

Information Access: A Prospective Pathway to National Transformation and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Development is critical and essential to the sustenance and growth of any nation and Information is an important key of achieving this sustainable national development. For a state or society to achieve a sustainable national development, the quality of its information should be improved. This paper attempts to explain the concept of information, the concept of sustainable national development and relationship between information and sustainable national development. The paper provides an insight into various challenges confronting information in Nigeria such as illiteracy, digital divide, gender divide, inadequate public knowledge of the FoI Act, poor record keeping practices and infrastructures etc. It finally suggested way on how to solve challenges confronting access to information in Nigeria. This is done through allocation of enough funds to various information institutes, improving on the infrastructural facilities in information centers, discouraging gender disparity by an enlightenment program, ensuring that access to information, open access and information provider reflected in national development plan etc.

Keywords: *Information Access, Transformation, National Development, Gender Inequality, Libraries, Nigeria*

Introduction

Information at all levels and in all its forms constitutes a vital tool for addressing virtually all global problems. It is the stimulus of all the thoughts and actions of living creatures. Information, in its various forms is the prerequisite for the functioning of modern society because success in every area of industry is attributed to the intelligent use of information of the appropriate types. Information is means to an end. It is a key Instrument for bringing about changes in knowledge, values and behaviors and life styles required to achieve sustainability and stability within and among countries. The idea of form and structure is central to the understanding of information from its origins in the Latin word *informare*, meaning to give form, to describe (Sukovic, 2008).

Information is any entity or form that provides the answer to a question of some kind or resolves uncertainty. It is thus related to data and knowledge, as data represents values attributed to parameters, and knowledge signifies understanding of real things or abstract concepts. Access to information is the ability for an individual to seek, receive and impart information effectively. This sometimes includes “scientific, indigenous, and traditional knowledge; freedom of information, building of open knowledge resources, including

open internet and open standards, and open access and availability of data; preservation of digital heritage; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, such as fostering access to local content in accessible language; quality education for all; including lifelong and e-learning; diffusion of new media and information literacy and skills, and social inclusion online, including addressing inequalities based on skills, education, gender, age, race, ethnicity and accessibility by those with disabilities, and the development of connectivity and affordable ICTs, including mobile, the internet and broadband infrastructures”(UNESCO 2015, UNESCO 2018).

Efficient flow, access to, and the use of information have become crucial factors in determining the economic strength of nations. Davis and Davidson (1991) state that nations would prosper or falter depending on their investment in building an information infrastructure and since human knowledge improvement presupposes information flow and sharing, the collective intellectual abilities of a nation, its human capital, will also depend on access to information (Crawford, 1991). Kuunifa (2011) state that access to information and transparency of governance is essential to ensuring accountability and prevents corruption. Micheal Buckland defines six types of barriers that have to be overcome in order for access to information to be achieved. Identification of the source, availability of the source, price of the user, cost to the provider, cognitive access, acceptability.

The Concept of Sustainable National Development was previously basically on the concept “Development”. However, the Bruntland Commission shifted the attention by reshaping and modifying the concept to “Sustainable Development.” The most interesting aspect of sustainable development is the fact that it puts into consideration the present conditions of people as well as not compromising those that come later. Therefore, the concept of sustainable national development remains the modern parameter of measuring development. In the 1987, the United Nations (UN) released Brunt Land Commission report which offered the most widely recognized definition of sustainable development as development that meets the need of the present without hampering the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Wikipedia, 2009).

Sustainable development is efficient management of resources for human survival, taking into consideration both the present and future generations (Adejumo, 2014). In another definition by Munasinghe (2004), sustainable national development is a process of improving the range of opportunities that will enable individual humans and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potential over a sustained period of time while maintaining the resilience of economic, social and environmental systems. Age (2005), identified some objectives which sustainable national development is expected to realize: increase capital income and employment, promoting human welfare satisfying basic needs; protecting the environment. Considering the path of future generation, achieving equity between rich and poor and participation on a broad basis in development and decision making is important.

