

Revitalizing and Repositioning Government-Owned Libraries in Nigeria through Digital and Policy-Based Strategies

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Abstract

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Government-owned libraries, which are majorly public and national libraries, have a brighter future in their operations and services, as they continuously play a significant role in the improvement of equitable quality access to information, and preservation of cultural heritage, among other things. Regrettably, in Nigeria, these libraries have not felt well in terms of support and commitment. However, despite a series of efforts, the state of these libraries remains an issue of major concern, hence the need to devise digital and policy-based strategies towards revitalizing and repositioning them. Employing thematic analysis, this paper assessed the current state of government-owned libraries in Nigeria. It went forth to articulate a series of strategies that can be employed in repositioning these libraries, such as policy reformation, provision of additional means of income generation, library automation and deployment of modern technologies for improved services, and library lobbying and advocacy, among other things. Conclusively, this paper believes that these digital and policy-based strategies, among others shall go a long way in revitalizing these government-owned libraries, especially in Nigeria and beyond.

Introduction

In the past, people were eager to learn more, advance their academic careers, address national and economic problems, and gain expertise to handle current circumstances. Given the value of libraries, especially, public and national libraries in society and the creative potential they can offer when used well, this led to the necessity of establishing libraries throughout Africa, not only in Nigeria. On the other hand, the necessity of libraries in Nigeria is the quest for storage, preservation, and provision of access to the accumulated knowledge by individuals and society (Namhila & Niskala, 2013). However, the biggest obstacle that Nigerian libraries, particularly public and national libraries, continue to face from the onset,

is the fight for survival occasioned by poor funding. Onuoha and Chukwueke (2020) wrote that the funding situation of these libraries is the primary cause of their difficulties in service delivery, adding that despite this, public and national libraries continue to be the hub for improving a society's social, economic, and educational conditions. As such, they must be revived and repositioned using practical methods.

Evidentially, government-owned libraries in Nigeria, such as national and public libraries have remained underdeveloped despite continuous calls on the government and private individuals to improve and reposition them for better services. Today, the deplorable nature of these libraries has affected the quality of service they render, leading to poor perception of government-owned libraries by society. It is important to note that revitalizing and repositioning government-owned libraries in Nigeria will involve making such libraries of standard, introducing a modern way of library service delivery, recruiting professionals, and ensuring proper training and re-training of this manpower. Above all, there is the need to ensure more governmental commitment and the right perception of the library. All these play vital roles in offering greater support for government-owned libraries to promote research and scholarship, and overall preservation of national culture and heritage. Agreeably, Ayenigbara and Seidu (as cited in Chipana, 2018) made it clear that government-owned libraries must be up-to-date in terms of procurement of information resources, as well as ensuring the availability and application of modern digital tools in service delivery. Nonetheless, these government-owned libraries, whether at the federal or state government levels, must be suitably supported financially, among other things. These and more issues are what this paper seeks to address in providing digital and policy-based strategies as a means of revitalizing and repositioning government-owned libraries.

Conceptual Clarification

A library is a building in which collections of books, CDs and newspapers are kept for studying, reading, research and recreational purposes. It could also be rightly seen as an institution that is specifically established for the acquisition, processing, organization, preservation, storage, retrieval and

dissemination of information stored in books and other contemporary (non-book) formats. Ezeala and Yusuf (2011) opined that a typical library is one that properly manages the intellectual products that individuals can gain access to, readily. It could be found in a building, serving as a centre for education and self-improvement, and functions as a vital component of the whole educational setting. Additionally, Ranganathan, cited by Iyanda and Salawu (2006), defined libraries, including government-owned libraries, as public institutions or establishments tasked with maintaining a collection of books. They have the responsibility of making the books accessible to those who need them and the task of transforming everyone in the neighbourhood into a regular library user and book reader. Libraries are of various types, namely, public, national, school, special and academic libraries. This typology of libraries is mostly based on the parent institution, user community, materials housed, and services rendered.

