

ENHANCING QUALITY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES IN NIGERIA THROUGH PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores various ways of public-private collaboration for quality public library services in Nigeria. It surveys the present collaboration between public and private sectors and terms it non-existent. After x-raying role of public libraries in the national development; mobile library services, provision of current information resources, internet facilities, staff training opportunities and sponsoring of special services to the physically challenged persons as the areas where the private sector can invest in public library services to meet the challenges of the 21st century, are identified. The authors suggests that private sector participation would help in acquiring necessary resources for ensuring reliable, current and quality services by public libraries.

KEYWORDS

Public Libraries; Public Library Services- Nigeria; Public-Private Partnership-Public Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

The philosophy underlying the establishment of public library services in the contemporary world is to facilitate greater access to information for every category of the people in a community irrespective of their age, gender, education, social or economic status. Public library is seen as a gateway to all types of information: economic, social, political, technological or even religious. The basic philosophy of public library services is better appreciated when viewed against the backdrop of the **UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994)** which states :

“The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for life long learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups”.

This recognizes that public libraries are at the heart of their communities, providing free, accessible space, resources and services for every one. As an integral part of a nation's social and economic engine house, public libraries can provide access to information and works of scholarship in a variety of formats and languages. Public libraries contribute to social capital and social inclusion making communities with libraries stronger than communities without them. For example, **Forsyth (2005)** argues that public libraries have crucial role in facilitating democracy and civil rights. Today, globalization, new information and communication order, information and communication technology and millennium development goals (MDG's) have contributed immensely in reshaping, redirecting and refocusing public library services and operations. Public libraries also focus on public dominance of the sector, growth of cultural affinity, nationalism and liberalisation of world economies (**Iwe 2005; Odi, 1996;**

Uhegbu, 2007; & Millennium Development Goals, 2004) The current reforms in the nation's socio-economic and political sectors are private sector driven, especially in the oil, gas, manufacturing, banking and health sectors. Public library services will benefit immensely if there is adequate private sector investment in institutions. **Nwokocha (1998)** and **Ogundipe (2005)** have decried the decay of public library infrastructure and the not-too-satisfactory services they render as a result of excessive public sector dominance of the institution. This situation can be reversed if private sector steps to support public library services. Public-private partnership initiative is a situation where the public sector represented by the government and private sector represented by the private individuals, organized groups, associations or corporate bodies in the management, collaborate in the provision and delivery of library services to the people. It is all about inclusion and working together to achieve a common purpose. It involves pooling resources, ideas, personnel and finance to improve the services of public libraries. The increasing sophistication of the users of public libraries, quantity and quality of service demands by users, influence of information technology and dynamics in the society have made the issue of private sector participation in the institutions more imperative. Public-private partnership initiative will not only help to improve information service provision and delivery through the injection of new capital and infrastructure, but will also work out for the appreciation of the role of the public library in the nation's socio-economic reforms.

PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES IN NIGERIA

Notwithstanding the low perception of the role of public libraries in national development by many Nigerians, the institution has continued to remain significant in the scheme of national

development. As a way of re-inventing public library existence in the minds of Nigerians, it is important to state some of the roles, public libraries play, so that the proposition for public-private sector collaboration is better appreciated. Public libraries in Nigeria have been in the vanguard in the campaign aimed at achieving the various issues relating to national objectives such as war against cultism, indecent dressing, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, fake and adulterated drugs, abuse of the naira, child labour and human trafficking, armed robbery, kidnapping, pipeline vandalism and other social vices. Posters that demonstrate the effect of these vices adorn the shelves and premises of many public libraries. In some cases, hand bills are printed and shared out to the users. Seminars, conferences and workshops have been co-sponsored by some public libraries to create the necessary awareness in Nigerians on their rights, duties and obligations to the nation. Public libraries have also become one of the sources of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) especially in the area of universal primary education, including sustenance of nation's adult education programme. Even the Open University Programme (OUP), in the country is anchored on effective library services. Many adult and poor Nigerians who cannot afford the exorbitant prices of information resources resort to the public library. Reading habits of many Nigerians have been sustained and weaker ones rekindled through the activities of public libraries (Olu, 2001). Public libraries are equally involved in sustaining the **6-3-3-4 system** of education in Nigeria. The reports of many research findings especially in the dreaded illnesses that affect man and animals find their way into the public libraries. People have become aware of current vaccines like the one against the avian flu by reading reports or materials acquired by public libraries (Lawal, 2002).

