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Public Library Services in Nigeria during and Post Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) Era Roles and Challenges

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Public Library Services in Nigeria during and Post Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) Era: Roles and Challenges

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Abstract

Pandemics have always been challenging times in every society. However, response and recovery periods are crucial times that every member of the society must come together to work as one. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new reality and upended the norm that we have become used to. Recovery periods are associated with general uncertainty with people eager to get quality, relevant and timely information from the government and other relevant agencies. Libraries from time immemorial have played crucial roles during pandemics. The study explored the roles/functions of public libraries and information dissemination by public libraries during the pandemic and the challenges within the Nigerian environment. The study proposed some key roles that public libraries, librarians and information specialists can play during the pandemic include: 1) public awareness on preventive measures and management of the disease where possible 2) supporting frontline researchers, clinicians and faculty with latest research and evidence available, 3) still provide traditional services albeit using alternative ways leveraging on technologies during the lockdown/reduced movement. The study recommends: 1) empowering public libraries with information materials and funds to expand their services so as to assist in dousing fake news, 2) Rebuilding and equipping old and dilapidated libraries and constructing new and modern public libraries at all the levels of government, and 3) Continuous skilling and reskilling of librarians in public libraries for service excellence.

Introduction

The outbreak of the corona virus in 2019, code named COVID-19 in Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020) and the rapid spread across the globe has caused a shutdown of economies and a drastic change to the lives of people. A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease which spreads over a wide area cutting across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives faster than an epidemic (Nagarka, 2020). It was when the corona virus disease (COVID-19) illness became severe and was quickly spreading across the globe that the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a pandemic on the 12th day of March, 2020 (Hickok, 2020). Before spreading around the world within few months and later became a pandemic, COVID-19 had begun in China as an epidemic, (Hickok, 2020). The COVID -19 pandemic upended so many things we once took for granted, with the biggest task been our ability to distinguish fact from fiction (NewScientist, 2020).

The novel nature of the COVID-19 has caused so much of panic with the world just getting improved understanding of the virus. The paucity of information about the spread, prevention, symptoms, treatments led to an “infodemic – an excessive amount of information about a problem, which is sometimes incorrect and can have a negative effect on finding a solution (Macmillan Dictionary, 2020)” of unquantified proportions at the initial phase. The first case of COVID -19 was discovered in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, in Lagos state from an Italian who came to work in Ogun state but operates from Lagos state. From that day, the fear of COVID -19 snowballed into a palpable fear. Towards the end of March with more cases confirmed, millions of Nigerians were scared to leave their homes which led to the

first lockdown announced by president Buhari in Lagos, Ogun and Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This was followed by nationwide lockdown, all roads leading from one state to another and schools nationwide were all put on indefinite lockdown by the President (Ifijeh, 2020). The reason given by the Federal Government of Nigeria is that it is a necessary measure to help curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. At critical moments like the COVID-19 pandemic, when virtually all human activities are at stand still, it is the time to let the society know the importance of libraries and the role of librarians in the organisation and dissemination of information (Nagarka, 2020) a library is an organised collection of books and other electronic information resources kept for reading, relaxation, and consultation. Public libraries amongst others could be generally referred to as a democratically organised information resource centres, hence its nature is to serve every citizen irrespective of their age, academic and religious affiliations.

Public libraries and the response to COVID-19 in Nigeria

With the whole world currently under the strangle hold of the dreaded corona virus disease outbreak, public libraries are burdened with frontline functions as health workers, researchers, and pharmaceutical companies. This is because of the “infodemic” that resulted from the flip flop of governments and agencies as regards information dissemination regarding the virus outbreak. Libraries as major information resource centres are expected to be at the centre of the dissemination of reliable and timely information to citizens which the WHO termed critical (Pan American Health Organization, 2020) leveraging on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Public libraries and other relevant agencies at this time should take up the responsibility of ensuring that the citizens are well informed about the state of the nation using every medium at their disposal.

The Nigeria response to the corona virus at best can be described as a calamity. The country displayed seriously high levels of negligence, unpreparedness and unwillingness to deliver quality healthcare (Lawal, 2020). Life in rural communities across Nigeria is nasty, brash and short because of the paucity of social amenities and vulnerabilities of lives in the grassroots and COVID-19 has aggravated the fault lines between rural-urban dwellers. *“Establishing this claim as a fact before legislators in the National Assembly, Mr. Boss Mustapha, Chairman of Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, lamented that he never knew that Nigeria’s healthcare infrastructure and delivery was in total ruins”* (Lawal, 2020). Capacity to test for the virus very low, with a paltry 350 ventilators and 350 ICU beds available to the entire population of about 200 million people (Dixit, Ogundeji, & Onwujekwe, 2020). Measures and policies so far taken by the government have not been commensurate with the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic. As on the directive from the government, public libraries have remained shut completely without the ability to support government policies on the COVID-19 pandemic. This has totally shut out the information dissemination role public libraries were supposed to play. So much of the policies of the government seems to have stemmed from ignorance of the functions of libraries in general and public libraries in particular. This has stifled any meaningful impact that public libraries in these times would have made.

