

THE ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN AFRICAN PARTICIPATION IN THE GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT: *Emergence of the global knowledge economy put a premium on learning throughout the World. However, indicators from international assessments suggest that most African countries risk being marginalised in the competitive global knowledge economy because their education and training systems are inadequate to equip people with the skills and competencies needed for active participation. While many scholars have identified the indispensable, growing importance of the library for promoting research and education, not many have investigated the roles of library in promoting skills and competencies required for individual economic development and wellbeing. Therefore, this paper which identifies the indicators of the knowledge economy and skills and competencies required for active participation, has examined the roles and challenges of the public libraries in promoting African participation in the inevitable global knowledge economy. The paper concludes that knowledge economy has implications for continuous education, skills acquisition, knowledge creation and utilisation. Therefore, equipping people to face these realities in Africa requires the use of public libraries which can provide tangible commitment to lifelong education and training systems, innovation and acquisition of vital skills and competencies imperative for individual economic prosperity and wellbeing.*

KEYWORDS: global knowledge economy, African economic participation, vital skills and competencies, public libraries, challenges of public libraries.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge economy has been described as information driven economy in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge play predominant roles in the creation of wealth. It is an economy in which knowledge is created, captured, acquired, transmitted, and used more effectively by individuals, enterprises, organizations, and communities to promote economic and social development. It relies primarily on the use of ideas rather than physical abilities and on the application of technology rather than the transformation of raw materials or the exploitation of cheap labor. In the last few decades, the economies of advance nations have increasingly evolved into knowledge-based, relying less on traditional factors of production for economic prosperity and wealth creation. These positive economic trends, prevalent in many developed countries, strongly depend on new technology investments, high-technology industries, human capital development and highly skilled labour (Blankley and Booyens, 2010). Being greatly facilitated by new information and communication technologies, knowledge economy has no national

boundary and appeals to relentless competition in the pursuit of profit even at global dimension. Hence it is commonly referred to as global knowledge economy.

The emergence of the Global Knowledge Economy (GKE) has put a premium on learning throughout the world. Ideas and know-how as sources of economic growth and development, along with the application of new technologies, have important implications for how people learn, acquire and apply knowledge throughout their lives. Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world around them. It may involve an increase in skills, knowledge understanding, value or the capacity to reflect. Effective learning therefore, will lead to change of attitude, meaningful development and the desire to learn more (Oseghale and Adeyomoye, 2011).

Lifelong learning is more than just education and training beyond formal schooling. A lifelong learning framework encompasses learning throughout one's lifecycle, from early childhood to retirement, and in different learning environments, formal, nonformal, and informal. It has indeed, been used more broadly to imply the integration of educational services provided from various sources, including universities, industrial training schemes, libraries, and other civil institutions. The central objective of lifelong learning is to provide people with opportunities to acquire skills, aptitudes, values, knowledge, and experience needed to equip them to become active citizens, to find employment in constantly changing workplace environments, and to cope with and respond to changes throughout their lives. It is been described as education for the knowledge economy.

The notion that the library is the hub, around which lifelong learning revolve, has been widely acknowledged. As major infrastructure for effective learning, libraries are known and accepted as indispensable components of any education system. While learners need access to published materials in their variety, the long-established role of the library has been to expand their access by acquiring published materials and organising them for appropriate retrieval and use. By acquiring and providing access to variety of information materials, technological tools and environments, libraries can provide people with opportunities for education and lifelong learning throughout their lifetime. Opportunities for learning throughout one's lifetime are becoming increasingly critical for human capital development (Oseghale and Adeyomoye, 2011).

Human capital development refers to the stock of competencies, knowledge, habits, social and personality attributes, including creativity, cognitive abilities, embodied in the ability to innovatively, efficiently and effectively execute a task so as to produce economic value. Therefore, as a viable source of education the roles of the library and information in human capital development, productivity, growth, and innovation has frequently been cited as a justification for government subsidies for library development. For that reason, no substantial, all-inclusive economic development can take place, without a qualitative source of education and training. According to Mohasi and Lephoto (2007), human resources need to be skilled and trained through continuous education for economic development to take place. Education therefore, is the foundation of all positively developed societies and globally competitive economies.

