

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Accessing SDG Information in Nigeria: the Place of Collaboration

Abstract: With the adoption of the new 17 SMART Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), access to government information becomes essential for these goals to be realised. This view was corroborated by IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) at its 2015 Cape Town Declaration. In Nigeria, the drastic reduction in the revenue accruable to the government following the sharp decline in the price of crude oil and the subsequent impact on the nation's economy have made it imperative for citizens of the country to insist on transparency and accountability regarding the activities of the government. Otherwise, the SDGs could end up like the much-talked-about MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) whose records were unimpressive despite the oil boom of that era. Public libraries could serve as useful channels for providing government information to citizens. However, their managers lack the necessary technical skills. This article considers how public libraries in Nigeria could provide access to government information for its users. This study is based on existing literature, international binding documents and observations, as well as drawing on the wealth of experience of the researchers themselves and their interactions with public librarians. It is recommended that the scope of the curricula of library schools in Nigeria be broadened to include the mandatory teaching of management of government information to budding librarians. Also, there should be collaboration between public librarians and law librarians. Such collaboration would help provide more access to government information for the citizens of Nigeria. Law librarians could also benefit from the collaboration and devise better skills to help improve their services to users.

Keywords: MDGs; SDGs; access to information; government information; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Access to information in the knowledge economy is essential. It is a basic necessity for the proper functioning of the modern day society because success in every area of human endeavour is premised on its intelligent use (Omotayo, 2015). Access to information has been described to mean different things at different times in the evolution of the human race. In the modern era, it has been categorized as a basic right which citizens must have if human development is to be achieved in any given society (Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria, 2016, Riekkinen and Suksi, 2015). Among decision makers, access to information is essential as it assists in helping policy-makers in crafting well-informed decisions so that the pros and cons are well considered before such decisions are finally made. In the absence of

qualitative information, the quality of decisions to be made may be adversely affected.

While access to information is essential for decision makers, it is perhaps more important to the citizens who need the information to be at their disposal, so that they are able to constructively engage their leaders on governance issues. This is of great importance for developing economies that are currently grappling with development challenges, partly due to the fact that governmental activities are transacted without the citizens being included (Riekkinen and Suksi, 2015). As opined by Wand (2016), there is a positive correlation between access to information and national development. It is therefore not a surprise that the campaign towards access to government information is gaining wide international attention as this is likely to improve the ability of nations to make considerable progress towards the actualization of the 17

SMART goals (Bradley, 2016). Both the economically viable nations and the developing economies are obliged to ensure that citizens are empowered to access information on the day-to-day running of governmental institutions and state affairs, since the leaders in their elective capacities only hold their respective offices in trust for their electorates.

In reality, especially in developing nations, there are deliberate efforts by governmental institutions to limit the knowledge of citizens with regard to activities of the government, especially concerning critical areas such as expenditure, daily routines and other activities that might expose the government if access was granted to citizens.

BACKGROUND TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

As the deadline for the actualization of the 15-year-termed Millennium Development Goals drew closer, there were various deliberations at local, national, international and regional levels to appraise the progress recorded thus far on the goals, and to draw out new goals for another 15 years (Malaolu and Ogbuabor, 2017). These deliberations eventually resulted in a new set of 17 development agenda items now referred to as Sustainable Development Goals or global goals, later adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 25th September 2015.

As listed by Wand (2016, p.111) the SDGs seek to put an end to poverty by aiming to: *End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture; Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages; Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities; Promote gender equality and empower all women and girls; Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all; Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization; Reduce inequality within and among countries; Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; Take urgent action to combat climate change; Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss; Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels and; To strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.*

It is a document with a roadmap for nations of the world and stakeholders to make progressive plans

towards the attainment of sustainable prosperity, social inclusion and equality while at the same time, preserving the planet without leaving any one behind. SDGs represent a powerful, shared aspiration for a better future and a critical agenda for coordinated investment and concerted effort. (DESA, 2019, Nakamura, 2019). While the deliverables are to be actualized by the year 2030, there are usually mid-term assessments by different stakeholders with the intention of appraising the level of success of the goals. Alamu (2017) averred that the summary of SDGs targets are to:

1. Establish a Universal plan and agenda to address some of the mounting problems confronting the world at large, including poverty, climate change and conflict.
2. Provide the expertise to drive progress and help support countries on the path to sustainable development.
3. Consolidate on the achievements already made with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

INSTRUMENTS ON THE ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

From the world's oldest legal framework of the 1766 Freedom of the Press Act of the Kingdom of Sweden which provided for public access to government documents to the University Declaration of Human Rights of 1946, the need to ensure access to government information has been canvassed by several authors and commentators, particularly in developing nations where governmental activities are still shrouded in secrecy. Government information can be likened to oxygen; nations wanting to survive have no other choice than to ensure that its citizens can access information as needed. In reality there are obstacles to accessing governmental information, by politicians aware that such information could be used to hold the government to account.

