

Short Communication

Opportunities and Challenges for Nigerian Libraries in National Environmental Protection Initiatives

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Abstract

Nigeria's environment is today being degraded with refuse and other pollutants at an alarming rate. Efforts by successive governments to combat this menace have proved abortive. This paper thus discusses the role that Nigerian libraries can play in environmental protection efforts, just as it is being done by libraries in other countries of the world. The paper concludes that for environmental problems to be successfully managed in Nigeria, the support of libraries is very crucial.

Keywords

Libraries, environmental protection, information dissemination, Nigeria

Introduction

“Environmental management is a complex system of concepts, values, processes, rules, and formal and informal organizations and behaviours that translate public preferences and goals into actions in order to influence environmental quality.” (Lovei and Weiss, 1998). As environmental protection is attracting increasing political attention and public support, many

developing countries are designing and putting into practice environmental policies and institutions.

The performance of environmental management is influenced by the importance attached to environmental protection in political decision making, and the commitment of the government to address environmental problems. These are influenced, in turn, by (i) the public's concern about environmental problems and its access to meaningful information on environmental issues; and (ii) the existence of mechanisms for public pressure on environmental decisions. (Lovei and Weiss, 1998)

Causes and Management of Environmental Problems

Some environmental problems are natural, while others are man-made. The man-made environmental problems are more common and varied. Ayoade (1997) stated that any process natural or man-made that modifies the physical characteristics of the earth's surface and the chemistry of its atmosphere has the potential to influence the pattern of global atmospheric circulation and the resultant pattern of global weather and climate. However, some authors are of the view that not all changes in the physical environment are environmental problems.

Sloep and Van Dam-Mieras (1995) opined that natural disasters and other changes not caused by humans should not be regarded as environmental problems, because including them would cloud the issue of human responsibilities and liabilities. They thus defined environmental problems as any change of state in the physical environment, which is brought

about by human interference with the physical environment, and has effects which society deems unacceptable in the light of its shared norms. This thus excludes natural disasters like flood, fire, volcanic eruption, etc. In consonance with the above, Uchegbu (1998) listed pollution (air, water and noise), global warming, ozone layer depletion, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, desertification, and atmospheric contamination as environmental problems. These man-made environmental problems are more common and varied than the natural disasters, and often also heighten the negative human impact of the natural disasters. Most of the environmental problems are directly related to the population of a particular region or city and the level of development associated with the region or city.

The various activities of man on the environment over the years are the root causes of the environmental problems. Ayoade (1997) stated that the climate exerts influence on man and his socio-economic activities in many and diverse ways. Man, in turn, influences climate through his various activities. Thus, environmental problems such as deforestation, desertification, noise pollution, air pollution, water pollution and solid waste generation tend to increase as the human population increases. In this respect, Dr. Jidbhong Jayavas, Deputy Governor of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, in a keynote speech in a UNESCO organized workshop on promoting awareness on environmental problems, emphasized that environmental problems are interrelated and that the roots of the problems are human in nature (Jayavas, 1991). Accordingly, in order to understand environmental problems, one needs to begin with the human factor.

Current Environmental Situation in Nigeria

The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Rio declaration (Earth Summit) of June 1992 both emphasize that, in order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it. However, the Nigerian environment today is in a sorry state of decay, neglect, degradation and overwhelming pollution environmental waste, neglected or destroyed landscapes, which make the society prone to increased probability of epidemics.

Furthermore, markets and motor parks established at unauthorised places lead to noise pollution and blockage of major roads which compounds traffic and crime control problems. The situation is partly confirmed by the National Planning Commission, Nigeria (2004), which reported that “development has proceeded with no regard for waste management or pollution control. Cities have inadequate systems for safe disposal and treatment of waste.” The National Planning Commission, Nigeria (2004) also reported that the problem of waste production and disposal worsens, as rural emigration to urban areas grows.

In Nigeria, many environmental sanitation committees and programmes have been set up across the country to tackle some of these environmental pollution problems. However, the tendency has been to pitch the authorities against the people, where the authorities rely completely on their coercive powers to enforce compliance by citizens. Most environmental sanitation committees are set up without broad-based representation from the citizenry aimed at making its programmes people-directed. Hence, citizens are not afforded the opportunity to internalise the programmes as something they own and which they should voluntarily and wholeheartedly support and participate in to ensure success and sustainability. The government tries to clean the environment without cleaning the minds of the inhabitants; hence, environmental sanitation programmes have always failed. A people-oriented environmental sanitation programme assisted by modern technologies for refuse collection, treatment and disposal will help to reclaim the country from filth and dirt and improve its environmental conditions sufficiently to turn the country into a destination for international tourists.

Public awareness is one of the key means for preventing and solving environmental problems. Lovei and Weiss (1998) emphasise this when they state that the key to sound environmental management is the degree of importance that the public and its representatives assign to environmental matters. The basic purpose of observing the World Environmental Day on 5th June every year is to bring to the forefront the environmental problems and issues to the enhancement of public awareness and concern for human environment. But, such an aim

cannot be accomplished, unless it is pursued honestly and continuously. All stakeholders should be adequately enlightened and sensitised, including citizens, governments at the federal, state and local levels, traditional rulers, town union leaders, village heads, societies, non-governmental organisations; landowners, teachers, students; professionals, etc. Therefore, mechanisms for interaction and consensus building among all stakeholders are imperative elements of environmental policy making and action.