Government-owned libraries also known as public and national libraries are public organizations which are governed by either the state or the federal government. Taxpayers' money and public monies are used to establish and sustain them. They are also established through effective legislation, regulations, and a management structure that is sensitive to the requirements of the people to whom services are provided. This management structure is referred to as the Board. Without proper governance, management structures, and practical tactics, government-owned libraries cannot be effective and efficient in terms of service delivery. This is in line with the assumption of Islam and Mezbah-ul-Islam (2010) that the ability of the government-owned libraries to offer the required public services at the grassroots level, there is a high need for commitment and efficiency in the capabilities of both the government authority and the library institution. According to Ogbonna (2014), the government library system in Nigeria functions on three levels: federal, state, and local levels.

At the federal level, is the national library. This library receives funding from the federal government via the Federal Ministry of Education. It serves all user types at the national level and has branches across the various states. Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of Education is in charge of the National Library's governance structure and directly determines how much money is allocated to it. More

senior librarians and the National Library's executives are in charge of material selection and acquisition, service delivery, and all other administrative duties. At the state and local government levels, is the public library. In these libraries, the State Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology is in charge of all urban public libraries at the state level, and the permanent secretary of the ministry serves as the library's overseer and supervisor (Ogbonna, 2014). At the local government level, the Education Board is in charge, with the Education Secretary as the supervisor. Ogbonna (2014) went further to submit that through the federal government's annual budget allotment to the states, the Ministries of Education are in charge of formulating policies, allocating funds, hiring personnel, and paying their wages. Presently, each state in Nigeria has a Library Board that oversees the operations of the main public library at the state headquarters as well as those of the affiliated rural libraries. The Chairman of the Library Board is typically a political office holder and may not be a qualified librarian (Ogbonna, 2014). There is also the public library's director, who also acts as the board's secretary, one or two librarians, and a few political appointments who are not professionals among the board members.

These libraries perform different services, whether personalized or not, to their community of users. The services of the government-owned libraries in the words of Ibrahim (2016) are accessible to everyone, regardless of age, religion, ethnicity or economic background. Consequently, government-owned library services have been a key element in the human development of the nation, since ancient times. These services started during the period when libraries were regarded as storehouses, where books were more preserved than utilized and librarians acted like some form of custodians (Mayega, 2008). In the words of Nwosu (2017), these library services go beyond just assistance to include resources, activities and programmes, which are provided by the library to assist the users in meeting their information needs. Nwosu (2017, p. 237) went further to explain that library services could be provided directly or indirectly. However, such services are provided to the users of the library in person or through communication technologies. To further ensure the effectiveness of these services, attention must be given to these libraries, hence, the essence of reposition and revitalization.

Revitalizing government-owned libraries in recent years has gained popularity over the African continent. This refers to changes in the material and human resources of the library concerning changes in urban planning and landscape. The multifaceted efforts include activities to revitalize the library's structure as well as restoration, reconstruction, modernization, revalorization, and overall repositioning of the services delivered and resources procured by these libraries. To summarize it all, revitalizing government-owned libraries in Nigeria involves actions targeted at being a part of national policy, affecting the whole resources and services of the library, as well as the action combining respect for the past and present state of the library with the need to solving the large funding problem because these libraries remain necessities in our societies due to the unique services they provide. IFLA Report (as cited in Chukwueke, et. al. 2018) maintained that through these services, individuals gain access to knowledge, concepts, and creative works in any format and across all boundaries. They further act as entry points to information, ideas, and culture, providing crucial assistance for both individual and collective decision-making, cultural advancement, research, and lifelong learning. These libraries are crucial in ensuring that people have unrestricted access to vital information and resources, which is a major element of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through revitalization, the library protects moral principles, cultural legacy, and fundamental civil rights while also effectively advancing and preserving intellectual freedom.

