

Public Library and Information Services: Dilemma for Riverine Communities in Delta State, Nigeria

EJEDAFIRU, Efe Francis (CLN)

Department of Library and Information Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract

The riverine communities in Delta state have been object of neglect and will continue if nothing is done by the governments and other stake holders to address their information needs through public library and information services. The need for a new structure that is directed towards the reduction of illiteracy by providing library and information services cannot be overemphasized. Information deprivation is biting hard on our riverine dwellers; this will continue to promote illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and poor living conditions. These categories of people need to be equipped to enable them make decisions that would impinge upon their day to day living and existence. The efficacy of information as a powerful tool of development has and will continue to lead many countries to commit much of their wealth to the establishment of public libraries and information services in both riverine/rural and urban cities. It is therefore suggested that Delta State and Nigeria in general should as a matter of policy come out with an equitable means of sharing infrastructural facilities between the riverine/rural and urban settlements.

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, public library auth to be an essential social service provided to every citizen irrespective of location or terrain. The public library, a product of modern democracy, is an agent for the integral education for every citizen. To cultivate a habit of reading, Deltans irrespective of where there live should have access to reading materials with which they can associate themselves and the materials should be in languages in which they are comfortable. Public libraries are agencies of information generation and dissemination to all within a society for self-development, as well as national development (Ejedafiru and Urhiewhu, 2014). Equity and justice requires that any programme for educational and socio-economic development, should cover and benefits all sections of the society, irrespective of location, social, economic or political differences.

Information is the lifeblood of any society and vital to the activities of both the riverine and urban communities. In this contemporary world, no conscious, sensitive and organized government would want to neglect riverine communities. The term riverine is often associated with “river” or “sparsely populated” areas because of their specific terrain. The indices and challenges of underdevelopment in riverine, and by extension, the rural communities in Delta State are typified by gross economic and political disempowerment, social disorientation, human and environmental abuses, insecurity, the near absence of social amenities, infrastructure and modern institutions (Okaba, 2015). On a more serious note riverine communities in Delta State are best described as theatres of misery, neglect, poverty, frustration and backwardness. Unlike their urban counterparts, riverine dwellers are the least informed and often marginalized with regard to access to public library and information services in Nigeria. In spite of all these, riverine communities play host to some of the leading oil producing companies in Nigeria but still traditionally linked with poverty and under developed characteristics that include lack of public libraries and information services, poor standard of living as a result of inadequate basic amenities, and complete absence of motorable roads.

A high percentage of the population is unemployed and poor, besides the lack of library and information services exposes them to information deprivation. Hence, children in these areas grow up not knowing what a library is because they have not been to one unless teachers organizes special trips to public libraries in urban areas to exposed them to resources of a library. The history of public libraries in Delta State is mostly limited to few urban areas. This has continued to promote high level of illiteracy and ignorance among young people in riverine and rural areas in general. In Delta State, a very large number of the population lives in these remotes riverine areas. Worst still, these areas are only accessible by boats or speedboats and bicycle. It is pertinent to note, that there are many unserved, but potential library users in these riverine communities. These disadvantaged or unserved groups need information to create, adapt, share and increase their capacity to learn in this contemporary information world.

Roles of Public Library and Information Services in Riverine Communities

The importance of information in riverine community development cannot be overemphasized because information has become a catalyst for change and development. Experience has shown that public libraries are meant to serve an educational role in both urban and riverine communities. But the thrust of the matter is that majority of the riverine dwellers are illiterate and that is to say that problems concerning the daily lives of these groups and many other roles in the riverine community are neglected. In a nutshell, public libraries have not

been able to meet the information needs of anybody in the riverine areas. Hence, library and information services have to be adjusted to comply with the disparity with information requirements of users other than literates.

Therefore public libraries should aim to serve the entire riverine communities, including the illiterate. Mayer (2002) opined that community library and information services play an important role in the rural areas by empowering the rural community members in as far as their basic needs. This can also be applied to riverine areas because the educational and economic status of these riverine communities can be taken into account by library and information services. The library services, resources and the collections should suit the needs of the riverine community who cannot read and write.

Education is the only solution to the persistent security challenges facing the riverine communities and Delta State in general. Mordi (2014) citing Ndoma-Egba, opined that the problem of insecurity can only be addressed when we educate the people. Indeed, education is very important in our quest for peace. Thus, for education to wipe out the symptoms of insecurity in Delta State there must be a reformation in public libraries and information services in both riverine and urban communities. The Delta State government, public library and information services, the education sector and other stakeholders must have the burning desire to give our riverine communities a new structure that is directed towards the reduction or total elimination of illiteracy.

UNESCO public library charter was drafted to give librarians and the general public in all countries a clear picture of the guiding principles of public library services endorsed by UNESCO. The charter was published as a leaflet and poster under the title, "The Public Library, a Living Force for Popular Education". Thousands of copies were distributed in English, French, Spanish, Italian and Arabic to UNESCO members states throughout the world. It is therefore the opinion of the author, that librarians and all information professionals within Delta State should market this slogan to the riverine areas. Thus, it can be said that, public library, if well articulated could eradicate ignorance and gives enlightenment on how to achieve economic, educational, social, political and cultural objectives towards the development of the entire riverine community.

Information needs of Riverine Communities

Information is a resource for the growth and development of an individual, an organization or a nation (Ogunrombi & Amadasun, 2009). In spite of the place of information in modern life, information deprivation is common and biting hard on our riverine communities; this of cause will continue to promote illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and poor living conditions. It is imperative to observe that in riverine areas of Delta State, poor communication infrastructure and the high cost of connecting to existing networks have created inequitable access to information resources of all types and in particular the internet, compared with devices available to users in urban areas. Library information resources consist of print and non-print materials such as books, journals, maps, bibliographies, CD-Rom, audio-visual, electronic resources e.t.c. These materials carry information to suit any class of library users, including riverine dwellers. Beside the quality of life of riverine dwellers can be highly improved by effective provision of relevant information resources to satisfy their quest for knowledge. The riverine dwellers need relevant, efficient and current information in the daily operations in fishing, small scale farming activities, production of local gin, political awareness and health related issues. Pertinent to note is information to manage the frequent flooding and security problems they experience from time to time and the need to secure their immediate environment from manmade or natural disaster.

