

LIBRARIES: KEY TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

ANABA A. ALEMNA

*Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana,
Legon, Accra, Ghana*

Email: *aalemna@yahoo.com*

Abstract

This paper provides the various ways that libraries assist in national development. These include the provision of educational, political, social, economic and health information. The barriers hindering these provisions such as illiteracy, lack of trained personnel, resources, poor distribution of libraries and financial constraints are mentioned. It is the view of the writer that libraries in Ghana can perform their roles effectively in national development if proper legislations and other provisions are put in place.

KEYWORDS: NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, INFORMATION
MANAGEMENT, INFORMATION PROVISION

Introduction

According to the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, (1999), to develop is “to make or become more mature, more advanced, more complete, more organised or more detailed”.

To Nyerere (1974) however, “the truth is that development means the development of people. Roads, buildings, the increase in crop output, or other things of that nature, are not development, they are only tools of development”. This and similar threads of thinking led to the notion of human development: the increasing of people's chances to acquire knowledge and have access to resources that would enable them to lead a healthy, gainful and dignified life (UNESCO, 2000).

Libraries and Development

Going by that definition of development, libraries can play direct as well as catalytic roles in contemporary development initiatives. For example, libraries enhance the value of human intellectual outputs by increasing access to them through professional processing, storage and dissemination (Azubuike, 2003). The world's intellectual outputs would be useless or even constitute a nuisance, if libraries were not there to gather, analyse, classify, catalogue and provide access to them. The hundreds of bibliographic records of published and unpublished materials can be used and reused to satisfy commercial, educational, cultural and recreational needs.

Libraries play a great role in national development through the support they offer to the education sector. It is an irrefutable fact that without libraries there can as well be no universities. All professionals, whether graduate or not, are capable of utilizing their skills through the knowledge they acquire through books and the Internet in libraries. Lawyers safeguard the flow of justice and foster constitutional development; teachers support literacy campaigns; doctors support health issues, the list is endless. All these are products of information dissemination progress through different libraries (Achitabwino, 2007).

The role of the library in “non-traditional” education should also be considered. “Non-traditional” is used here to mean the type of education which would ordinarily not have been provided with normal library services. These include Non-Formal Education, Distance Education, and services to students with Special Needs.

When properly organized, libraries are the best source of literature and information for such groups of users. Extension services could be provided for these users through various non-book media such as radio, television and Braille books.

It is an irrefutable fact that libraries are a pivotal point in democracy promotion and socio-economic development in a country. It is often argued that for democratic processes to make sense, those that govern, must be aware of the needs of those that are governed, whatever or wherever they are. To articulate such awareness, politicians and the electorate must be provided with information relating to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Libraries play a vital role in the health sector. A vibrant health sector needs well-documented and organised health information meant for dissemination to users and potential users in order to consolidate health records, planning and management. Libraries provide people with appropriate information on diseases and prevention measures, health care, side effects of premarital affairs, dangers of early pregnancies and any other health related information.

For a nation like Ghana that has an agricultural dependent economy, the need for the management and provision of agricultural information to communities and individuals is necessary. We require libraries that provide agricultural information which should be accessible to policy makers, researchers, extension workers, students and the communities as a positive step towards improving the declining food security and to harness information on marketable crops, agri-business, agri-economics, diversion of crops, diseases affecting crops, farming methods, irrigation, etc.

The world is now geared towards industrialisation. However, industries can hardly develop without relevant information on prospects and challenges. There is therefore, a need for professionally managed libraries at work places if total quality is to be achieved, because apart from making the information that enables decision-making timely available, libraries also contribute significantly to staff development (Achitabwino, 2007).

As competition in business stiffens and economic instability keeps threatening the nation, investors need information to develop suitable business strategies. In general terms they need libraries that can provide them information on economic data, on import and export figures. The business community needs librarians that would be harnessing information on the cost of living, worker productivity, costs of machinery, changes in international treaties, domestic consumption and production, communication, infrastructure, labour laws, etc.

The role of libraries in promoting the marketing of the tourism sector cannot be underestimated. Libraries as reservoirs of information are the most reliable information reference centers where tourists can seek information on hotels, motels, national parks, mountains and other interesting places.

A well-established library system can also enhance the productivity of individuals and organizations (Azubuike, 2003). Access to the right information is a very critical component in the productivity of workers, and consequently the productivity and good decision-making of the organizations employing them. For the self-employed knowledge workers, use of libraries make them more productive on their jobs, especially as they can obtain job-related training in the area of computer and information literacy skills and good business practices (Bolt, N., 1991; Keyes, A. M., 1995).

One major role of libraries in national development that is often taken for granted is the role of social inclusion. Libraries serve the needs of disadvantaged populations such as the poor, the elderly, the physically challenged, the unemployed and those with learning disabilities. These are the groups least likely to have the means to acquire the necessary information sources (CILIP, 2002). I believe most of us here can recall the good old days of the public library system in Ghana. But for the free access to that system, some members of the community might not have had access to any reading materials outside the class textbooks.

For many communities and organisations, libraries also serve as civic centres, which assist them in meeting their civic duties by offering a meeting space for civic organizations. Libraries also serve the public by providing assistance in finding answers to many basic questions, from how to find jobs to where to find up-to-date health and legal information. The information that the library provides answers some of these important questions which can lead to significant economic benefits and impacts (Alemna, 2006).

