement, which is embedded on building a high level of literacy in all facets of the population.

Be that as it may, this paper will embrace the following, which includes reading culture and development, constrains to the development and improvement of reading culture, education as the focal point for development as well as strategies for the improvement and development of reading culture in Nigeria.

Reading Culture and Development

According to Etim (2008) basic literacy means an individual's ability to read, write and speak in English. Reading is the corner stone of learning. Gbadamosi (2007) quoting Okwilagwe describes reading as reasoning involving the meaningful interpretation of words, phrases and sentences requiring all types of thinking such as critical, analytical, creative, imaginative, evaluative, judgmental, and problem solving. Reading habit is the use of reading as a regular activity. It is the cultivation of an attitude and possession of skills that make reading a pleasurable, regular and constant activity. Reading habit is identified as the single most important determinant of a student's success in education and in our modern complex society (Nssien, 2008). Reading culture is the process of building up positive reading attitude among students and children over a period of time. When an individual habitually and regularly read books and other information materials that are not necessarily required for him to advance in his profession or career, he is said to have a reading culture (Gbadamosi, 2007:44). Reading culture in essence therefore is the kind of culture that imbibes reading and studying as the basis of growth and development. It is the type that sees continuous and dedicated reading of information resources by pupils, children, students and adults for knowledge

acquisition, which will be applied practically for development. Reading sharpens the mind, makes one reason rationally and objectively as well as projects one for greatness in life. That is why Scholastic Inc describes readers as leaders.

Development generally means the improvement of people's lifestyle through improved, qualitative and functional education; incomes, skills development and fulfilled employment. Development also means that people should be able to read and write. In Africa, this is a problem as most people are still illiterates, Nigeria inclusive. Investment in education is a productive venture. This is because an educated labour force is a source of productivity for national development. Nigeria needs this kind of development in order to meet the needs of its present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their needs. This is an embodiment of sustainable development.

Constraints on Reading Culture

Libraries have a historic mission of fostering literacy and learning. The relegation of that vital institution in recent decades is indeed a matter of great sadness. Libraries, learning and reading can and do change lives and they have a role to play in determining the future of our society. Libraries are vital to education; and research has shown that current lower levels of proficiency in reading are due to under funding of libraries and their services (Eyo, 2007). While lamenting the generally poor state of provision of library facilities and resources in most primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, Fadero (2007) stressed that inadequate provision of libraries in schools is a general disease that is plaguing education in Nigeria. From North to South and from East to West of the country schools are generally without libraries to support teaching, learning and the curriculum. There is no clear cut policy on funding school libraries and so those libraries are generally ill- equipped, lacking proper accommodation, qualified staff, relevant information resources such as books and other educational materials. Corroborating with Fadero, Unagha (2008) using Universal Basic Education (UBE) as a case study stresses that effort by Nigerian governments to promote education and literacy have failed because there was no provision for school libraries in the implementation of programmes. According to Lawal (2004), Odusanya and Amusa conducted a survey on the use of school libraries in Nigeria and revealed that: "some primary and secondary schools were visited to see physically the condition of the libraries in such schools. The findings show that libraries are almost non-existent in primary schools while few secondary schools have what could be referred to as reading rooms." On their evaluation of school library services since inception of the library profession in Nigeria, Elaturoti et al (2003) revealed that there were more inspections of the school libraries than the actual supply and processing of library materials. The libraries of many primary and post-primary schools are so poor that they impede rather than promote learning and knowledge acquisition. There are cases of lack of (not inadequate) dedicated library space, inappropriate use of libraries, poorly stocked and unattractive libraries etc, which lack the potentials to encourage anyone to read for knowledge or pleasure. In some cases, majority of these schools exist without libraries. The same condition is applicable to public libraries as Ehigiator (1997) revealed that the practice of governments releasing to the public library boards an amount that is far less than what was approved for in a given year affects the quality and quantity of materials acquired and the level of services rendered. These cases are counter – productive and a great impediment to Nigeria's quest for sustainable development.

In the words of Nssien (2008: 94) poor reading skills which has been identified as the problem of Nigerian students was as a result of the following: slow comprehension rate, slow reading rate, difficulty in distinguishing main ideas from irrelevant details, inadequate vocabulary or word power, inadequate

reading interests and habits, distractions from television and film viewing and lack of interest and relevant reading materials.