Ali and Gatti (2020) gave insight into what many libraries in Pakistan had managed to provide virtual support to their users which include providing them with reference services, document delivery, literature searches and systematic reviews, and that some of the libraries have also initiated online webinar sessions to keep in touch with their users using some web platforms like the google classroom, google hangouts, skype or zoom during the recent lockdown. Public libraries strive to make the necessary information and information resources available through the provision of free online homework and help students with their school assignments, access to a wide range of e-books, audio books, news sites magazines and streaming videos to help people get through the covid-19 pandemic, (Ladan, et.al. 2020).

Role of public libraries during a pandemic

Public libraries were established to carry out certain functions to improve dissemination of vital and timely information to the general public which it serves. Functions of public libraries can also be classified as roles of public libraries. Folorunso and Folorunso (2010) highlighted the major roles of public libraries which include:

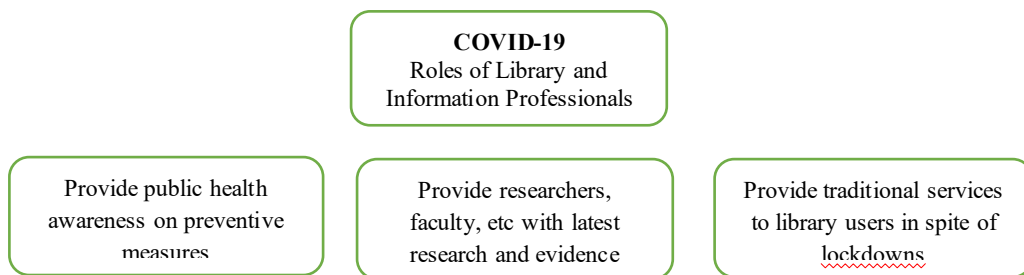
- (a) provision of information for planning;

- (b)providing political and economic information;
- (c)providing educational information and facilities;
- (d)undertaking researches;
- (e)organising enlightenment programmes;
- (f)promoting culture;
- (g)providing recreational services; and
- (h)serves as the engine room for national development.

This highlights how Public libraries have been construed by the society to act in every sphere of society. The roles are further heightened when emergencies occur, like the COVID-19 outbreak. Pandemics are periods of emergencies where people and government need adequate and timely information disseminated. Aabo, (2004) in buttressing how libraries can function during periods of emergencies stated that a key purpose of public libraries was to promote enlightenment, education and other cultural activities through information dissemination and by making books and other suitable information materials available and free of charge.

Pandemics are never a period devoid of tension and so much information flying around albeit with a mix of fake and authentic information. Confusion, panic, and anxiety about the uncertainty surrounding these periods. The public libraries in themselves are not able to do anything but the librarians and information specialists using the platforms to help the society to cope with the circumstances. According to (Ali & Gatiti, 2020) there are three dimensions to the roles that library and information professionals play or can play during pandemics. They include:

1. Promoting public health awareness by creating and disseminating timely information relating to preventive measures. Librarians need to engage the community on all available platforms by sharing evidence-based information about this pandemic. Also, providing other useful information on histories of those recovering from the corona virus, nutrition and lifestyle choices that could aid the prevention and management of the virus when infected.
2. Support research teams, researchers and faculty working on solutions by providing information regarding latest developments, research and literature. As experts at information provision, librarians could support medical staff, academics battling to find solutions and research teams by providing access to relevant studies and well-known databases relating to the COVID-19.
3. Meeting the core needs of regular library users seeking all kind of information. Librarians and information experts from the public libraries still need to continue providing services to its traditional user-base albeit leveraging on other platforms outside the physical space of the library. Provision of virtual support, document delivery, literature search, systematic reviews and webinars on a number of key topics via Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, WebEx, and so on.



