

Information as an Economic Resource: The Role of Public Libraries in Nigeria

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***ABSTRACT:** The development of a country depends greatly on how much information its citizenry are exposed to. Information is so crucial that it has been recognized as the fifth factor of production. Information has no substitute when it comes to the national development because it has been identified as the driver of economic growth and productivity. The paper discussed the roles of public libraries in Nigeria and also examined various ways in which public libraries can help curb unemployment among youths by providing them with timely and accurate information. It concluded that public libraries should identify themselves with the aspiration of economic development of the country.*

I. Introduction

Access to information is very crucial. It accelerates the level of individual advancement as well as corporate educational development. Information is indispensable. Yusuf (2007) asserted that “it bridges the gap between knowledge and ignorance”. Berezi as cited by Onu (2005) averred that “information has been recognized as the fifth factor of production”. He further posited that “increasing the information component of the input factor mix definitely improves productivity”. Information is synonymous to knowledge and it has been recognized as the driver of economic growth and productivity. Information has no substitute when it comes to the national development.

Information has been defined by BusinessDictionary.com as follows:

Data that (1) has been verified to be accurate and timely, (2) is specific and organized for a purpose, (3) is presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance, and (4) that can lead to an increase in understanding and decrease in uncertainty.

The value of information lies solely in its ability to affect a behavior, decision, or outcome.

This paper focuses on the unemployed youths and how they can boost the economy of Nigeria if they get accurate and timely information.

II. Unemployment and Nigerian Youths

Onyekpe (2007) posited that “youths occupy a prominent place in a society”. He further asserted that “apart from being the owners and leaders of tomorrow, they outnumber the middle-aged and the aged”. “Apart from a numerical superiority, youths have energy and ideas that are society's great potentials. Youths are the foundation of a society. Their energies, inventiveness, character and orientation define the pace of development and security of a nation. Through their creative talents and labor power, a nation makes giant strides in economic development and socio-political attainments” (National Youth Development Policy, 2001).

The development of a country depends on how much information its citizenry is able to acquire. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) ranked Nigeria 142nd out of 169 countries while accessing the human development indicator (UNDP, 2010). This implies that Nigeria is among the low human development countries. For improvement in an organization, society or country, human resource development is very vital and indispensable. Although thousands of graduates are turned out each year, the majority of them suffer frustration as they cannot get a platform on which they can exhibit what they have been taught in school. This was confirmed by Okafor (2011) when he stated that “Nigerian streets are littered with youth hawkers who ordinarily would have found gainful employment in some enterprise”.

Oye, Ibrahim, and Ahmad (2011) posited that “unemployment has shown an enormous effect (over 65%) on the making of the Nigerian Gross Domestic Product”. They further asserted that “any increase in the unemployment rate will lead to economic drawback”. The issue of unemployment in Nigeria has been a serious source of concern to policy makers because of its devastating effects on the economy, individuals and the society at large; the reason being that most unemployed youths gradually turn into social miscreants since they are not actively engaged in any work or business.

Umoru (2011) reported that “the Minister of Youths and Social Development Mr. Bolaji Abdullahi, in a presentation to the Senate Committee on Youths and Women Affairs noted that there were developmental initiatives across various sectors and tiers of government aimed primarily to address the problem of unemployment in Nigeria; he however, regretted that the efforts were hardly visible”. He further asserted that “most of these initiatives fall short in terms of scope and scale and current interventions in the public, private and non-profit sector reach fewer than 100,000 youth per year out of more than 20 million unemployed youths.”

