

The Role of the Library in Bridging Rising Social Inequality Gap in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the rising social inequality in Nigeria and the role of the library through its information delivery service in bridging the gap.

Design/Methodology/Approach: An exploratory approach through extensive review of related Literatures was adopted for this study. Conceptual framework was developed to understand social inequality and the different dimensions it takes in Nigeria. Next was the discussion on the role of the library in bridging rising social inequality in Nigeria

Findings: This paper found out that inequality in Nigeria has continue to increase despite several intervention programs embark by different government to create equal opportunity for all. With the importance of placed information in development, it found out that library and information services centered on reducing information poverty, bridging digital divide, creating social capital and supporting the development of democratic institutions will have great impact on bridging rising social inequality gap in Nigeria.

Practical Implication: The economic, political and social life of people is endangered in a society where the gap existing among people in relation to access to basic things of life such as education, health care, income, political power continue to rise. Provision of library and information resources to people will empower them thereby eliminating the thin line that separates them.

Originality/Value: It is recommended that there should be a synergy between the library and the people that will lead to adequate utilization of information resources for the advancement of the society at large

Keywords: Social inequality, information poverty, digital divide, social capital and democracy.

Paper type: Conceptual

Introduction

In every human society, be it agrarian, developed or developing, there is stratification. People are grouped on the bases of haves and have-nots that is either between the rich and the poor, educated and illiterates, informed and uninformed, the rulers and the ruled, males and females e.t.c. indicating that people are not equal. This is clearly portrayed in George Orwell's Animal farm that "all animals are equal but some are more equal than others". Ubong (2013) rightly confirmed this as he stated that "Social inequality is a fact that is evident in virtually every aspect and institution of society. The fact that there is stratification in churches and mosques appear to imply that even in religion, all men are not born equal". With these facts it is clear that some people are in advantaged positions in the society while some are on the disadvantaged side hence, the existence of social inequality.

Social inequality has been of great concern from times immemorial due to the effect it has on the society and this has stimulated various researches on its causes and effects. Kolawole, et.al (2015) sited some studies that were carried out on poverty and inequality in Nigeria and came out with the conclusion that an average Nigeria is still worse off such that there is widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the country. Nigeria like most developing economy is experiencing inequality in all aspect of its people's social, political and economic life ranging from regional (state) imbalance, inequality in income, power, gender, education, health care etc. This has created negative effect on individuals which according to Barneret' al (2014) may lead to negative outcomes, such as violence, victimization, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, and disease." That is why all countries including Nigeria have engaged in several intervention programs and signed international treaties and conventions to create

better lives for its citizenry and to prevent the negative effect of these social vices on the society on the long-un.

The fact that Nigeria sits on a treasure-trove of natural and human resources that are the envy of the world does not really imply better standard of living. Information being the catalyst of change in this 21st century must be fully utilized to bring about the desired change since “the world has entered an era where the source of wealth and power is increasingly from information and human mental creativity as compared to physical resources” (Okey,n.d). With this, the library is seen to play critical roles in providing basic information resources and services that empowers people to better their lives and also to break and dissolve barriers impending national development.

Since information has become the propelling force for socio-economic and political development in the 21st century, the librarian’s task of providing readily available, accessible, effective and efficient library and information services in meeting people’s information needs for the attainment of their individual and collective goals has become very vital. It is on this premise that this paper tries to explore the different areas which the library can play greater role in bridging social inequality in Nigeria through the various information resources and services it provide that is targeted at creating greater awareness on rights and privileges of individuals and groups and also increase their participation in economic, social and political activities which if fully achieve, will better peoples’ lives and bridge the gap existing among them.

Understanding Social Inequality

The term social inequality is an issue that has received great attention due to the attempts to create a better place for people and as such, result to several studies being carried out by different social scientists. In the course of the study, several definitions have been profound among which are by Veenhoven (2005) who simply see it as “the difference in access to scarce resources” while Moffitt, (2015) defined it as, “the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or status within a group or society.” These definitions clearly depict the differences in the socio-economic conditions of people and, also show

that there is stratification, discrimination and social exclusion in all human societies.

Social inequality has become a global phenomenon that is present in every country of the world. The differences in access to political power, quality education, health care, economic resources etc determine the level of inequality exiting among people, groups and even countries. Accessibility to these life chances has given different dimensions to social inequality. The International Forum for Human Development (2006) clearly categorized social inequality into six. They are: (1) inequalities in the distribution of income, (2) inequalities in the distribution of assets, (3) inequalities in the distribution of employment, (4) inequalities in access to knowledge, (5) political inequalities, and (6) inequalities in access to medical services, social security, and safety. Thus increase in socio-economic activities and the advancement in technology have further widened the dimensions of social inequality.

