

PUBLIC LIBRARIES DURING ECONOMIC RECESSION: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: *Global economy is witnessing a steep recession and the effect permeates all sectors of the society. Libraries and particularly public libraries are vulnerable to these changes in world economy because of greater reliance on public funding which makes them easy targets for information resource budget cuts, layoffs, foreclosures and job freezes. An investigation into the position of public libraries in this credit crunch stirs up a pragmatic mix of tension between decrease funding in the face of overall cut in public expenditure and increase demand for library services forcing staff to develop new strategies with very limited resources to respond to the information needs of people during recession and explore means to buffer the financial storm. In Nigeria, public libraries suffer chronic neglect which impairs them to display the librarian's axiom characterized by decrease funding and increased usage in times of fiscal crisis. This paper recommends a redirection of government policy towards the sustenance of public libraries even during recession and a retooling of library human resources for better value.*

KEYWORDS: economic recession, inflation, unemployment, sustainable development, public libraries, information service.

INTRODUCTION

Our economy is witnessing major setbacks and the current leadership is grappling to get this crisis contained. Speaking at the end of the Monetary Policy Committee (PMC) meeting in Abuja, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) governor, Godwin Emefiele announced that with two consecutive quarters of slow growth the Nigerian economy has slipped into recession and proactive steps must be taken to revive growth in the key sectors of the economy. The indices for this downturn, he concluded, is the continued effect of implementation of Treasury Single Account (TSA), elongation of tenure of state government loans as well as loans to oil and gas sector which is aggravating liquidity situation in banks and impair their intermediation role in boosting the economy. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) announced on August 31 2016 that Nigeria had officially slid into recession after negative growth in the first two quarters of the year. The NBS explained that the economy has been battered by low oil prices (mainstay of our economy as Nigeria relies heavily on oil export) truncating government revenues, weakening national currency driving up inflation to an all-time high. In the second quarter of 2016, Nigeria Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined 2.06% in real terms (see Vanguard Editorial 'Breaking News; Chiejina 2015). These provisional figures, looking at the economy, in all ramifications, shows a steady relative decrease and the lowest level of capital imported into the economy on record and would also represent the largest year on year decrease in two consecutive quarters therefore supporting the conclusion that our nation has slid into recession. In the Nigeria's GDP Annual Growth Spreadsheets the GDP is also shown to have further shrunk 2.24% year-on-year in the 3rd quarter of 2016 following a 2.06% decline in the previous period and marking the third consecutive quarter of contraction (see Nigeria GDP Annual

Growth Rate 1982-2016 www.tradingeconomics.com>Nigeria; 'Nigeria's economy shrinks by 2.4 % in the third quarter Nov 21 2016 YOHA' <http://www.yohaig.ng/ng>punch-newspaper>update>, Baba Aye 'Nigeria GDP falls 2.24% in the 3rd Quarter of 2016' www.channelstv.com; James Nwabueze (2016) sunnewsonline.com/nig.) Lower oil prices continue to hurt the oil sector which slumped for the 4th straight quarter while the non-oil sector was flat after shrinking in the previous two periods (see PressReader – Thisday 2/3/2017; The Hindu (2016). Apart from raw statistics, the media is spilling over with worsening updates on our economy, TVs, radio, twitter, newspaper reviews, all headline our recession as 'Breaking News'. We are confronted with a shrinking economy and its trajectory on citizens and jobs prospects. Experts see this situation as the worst economic crisis to our nation in decades.

By all accounts, the profession of librarianship is not immune to this catastrophe or compounding economic collapse. Indices portend that we are falling hard and fast. As of August 2016 the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) declared a 13.3% unemployment rate (Punch Newspaper Aug 31/16) across the nation rising from 12.1% in the first quarter 2016 to 13.3% at the end of the second quarter representing the worst unemployment rate since 2001 (Punch Newspapers punchng.com>Nigeria's-unemployment-National Bureau of Statistics NBS Unemployment/Under-Employment Watch Q1 2016). Premium Times Nigeria (2016) puts the jump for unemployment figuratively by 518,000 in 3 months between Q3 and Q4 of 2015, between Q4 of 2015 and Q1 of 2016.