While continuous education has been substantially identified as a driver of innovation, economic prosperity and productivity in the GKE, the capacity to innovate and develop economically remains relatively low in most African countries (Anyanwu, 2012). Developing a system that promotes innovation depends on the levels of expenditure on research and development, and on the quality of some other sectors such as education and information infrastructure. Countries with inadequate expenditure on education, research and information infrastructure suffer from a lack of innovation leading to weak knowledge economies (Arab knowledge index, 2015). As a consequence, Africa faces a “severe learning crisis” that undermines economic growth and the well-being of its citizens (World Bank, 2018). Despite the fact that the region has made considerable progress in boosting primary and lower secondary school enrollment, World Bank (2018) reported that over 50 million children still remain out of school and most of those in school are not acquiring the basic skills necessary for success later in life. Supporting this view Edudzie (2019) stated that rapid increases in school participation and educational attainment across Africa have come at the cost of quality, thereby contributing to a serious shortfall in the skills needed for productive employment. According to Edudzie (2019), many African children are not acquiring the skills that provide the foundation for a productive life because of the abysmal track record of Africa’s weak education systems in producing these skills.

This assertions support earlier indicators from international assessments which suggest that some African countries risk being marginalised in the competitive GKE because their education and training systems are described inadequate to equip learners with the skills they need for active participation (World Bank, 2003). According to the report education, coverage is insufficient, access is inequitable (especially in tertiary [higher] education and in employee and adult training), as education facilities are grossly inadequate and the quality of education is ridiculously low. Private intervention in education has not helped matters as rote learning, exam-driven schooling, and the soaring cost of private education have long been policy concerns in most Sub-Sahara African countries (World Bank, 2003). Thus the goal of education for all has revoltingly remained elusive in many low-income countries (Oseghale and Adeyomoye, 2011).

African participation in the GKE

Literature on African participation in GKE can be discussed considering the four main pillars of knowledge economy which include education, innovation, Information and communication technologies (ICTs), a regime of incentive and the state of knowledge economy in Africa. The roles of educational institutions in human capital development, research and technological innovation cannot be underestimated. According to Omeluzor and OGO (2018), education is the bedrock of human development since it produces the much required manpower to sustain a nation. Wantchekon et al. (2014) assessed the positive role of education on human capital development in Africa, Ford (2007) documented educational challenges facing African in the GKE. Amavilah (2009) identified the need for more investment in education and knowledge production in Africa. Chavula (2010) assessed how knowledge affects economic growth and concludes that African policy makers need to place more emphasis on knowledge economy projects. Weber (2011) stated that education diversifies the economy, preserves cultural integrity and ends illiteracy. Oseghale and Adeyomoye (2011) explored the implications of GKE on lifelong learning and training

systems in Nigeria. Omeluzor and Ogo (2018) examined the roles of libraries in sustainable education system.

In a study on innovation in African development, Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and Gehl, (2007) documented that innovation increases productivity and economic growth. Carisle et al. (2013) assessed the role of innovation in tourism and found that institutions have a critical role to play in preserving best practices, networking and transfer of knowledge. In summary, Anyanwu (2012) declared the imperative for more innovation in African development as has been discussed consistently in recent stream of literature.

In a study of ICTs development in Africa, the Africa Development Bank (2007) established that ICTs are necessary in boosting economic growth and reducing poverty in the African Continent. This is because ICTs provide income generating opportunities, enable access to new markets or services, improve governance and ameliorate efficiency. In the same way, Graham, Ojanpera, Anwar and Friederici (2017) discussed the imperative for digital connectivity to encouraged politicians, journalists, academics, and other citizens to interact effectively and efficiently in the ICT-fuelled GKE. Cogburn (2003) provided valuable insights into best practices of knowledge economy and lessons for developing countries and elucidated the transition in international telecommunications regimes.

While other developing countries in Latin America and Asia have been catching-up with calculated moves that emphasise the importance of GKE in the pursuit of their regional and national goals (Tchamyu, 2016; Chandra & Yokoyama, 2011; Dahlman, 2007), the overall index of knowledge economy in Africa has been decreasing since the beginning of the third Millennium (Patel, 2018). Considering the state of education, innovation, ICTs development and a regime of incentives in Africa, Anyanwu (2012) investigated the state of GKE on the continent and concluded that Africa is substantially and concluded that Africa is substantially lagging behind when compared to other regions and advanced countries. Rooney (2005) identified limitations to knowledge economy in Africa in a number of dimensions including understanding of the concept and technocracy. Mensah and Benedict (2010) examined entrepreneurship training, poverty alleviation and the imperative to empower the poor in the Eastern Free State of South Africa; Nyarko (2013) discussed the need to sustain high economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa; Ilomaki, Paavola and Lakkala (2016) revealed the kinds of skills and competence imperative for participating successfully in the knowledge society, including what to teach young people and how to do it; Tchamyu (2016) reviewed the role of knowledge economy in African business; Asongu & Nwachukwu (2017) advocated for appropriate policies and strategies for building knowledge economies in Africa.