Social Inequality among nations varies base on their level of development. As countries are advancing, they are eliminating some forms of social inequality such as income, gender, education, health while at the same time creating new ones like lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) seeking equality and recognition which goes against the norms and believes of most societies. The information age has also created another form of social inequality that has to do with the digital divide were access and use of the internet and other ICTs to access information has created a gap among people in both developed and developing economy.

Social Inequality in Nigeria

With civilization, countries around the world have always wanted a society where there is equal opportunity for all to achieve their personal and collective goals. This is why most countries have guaranteed equal rights to their citizens by clearly stating it in their constitutions or other documents of national importance. For example, the preamble of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 states that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal....” This same principle was enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Article 17 (1 & 2) which states that 1. “The states social order is founded on ideals of freedom equality and justice. 2. In furtherance of the social order, every citizen shall have equal rights, obligations

and opportunity before the law". (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

Apart from the constitution of Nigeria which guarantee equal rights to all its citizens as stated above, the National Development Plan outlined five main objectives of Nigeria as the foundation for the national policy on education to include: a free and democratic society, a just and egalitarian society, a united, strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy, and a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (Adenle and Uwameye, 2012). Similarly, The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as contained in AmusanEt'al (2012) which Nigeria adopted has eight goals to be achieved by 2015. The goals are: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve Universal Basic Education, promote gender equality, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health , combat AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and to develop a global partnership for development All these are indications that Nigeria is striving towards establishing equal opportunity to all its citizens but bad leadership, corruption, poor policy implementation remained some of the problems that leads to the underdevelopment being experienced in which inequality remains a visible sign.

Social inequality existing in Nigeria has taken a wider dimension due to the country's level of development. Though it is experienced in all facets of national life, some areas are more conspicuous than others. One of such is income inequality which has a multiplier effect. The extend of disparity in income determines the availability, use and types of social amenities and resources such as schools, health care, markets, food e.t.c available to the population. Ogunyomiet'al (2013) stated that "the disparity of people on the bases of financial statue has continued to widen despite increase in the standard of living of people". Adegoke (2013) affirmed this by saying that "Nigeria is among the thirty most unequal countries in the world with respect to income distribution, the poorest half of the population holds only 10% of national income". This has created a negative effect which according to Okorinkwo (2011) result in the "gradual building up of conscious hatred and deep rooted envy against the upper class who are often perceived to be exploiting the lower class". Also, Osahon & Osarobo (2011) added that the lopsided development in income distribution has often times resulted in

discontents, violence, corruption. Economic programmes like the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), and Poverty Alleviation Programme etc were introduced by different governments to bridge the poverty level in the country

Access to education in Nigeria has always been a thing of great concern. The importance of education to both individual wellbeing and national economic life has always been a critical issue that is why the Federal Government of Nigeria categorically stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) that "every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunity irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities, each according to his or her ability". Reforms and initiatives were put by various governments towards providing equal educational opportunity such as the introduction of Universal Basic Education (UBE), Education Trust Fund (ETF), National Open University, and National Commission for Normadic Education etc. Nwogu, (2015) discusses election method, the quota system of admission, unaffordable costs, gender discrimination, humanitarian emergencies and armed conflicts as barriers to attending equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. Many socio-economic disparities between the Northern and Southern parts of the country as well as those between the "haves" and the "have nots" "urban and rural areas" (Nwogu, 1998) are also factors that hinders equality in educational opportunity.

Another form of social inequality in Nigeria that is so prevalent is gender discrimination which is thus a pervasive global problem. Men seeing women as weaker sexes is common in most societies thereby depriving women of their rights and privileges. Ikpeze and Ifemeje (2012) x-rayed the Nigerian situation in which they concluded that: "Women, who constitute half the total Nigerian population, still continue to suffer intense marginalization and relegation to the background. They are discriminated against in virtually all spheres of life in Nigeria, e.g. in the home front, in educational institutions, in working place, and in political appointments".

The participation of Nigeria in some world feminist conferences like the Beijing conference (1995), being a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1985), and the embarking on several empowerment programs

for women like the Better Life Programme for Rural Women (1987) are all geared towards empowering women and eliminating gender inequality.