Worried about the adverse impact of hoarding government information, there have been concerted efforts worldwide to advocate access to government information to improve transparency and accountability in governance. There is also an understanding that any nation that will make significant progress towards achieving the 17 SMART goals will be ones that have empowered their citizens to engage the government in its activities through unfettered access to information on the working of the government. In this regard Nigeria cannot afford to lag behind. In view of this, there have been a number of binding instruments relating to citizens' access to information emanating from different fora. However, only two of these instruments will be our focus due to their recent nature and importance to SDGs.

THE CAPE TOWN DECLARATION

Making access to information for citizens more widespread re-emerged in Cape Town in 2015 when many

countries converged to discuss the role of the government in granting information access to citizens (Bamgbose and Imaobong, 2015). On the 14th August 2015, Ministers and country representatives from a number of nations including Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Lesotho, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, South Sudan and Swaziland met to discuss the status of libraries and the implementation of an 'access to information' agenda. The participating nations committed themselves to 'Promote library policies on access to information as part of a universal human rights approach as well as rights of people to knowledge' (Cape Town Declaration, 2015).

The forum also provided participants with the opportunity to make further pledges towards improvements in ICT as well as the local management of libraries amongst member nations. The Cape Town Declaration recognised the need for signatory countries to develop at their own pace without necessarily interfering in the local governance structure of their respective nations. The issues raised in the Declaration are so germane and quintessential that if the issues raised therein can be localized and implemented, it will without doubt greatly improve access to government information for citizens across the member nations. In Nigeria in particular, if well implemented along the linguistic divides providing better access to information for its 180 million people spread across the six geo-political zones of the country, this can be achieved.

LYON DECLARATION

The Lyon Declaration on Access to Information of Library Associations and Institutions was released on 18th August 2014 at IFLA's 80th General Conference and Assembly which was held in Lyon, France. The document is a bold attempt by different organisations and institutions, around the world, to pledge their dedication to ensuring access to information by citizens. The number of signatories has increased since ratification, and is now standing at 604 signatories, representing various organisations, which acknowledged the importance of information in helping people to:

1. exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
2. be economically active, productive and innovative.
3. learn and apply new skills.
4. enrich cultural identity and expression.
5. take part in decision-making and participate in an active and engaged civil society.
6. create community-based solutions to development challenges.
7. ensure accountability, transparency, good governance, participation and empowerment.
8. measure progress on public and private commitments on sustainable development.

(IFLA, 2015, cited by Bamgbose and Imaobong,

2015). The Lyon declaration respects the rights of the citizens to be informed about the activities of the government through the running of the government in a transparent and accountable manner.

The document declared that:

'increased access to information and knowledge, underpinned by universal literacy, is an essential pillar of sustainable development.

Greater availability of quality information and data and the involvement of communities in its creation will provide a fuller, more transparent allocation of resources'.

Signatories to the Declaration unanimously called on Member States of the United Nations to publicly and formally recognise the place of access to information, and the skills to use it effectively in achieving sustainable development. They also urged Member States to recognise the role that access to information would play in the post-2015 development agenda.

THE DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT INFORMATION IN THE SDG AGE IN NIGERIA

Serious-minded nations are nations with a clear path for development. They are nations with the strong determination and clear path to succeed, and not nations who will sit and place heavy reliance on foreign aid while failing in their respective duties to formulate and implement programmes that will help develop their countries. Regrettably, Nigeria being Africa's largest economy does not have much to show for the wealth the nation has acquired in the past 16 years, owing to mismanagement and secrecy that have accompanied the workings of the government. The Millennium Development Goals were ratified in the oil boom era but, despite the windfall, not much was recorded as to the progress made with the goals. Onyejekwe and Bamgbose (2016) noted that corruption thrives in an environment of secrecy.

By early 2016 the price of crude oil in the world market had crashed such that many states of Nigeria could not afford to pay their staff salaries let alone embark on developmental or capital projects. Given the shocking revelations by the current administration concerning embezzlement by previous government officials to the tune of billions of dollars, Nigerians cannot afford to wait until 2030 before they begin to chronicle the reasons for the failure of government. Therefore, proactive disclosure of the activities of the government is needed more than ever.

For the purpose of this study, access to government information is regarded as a catalyst to achieving great success in the 17 SDGs. Therefore, access to government information includes the citizens' power to achieve the

SDGs using information at their disposal to engage the government in specific performances on the SDGs. Access to government will reveal to citizens how the resources set aside for development projects are spent as well as the manner in which the country is being governed. Where citizens feel disenchanting with the activities of the government, they could call the government to order through the deployment of any lawful option.

