

Public Library and Information Literacy Programme: Mainstreaming Rural Populace for Information Literacy in Delta State

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Abstract

Historically there are great differences in the access to public library services, or the ability to read and write between urban and rural dwellers in Nigeria. It therefore brings into question the ethical foundations upon which every society is built. A cursory look at Delta State and Nigeria in general, one of the persisting issues remain, the difference in educational opportunities and access to library and information centers, hence rural dwellers have a lot to overcome when it comes to dealing with literacy. These have widened the literacy gap between the neglected rural dwellers and the urban dwellers. The access to good public libraries and educational facilities in rural areas remains a major ethical dilemma. Hence, the authors argues for the restructuring of public libraries and literacy programs in rural areas to overcome the barrier of distance to opportunities and also to bridge the escalating knowledge gap between the urban and rural communities in Delta State.

Keywords: Public library, Information literacy, Program, Urban and rural.

Introduction

Public libraries in Delta State are supposed to have statewide spread, but history have shown that rural communities in Delta State have suffered from enjoying any meaningful development largely because of policy implementation gap, artificially created by the political system. The consequences of these neglect resulted in rural communities lacking access to basic informational needs. Hence, Chester and Neelamegha (2006) opined that rural communities in Africa constitutes the larger percentage of the population whose information and development needs are not adequately met and consequently they have not been able to productively participate in the development process and enjoy the benefits thereof.

Given the importance of information to every citizen and its contributions to the state and national economy in general, enhancing the development of public libraries should be central to government and public administration. This is necessary as an informed citizen lead to an informed society which will further lead to the overall national growth and development. Information has been universally viewed as a basic resource which every citizen and most especially those in the rural areas of Delta State and Nigeria in general can use to improve their condition of living and is essential to developmental process.

Delta State is one of the leading oil producing states in Nigeria, worst still a high percentage of the population are illiterates, unemployed and poor. Empirical evidence has shown that large group of people in the rural communities have and will continue to miss the advantage of formal education, and access to opportunities can be found for them through literacy programs tailored to their local needs. There is also a lack of library and information services in the rural communities which constitute the larger population in the state while there are skeletal library and information services in few urban cities. Public libraries in Delta State are mainly supported by the state government, to conserves and organize human knowledge in order to place it at the service of the community be it urban or rural. It becomes imperative that the public libraries in Delta State should not only serve the literate minority, but should also encourage the illiterate majority in the rural communities to become literate by providing information resources in various formats. Besides if the rural communities are to play their expected roles as key partners in sustainable socio-economic development and democratic culture, they must be mobilized and empowered through literacy programs.

Ejedafiru (2014) observed that the poor state of public libraries constantly stare us on the face as we see the under-developed library system widen between the urban and rural areas. Couple with the emergence of information and knowledge society which is a significant intervention with the potential to ensure that knowledge and information are very important for achieving meaningful development within and outside the state. Balit (1996) earlier supported the relevant of this revolution when he opined that the least expensive input for rural development is knowledge, knowledge and information are basic ingredients of making one to be self reliant and are essential for facilitating rural development.

The thrust of this presentation is that public libraries have important roles to play in raising information literacy at every level be it rural or urban. With this, public libraries in Delta State should be well situated to

address information literacy among the teaming underserved rural dwellers and this will help to bridge the wide gap that has always existed between the urban and rural communities.

Information literacy is the ability to find right information and use effectively, evaluate information critically and competently and use information accurately and creatively (Lau, 2006). Traditionally, information literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze and use information. An encompassing definition of information literacy was given by Suskie (2009) as follows;

- Recognize the need for information.
- Identify what information is needed.
- Find that information
- Evaluate information critically or relevance and credibility.
- Use information to solve a problem or answer a question.
- Use information legally and ethically

Information literacy means knowing why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner (CILIP, 2004). However, the American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy report in 1989:

“To be information literate an individual must recognize what information is needed. Ultimately information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to, because they know how information is organized, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning because they always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand. (America Library Association, 1989)”.

Recognizing that people acquire and apply information literacy for different purposes in different situations, and that literacy is not uniform, but is culturally and linguistically diverse. It is therefore pertinent to note that literacy should not only be the privilege of those few population that lived in the urban cities in Delta State. UNESCO (2006) recognizes that skills for writing expression and comprehension are related to particular contexts and languages, and that the value of these skills lies in the ability to apply them in a beneficial way. Hence, it becomes necessary for every citizen irrespective of location to embrace these skills in other for such citizen to close the door of poverty and ignorance. And also bridge the gap between the urban and rural settlement (poor and rich) in Delta State.

Importance of Public Library to Information Literacy

Although the role of public libraries has been acknowledged as a valuable provider of literacy skills for the communities, existing literature primarily focuses on addressing the role of the public library and their IL activities (Harding, 2008). In spite of the acknowledge role of public libraries in IL, there is still a lack of relevant study investigating IL training in public libraries in Delta state and Nigeria in general, especially in the quality and organization of IL courses and the IL skills of public librarian. This could be traced to the poor funding, lack of adequate staff, poor physical facilities, lack of adequate space and inability to cope with technological trends.