Most of these roles that libraries play require a lot of money to get implemented. Some require special facilities and technical know-how. Many a time public libraries do not meet up with their targets because of poor funding and decayed infrastructure. This situation is attributed to the fact that there is hardly any support besides government assistance to public libraries. It has therefore, become clear that the government alone cannot sustain the activities of public libraries because of dwindling public revenue and increased demands from the public library users for better services. If public libraries are to remain relevant in terms of provision of quality services in 21st century, they require urgent private sector participation.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP: PARTICIPATION

Public-private collaboration in library institutions in Nigeria is most -wanted. There has been insignificant participation of the private sector in the existence and operations of public libraries in Nigeria. Unlike in the health, oil, gas, education and banking sectors, the participation of the private sector in public library services is almost non-existent. What is even more pathetic is that among the current reforms going on in the national economy, none is taking place in the public library system. The domination of the public library system by the government often leads to poor funding and sometimes negligence. What is presently obtainable in the public library system in the country is the occasional erection of public library building by some rural communities or associations; and in very few cases private buildings by individuals like Aboh Mbase and Ohafia .In some rare occasions too, books and journals are acquired and donated for the existing public libraries. This interest by the private sector through occasional donations and other sundry gestures can never make public libraries in the country to provide quality services or meet

the challenges of the 21st century which is now driven by the new information and communication order, information and communication technology, globalization and the millennium development goals. The absence of sustainable private sector participation has greatly affected the number of public library institutions in the country, quantity and quality of services, infrastructure, personnel, remuneration, increased public library use and the general perception of public libraries by Nigerians. The characteristics of public libraries as non-profit making institutions that provide services free of charge requires continuous support in terms of funds and infrastructure so that they can satisfy the various information needs of the users. It will also make them to be in a proper footing to meet the challenges of the future. **Soludo (2007)** laments that developing countries including Nigeria which, for whatever reasons, fail to take advantage of the participation of the private sector in its economy are bound to trail behind others in all spheres of development. Public-private sector collaboration in public library services will ensure proper formulation of public library policies, improve the services and working environment, facilitate the development of infrastructure, encourage quality and reliable information services, design, packaging, delivery and injection of needed funds for service expansion.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE SECTOR COLLABORATION: AREAS

Public libraries are non-profit, free access institutions whose responsibility is to cater the information needs of all categories of clientele in a community. Even though the situation of public library institutions in the country requires urgent face-lift, the type of public-private sector collaboration has to go beyond mere donation of cash, books and journals. For instance, public libraries are meant to provide mobile library services including mobile

book to rural people where access to public library services is difficult. This type of service requires vehicles and personnel. The private sector could participate here by donating vehicles that could carry both the personnel and the books. This could also be through provisions of films and film projectors so that specific information services that require practical demonstration to the people could be done during this mobile public library service delivery. Issues like voting procedures, samples of fake and adulterated drugs, abuse of the naira etc could practically be shown to the people via the film shows. This would make for more lasting impressions in the minds of Nigerians. Books and journals that ensure reliable and up-to-date public library services are hardly easy to come by. Even computers and other information and communication technology accessories that make for faster and convenient service delivery are too expensive to purchase and need to be imported. Poor funding makes it very hard if not impossible for public libraries to acquire these resources, either from overseas or local market. In this regard, private sectors could make the difference if they could procure the books, journals and ICT facilities and donate them to public libraries. This would certainly improve the quality and delivery of services. Many public library users are physically challenged persons – the blind, the lame, the deaf; etc. They also require information and services for their betterment. Because of the nature of these users, they require special facilities like Braille books and talking machines. Many public libraries may have stopped taking care of these users because they could not cope with the cost of the materials, and for those which still provide them, leaves much to be desired. As a result, the information needs of the physically challenged people are neglected. With private sector participation, this gap could be filled. They could take the responsibility of sponsoring the provision of services to the physically challenged persons or

purchase the special equipments or even equip and maintain a section of the library for the physically challenged persons. If this is done, physically challenged people, who, because of their physical disabilities were unable to use public library, would now be able to exercise the facilities. Today, on-line services are in vogue. Libraries access information and resources around the world through the internet. In Nigeria, hardly one can think of any public library that has internet facilities. In fact, **Uhegbu (2007)** has argued that one of the causes of poor service provision and delivery in many libraries in Nigeria is the absence of internet facilities. As a result, access to current information sources can't be achieved. This is another area that requires private sector participation. There are two ways to this. It is either the private sector that can provide the internet facilities and allow the public sector to maintain it or vice versa. This would open the public libraries to the world with its quality public library resources and services. Private sector involvement in public libraries could be in the area of staff development also. Private individuals and corporate bodies could institute "staff development funds". This fund will be used to train librarians and other information workers. It could be for a full time study in institutions of higher learning or by sponsoring them to workshops, seminars and conferences, locally and internationally. This would make the personnel to acquire the necessary training and skills. This would further guarantee delivery of sustainable quality library services.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary public library environment in Nigeria no longer justifies the dominance of the public sector. What is now required is viable and sustainable public-private partnership. Public libraries could attract private sector participation by writing the name of a donor on the item, he/she donates, such as vehicle or

equipment. Furthermore, one of the rooms in the library could be designated a "museum" or "hall of fame" where the names and pictures of friends to the public library would be displayed. In addition, public libraries in conjunction with the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) could institute a merit award to befitting friends of the library. Such award when organized could be highly publicized by televising and airing it in national television and radio stations. One of the rooms in a public library could be named after the name of donors of many books and journals. All these would help to immortalize the names of the persons and then motivate other Nigerians towards contributing to the operations of public libraries in the country. This will encourage overall growth of the public library system and ensure the provision of quality services.

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