

Public Libraries and Provision of Human Rights Information for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper discusses the roles Public Libraries play in the Provision of Human Rights Information for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria.

Design/Methodology: A literature based opinion paper which examines concepts of democracy, fundamental human rights, and the role of public libraries in providing human right information. It also examined experiences from other countries, and further discussed challenges facing libraries in discharging this responsibility, and the way forward was clearly stated.

Findings: For a sound democracy, an informed society is an essential element, and public libraries need to position itself well to play this role.

Practical Implications: Information is a vital wheel on which democracy can efficiently rotate. Without information, people are kept in dark concerning their fundamental rights that are suppose to make them better citizens and active participants in the democratic process. Therefore, public libraries are very essential for democracy, since its essence is to provide, organize, preserve and make accessible information materials in print and non print media which will enable citizens to be informed members of the society thereby contributing to the growth and building of a strong democratic society and eradicate injustice which is a treat to democracy. This paper therefore recommends that Public libraries should provide space and a forum were people can come to interact and exchange ideas on issues bordering on democracy and human rights. Public libraries should also facilitate the teaching of human rights at all levels of education and professional training, through provision of research materials on human rights and democracy.

Originality/value-The role of Public libraries in the provision of human rights information for sustainable democracy in Nigeria were well discussed.

Keywords-Public Libraries, Information provision, Human rights, Sustainable Democracy.

Paper Type- View Point

Introduction

A society that is not informed is a deformed society and cannot grow and develop beyond the level they are informed. Therefore information is critical in the actualization of goals, aspirations and development of any nation. Information is power. It is relevant data, fact or ideas available for useful purpose Edoke (2000). It is knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact or circumstances. In the world today, information and knowledge have great impact on general developmental process of a nation. People that have access to the right information and understand how to make use of the acquired information in exercising their economic, political and legal rights become empowered, which in turns enable them to build a solid democracy. (Asari, 2008). Democracy in its definition and meaning connotes respect and upholding of fundamental rights of citizens

without which no government is qualified to be termed democratic. Therefore, for a country to be truly democratic, the fundamental rights of the citizens must be respected such as right to life, right to vote and be voted for, freedom of expression, right to express ideas etc. To this effect, efforts are being made by various individuals, regional and international organizations, as well as non governmental bodies to internalize and globalize the campaign for promotion of human rights and democracy with a view to eradicating all forms of oppressive regime in human society as a means of achieving peace, stability and development (Idowu, 2008)

In view of the above scenario, the public libraries have veritable roles to play in enlightening and informing the citizens irrespective of their religion, tribe, cultural and economic background since they are the chief custodians and disseminators of information.

The Concept of Democracy

Abraham Lincoln the 16th United States president described democracy as “government of the people by the people and for the people”. In the present world democracy has become a popular concept that resonates in people’s minds and springs from their lips as they fight for freedom and a better life. The word democracy comes from two Greek words “demos” meaning the people and “kratos” meaning rule or power. Therefore democracy simply means people’s rule. It is a form of government in which the people own the government and not the government owing the people. Modern democracy is representative in nature in that they elect a certain member of their fellow citizens to represent them in making decisions about law and other matters; however, the power to govern still comes from the citizens. The following features among others characterizes democracy: the principle of equality, right to vote and be voted for, freedom of speech, right to life, freedom of association, freedom to think, freedom to work and live where a person choose, freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment etc. Therefore, in an ideal democracy, people should be free within the framework of the law to behave, believe and express themselves as they wish (Ruth, 2008). The principles of democracy equally recognize that it is the right of the people to take part in the government of their country. The above guarantees a true democracy; a society where people cannot express their opinion freely cannot be democracy. It is on this backdrop that the American declaration of independence stated that:

“...all men are created equal; and they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights government are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it”

Knowledge is power, and information is the remedy to the darkness under which corruption and abuse thrives. Democracy solidifies on a knowledgeable citizenry whose access to a broad range of information enables them to participate

fully in public life, help determine priorities for public spending, receive equal access to justice, and hold their public officials accountable. When the government and quasi-governmental agencies perform under a veil of secrecy, people are denied the right to know about public affairs, and the press is only able to speculate and subsist on rumors. Poor public access to information feeds corruption. Lack of information impedes citizens’ ability to assess the decisions of their leaders, and even to make informed choices about the individuals they elect to serve as their representatives. Although perhaps most often considered in the fight against corruption, access to human right information is equally critical for citizens’ capacity to exercise their rights and to uphold the responsibilities and accountability of their leaders. (Neuman, 2007).