Since the 1980s, the concept of sustainable development has been widely used. The term gained popularity when it became fashionable for experts to use it as a way of responding to global economic concerns, equity and distribution. In year 2000, 189 member countries of the United Nations adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to address the issue of sustainability in development. In this regard, the United Nations outlined eight goals to be achieved in 2015. The motivations for the goals were to eradicate poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. However, by 2015, many developing countries including Nigeria were far from achieving the MDGs. Coming to terms with the reality that the MDGs were far from being achieved in many developing countries, the United Nations member states at a summit in 2015 adopted a 2030 agenda for achievement of a set of 17 sustainable development goals to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice and tackle climate change. To achieve sustainable development, the world summit on sustainable development suggested that countries must ensure the full participation of their citizens in development programmes and strengthen the capacities of citizens to access and utilize timely information

Objectives of the Study

The study was carried out to examine the role of information in transformation and development of Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are to;

1. highlight the roles of information to development of Nigeria
2. show the relationship between information and sustainable national development
3. determine the strategies that could be adopted to ensure the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria
4. examine the challenges confronting access to information for sustainable development of Nigeria.

Literature Review

Access to Information and Sustainable National Development: The Relationship

Information is a vital tool to development. This is because, for any nation to develop, it needs to have and provide relevant, updated and adequate information on food security, democracy, health, education, gender equality etc. Development is the transformation of community into socially, economically, politically, educationally, orderly, and materially desirable conditions, with the aim of improving the quality of life of the people. It is also referred to as the uniform distribution of resources, the integration of the people into national economy, it is a socio-economic process which seeks to bring about a more equitable distribution of resources and income within the society (Mundi, 2008 as cited in Adekoya & Ajilore, 2012). Development is

also a noticeable growth from one state or stage to another which is higher, desirable, or more advanced than the previous.

Development is championed through information. For any nation to achieve an enviable or creditable level of development, the citizens of such a nation must have access to information. Information and sustainable national development are interwoven, intertwined, and interconnected. While on the one hand, development is geared towards producing or creating something new or more advanced for the society and its members. On the other hand, information is a tool which can enhance the desired sustainable development. Sustainable development has been defined as the development that meets the social, economic and technological needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. To attain sustainable development, the roles of information cannot be ignored.

Some of the most important policy advances linking the information society and sustainable development have occurred in the areas of access to information and participation since 1992. In Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, the government of the world affirmed that the public's right of access to information, participation and justice in decision-making is instrumental in protecting the environment and in integrating environmental values into development choice (Petkova, Elena et.al 2002). These norms of equitable and environmentally sound decision-making are, to a large degree, fundamental pre-requisites for the operation of a sustainable national development. Within the realm of policy discussions regarding the access to information, we may, however, focus primarily on the first two access principles: information and public participation. These processes reflect the two sides of a healthy ongoing dialogue between national governments and their citizens – ensuring flows of information from government to citizen and from citizen to government.

Meaningful participation in democratic processes requires a citizenry that is well-informed. And commitment to open and transparent governance is a non-negotiable if people are to get the information they need to hold their governments to account, build trust, reduce corruption and be active and meaningful participants in their own development. However, worldwide demand for access to information has grown in recent years, driven by at least three interrelated forces: the urgency and scope of environmental problems, the increasingly active character of civil society and the revolution in information technology. The importance of the issue has been recognized for decades though. According to Elena Petkova et al in *Closing the Gap*: “The importance of developing and sharing environmental information through scientific exchange, educational programs and the media, has been recognized at the international level since at least the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. In the decades since, advocates for right to know legislation have argued that the right to know is a critical tool in fighting corruption and waste...worldwide, 44 countries had passed access to information legislation as of 2000” (Petkova, Elena et.al 2002).

Right to know legislation is based upon the logic that better information enables decision-makers to make better decisions; broad access to information promotes better decisions by mobilizing demand for sustainable solutions to problems; and access to information empowers citizens to take a more active role in providing improved environmental performance independently of the state (Petkova, Elena et.al 2002).

