



REFOCUSING PUBLIC LIBRARY CRUSADE IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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Article History

Received: 12.10.2023

Accepted: 21.01.2024

Published: 15.05.2024

Abstract: This article explores the challenges facing public libraries in Nigeria and proposes strategies to refocus the public library movement in the nation. Public libraries are crucial for promoting literacy, addressing information poverty and inequality, supporting economic development, and fostering social cohesion. However, inadequate funding, issues of ethnicity and religion, location disparities, poor conditions of service, and government attitudes towards libraries pose significant challenges. To refocus the public library crusade, strategies such as making libraries public gathering places, enhancing government-library relationships, showcasing history and information, training librarians, reviewing remuneration, fostering communication, providing a wide range of community services, advocating for public participation, ensuring accessibility, and improving library infrastructure and management were recommended.

Keywords: public libraries, refocusing, library crusade, library challenges, strategies.

Cite this article:

CLN, O. B. A., CLN, O. A. K. M., OLUWATIMILEHIN, O. A., (2024). REFOCUSING PUBLIC LIBRARY CRUSADE IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(5), 16-22.

Introduction

People have constantly sought knowledge throughout human history in order to overcome obstacles and improve their quality of lives. The pursuit of knowledge has always been essential to human existence, from prehistoric times to the present, providing a way to solve pressing problems and get past challenges. In the modern world, information availability is still essential to humankind's intellectual and social development. Essentially, knowledge is a basic instrument for both individual and group development, supporting 21st-century social and intellectual advancement. There are many notable individuals in Nigeria that were able to reach the peak of their chosen endeavour due to availability of well-equipped public libraries that provided for their information needs. No wonder scholars agreed to the other name that is ascribed to the public library 'the people university'.

The patrons of public libraries are diverse, comprising both literate and illiterate individuals, the elderly, the disabled, kids, teenagers, and any other social group in the community. Scott (2011). They fundamentally offer a variety of tools and services that enable access to knowledge, information, and imaginative creations. Aidenojie & Obiyan (2019). Due to its ability to provide people with access to a vast array of information, viewpoints, and ideas, public libraries play a vital part in the growth and upkeep of democratic societies. Libraries provide information about government programs and services, health and well-being, and new skill acquisition. They also assist people in learning new things (2019) Onyenachi. The public library serves as the community's

information hub and offers the foundational resources necessary for lifelong learning, autonomous decision-making, and the cultural advancement of individuals and social groupings. Amaoge, Nonye, and Ejike (2019). They are neighbourhood information hubs that provide a wide range of people with easy access to a variety of information. The state government founded, advocates for, and provides funding for them. Through a variety of tools and services, they give people access to knowledge, data, and imaginative works. The Oyetunji et al. (2022)

Public libraries are essential to the advancement of education, literacy, and community development. However, there are a number of obstacles that the public library system in Nigeria must overcome if it is to effectively serve the requirements of the populace. This article looks at the problems Nigerian public libraries are facing and suggests ways to refocus the movement in that nation. Fundamental organizations, public libraries are essential to the advancement of education, literacy, and community development. However, there are a number of obstacles that the public library system in Nigeria must overcome if it is to effectively serve the requirements of the populace. This article looks at the problems Nigerian public libraries are facing and suggests ways to refocus the movement in that nation.

Brief History of Public Library in Nigeria

The pivotal seminar held in Ibadan in 1953, organized jointly by the Nigerian federal government and UNESCO, and marked a significant moment in the evolution of public libraries in Nigeria. This event catalysed the establishment of regional libraries across

the country, following the recommendations made during the seminar. The objectives outlined during the seminar included promoting adult education initiatives, facilitating access to information and reference services, providing quality services to children and young adults in educational settings, and fostering a culture of reading.

The regional libraries established in the former Eastern, Western, and Northern regions of Nigeria were initially under the administration of their respective regional governments. For instance, the Eastern Regional Library was inaugurated in 1955 with the aim of serving the population of the Eastern region and tackling illiteracy. Following the regional reorganization into states, the assets of the regional library were distributed among the newly created states, leading to the establishment of state libraries.