For us in Africa, one major role that libraries have played in national development is that they have helped in changing societies from a traditional, oral oriented culture into a print-based one, with a growing book culture. Knowledge in African societies has been in the past, (and to a considerable extent presently) oral-based. In this age, when knowledge has gained a duality as both print and information technology-based, the role of libraries in Africa is now towards accommodating oral, print and electronic resources in order to satisfy the largely illiterate as well as the growing literate population.

Barriers

Unfortunately, at present, the greatest barrier to information provision by libraries to promote democracy and socio-economic issues is the high illiteracy rate. Most information is in print and over half of the population of Ghana cannot read and write. Coupled with illiteracy is the fact that even those who can read and write have little interest in reading.

Other barriers include lack of trained personnel in librarianship, lack of resources, financial constraints, inadequate library services, poor distribution network of libraries, lack of viable publishing industry that can be publishing and providing survey reports, workshop reports, etc. on local democratic and socio-economic issues (Achitabwine, 2007).

I shall not spend more time on these barriers, since they are a common knowledge. I shall however emphasise more on the solutions to these barriers.

Solutions

In order for libraries to fulfill their role in national development in Ghana, it is imperative that we as information professionals do some “homework”.

If our library services are to be placed on a proper footing then legislation is important. Today, there is no general legislation to enforce the provision of library services in Ghana. Such a situation has contributed very much to the haphazard nature of our library service. A comparative study of library legislation in other developing countries, particularly in Africa, should be undertaken in order to produce legislation best suited to local conditions. Among, other things, the Government should legislate for the establishment of a National Library. When one considers the advantages to be obtained from the services of a National Library, then one notices the loss to the country for not having one (Alemna, 1997).

Libraries will not run efficiently without qualified librarians, and one way to obtain them is to establish training courses. The status of the librarian depends on many factors, but high academic and professional qualifications are of paramount importance. Efforts to develop library services can be costly failures without proper personnel. A generous training scheme for producing qualified personnel is a pre-requisite. There is a tendency to push into the background the question of staff training, with disastrous consequences. Some argue that training should not be undertaken until adequate funds for library development have been secured. But it is important to note that there should always be staff to implement any

scheme when money becomes available. Hence the need for another training school to complement the training given at the Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. I believe this is long overdue (Alemna, 2000).

Libraries and librarians should also be involved in literacy campaigns. The value of the professional support librarians can give to others cannot be over-emphasised. Librarians, like teachers, are concerned about the disturbing social effects of illiteracy. It is also important to note that a truly national library service can only be created by improving the standard of literacy. People receiving tuition in reading skills are potential users of the library and must, therefore, be the concern of librarians. There is the need for libraries and librarians to have close contact with literacy groups and other agencies in their efforts to cope with adults learning to read, write or spell.

Public libraries, especially in the rural area, should be used as literacy centres if they are to play an effective part in the campaign. The public library has particular value in relation to educational work, not only because of its widespread accessibility but also because of its general acceptability at all levels of society. But the role of the library and its staff must be clear from the outset. It should be merely supportive, to collect, organize and disseminate information concerning literacy. National literacy campaigns should, in turn, seek the co-operation of libraries. It is therefore important that there should be good libraries to back up the development of the literacy campaigns.

The 21st Century is witnessing major progress in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Sooner than later, Ghanaian library patrons living in an Internet-propelled global village will be demanding more and more ICT-based library services and resources (Tiarniyu, 1997). Libraries in Ghana must therefore get ready to meet patrons' needs or become irrelevant. A proactive approach will afford libraries the opportunity to adequately understudy and exploit the technology at their own planned pace.

Oral communication has been used by authorities carrying out political, health, agricultural, religious and community education in rural areas. But this method is not as effective as the printed word. The ability of the librarian to repackage the printed word into oral forms for the illiterate is therefore essential. This role includes the collection, organization and documentation of oral tradition in order to diversify the services provided by libraries.

On the question of finance, it is necessary to reflect on the question of private support. Many of us underestimate the contribution that we can make as individuals or organizations towards the development of our country. But it is important to realize that many libraries, especially in the Western world, have benefited from the generosity of private individuals and organizations. I believe we may still have a few Bishop Anglionbys and Carnegies in Ghana who can chip in some millions of Ghana cedis if attempts are made to contact them.

Contact with other national and major library organizations would be of value for advice and assistance and in making the aims and needs of Ghana's library services more widely known. Contact, both formal and informal, should be resuscitated with friendly countries. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA), and the Standing Conference on National and University Libraries (SCONUL), among others are very important international organizations.

I am aware that Ghana has a national membership to some of these organizations but the question is whether we are deriving the full benefits of our affiliations. The issue of Twinning between Libraries of advanced countries and those of developing countries should be seriously considered.

Conclusion

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 other hand, reliable information may be difficult to obtain in a country with a poorly organized information network (Dodoo, 2003).

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. If effectively used and supported, libraries can promote democracy and socio-economic developments in the country. No nation prospers without information and no information can be properly managed and disseminated without libraries and librarians.

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