

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN NIGER STATE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

Mohammed Abubakar Bitagi (Ph.D)

University Library

Federal University of Technology

Minna, Nigeria

bitagi2006@yahoo.com/a.bitagi@futminna.edu.ng

GSM:08036810242

Idachaba Joy Asibi

University of Agriculture Makurdi, Nigeria

idachabajoy@yahoo.com

GSM:08059632740

Abstract

This paper focused on the development of libraries and information services in Niger State: past, present and future with particular reference to the state's public library service. The term development as a major variable of the paper was defined. The types of libraries expected to be covered by the development were identified. Types of information resources and services expected to be provided and improved upon by these libraries were also highlighted. The public library, which became the major focus of this paper was defined, its roles and the need for which the state government will prioritize the provision of public library services were explained. The paper then traced the history of the state public library to the Northern Region in the 60s up till the design and building of a purposeful State library complex named after late Abubakar Imam. The paper noted that efforts made to provide library services at Local Government Areas yielded minimal success. The present state of Abubakar Imam Library and the Bida, Agaie, Suleja and Kontagora branches were discussed. The future expectations of the Niger State Library Board were pointed out. Meanwhile, factors militating against development of public library service in Niger State were also revealed. The paper concluded that despite the fact that Niger State started benefitting from public library services since early sixties, not much effort has been made to improve the condition of libraries and services therefrom in line with present day expectations. Based on that, the paper recommended, among others that Niger State government should commit more financial resources for the realization of the objectives for which the library board was established.

Keywords: Development of Libraries, Future, Information Services, Niger State, Past, Present

Introduction

The term development has recently acquired shades of definitions by different researchers and writers. Example, Hornby (2015) defines development as an act of improving by expanding or enlarging or refining. In this perspective, the term development could be taken to mean the extent to which information resources provided and utilized in various types of libraries in Niger State have improved within the period of their establishment. These types of libraries include public, academic, school and special libraries. The types of information resources expected to be provided by these libraries within their developmental period include current, relevant and adequate textbooks, technical journals, technical reports, theses and dissertations magazines, newspapers and all related resources in print format. In addition to these, all types of libraries, according to Bitagi (2014) are supposed to provide information resources in non-print format such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and related electronic gadgets that provide or store information required to satisfy the information needs of their users.

In relation to the above and to make the available information resources easily accessible for use, libraries, irrespective of type are also expected to provide information services to users. There are various types of services rendered by libraries. These include, but not limited to Current Awareness Service (CAS), Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Indexing, Abstracting, On-line access to information within and outside the library etc.

Because of the diversity of libraries in Niger State and coupled with the various types of resources and services they are expected to provide to their numerous users, this paper is devoted to the Niger State public library which is believed by this author to be the mother of all other types of libraries in the state.

The Public Library

Ordinarily, a public library is that which provide all types of information resources for free access by users so as to enhance the reading habits of everybody in the state. However, Bitagi and Umar (2008) define the public library as those that provide services to every citizen of the community without discrimination in the form of religion, ethnicity, cultural practices, political learning, professional background, status and ability. To buttress this point, Mamman in Bitagi and Garba (2008) argues that going by the provision of UNESCO Manifesto, public libraries can be considered as the people's universities because they serve a greater portion of the community, the elites, the rural dwellers, children and women, and give access to all irrespective of age, education, ethnic and religious inclination.

The role of the public library to support and enhance reading culture among citizens of the community is demonstrated by Nwali and Nwali (2010) when they opine that reading support class or academic work, provide enjoyment or recreation, prevents loneliness and isolation, escape from anxiety or emotional trauma. Other advantages of the public library services, according to the authors includes, vocabulary increase, prevents relapsing into illiteracy or iliteracy, prevents deviant behaviours and inculcation of societal norms or rules and regulations.

From the forgoing therefore, there should be no doubt in our minds that the establishment of the state library and branches and the need to equally make them functional by providing necessary information resources and services therefrom should be a major priority of the state government.

Development of Niger State Public Library in the Past

Niger State started benefitting from public library service from the colonial era. This it did by the establishment of a good and purposeful library at Bida in the early 60s. In view of this development, one has good reason to rejoice that with the creation of Niger State, the new state had a good foundation from which to take-off, as far as library service is concerned.