Source: Ali & Gatiti (2020. Pg 159) Fig. 1 Roles of library and information professionals in a pandemic

Challenges of Service Provision

Devising effective communication strategies that provide both the general public and exposed population who are most at risk with actionable information due to the nature of the virus. Concerns about the general and individual

safety of Nigerians (library staff and its users), and curbing the spread of the virus has remained a critical consideration. With the indifference shown by a large section of the Nigerian populace, due to high level of distrust in the government (across federal, state and local governments) has made public library services almost impossible to provide. Staff safety (both from the virus and security personnel) and meeting community's needs has shown to be a very tricky pedestal for public library managers. Some of this challenges stem from:

1. Government handling of the pandemic – the COVID-19 pandemic has been poorly handled so far by the government with an abject lack of preparedness at all levels. So much of what has been done has been reactionary, and a general copying of what other countries were doing without recourse to the uniqueness of the Nigerian people. The president, and leaders of the government have not shown ability to communicate with the people, evidenced in a general apathy towards following guidelines except with force. The Secretary General of the Federation in a speech stated that he was not aware of the level of decay in the health sector (Iroanusi, 2020). Governments in Nigeria have a poor knowledge of the services that libraries render, and as such have not thought of adding libraries to the essential services group to help manage information dissemination.
2. Security – insecurity has escalated due to the poor handling of the pandemic by government and its agencies. Palliatives have not reached those it should and many have decided to break protocols due to hunger and the need to survive themselves since the government has not been able to do the needful. This has resulted in unsavoury encounters with security personnel, who have not shown restraint thereby resulting to high level of police brutality recorded in many states of the federation – (BBC, 2020; Social Action, 2020; Okunola, 2020). This also coupled with pockets of unreported cases with criminal elements who steal, maim and kill in many instances and making life more difficult for the Nigerian populace. This has made it impossible for public library managers to render any form of service even online.
3. Indifference of the people – a high section of the populace has lost trust and faith in the government. So many now see almost every action of government as having political or selfish undertones. As a result, there is a high level of disregard for public safety, as people do not follow guidelines (Ayinla, 2020; Shaban, 2020; Okwumbu, 2020) – like; avoiding public gatherings – with marriages, burials, markets, religious gatherings, etc still common place, use of face masks in public places
4. Uncertainty about the future of libraries – the state of public libraries in Nigeria is appalling (putting it mildly). From poor to dilapidating buildings housing the libraries, to shortage of skilled manpower and resources has been the bane of libraries in Nigeria with public libraries worse hit. There is a crass disregard for what libraries stand for (due to ignorance, greed, and corruption on the part of the political class and unwillingness to fight on the part of the professionals). Recently, one of the best public library edifices around the country was vandalized by political thugs due to election outcome in Bayelsa State (Azaiki, 2020) to show the level of disregard shown to the library as an institution. The future of the profession is under scrutiny and bleak at best for public libraries in Nigeria.
5. Funding and budget cuts – A major challenge to almost every facet of governance over the years in Nigeria. Poor political will, inadequacy of the economic policies, and a general poor handling of the resources of the country. Public libraries in Nigeria are almost moribund due to an almost non-existent budgetary provision. Most public libraries in states across the country are in a state of disrepair and dilapidated structures and high disinterest in them by successive governments. Albeit, this has been the fate of the entire educational sector in Nigeria, the rot is only worsening in the public library sector.

Conclusion

With no certainty regarding when the corona virus pandemic end, it is critical that we (governments, libraries, and the people) must work out how to stop the spread of poor information, particularly with the impact of social media. However, with the move towards reopening of economies due to the inability to sustain the lockdown, caution with facility re-opening should be considered, expansion of libraries services to include virtual platforms (social media,

teleconferencing/video conferencing software – Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco WebEx, and so on), provision of phone services during the crisis, and exploring means of continuing library activities beyond physical walls. Efforts should be made to ensure safe buildings with health and safety protocols for staff put in place. For patrons, WHO guidelines like physical (social) distancing, and processes for sanitizing materials. Also, alternate ways of service should be considered by heads of libraries to reduce large gatherings – online booking and schedule pick-up time, appointment-based services, and provision of kiosks outside the library to enable pick up of materials. With the uncertainty regarding when the COVID-19 will pass, access to the right information, at the right time, and in the right format is of grave importance.

Recommendations

- Government bodies and relevant agencies as a matter of emergency empower public libraries with information materials and funds to expand their services so as to assist in dousing fake news and tackle the current “Infodemic” caused by the corona virus pandemic.
- Rebuilding and equipping old and dilapidated libraries and constructing new and modern public libraries at all the levels of government (Federal, State and Local) will go a long way in providing access to the right information, at the right time, and in the right formats for the entire populace.
- Continuous training and retraining of librarians in public libraries on the current trends in information handling and dissemination using an array of new media and platforms.

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