Similarly, the Western Regional Library was founded in 1955, with a public lending library section established in Ibadan in 1957. Notably, the library implemented various measures, such as regular book deliveries to local government council reading rooms, to enhance accessibility to its resources. Additionally, the Western regional government maintained departmental libraries to house government documents, newspapers, textbooks, and other pertinent materials. Throughout Nigeria's history, public libraries have been vital for advancing literacy, education, and community development despite obstacles including financial shortages and inadequate infrastructure.

Why Refocusing Crusade?

Public libraries are essential establishments that support community growth, education, and the sharing of knowledge. However, these important institutions in Nigeria face a lot of obstacles that call for a reallocation of resources and attention. Refocusing means putting more effort into a particular activity, in the belief that one will record more success. It also means to change the emphasis or direction of something in such a way that will profit the organization or the nation. Focus (attention or resources) on something new or different or give attention, effort, etc. to something new or different Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2017). One cannot continue to do something in the same way and keep expecting different results. For a new result, such an action must employ a new method. The public library had in the past helped some notable (living or dead) Nigerians in the past to achieve their missions. This same library still has such capacity if concerted efforts are redeployed into making it function as expected in this 21st century. The following are the reasons why Nigeria should give public library revitalization top priority:

Promoting Literacy and Lifelong Learning: According to Nielsen and Borlund (2014) in today's information society, lifelong learning has become indispensable for individuals due to the easy and free accessibility of information. At its core, lifelong learning entails the continuous or periodic acquisition of knowledge throughout one's life, extending beyond formal educational settings. This suggests that learning opportunities are not confined solely to educational institutions but can also occur in places like public libraries. Public libraries, therefore, hold significant potential in supporting the lifelong learning process, primarily because lifelong learning embraces informal learning components, offers flexible learning options, and encourages self-directed learning. Such self-directed learning fosters active citizenship and enhances employability, enabling individuals to engage effectively

in various aspects of social, political, and economic life Nielsen and Borlund (2014). Stress the importance of public libraries in fostering lifelong learning and literacy. Public libraries are vital centres for advancing literacy and cultivating a reading culture in a nation where literacy rates are still below ideal levels, especially in rural areas. Nigeria may improve access to educational materials and literacy programs by emphasising public libraries again. This would enable people to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for personal and professional growth.

Addressing Information Poverty: Information poverty poses a significant barrier in contrast to information's vital role in attaining sustainable development. According to Boucher and Lance (1992), public libraries serve as valuable sources of timely, accurate, and beneficial information for community members, presenting the potential to address obstacles leading to digital inequality and promote digital literacy skills. By employing a connectivist approach to learning and emphasizing peer-to-peer support, libraries can enhance initiatives aimed at boosting digital literacy. Information poverty extends beyond mere absence of information or technology; it encompasses inadequate utilization, accessibility, production, and recognition of information's value (Strand, 2016a). Marcella and Chowdhury (2018) define it as the lack of access to essential information necessary for survival and development. Britz (2004) elaborates, stating that information poverty occurs when individuals and communities lack the necessary skills, abilities, or material resources to efficiently access, interpret, and apply information within a given context. Furthermore, it is marked by insufficient information and deficient information infrastructure.

Addressing Information Inequality: Yusuf (2019) highlights the importance of public libraries in addressing information inequality in Nigeria. With the digital divide widening and access to information becoming increasingly crucial in the digital age, public libraries play a vital role in bridging this gap. However, inadequate resources and outdated infrastructure hinder their ability to provide equitable access to information for all citizens. By refocusing on public libraries and investing in modern technology and resources, Nigeria can work towards reducing information inequality and promoting social inclusion.