The low level of reading habits and culture among Nigerians is caused by multi-varied factors. According to Gbadamosi (2007:45), it includes:

- Change in Nigeria's value system. The quest for material wealth has eroded the interest for the search of knowledge.
- Economic hardship that is prevalent in many homes. Most parents manage to pay their wards school fees and forget about buying book for them.
- Astronomical prices of books and other information materials have put them out of the reach of the masses. Coupled with high cost of books is poor availability of indigenous books owing to the fact that local authors are not encouraged to write books.
- Also cost of publishing books is very high. Indigenous writers are not motivated as they may not be able to finance the high cost of book publishing.
- Advent of home videos, film houses and other electronic gadgets.

Another constraint to the development of reading culture is what can be described as literary apartheid and slavery or literary neo- imperialism. Most of the bookshops in the country prefer shelving foreign authors. Hardly you see indigenous publications in their bookshops. Even when Nigerian authors approach them in order to sell their books, they (bookshop owners) will turn their request down. This has made most of the authors to sell their books by themselves. This is not acceptable for a developing country like Nigeria.

Education as the Focal Point for Development

Why on earth would a country like Nigeria that is outstandingly equipped with intellectuals and academia of world class standard in all fields of knowledge, that is scattered all over the globe would close its eyes on issue that can destroy its future hope, promote illiteracy and impede development – Education? A careful perusal of TELL magazine of November 3, 2008 will give an overview of the gross decay in Nigeria's educational system. According to Mordi, (2008) Education of the citizenry is not yet a priority going by the budgetary allocation to the sector by the different levels of government over the years. It is a known fact that no nation can develop without massive investment in the educational system. This is because a country's development is tied to the quality of its human resources. In the words of Osundare (2009), "Education is to society what the eye is to the body as well as what the rain is to the land in a fit of drought. It is the supreme light-giver, the breezy down after a night of suffocating darkness. It is what clears a path through the jungle, the compass that takes us ashore from the rough and clueless waters". Genuine education is the surest antidotes to ignorance. In general terms, education is the main author of the spectacular difference between the advanced, developed parts of the world and their backward, underdeveloped counterparts like Nigeria.

Education ought to be one of the foremost national priorities, but successive government at different levels have only succeeded in paying lip service to education with all kinds of slogans. But funding is, perhaps the bane of the sector in Nigeria. Given the importance of education to national development, UNESCO recommends that developing countries should allocate 26 percent of their annual budgets to the sector. However an analysis of the federal government's allocation to that sector in the last nine years is nothing to cheer. In 2000, the budgetary allocation to the sector was 8.36 %; it decreased to 7 % in 2001, only to increase again to 8 % in 2002. However, in 2003 it went down again to 7 %. The dig-dong affair continued in 2005 as it fall to 11 % that year and stabilized in 2006, only to fall to 8 % in 2007. In 2008 the allocation

rose for the first time to 13 %. Before 1999, the federal government's expenditure on education had been below nine percent of its overall expenditure on the average (Mordi, 2008: 32).

The 7-point agenda of the present government and its dream to make Nigeria's economy one of the world's strongest 20 in year 2020 will remain a mirage considering the alarming deterioration of our educational institutions. For Nigeria to join the vanguards of developed nations, she must make education the top priority in her ranking of needs. Our nation's decrepit educational infrastructure is crying for an urgent and holistic overhaul; the classrooms (as well as the entire learning environment) needs to be safe, neat, creative and functional; the laboratories need to be equipped to world class standard, the libraries must be empowered to update and replenish their acquisitions, as well as full deployment of ICTs and other related equipment where necessary in our educational system. And all who toil in the education vineyard must be accorded their well-deserved respect and given their merited remuneration. The time is now.

Strategies for Improving Reading Culture in Nigeria

The task of improving as well as developing reading culture in Nigeria is for all and sundry viz; the family, teachers, librarians, philanthropists, the media, religious bodies, non governmental organizations, government etc. The strategies include:

- Giving Education priority attention in national human capital development:

The improvement and development of reading culture in Nigeria has to start with adequate funding of the education sector. UNESCO has given a minimum percentage of twenty-six; Nigeria should start from there and the funds should be properly utilized. The greatest resource for development is the human resource hence no nation can develop in isolation of her human resources; and education is the producer of human resources. So adequate funding of the sector by all the levels of government will impact positively on libraries, which is the main tool for the development of reading culture.

- Establishment of National Commission for Libraries (NCL):

This commission when established will cater for the growth, development, coordination and services of various zonal and regional branches of the National Library of Nigeria in different states of the federation.