From the array of literature, inference can be drawn that enabling African effective participation in the GKE implies developing a dynamic system of education, innovation, ICTs tools and techniques together with a regime of incentives to encourage and provide opportunities for individuals to continue to learn, acquire skills and competencies essential for wealth creation and social well-being. While the stream of studies is consistent with the need for more scholarly research on factors that can encourage participation in the GKE in sub-Sahara Africa, there is yet no study that has investigated the roles of libraries in promoting participation in the competitive

GKE. Against this background, this paper explores the roles of public libraries in enhancing African participation in the competitive GKE. The paper identifies:

- indicators of the GKE;
- vital skills and competences required for active participation in the GKE;
- roles of public libraries in promoting participation in the GKE and
- the challenges of public libraries in Africa

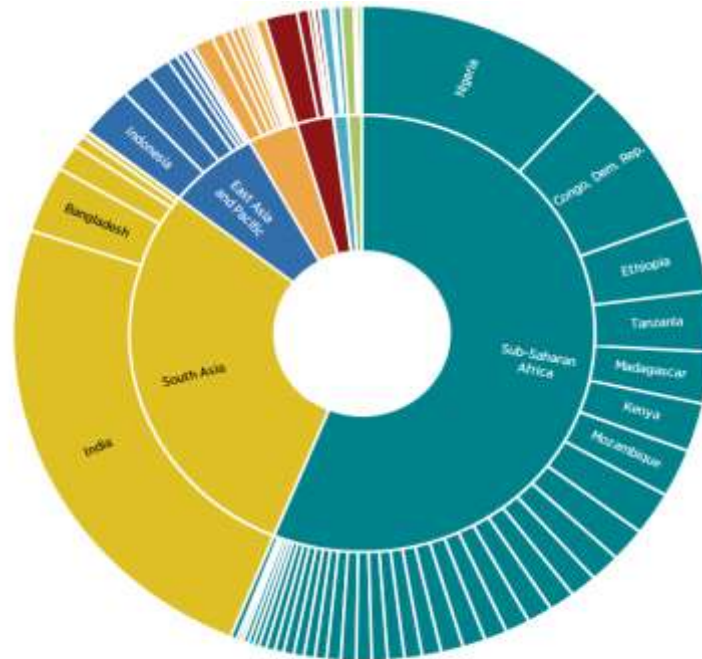
This paper which focuses on the increasing roles that public libraries can play in promoting participation in the GKE is a clarion call on African countries to develop a structure of education reflecting global perspective of lifelong learning strategy. It also points out the need for African countries to look beyond traditional approaches to education and engage policies that promote the pedagogical and economic value of the public libraries as sources of lifelong learning for the GKE.

Indicators of global knowledge economy

Knowledge economy indicators provide a measure of the relative state of the knowledge economy in a country. Notwithstanding the fact that there is no set of standard indicators for insufficient participation in knowledge economy, Blankley and Booyens, (2010) suggested that indicators for participating in the GKE consist of individual countries expenditures on Research and Development (R&D) as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP). Such individual indicators, when compiled in a particular continent, forms a composite indicator based on which inferences about participation can be drawn. Examples include the European Innovation Scorecard or the World Bank's Knowledge Economy Index. Composite indicators are useful communication tools in terms of their ability to integrate a large amount of information, but can be misleading and are easily manipulated (Blankley & Booyens, 2010).

A more critical indicator of Africa's insufficient participation in the global knowledge economy is the global multidimensional poverty index. The World Bank report (2018) titled "Poverty and Shared Prosperity: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle" gives a detailed guide to understanding the most recent trends in global poverty. The report reveals that in 1990, 36 percent of the world's people living in poverty, defined as an income of less than \$1.90 a day, live in East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa region. The Sub-Sahara Africa poor grew from 278 million in 1990 to 413 million in 2015. However, when compared to East Asia and the Pacific's contribution to declining global poverty, and more recently South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa's much slower fight against poverty has been unable to match the progress of these other regions (Patel, 2018).