Supporting Economic Development: Economic development encompasses activities aimed at increasing the real income of society, providing new prospects, and broadening opportunities for individuals. Public libraries play a vital role in fostering economic development within communities by expanding their services and activities related to local businesses and economic endeavors through their informational functions. The recognition of libraries as valuable information providers for businesses and industries underscores their significance in justifying their existence. The extent and specific nature of services offered to contribute to the community's economic development vary depending on the library and its community. As suggested by Bleiweis (1997, p.37), these services may include: City Business Directory: Initiating with the compilation of the city's business directory, as demonstrated by the Newington Public Library in Connecticut.

- Book Lists: Curating book selections tailored to assist business professionals in enhancing their success, such as lists featuring bestsellers in the business field.
- Information Alert Service for Businesses: Offering pertinent information for businesses, including insights

into previously resolved problems within other businesses that may be of general interest to the community.

- **Computer Access:** Providing access to computers for both businesses and the general public, particularly for those businesses that are not yet automated.
- **Business Advice Service:** Facilitating talks and meetings between business professionals and specialists, as well as offering assistance from professional librarians with expertise in business-related matters.
- **Community Information:** Providing a comprehensive guide containing relevant information about the city, including details about restaurants, banks, hospitals, pharmacies, and laundromats. This information caters to various users, including new residents, visitors, and entrepreneurs conducting market analyses and exploring new business opportunities.
- **Job and Career Information:** Offering resources to assist the unemployed or those seeking new job opportunities, such as annual business reports, books on job interviews, and guidance on resume writing.

Public libraries also contribute to economic development by providing resources and support for entrepreneurship, job training, and skills development. According to Ogbomo and Igun (2018), public libraries can serve as catalysts for economic growth by offering business resources, entrepreneurial programs, and access to information on market trends and opportunities. By refocusing on public libraries and expanding their role in supporting economic development initiatives, Nigeria can empower individuals and communities to thrive in a competitive global economy.

These services exemplify the multifaceted role that public libraries play in supporting local businesses, fostering entrepreneurship, and contributing to overall economic development within their communities.

Fostering Social Cohesion and Community Development: A public library is an institution open to all members of the public, typically offering its services free of charge. It is usually sustained by local funding and government grants. Social cohesion refers to actions that ensure every individual in a community has access to the means necessary to meet their basic needs, progress, protect their legal rights, and maintain dignity and social confidence. Any lack of access in these areas undermines social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2001).

Public libraries play a vital role in serving communities by providing a wide range of services and helping individuals become literate and informed about their surroundings (Pandit & Biswas, 2023). They also contribute to the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies by offering safe, open civic spaces. Libraries promote civic understanding by actively engaging with their communities, welcoming minority groups, and addressing local needs for information, culture, education, and other social aspects (Byrne, 2018). Building cohesive societies is crucial for enhancing the well-being of their members and fostering resilience against social tensions and conflicts. Public libraries achieve this through their collections, strategic locations, and services tailored to various segments of society. By refocusing on public libraries and revitalizing their role as community hubs, Nigeria can strengthen social ties, promote civic engagement, and build resilient communities.

Refocusing of Nigeria's public libraries is imperative for promoting literacy, addressing information inequality, supporting economic development, and fostering social cohesion. By investing in resources, infrastructure, and innovative programs, Nigeria can unlock the full potential of its public library system as a catalyst for individual empowerment and national progress.

Challenges Facing Public Libraries in Nigeria

A challenge refers to a situation that presents a test or obstacle. It entails encountering new or difficult circumstances that disrupt the smooth operation of a system. Occasionally, people use the term "challenging" as a courteous and more optimistic alternative to describe troublesome or problematic situations. Ebiwolate (2010) in **Okafor (2020)** highlighted the following challenges facing public libraries to includes:

Inadequate Funding: Inadequate funding poses a significant challenge to the operations of public libraries in Nigeria, severely affecting their ability to deliver effective and efficient services. Government funding for public libraries is insufficient, leading to various problems. Ebiwolate (2010) equates this challenge to a lack of political will, resulting in government negligence towards adequately funding public libraries. This includes issues such as failure to approve budgets, non-release or non-implementation of approved budgets. The consequences of inadequate funding are numerous, including deteriorating service conditions, a shortage of professional staff, poor human resource management, deteriorating infrastructure, outdated resources, and difficulties in extending services to rural areas. Aina (2004) further asserts that public library services in Nigeria suffer from gross inadequacy, characterized by outdated collections and insufficient professional librarians. The level of patronage is low, acquisition of relevant materials is limited, community awareness and understanding of the public library concept are lacking, bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder operations, and there is a lack of enthusiasm for introducing new services. Additionally, Internet facilities installed in some public libraries are unable to be maintained due to financial constraints, rendering them non-functional.

