

LIBRARIES, INFORMATION AND NATION BUILDING IN AFRICA

VICTORIA DODDOO (Mrs)

Ag. Deputy Librarian, Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon.

Abstract

With particular reference to the African situation, this paper discusses the important role of libraries in nation building. Issues covered include the role of information on the educational, political and socio-economic development of nations. It also examines the impact of libraries in the development of literacy, and proposes the establishment of more oral documentation centres in Africa.

Introduction

Nation building implies national development. In the view of Rodney (1974), development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships. Society is said to develop economically as its members jointly increase their capacity for dealing with the environment. Other development theorists such as Fraser (1983) describe the process as a planned introduction to change. A developed nation is one that has achieved modernisation in its productive processes and high quality of life for its people.

Many African countries have drawn up national development plans which clearly show a move from the agrarian system towards development in the form of economic, political, industrial and social growth. Attention is paid especially to economic growth and ways and means of achieving or pursuing this goal. Unfortunately, these countries are yet to recognise libraries as powerful instruments of economic, social and political change. For a long time now, libraries in Africa have only served as repositories of information and knowledge. Their roles in the socio-economic, cultural, educational and political development have mostly been relegated.

National development

Libraries and the information that they provide constitute the building blocks of national development. Every planning process that leads to an enhanced development of the nation must be based on reliable and adequate information. This can easily be provided by well-supported library networks. On the contrary, reliable information may be difficult to obtain in a country with a poorly organised information network.

It is common knowledge that because of scanty and inadequate information, a number of development projects in Africa meet unanticipated difficulties and many simply fail to be cost-effective. Those that succeed produce only temporary or marginal benefits; others do not generate the rate of return or the flow of goods and services anticipated in their conception and design.

For example, at the end of the first phase of Ghana's Economic Recovery Programme in 1985, it was discovered that the cost of some of the projects were initially underestimated simply because at the planning stage, there was insufficient data relating to many sectors of the economy (Alemna, 1991). This implies that timely and reliable information is necessary for the development process. Hence the need for

an efficient and effective library system.

In his study of the Second Development Plan of Nigeria, Banjo (1971) observed that one of the reasons for the non-achievement of the lofty ideas contained in the plan was the lack of information about the objectives of the plan. He concluded that the difference between developed and developing countries, in terms of attainment of national development objectives and technological know-how, lies essentially in the level of access to accurate, up-to-date and relevant data to policy-making and policy-executors.

Rural development

Most African countries place a major emphasis on rural development. This is impossible without exposing the rural dwellers to functional education to enable them participate in the formulation of their own problems. It is therefore interesting to note that a number of African countries such as Ghana, Uganda and Kenya are adopting the principle of decentralisation (Aye, 1988).

What is not clear is whether the devolution of power to the districts will encourage the establishment of more rural libraries and information centres. The laws governing decentralisation must ensure that these centres are established. Apart from ensuring that library services and thereby information are truly brought to the grassroots, the establishment of district and community information centres will also ensure that information is provided to those responsible for rural development programmes and the culture of the community is preserved. In this way, literacy will be stimulated in the community.

Literacy

There are a number of reasons that account for the low literacy rates in Africa, the major one being the educational system. Educational practices in Africa today are such that they practically do not develop in

the individual the habit of reading. This creates serious literacy problems for first cycle school leavers who constitute the majority of products of the formal educational system. Indeed, many of these school leavers revert to illiteracy in no time for want of use and back-up, most of which only the book, through reading, can provide. The oral traditional system as well as economic problems such as the ability to purchase books are also some of the factors.

Libraries have a major role to play in literacy development in Africa. Presently, the public library network is the main provider of reading materials for the general reading public in Africa, as the school library system is virtually non-existent in most schools in Africa. The few that are existing cannot be seriously referred to as school libraries.

This is coupled with the fact that the poor book-buying habit of Africans also means that there are few home libraries. Unfortunately, public libraries – the main providers of books and other reading materials in Africa, are also faced with a myriad of problems such as inadequate funding, personnel, materials and transport to get books across to the rural people.

It would seem, therefore, that the best way of promoting literacy in Africa is the establishment of rural or community library/information centres in the rural areas where the majority of the illiterate population reside. The establishment of these libraries with a few hundreds of books including those by African authors will go a long way in improving access to reading materials in Africa, thereby increasing the literacy roles (Alemna, 1995).

It could be argued that branches of public libraries already exist in some rural areas in Africa. This is correct. But what is often forgotten is that most of the Public Library Acts in Africa do not emphasise literacy as a function of the public libraries. They were

established for the purpose of serving an already reading public. Their materials have therefore almost always been geared towards the minority urban elite as against the majority rural illiterates. There is therefore an urgent need for a revision of these Public Library Acts so as to make way for the promotion of literacy and development of indigenous literature in Africa.

Oral Documentation

It is well known that all African cultures encourage an awareness in the individuals of the need to preserve the knowledge of his ancestry and his past generally. Traditionally, libraries in Africa are used to dealing with printed materials in various formats and most services of libraries are based on the printed word. In the area of oral records documentation, very few centres or libraries have ever made any attempts to organise these materials (Alemna, 1992). Some of the few collections available are by individual scholars and researchers, thereby making access to them difficult.

It is suggested that academic libraries in Africa would be in the best position for initiating such programmes. These libraries are staffed with professionals of wide ranging subject backgrounds and also have the necessary environment for locating and documenting oral records. In this way, a lot of history, tradition and culture which is gradually being lost on the continent could be retained for the development of the society

Conclusion

African governments must appreciate the importance of literacy and library services for the welfare, social, political and economic development of the people and

the state. Literacy and library development plans need to be incorporated in national development planning. Libraries must receive adequate funding to establish and maintain the infrastructure of service and acquisition of resources. It is also important that librarians in Africa reject the age-long role of libraries as repositories of knowledge and ideas only, so that they become dynamic and proactive national institutions vigorously involved in Africa's development.

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