

ASSESSMENT OF FEDERAL INFORMATION RESOURCE CENTRE, MINNA, NIGER STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Relevant and timely information is a necessary implement that is required in the toolbox of all and sundry. This statement holds increasingly true especially in the 21st century which we popularly refer to as the Information Age. This is the background for an evaluative study of Government-owned information centres, whose duty is to provide information and information materials to their clientele. A survey method is used in the research using Federal Information Resource Centre, Minna as a case study. The results of the study shows that the centre in question is inadequately stocked in terms of resource materials, technical expertise and funding in order to reach its clientele, especially those at the grassroots with the variety of information and information materials required to reach the diversity of persons considering their educational status, age, social class, business and leisure needs. Based on the findings it is recommended that professional help, as well as private sector participation should be encouraged. This could be in form of partnership to help in proper policy framework so that the focus is not lost; increase funding avenues, as well as ensure that the skilled manpower with the required technical know-how required for information management is utilized.

INTRODUCTION

Information is a vital and strategic resource in all-human endeavors. It is therefore important to manage and guide it with all it takes. It is not enough that information be available, it must be accessible. "The information must be readily available in a form that the recipient can use. It must be available to everybody- not just decision makers, but to everybody- when they need it, where they need it and in the form that they can understand and use it to make decisions or participate in decisions (Amoako, 2003).

In a country like Nigeria, the government has played a major role in the provision of information to its citizens. Up until about ten years ago, the government literally controlled the electronic media – owned almost all the television stations, as well as a large chunk of the radio stations in the country and had a significant presence in the print media. However, the day-to-day running of government requires the active participation of the citizenry. This therefore necessitates the effective communication of government programmes, projects and policies to the populace, who dwell in both the urban and rural areas.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Federal Information Resource Centre FIRC in Minna has been set up now for over four years. It has been observed that ineffectiveness and gross underperformance sets in after a few years of setting up this government parastatal. This can be as a result of lack

of continuity in government policy, which will lead to alternating priorities given by various succeeding administrations and managements, inadequate funding, loss of focus due to improper handing down of organizational objectives, or corruption and embezzlement of public funds. The study is aimed at evaluating the present performance of this Centre to see how it has fared so far, as regards the resources available and quality of service rendered, and to ascertain whether it is meeting up with the objectives for which it was set up. It would then serve as a point of reference to evaluate the performance of the other information Centres, especially those set up by the government across the country.

Objectives of the Study

1. To get the overall objectives of the establishment.
2. To ascertain the kind of information resources they provide.
3. To measure/evaluate the performance against their objectives.

Significance of the Study

This study is of utmost significance to mainstream information professional/experts, policy-makers, both in the private sector and government. It will be of significance in the following ways:

1. It will help the information professionals/experts, as well as everyday information seekers to get adequate information about the activities of the FIRC, and how they can harness its services, and/or partner with them for their own advantage.
2. It will help students/researchers by providing the required general or specific information necessary for reading and/or study purposes in the aspect of information centres in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Specifically, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, she has not come across any thesis or articles that attempt to evaluate the resources, organisation and services of any of the Federal Information Resource Centres in the Nigeria. However, commenting on the need for an assessment study of the resources and services in special libraries and information centres, Afolabi (1989) in his writing on the "Management of special libraries: Strategies for their survival and growth" says, "the more the special library works towards reducing hidden areas, the higher the level of awareness of the value of the library among members of the organisation." This applies to information centres like the FIRC, which is supposed to be an information *hub* for the rural dwellers. When they hold in custody information and the members of the public are not aware of the existence of such information, then it is expected that ill-informed decisions will be taken. Similarly the information centres may be offering services that members of the organisation may not be aware of. The study is relevant, seeing that FIRC, Minna is a Zonal centre covering six states, and therefore needs the required publicity so that there can be adequate patronage from the constituency which it was created to serve. This research/evaluation is expected to trigger interest from the readers as well as respondents who will be reached on the fields in the course of the research, as to the presence of the organization and its functions, as well as its performance.