Unfortunately however, when the new state took-off in Minna in 1976, there was hardly any reasonable space from which to begin effective library services. It was also unthinkable that the library should start operation from Bida where there is a functional building for that purpose. The only option was to stay in Minna being the state capital. From inception therefore, only two office rooms were continually allocated to the library from its initial base at Bosso down to Paiko and Muazu Muhammadu roads which served as the state's temporary secretariats. That is to say that even when the two temporary secretariats were designed and built, the public library was not in focus. However, as a result of the pressure mounted by librarians then, the library was later allocated a classroom block along Bosso road, It must therefore, be emphasized that it was a big disappointment that the state that had benefited from public library service since early sixties could not boast of a purposeful public library building at the state capital up till late 80s.

The pressure mounted by the then NLA EXCO, Niger State Chapter further led David Mark who was the Military Governor, in 1986 to relocate the library to the vacated State House of Assembly Library in the present day Government Secondary School along Bosso Road with a promise to look into the issue of

establishing a library board and building a purposeful and functional State library complex without delay (Bitagi, 1989). His commitment and that of his successor led to the design and building of the present library named after Abubakar Imam.

At this juncture, there is the need to emphasize that efforts made to establish branch libraries in Suleja Kontagora and Agaie in addition to that of Bida yielded minimal success as they all (including the Abubakar Imam Library) fall short of what could be regarded as standard public libraries up till today. This is because all of them are housing inadequate and outdated information resources. The staff strength is equally inadequate and untrained to meet the challenges of modern library in terms of resources and services provision.

The Present State of the Public Library Service in Niger State

The building of Abubakar Imam Library (ALI) looks as if the focus of the government is to erect a building just to satisfy the yearning or mounting pressures by librarians. There was no consideration for the quality of building to be put in place. It is agonizing to observe that AIL complex which was commissioned in 1998 is in a high level of dilapidation. Though these authors are not Engineers by profession, he can say certainty that the building housing the State Library Headquarters is structurally defective. Given the present state of that building therefore, it could be assumed that if due attention is not given, it may in the future collapse. When this happens, it may have disastrous effect on the state government, staff and users. Then, Niger state will make history as the first state where a purposefully designed public library has collapsed in Nigeria.

From the above observations, it would not amount to an overstatement that if Abubakar Imam, a veteran journalist, lover and author of books is alive today, he would have described this library complex as a sham and regret that his name is ever used in a building meant to house valuable information resources designed and built without putting into consideration the quality and purpose it is to serve.

From the foregone, when compared with some other public libraries in Nigeria, Niger state public library service has not faired at all. While some states are boasting of beautiful and equipped library buildings as headquarters with branches almost all over the state, ours is an eye sore without any serious branch and is ill equipped. Even the inherited Bida branch was bastardized, allowed to decay, for lack of renovation, non-acquisition of current information resources and sub-standard staff to man it. Thanks to a member of the house of representatives from that constituency, Alhaji Honourable Abdulmalik that came to renovate it. It is regrettable, that a state with 25 local government areas cannot boast of three functional branch libraries, one in each of its political zones. It follows that even though Ugboma (1998) affirmed that today in Nigeria, branch libraries of the national library and STATE PUBLIC LIBRARIES (emphasis ours) are found all over the country bringing services to the grassroots, the reverse is the case in Niger state today as far as state public library service is concerned. It could be safe therefore, to argue that the public library service in Niger state has only developed minimally since its establishment in 1976.

Expectations in the Future Development

Public librarianship in Niger State in the future has to do with changing the way library resources and services are offered with a view of expanding their horizons to meet with the challenges posed by the current underdevelopment of libraries in the state. Thus, the question is what is required to be done to move the public library forward in Niger State?

In an ideal situation and given what it takes, we must first of all think about establishing functional libraries in the entire local government areas. This will be followed up by adequately providing the basic and necessary information resources and services to meet the information needs of the users. It must however, be emphasized that these objectives will remain more of a dream if adequate, qualified and dedicated staff are not employed to perform the expected functions. For the purpose of a guide, the following categories of professionals are recommended:

1. Executive Director-one position.
2. Deputy Directors ----- 4
3. Assistant Directors ----- 7
4. Chief Librarians ----- 7
5. Assistant Chief Librarians ----- 7
6. Principal Librarians ----- 7
7. Senior Librarians ----- 32 i.e. 7 at headquarters and 1 for each branch
8. Librarian I ----- 32 i.e. 7 at headquarters and 1 for each branch
9. Librarian II ----- 32 i.e. 7 at headquarters and 1 for each branch

Total Number of Professionals = 129

The above stated number of professionals is assumed to be the average requirement if one considers the population of over three million or there about to be served. In addition to that, assorted para-professional staff and Library Assistants are required to assist in the provision of information resources and services.