Religion and Ethnicity: The issue of ethnicity (tribalism) and religion is not unique to Nigeria but is present to varying extents worldwide. In contemporary society, individuals are often hired not solely based on their competence and qualifications, but rather on personal connections or affiliations. This practice hinders progress and leads to inefficiencies within organizations, as individuals may lack the necessary skills or expertise for their roles.

Public Library Location: Public libraries in Nigeria are predominantly located in urban areas, limiting access to their services for rural residents. As a result, individuals in rural areas do not have the same opportunities to benefit from public library services, including bookmobile services. According to Bioks and Papadimitrion (2018), bookmobile services were established to provide access to knowledge for all, especially those facing challenges accessing standard libraries due to social, geographic, health, or age-related reasons. Despite the government's initial efforts to establish bookmobile services in the 1960s and 1970s, as reported by Ebiwolate (2010), these initiatives were not sustained in Nigeria due to various factors such as poor road conditions, long distances, and the use of deteriorating vehicles. Consequently, these services were discontinued, resulting in a negative impact on public library service delivery.

Poor Condition of Service: In certain public libraries, inadequate staffing is a direct result of substandard conditions of service. Young librarians often opt for employment in federal government-owned institutions due to more favourable conditions, including higher salaries, regular promotions, and study leave with pay, benefits that are typically unavailable in public libraries. The poor conditions of service contribute to difficulties in attracting and retaining staff, ultimately impeding service delivery.

Attitudes of third world countries' Governments towards Libraries: there is need for change in orientation regarding the ways libraries (public libraries especially) matters are being handled by the government of the third world countries. There is need to understand that library matters are primary to nation development because the public library still remains people university and some people are deprived using this opportunity because of the attitude of the our government towards library.

Inadequate infrastructure for ICT: A significant proportion of public library staff in Nigeria lack proficiency in ICT skills. Research consistently highlights insufficient levels of ICT literacy as a key challenge confronting libraries in the country as they transition into the 21st century. Issues such as inadequate ICT infrastructure development and limited funding have been identified as primary concerns, compounded by the poor ICT competencies among staff members (Ebiwolate, 2010)

Strategies for Refocusing the Public Library Crusade

Strategy means a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim. It is a general plan or set of plans intended to achieve success in situations. Through all the evidences provide by consulted literatures, it is obvious that public libraries in Nigeria are not performing as expected, hence the need to highlight some of the strategies for this refocusing crusade.

To refocus the crusade of public libraries in Nigeria, the following strategies can be implemented:

- **Public libraries should be made public gathering places:** By organizing a range of activities, such as educational lectures and cultural festivals, public libraries should develop into thriving community hubs that draw people of all ages and backgrounds. Furthermore, outdoor areas can be used for events and exhibitions, which promotes a feeling of community involvement and connection.
- **There should be Cordial relationship between Nigerian government and public library:** Enhancing the link between public libraries and the Nigerian government is essential to creating a vibrant information ecosystem and ensuring that all citizens have access to knowledge and education posited by Chukwusa, J. (2022). To accomplish this, the government might provide more funds and resources to encourage the growth and development of public libraries around the nation, making sure that they are suitably furnished to cater to the various needs of local populations. Furthermore, defining explicit guidelines and procedures for cooperation between government agencies and library authorities can improve coordination and cooperation in library development projects, allowing for a more efficient use of the resources and knowledge that are available.
- **Public libraries should be encouraged to showcase history and information:** Public libraries should act as archives for regional history and culture, providing materials and events that honour the past of the area. Additionally, they can serve as civic information hubs, offering insightful information about local affairs and promoting public discussion on important topics.
- **Training and re-training of Librarians:** One of the most important strategies for promoting public libraries in Nigeria is to train librarians to meet the information demands of library customers in an effective manner. According to Hook S.J., Bracke M.S., Greenfield L. and Mills V.A (2003). Librarians have a more involved role than just curating resources; they also actively engage with patrons to understand their information needs. As recommended by Khan and Rafiq (2013), librarians can improve their ability to teach information literacy, provide reference services, and employ information retrieval techniques by receiving specialized training. This will enable them to better meet the varied demands of library customers. These training programs are in line with the suggestions made by Obim (2023), who stress the value of ongoing professional development in helping librarians adjust to changing information environments.
- **Upward review of remuneration:** In order to ensure equitable compensation and to draw and keep talented experts in the area, the pay of librarians and other staff members at Nigerian public libraries needs to be reviewed immediately. Chukwusa, J. (2022) assert that many Nigerian public library employees currently earn inadequate pay that is out of proportion to their training, experience, and crucial role in advancing literacy, education, and information access in local communities. Inadequate compensation frequently results in low morale, significant employee turnover, and difficulties finding qualified candidates, all of which lower the standard of public library services. The Nigerian government and pertinent stakeholders can show their dedication to bolstering the library sector and improving public library services by examining and modifying compensation packages to reflect the worth and significance of the work completed by staff members of public libraries.
- **Public Libraries foster communication:** Public libraries ought to make an effort to be engaging places where patrons may converse and share ideas. Libraries can stimulate the exchange of ideas and foster cultural understanding by implementing community access media stations and organizing cultural events.
- **A wide range of community services are provided by public libraries.** Beyond only lending out books, libraries ought to offer a wide range of services like child care, help finding employment, and educational opportunities. Libraries may increase their influence and relevance by serving a range of community needs.
- **More Advocacy is required:** Furthermore, encouraging public participation and understanding of the value of libraries as vital community resources can aid in mobilizing support and lobbying for ongoing government funding and dedication to the expansion and sustainability of public libraries in Nigeria.
- **Public libraries provide easy access:** Libraries should guarantee accessibility for fit and non-fit individuals. Construction of their buildings and infrastructure should from time put into consideration the physically challenged.
- **Public libraries should be built to improve the neighbourhood:** They should be the type that influence

the environment of its location. As tertiary institutions in Nigeria impact their host community, public libraries should be to do the same. They should be able to draw more people and establish a sense of place by interacting with the community and contributing to the development of the host community environment.

- **Public libraries should be designed to support functions:** The architecture of public libraries should support their intended usage. Both indoor and outdoor spaces should be able to accommodate a range of activities and uses. Libraries can create a dynamic and engaging environment by placing smaller attractions, like playgrounds or vendor carts, strategically within and around the library.
- **Libraries offer a range of facilities:** Wi-Fi, pleasant seating places, and public art exhibits are a few examples of features that libraries should include to improve the user experience and encourage social interaction. These facilities will entice individuals to use the library's materials and activities.
- **Libraries rely on prudent management:** Meeting user requirements and achieving the goals of the organization depend on effective management. Public libraries may stay relevant and responsive to changing community requirements if Nigeria government appoint qualified and proactive individual to man these libraries. Libraries are essential community assets.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, Nigeria's public libraries need to be revitalized in order to support economic development, address information poverty and inequality, increase literacy, and promote social cohesion. In order to do this, it will be necessary to make coordinated efforts to solve difficulties including insufficient funding, problems with race and religion, differences in location, subpar service conditions, and government views regarding libraries. It is advised that tactics like strengthening ties between the government and libraries, educating librarians, examining pay, encouraging dialogue, offering a variety of community services, pushing for public involvement, guaranteeing accessibility, and enhancing library administration and infrastructure be put into practice. Nigeria may fully realize the potential of its public library system as a catalyst for both individual empowerment and national advancement by refocusing the public library campaign.

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