

FACILITATING PUBLIC ACCESS TO INFORMATION: THE ROLE OF NIGER STATE LIBRARY BOARD MINNA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of Public libraries in facilitating public access to information. The purposive sampling technique was adopted for the study. Questionnaire and observation checklist were used to collect data from seven (7) Professional librarians and forty-one (41) Para-professional library staff given a total of forty-eight (48) respondents. The sample size for the study was thirty-seven (37). The data collected were analysed using four Likert-scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree as well as mean scores. Textbooks, reference sources and newspapers were the only information resources available in the library. Only four (4) out of twelve (12) mechanisms were adopted by the library in providing and enhancing access to information. Lack of fund, lack of current textbooks and lack of conducive learning environment were the major constraints in the library. All the remedies were accepted by the respondents. Based on the findings, the study concluded that public libraries lack adequate information resources in providing access to information. This study recommended that public libraries should be adequately funded by the State government. Relevant and current information resources should also be provided.

Keywords: *Access; Facilitating; Information; Library Board; Public libraries; Role; Minna, Niger State.*

Introduction

The importance of library to national development cannot be overemphasized. Humans rely heavily on different kinds of information to meet their daily basic needs and thus, access to this information by libraries and information centres is even as significant as the information itself. Libraries especially public libraries play vital roles in meeting all types of information consumable by different categories of users in all ramifications. This is why public libraries are considered as 'people's university' because of its area of coverage in information services provision to members of the public regardless of educational, ethno-cultural and socio-economic status. Thus, it is an 'information for all centre'.

Information is a statement or collection of figures and letters that has meaning to the recipient. Information can also be described as data which is subjected to some processing functions and have the ability of answering users' questions, either summarized, recorded or collected that would assist in making decisions. Information is something told, news or knowledge given. This implies that information is a conveyor of knowledge, a change agent, a reinforcement of ideas and opinion. Hence, information can be seen as that which adds to our awareness or understanding of some events, ideas, issues or problems to which people in the society should have access (Uhegbu, 2013). Bitagi (2014), information can be defined as knowledge that was unknown to the receiver before its receipt. The author further stated that information can be data that is accurate, timely, and relevant. The above definition attributes to the fact that information is absolutely a new opinion or idea that comes to the receiver for the first time. According to Shera cited in Ezekiel and Saleh (2014), defined information as that which is transmitted by the act or process of communication be it a message, signal or stimulus. It assumes a response in the receiving organism and therefore possessed response potentials.

Access to information is an integral part of human development. Oyeronke (2012) averred that Access to information is very crucial. It accelerates the level of individual advancement as well as corporate educational development. Moreover, to Yusuf (2011) access to information bridges the gap between knowledge and ignorance. Libraries are not only charged with responsibilities of providing information but access to information that are current and relevant to the needs or demands of the library's public. Libraries attached to higher institutions of learning has it as a responsibility to provide access to all information required by its public such as students and lecturers. In a similar vein, special library meets the satisfaction of users (its public) such as researchers in the research institutes or the specialists by making quality assured access to their information needs. The public libraries on the other hand ideally covers every individual's information needs. All members of the public including, business men, craftsmen and fisher men are public library's 'public' and therefore charged with the responsibility of not only providing information but also ensure easy access to information.

Historical background of Niger State Public Library

The Niger State public library was established in 1976, when the state was created. As at that time the state library services were a division under the ministry of Education. The division started her first operation in two offices allotted to her at Bosso village, as temporary site where federal university of Technology Minna is currently operating. At the completion of the state Secretariat along Paiko road in 1977, the state public library was relocated to the secretariat in a block containing three offices. In 1984, the library services department was cut out from the

ministry of Education and merged to the ministry of information, Youth, sports and culture. Between 1976-1992, the library services division was moved from one temporary site to another. For example, from Bosso village temporary office to the state secretariat along Paiko road, to a block of school building formerly housing Marafa Primary School along Bosso road and later moved to house of assembly.

The Niger state government partially completed and commissioned an ultra-modern library complex to house the state library board headquarters in December, 1991. The building is situated off the old secretariat road between the state government intermediate civil servant's residential quarters, Minna. In the same year, 1991, an edict establishing library board in Niger state was formally promulgated by his Excellency Lt. Col. Lawan Gwadabe, the then military governor of the state. Board members were also constituted and sworn in by the same governor. The constituted board of the library was however dissolved by the civilian administration headed by Dr. Musa Inuwa in 1992.