This logic introduces the second element of the access principle: the right to participate in decision-making. This element reflects the importance of ensuring that all relevant issues-ranging from defining the scope of a problem to developing solutions for it-are addressed (Petkova, Elena et.al 2002). The role of public participation has shifted over time to include keeping governments accountable for their actions, identifying and understanding the public interest, and developing the substance of policy (Berle et.al 2002). People cannot play their full part in society without access to information. They cannot exercise their rights and claim their entitlements without information, nor can they participate fully in democratic processes. It is in this context that Doctor (1992) opines that improved access to information fuels some of the changes the society is experiencing from information-economy to “information democracy”, which he defined as a socio-political system in which all people are guaranteed the right to benefit from access to information resources. Right to information, and particularly the right of access to information held by public authorities, has attracted a great deal of attention all over the world.

The right of citizens to have access to information acquired by public agencies is founded in the ideal political principle that government should be of the people, by the people, and for the people. Access to information, also referred to as Freedom of Information (FoI), and refers to a citizen's right to access information that is held by the state. It is the ability of citizens of a country to have free access to information enabled by legislation. In many countries, this freedom is supported as a constitutional right. FoI obliges government to disclose as much as is possible about its workings.

According to IFLA reports on Development and Access to information, access to information is defined as the rights and capacity to use, create, and share information in ways that are meaningful to each individual, community, or organization. From the foregoing, therefore, it can be perceived that information is an instrument or tool for achieving national development. It can be deduced that access to information, in all its dimensions, is a fundamental ingredient in the struggle to achieve more inclusive societies. However, we must not overlook the critical role of those who effectively translate that information into accessible knowledge^[1] and purposive use. Traditional media, civil society organizations, and public institutions such as libraries have performed this critical intermediary function by curating information, extending informational resources to communities in need, and offering social spaces for convening, learning, creating, and problem-solving in their communities. Such actors have been tremendously important in shaping the ways individuals interact with and apply information, while also helping communities leverage their knowledge and skills toward positive ends such as educational achievement and stronger civic participation. As such, libraries can act as agents of change to advance the SDGs. An assessment of the situation in Nigeria reveals that libraries at different levels

have critical roles to play in surmounting the challenges of information accessibility.

Materials and Methods

A Community-driven approach was used for building the paper list used in this literature review. However, data for this paper was collected through the literature review whereby all papers with information about information access and national development were collected and used in this study. Collection of papers was done using various online tools with relevant information including LibHub - a Library Gateway to Information resources (<http://libhub.kiox.org>), Google scholar (scholar.google.com). The literature searching was conducted after three major steps; (i) Search formulation where the topic was analyzed to give key concepts (Information Access, Sustainable National Development and Gender Inequality), (ii) Choosing the appropriate information sources, and (iii) Use the identified keywords in step (i) to conduct search in the LibHub, Google scholar. The searches were restricted to recent publications.

Discussion of Findings

Library as an Agent of Sustainable Development

In the world where the amount of digital content is predicted to double every two years, the ability of people to locate and authenticate information is essential. However, the library is an institution that meets these people's information needs. That has been its role historically: providing a place for people to visit, ask questions, and access and use information resources. In doing so, libraries have long played a role as an enabler of individuals in their paths for lifelong learning. Take for instance the public library which is a community-based institution, and has the added role of meeting community-wide needs. By applying their inherent resources, including technology infrastructure, knowledgeable staff, and social space, public libraries are able to offer a range of services that address the economic, health, educational, and civic needs of their communities. In doing so, libraries can support the SDGs by acting as agents of change at the local level.

One of the reasons why illiteracy rate is high in developing countries is because many people relapse into secondary illiteracy for what of adequate and relevant reading materials to sustain and consolidate the reading skills acquired in the classroom. Without any shadow of doubt, the extent to which young people and workers of today will be creative, informed and knowledgeable will be shaped by the boundaries of the contents of the library resources available within their environment or community. A wide variety and plentiful supply of resources are required to encourage independent study so that young people or workers from an early age can learn how to think so that their convictions and views are formed as a result of active mental effort. All these efforts can serve as solid foundation for the successful concept of sustainable development in Nigeria. By the second half of the 19th century, Nigeria has experienced such a proliferation of books of all sorts that the nature of the librarian's work was radically altered, being well-read no longer

a sufficient characteristic for post. The library of today should no longer be a library of the 17th century image.