Librarians represent a fraction of the unemployed population. So while the nation is suffocating under the weight of economically unworkable terms, the library is cowed under harsh socio economic environment of lean development and stunted growth with devastating effects on her workers and non-workers alike. The current high rate of inflation without a correspondent rise in employment or even a rise in salaries of workers show that Nigerian populace can no longer cope with life as was the case in times past. According to ngenvirons.blogspot.com.ng 'Nigeria environment issues', the Nigerian economic situation has been aggravated by several man-made factors, namely, the operation of a mono cultural economy of overdependence on oil alone, the unequal distribution of wealth, misplacements of priorities, mismanagement of resources to mention a few. The common denominator is the management or mismanagement of all the sectors of the economy of which the information sub sector is one of them (Ifidon 1994). Thus in recent times we have witnessed incessant strikes caused by irregular or nonpayment of wages, protests by host communities of oil installations for non-inclusion in employment policies resulting in kidnappings for ransom and sometimes outright killing of oil workers (white expatriates most often as targets), vandalizing of oil pipeline installations by militants, bunkering which encourages hoarding of fuel and subsequent sales at the black market, sometimes fuel is adulterated for maximum gain or meters get adjusted at the stations and the corresponding rise of Foreign Exchange (Forex) in parallel markets.

Libraries are particularly vulnerable to changes in the world economy because of their heavy reliance on highly priced globally sourced information products from expenditure allocations that are heavily dependent on public funding (Ray and Sheila 2011). Recession brings about no increase in absolute terms, meaning, down wages, reduced incomes; in most cases these income cannot even pay taxes to minimally drive the economy much less sustainability of living expenses. In case of libraries, recession brings a decline in library resource acquisitions, even books and journals acquisition is spiraling downwards and the downturn makes spending cuts to vital research materials and even cut to human capital inevitable.

An investigation of the initial effect of the downturn on Nigerian libraries was conducted by Ekpenyong (1993). She noted that libraries could no longer afford to acquire all the research materials needed for their end users because of inadequate funding. A similar assessment on libraries in the United Kingdom was conducted by Ray and Sheila (2011) to assess the impact of economic downturn on human resources and working practices, information resources and collection management, service portfolios, projects and developments in five university libraries. Results showed that staffing and journal subscriptions were most affected with services and projects largely protected. Child and Goulding (2012) analyzed the impact of recession to public libraries in Midland region in the UK using two public library authorities. Data was gathered through a specially designed questionnaire and supported by interviews. Findings supported the librarian's axiom that more people use the library during recession particularly for job seeking activities, advice and training. Library Research Service LRS (2016) also carried out a 60 seconds online survey to gather input from librarians in the field about how their libraries and careers have been impacted by the current economic situation. Giannakopoulos (2014) focused on the effects on operation and services to Greek and Cypriot libraries and the impact caused by salary reduction and personnel layoffs through an online questionnaire. Findings in all these efforts, confirmed prior assumptions about human and information resources as target for cuts. Libraries are always candidates for revenue allocation contraction at the slightest fall in revenue allocations. Main casualties are textbooks and journals. Workers are either retrenched or underemployed in the face of budgetary restrictions forcing them to not only think up new priorities to service provisions with limited resources but be proactive to processes to mitigate these challenges. In other words public libraries are seen to demonstrate strong commitment to service provisions and showcase critical managerial behavior during economic crisis. The other activities like request for use of the library (help with the use of computer, request assistance on job seeking activities) recorded increase in traffic and remain very active during recession. For example, the 2010 Harris interactive poll showed accelerating library visits during economic crisis. The report indicated that 219 million Americans felt that public libraries improved the quality of life in their community, 223 million Americans felt that provision of free access to materials and resources by public libraries played a very important role in giving everybody a chance to succeed (www.ala.org/news/pressreleases2010). Lance, Hofschire and Daisey (2011) also reported many libraries as having higher usage patterns on more frequent library visits, high rate of program attendance, library service and public internet computer use during the recession. Usage for this program peaked because during the recession, the public library offered the local community a neutral calm space to access information for leisure. It also offered information and assistance needed to cope with psychological stress, strained family budgets, changing retirement plans, unemployment and underemployment.