The Concept of Human Right

Human rights are inherent in human nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. The origin of human rights can be traceable to the creation of man and the right to life accorded him by God while the inherent nature of these rights is one of the many qualities that God has given to man. Fundamental human rights have been defined as moral rights which every human being everywhere, at all times, ought to have simply because he is rational and moral. (Idowu, 2008). Human right is what enables us to develop fully our human qualities, intelligence and our conscience. They are based on humankind’s increasing demand for a life which the inherent dignity of each person is accorded respect and protection. Their denial is not only an individual and personal tragedy, but creates conditions of social, economic and political unrest which undermines democracy.

The need to uphold the concept of human rights can be traced to the dehumanizing events, gross violation of human rights and wanton destructions of lives and properties during the Second World War, which compelled most nations of the world to adopt the United Nations charter in 1945 at San Francisco with the following preamble which reads as follows:

“We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal right of men

and women of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for obligations arising from treaties, and other sources of international law can be maintained and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.. to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another...”

In line with the above, Kofi Annan stated on the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of human rights that “Human rights is foreign to no country and native to all nations... and that without human rights, no peace or prosperity will ever last”. (Ibrahim, 2006) argues that there is a universal consensus that human rights must be continuously promoted and defended around the world. Therefore, since the adoption of international human rights, states have made commitments to promote and defend the freedom, rights and dignity of all human beings. Many reasons have now emerged as regards the origin of the human rights provisions in Nigeria 1960 Independence Constitution. The most popular is the recommendation by the Willink Commission on Minorities. Others are the demand by early nationalities. These fundamental human rights which are guaranteed in the constitution are not privileges in the sense that they could be withdrawn at the whims and caprices of the government of the day. They are rights which the executive, the legislature and the judiciary are all enjoined to protect. Any violation by the government is liable to be called to order. Where the violation has occasioned injury which could be compensated in financial terms courts are duty bound to make orders of reparation in monetary terms. In fact the hallmark of democracy in recent times is the extent to which these guaranteed rights and freedoms are protected. To mark the importance which the Nigeria state attached to these provisions, constitutions from independence to the present have all included very stringent procedures for its alterations. (Aduba, 1999) This is particularly true in Nigeria where struggles for human rights were seriously repressed by corrupt and authoritarian regimes that has no commitment to protect human rights and the rule of law thereby endangering the principles of democracy; this lead to the struggle and fight for human right by various human right groups and activists. The enjoyment of human rights by everyone regardless of sex, gender, race ethnic

origin, nationality, religion, economic status has been and will continue to be one of the greatest aspirations of all people.

Therefore, fundamental rights must be guaranteed and protected before citizens can be in a position to render their human resources for effective democratization and overall development of their nation. In other words, promotion of human rights is primarily fundamental to the emancipation of an enduring democracy and national growth. (Idowu, 2008).

The Role of Public Libraries in Providing Access to Information on Human Rights

UNESCO Public library manifesto states that:

“The public library shall in the principle be free of charge and services should be provided on the base of equality of access for all regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language and social status. It equally defines public library as agency which helps to create a democratic, equal and peaceful society.”

By the above manifesto, public libraries are democratic institution by its very nature and stands in the position of providing access to human rights information.

Public libraries have a veritable role to play in promoting democracy, being a social agent for informing and educating people about their fundamental human rights. It is a central service unit of operation established to provide information materials and facilities for knowledge acquisition. According to (Abba Iya, 2009) libraries are agencies through which sources of information of accumulated knowledge and experiences are selected, acquired, organized, preserved and disseminated to those who need them. It is the intellectual centre of the society containing cultural, economic, social, educational and political records. Public libraries are regarded as the people’s university providing and independent decision taking (Oyegade, Nassarawa and Mokogwu, 2003). It attempt to meet a wide varieties of readers needs, providing varied information resources such as text books, journals, literary books and other publications. For example, in the United States, public libraries are considered as particular form of the freedom of expression because they are conceived as a necessity for an informed society

to enable the system function effectively (Aguolu and Aguolu, 2000). Through the provision of wide range of information materials, public library users are exposed to vital information concerning their right and responsibilities. Public libraries by its nature are accessible to all regardless of age, culture, tribe, education, or political inclination. It gives people opportunity to acquire whatever knowledge or information they may need to function. There are some materials by its nature might not be easily acquired by individuals, due to cost and accessibility, the public libraries can make it accessible to users. It houses relevant information materials pertaining to human rights and can be organized and designed to captivate the interest of the readers through special information service delivery such as: exhibition of materials that deals on human rights, posters on human rights, charts, group discussion on some vital issues as it effects their human rights, current awareness services, and selective dissemination of information. Public library also serves as an avenue for in-house story telling hours ‘ for the young ones, and other extension services such as the establishment of book clubs, book services, organized debates, symposia, drama, and poetry. (Wall, 1991) Through this service, the public libraries make information materials on human rights easily accessible and available to the community, when they need it and in the manner they will comprehend it.

