

Dynamic partnership for access and transformation in libraries for young people in port Harcourt: UNESCO 2014 World Book Capital

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how a non-governmental organization (NGO) can collaborate with libraries and individuals to provide access to reading materials and libraries for young people in Nigeria, using the platform of the 2014 UNESCO World Book Capital City (WBCC) programme. The NGO known as the Rainbow Book Club (The Club), with support from the President of Nigeria and the government of Rivers State bided and won the 2014 UNESCO (WBCC) for Port Harcourt City, making it the first city in Sub-Saharan Africa to win the prestigious title. The Club promotes reading and encourages reading habits in children through their various activities since 2005.

The Club's activities under the PHWBCC, in partnership with libraries affected access to reading materials and libraries for the young people in the city of Port Harcourt and its environs. These activities included planting of 'seed' libraries, book clubs, book donations, renovation and construction of public libraries and other literary activities identified in the paper. Port Harcourt is the capital of Rivers State having a population of about 5.6 million people.

How the partnership between Rainbow Book Club and the libraries provided access to reading materials, library-related activities and transformed libraries in the city of Port Harcourt is what this paper attempts to illustrate using Tables and simple percentages, while showing photographs and video clips of the UNESCO WBCC, 2014 during presentation.

Keywords: Library partnerships. Young people. Port Harcourt World Book Capital City, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The World Book Capital City (WBCC) project is an initiative of UNESCO. On November 2, 2001, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the 31c/Resolution 29, establishing the WBCC. Through the selection Committee –comprising UNESCO representatives, International Publishers Association, International Booksellers Federation and IFLA, cities are nominated. Up until 2003, cities were nominated without public bid. From 2004, winners of WBCC emerged by public bid. Each winner starts from the Copyright Day which is April 23rd and ends on April 22nd the following year. Port Harcourt City of Nigeria became WBCC in April 23rd, 2014 to April 22nd, 2015.

Port Harcourt is the capital of Rivers State. Rivers State is one of 36 States that make up Nigeria. The State prides itself as the “Treasure Base of the Nation” with flowing “Rivers of Possibilities” because of her oil wealth. Hence the PHWBC 2014 had as its theme: **“Books: Windows to Our World of Possibilities”** to drive all of her programmes. Known as “Oil Rivers Protectorate” in the colonial era, still, a home to multinationals. There are international airports, seaports, several institutions of higher learning and other modern infrastructure. It is Nigeria’s “Garden City” because of her beautiful gardens and recreation centres. Port Harcourt Polo Club ranks amongst the top 100 polo clubs in the world (*Rivers of Possibilities* Vol.1, p120). A major characteristic of Rivers State is that “it is one of the most multi-ethnic and multi-lingual states of Nigeria” (Lawrence-Nemi, 2014) with corresponding diverse cultural heritage and history with a population of over 5 million people (*Rivers of Possibilities* Vol. 2, p.12). The city served as a centre point for British Military operations in World War 1 for transporting coal from Nigeria to Europe.

The Rainbow Book Club (The Club) - a non-governmental organization - is the body through which Port Harcourt won the WBCC bid. The Club has been promoting reading and encouraging reading habits in children through their various activities. They did the bidding and won the WBCC 2014. Port Harcourt became the first city in Sub-Saharan Africa to win the coveted title and second in Africa after Alexandria (Egypt) in 2002. The yearlong activities of the Port Harcourt World Book Capital City (PHWBCC) enlisted the participation of stakeholders in the book industry (writers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, readers) and the public. The main aim was to provide access to more reading materials and libraries for young people to get them reading again. In what follows, we shall examine how the partnership between the Club and libraries on the platform of the 2014 PHWBCC provided access to reading materials, literary activities and libraries for young people in Port Harcourt.

PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES OF RAINBOW CLUB

According to the Oxford dictionary of current English, 3rd ed. 2001, partnership is the association of two or more people doing something together as partners. Here, the Club in partnership with individuals, organizations and libraries organizes library-related literary events in Nigeria. For example, in 2009, the Club in partnership with Skye Bank, renovated and equipped a library in the oldest primary school in Ogoja, Cross Rivers State of Nigeria. In 2005, the Club initiated “Get Nigeria Reading Again” campaign in Port Harcourt, drawing attention to reading for personal and national development. The Club observed that the young people in Nigeria were gradually losing reading habit. Hence, under the PHWBC, 2014, the Club collaborated with libraries to organize the activities described in the following paragraphs.