Recently, the President of Nigeria, His Excellency Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Communication Technology (CT), and the Ministry of Youth Development, launched an annual Business Plan Competition (BPC) for aspiring young entrepreneurs in Nigeria in line with the Federal Government's drive to create more jobs for Nigerians. The program will be implemented in partnership with Nigeria's private sector, which will be requested to provide funding support. Some of the program objectives are listed on the YouWiN! website:

- Attract ideas and innovations from young entrepreneurial aspirants from Universities, Polytechnics, Technical colleges, and other post-Secondary institutions in Nigeria;
- Provide a onetime Equity grant for 1,200 selected aspiring entrepreneurs to start or expand their business concepts and mitigate start up risks;
- Generate 80,000 to 110,000 new jobs for currently unemployed Nigerian youth over the three years during which the three cycles will be implemented;
- Provide business training for up to 6,000 aspiring youth entrepreneurs spread across all geo-political zones in Nigeria;
- Encourage expansion, specialization and spin-offs of existing businesses in Nigeria; and,
- Enable young entrepreneurs to access a wide business professional network and improve their visibility.

This program is called “YouWiN!” and details are available at:

<https://www.youwin.org.ng/whatisyouwin.php>

Despite all these measures put in place by the Government, the unemployment rate is still rising. In a briefing with newsmen in Abuja, Dr. Yemi Kale, Statistician General of the Federation and Chief Executive Officer of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), said that “the total number of unemployed Nigerians rose from more than 12 million in 2010 to more than 14 million in 2011, with the figure increasing by 1.8 million between December 2010 and June 2011. The unemployment was highest among youths aged between 15 and 44. The problem was more pronounced in the rural areas” (*The Nation*, 2012).

III. The Role of Public Libraries

The mission of a library is to provide timely, accurate, current, and reliable information to their users. Olowu (2004) posited that “librarians are devoted to improving access to information and satisfying the user’s information needs”. “There is a growing recognition that library services, particularly in public libraries, are an integral part of the national socio-economic development and improvement of the general quality of life” (Kibat, 1990). Libraries have an important role in the advancement of knowledge. “This role can be effectively carried out with well-structured and well-planned library services, which include the packaging and repackaging of information” (Iwhiwhu, 2008). Libraries are not to be regarded just as a place for reading; they are centers for research. Johnson and Lanre (2002) averred that the library contributes to education in a number of ways such as:

- Encouraging reading
- Expanding learning process
- Developing learning skills
- Developing appreciation, attitude, and value
- Assisting with development task

“The public library provides information, inculcates ideas, and develops knowledge that is so essential to functioning successfully in today’s information and knowledge based society. It is fundamental to equip youths with lifelong learning skills and develop in them creative thinking

and imagination, and enabling them to live as ideal and responsible citizens” (*Library as a Learning Resource Center*, ND).

To be successful in life, youths must have access to basic information that will keep them informed and educated because educating youths is building a country since they are always referred to as leaders of tomorrow. Libraries can help in building self-confidence and self-worth in youths by providing resources that will help to broaden their capacities.

Uhegbu (2001) argued that “people will have to be provided with a continuous access to information, which will guide them through and where necessary to translate that information into action”.

Libraries that are “well equipped with current and relevant materials are considered to be great assets as they provide an avenue for consulting materials that will provide factual knowledge needed for the day to day challenges the users face and in the end, make intelligent decisions concerning their personal lives” (*School Library Support*, 2012).

Libraries help in “facilitating the planning and implementation of learning programs that will equip users with the skills necessary to succeed in a constantly changing social and economic environment” (*School Library Support*, 2012).

As observed by Mchombu (2005), “information services that addresses economic and business issues serves as a hub to all other services because without economic development, recreational, cultural and educational pursuits become very difficult. Jonas (2011) also opined that “Through resource-based programs, students acquire skills to collect, critically analyze and organize information, problem-solve and communicate their understandings.”

The public library as a centre of information has a pivotal role to play in promoting sustainable development in the society. Wikipedia (2007) stated that “public libraries exist in most nations of the world and are often considered as essential part of promoting an educated and literate population”.

Public libraries contribute to local economic development. They are addressing issues on literacy, workforce training, prosperity of small-businesses and quality communal life. Reference desks have taken a new turn as they now house special sections for entrepreneurs where they can find sources of information about local and international businesses (Yusufu, 2011).