Government-Owned Libraries in Nigeria: An Assessment of Challenges and Need for Repositioning

Government-owned libraries in Nigeria are nowhere to be ascribed to standard libraries when compared to their counterpart in other parts of the world. These libraries have continued to face numerous challenges since their establishment. The culmination of these challenges preempted the submission of Namhila and Niskala (2013), that these libraries have never been seen as catalysts for the advancement of the states and nation. It has caused them to be abandoned; significant examples are the dilapidated nature of most public libraries, while the branches of the National Library have continued as tenants. Sad enough, the National Library of Nigeria uncompleted building, after several decades. Today, there is a lot of

controversy around whether or not government-owned libraries exist in Nigeria since they are still invisible and of a lesser standard. On the other hand, is whether Nigerian government-owned libraries are dying or merely deteriorating. There is a great deal of anxiety around the existence and fate of government-owned libraries in Nigeria if such a narrative continues.

Lynch, Young, Jowaisas, Boakye-Achampong and Sam (2020) pointed out that the greatest tension between the potential and struggle of the existence of these libraries is not new because they have always faced a difficult battle, caught between the communities they serve, political leaders, and external stakeholders. They are yet to be considered as an important agent of development in the Nigerian soil. It did not start today. Earlier, the colonial administrations' construction of libraries, which prioritized text-based techniques and were designed to duplicate a European ideal but were neither relevant nor accessible to the general public, was the root cause of the failures of government-owned libraries in Nigeria. This negative effect continued until today (Moahi, 2019). In support of Moahi's (2019) assertion, Lynch et al. (2020) felt that the way these libraries are portrayed pigeonholes them and restricts the comprehension of their contributions to community-driven development. Okojie and Okiy (2019) additionally noted that libraries' potential to serve as a bridge between the Nigerian communities and their development is obscured by the impression that they are unimportant and unrelated to the needs of their communities. Hence, the efficacy and efficiency of these libraries are seriously impacted by the unfavourable impression of these groups of individuals and their actions.

Elbert, Fuegi and Lipeikaite (2012) citing cases of Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe opined that libraries are perceived as mere lenders of books thereby restricting the libraries in terms of technology and deleting them as agents for national and continental development and innovation. Such is also a replica in the Nigerian state. Corroborative, Baada, Ayoung, Bekoe and Azindow (2020) stated unequivocally that politicians often give lip service to libraries without allocating adequate funds or redirecting funds intended for the development of these libraries, and that this lack of understanding of the significance of the library continues to be a major obstacle to obtaining adequate resources for such

libraries. Further narrating the setbacks of the government-owned libraries in Nigeria, Benson, Anyanwu, Co and Nwauwa (2016), Moahi (2019) and Lynch et al. (2020) observed that the poor state of these libraries is made worse by the lack of a clear role for these libraries in the plans for the national growth and development. This has seriously forced many of these libraries to rely on sporadic and temporary funding. However, how these government-owned libraries can be revitalized and repositioned is still a significant question that has to be answered, thus the need for digital and policy-based strategies. The earlier these government-owned libraries, across all states and sectors, are properly placed in terms of policy and digital assets, the quick and possible actualization of effective and efficient library service delivery in Nigeria and beyond.

Revitalization and Repositioning Government-Owned Libraries: The Place of Digital and Policy-Based Strategies

There is a need to consider the revitalization and repositioning of government-owned libraries in Nigeria as an issue of high concern. This is in a bid to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of these libraries. Having the understanding that these libraries are built in the hope that they will assist in the mass education of the Nigerian population, serving as a means of preserving the cultural heritage, and historical knowledge of the people, while serving as an avenue for historical tourist attractions. All these can sustain readership, research, and publishing output. Thereby not only making these libraries an agent of national growth and development but also winning the hearts of people towards patronizing them. Furthermore, the efforts of several organizations in supporting library development in the Nigerian nation should not be undermined, hence, the creation of more to leverage this. Today, it could be that minimum and indirect support is given to the libraries in Nigeria. In such places where the supports are given, a large percentage of this support is diverted for other purposes aside from the development of the libraries. However, the strategy for revitalizing and repositioning government-owned libraries in Nigeria calls for new and more robust ways of managing and administering library services. This stems from a critical look at the parent

institutions and the managerial structure of these libraries, down to administration and service delivery in these libraries. Hence, the following are suggested:

1. ***Redesigning of the library policies:*** The Nigerian government needs to come to the understanding that libraries have a pride of place in educational and societal development. It is quite unfortunate that matters concerning the library in Nigeria oftentimes receive less attention from political leaders today. Most of the political leaders and policymakers are yet to consider the library as a priority and the need to have a national library is still highly politicized. Several times, funds meant for library development are diverted to other places because these political leaders feel that the library is not a place to invest in. While we still copy from our colonial taskmasters, no Nigerian political leader has considered copying the nature of their libraries. To this end, our libraries continue to be jeopardized. The library associations in Nigeria on their path are trying. However, enabling laws should be enacted across the nation to secure a place for the library. The earlier our policymakers begin to consider the library as a vital component, the more government-owned libraries and other libraries in the Nigerian soil will survive. The Nigerian constitution and Acts establishing institutions should make provision for the establishment of libraries as well as their proper management across all states and institutions.
2. ***Provision of adequate manpower/personnel:*** There will be ineffective management of government-owned libraries in the case of inadequate library personnel. A typical library should boast of adequate staff cutting across the professional, para-professional and non-professional staff cadres. This may not be obtainable in most Nigerian government-owned libraries as recruitment of library personnel is done half-hazard. Such cannot happen in professions such as Medicine. Today, especially the public libraries, anyone can occupy the seat of a librarian, resulting in little manpower driving the operations and functions of the library. This situation, if not handled, will continue to affect the quality of services delivered in these libraries. Consequently, it is not a matter of recruiting; these staff should have adequate educational preparation, certification and hands-on experience. Provision for their training and development should also be made.

3. ***Provision of adequate/ proper funding:*** In every matter of discussion where the challenges facing Nigerian libraries are discussed, the answer one gets will always be the issue of inadequate funding. This is not far from the truth as these government-owned libraries have suffered from this malady for a long period. Inadequate funding has been a major challenge ravaging the management of government-owned libraries in Nigeria. It is no longer news that libraries, especially in Nigeria are poorly funded. The case of Nigeria building a National Library for decades will stir the realities on our faces. Contributing to this situation is the duo of a poor economic state of the nation, and the sporadic and insufficient financial assistance from the library's parent institutions. At the moment, the funding of the Nigerian government-owned libraries is not improving rather it is worsening and has affected almost all areas of library functions and services. To overcome this challenge, the need for additional means of generating income by the library should be devised. This could be through the introduction of fee-based services, advocacy and any other means. Except this is done, the Nigerian government-owned libraries will remain on the ancient path and a mirage.
4. ***Provision of adequate library infrastructure:*** The negligence and negative perception of the libraries in Nigeria have oftentimes resulted in the shortage or total absence of library infrastructure. These libraries have always been thrown into a state of fashioning their ways in terms of infrastructure. Not too bad. However, before such should be done, the library should have been granted autonomy in the national and public view, made a faculty in the academic view and a department in the special organization's view. Consequently, when these libraries are poorly funded, it affects the tools available in the library for service delivery. Most of these government-owned libraries are still tenants and cannot boast of sufficient reading carrels, bookshelves, display racks, catalogue cabinets, selection tools, stamps, accession registers, ICT gadgets, classification schemes, subject headings lists, etc. In an attempt to create a pathway for Nigerian libraries, this scenario should not be allowed to continue. The library needs not only to be equipped with infrastructure but also with basic infrastructure.