The Niger state government inherited a branch library built by defunct Northern regional government at its inception in 1976. The branch library situated at Bida was established in 1963. The state library board has since established three (3) branches in Suleja, Kontagora and Rijau. Some of the branch libraries still operate on temporary sites. The buildings housing the libraries are loaned to the board by the respective local government councils. The state library headquarter is now occupying an ultra-modern library complex befitting the status of the state government which was named after a renowned Islamic Scholar Dr. Abubakar Imam library complex. The library has four main sections. The technical section, the reference, the serial section and the administrative section. It provides public library services to the entire people of Niger State. Currently, the library has Six (6) branches located in Agaie, Bida, Kontagora, Rijau, Suleja and the headquarters which doubles as Minna branch of the board (Adamu, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Public libraries play vital role in providing information of all kinds to all categories of clients regardless of occupational, social, economic, educational, political, ethnic as well as religious background but freely accessible to all. Thus, public libraries are regarded as 'information centres for all' because the large scope of their clients. Nowadays, public libraries are faced with challenges of providing access to information demands of users. In the preliminary observation by the researcher, it is so pathetic to note that information resources in Niger State public library are under-utilized or not regularly patronized when compared to the large categories of users that makes the libraries to be tagged as 'peoples university'. This also limits the public library's strength in carrying out its statutory role of providing and enhancing access to information for all. Identification of factors responsible for this situation fills a gap in knowledge. This study is therefore carried out to examine how public libraries in Niger State facilitates access to educational and political information by the public.

Objectives of the Study

The general objectives of this study is to examine how Niger state public libraries facilitates access to information by the generality of its public. Specifically, the study is to:

1. Determine the types of information resources available in Niger State Library Board Minna;
2. Examine how Niger State Library Board, Minna provide easy access to information by the public;
3. Determine the challenges faced by Niger State Library Board, Minna in providing access to information to the public;
4. Determine the remedies to the challenges faced by Niger State Library Board, Minna in providing access to information to the public.

Research Questions

The study is carried out to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What are the types of information resources available in Niger State Library Board Minna?
2. How does Niger State Library Board, Minna provide access to information to the public?
3. What are the challenges faced by Niger State Library Board, Minna in providing access to information to the public?
4. What are remedies to the challenges faced by Niger State Library Board, Minna in providing access to information to the public?

Literature Review

Many literatures abound on information access by the public library users. Information can be defined as data that has been processed. It could also be seen as raw fact(s) that has been transformed into a meaningful way to its user. Information is an important resource for human consumption, growth and development. It aids in decision making process and reduces risk-bearing. Provision of access to information means deploying all available tools or mechanisms to aid library users in locating the right information at the right time and in the right format. Access to information is very crucial to human development and is the sole responsibility of libraries all over the world regardless of the types of public or institutions they serve. Iwe (2003) as cited by Ezema and Ugwuanyi (2014) confirms that access to adequate and timely information has been described as very critical indicator for the overall national development and specifically very useful in combating poverty, ignorance and diseases in many developing countries. To Obasi (2015), Access to information is a continuing issue in the library and information discipline. It is the basic and fundamental tenet upon which all library policies activities, operations and resources are built upon. The author further asserts that libraries embody a principle of rights of access to information and acquisition of knowledge by all categories of individuals in a society.

Access to information in public libraries is the entire process of making all types of information resources locatable to all categories of users within and outside the library environment. i.e. to ensure that users can lay their hands on the information resources for effective utilization. For public libraries to be relevant they must ensure that adequate access to their resources and services is their driving force. Abbas (2012) views that Effectiveness of a library and worthiness of its services in the present digital age depends largely upon the adequacy and accessibility of its services and resources.

Public Libraries

Public library can be defined as a library established, owned and maintained by government whose responsibility is to serve the general public by ways of providing an enabling environment for easy access to all varieties of information as may be demanded by the public and its immediate community where it is established, regardless of educational, social, economic, racial, cultural, ethnic and religious affiliations but freely accessible to all. IFLA/UNESCO public library manifesto (1994) defines public library thus: The public library is the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users. The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison. In the view of Obasi (2015) Public libraries are service institutions which foster education, culture and information. It is the only type of library that is open to all in the society.