As acknowledged by government representatives from various nations in Cape Town, including Nigeria's access to information can now be viewed as a rights-based issue. If this is considered alongside the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2011, it is evident that Nigerians now have a legal platform to demand the release of information by the government where it is unreasonably withheld. The legal frameworks, particularly the Freedom of Information Act, provide that every individual is entitled to demand public information on any matter assuming that the information is not within the excluded list, eg. information on security, professional-client relationships and other information which the law may construe as restricted.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

There are over 320,000 public libraries worldwide. There are more than a million national, university, research, school and public libraries (SDGs partnership platform, 2015). As shown in the statistics of the Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria, there are now 316 public libraries with 598 qualified librarians across the 36 States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria, 2016); hence the potential of the libraries to provide services to all Nigerians through its branches across the six geo-political zones of the country. However, as important as public libraries are in meeting the information needs of the citizenry, these libraries across Nigeria lack basic facilities to provide quality services to their users, such as ICT resources.

Public libraries are the initiatives of the government which aim to ensure access to information by all people. Beyond the provision of information access to users, Glass et al (2000) reported that public libraries could assist in achieving economic development and prosperity through the choice of information that could assist existing and prospective businesses. The services rendered are free of charge to different categories of users, including the indigent ones who ordinarily could have been excluded if the information services were to be left in the hands of private individuals. The services rendered are indispensable (Reitz, 2004) and could help to achieve social development and re-engineering (Badawi, 2004). Through public libraries, certain skills and capabilities could also be acquired (Onyenachi, 2012).

Public libraries also provide access to the development of education through encouragement of reading,

expansion of the learning process, development of learning skills and through the provision of support of development tasks (Johnson and Lanre, 2002). Meanwhile, in the SDG era, public libraries could assist in many ways. Saliu (1999) averred that 'public libraries can develop local economic capabilities by making available necessary information on income'. This could help a great deal in Nigeria and other developing nations witnessing an economic downturn. Nigeria, being a monolithic economy has experienced irregular income. This may be even worse in the coming months, as the revenue accruable to the government has declined due to the general reduction in the price of crude oil on the world market and the increasing unrest in Nigeria's oil rich Niger Delta. Public libraries are well placed to promote ideas that would engender the economic prosperity of their users.

However, despite the importance of public libraries to the advancement of the society, Nigerian public libraries are facing many challenges ranging from insufficient funding, lack of good roads, limited library materials, irrelevant or outdated materials and other factors (Ebiwolate, 2010 and Opara, 2008).

LAW LIBRARIANS

Many have attempted to define who law librarians are. The American Association of Law Libraries seems to be apt in its definition of a law librarian '*as a legal information professional, who works in various legal settings, including law schools, private law firms, and government libraries*'.

In Nigeria, law librarians are professionals who manage law libraries. The law libraries which they manage can be categorized into three different groups for the sake of easy identification:

- Specialist libraries: law libraries at commercial law firms, courts and government departments.
- Academic libraries: in faculties of law in universities, the law library of the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies and the Nigerian Law School.
- Legal practitioner libraries: the law libraries of law firms (Ifebuzor, 1994).

In some jurisdictions, including Nigeria, academic law librarians are required to have a degree in law in addition to their qualifications in librarianship. Some law librarians are as a result of this requirement, qualified attorneys. Over time the daily routines of these law librarians, coupled with their interactions with users who sometimes require governmental information, helps to develop special skills and competencies required for the management of government information.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Despite the need for increased access to government information in the modern era and the training of librarians who will be able to work in this area of discipline, it

is still possible for an aspiring librarian to go through library schools in Nigeria without being taught about the management of government information. This is because it is not a compulsory course in most universities. A typical example is the University of Ibadan where its curriculum for the Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) programme describes the course 'Government Information Sources and Systems' as an elective one (University of Ibadan, 2006).

Equally, this study reveals that most public libraries in Nigeria are constrained by several factors that affect their proper functioning. These constraints include lack of access to proper funding, unfriendly working environments, inadequate staffing, deterioration of library-based resources, lack of ICT-enabled facilities, political influence on the leadership of public libraries and policy changes. These challenges often make it difficult for these libraries to perform the roles expected of them in a knowledge economy. The situation tends to be a bit better for law libraries, especially law libraries in academic institutions. This therefore may suggest that law libraries might be in a position to assist public libraries in discharging their responsibilities.

Furthermore, it is the contention of the authors that there is a correlation between the skills, capacities and competencies of librarians in public libraries and those in law libraries. While law librarians have specific training in the storage, processing, retrieval and dissemination of government information to their users, public librarians have comparable strengths in providing, managing and the dissemination of information to a wider range of clientele across different stratas of society.