In a related development, Oguntubo (1997) quoting Aiyedogbon (1981), who evaluated the resources, services and organisation of the Savannah Forestry Research Station

Library, Samaru, Zaria traced the growth, development and operations of the library in order to identify its strength and weaknesses. She said "many special libraries are custodians of an unimaginably large quantity of information, and members of the organization may not be aware of the existence of such information which could have been used in taking management decisions for research purposes." Despite the fact that the study looks similar to the present one, and so relevant inferences can be drawn from it, the point of difference lies in the fact that the organisation under the present study is not a specialized institution that offers specialized information per se, rather it serves the general public.

Similarly, Oguara (1975) in his paper entitled "Special Libraries in Nigeria: Situation and Outlook in development in 1975" made a survey of special libraries in various stages of development serving a variety of institutions. He mentioned the fact that giant strides have been made through the years in the establishment of special libraries in the country. He noted however a great defect in the present system of special library development in the country due to the complete or near-complete absence of special libraries established by professional and research associations. He then urged that such associations should pool their resources together in order to contribute immensely to the library resources of the nation. He also mentioned that one of the most difficult problems Nigeria special libraries face is inadequacy of trained staff. According to him, special libraries were the first arrival on the Nigerian scene, but they have been the most neglected in the provision of professional trained staff until very recently.

Even though the paper highlighted some of the problems of special libraries and information centres, it is not directly related to this study, as this particular evaluation is just an attempt to give a broad perspective on the resources and services of a particular information centre (FIRC, Minna). His approach was both descriptive and analytical; however the focus was not to describe the functions or resources of any particular library or information centre.

Also, Oguntubo (1997) quoting Utuk (1971), in his dissertation on the problems of special libraries in the North Central State (NCS), surveyed the various problems of about nine special libraries within the state. He asserted that he was convinced that if our existing special libraries with the present facilities for disseminating information were publicized, more extensively, it would not be a difficult task to satisfy the enormous increase in queries that would result. This means that more patronage will be the result, leading to an increased level of awareness, for the benefit of the state and country at large.

It is clear from the above studies that information centres need to be evaluated from time to time in order to know their strengths and weaknesses and make useful suggestions for improvement in areas where necessary.

METHODOLOGY

The design used for this research was survey method. The population strength of fourteen (14), that is the number of FIRC staff. The total population was used for this study using Purposive Sampling Technique since the population was manageable.

Interpretation of Data

Does the Centre have a written acquisition policy for information materials?

The question was responded to by all 14 members of staff of the Centre. The results are tabulated below:

S/N	Does the centre have a written acquisition policy for information materials?	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	0	0%
2	No	14	100%

Table 1: Does the centre have a written acquisition policy for information?

They all subscribed to the fact that the Centre did not have any acquisition policy for information materials. On further questioning by the researcher they said that their information materials were procured and sent to them from the headquarters in Abuja.

What kind of information Materials do you provide?

The question was responded to by the staff of the Centre and is tabulated below:

S/N	What kind of information materials do you provide?	Frequency	Percentage
1	Books	14	100%
2	Journals/Serials	14	100%
3	CD-ROM/Audio Visual Materials	14	100%
4	Online Resources	14	100%

Table 2: What kind of information materials do you provide?

The response showed that all 14 members of Staff responded in the affirmative (yes) that the Centre provided Books, Journals/Serials, CD-ROM and Audio Visual materials as well as Online resources through the Internet.

Do you provide reference services?

The staff response varied on this question. The response is tabulated below:

S/N	Do you provide Reference Services?	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	10	71.4%
2	No	4	28.6%

Table 3: Do you provide reference services?

Ten of them (about 71.4%) responded that the centre provided reference services, while four of them (about 28.6%) denied that the centre provided reference services.

Do you provide Current Awareness Services?

The staff of the centre responded to the question and it is tabulated as follows:

S/N	Do you provide Current Awareness Services?	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	4	28.6%
2	No	10	71.4%

Table 4: Do you provide Current Awareness Services?