As a consequence, most of the global poor live in sub-Saharan Africa. The average poverty rate for sub-Saharan Africa stands at about 41 percent, and out of the world's 28 poorest countries, 27 are in sub-Saharan Africa all with a poverty rate above 30 percent (Patel, 2018). Projections by the World Bank also show that extreme poverty is showing few signs of improvement in the region, and may keep countries from ending extreme poverty by 2030 (World Bank report, 2018).



Source: PovcalNet (online analysis tool), World Bank, Washington, DC, <http://research.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/>.
 Note: The inner circle is proportionate to the percentage of the total population of poor people living in each region. The outer circle is similarly proportionate, but at the country level. The 10 countries with the most poor people in the world are listed.

The chart shows global distribution of extreme poor by region and country, 2015

More worrisome according to Patel (2018), is the region's slower rates of economic growth. The Regional Economic Outlook (2018) identified conflict, weak institutions, and a lack of resilience as major barriers to improving the outlook of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. The report covers the multidimensionality of poverty and suggests that being poor is not just defined by a lack of income given that well-being is an accumulation of many aspects, including education, access to basic utilities, health care, and security. Earning a certain threshold of income may still not be enough to meet these basic needs. Using this multidimensional definition of poverty, the report suggests that the share of poor is approximately 50 percent higher compared to strictly monetary indicators.

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to imagine how sub Saharan Africa with over 413 million unemployed poor can create the 20 million jobs per year needed over the next two decades to absorb its growing workforce. Over the medium term, current governmental policies in the region are expected to accelerate growth to about 4 percent. That, according to Regional Economic Outlook (2018), is too low to create the number of jobs needed to absorb anticipating teaming new labor markets entrants in Sub-Sahara Africa. Therefore recovery and creating enough jobs for the region to harness its full demographic dividend would require strong, sustainable and all-inclusive economic growth initiatives. Achieving this would require policies to strengthen education and lifelong learning institutions such as public libraries to and encourage the acquisition skills and

competences which will in turn, strengthen peoples' resilience to participate effectively in the inevitable GKE.

Vital skills and competences required for active participation in the GKE

Operating successfully in the GKE requires a set of abilities, skills and competencies.

1. Information literacy skills

Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. It involves concrete expectation, required competencies and aptitudes designed to satisfy the information needs of functioning members of society. Integrating information literacy skills is fundamental to learning in all contexts (Hanbidge, Sanderson and Tin 2016). The central goal of information literacy is to cultivate necessary abilities and skills that ensure that individual's effectiveness and continued functioning in society is through effective navigation, evaluation and use of information. Libraries have been adjudged the information and literacy access points needed to succeed in 21st Century information society. Information literate strengthens individual resilience for lifelong learning and determination to use knowledge for productive venture.

2. Digital literacy skill

In the knowledge economy, digital literacy skill is fundamental to all areas of learning, as it unlocks access to relevant information. Parvathamma and Pattar (2013) define digital literacy as the ability to use ICT tools and techniques to generate and communicate information in a global scale. It is the acquired awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesise digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process. Radovanović, Hogan & Lalić (2015) defines new literacy requirements as including competencies in finding, processing, producing, and communicating information as well as fluency in online technologies, communication norms, application, and programming environments. According to European Commission (2006 p. 16),

“Digital competence involves the confident and critical use of Information Society Technology for work, leisure and communication. It is underpinned by basic skills in ICT: the use of computers to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet”.

Martin and Grudziecki, (2006) as quoted by Spantel, Hashem, Lundin & Alger (2018) state that digital competence is underpinned by digital literacy. In 2013, the European Commission published a Digital Competence Framework based on five areas and 21 competences, which include the notion of digital literacy (Ferrari, 2013). At a systemic level policy documents often emphasise the need to invest in digital skills enhancement for economic growth and competitiveness (European Commission, 2010). Furthermore, it has been argued that in our interconnected world sustainable development and social cohesion depend critically on the

competencies of all of our population—with competencies understood to cover knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (OECD, 2006). Developing digital competence enables individuals to:

- use ICT tools interactively as instrument for active dialogue. This involves being aware of and responding to the potentials of new tools and being able to use language, text, symbols, information and knowledge interactively to accomplish goals in the GKE.
- act autonomously. This includes building and exercising a sense of self making choices and acting in the context of a larger picture, being oriented towards the future, being aware of the environment, understanding how one fits in exercising one's rights and responsibilities, determining and executing a life plan and planning to carrying out personal projects are parts of the competencies for active participation in The GKE.
- function in socially heterogeneous groups. This involves ability to interact effectively with other people, including those from different backgrounds; recognising the social embeddedness of individuals; creating social networks; and being able to relate well to others and cooperate and manage to resolve conflict. The concept of competency has several features. It is strongly related to context, as it combines interrelated abilities and values. It is teachable (although it can be acquired outside the formal education system), and exists on a continuum. Possession of these key competencies contributes to a higher quality of life across all areas (World Bank, 2003; Oseghale and Adeyomoye, 2011).