5. **Disaster preparedness:** Is the issue of natural disaster a challenge to the survival of the government-owned libraries in Nigeria? Yes. Considering the incessant fire outbreaks and other disasters, it is appropriate for the library to devise means of disaster preparedness. Consequently, the issue of security in the library should be enhanced. It has also been revealed that most libraries on Nigerian soil are often faced with certain security challenges ranging from the negative user attitude, which leads to mutilation of resources, and vandalism of library buildings, to theft of library equipment, and facilities by both staff and users of the library. The management of these libraries cannot be maintained if the information materials acquired continue to deplete due to the activities of users or natural disasters and the absence of security gadgets on the side of the library. Looking at the scenario of COVID-19 and how the library in Nigeria responded shows the need for more attention in the area of disaster preparedness. Services of the library need to go beyond the four walls of the library to the library on the space.
6. **Library automation:** The importance of ICT in the management of government-owned libraries in this present century cannot be overemphasized. However, the absence of this technology, inadequacy or non-functionality, is a major challenge to Nigerian government-owned libraries. Reports over time have shown that most libraries in Nigeria have been experiencing low utilization of ICT, mainly due to a lack of ICT facilities and infrastructure, and inadequate and subpar telecommunications infrastructure. Although some government-owned libraries have indeed acquired personal computers and other necessary software packages for their library operations; however, there is irregular or non-maintenance and upgrade of both hardware and software. All these constitute challenges to the efficiency of the library. This needs to be handled. Evidentially, some libraries have improved their services by incorporating digital tools and gadgets, such as laptops, tablets, Wi-fi, e-books, and e-readers, to attract more new patrons and satisfy existing ones. This effort needs to be complemented by other government-owned libraries.

7. ***Library campaign and advocacy:*** This point should have been the first point to talk about going by what it means. The issue of advocacy greatly affects the management of any type of library. The library in Nigeria needs to sensitize its user communities on their roles, services delivered and resources provided. Library campaigns and advocacy will go a long way in changing the negative perception of the people about the library as well as attracting patronage. Advocacy is public support for a particular cause or policy. It is any action or activity that can help decision-makers to support the library. It is an ongoing process that should be a regular part of every library in Nigeria. It has to do with speaking up, drawing attention to important issues and directing decision-makers towards finding a solution. The Nigerian libraries' advocacy could be talked up through special appeals to the community as well as its leaders. It could also take the form of making suggestions, recommendations, demands and even threats. It could further be done by calling radio/television talkback shows, arranging interviews, sending a press release, writing letters to organizations and members of the legislators, journal articles, and books. This must be done.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Analysis of literature on government-owned libraries in Nigeria suggests the negative perceptions of these libraries as an important component of societal and educational development, remaining low and limited, associated with poor visibility of these libraries and low funding, have remained a major challenge. However, there is evidence that such negative perceptions can change over time if the political leaders, library administrators and managers are willing to see the potential of the library as a player in the development of the nation. Combining current perceptions of the Nigerian libraries with what is expected of them, many possible roles exist for the government-owned libraries to play. To position themselves in these roles, it would be strategic for these libraries to provide relevant and essential services with a special and strong focus on remaining visible and relevant on Nigerian soil. While the above assertion is largely optimistic about the ability of Nigerian government-owned libraries to shift perceptions through the provision of relevant resources and services, it is necessary to qualify this

optimism by underscoring the nature of funding these libraries. The challenge remains for libraries to navigate their way through the fractured, ever-shifting sea of international development agenda and players as well as devising means for additional income generation.

In the end, Nigerian government-owned libraries may have the enthusiasm and passion, but without well-connected advocacy and the ability to support their programmes effectively, their potential as development partners may stall and they may not survive in the face of the multiple competitors. This underscores the need for a national policy on what capacity Nigerian libraries should have for information generation and dissemination. It is indeed very true that the government-owned libraries in Nigeria have always experienced the challenge of inadequate attention on the side of the political leaders and policymakers. However, we need not allow this narrative to continue if we must revitalise and reposition these libraries. There is a need for Nigerian leaders to begin to see the library as a potential national building venture. Nigerians need a better understanding of the recent efforts by government-owned libraries in information provision and cultural heritage preservation.

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