

Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria: Its Relevance and Challenges to National Development

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Abstract

Purpose: The goal of the paper is to provide general review of the freedom of Act in Nigeria with particular reference to its relevance and challenges to national development.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The approach secondary research.

Findings: The paper highlighted critical provision of the freedom of information Act, and its relevance especially with regard to democracy and good governance, economic prosperity, free press, and gender empowerment.

Practical Implications: The practical implication lies in the challenges likely to be countered in the implementation of the freedom of information Act. For instance, the paper contends that the 2 days given to Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDA) within which to provide request information may be too short.

Originality/Value: the originality of the paper predicated on the argument that easy access to information is the foundation of sustainable democracy good governance and indeed of any economy.

Keyword: Freedom of Information Act. Challenges, National Development, Nigeria, Democracy

Introduction

Development in all fields of human endeavour is a goal that all nations of the world strive to attain. Information on social, health, education, economic, demographic and environmental conditions of a country serve as the foundation for the planning of every developmental activity. Availability and access to information has therefore been identified as a most crucial factor for the development process of all nations as it aids in evidence-based forecasting and policy making for the authorities, helps researchers analyze the society and assists the citizenry in general to have opinions and hold government accountable for their policies and actions (Gewalli, 2009). Lack of access to information breeds poverty, ignorance, corruption, bad governance and backwardness for any nation (Denedo, 2003). In this present era of globalization and democratization, information has become a social, political, educational, health and economic necessity. It has become a tool of empowerment for all and a stimulus for social change, active and participatory citizenship and lifelong learning (Carlsson, 2010).

Information is central to human existence and is the basis for political, social and economic liberty. Information is also a necessary ingredient for making of sensible choice or wise decisions. Information provide facts and facts constitute the basis of order in personal and communal lives. Viewed from a political perspective, it is generally acknowledged that when people are empowered with vital information to appreciate, understand and make up their minds as well as take own decisions concerning various political issues such as election and good governance, sustainable democracy would be entrenched. The United Nations General Assembly in its 1946 session adopted Resolution 59(1) which affirmed that freedom of information is a fundamental human right. This was properly articulated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a United Nations General Assembly Resolution 217 (111) of 1948 which recognizes that freedom of expression including freedom to access information and free press is a fundamental human right. Freedom of expression includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and right to access information held by public authorities (United Nations, 1999).

Access to government documents and information is a necessity for developing and sustaining a civil and egalitarian society (Banisar, 2002). It is therefore understandable for the African Commission on Human and People's Rights to assert that 'public bodies hold information not for themselves but as custodians of the public good and everyone has a right to access this information, subject only to clearly defined rules established by the law' (African Commission on Human and People's Rights, 2002). In other words those in authority are mere caretakers of the government information on behalf of the people, not owners. However many laws made in different countries including Nigeria have secrecy clauses which prohibit the disclosure of official information.

In Nigeria, the Official Secret Act, Federal Commissions Privileges and Immunities Act, Public Complaints Commission Act, Evidence Act, some provisions in the Criminal Code and the Penal Code make it an offence for a government official to reveal particular types of information. These provisions engendered a culture of secrecy in government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) as the divulging of certain types of information could earn an officer a jail term or termination of his services irrespective of Section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the country which guarantees every person the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. Democracy and good governance can only be enthroned when the principles of accountability, citizenry participation and transparency are taken cognizance of. This however cannot be meaningfully achieved when government hoards vital information that should be of public interest. A law that would lay down the procedure to translate the universal right to information into reality was therefore needed to provide a statutory framework for the provision of access to government held information.

This study therefore aims to trace the history of the realization of the Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria, to find out the relevance of the Act to the different sectors of the country and determine the possible challenges that might be faced in the implementation of the Law in certain sectors of the national polity.