The UNESCO Public Library manifesto indicates that “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. The Delta State library board confirms most of the visions as suggested in the UNESCO Public Library manifesto. However, the vision statement in the library board is to have a Delta State when access to information is easy, affordable, timely, effective and transparent with the use of cutting edge technology by the year 2015.

Information Literacy Scenario in Delta State

The pervasive state of public libraries in rural areas in Delta and Nigeria in general call for concern. The Delta State library board with it headquarter in Asaba, have fourteen branch libraries and eight reading rooms situated in the urban and semi—urban cities in Delta State. The trust of the matter is that the rural areas which play host to majority of the population lack library facilities. That is the rural communities are excluded from the benefit of library services which automatically amount to information deprivation. Hence, information is still not perceived as being as important as other resources. In collaboration, Neelameghan (2006) and (Amara 1990) hint that planners, developers and governments do not yet acknowledge the role of information as a basic resources, or are unaware of its potential value (Sturges and Neil, 1998).

Literature have shown that information plays an important role in almost every activity value in the development process Neil (1998), all agreed that lack of information has impacted negatively on the development process. Not only does information expand the possibilities of social, political, educational and economic development of any community, but it also facilitates awareness and empowerment among rural

dwellers.

However, access to information in rural communities in Delta State is affected by a number of barriers, such as basic infrastructures, (electricity, telecommunication, utilities, roads and transportation) low level of literacy, lack of adequate information services, technical competencies on the parts of public library staff and absence of information literacy programs in the state. Development can only be effective if rural dwellers have access to the relevant, diverse information for their activities, this can be enhanced by proper information literacy programs. Information literacy could be part of efforts to give access to knowledge and information by non-literates who constitute the majority of the rural dwellers in the state. Okiy (2003) had earlier noted that rural development is a basis for economic development and information is an important ingredient in development process. In all intent and purpose, the unhealthy situations in public library service constitute a major impediment, which keep the rural communities in Delta State far away from development indicators. A report on a rural project (2007) outlined that, "Access to and the ability to use of information and knowledge are not equally distributed (between urban and rural communities). Besides, poor access and use of information and knowledge is tied to the poor state of information literacy level of the rural dwellers. It becomes instructive to note that poverty and illiteracy are the major barriers to rural development.

Achieving Rural Development through Information Literacy

For the rural populace to be able to exercise their sovereignty and assume responsibility for development, they must have necessary resources, adequate revenue allocation from Federal and State sources and internal capacity to generate their own revenue locally as well as access to relevant and desirable information for development (Obasanjo & Mabogunje, 1991). In today's society, powered by acceleration in the use of information technology and the proliferation of information, public libraries have to re-assess their role and redefine tasks in order to ensure that all citizens irrespective of locality have access to information. Information literacy, organization, its availability and most importantly, its accessibility are powerful concerns that public library needs to take into account.

It is in the realization of the importance of literacy to the development of a nation, that all over the world, nations establish public libraries and information centres to serve their citizens irrespective of locality. Hence, public libraries and librarians, in redefining their role and creating new services, should have a dynamic future in serving disadvantaged communities, especially in developing countries, where these communities do not have access to ready sources of information because of their levels of illiteracy (Pienaar, 1995).

In another development Wedgeworth (2003) described public libraries as the natural allies, because the transmission of culture relies greatly on communication in the form of literacy. The author further notes that the idea of embracing literacy as a core mission of the library will "...have a liberating effect across the spectrum..." Therefore, public libraries in Delta State should begin to play crucial roles in providing Deltans especially the rural dwellers with unfettered access to education, recreation and information. Mudannayaka, (2007) agrees to the importance of public libraries as a local gateway to information provision to grass root level, especially with the expansion of ICT.

To cultivate a culture of reading, Deltans must have access to reading materials with which they can associate themselves, and thus material should be in a language in which they are comfortable. It becomes the responsibility of the public library, the librarians and professional associations to work together to ensure that every potential reader has the skill to read, access to reading materials that is relevant and in a mother tongue if possible.

Bridging the Gap between Rural and Urban through Innovative Community Information Center

The establishment of public library in Delta State however, has been mostly linked to urban areas. That has resulted in illiteracy and ignorance among young people in rural areas. Besides, majority of the population lives in remote areas. Some of these areas are only accessible by boats or speed boats and bicycles. For people living in these areas there is no flow of information and no opportunity to become part of the global information highway. This is because adequate attention has not been paid to library services in the rural areas and this has affected their level of illiteracy. As Aboyade (1987) has observed, some librarians argue that because it is not yet possible to adequately serve the city dwellers, who have the educational capacity to use library services, serving the rural dwellers, which are mostly illiterate would be a misdirection of efforts.