Public Libraries during recession

The Public library is a social institution that is an asset and very important in the life of any nation, a ubiquitous part of the Nigerian landscape. If Nigeria must build a strong nation, the populace must be educated, transformed and inspired. The illiterate public is not left out, all resources and sources are tapped towards national developmental goals. According to Morris (<http://www.yesmagazine.org>) public library stands as an enduring monument to the values of knowledge preservation and sharing in the community and stands for individual to read or learn at their own pace. It serves a diverse population with diverse information needs as varied as inhabit the community. The public library stock includes every conceivable item ranging from that which would add knowledge to promote understanding among diverse groups that use the

library, celebrate cultural diversity to that which would support literacy development, personal development to meet recreation and leisure, provide for research materials and even informational needs of the community. UNESCO declared public library as a living force that provides education, information and recreation materials to the public and is regarded as partners in progress (UNESCO Public Manifesto).

The reaction of libraries to economic downturn (tension between increased usage and decreased funding) is best answered by Poole (2002) who explained that when people's lives are disrupted they tend to look for places of sanctuary, places they can feel safe and from whose vantage points they can understand the things that are happening around them. Libraries provide essential social services and are designed around the fundamental principle of equality of access to information and freedom of expression. Libraries hold a unique role in supporting citizens through crises and in the words of Becky Walpole about the vital role of public libraries in austere times 'we are not a luxury but a necessity'. In exploring why citizens turn to libraries in times of crises, few things are discernible— for some it is time to go read free papers or surf free internet to look for answers and jobs to build new futures. Having an unfettered access points and such educational opportunities for both formal and informal learning as provided by the public library is quite refreshing. For some it means going back to school for continued education and for lifelong learning supporting self-conducted education at all levels to the public yet for others according to Davies (2009) it means access to practical instructions which could help them reskill, enhance their knowledge, gain new capabilities and even save money while borrowing instead of buying books and other study materials. Public libraries build citizens, educate individuals and foster thoughtful communities and are essential components of communities worth fighting for (Biando et al 2013). Libraries are important partners in sustainability development whose collections grow out of specific community needs. For example, concerns of the communities are addressed through organizing workshops, awareness programs to not only talk about fiscal challenges but help citizens gather enough knowledge to develop strategies to mitigate the effects of such challenges

Public Libraries in recession – The Nigerian Experience

There is a growing recognition that library services particularly in public libraries are an integral part of national socioeconomic development of the general quality of life Kibat(1990) in Oyeronke (2014). What goes on in the society is mirrored through the public library. Put differently, public libraries are social institutions tied to the political and social realities of the communities because they serve the public (Projects 2017). Common among all vices is unemployment on the rise, layoffs and foreclosures announced everyday- what does our profession expect. We do not need a historian to lay out the effect of this present crisis to our economy as a whole. Of course all societal organs must feel the pinch. We have read about effect of recession on public libraries of other countries. While other communities peaked in public patronage of library services except for human and budget resource use during recession, Nigerian library activities dwindle steadily downwards irrespective of the state of the economy. While public libraries of other economies are seeking huge increase in usage during recession, Nigeria took the opposite direction as per the report of public library usage. In Nigeria each of the 36 states including Abuja has a Public Library Board established under the Edict or Laws made by the state legislatures. They are supported by some funding streams - government subventions, local rates or charges. Funding and financial allocations to these public libraries have remained poor for decades since inception (before and during recession) and becomes an intractable phenomenon. These libraries were built decades ago and books have not been

restocked. Same old books are still on the shelves, structures are dilapidated and quite frankly, it looks like public libraries were built because other nations speak glowingly about educational attainment or benefits such institutions bring to their societies not built out of convictions that such benefits could also be harnessed especially during recession. Public libraries have never been considered cutting edge and are always first to be questioned for their effectiveness during budget cuts. They are not commercial ventures so the majority of people do not understand their values and why they exist in the first place. Government never placed much investment on them so they entered recession with very weak structures that make the story of public libraries in Nigeria tainted with uncertainties within a constantly shifting environment

Fast forward to current recession, it is fool hardy to ignore the fact that the Nigerian society does not have a reading culture in the first place (Aina et al 2011). A case in point is the Readership Promotion Campaign sponsored by the National Library with these lofty objectives:- to encourage more reading among Nigerians; to promote the increase in product of reading materials in Nigeria both in quality and variety and to identify the major obstacles that inhibit reading in the country and find ways of eliminating them. Sequence to the above, experts criticize that The National library has no funding, no policy backup or enforcement to carry out this mandate; campaign for objective attainment is restricted to a few Metropolitan cities like Abuja, Lagos and a few urban states, inner cities feel no such presence. Experts are quick to point out that we have no functional libraries in rural Nigeria. A news map snapshot of the latest stories about the value of libraries shows lack of facilities to attract the reading public. The State Library Board in Calabar municipality for example had not had light for several months when visited.