Public libraries play an important role in every society or community. For effective national development, a public library must have a vital impact on the community, in which it is established and must, as a matter of necessity, contribute to the promotion of information literacy and socio-cultural and educational services.

Saliu (1999) posited that “public libraries can develop local economic capabilities by making available necessary information on income generating projects, self employment activities, credit facilities, state assistance schemes, etc.”

In the words of Glass et al. (2000), “public libraries can play a large role in economic development by providing resources for existing businesses and for potential business startups. These resources should be seen as a source of value-added information that is got in time and accurately”.

Kargbo (2002) observed that “the culture of librarianship in the country tends to be responsible only to itself”. That is to say, the structure of its work, its commitment and loyalties are defined institutionally and professionally rather than in relationship to the community which is the focus of its work. He further reiterated that “in order for librarians to attain their goals in this era they should provide quality service tailored to the immediate needs of their respective communities and sensitize people to the availability of such services”.

IV. How Public Libraries can Help Curb Unemployment?

Public libraries can help in reducing the level of unemployment in a country by engaging in the following:

1. Organize seminars and workshops

Public libraries are government-owned libraries. Therefore, they can liaise with other government agencies such as the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). CBN is involved in training youths who are interested in starting small-scale businesses by organizing regular seminars and workshops for them. The youths are not just trained; they are given credit facilities to start their businesses (Central Bank of Nigeria official website). The involvement of public libraries can create awareness among unemployed youths who are interested in such trainings but are ignorant of its existence. By so doing, both public libraries and CBN will help in achieving one of the Millennium goals, which is eradicating unemployment among youths. Apart from liaising with CBN, public libraries can organize seminars, workshops and trainings where entrepreneurs who started their businesses from the scratch are invited as resource persons to share their experiences. “The traditional concept of a library has been redefined from a place to access paper records or books to one that also houses the most advanced electronic resources, including the Internet, digital libraries, and remote access to a wide range of information sources” (*Academic Advising Center*, ND). Information is now stored in various formats and this places an onus on public libraries to make judicious use of every platform in which information can be passed across to its users. Documentary CDs, DVDs, audio tapes or video cassettes on how to start and maintain small businesses should form part of the audio-visual collections.

2. Create awareness

Public libraries can create awareness and this could also take the form of jingles on radio and television stations. Bill boards containing information on where and how the unemployed youths can get their information needs met could be erected at strategic positions like university campuses, government parastatals, etc. Library services such as business collections and services should be marketed to the youths. These services should be well explained and promoted. It should also be made known to them that they can make use of the internet to market their

products and services. Doing this will enhance the library's visibility and lead to expansion of service to nontraditional users of the library.

3. Provide mobile library services

Ebiwolate (2010) stated that "The establishment of public libraries in Nigeria has been mostly limited to urban areas and this has resulted in illiteracy and ignorance among the people in rural areas." The Federal Government and the Nigerian Library Association in association with other stakeholders should join hands and establish and/or revitalize public libraries in rural areas. This will ensure that youths in rural areas get an equitable amount of information like their counterparts in the urban areas. Before this is done, public libraries can use the mobile library system, which is also known as "library on wheels", to take information resources to these rural areas so that the unemployed youths there can get informed. The mobile library must house not only books but all formats of information materials such as CDs and DVDs. Visits to the rural areas must be well scheduled to make sure that the target audience will be available at the time of visit. Mobile libraries could also be used to reach these youths in strategic places like cinema houses, shopping malls, clubs, hotels, and other public places.

4. Re-engineer youth for the society

A library is a social institution and it is an onus on it to serve the community in which it is located. "The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups" (UNESCO, 2004). It is important to re-engineer the youths so that they can be positive in their thinking and actions. Some unemployed youths have become social miscreants because they are not actively engaged in any meaningful job or business. Some of these youths have become political thugs, who disrupt political processes in a country; some engage in armed robberies, vandalize government properties, and place life and properties of individuals at risk. This is because they are full of energy and have to expend this energy in one way or another. This is why public libraries must rise to the occasion of re-engineering their thoughts and actions. Information packaging and repackaging should be the priority of public libraries so as to meet social needs of their communities.