Freedom of Information law in Nigeria

In 1993 three civil society groups and professional bodies in Nigeria started the agitation independently for the citizens of the country to have legally enforceable right to access government records and information including information held by private organizations that receive government funding. Subsequently, the organizations – Media Rights Agenda (MRA), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) and the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) agreed to work together for the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act (Freedom of Information Coalition, 2006). A Freedom of Information Bill was proposed which would amongst other things protect public records and information to the extent consistent with public interest and protection of personal privacy as well as protect serving public officers from adverse consequences for disclosing certain kind of official information without authorization and institute procedures for the achievement of those purposes. These bodies drew their ideas from other countries which had formerly passed the Bill into law. These include Sweden which was the first country to have a Freedom of Information law in 1766, followed by Colombia in 1888, Finland – 1951, United States of America – 1966, France – 1978, Australia and New Zealand – 1982, Canada – 1983 amongst sixty eight (68) other countries (Udapudi, 2007).

In Nigeria, the 34-clause Bill was presented initially in 1999 with the return to democratic rule. There were great expectations that the Bill would be passed into law. The House of Representatives passed the Freedom of Information Bill by August 2004 and two years later, by 2006, the Senate by a consensus vote passed the same Bill. Curiously, the Bill was not vetoed, amended or assented to within the two-term eight years duration of the government. Advocacy visits to the legislative arm of the Federal government, Federal government media agencies, workshops, seminars and informal meetings were embarked on by civil society groups, coalitions and professional bodies to raise awareness about the Bill and sensitize the government and the entire populace on the necessity of signing the Bill into law. After spending over eleven years in the legislative chambers, it was signed into law by the President Goodluck Jonathan on May 28, 2011.

The passage of the Bill was preceded by the clause-by-clause consideration as prepared by the House Committee on Information and Orientation and the Justice Committee. It had gone through the normal legislative procedures of three Readings, a Public Hearing and passage by both chambers of the National Assembly.

The law makes provision for the public access of government records and information to the citizens of the country irrespective of the form in which it is kept. This is to enable them participate more effectively in the making and administration of laws and policies, and to promote accountability of public affairs. The law also establishes procedures for the achievement of these purposes and related ones. It prescribes a three-year jail term for any officer of government found guilty of falsification or destruction of information. As stated by the law; "It shall be an offence punishable with three years imprisonment for any officer of public institution to destroy, alter, falsify or deliberately misrepresent information kept in his custody".

The law however, denied the public access to information on defense, international affairs, and matters under investigation by law enforcement agencies. The Bill also excluded public access to information affecting the economic interest of the country. In Section 15, the Bill states that "a public institution may deny an application for information that contains trade secrets, financial, commercial or technical information that belongs to the government and has substantial economic value or is likely to have substantial economic value." The law in Section 19(1) C also avers that an applicant for information about library circulation and other records identifying library users with specific materials may be denied except where the public interest in disclosing the information outweighs whatever injury the disclosure would cause.

Also, the Freedom of Information Act, 2011 made it mandatory for every public institution to publish certain information concerning its operation even without request by anybody. Section 2(3) of the law declares that "a public institution shall cause to be published the following information:

- ❖ A description of the organization and responsibilities of the institution including details of the programmes and functions of each division, branch and departments;

- ❖ List of all classes of records under the control of the institution in sufficient detail to facilitate the exercise of the right to information under this Act;
- ❖ A list of all manuals used by employees of the institution in administering or carrying out any of the programmes or activities of the institution;
- ❖ A description of document containing final opinions including concurring and dissenting opinions as well as orders made in the adjudication of cases;
- ❖ Document containing substantive rules of the institution; and
- ❖ Document containing statements and interpretations of policies, which have been adopted by the institution.

The Act makes adequate provision for the information needs of illiterate and disabled applicants. It also provides for a judicial review where access to information is denied. According to Ojo (2011), beyond guaranteeing access to government held information, the law will facilitate development, energize the nation's media and give the citizenry the opportunity to be involved in governance as they would know what decisions are being taken and they can contribute to the decision-making processes.