The future of public librarianship in Niger State suggests that to provide maximum service from a well-established library, the library system must be automated. Automation of the library entails sharing the traditional mode of approach or practices to information resources provision, its creation, storage, retrieval and dissemination between humans and machines. The need for automation or computerization of the library according to Bitagi (2000) is as a result of repetitiveness and slowness associated with library practices in addition to the inadequacy of the quality and quantity of services rendered. The author further opined that library automation facilitate, in a faster way the performance of traditional functions of the library such as acquisitions, technical services, serials control, circulation, networking, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), compilation of bibliographies, abstracting and indexing services, and accession list etc, In a similar dimension, Madu (2004) further elucidated that library automation provides interconnectivity. According to the author, the implication of this is that a library can easily access the collection of other libraries. This is to say that when the public libraries in Niger State are automated, the resultant effect is that all libraries will be linked with, and their collections accessible to each other any time, any day. This system will also facilitate the balancing of library collections within the state because what is available to one library will be available to all other libraries.

Finally, when the library system is automated, it would form the basis for which library users, especially the youths will begin a formal or informal training on computer literacy which in the future would be a necessary requirement for any type of job.

Factors Militating Against the Development of Public Library Services in Niger State

Several factors could be identified to be negatively impacting on the development of Niger State public library service. These include the followings:

Funding

Funding has been likened to a corner stone in the development of public libraries not only in Niger State but in Nigeria as a whole. For example, Aziagba and Umeazor (2008) discovers that principal among factors militating the provision and utilization of information resources is funding. Bitagi (2014) concurs with this position when the author identifies that funding is the mother of all problems militating against library development in Nigeria since it is required at all levels of activity.

Because of lack of adequate funding of public libraries, Ugwoke (2011) reiterates that it has made it difficult for them to render expected services and especially those that are electronically based. From this assertion, it could be observed that the problem of funding of libraries is not limited to Niger State alone. However, when some states find it difficult to provide services that are electronically based, Niger state library service is finding it difficult in providing services from all formats of information resources (print and electronic) because of their unavailability.

In relation to the above view, Edoaka in Lawal and Okwueze (2007) notes that funds of library and information development are traditionally derived from the library's proprietor. In this circumstance, the state library's proprietor, the Niger State government which set up the library board to serve the entire citizenry of the state with information resources and services to meet with their information needs through this agency should take full responsibility for its funding in all areas of development such as infrastructural facilities (buildings etc), information resources, (books, journals, computers etc) and reasonable payment of staff salaries.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that because of paucity of funds and lack of sufficient commitment by the state government, the Niger State Library services is in shambles. The state library headquarters lacks renovation and outwardly, it does not even look like an inhabited building. The inside of the library is more horrible. The information resources, particularly books are outdated and cannot in any way meet the current information needs of users. The tables and chairs are so dilapidated that a decently dressed user may not want to sit in the library.

The paucity of funds from the state government has led to lack of establishment of functional branch libraries in Local Government Areas. The branches at Suleja, Kontagora and Agaie are in borrowed rooms without any serious information resources to back up. The Bida branch library which was inherited from the Northern Nigerian Government of the 60s was nearly pulled down except for the intervention of a member of the state house of assembly, Mallam Isah Farouq who rebuilt and renovated it. Yet, the branch library lacks adequate and current information resources from which to provide library and information services.

The most unfortunate incidence befalling the Niger State Library service is the unavailability of adequate, qualified and experienced professionals. In this regard, the state government has ill-equipped and incapacitated the board from functioning according to expectations. How could, for example, one expect that the whole state library be manned by less than ten (10) professionals?.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that despite the fact that Niger State started benefitting from public library services since early sixties, not much effort has been made to improve the condition of libraries and services therefrom in line with present day expectations. Thus, there seems to be total neglect of library services in Niger State.

Recommendations

In view of the above analysis, the following recommendations are made:

1. Niger State government should commit more financial resources for the renovation of AIL, procurement of information based resources both in print and non-print form to satisfy the yearning of its information seeking populace, especially the youths.
2. A branch of the state library in each of the 25 Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the state should be established.
3. There is the need to employ more qualified librarians and other categories of library staff to provide effective services.
4. The state government should, as a matter of policy and priority establish a book and school materials depot at the State Library Headquarters in Minna where books and other educational materials will be centrally acquired, processed and equitably distributed to branch libraries by the board.
5. Finally, a consortium of public libraries should be established in the state linking the facilities of one library with the other through information technology services.

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