- Establishment of State Commission for Libraries (SCL) throughout the 36 states of the federation.

The commission will be responsible for the growth, development, coordination and services of its branches in the local government areas of the state. There should be the establishment of libraries in all the local government areas of the respective states. Recently, Governor Peter Obi of Anambra State pledged to establish libraries in the 21 Local Government Areas of the state in order to improve reading culture (Vanguard Newspaper, November 18, 2008). This is a welcome development. He should match his word with action. Each local government should have a director of library services who will establish where there is none and coordinate all the public primary and secondary school libraries under the local government. Professional librarians should be made directors of local government library services. They should ensure that each of the primary and secondary school libraries would have a professional librarian or at least an education graduate with certificate or diploma on librarianship. The essence of this specific qualification is to have competent librarian(s) that will be able plan, develop and execute result-oriented information literacy education.

- Integration of Information Literacy Education in the curriculum of secondary schools and in the tertiary Institutions as an independent general studies course with units/credits allotted to it.

In primary schools there is the teaching of reading and writing. As a continuation, there should be the inclusion of Information Literacy Education as a subject in the curriculum of secondary schools. Information literacy has to do with the ability to recognize when information is needed and how to locate, evaluate, effectively use and communicate information in its various formats. Its aim is to use the techniques and skills for utilizing the wide range of information materials and tools to solve problems (Etim, 2008:73). At the tertiary level, Information Literacy Education (Library User Education) is equally neglected. According to Eze (2004) many Nigerian Universities such as the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-ife, University of Lagos, and Enugu State University of Science and Technology still integrate library user education with courses. In Abia State University Uturu, it is part of Use of English, which is a general studies course. The same is equally applicable to Bayero University Kano where it is included as part of the general studies programme. Some others like the University of Ibadan organize an hour lecture and guided tour of the library including library weeks, which are spread over a month after which students are deemed to have mastered the techniques of library utilization. When these students are bombarded with lectures and they rush to the library to source information, their manner of approach to the library and its information materials speak volumes of poor knowledge of library user education. There is therefore urgent need to make library user education or information literacy education an independent general studies course in all tertiary institutions in the country with units not less than two allotted to it. And its teaching should be handled by professional academic librarians who are experts in the field.

- Creation of library periods in School Timetable:

Library utilization periods should be included in the time table of primary and secondary schools. It should be in such a way that at least a class (for instance primary 1 or junior secondary 1) will have two hour in a week for library use. In boarding schools, evening prep, which is usually between 4-5 pm, should be set aside for library use. Primary one to six and secondary one are to six to share the days from Mondays to Saturdays respectively. This is practiced in Thomas Adewumi International College Oko, Kwara State. During the period, the library staff properly supervises students. This is an instrument of reading culture development.

- State Government should establish state-of-the-art publishing firms:

When established, these publishing firms should encourage the effort of our indigenous authors. The state publishing firm should encourage scholarship and creativity by charging lesser in publishing of materials. Specific copies of these published books should be distributed to public schools (in their libraries) in the respective states bearing in mind the relevance of such materials with respect to the development of the students' reading habit.

- Establishment of family libraries:

Parents have a role to play in the development of the reading habit of their children. Eyo (2007) revealed that 70 % of the problem associated with the poor reading culture of our children is traceable to many social and environmental factors, including parents. Parents and guardians should always monitor what their children and wards do. Children spend more time these days watching television and other electronic gadgets like computers. To many of our young people, watching movies has become an addiction, with the result that

many children and adult consider reading an ordeal. Children can only benefit optimally from electronic technology when they are firmly established as readers. The view that school and children's libraries should be deployed with ICT facilities as the only way of enabling children to be in touch with information is a tragically mistaken policy that is likely to decrease literacy rather than advance it. Michael Gorman, an experienced British Librarian bluntly states that it is literacy that is the major enabling technology in the development of reason, logic, systematic thinking and research (Eyo, 2007), while inadequate skills of many students accepted into higher education today are the products of a society and a school system that has de-emphasized basic skills, including the most basic skills of all: reading and writing. Let me share the experience of Dr. Reuben Abati of the Guardian Newspaper at the 50th anniversary of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in order to buttress my point.