Relevance of the Freedom of Information law

➤ Democracy and good governance

The Freedom of Information Act, 2011 is most relevant to the entrenchment of democracy and good governance in Nigeria. Information is vital for the functioning of a genuine democracy. The citizenry have to be kept informed of affairs of the government. Free exchanges of ideas and discourses have been deemed essential for the survival of a free society. An underlying foundation of a democratic state is the existence of an informed population who is able to thoughtfully choose its representatives and hold them accountable. A country that grants access to government information stands to have a more grounded democracy as the Freedom of Information Act encourages the existence of a pluralistic society where value is placed on differences in ideology, creed and orientation as necessary components of democracy (Nyei, 2011). The access to government information would therefore encourage the citizenry to make informed inputs on how they are governed and how their common wealth of resources can be

equitably shared. This is expected to aid in eliminating the perennial friction and mutual suspicion as well as the continual cries of marginalization by different sections of the country as it would give everyone a sense of belonging and government facilities, programmes and assets would belong to everybody and be better protected and appreciated.

A large segment of funds meant for the improvement of standard of living of Nigerians in the areas of housing, transportation and road network, health, education and power generation end up in private bank accounts. It is therefore not surprising that Transparency International (2006) rated Nigeria as the most corrupt out of ninety (90) nations assessed in 2000, second out of ninety one (91) nations in 2001, second out of one hundred and two (102) nations in 2002, most corrupt nation out of one hundred and thirty three (133) nations assessed in 2003 and in 2005 Nigeria was adjudged the sixth most corrupt nation out of 186 nations assessed (Transparency International, 2006). The right to access government held information would promote accountability and good governance thus eliminating secrecy which is a breeding ground for corruption, abuse of power and financial mismanagement as it would help expose corrupt officials and deter others from manipulating figures that are already known to all.

The military government of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the June 1993 presidential elections which had been adjudged to be the fairest and most credible election held in the country. Nigerians were never told the reason why it happened, rather the military ruler asserted that he had access to information that compelled him to annul the election. The Freedom of Information law would serve as a deterrent to such occurrence taking place again in the country.

The Freedom of Information law is thus meant to reduce corruption and enthrone transparency as the Act establishes the right of every Nigerian to be granted access to information about the mandates, roles and responsibilities of public institutions. This would make it possible for the public to know what these government bodies do and enable citizens to ask questions and receive answers when government services are not up to the expected standard. The law would also enable the opening up of the books of

government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) so that the citizenry would have access to processes, procedures and decisions relating to the functions of government officials. This act of transparency would aid in establishing the amount of service expected from MDAs so that undue demands would not be made (Mensah, 2010). The law provides suitable platforms for the led and the leaders to know about each other and this helps in giving the government of the day legitimacy at the grassroots' level. This can potentially facilitate the entrenchment of democratic values in the next generation of leaders.

Corruption, lack of transparency and non-accountability by government officials are clear indicators of underdevelopment of African countries especially Nigeria with its huge oil resources. With the passage of the Freedom of Information law in the country, it is expected that the nations' wealth which has been formerly siphoned away through corruption would now be equitably and openly used to provide the much needed infrastructure in health, education and transportation while services like electricity and water supply would become stable (Olagunju, 2011).

➤ **Economic prosperity**

In the absence of true information, one can at best be making wrong and costly assumptions when confronted with decision-making challenges. For instance is it possible for a businessman to make meaningful and reliable plans on where to get the most number of teenagers for his product targeted at that particular age range when the correct population figures are hidden away in government records and a doctored one released to the masses? Any decision taken in this particular circumstance would most likely be an uninformed guess and can be a miscalculation. Many businesses in Nigeria are tied to government's actions. To a large degree, the Nigerian private sector is still heavily dependent on public sector transactions. Restrictions on access to government information about inflation rate, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and other statistical financial information would most probably lead to large scale miscalculation and mal-investments by entrepreneurs. The Freedom of Information Act would therefore create a level playing ground for both sectors. It would help in generating confidence in the economy and

contribute greatly towards attracting increased inflow of both new direct foreign and local investments into the country (Freedom of Information Coalition, 2005).

The relevance of the Freedom of Information law to the Nigerian economy can never be over-emphasized. Is it possible for Nigerians to correctly calculate the true price of a litre of refined fuel when information on crude oil production, transportation costs to the refinery and the true state of refineries in Nigeria may be known only by oil companies, Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) and other high level government officials? If the Freedom of Information law was in existence when the contracting of the US\$16 billion power projects were given, Nigerians would have had access to the information that many of the firms that bid and won the contracts were unregistered ghost companies and were out to defraud the nation. Enough noise would have been made and qualified companies would have won the contracts and Nigeria's power problem would have been immensely reduced. This would have given a major boost to industrialization as use of private generating plants for power has been a major drawback for maximum production by industries. Industries would have employed more people, more medium scale industries would have sprung up, artisans would ply their trade more successfully and all these would have helped in keeping the crime rate low as more and more people would be gainfully employed (Ajayi, 2008).