Technical, interpersonal, and methodological skills

Performing in the GKE also requires mastery of technical, interpersonal, and methodological skills. Technical skills include literacy in foreign languages, mathematics and science, problem solving and analytical skills. Interpersonal skills include teamwork, leadership, and communication skills. Methodological skills involve the ability to learn on one's own, to pursue lifelong learning and to cope with risks and challenges. These competencies are needed because of the rapid proliferation of scientific and practical knowledge, the shortening of the useful life of knowledge because of continuous production of knowledge, and the growing influence of science and technology, which profoundly change the organization of jobs and lives (Oseghale and Adeyomoye, 2011). Generally, operating successfully in the knowledge economy requires that one learns to locate where a certain kind of knowledge is, retrieve and store the knowledge, and then make it accessible to others. The information source can be a book, the Internet or some other person. Therefore, libraries have challenging roles to play in enhancing societies' effective participation in the GKE.

The roles of the public libraries in promoting participation in the GKE

Libraries, be it national, public, academic, school, special and digital libraries are regarded as educational tool designed to develop individual and society at large through their services such as acquisition and processing of materials, repackaging of information, serving as center for research, contribution to education via encouraging reading habit, expanding learning process and development of critical thinking, thereby enabling the citizenry live responsibly. Many advance nations of the world acknowledge the place of library in national development. They value highly, the materials of knowledge that are housed in a purpose building infrastructure, systematically arranged and made available for use as vital requirements for daily survival. The materials can broaden knowledge as well as sharpen and upgrade skills. They are means of investigating past events with a view to finding solutions to current problems of keeping abreast of current development as well as serving as the repository of the heritage and civilization of the people. There are different types of libraries performing various functions in the society. Prominent among them is the general or public library, which may be freely used by anyone.

The 1953 UNESCO public library seminar held at Ibadan, Nigeria marked the beginning of public library development in Africa (Ezema and Ugwuanyi, 2014). Public libraries are community libraries built to run on public fund and with the intent of promoting literacy, helping to conserve cultural heritage and keeping the people abreast with what is happening around the world (Ekere and Ugwuanyi, 2011). Public libraries have proven to be very reliable public institutions that provide for the information needs of all categories of people. Their users vary from the highly educated and intelligent to the stark illiterates, from the poorest to the wealthiest, from the inhabitants of most rural areas to those living in the urban areas, and from the least disadvantaged to the most advantaged in the community (Ezema and Ugwuanyi, 2014).

Resources in public library are available to all regardless of religion, nationality, language, age, gender economic status and educational standard. Public libraries provide information related to childcare, birth control, nutrition, immunization, sanitary, and health care services (Kaula, 2007). Their vantage positions of easy accessibility to all, and the type of services rendered make them a critical factor in disseminating information for the knowledge economy. Access to adequate and timely information has been described as very critical indicator for the overall national development and specifically very useful in combating poverty, ignorance and diseases in many developing countries (Iwe, 2003; Ezema, 2011). According to the UNESCO, the public library should improve lifelong learning by:

1. Providing books, pamphlets, magazines, maps, pictures, films, music scores, recordings and giving guidance in their use.
2. Offering children, young people, men and women opportunity and encouragement to:
 - educate themselves continuously,
 - keep abreast of progress in all field of knowledge
 - keep abreast of progress of expression and have constructive critical attitude towards all public issues.
 - be more efficient in their day-to-day activities
 - develop their creative capacity and powers of appreciation in arts and letters.

- aid generally in the advancement of knowledge
3. Promoting personal happiness and social well-being and
 4. Providing needed information to members of the public.