Types and Formats of Information Resources in Public Libraries

Information resources are sources through which information can be gotten so as to satisfy the information needs of the clientele. They are channels through which ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings are stored and preserved. Information resources are all the library materials found in the library to serve the library users for the purpose of satisfying their information needs. Oluwaniyi (2015) classified information resources to include: print, non print and electronic resources.

Print Resources: - These are materials which have gone through the technical process of printing. They are sub divided into reference and non-reference information resources. Examples of reference books being found in libraries are dictionaries, encyclopediae, colorful atlases, almanacs, directories etc. while examples of non-reference books are fiction books, periodicals, newspapers and magazines.

Non-print Resources: - These are resources which depend on the senses of sight and hearing to convey meaning. They are also divided into audio-visual software and hardware. The audio-visual software include films, home video and television slide while the audio-visual hardware are the machineries or gadgets for using the software. These include record players, projectors and video recorders.

Electronic Resources: - These are computer based information resources in the libraries, e.g. microcomputer with a Compact Disk -Read Only Memory (CD-ROM), computer with internet connectivity, etcetera. Library information resources are very essential because they are the librarian's stock in trade; there is no way a library can offer any meaningful services without these library resources.

As its name implies, public libraries constitute a wide range of information resources or sources that are aimed to meet the varieties of demands of public or users. The information content of public libraries is unimaginable as it covers information relating to all fields of human endeavor or all aspects of human life from the beginning of its existence and on a continuous basis. The IFLA/UNESCO guidelines for public libraries (2001) stated thus:

To fulfill its roles satisfactorily the public library must have adequate resources, not just when it is established but also on a continuing basis, to enable it to sustain and develop services that meet the needs of the local community. This means it should provide materials in all formats, updated regularly to meet the changing needs of groups and individuals, including newly-published and replacement materials. It should also provide adequate levels of staff with appropriate training and sufficient funds to support whatever methods of service delivery are needed for it to meet its vital role in the community.

The IFLA/UNESCO document further highlighted the library materials that may be represented in a typical public library to include but not limited to the followings: Fiction and non-fiction for adults, young adults and children, Reference works, Access to databases, Periodicals, Local, regional and national newspapers, Community information, Government information, including information by and about local administrations, Business information, Local history resources, Genealogical resources, Resources in the primary language of the community, Resources in minority languages in the community, Resources in other languages, Music scores, Computer games, Toys, Games and puzzles, Study materials. The following formats may be included in a public library collection although this list is not exhaustive and new formats are continually appearing: Books, both hard and soft covers, Pamphlets and ephemera, Newspapers and periodicals including cuttings files, Digital information through the Internet, Online databases, CD-ROM databases, Software programmes, Microforms, Tapes and compact discs (CDs), Digital versatile discs (DVDs), Videocassettes, Laser discs, Large print materials, Braille materials, Audio books, Electronic books, Posters.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this study are presented in the following format:

Research Design

The study adopted descriptive survey research design for conducting this study. This is to give respondents free will to elicit responses on items on the questionnaire based on their opinions and views.

Population of the Study

The population of the study was made up of 48 professional and para-professional library staff of the Niger State Library Board. This number was drawn from five (5) branches of the library board and the State headquarter in Minna. The branches include: Agaie, Bida, Kontagora, Rijau and Suleja. The data on population of the respondents were collected through internal records of the Niger State library board.

Table 1: Population of the Study

S/N	State Library Board Branches	Professionals	Para-professionals
1.	Minna	5	17
2.	Agaie	1	4
3.	Bida	1	6
4.	Kontagora	-	5
5.	Rijau	-	4
6.	Suleja	-	5
	Total	7	41

Source: Internal Records of the State Library Board, Minna

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size for this study was 37 professional and para-professional library staff. Krejcie and Morgan (1970), sample size population table was used to obtain the desired number of respondents to form the sample size. The study adopted purposive sampling technique to sample the number of professional and para-professional library staff of the library to give equal chance to each of the respondents for the purpose of generalisation. Korb (2012) defined purposive sampling as the judgmental form of sampling where the researcher determines the sample based on satisfaction of his needs.

Instrument for Data Collection

The research instrument used for this study were questionnaire and observation checklist. Observation checklist was used to gather data for research question one while questionnaire was used to gather data for research question two, three and four respectively.