This study equally submits that even though there is much that could have been achieved through partnerships between public libraries and law libraries, nevertheless there are no significant partnership activities between public and law librarians in Nigeria. As members of the Nigerian Librarian Association (NLA), both professional groups are expected to coalesce under the umbrella of the NLA. However, in reality, it does not happen. In fact the Nigerian Library Association and Council of Legal Education often organise their annual meetings at conflicting times. This limits the cooperation and partnerships that should exist between both professional bodies.

It is also observed that a number of public libraries are not engaged in the provision of government information to their users. This may be due to the peculiar nature of the management of the information and lack of capacity on the part of public librarians to provide such information. In certain instances, apart from not having the expertise to provide the needed services to the users, the public libraries do not always have the resources to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the challenges raised above, the following recommendations are proffered in the belief that, when

applied, they could assist in enhancing synergy between public librarians and law librarians in ensuring access to SDG information by Nigerian citizens.

REVIEW OF SCHOOL CURRICULA

In response to the dynamic trend in the management of information, it is instructive that institutions responsible for the task of training librarians and other information professionals constantly review their syllabus to reflect the changes in the way that information management systems are taught to their students. It is recommended that the curricula of library schools themselves in Nigeria should be reviewed. Teaching about the management of government information and e-government for aspiring librarians should be made compulsory. Fortunately, the Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), which is the statutory body recognised by law as the sole regulatory body for the practice of librarianship in Nigeria, is in the process of reviewing the library and information studies curriculum which will then regulate the teaching of the library and information courses across library schools in Nigeria. This component should be included in the ongoing review. It is further suggested that the LRCN should work in conjunction with the National University Commission (NUC) to ensure that curricula are harmonised and strictly adhered to by institutions offering the study of librarianship in Nigeria.

FORGING OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to the review of the curricula of library schools to reflect the reality of today's world, it is becoming increasingly imperative that there are potential partnerships amongst relevant stakeholders which could help, by working jointly to ensure that information is provided directly to users. Such partnerships can strengthen the efforts of librarians, resulting in access to more information. These partnerships can be within, and outside, the field of librarianship.

It is recommended that librarians in charge of public libraries and law libraries should engage in the form of partnerships that will enhance their job performance and improve service delivery in the management of government information. One of the key suggestions in this area is for the observance of a sabbatical year in public libraries by law librarians instead of them going to another law library. This approach will be beneficial to both law libraries and public libraries.

The partnership will position law librarians to help their colleagues in public libraries to deliver the services which they render in their law libraries to the users of public libraries. In this symbiotic relationship, law librarians will also be able to learn more on the diverse ways in which public librarians can help meet the information needs of their clientele.

Lecturers offering courses related to the provision of government information at Library and Information Studies (LIS) institutions could also offer to spend their annual leave and sabbatical year at public schools. This is in view of the general constraints of funds to engage in retraining of staff. The collaboration would no doubt help improve the knowledge base of the staff of the public libraries while the opportunity to work in the public library could provide up-to-date field experience for the lecturers.

More so, having multi-disciplinary research between law librarians and public librarians, particularly in the area of the provision of government information would help broaden the horizon of the public librarians on how to provide the service to their users.

The Association of Government Libraries (AGOL) of the Nigerian Library Association should be strengthened. This unit could then also cater for the development of information professionals who would work at ministries, departments and agencies, in attending to information requests as provided for under Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Fast-tracking the full implementation of the outcomes of the library summits held from the year 2011, as well as the Lyon and Cape Town Declarations, will position public libraries in a manner in which they can successfully discharge their duties in highly professionalized manner.

Irrespective of the partnerships and collaborations established between public librarians and law librarians, as long as the libraries lack basic working tools such as ICT facilities, there is a limit to the extent to which libraries can function. It is simply preposterous to think that a public library will hold only print resources in the modern age. Inevitably, ICT will enhance better and more efficient partnerships.

Finally, collaboration between public librarians and other professional groups such as the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ) and the Civil Society Organization and the Faith

Based Organizations will help public libraries to be able to function more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The provision of government information being a legal right is key towards actualizing the recently launched SDGs. Hence the increased legal obligation for librarians, information professionals and other concerned stakeholders in the sector of information management to live up to the expectations. Public libraries which are the gateways to disseminating government information remain critical in this engagement. While strategizing to achieve greater results, public librarians need to step up their activities to be able to discharge their responsibilities. They need to contact and connect with law librarians and other stakeholders to achieve mutually beneficial relationships, particularly for law librarians who can in turn learn how to improve their services to their users on SDG and other development-related issues.

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