The privatization of government owned entities like NITEL would have been a success if the Freedom of Information law was in existence when those companies were sold. Nigeria is a country abundantly blessed with natural resources including oil and gas deposits, a variety of solid minerals and arable agricultural land. The nation has no business being poor. With the enactment of the Freedom of Information law, the records of monies accruing from all these resources would be better trailed and the spending would be monitored for development.

➤ **Free press**

The disappointing level of development in Africa is due to the fact that political leaders mismanage and misappropriate national resources meant for projects that would enhance the level of modernization as well as the overall material well-being of the masses. However a

free press can be used as the main weapon that could be used to curb these excesses (Ogbondah, 2004). Anegbode & Azelama (2003) have portrayed the press as the watchdog and conscience of the nation. The effectiveness of the media depends on access to information, media freedom and freedom of expression which is undermined by government secrecy which denies the media access to information on matters of public interest (Sowunmi, Raufu, Oketokun, Salako & Usifoh, 2010). The job of the media involves a lot of investigation and cross checking of facts; the ability of the press to gain access to government held information and information about government funds in the private sector would therefore subject transactions of those in power to close scrutiny (Omoera, 2010). With the enactment of the Freedom of Information law, the power of the press to ferret out facts for the citizenry for a better society would be unleashed. The law would therefore improve the circulation of information through the mass media and improve the quality of the media in Nigeria as the press would have access to accurate information. Propaganda by government owned media agencies would be reduced as both the private and government press organs would know the facts of stories emanating from government sources (Olakitan, 2012).

➤ **Gender empowerment**

Gender empowerment is needful for national development as women are an important segment of the society. The Freedom of Information law would enable everyone including the civil societies and foreign donors to know what the government has done on behalf of the marginalized section of the society especially the women in rural areas. It is also believed that the law would assist in exposing human rights violations against women as a vulnerable group and ensuring that the perpetrators are held accountable. The law also has great potential in the enhancement of women's right and emancipation in Africa as information about resources allocated to the improvement of women's health would be easily accessible (Kagoiya, 2009).

Challenges to the Freedom of Information law

Some challenges may be faced in the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act for national development. It is envisaged that these challenges would be faced by the

MDAs, media houses, libraries as well as by the general populace.

- **MDAs**

There is the likelihood that untangling government held information for public access would take some time because governance has become quite complicated, powerful and corrupt. Old habits die hard, the culture of secrecy has eaten deep into the fabric of the Civil Service. The Official Secret Act must be repealed to make the FOI law very effective as public officials may still want to hide under it to withhold information. Government MDAs do not have a single system of filing and record keeping. Pages go missing in some files while some files simply disappear. Government workers need to be reoriented in openness and transparency as well the import of the new law. The law requires the publication of annual reports by MDAs, an exercise which had been erratically done over the years. Openness and objectiveness of government are needed to deepen the impact of the Act. Public officials must ensure that information on their activities are properly compiled and documented, so as to ease dissemination. Records management in Nigeria is still poor in spite of the FOI Act, however the attitude of Nigerians towards record keeping is expected to change as demands for information are made on MDAs (Aminu, Kagu, Malgwi & Danjuma 2011).

However, the seven (7) days given within which the MDAs are to provide information requested for has been regarded as too short as government officials would need time to sort through files to be able to accurately collate the needed information. This would prove a major challenge to MDAs especially if there is no Department headed by a professional specifically set up for the provision of requested information.

- **Media Houses**

Media houses in the country need to embark on massive training of their workers for them to be in tune with the provisions of the Act. Their managers need to invite experts to show them how they can go about extracting information from government departments without offending the rules. They need to be trained on how to be professional about this, how to do it employing the best practices (Okparadike, 2011).