Therefore, the public libraries play a mediating role by providing access to such materials freely without restrictions without which the right to some information would have been denied to some people that which is their democratic right. People who dwell in rural community and do not have access to library services remain behind in development and hardly take part in democratic process, they hardly know their rights and had leaders imposed on them (Throup, 1998). The American declaration of independence states that... “Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of the ends for which it was instituted, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it”. These above statement makes the role of Public libraries glaring since people cannot enforce the right which they no nothing about. Without adequate information and access to it, people are not enabled to fulfill their learning potentials and engage in the democratic process and learn new skills to enhance their livelihoods. Public libraries therefore caters for the information

needs of the community it serves by providing various information materials on human right and all areas of knowledge in form of print and non print materials, through a specialized information service particularly in a democratic society where people need to be part and parcel of government, and this can be achieved when people know their duties, rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. The United Nation declaration on Human rights article 19 stated that “everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression to seek and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers” As Mason quoted by Kranich (2007) stated: “knowledge will forever govern ignorance and that people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy or both.”

Experience from other Countries

In the case of the United States, (Kramch, 2003) stated that the public has registered to vote and cast election ballots in libraries, schools and community centers. They monitor the work of both elected and appointed officials through the reports housed in depository libraries of government information; there they also gather data for taking position on issues facing the communities. During campaign period, citizens find voters guides and other relevant information about election there. American libraries ensure the freedom of speech, the freedom to read, the freedom to view. Their libraries stand in defense of freedom. Among their prominent leaders are Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson who believe that a free society must ensure the preservation and provision of accessible knowledge for all its citizens.

In Kenya, a public library has various clubs in which the public interact with one another; this forum brings people together to exchange ideas. Before Kenya general election of 2007, Kenya National library brought people from the electoral commission to sensitize the public on the importance of the right to vote and the right to choose the candidate of their choice. (Ngugi, 2007).

Challenges Facing Public Libraries

Information Suppression

This is one of the major challenges facing the public libraries in their efforts to disseminate

information. Sometimes freedom of information is suppressed by certain individual or groups, reason being that they do not want people to have adequate knowledge or information on such areas that might seem detrimental to them so that no one will have access to it. Sometimes they justify their actions by labeling such materials to be destructive to society. However, public libraries should insist on providing information about the government that they want to have.

Inadequate Public Awareness

This is another challenge facing public libraries. Most times important information materials in the library are not known by the users and so they are left unused.

Fund and Funding

No library can function effectively without adequate funding. Without adequate financial support public libraries cannot play the role expected of it. Funding therefore has continued to be a great challenge facing most public libraries.

Recommendations

Public libraries should provide space and a forum where people can come to interact and exchange ideas on issues bordering on democracy and human rights. Facilitators can be invited to talk and sensitize the people on issues such as their right to vote and elect their representatives, human right issues and the importance of democracy etc

Public libraries should also facilitate the teaching of human rights at all levels of education and professional training, through provision of research materials on human rights and democracy.

Equally, citizens cannot request for an information materials, unless they are aware of its existence. Therefore, it is important that the libraries create awareness of the existing materials through posters, library talks, book display, library orientation library guides etc. The public libraries can as well help to educate and inform the illiterate on their rights through posters and illustrations that shows them what they need to know and do, and also through films in local languages.

Conclusion

For a sound democracy, an informed society is an essential element. Individuals need to know their rights and responsibilities so as to demand it when it is not given and also to understand the democratic process. Therefore, to achieve sound democracy, public libraries should position itself well to collect, organize, preserve and provide access to information regarding the fundamental human rights of the citizens so as to position them to be well informed without which democracy will be endangered. Equally, Public libraries should provide access to government-held information, which allows individuals to better understand the role of government and the decisions being made on their behalf, and with an informed citizenry, governments can be held accountable for their policies, and citizens can more effectively choose their representatives.

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