Today's libraries, especially academic, school, digital, national, special and public libraries to play their active roles as an educational tool to sustainable development it must be well information systems. As far as the concept of sustainable development is concerned, information has always played a very important part in human life. For some people libraries are so abstract that it can not have any impact on their practical life. Consequently, such people believe that libraries are irrelevant to sustainable development. The misconception persists because of people's ignorance of what libraries are all about. They fail to realize that libraries are one of the most (if not the most) useful enterprise ever undertaken by man. This is evidence by human development, which shows that libraries with its information have been the greatest force that has contributed in shaping human civilization.

Moreover, information is a vital tool to development. For any nation to develop, it needs to have and provide relevant, updated and adequate information on food security, democracy, health, education, gender equality etc. Libraries can provide such access to information that would enable people live gainful lives as they specialized at acquiring, organizing, preserving and disseminating materials irrespective of the form in which it is packaged in such a way that when it is needed it can be found and put to use (Karki, 2006).

Quality Education

Education is key to improving the livelihood of individuals, families and communities, and it is a critical vehicle through which citizens can feasibly aspire to improve their livelihoods. Yet education can manifest the inequalities that exist in many nations, hampering the prospects of young people. However, meaningful access to information is closely intertwined with education. Clearly, the possibility to connect to the library can open up exciting new possibilities to access materials and tools for learning. Libraries are very relevant to the development of educational system. Okiy (2006) quoting Akintunde (2004) stated that libraries have always served as tools for educational advancement at all levels of education. Libraries drive the 'An Educated and Informed National Pillar of 2030 Agenda' directly in that they collect, organize and disseminate information that society access and uses to inform themselves on various issues of life. However, attainment of the Vision extends beyond just informing and educating, it cuts across all the pillars by empowering communities through knowledge and the ability to access information for themselves.

Gender Equalities

The goal 4.5 of the UN 2030 Agenda is to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations. Libraries have been playing a key role in promoting gender equalities however, should be more active in cater for the services of people with disabilities.

Partnership for the Goals

In the world where the amount of digital content is predicted to double every two years, the ability of people to locate and authenticate information is essential. Libraries led the world by developing Media and Information Literacy. Libraries make internet access available to the community at no or low cost. In many countries, public and educational libraries are the major or only providers of such access.'

Challenges of Information in Nigeria

The fact is information constitutes the major instrument for sustainable human development and fulcrum around which every other activity revolves. Nation which has recorded tremendous feats in the world heavily relied on the instrumentality of information. Access to information faces great difficulties because of the global digital divide. A digital divide is an economic and social inequality with regard to access to, use of, or impact of information and communication technologies (ICT). The divide within countries may refer to inequalities between individuals, households, businesses, or geographic area, usually at different socioeconomic level or other demographic categories. Meanwhile, in Nigeria there is still a wide gap between those who have ready access to computer and the internet, and those who do not. There is a digital divide between rich and poor, young and old in terms of computer use.

However, in the area of gender divide, women's freedom of information and access to information is far from being equal to men's. It is the access to information gender divide. Social barriers such as illiteracy and lack of digital empowerment have created stark inequalities in navigating the tools used for access to information, often exacerbating lack of awareness of issues that directly relate to women and gender, such as sexual health. There has also been example of more extreme measures, such as local community authorities banning or restricting mobile phone use for girls and unmarried women in their communities (Chupke, 2018). A number of states, including some that have introduced new laws since 2010, notably censor voices from and content related to the LGBTQI Community, posing serious consequences to access to information about sexual orientation and gender identity (Deeplink blog 2018). However, in Nigeria there seems to be a daily decline of information standards due to poor implementation of the access to information law. One of the obvious challenges in the implementation of the access to information law is that government institutions have hardly had to keep record until now. Thus, when Nigerians seek information, apart from the ignorance of the public officers about the Act, those who request information or records confront situations where such information do not even exist.