Four of them (28.6%) said the centre provided current awareness services while ten of them (71.4%) disagreed, saying that the centre did not provide current awareness services.

Do you provide Selective Dissemination of Information?

The staff of the centre responded to the question and it is tabulated as follows:

S/N	Do you provide Selective Dissemination of Information?	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	0	0%
2	No	14	100%

Table 5: Do you provide Selective Dissemination of Information

All of them said that the Centre did not provide selective dissemination of information either to the staff or clientele of the Centre.

Do you provide Public Awareness Services/Campaigns?

The above question was posed and the results tabulated below.

S/N	Do you provide Public Awareness Services/Campaigns?	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	14	100%
2	No	0	0%

Table 6: Do you provide public awareness campaigns

All the staff of the centre affirmed that the centre provided public awareness campaigns.

Analysis of Interview with Director of the Centre

A total of nine prepared questions were posed to the Director of the Centre in a brief structured interview session. The response to the questions is stated below:

Question: When was the information centre established?

Answer: In 1971, with the establishment of FICs, but the present FIRC was in 2004.

Question: What are the objectives of FIRC?

Answer: For public enlightenment on Government policies and programmes

To serve as a place one could get information about government policies

To monitor federal government programmes and write feedback

To provide public address gadgets to the public

For press coverage of events of both the federal and our residing state governments.

For entertainment

Question: What is the scope of your constituent publics?

Answer: We have no particular publics, we serve the general public

Question: What challenges are being faced presently?

Answer: Inadequate funding for maintenance, purchase of books and equipment, and carrying out services leading to delay. Lack of technical hands to handle the equipment.

Question: How would you rate the performance of FIRC, Minna against the stated objective?

Answer: we let the public judge us. We cannot judge ourselves.

Question: How do you receive feedback from your constituent publics?

Answer: We receive feedback by going out on public enlightenment and to interview a cross-section of the public on various issues. The people ask questions and we give them answers. We document our finding and send to the headquarters.

Question: How in your own estimation do your publics perceive your services to be?

Answer: They are always eager to see us and they are happy to know that the government has come to them.

Question: In what areas do you think you can improve?

Answer: Grassroots oriented information dissemination is one of the core reasons for establishing the center in the six geo-political zones of the country. There is need for enough money to go out into these areas. The vehicles need to be kept in good shape, allowances need to be available for running costs of staff.

Question: How do you channel the feedback to the government for implementation?

Answer: We write feedback reports on all our activities and forward it to the headquarters in Abuja.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the research objectives raised for this study and the research tools used by way of questionnaire responded to by the staff, and the interview with the director of the centre, the findings revealed that the objectives of the centre are clear, however there is a need for a more detailed plan (policy) in order to achieve their objectives. Their clientele is non-specialised, meaning that they serve the general public, and so their scope ought to be diverse, covering the various age brackets, educational status and social inclinations. The information materials provided are available but inadequate and in short and spasmodic supply due to the lack of clear acquisition policy. Their patrons have also agreed that they do not have enough resources to carry out their function as an information outfit responsible for reaching the grassroots with adequate information considering the size of their clientele. The immediate patrons (Minna) cannot even be serviced with information talk less of the entire North-West geo-political zone. The professional skill is lacking, to organize the information materials for easy access to all and sundry. The information services provided are not processed enough for use by the clientele due to the same lack of skilled personnel. There is also short supply of funding which incapacitates the centre to function optimally and the necessary equipment is either lacking, or not sufficient to cover the scope of their work.

CONCLUSION

The centre would require a lot of funding to meet up with its set up objectives. However, there are prospects of raising these funds with increased participation of the private sector in the activities of government in form of partnership, policy making which will require a certain percentage of the people's tax to go into the provision of resources for the Centres and employment of technical expertise

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above conclusion reached in the course of the research, I will recommend that Partnership should be sought from the non-governmental and international donor

agencies, to ensure the provision of financial resources for the Centres for proper stocking of up-to date resources. This could either be in the form of social responsibility or government/private-sector partnership.

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