Authors/Celebrities/Leaders Read

This is a reading campaign whereby authors, celebrities and leaders were invited to read their books to the public. In one of such gatherings, Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka was a Guest and he read to the public. As these prominent citizens and role models read to students at community centres, libraries and schools, participants were inspired to derive pleasure and entertainment from reading books. Over 500 children benefited from this activity.

Book Exhibitions, Arts and Culture

Through these events, foreign missions represented in Nigeria were invited to display their arts, culture, book and reading traditions. Some of the embassies included those from Switzerland, Ghana and the British Council. The foreign cultures and book exhibitions provided exposure to children and libraries.

Reading Tree for Primary Schools

Reading Tree (RT) was a weekly, graded reading exercise that ran in 50 primary and secondary schools for ages 5 to 11 year-olds. The RT comprises carefully selected books ranging from timeless classics to African folk tales. As children ascended the reading tree, they were rewarded by television appearances. Weekly book clubs ran alongside to compliment the RT.

The Walking Book for Junior Secondary Schools

Schoolchildren aged 10 to 14 years old were engaged in writing a chapter each of a book, detailing the *Sights and Sounds* in festivals, traditions and landmarks of their communities. At the end of the exercise, books of historical importance on Port Harcourt were compiled and published. Examples are: *Port Harcourt By the Book: A Pictorial Journey of Nigeria's Unesco World Book Capital City, 2014* and *100 Years Around Port Harcourt: Sights and sounds of Port Harcourt through the eyes of the children* written by children in Community secondary schools across Rivers State. These books were published and made available for sale at a reduced price. The Walking Book programme thus afforded the schoolchildren the opportunity to become budding authors, contributing to the growth and transformation of libraries in Port Harcourt.

Book Clubs

Under this programme, students read a pre-selected book-of-the-month, which they met monthly to discuss. The purpose was to encourage the students to read for information, entertainment and a central point for social gatherings and discussions. The gatherings helped to build interpersonal and critical reasoning skills and the friendships would grow beyond school days. 200 Book Clubs are now running in both public and private schools. There are 300 teachers and 100 volunteers trained to coordinate and run the book Clubs. 2,500 students participated under this programme. (“30 Days Left”).

Centenary Essay Competition

The 2014 PHWBC keyed into the activities marking Nigeria's centenary launched nationwide. In the essay competition, the young people created a story that formed part of the landmark of the centenary. Two publications entitled: “*100 Years Around Port Harcourt*” and “*100 Years Around Nigeria*” resulted from this writing exercise. 600 Secondary school students and 60 teachers.

The Book-of-The-Month

This focused on a book each month. Students, writers and the public met to hold conversations on the book in focus. This is different from the pre-selected book-of-the-month under the Book Clubs established in schools. Drama performances based on the content of the book followed the discussions. 12 books were used for the 12 months of the PHWBC, It started with *Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe for the month of April 2014 and closed with *The Virtuous Woman* by Zaynab Alkali for the month of March 2015. The children shared the challenges and morals in these books with their authors. From these, 6 books were adapted for stage and performed.

Books-In-The-Air

Books-in-the-Air was a television series that featured the book clubs running in schools. It is pre-recorded and aired on different television stations. Appearing on the show served as a reward for diligent Book Clubs. This initiative further publicized the Book-of-the-Month.

Writers-In-Residence

Here, 15 up-coming writers selected from amongst applicants were assembled in Port Harcourt to write stories derived from the theme “Books: Windows to our World of Possibilities”. This is to sharpen their writing talent.

Library Support Initiative

In partnership with the libraries, the 2 public libraries and the 100 participating schools libraries were enriched with 66,500 books from Book donation drives organised to encourage individuals and groups to donate books to libraries. Indigent communities had 14 ‘seed libraries’ planted for them and got 9,440 books. Thirteen Orphanages including Prisons had library support.

IMPACT OF THE ACTIVITIES ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN PORT HARCOURT

Nigeria is said to have the highest number (10.5 million) of out-of-School children in the world, which accounts for 47% of the global out-of-School global population (PHWBC 2014. Opening Ceremonies Programme 22nd-26th April 2014). The public schoolchildren, public libraries, authors, celebrities and ordinary citizens of Port Harcourt assessed the impact of PHWBC in terms of their responses to a question put to them. The question was: “Port Harcourt is UNESCO World Book Capital 2014. What possibilities do you see for the city as a result of this nomination?”