As a result, many nations government policies and scholarly work have identified as indispensable, the growing roles of public libraries in promoting research, education and lifelong learning for the world-wide knowledge economy (Marginson, 2010). According to Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), public libraries are social institutions, created to conserve knowledge; preserve the cultural heritage; provide information; and to serve as fountain of recreation; undergird and underpin education and research. Quoting P.F. Wilmot a well noted sociologist, Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) emphasised that libraries as repositories of intellectual production, play a fundamental role in a well-functioning society, and, when tied to global development priorities, can promote sustainable development solutions. It serves as content and knowledge repositories by collecting and providing access to books journals, and all other forms of recorded information. By providing access to, and repackaging information, public libraries ensure that the right information is made available and in form that users can understand.

As the Agenda 21 affirms, “the need for information arises at all levels, from that of senior decision makers at the national and international levels to the grass-root and individual levels” (Agenda 21 :40.1). Whether through the more traditional paper-based library, up-to-date internet and other ICT resources, or through a combination of both in the form of “hybrid libraries”, society needs to be able to access information to allow it to develop. Beyond connectivity, people and organization in developing countries need to acquire new capacity and skills suited to knowledge economy.

By developing collections, facilitating access to information resources, teaching the effective use of information resources and critical evaluation skills and offering research assistance public libraries promote intellectual growth and creativity. They are extension of learning environment or schools that students, academicians, workers, market women and artisan can use to further their formal education. Hence they are fondly called “the Peoples’ University” According to Conable (2007), American public libraries flourish out of a commitment to the principle that knowledge and access to information empower the individual. Public libraries embody the firm belief that information must not be the exclusive province of a privileged few and that it should be widely and freely made available to all.

In addition to the roles of reading and writing literacy which public libraries champions, librarians, working in public libraries have an important role in helping their communities become information literate. They can support information literacy for adults and youths by providing programs such as computer training, and teach information literacy skills every day at information desks. Information literacy include showing a library user how to access articles in databases, evaluate web sites, use the Dewey Decimal system, or even to use the index at the back of a book.

Public librarian can also teach how to evaluate information. With the rising profile of fake news, librarians of all backgrounds are called to action. For example, Ireland (2017) shows how the Oakland Public Library offered “Stop Fake News!” classes in the beginning of 2017 in which the

librarians showed patrons how to find reputable sources of information through the library. According to Ireland (2017), they provided patrons with the tools to identify fake news. Moreover, the Gail Borden Public Library also offered a similar program in January 2017 called “Librarians vs. Fake News.” This session was live-streamed over YouTube, and the recording of the event is available on their site (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6Gvs_KZ9uM). Through information and media literacy skills, academic librarians were engaged in teaching students how to negotiate increasingly complex information environments for centuries. They are trained to think critically about how to evaluate a wide range of information sources for accuracy, whether a book, an article, a webpage, or a news story.

There is no dispute about the fact that digital technologies have essentially altered the way we live and work. They have broken down barriers and given rise to a wave of new job titles, a growing virtual workforce and an explosion in personalised online services – all of which are having a profound impact on what and how we choose to learn. As many communities struggle to keep up with shifts in technology, public libraries must also provide critical digital literacy training that will help people improve their digital skills and prepare them for the competitive GKE. It must seek to develop people's information and digital literacy by providing users with computers and other ICT tools and giving guidance in their use.

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (2006: p.2) describes the term “digital literacy” as digital information fluency and stated that it involves “knowing how digital information is different from print information; having the skills to use specialised tools for finding digital information; and developing the dispositions needed in the digital information environment”. Offering two suites of learning modules: *Digital Essentials* and *Assignment Essentials* the University of Queensland has developed a series of online modules for users to help quickly build their digital skills so they can succeed in their study and work.

Developing and sustaining information literacy education in public libraries will depend on more dynamic leadership and on a vision of a new model of public library (Hart, 2006). With more creative thinker and dynamic leadership, public libraries should be able to provide rooms for learning and getting together and, to a lesser degree, modular working spaces where digital skills and competencies and could be acquired (Mainka et al; 2013). The prototypical public library in the knowledge society should have two core services: (1) to support citizens, companies and administrations in their city and region with digital services, namely e-resources as well as reference services, and to communicate with their customers via social media; and (2) to provide physical spaces for meeting, learning and working, as well as areas for children and other groups, in a building that is a landmark of the city (Mainka et al; 2013). Therefore, equipping the public libraries with the best resources and facilities to train, communicate, and to gather information, African nations would improve their scientific and technological abilities, health outcomes, promote rural development, fight poverty and natural disasters in a better manner.