5. Policy-makers

Policy makers need a very strong information base to discharge their duties. All decisions they make depends largely on how informed they are. For the national development, policy makers in Nigeria must be served with valuable and timely information to facilitate their decision making process. Ogunsola (2008) observed that "at the level of policy formulation, policy errors have been known to occur as a result of inadequate policy analysis and inaccurate and untimely data or outright unavailability of relevant information". He further asserted that "this is where the provision of adequate library facilities comes in because some of these adequate policy analysis and timely data and outright relevant information should be made available in well-funded and adequate libraries in their localities". Some of these information sources include "newspaper, magazines, learned journals, books, monographs, in-house memoranda, (files), indexes, abstracts, conference proceedings, these and dissertation, bulletin form the private sector, government

publications, consultancy reports and feasibility reports” (Aiyepetu, 1989). Public libraries should provide selected dissemination of information (SDI) to policy makers in Nigeria. Due to their busy schedules, policy makers may not have the time to make use of the library. Therefore, materials of value and importance can be scanned and sent to their email box. This information can be accessed on their blackberry phones, iPad, iPod, etc. It is imperative for public libraries to have state-of-art equipment that will make such communication possible.

6. Promote adult and continuing education

Youths need to learn, re-learn and unlearn. It is a mandate for public libraries to provide continuing education for youths. Programs should be organized for those who dropped out of school so that they can become useful and responsible citizens. These programs may be evening classes where they would be taught how to read and write for those who were not privileged to attend any form of formal schooling. This would be very beneficial for those in the rural areas. Other programs such as computer training could be organized both in rural and urban areas. It is also important for public libraries to acquire and disseminate information in local languages of its users.

All above points can only be actualized in an ideal situation. Therefore, it is important to highlight some problems that hinder public libraries from achieving these goals and objectives.

V. Problems and Prospects

1. Lack of adequate funding

Funding is a major setback for public libraries. No matter what amount of energy expended by librarians to put in place programs of value to the community, if there are no funds to carry out these programs, then all efforts are in vain. Public libraries in this era should be boasting of e-resources and automation of all routine activities but this is farfetched because funds are not readily available to execute such projects.

2. Lack of public awareness

The people the public libraries are meant to serve are generally not fully aware of the importance of having a public library in the community. Some feel the library is meant for the elites and students who need to read either to pursue their careers or pass examinations.

3. Out-dated materials

Most reading materials in public libraries are outdated. The reason is that they are not able to subscribe to current journal titles and that they can buy just few new books at long intervals due to financial constraints. This can be demoralizing and can puncture the hopes of users who are willing to make use of the library.

4. Training and retraining of staff

It is crucial for library staff to receive constant training and retraining. It is important for them to build capacity that will enhance their productivity. This can be in form of attending conferences, workshops, seminars, short-term trainings or pursuing higher degrees. If librarians are to offer their users efficient and effective services and bring best practices to the fore, then it is important for librarians to be very conversant with changing trends in their profession.

Despite all these challenges faced by public libraries in Nigeria, there is still light at the end of the tunnel. Recently, a campaign tagged “Bring Back the Book” was flagged off on the 20th of December, 2010. This campaign was aimed at resuscitating reading culture in Nigeria. This brings a ray of hope that very soon public libraries will receive the much desired attention they deserve to serve their communities more effectively.

VI. Conclusion

The whole essence of having public libraries in communities is to impact them beneficially and positively. It is of paramount importance for unemployed youths to get timely information that will enable them make intelligent decisions and live as responsible citizens. Public libraries should rise to the occasion and provide relevant and current information to those unemployed youths. To boost the economy of Nigeria, the GDP must be on the increase. For this to happen, the rate in unemployment must be reduced considerably. Therefore, public libraries should closely identify themselves with the aspiration of economic development of Nigeria. The public library must make it a top priority to provide relevant and current information to unemployed youths.

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