Impact on Public School Children and Young People

The PHWBC activities affected the 100 schools in several ways. Some had their libraries developed for them with “seed libraries” and others had their existing ones greatly improved by way of organization and supply of more books. The children had one-on-one interaction with authors/celebrities and leaders. They were inspired to love to read and write books. Each school had 10 representatives. Some of the schoolchildren when asked what impact they expected from the PHWBC, one 9-year-old replied, “It would help people to know how to read and... make reading fun and interesting. ...enable people to write their own books, communicate better and enable government build libraries”. A 6-year-old said, “... more Book Clubs formed for children...to improve reading because readers are leaders.”

(Port Harcourt by the Book, 2014: 92.

These responses reveal more reading clubs in schools, reading habits and interests formed, reading seen as fun, writing skill developed and more libraries built all of which positively influenced them.

4 international road shows displaying Nigeria’s rich literary heritage were organized, of which the young people actively participated. In collaboration with an entertainment group - Chocolate City - featuring popular music artists, a Theme Song for the PHWBC 2014 was produced. This made an indelible mark in the young minds.

Impact on Access to Reading Materials and School Library Transformation

The PHWBC 2014 activities were aimed at working with secondary and primary schools to provide greater access to reading materials by planting school libraries. The book donation drive was to source for books to donate to the school libraries. The donations increased access to libraries and books. Institutions, The Reading Trees, Book Clubs, Leaders Read and Book Fairs organized motivated and made school proprietors to see the need and importance of establishing and owning school libraries.

Table 1 shows that before the PHWBC activities, only 33(55%) out of the 60 secondary schools investigated had acceptable school library in a separate apartment. 20 (33.3%) had what they called school library but the books were kept in a small Reading Room. 4 (6.7%) schools had their library in the Head Teacher’s office, while 3 schools depended on class visits to the available ill-equipped two public libraries. After the PHWBC, a lot of improvement had taken place. The number of schools with acceptable libraries increased from 33 to 57(95%). Class visits to the public library and Head Teachers’ office syndrome as a way of access to a library was no more practiced in any secondary school. Transformation has taken place.

Table 1: LOCATION AND ACCESS TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LIBRARY

S/N	LOCATION/ACCESS TO THE SCHOOL LIBRARY N = 60	NO. OF SCHOOLS BEFORE PHWBC	NO. OF SCHOOLS AFTER PHWBC
1	Separate Apartment within the School Premises	33 (55%)	57 (95%)
2	Inside Principal's Office	4 (6.7%)	0%
3	Library Hour/Periods/Reading Room	20 (33.3%)	3 (5%)
4	Visits to a Public Library Only	3 (5%)	0%
	TOTAL	60 (100%)	60 (100%)

Source: Survey Conducted between December 2013 and December, 2014.

The Book Clubs that started with 3 secondary schools and 4 primary schools that ran for two months at a pilot phase sensitized the young people in the city. The books used in the Secondary Schools were works by some Port Harcourt writers including Chimeka Garricks (*Tomorrow Died Yesterday*) and Kaine Agary (*Yellow – Yellow*). The books for the primary schools included Achebe (*How the Leopard Got His Claws*) and Dan Fulani (*Dead Men's Bones*). With the Book Clubs and book donations, the School Proprietors now see the need to own school libraries owing to the excitement generated in the children's reading.

Table 2 shows that before PHWBC, only 8 (20%) primary schools had libraries in a separate apartment within the school premises. This number rose to 32(80%) while the 12(30%) Head Teacher's office libraries syndrome dropped to 4(10%). Those that depended on visiting public libraries also dropped from 17(42.5%) to 4(10%). With this impressive statistics, it is hoped that this transformation of libraries will continue.