As industries and markets are becoming knowledge driven, public libraries should serve as important knowledge hubs and main components of the infrastructure of a knowledge economy (Ergazakis *et al.* 2009; Merrick 2009). Johnson (2012) states that such information cities must

attract workers who are well inform, open to new ideas and creative minds. According to Johnson (2012, 31), they are “smart people” who are in need of “smart librarians” to work in “smart libraries”. In order words, knowledge economy thrives in smart cities with smart people. For Public libraries to meet the information needs of these “smart people”, they must become “smart libraries” with “smart librarians” working in them. Achieving these is not without challenges for public libraries in Africa.

The challenges of public libraries

The public library is the most affordable gateway to knowledge, which provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and the social group (UNESCO, 2000). For it to actualise all these, (Opara, 2008) states that establishing authorities as well as members of the community for whom public library is established need to adequately support it. According to Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), the establishment of any library is predicted upon two fundamental assumptions: that the authorities setting it up are prepared to see to its continued existence by adequate financial support and that the people whom the library serves appreciate its informational and educational values.

Aguolu (1989) had earlier observed that for the library (including public libraries) to flourish in any society, the economy must be sufficiently bright to motivate the government to commit funds to library development. Supporting this view, Patel (2018) states that a country that has problem of hunger, education, economic and political freedom cannot give priority to the right to information. Also, he contended that the right to information has no meaning for person who is hungry, who does not have enough money, who is not educated and who does not have freedom.

The development of libraries in Africa presents policy makers and managers with a set of policy and organizational challenges. Despite the fact that access to higher education is inequitable, coverage is insufficient, adult literacy rates are low, and the soaring cost of private education have long been policy concerns in most African countries , public library services are far below expectation. This is because they are not given adequate attention by governments. Challenges such as inadequate funding (Opara, 2008) and gross neglect occasioned by maladjusted economy have been identified as combined factors militating against the development of public libraries (Oyegade, Nassarawa and Mokogwu, 2004). Other challenges include, inadequate and unmotivated workforce (Opera, 2008). The IFLA/ UNESCO guidelines for public Libraries services provide that:

The public libraries must have adequate resources not just when it is established but also on a continuous basis to enable it to sustain and develop services that meets the needs of the local community. This means it should provide material in all formats, up-dated regularly to meet the changing needs of the group and individuals, including newly published and replacement materials.

Despite the provision of guidelines, African public libraries suffer abysmal neglect. Dilapidated infrastructure resulting in insufficient man-friendly learning environments insufficient

instructional materials, inadequate supply of resources and qualified personnel have been the consequences of the huge neglect suffered by public libraries in most African countries. It is yet to be realised by both leaders and the led that information is power that can play a decisive role in repositioning the Africa nations for the challenges of global knowledge economy. Commenting on the state of public libraries in Africa, Opara (2008) identified the problem of ideological inclination on the part of the leaders towards supporting the public library. This is partly because the public library is hardly perceived as powerful instrument for the socio-economic and political transformation of the community in which it is located.

The state of the public library system in any nation is indisputably a reflection of the level of acceptance of libraries and librarians by the nation. It is also a reflection of the prevailing values system in the country. Opara (2008) affirmed that the poor recognition of the role of the library manifest itself not only in government action or inaction, but also in the perceptions and attitudes of individual members of the community for whom it is established. He contended that too many library users (and non-users) in our communities still have narrow views of the role of the library. While accepting that majority of Africans are still illiterate, He argued that inadequate support for public libraries cannot be attributed mainly to the high level of illiteracy among the citizenry. Information access and use can only flourish in a society that appreciates the need for it and where government recognises that information is the key to national growth and prosperity. It has been observed that even the highly-educated lack awareness of the crucial role that public library can play in their lives or that of the society at large. The result is that if such people are ever in a position of influence or policy making, they will find it difficult to support the library cause.

In this line of thought, Opara (2008) concluded that “if the educated minority can support the cause of the public library at every given opportunity, its fortune is likely to improve”. As providers of materials and cultural institutions, if properly channeled, Public libraries can contribute to the development of literacy in Africa. This is because the provision of access to books and reading material is crucial to the development of literacy. According to the reading researcher Krashen (2004, p. 57) “when books are readily available, when the print environment is enriched, more reading is done”. Evidence suggests this is true in international settings as well. Initially, Elley (2000) suggests that increased access to books increases first- and second-language literacy rates in developing countries as well. National literacy rates are highly correlated with levels of development, and there is “strong association between the extent of human development (specifically economic, education, and health) within a developing country and reading achievement levels as measured by literacy rate” (Greaney, 1996, p. 27).