"I was in Abuja the other week as compere of an evening of readings put together by the Federal Capital Territory administration. I was astounded when a young lady, a final year English Studies undergraduate, in a private conversation, could not establish the link between Chinua Achebe and Things Fall Apart. She insisted that Peter Edochie wrote Things Fall Apart and that the man in fact played the role of Okonkwo on television. She has never read the novel but she has watched the television series based on the novel and, Edochie who acted the lead role had made an impression on her as the author. I had to give her my copy of the Heinemann 50th anniversary edition of the novel, to purge her of her crime" (Abati, 2008)

Parents should establish private libraries at home in order to encourage the reading habit of their children. A large room in the house can be set-aside for this. It should be provided with shelves and reading desks. Then purchase of books for the library should be done gradually as the information needs of the children grow. A parent can buy at least five books in a week, and in one year, the family will have a sizeable library that will cater for the information needs of the family.

- Philanthropists and other spirited individuals should come up with the establishment of non-governmental organizations for promoting reading culture.

The efforts of such NGOs like African Center for Reading and Development Port Harcourt, City Profs Academy Lagos etc in providing mobile library services as well as increasing reading awareness in the public schools is commendable. Also spirited individuals can donate books to our school and public libraries in order to encourage reading habits.

- Media houses like radio, television and newspaper publishing firms are equally stakeholders in this course.

Radio and television houses can contribute by airing promoting reading habit jingles where as newspaper houses can advertise things that will stimulate reading.

- Institutionalization of Scholarship Schemes by State Governments:

The governors of the 36 states of Nigeria should implement scholarship schemes in the secondary and tertiary levels of education including postgraduate studies at national and overseas. The case of Ekiti State of Nigeria as championed by the state governor, Engr. Segun Oni is yielding encouraging results. Other states and their respective chief executives should follow same.

- Formulation and implementation of a viable National Information Policy (NIP):

According to Gbaje (2007), the Nigerian government approved a national information technology policy in March 2001. The implementation started in April 2001 with the establishment of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), whose mission was “to use Information Technology for education, creation of wealth, poverty eradication, job creation and global competitiveness”. According to the policy, the government will set up and develop national information infrastructure backbone as the gateway to the global information infrastructure and create state as well as local area networks (Womboh, 2008). Some years after the establishment of NITDA, Uhegbu (2007) cites the unstable nature of Nigeria’s economic and political environment; government’s apathy towards information infrastructure, resources and services; weak and uncoordinated information professional associations in the country; oral medium of communication and high illiteracy rate; underdeveloped and deficient information facilities within the country and frequent interference in the functions of the country’s information institutions as some of the problems hindering the implementation of a result-oriented national information policy. Nigerian government had acknowledged the failure of NITDA, and has put in place a mechanism to review the IT policy (Gbaje, 2007). However, in reviewing the policy for a viable national information policy, there is need for proper assessment, planning and implementation. A national information policy according to Uhegbu (2007:250) is a road map to sustainable and balanced flow of information in all sectors of the economy, proper development of our information infrastructures, appropriate and reliable information packaging for human resources development. It will also encourage standards in the establishment, maintenance and operation of information infrastructures such as libraries, publishing firms, information resource centres, telecommunication companies, information technology driven establishments etc. This will play a significant role in fighting illiteracy and will be geared towards fostering reading habit among Nigerians.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that the development of our reading habits and culture will improve the nation’s human resources that will champion the much-expected sustainable development. Massive investment in improving access to books through public institutions such as schools and libraries is a matter of absolute urgency. Books and libraries are essential especially in this information age where knowledge and information have acquired the materiality of capital and commodity, whose uneven accumulation will dictate the wealth of countries or otherwise. In order to achieve a total national consciousness of the value and benefits of reading, all stakeholders in the reading chain which include writers, publishers, booksellers, the media, teachers at all levels, librarians, civil societies, the corporate sector, religious bodies, community based organizations, non-governmental organizations, governments at all levels etc must support and participate actively in this clarion call. In drawing inference from the words of Sisulu (2004), I propose the following vision of a Nigeria with strong and viable reading culture:

- It would be a nation of avid, lifelong readers who read widely and value Nigerian literature and languages.
- It would have a government that vigorously promotes the value of reading at national, geo-political, state, local and community levels.
- It would have an education system that integrates reading, library use and information literacy education at the core of the curriculum at all levels of education, and encourages reading for pleasure and lifelong learning.
- It would have a flourishing writing and publishing industry to support the increasing demand for books and other reading materials from the education sector and the general public.
- It would have a strong library network backed by an equitable information

resources distribution system that ensures that everyone have access to a wide range of reading materials, regardless of economic status or geographical location.

In conclusion, the implementation of the recommended strategies above will go a long way in making Nigeria a nation with strong reading culture for sustainable human resources development.

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