Table 2: LOCATION OF AND ACCESS TO THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LIBRARY

S/N	LOCATION/ACCESS TO A LIBRARY N = 40	NO. OF SCHOOLS HAVING LIBRARY BEFORE PHWBC	NO. OF SCHOOLS HAVING LIBRARY AFTER PHWBC
1	Separate Apartment within School Premises	8 (20%)	32 (80%)
2	Inside Head Teacher 's Office	12 (30%)	4 (10%)
3	Library Hour/Period	3 (7.5%)	(0%)
4	Visits To a Public Library only	17 (42.5%)	4 (10%)
	TOTAL	40 (100%)	40 (100%)

Source: Survey conducted between December 2013 and December 2014

Impact on Public Libraries for Young People in Port Harcourt

It was historic when Port Harcourt took over from Bangkok as WBC, 2014. The implication was enormous for all stakeholders. The government of Rivers State and residents of Port Harcourt, authors, book publishers and sellers, the libraries and librarians had roles to play. Before PHWBC, the only two public libraries serving a population of over 5 million people were ill-maintained, users sat on broken chairs and reading tables. Out-dated books dotted the bookshelves. Users were mainly private students preparing for various examinations went there with their own books to read.⁴ The partnership drew attention of stakeholders to the inadequacy and deplorable condition of the libraries. It was, therefore, exciting to note that under the WBC Bid, building of more public libraries in Port Harcourt was a major component. Hence, 7 more public libraries were earmarked for construction and equipping. Contract for the construction of 4 of the 7 had been awarded and construction began in earnest by the State

Government. As the two public libraries received complete structural facelift in terms of physical renovation and equipment, the books are yet to arrive to fill the shelves, although the process is on to procure the books.

Tables 4 and 5 below show the use of one of the public libraries before and after the PHWBC 2014. Table 4 reveals that 742 young persons used the public library for various reasons between January 2013 and November 2013, while 469 of the same group used the same library between January 2014 and December 2014. This shows a drop by 273 users representing 37%. The Table also shows that in December 2013 and from March to April 2014, users were technically “locked” out of the premises during the period of structural renovations.

Table 4: PUBLIC LIBRARY USE BEFORE AND AFTER 2014 PHWBC: CHILDREN’S LIBRARY

DATE	BOOK ISSUES	
MONTH	YEAR 2013	YEAR 2014
January	74	47
February	65	44
March	70	Renovations
April	63	Renovations
May	69	Renovations
June	61	26
July	60	48
August	66	54
September	65	60
October	73	67
November	76	53
December	Renovations	70
TOTAL	742	469

Source: Acting Director’s Office, Rivers State Library Board, February 2015.

The Adult Lending statistics on Table 5 shows that 582 adults borrowed books from January to December 2013, while 390 did so from January to December 2014. This represents 33% drop in 2014. One explanation is the period of four months structural renovations and the fact that the bookshelves are still empty to date. The Adult Reference Section had 62,478 consultations from January to December 2013, and 48,271 recorded from January to December 2014. This also shows a drop by 23%.

Table 5: PUBLIC LIBRARY USE BEFORE AND AFTER PHWBC: ADULT SECTION

DATE	LENDING SECTION		REFERENCE SECTION	
MONTH	YEAR 2013	YEAR 2014	YEAR 2013	YEAR 2014
January	68	29	5630	7158
February	51	30	4328	2236
March	96	Renovations	3624	Renovations
April	3	Renovations	4935	Renovations
May	41	Renovations	5721	Renovations
June	42	Renovations	6252	8629
July	44	73	5333	4093
August	36	67	5476	3494
September	47	61	5249	5615
October	37	54	4930	7601
November	41	46	6030	4284
December	26	30	4970	5161
TOTAL	582	390	62,478	48,271

Source: Acting Director’s Office, Rivers State Library Board, February 2015.

Impact on Access to Reading Materials for Young People in Port Harcourt

The book donations helped the less privileged young people to own free books. The books were for all ages and covered all disciplines. To ensure that those books actually meant something to the recipients, the volunteers helped to read the books. 46 workbooks were also created for the Book Clubs.