For the purpose of equity, the researchers are of the opinion that this thinking is unacceptable. It is therefore vital to promote the information literacy competency development programs for rural dwellers. Information literacy programs not only help a person becoming knowledgeable, socially responsible and socially productive person but also help in personality development. Information literacy competency development program may be initiated by public libraries to impart necessary information literacy skills and reading skills to rural dwellers in maximizing utilization of public library resources. Library skills enable learners to become able to teach themselves, thus opening the way to lifelong learning. This should not be privileged of the city dwellers

only rather the right of every citizen both urban and rural.

With the growing importance of ICT and media in society, a new form of literacy is emerging; computer literacy or media literacy (Livingstone, 2004). Media literacy can be seen to serve three key purposes, contributing to;

- Democracy, participation and active citizenship.
- The knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice; and
- Lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfillment (Livingstone, Van and Thumin, 2004).

In view of the listed medium literacy purposes, information literacy program is to serve as the pathway to equip the citizen with the knowledge, attitudes, values and skills to build a society that is united, stable, politically, socially and economically strong to guarantee individual well being and its sovereignty. Hence, Lesame (2005) opined that the availability of better information helps to improve people's education, health services and general knowledge life-long learning. Hence, a holistic approach which involves information technology and traditional practices in public libraries is highlighted in figure 1 below.

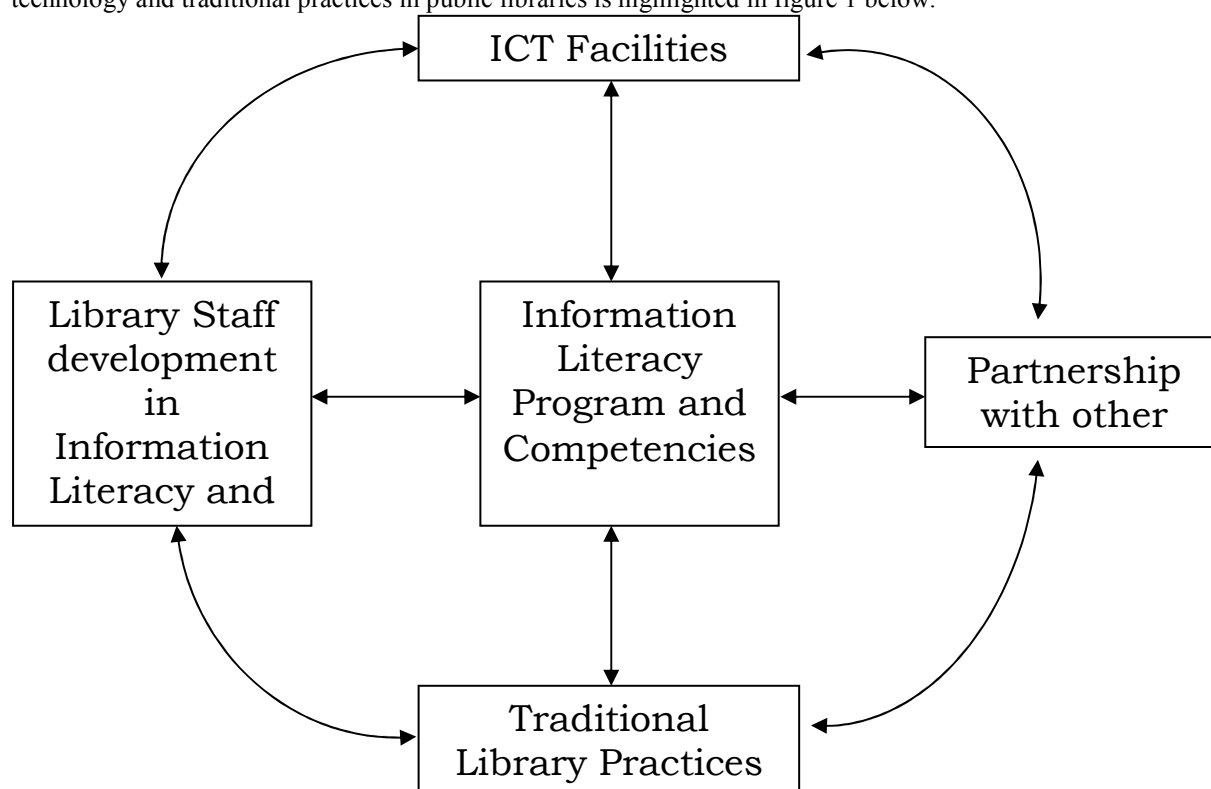


Figure 1: Source: develop for the study (2015)

Apart from public libraries and literacy program acting as a catalyst for national development and social change, it is geared towards the preparation of the Ideal man. It is therefore pertinent for Delta state government to create an enabling environment for public library and literacy programs to flourish in rural and urban communities in order to promote equity, fairness and social justice in the society.

Conclusion

The study has shown that public library services and information literacy programmes lacks statewide spread in Delta State, hence the need to mainstream rural communities in order to enhance equity in terms of access to information and educational opportunities irrespective of locality. The escalating knowledge gap that exist between the rural and urban dwellers need to be bridged, literacy should not be privilege of the few population living in urban cities. It is pertinent for every citizen irrespective of locality to have access to library and information services to enable them improve their level of literacy.

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