Ethnic and regional imbalance is another form of inequality in Nigeria which is a country with vast land mass and very high population that is “distinguished by language, customs and religious beliefs and varies in size, power and influence” (Raheem et al, 2014). This explains the concentration of institutions (education, health, military formations, industries and other developmental programmes) in certain areas than others translating into unequal economic opportunities, development and power. Odeyemi (2014) viewed the negative effect of ethnic inequality where he said that “the virus of ethnicity has been one of the most definitive causes of social crisis, injustice, inequality and religio-political instability in Nigeria. Though the quota system through the Federal Character Commission and the creation of states were done to give all a sense of belonging, the problem still persists.

Social inequality in Nigeria will continue to take a wider dimension as the world continues to advance technologically, politically, socially and economically. The inability of the country to catch up with these changing trends will automatically result to creating more gaps among its people.

Libraries as a Bridge to Social Inequality

The Holy Bible rightly states that my people perish because of lack of knowledge and information which is the source of knowledge is said to be power. Once people are equipped with the right information, their rights and privileges cannot be trampled upon and they will be able to make choices that will better their lives as such. The thin line that separates them on the bases of income, gender, prestige etc will diminish or reduce to the minimal and a society full of equal opportunity for all will be established.

The library which is an information management institution has a significant role to play in bridging the rising social inequality in Nigeria. This was explicitly stated by IFLA (2006) while explaining the role of library services in the information society as:

“Library and information services are key actors in providing unhindered access to essential resources for

economic and cultural advance. In doing so, they contribute effectively to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom, safeguarding democratic values and universal civil rights. They encourage social inclusion, by striving to serve all those in their user communities regardless of age, gender, economic or employment status, literacy or technical skills, cultural or ethnic origin, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation, and physical or mental ability.”

In achieving these roles as stated by IFLA, the library can also help to reduce social inequality by providing library and information services that are geared towards problem solving.

Reducing Information Poverty

Information poverty has remained a phenomenon that affects both developed and developing economy. It is “that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it” (Britz, 2004). This individuals and communities according to Shen (2013) who cited Kegan are:

1. The economically disadvantaged populations;
2. Rural people who are often geographically isolated by lack of communication and transportation systems;
3. Those disadvantaged by cultural and social poverty especially the illiterate, the elderly, women, and children;
4. Minorities who are discriminated against by race, creed and religion; and
5. The physically disabled/challenged".

These people are socially excluded and lack access to some basic things of life such as education, health care, employment opportunities, housing etc. Information gives these marginalized groups a sense of belonging in the society due to the role it plays in national development. Nkiko and Iroaganachi (2015) give the importance of information when they said that “Information is a very vital instrument for maintaining a healthy society and sustaining steady development in all facets of life. When this is absent deficiencies and deprivations of diverse magnitudes are perpetuated”. Information has therefore become an important

ingredient that stimulates socio-economic activities and serves as a tool for social change thereby bridging social inequality.

The role of the library in bridging information poverty therefore cannot be over emphasize as it provide link to vital information resources and equip people with the skills to locate, access and evaluate information to become information literate. Various library and information services such as Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), reference services, mobile library services to rural areas, library services to people with special needs (eg. the blind and deaf), audio-visual services among others should be make effective and geared towards meeting the information needs of different categories of people within the society.

The changing role of the library in the information age which Krolak (2005) observed "have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions". This role is facilitated by the library which employ the use the internet and other ICT's to facilitate easy access to information through subscribing to online databases and forming consortium for sharing information to meet the information needs of every individual in the society. The library therefore guarantees freedom of information to all to satisfy their information needs thereby keeping them inform with happenings around them.

Bridging the digital divide:

The transformation that is taking place in the world today is unprecedent due to the explosion of information powered by information and communication technology (ict). The internet and other associated technologies use in managing information are very essential in today's competitive global economy. "One of the key problems of the digital society is the gap between people with and without access to new, modern technologies and sources of knowledge" (Sabolovic-Krajina, 2011). And this digital divide has further widened social inequality in the society.

According to Gautam (2014), "The information revolution is exciting, and at its best, is about expanding equality of opportunity for all in our society. The 2016 International Telecommunication Union report which put Nigeria at 2.5% share of world internet usage

shows to a degree its level of social inequality. Bridging the digital divide which invariable will reduce the level of social inequality is pertinent. Pateman (n.d.) suggested that the digital divide will only be reduced or eliminated when the following conditions are created:

- All individuals are able to exercise an empowered and informed choice about their use or non use of ICT
- All individuals have ready access to the requisite social and technical support, skills and know how to support their use of ICT
- All individuals have ready access to ICT based content and services which are relevant and useful to their needs and interests
- all individuals have ready access to a full range of ICT hardware and Software.