Impact on the City of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt has been a home for renowned writers such as the poet Gabriel Okara, the novelist Elechi Amadi, Late Ken Saro-Wiwa and the playwright Ola Rotimi. The impact on the City of Port Harcourt as seen from the responses some of the old generation and young up-coming writers of the city gave when they were asked same on the possibilities for the city as a result of the PHWBC nomination. A 30-year-old writer (Chiamka Garricks) responded thus: “Port Harcourt’s many talented writers, (particularly its vibrant poets), will get the needed exposure and recognition that their talents deserve. ... Improved funding and internet accessibility for public libraries on Bernard Carr and Afam Streets to make them meet the needs of a modern society”⁵

Another 80-year-old author (Elechi Amadi) said: “... it will galvanize the government to begin to sponsor literature seriously”. According to a 12-year-old writer (Daniella Clinton): “I see more authors springing up from this city. The literary festivals alone inspired a lot of my classmates to start writing. I am certain this nomination will draw more children and adults into the culture of reading and then writing. This is exactly the kind of opportunity the nomination of Port Harcourt, as UNESCO World Book Capital will afford Rivers State and Nigerian children.”⁵

The above observations encapsulate the impact of the PHWBC from the perspective of writers. Other ordinary non-writer residents of Port Harcourt also had answers to that same question on impact of the PHWBC. One of them said: “UNESCO’s recognition of Port Harcourt as World Book Capital makes me ecstatic that the time isn’t too far before Port Harcourt becomes a major player on the global stage” (Tigidam, Perez)..

CHALLENGES OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES AFTER THE PHWBC

The two public libraries were massively renovated. Both buildings were re-roofed, re-painted and the premises inter-locked with concrete. The library furniture and bookshelves were replaced with new ones; long-out-dated books discarded leaving the new shelves empty and ready for new books. The major challenge **aside minor ones**, is the absence of books on the shelves after five months. The new books are yet to be procured. Like most other activities that were caught-up with Nigeria's general elections, procurement of the books was not spared. As the statistics on library use indicate, readers are yet to return to the public libraries. Other challenges are the poor illumination within and outside the library premises, poorly finished fence, old ceiling fans removed and not replaced, reception area partition demolished and not replaced and no protective walkways to the public convenience.⁴

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PHWBC ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

One can safely argue that the most important aspect of success is its sustainability. Bearing this in mind, the Rainbow Club planned a round-off symposium aimed at brainstorming on how the legacy left behind can be sustained. Participants at the symposium would include the key stakeholders in the book industry. The Club, in addition, will host a dance drama performance tagged: *The Book Leads us Forward* depicting the future of the book and reading in the city after WBC 2014. These are good but remain one-off symposium and drama performance, not a systematic plan for sustenance of achievements.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, one can safely argue that the PHWBC 2014 created an opportunity for a dynamic partnership between the Rainbow Club and libraries to provide access and transformation in libraries for young people in Port Harcourt. This was achieved in several ways. The Book Clubs, Reading Tree, Book-of-the-Month, exhibitions, amongst others, fostered the appreciation for and the pleasures derivable from the book, which is really the cradle for the formation of a life-long reading habit. The Walking Book and Writers in Residence promoted established authors and birthed child-writers. PHWBC was an avenue for the public and school libraries to receive desired attention from their proprietors, thereby providing greater access to books and reading for young people in Port Harcourt. In conclusion, the PHWBC, 2014 opened "Windows to our World of Possibilities" through access to more libraries and more literary activities in the city.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Judging from the positive impact of the partnership between Rainbow Club and libraries have had on access, transformation and the development of libraries in Port Harcourt, we recommend that more NGOs should get into partnerships with libraries in their communities to provide greater access to books and libraries for young people. Such partnerships will draw the attention of stakeholders, especially the government and school proprietors, to take the development of libraries and literature more seriously. There should a reward mechanism and scholarships for young writers to motivate them. Exposure and promotion of authors should be organized more regularly than an annual event. Individuals and organizations should support sustenance of programmes. Beyond symposia and drama performance, there should be a follow-up plan of action where Proprietors of the libraries and schools Book Club coordinators will have targets and milestones to achieve within specific time-lines. Following from this should be a Monitoring Committee empowered to take appropriate actions against defaulters. Representatives of stakeholders should be members of this body. Sanctions should include withdrawal of support and other recognitions. There should also, be a formal handover by the Schools reading Club Leaders whereby Rainbow Book Club representative should supervise the event. .There should be some financial and other forms of aid from UNESCO to support Bid winner-countries, especially those from the developing and poor countries. This will enable them to achieve more results. Without the huge financial support from the Rivers State and Federal Governments of Nigeria, Rainbow Club would have recorded little success. These and other measures could form part of what should sustain literary activities and address the reading and library needs of young people in the city after PHWBC 2014

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