Method of Data Collection

The researchers used observation checklist to identify the types of information resources available in the various branch libraries while copies of questionnaire were distributed to the respondents in their various branch libraries by the researchers. The distribution and retrieval of copies of the questionnaire were completed within two weeks.

Method of Data Analysis.

Data gathered for this study were organised and analysed according to the variables studied with descriptive statistics using statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) IBM version 21.0 software. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages as well as mean scores were used to analyse the variables in the research questions 2 to 4 while observation checklist was used to answer research question one.

Results and Discussion of Findings

From a total of forty-eight (48) questionnaires and two (2) observation checklists distributed, a total of 46 questionnaires representing 95% was returned while the two copies of checklist were completed and returned. Two of the seven professional librarians (4.1% of the respondents) hold Master's Degree in library and information science, while the remaining five professional staff (10.3% of the respondents) hold Bachelor's degree in the same field (LIS). Other category of respondents possesses ordinary and national diplomas respectively representing 80.5% of the

entire respondents. Moreover, the gender difference of the respondents is 40 males (82.6%) and 16 females (33.0%).

Research Question One: What are the types of information resources available in Niger State Library Board Minna?

Table 2: Responses on the Observation Checklists on the Types of Information Resources Available in Niger State Library Board, Minna

S/N	STATEMENTS	AVAILABILITY
1	Textbooks	√
2	Journals	×
3	Reference sources	√
4	Newspapers	√
5	Magazines	×
6	Audio-visual materials	×
7	Electronic Information Resources (e.g. e-journals, e-books, online databases etc.).	×
8	Bibliographies	×
9	Indexes	×
10	Abstracts	×

Key: √ = Available × = Not Available

Table 2 reveals that among all the items on the observation checklist of information resources, only three (3) out of ten (10) namely: textbooks, reference sources (dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc.), and newspapers are available in the library under the study. This means that the library does not order for or subscribe to information resources apart from the three mentioned above. However, it is very imperative for public libraries to make available and accessible all the resources mentioned above. This is due to the public-centred nature of public libraries and the fact that users of public libraries are diverse as they include all aspect of human endeavor.

Research Question Two: How does Niger State Library Board, Minna provide access to information to the public?

Table 3: Access to Information by the Public

S/N	STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	(\bar{X})
1	By displaying new arrivals on shelves at the entrance	24(64.9%)	8(21.6%)	4(12%)	1(0.5%)	3.51
2	By shelving textbooks based on the class marks	23(62.2%)	14(37.8%)	-	-	3.62
3	By announcing on the mass media such as Radio and TV stations	16(43.2%)	14(37.8%)	6(16.2%)	1(2.7%)	3.22
4	By extracting the table of contents from journals and display them for easy access	27(73.0%)	4(11.8%)	5(16.1%)	1(2.7%)	3.57
5	By cutting out educational and political pages of newspapers and bind them to volumes	19(51.4%)	11(29.7%)	7(18.9%)	-	3.32
6	By hosting educational and political conferences and workshops	8(21.8%)	20(54.1%)	9(24.3%)	-	2.97
7	By organizing book exhibitions/ book fares to showcase available literature in politics and education	19(51.4%)	6(16.2%)	12(32.4%)	-	3.19
8	By displaying posters, flyers etc. about workshops/conferences or campaigns that concerns politics and education	11(29.7%)	16(43.2%)	4(12%)	-	3.14
9	By organizing reading competitions for primary and secondary school students	28(75.7%)	7(18.9%)	2(5.4%)	-	3.70
10	By subscribing to political and educational databases or Internet services	19(51.4%)	9(24.3%)	9(24.3%)	-	3.27
11	By rendering Current awareness services and selective dissemination of information to teachers, students and politicians	13(35.1%)	19(51.4%)	5(13.5%)	-	3.22
12	By co-operating with other public libraries to provide access to educational and political information.	6(16.2%)	11(29.7%)	9(24.3%)	-	2.88

Key: Strongly Agree = (SA), Agree = (A), Disagree = (D), Strongly Disagree = (SD), Mean = (\bar{X})

Table 3 reveals the methods or ways of enhancing educational and political information by Niger State library board. The respondents reveals that only four (4) out of twelve (12) were the major ways or mechanisms adopted by the library in providing and enhancing access to information on education and politics to the information seekers. This was shown in the mean scores (\bar{X}) of the responses given which ranges between 3.51 – 3.70 going beyond 3.50 set as minimum standard for acceptance of mean scores.