The library being a key player in the information society due to its role in acquiring, organizing, storing and disseminating information has a greater capacity to implement the above. It does it by providing access to the internet and other communication technologies at little or no cost to a wider population. Also, librarians who are professionals in information management provide its users with the skills (through training and education) of using the computer (including software), other ICT devices and surfing the World Wide Web to obtain the information of their choice. This is essential for users of the library to be information literate and make optimum use of the various Information resources of the library and the web in this digital age.

Creating Social Capital

The library in the digital world is "no longer a passive repository of books and information or an outpost of culture, quiet and decorum in a noisy world. The new library is an active and responsive part of the community and an agent for change" (Urban Libraries Council, 2005). This new role of the library is not individual centered but involves group of people who come together to share ideas and create what is term social capital which according to Glaeser et al (1999) who cited Putnam represents features of social life-networks, norms, and trust-that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. These networks of people have real value for one another and work together towards achieving their mutual goals.

Social capital is an intangible resource and involves social networks that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefits which has a great impact in reducing social inequality in the society. Allan, Ozga and Smyth (2009) rightly affirmed this when they said that social capital is having great significant potential for reducing disadvantage, improving educational outcomes and enhancing health and wellbeing. The library being a social institution has a great potential of creating social capital based on Vårheim, Steinmo and Ide (n.d) who sited Cox et al. in their studies find out that libraries function to enhance social interaction and trust, and that they foster equal access and a sense of equity within the community within which they are placed, which in turn contributes to social capital. The library which is a hub for information promotes literacy and help people to share other people's idea that are contained in books, journals and other sources of information and also provide space and infrastructure for them to interact and discuss on ways to solve their problems. This interaction build up trust among them and enables them to solve societal issues that has to do with wealth generation, education, health, gender issues and power sharing etc.

Supporting the Development of Democratic Institutions

Democracy which is believed to be the best form of government in the world is defined as a political system of mass participation, competitive elections, and human and civil rights (Roskin et al, 2012). Gberekvbie (2014) cited Badru who further explained that:

"Democracy represents, first and foremost, an increase in citizens' political equality and equity in terms of their popular participation in the society. He argues that democracy is a system of government that enables both the leaders and the citizens to be conscious of what is required, and accomplish it for the betterment of that society in terms of political, social and economic development."

It is clear from the above statements that democracy promotes social equality which according to Dye and Zeigler (2003) is achieved by popular participation through majority rule and respect for the rights of minorities. The minorities in the society are the silent majority who are being discriminated on the bases of income, gender, ethnicity, social status etc. and democracy empowers and make them equal

participants in decision making on issues that affects the society as a whole.

Agbo and Onyekweodiri (2014) in the words of Bhatti said that information has help in the democratization process as it "promotes and empowers citizens' participation in the democratic process; it maintains the rule of law and creates a viable outlet for the injection of public opinion. Information informs the policy-making process of political leadership, all of which nurtures the building of sustainable peace for the enhancement of the state". As such, Democratic institutions -the legislative, the judiciary, the executive, the electoral commission and the police need to be empowered with information to function effectively for the realization of democratic ideals. Based on this, libraries remained the backbone that provides support for the democratic institutions to realize their potentials. Presidential libraries, parliamentary libraries and libraries in police training institutions provide the relevant information resources that will strengthen the democratic processes. Members of the three arms of government and the police with information at their disposal will be able to carry out their functions more effectively which will help in ensuring that democratic institutions are strengthen for achieving a virile democracy.

The role the library will play consciously in these areas will not only make people well informed, it will also lead to their overall development which vis a vis will reduce the thin line that separate them.

Conclusion

The role of libraries in bridging social inequality can only be achieve with total commitment on the part of the librarian in rendering effective and efficient library and information service delivery that are geared towards meeting user's information needs and the willingness of the users to utilizes the information. The library as a social institution must engage the community it serves with literacy advocacy programs that will empower them with the right skill to access the relevant information for their individual and community development which at the long run will ensure respect for human dignity and thus reducing the disparity existing among them.

Recommendations

The following are recommended based on the discussion:

1. The library should provide resources that are relevant to the information needs of the individual or society it serves.
2. Readership promotion campaign should be embarked upon by the library to encourage people to read so as to obtain vital information that will empower them.
3. The library should organize workshops, seminars and conferences on issues affecting the society and also provide facilities for people to always interact and share ideas.
4. The library should encourage the use of ICT's in its information service delivery so as engage its user community in the 21st century information society.

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