Poor Record Keeping Practices and Infrastructure

Record keeping in most Nigerian government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) is still manual-based. Sebina (2005) highlights that legal provisions for access to information would be fruitless where good quality records are not created, where access to them is difficult, and where procedures are lacking on records disposal. A visit to some of the MDAs in

Nigeria reveals a picture of how difficult it will be to obtain basic information. Information and records in many public institutions are still paper based and tied up in bundles of stacks of files. Majority of the documents containing the information have been torn and eaten by insects and rodents. Few MDAs have computerized all these documents. Therefore, some of the information that might be requested by the public might not be easily available within seven days, as stipulated by the FoI Act as some public records are not in proper shape and so retrieval of some information may take more days. The time limit within which decisions must be made on requests for access to records and information is an important means of ensuring that public authorities process requests efficiently and that applicants are satisfied and received their information within a reasonable time. In the opinion of Sebina, constitutional guarantees of access to information would be fruitless where good quality records are not created, where access to them is difficult, and where procedures are lacking on records disposal.

Inadequate public knowledge of the FoI Act

The freedom of Information act 2000 provides public access to information held by authorities. It does this in two ways: Public authorities are obliged to publish certain information about their activities and, members of the public are entitled to request information from public authorities which denial may lead to hate speech. Another challenge facing access to information in Nigeria which should be a concern to librarians is how to ensure that ordinary people have a fair knowledge of the FoI law, the procedures and conditions outlined in them, the remedies available in the event of denial of access to information, and most importantly, the potential impact of the law on people's lives. This clearly presents a problem, as unsuspecting persons have fallen prey to profiteers and street vendors who print wrong versions of the FoI Act for sale.

There is a wide belief, unfortunately encouraged by legal practitioners, that ordinary people will not be able to understand the FoI Act like all other laws of the country that are legal text. Most ordinary people do not read legal texts, and since FoI law is essentially legal text, it is unlikely that many ordinary people will read the original text. Even among mainstream advocates of the FoI Act, very few who are not in the legal profession actually read texts of laws or draft laws which will make the provisions of the Act ineffectual if not read and understood by the public. The issue of literacy level of Nigerians is actually accounting for this challenge. Nigeria literacy level is very low. Making the general populace to have an understanding of the law is not an easy task.

Conclusion

As we move from the age of industrialization into the age of information, it would seem appropriate for us to consider the implications of access to information in sustainable development and vice-versa. The paper explained the vital roles access to information play in the development of Nigeria nation. The discussion clearly revealed that in our contemporary knowledge and information driven age, access to information make enormous contributions to national development. More so, the achievement of national development

will be feasible provided all the information agencies including libraries are given the desired attention to contribute their quota in that direction.

Recommendations

The following are some of the suggestions:

1. There is need for allocation of enough funds to various information institutions to enable them to be able to meet up with the demands of sustainable national development
2. There is need for a Committee Managing and Supervising Acts to ensure implementation of Acts design for a particular developmental programme in the society;
3. For the purpose of achieving sustainable national development, the learning environment must be made conducive environment. As such, the dilapidated infrastructural facilities such as libraries in schools and colleges must be improved;
4. Government at all levels federal, state and local must contribute their respective quota to the implementation of policies relating to access to information. This will ensure a speedy achievement of sustainable national development.
5. Gender disparity and boys and girls discrimination on access to information should be discouraged by a particular enlightenment programme using media (such as radio, television, etc.)
6. Libraries and information centers should be encouraged to promote the adoption of access to information as part of the post 2015 agenda (2030 agenda) in particular sustainable development Goals.
7. The relevant ministries should ensure that access to information, open access and information providers (such as libraries, and information centers) are reflected in the National development plans.
8. The Nigerian School Library Association should collaborate with other Library and Information associations/bodies such as COAR, FAO, and IFLA- to raise awareness of open access and access to information in the context of sustainable development goals (SDGs).
9. Every government or public institution must ensure the provision of appropriate training for its officials on public's right to access to information or records held by government or public institution- the Act mandate.

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