Research Question Three: What are the challenges faced by Niger State Library Board, Minna in providing access to information to the public?

Table 4: Challenges of Access to Information by the Public

S/N	STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	(\bar{X})
1	Lack of fund	18(48.6%)	4(10.8%)	4(10.8%)	-	3.54
2	Lack of current books and resources	19(51.4%)	4(10.8%)	3(8.1%)	-	3.62
3	Inadequate manpower	8(21.6%)	14(37.8%)	3(8.1%)	1(2.7%)	3.12
4	Library environment not conducive for learning	27(73.0%)	4(10.8%)	5(13.5%)	1(2.7%)	3.57
5	Inadequate reading chairs and tables	12(32.4%)	4(10.8%)	10(70.3%)	-	3.08
6	Library opening hours not enough	18(48.6%)	5(13.5%)	3(8.1%)	-	3.58
7	Indifference of Government on public library development	13(35.1%)	10(27.0%)	3(8.1%)	-	3.38

Key: Strongly Agree = (SA), Agree = (A), Disagree = (D), Strongly Disagree = (SD), Mean = (\bar{X})

Table 4 reveals that lack of fund with the mean score (\bar{X}) of 3.54, lack of current books with mean score (\bar{X}) of 3.62, and insufficient library opening hours (mean score (\bar{X}) = 3.58), unconducive learning environment with mean score (\bar{X}) of 3.57 are the major constraints to provision of access to educational and political information to the public by the library. Thus, it shows that other items shown above are minor problems encountered by the library under the study.

Research question Four: What are remedies to the challenges in Niger State Library Board, Minna in providing access to information to the public?

Table 5: Remedying the Challenges of Access to Information by the Public

S/N	STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	(\bar{X})
1	Library should be adequately funded	28(75.7%)	7(18.9%)	2(5.4%)	-	3.70
2	Adequate and current resources should be acquired by the library	27(73.0%)	4(11.8%)	5(16.1%)	1(2.7%)	3.70
3	Library environment should be made attractive and conducive	18(48.6%)	4(10.8%)	4(10.8%)	-	3.62
4	Additional manpower should be employed	15(40.5%)	11(29.7%)	26(70.3%)	-	3.58
5	Government should show much concern about public libraries like its counterparts in public institutions	21(56.8%)	7(18.9%)	2(5.4%)	7(18.9%)	3.70
6	Enough reading chairs and tables should be provided	15(40.5%)	11(29.7%)	-	-	3.58
7	Library opening hours should be extended	7(18.9%)	15(40.5%)	4(10.8%)	-	3.12

Key: Strongly Agree = (SA), Agree = (A), Disagree = (D), Strongly Disagree = (SD), Mean = (\bar{X})

Table 5 shows that almost all respondents agreed that the items on the list are the actual remedies to the challenges facing Niger State library board in providing access to educational and political information to the public. The mean score (\bar{X}) ranges between 3.58 – 3.70 which is above (3.50) the minimum requirement for the acceptance of the mean score. Therefore, all the remedies suggested by the researchers are valid and accepted.

Conclusion

This study examined facilitating public access to information resources. The terms public access, information and information resources were defined. The concept of types of information resources available, access to information, challenges of access to information and remedy to challenges of access to information were highlighted. Adequate funding, adequate and current information resources, conducive environment, provision of enough reading chairs and tables and among others. Once these are provided in the public libraries under study in Niger State, access to information by the public will be improve.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made to improve access to information in public libraries under study in Niger State.

1. Public libraries in Niger State should be adequately funded and continuously maintained by State Government in order to have an attractive and conducive learning environment.

2. Public libraries in Niger State should be adequately beefed up with relevant and current information resources.
3. Public libraries in Niger State should create awareness on the availability of information resources through mass media and social media, extraction of contents of journals and other periodicals are highly recommended.
4. Public libraries in Niger State should employ all access mechanisms or tools recognized in the field of librarianship in ensuring quick and improved access to information resources by users through adoption of Information Communication Technology (ICT) gadgets which can be very crucial to the services of public libraries.

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