Stakeholders agree that Nigerian policy makers do not appreciate the importance and needs of public libraries and the services they offer. This is reflected in level of funds allocated to it by government. State government subventions which constitute about 80% of public library funds is grossly inadequate(Azubogu <http://www.ajol.info/index.php/>), the Transparency International(2013) reported that 84% of respondents attribute the current recession to corruption of systems and 75% of those surveyed also said that the government was at best ineffective at fighting corruption. Fundamental to corruption is the fact that corporate leaders at best give public library buildings physical facelift to pretend that structures are hosted inside. Corruption is the bane of economic growth and affects to a great extent the reading culture. According to Aina et al (2011) corruption is present everywhere in Nigeria, from government institutions to private organizations. In schools for example students would rather indulge in illicit sex for grades, lecturers sell ungraded textbooks and students pay for examination grades. These students consider reading a waste of time less use the library. If a student does not need to prepare for examinations to pass to the next level then why read

Public libraries in Nigeria suffer untold neglect as the economy struggles; they are at the bleeding edge of technology. Staff are not trained and prepared for retraining for users. They can have on the job training if outside training will gulp more money but one is trained on the job by watching what other people do or being corrected by a more experienced person during the process. When there are no experts sticking around because of dilapidated conditions then who guides? -surely, self-motivation or improvement stalls. Nigeria is tightening her belt to a historical low level. Children are found hawking on the streets for being driven for fees. How then can they pay transport to non-functional public libraries that have no light and not even equipped. How does a hungry man read? He could even enter the library pretending to read for the sake of Air Condition but none is working.

What library can do – The Bottom Line

Librarians should adapt to changes being born out of social, digital and economic challenges and especially changes born out of this economic constraints. Being able to adapt and think creatively will allow public libraries to develop valuable initiatives and become long lasting. Now that budget cut is commonplace, Government of Nigeria must recognize public libraries not only as partners in educational development but begin the process of her integration into policy strategies at all levels.

In the realm of consortia services, one would think that this tight economic situation would persuade libraries to cooperate to their mutual benefits in areas of personnel, cooperative acquisition, joint cataloguing and classification, ICT infrastructure, timely access, resource and operational savings. Strong potential for resource sharing enables participating libraries to leverage shrinking budgets, learn from one another, build better tools with each other and serve their users better (Borek 2016). Ekpenyong(2005) calls for renewed consortia efforts among libraries. Although she identified constraints that can militate against such projects like funds, interrupted power supply, low infrastructure for networking but still believes the venture is worth it especially as it boosts fiscal management in the face of lean resources

Downturn will focus libraries thinking on return for information service investments. Changes in the profession are coming at a very fast pace both in magnitude and diversity. Public libraries are confronted with structural challenges and a rapidly changing educational environment where majority of users are skilled and closely knit technologically. The professional librarian must be proactive and be totally abreasted with latest developments in her field before she can render quality service to clients even in the face of limited resources. Public libraries have to create professional visibility through ingenious quality service delivery in this time for community engagement and cohesiveness.

CONCLUSION

Public libraries in particular exist to provide the means to self-education and are acknowledged as a fundamental force that weaves societies together since they directly serve the public. Education is the cornerstone of progress and since it is also the interest of states, by educating the public; people become useful members of society. In other words, society has a stake in what the library does. It is interesting to have the library affect a lot of peoples' lives in most positive ways. Granted that not everybody likes or uses the library or even understands why they exist or should be funded, public libraries must implement best practices to attract the reading public. Understandably, budget cuts put them at a disadvantage to implement efficiencies in educational processes and increase information literacy as they profess but it becomes a lesson in the management of scarce resources to achieve great benefits in austere times.

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