Thus developing countries and transition economies face the dual challenge of addressing the longstanding issues of access, quality, and equity while moving toward a lifelong learning system. To satisfy individuals’ quest for knowledge, and cope with growing societal-demands for people-based development and adult workers seeking more opportunity to actively participate in their countries’ future, it is the position of this paper that developing countries like Nigeria should look beyond the “professed” formal approaches to education and training and engage a policy of dialogue on the pedagogical and economic consequences of public libraries and lifelong learning.

The Way Forward

To create learning society that would participate effectively in the GKE, there is no doubt that the public libraries have roles to play and these roles must be defined. This is only possible if the right attention is given to the development of public libraries. First and foremost, African government through the various ministries can implement policy actions capable of initiating the society into knowledge conscious and information driven one. Librarians through national library association should sensitise the government and policy makers on the need to repackage libraries to meet the challenge of the global knowledge economy. Secondly, librarians and National Library Association should embark on information capacity building to enable the people appreciate the place of information in enhancing their performance in the knowledge economy.

Studies have established a strong correlation between the use of the library in childhood and reading activities in adulthood. Therefore, African governments and indeed educational policy makers should encourage the development of libraries in primary and secondary schools in order to foster reading culture in children. Those who cannot afford formal education system should be catered for in public libraries. Equipment such as audiovisuals (television, computers) should be made readily available to take care of adult literacy classes for categories of people. There should also be room for continuing education which is part of lifelong learning. In the same way, arrangements should be made to cater for the educational needs of the special candidates such as the blind, deaf, mentally retarded etc. The mobile library section of the public libraries should be empowered to cater for the education needs of the rural people and the nomads.

CONCLUSION

The speed of change in the dynamic knowledge economy means that skills depreciate much more rapidly than they once did. To compete effectively in the constantly changing environment, workers need to be able to upgrade their skills on a continuing basis. Change in the knowledge economy is so rapid that firms can no longer rely solely on new graduates or new labor market entrants as the primary source of new skills and knowledge. Education and other training institutions thus need to prepare workers for lifelong learning. Educational systems can no longer emphasise task-specific skills but must focus instead on developing learners' decision making and problem-solving skills and teaching them how to learn on their own and with others.

The relationship between knowledge and the economy stems from the understanding that knowledge can boost productivity and economic growth. It does so by facilitating the application of technology through all stages of the production and delivery chains. In countries where transition to a knowledge economy has been achieved, visible benefits have accrued in terms of increased gross domestic product (GDP), new job opportunities, innovation in the way business is conducted and improvements in the management of human and financial resources, thereby resulting in higher productivity. Therefore, the implication of the knowledge economy is that there is no alternative way to prosperity than to make learning and knowledge-creation of prime importance. Equipping people to face this reality in African countries, requires a new mode of education and training, a lifelong learning framework that encompasses learning throughout one's

life cycle, from early childhood to retirement. It includes formal, nonformal, and informal education and training.

According to Omeluzor and Ogo (2018), evidence-based studies have revealed that the library is a critical hub of meaningful development since it engages its users in activities that turn them into critical thinkers, problem solvers, independent information seekers and lifelong learners. This position is further supported by IFLA Lyon declaration that the library is a medium for accessing information, ideas and works of imagination. Furthermore, IFLA noted that communities with quality access to timely and relevant information are better positioned for quality education, health care, improved agriculture, poverty eradication and equality (IFLA, 2014). Invariably, an informed citizen will contribute to the development of a nation as the availability and access to information resources would promote peaceful coexistence among the people as well as inclusiveness for sustainable development (Omeluzor and Ogo, 2018).

The essential function of the public library is to offer knowledge and information to the average citizen who cannot afford, with individual resources alone, to secure all the information necessary to meet his or her self-defined needs in a complex and challenging world. By developing and facilitating access to the richness of human expression in all its recorded forms, protecting everyone's rights of access to resources, teaching effective use of information resources and critical evaluation skills and offering research assistance, public libraries provide tangible commitment to self-education, innovation, free speech, self-government and the promotion of lifelong learning. Therefore, if given the desired support public libraries will help African people to increase their resourcefulness, innovation and productivity as vital requirements for effective participation in the GKE. This commitment goes further to justify the existence and support of public libraries in Africa.

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