The Freedom of Information Act would promote press freedom. Primarily, press freedom means that news media are not subject to censorship by the government, either directly or indirectly. This means that government does not have the right to try to control or block certain information from being published by the press. Irrespective of how advantageous this seems to be, media houses would face the challenge of now 'applying brakes' themselves concerning which information to let loose on the citizenry (Maduabuchi, 2011). This might be adjudged dangerous to national security and the moral fabric of the society as the country is yet to have an Information Policy that would check the dissemination of all types of information (Uhegbu, 2007).

- **Libraries**

Librarians have long been concerned with issues around transparency and freedom of information. Indeed, libraries are seen as playing a crucial role in terms of facilitating access to information which is a fundamental constituent of the democratic process. The implementation of the Act would prove challenging in some areas to libraries.

The law advocates in Section 9(2) for proper record keeping by every government institution of all its activities, operations and businesses and proper organization and maintenance of such records in such a way that would facilitate public access to such information. The proper organization and maintenance of information resources to enable access is the core duty of librarians. On this lies the onus of the law because without organizing, maintaining and making the government held information available, the whole purpose of the law would be defeated.

According to Oyetibo (2011), the position of the public information officer was absent in the law thus applicants may be confused on whom to address their applications to and who should be held accountable for failure of provision of information. Would it be proper to call the staff who organize, maintain and make accessible information sources 'public information officer' rather than a librarian? What qualifications are needed to be a public information officer? However the professional body of librarians – Nigerian Library Association and the body regulating the practice of librarianship in Nigeria

are yet to take proper cognizance of this and come up with policies that would ensure that other professionals do not encroach on the exclusive preserve of librarians. The neglect of this issue by these bodies could give leeway to the creation of a cadre in the Civil Service to perform the functions of librarians and this would be a major challenge of the law as pertains to librarianship. Underlying the whole process is the need for effective records management. Libraries also need to formulate policies and mechanisms that would aid in the determination of how documents and records should be kept temporarily, archived or disposed of, and an audit trail of such decisions would also be recorded.

The classification of government information has proved to be problematic as they are differently labelled from source and this can be confusing. According to Bullen (2008) the government is an enormous source of information ranging from statistics on education, health and the society to rules and regulations about every facet of living. The Freedom of Information Act is a significant tool in allowing access to this information. However the classification of these information resources need to be synchronized by the Library and Information Science professionals so that access can be ensured.

Section 2(4) of the Act notes that public institutions should ensure that information about their organizations be widely disseminated and made available to all through various means including print, electronic and online sources and at the offices of such public institutions. The recognition of the role of libraries especially the public libraries as the memory banks of their community was seriously omitted. Making such information resources available to public libraries either in their print or electronic format would augur well for the wide use of such resources and the success of the Act as more people would gain access to them. This would eliminate delays and hindrances that might be encountered for request of information at the public institutions.

General populace

Low level of awareness amongst the citizenry about the existence of the Freedom of Information Act and how to use the law serves as a great impediment to its effective implementation and enforcement. Even amongst the educated, the law is viewed as a media Act

that does not concern the ordinary citizen. Massive awareness of the law need to be undertaken so that the general populace can begin to grasp at the meaning of having access to government held information.

The general apathy normally displayed by the citizenry over government actions is also a huge challenge to the success of the law. Roads are shoddily constructed and nobody asks why, instead it is assumed that those in authority have taken their share of the contract money so who are you going to report to? How many citizens would leave their everyday oil to earn what to eat and go to government offices to lay complaints about the non-collection of refuse that had been contracted out at a huge sum? For the Freedom of Information law to have any impact in the country, citizens need to learn afresh how to assume civic responsibilities.

Conclusion

The enactment of the Freedom of Information law is a move towards the right direction as pertains to the national development of the country. Easy access of information is the foundation of sustainable democracy and good governance as well as the livewire of any economy. Government is not only for those in positions of authority but also for the governed. It is therefore right for the citizenry to have access to government held information. The challenges of low level of awareness of the law, training for mass media practitioners to be able to operate under the law, provision of more time frame to government workers for provision of information and the issue of who organizes and maintains government information for accessibility as well as the recognition of public libraries as the memory banks of their communities need to be tackled for the law to fully impact Nigerians positively.

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