There are many constraints on governments' environmental protection efforts in developing countries. These often include funding, rehabilitation of displaced people, political opposition, sustainability of programmes, authoritarian actions of environmental protection agencies, rehabilitation of displaced people, and citizens' resistance to change.

Potential Roles of Libraries in Environmental Protection Programmes

Libraries can play significant roles in the management of environmental problems. Kolb (1991) stated that as one of the institutions that serve as depositories of knowledge and information, libraries can play an important role in disseminating information and organising activities that create public awareness and understanding on important national concerns, such as that of the protection of the environment. To illustrate this correlation, UNESCO and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration organised a sub-regional workshop on the role of public and school libraries in promoting awareness on environmental issues and problems (Kolb, 1991). The workshop was organised within the framework of the UNESCO Network of Associated Libraries (UNAL).

Libraries are well suited to play this role because they are considered as non-formal educational institutions, which provide books and information in various forms, as well as help the people to develop healthy and productive ways of thinking, living and participation in day-to-day activities. Library services are geared towards motivating creativity and innovations for improving the status, quality and productivity of people in society. Libraries are considered as institutions for promoting education, culture and information; for promoting life long learning; and, through their access to collections of knowledge sources, for offering accurate information to influence thinking on vital issues.

The role of libraries in helping the people to develop healthy ways of thinking and participation in public activities is a role which the federal, state and local governments in Nigeria should encourage and exploit by providing adequately for libraries to participate effectively in the efforts to improve the poor orientation of the populace to environmental protection. The success and sustainability of the environmental development and protection programmes of the federal and state governments will be enhanced, should the government at the different levels recognise the role of libraries in these programmes. Otherwise, the hindrance created by the widening gap between the government and the citizenry would continue to be the stumbling block that may derail the good intentions of government's environmental protection programmes.

Some library activities that can be used in promoting awareness of environmental issues are:

- Acquiring and providing books and information materials related to environment.
- Providing information dissemination services: journals/newspapers clippings, selective bibliographies, guides in finding information, current awareness services, selecting and packaging information materials, mobile libraries.
- Organising activities to create public awareness on environmental issues and problems: campaigns, workshops, meetings, forum lectures, exhibitions, film/video shows, rallies, radio/television programmes.
- Mobilising pupils, students and the youth to take interest in protecting and preserving the environment: arranging programmes such as book talks, storytelling, plays, songs, and quiz contexts on environmental themes; encouraging school children to read and share what they read with friends and family members.
- Supporting the initiatives of environmental groups and organizations through various library activities.

Governments in developed and some developing countries, realizing the importance of libraries, have partnered with them for the beneficial purpose of providing the right information to both the government and the public. In the United Kingdom, public libraries secured government funding in the middle 1990s for computers in every library as part of the "People's

Network Project” (Krolak, 2005), a project that assures that no one needs to be excluded from the information revolution. Also the libraries in UK, Denmark, Finland, USA, and Singapore are modern examples of highly developed library systems that are an integral part of a national education and information strategy based on library laws and appropriate funding.

Scope and Challenges for Nigerian Libraries in Information Dissemination for Environmental Protection

In Nigeria, not much can be said on the support of the government to libraries and librarians to encourage and enable them take up their rightful role, even in the present day democratic Nigeria. The government and other relevant organs have failed to see the library as the true local gateway to knowledge, which provides a basic condition for life-long learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social group. The government also seems ignorant of the fact that libraries in Nigeria are agents that can enhance the citizen’s constructive participation in governance, and that the development of democracy depends on satisfactory education, as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information, which libraries can provide, given the required recognition and support.

Librarians in Nigeria should therefore gear up to make the government and other agencies realise the very significant role of libraries in environmental protection programmes. This can be done by planning series of national seminars on the formulation of a national policy on the development of library and information services; promoting active participation of librarians in international and national campaign, conferences, radio/television programmes, as well as membership in voluntary and professional organizations (state, national or regional); sensitising government authorities, mass media, teachers, parents, community leaders and international non-governmental organizations on library programmes and services. Nigerian libraries can thus help to

clean the minds of Nigerian inhabitants, a prerequisite to making them appreciate, implement and sustain programmes to clean up Nigeria’s environments, and ensure that it is protected from degradation in future.

Conclusion

Environmental problems will continue to occur and increase as the world’s population increases and urbanization increases. The key issue then is effective management of such problems through effective environmental rehabilitation and protection policies and programmes. For the environmental programmes to be successfully managed in Nigeria, however, libraries and librarians must initiate and be supported to play their rightful role not only as depositors of knowledge and information, but also as key social institutions for providing information that will help the people to develop healthy ways of thinking and living necessary for ensuring adequate protection of Nigeria’s different environments.

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