Meeting Information Needs of Riverine Dwellers in Delta State through Public Libraries and Information Services

Public library has always been viewed as an important entity in a local community development and empowerment process particularly in riverine and disadvantaged communities. The riverine areas of Delta State consist of creeks which are tributaries of the Forcados River which empties its content into the Forcados Sea. The major occupations of the inhabitants of this region include fishing, salt-making, production of local gin or alcoholic drinks, canoe carving, petty-trading, blacksmithing and subsistence farming. These occupations will continue to determine their information needs and is high time public libraries retool in this direction. Riverine dwellers have an amazingly rich oral culture and tradition which the public library is supposed to project. The traditional public library has failed to reach its potential majority target audience effectively with oral information and relevant knowledge.

The Delta State Library Board Service Charter mission statement is posed to disseminate information through books, journals, periodicals, etc, to the general public as well as provide consultancy, indexing, abstracting, and reference and referral services. The thrust of the matter is that these information needs and services should not be restricted to the few urban centres as researches have shown. Rather it is right to say that the riverine areas of Delta State should be made to enjoy these information services because they should be allowed to be part of global trends.

Information users in riverine communities comprise of fishermen and women, petty traders, illiterate, young school drop outs etc. Bringing these riverine dwellers close to social development, they must be well

acquainted with relevant library and information service that will enable them to make decisions that would impinge upon their day to day living and existence. Hence public library in Delta State should strive to improve on their service commitment, by reaching the disadvantaged communities with library and information services that will be accessible, affordable, timely, effective and transparent with the use of cutting edge technology that will meet their local needs.

Challenges of Library and Information Services to Riverine Communities in Delta State

To cultivate a culture of reading, Deltans must have access to reading materials with which they can associate themselves and these materials should be in a language in which they are comfortable (Ejedafiru & Toyo, 2015). Ironically, library and information services are not meeting this service need, hence the educational, political, social and economic realities of these riverine areas are not realistic. In spite of the fact that government ought to be the principal supporter of the public library system in Delta State, beside there is total absence of library and information service, which makes development of these communities difficult or impossible. This could be trace to lack of recognition of the role and importance of information by government authorities.

Riverine communities and their information need and learning, including literacy are neglected in the international development agenda. They are not part of Millennium Development Goals and in international aid and funding, for instance the Global Digital Library (GDL) which is committed to creating a community-owned library system for rural development in developing countries is not in sight. In spite, of the fact that information revolution is breaking barrier between literate and illiterate, riverine and urban, it is globally accepted that information and communications are essentially preconditions for development. Studies have shown that there are no alternative to the adoption of ICT by developing countries. It is uncertain, however, how this transition will be managed and financed given the constraints of limited financial resources and the narrow focus of the governments toward the development of public library and information services. Hence, there is no good evidence base for development of library and information services for riverine community in Delta state.

Generally speaking riverine communities unique challenges includes the following: isolation, low population density, mobility disadvantages, scarcity of financial institutions and resources, inadequate educational facilities, lack of expertise and human resources, resistance to change and innovations, lack of social services, absence of library and community information centre's, absence of internet service providers (ISP) and high level of illiteracy. Besides erosion is a major challenge to the sustainable provision of infrastructure. It is therefore pertinent to observe that the political will to carry the riverine dwellers along is lacking in Delta State. The riverine communities are finding themselves almost abandoned by their own governments as aid is slowing down, trade is becoming protectionist and diaspora remittances are declining. Hence, provision of information and other social amenities to these riverine areas are not in the priority lists of the government for the past twenty years. It is also true that large percentages of the information made available to riverine people are irrelevant to their immediate needs. This is tied to the inability of governments and other stakeholders to carry the people along.

Sadly, the social services in riverine areas are grossly deplorable and inadequate, therefore encouraging the drift of their youths to urban centres. In the opt words of Okaba (2015):

“A sieged mentality and psychology of deep-seated and animosity against the state and oil companies, community leaders and the competing neighbourhood have been fostered particularly among the youthful population. These youths who are denied meaningful education and employment and therefore a promising future, now concede and indulge in conflicts and vices of all ramifications, including hostage taking, prostitution, armed-robbery, drug trafficking, etc, as strategies to escape poverty and deprivation.⁴¹”

Conclusion

If the riverine communities are to play their expected roles as key participants in sustainable socio-economic development and democratic culture, they must be mobilized and empowered by library and information services. Public library can improve upon the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of present channels of communication with the non-literate riverine population. No nation can rise above her citizens, the efficacy of information as a powerful instrument of development has led many nations to commit much of their wealth to the establishment of public libraries and information services in every nook and cranny of their countries. Nigeria and Delta state in particular should not be an exception, this calls for thorough planning on the part of the various governments, to reach these remote areas which terrain pose serious challenges.

Weech (1980) opined that established guidelines and standards for quality public library service to populations do recognize that sparsely populated areas, thus, would have trouble supporting locally organized public library service. In the same vein, rural public libraries are vital to rural community and economic

development, just as public libraries have been vital to the education of the masses (Chu & Collins, 2008). In collaboration Aboyade (1984) said that the role of rural community library goes far beyond just the provision of reading materials; these libraries hold great potentials to serve those non-literate community members who may not have any other means of obtaining information.

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