

Provision of sustainable development goals (SDG) information to Nigeria citizens through a collaborative approach: a proposal

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Abstract:

With the adoption of the new 17 SMART Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), access to government information becomes essential towards the actualization of the goals. This view has been corroborated by IFLA at its 2015 Cape Town Declaration.

In Nigeria, the drastic reduction in the revenue accruable to the government following the sharp decline in the price of crude oil and the impact of same on the nation's economy have made it imperative for citizens to insist on transparency and accountability in the activities of the government. Otherwise, the SDGs may end up like the much-talked-about MDGs whose records were unimpressive despite the oil boom of the era.

Meanwhile, public libraries could serve as channel to provide government information to the public but for lack of the needed technical skills by its 'managers'. Hence, the justification for considering how public libraries in Nigeria could provide access to the government information for its clientele.

The study employed the use of existing literature, international binding documents, observation as well as the wealth of experience of the researchers and their interactions with public librarians in arriving at the findings therein.

It is recommended that the scope of the curricular of library schools in Nigeria be broadened to include the mandatory teaching of management of government information to budding librarians. Also, there should be collaborations between public and law librarians through observance of sabbatical leave; combined multi-disciplinary studies and the creation of endowment chairs, fellowships and exchange programs at public libraries for law librarians.

Finally, while the collaborations would help provide more access to government information by the citizenry, law librarians would through their collaborations with public librarians, also learn and devise better skills on how to render more satisfactory services to their clientele.

Introduction

Access to information in the knowledge economy cannot be dispensed with. It is a basic necessity for the proper functioning of the modern day society because success in every area of human endeavour is premised on its intelligent use (Omotayo, 2015). Access to information has been described to mean different things at different times in the evolution of human race. In the modern era, it has been categorized as a basic right which citizens must have if human development is to be achieved in any given society (Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria, 2016). This is particularly essential for developing economies that are currently grappling with development challenges. As opined by Wand, P.A (2016), a positive correlation does exist between access to information and national development.

It is therefore not a surprise that campaign towards access of citizens to government information is widely gaining international attention as this portends positive impact on the ability of nations to make appreciable progress in the actualization of the goals.

Background on Sustainable Development Goals

As the deadline for the actualization of the 15-year-termed Millennium Development Goals drew closer, there were various deliberations across local, national, international and regional levels to appraise the progress recorded so far on the goals, with the bid to draw out new goals for another fifty years. These deliberations eventually resulted in the adoption of a new set of 17 development agenda now referred to as Sustainable Development Goals or global goals, later adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 25th of September, 2015.

The goals in the words of Wand, P.A, 2016 seek to put an end to poverty; End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture; Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages; Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities; Promote gender equality and empower all women and girls; Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all; Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization; Reduce inequality within and among countries; Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; Take urgent action to combat climate change; Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss; Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels and to Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

While the deliverables are to be actualized by the year 2030, there are usually mid-term assessments by different stakeholders with the intension of appraising the level of success of the goals.

Instruments on the access to government information

There have been a number of binding instruments relating to citizens' access to information emanating from different fora. This stems from the understanding that any society that will record significant stride in the actualization of the 17 SMART goals will be nations that have empowered their citizens to engage the government on its activities through unfettered access to information on the working of the government. Nigeria cannot afford to lag behind here. However, out of these instruments, only two will be our focus due to their recent nature and importance to SGDs:

Cape Town Declaration

Mainstreaming citizens' access to information in the post 2015 Sustainable Development era came again to the fore at Cape Town in the year 2015 when many countries converged in South Africa to discuss on the role of the Government in granting information access to citizens (Bangbose, O.J and Imaobong, A.E, 2015). Precisely, on the 14th of August, 2015, Ministers and country representatives from a number of countries including Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Lesotho, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, South Sudan and Swaziland met to discuss the status of libraries and implementation of access to information agenda at Cape Town, South Africa. The participating nations committed themselves to '*Promote library policies on access to information as part of a universal human rights approach as well as rights of people to knowledge*' (Cape Town Declaration, 2015). They further pledged their support for improvements in the area of ICT development and local contents in the management of libraries amongst member nations. If the issues raised at Cape Town can be localized and implemented, it will no doubt provide access to government information for citizens across the length and breadth of the six geo-political zones of the country.

Lyon Declaration

The Lyon Declaration ratified by over 515 signatories representing several organizations from different walks of life acknowledged the place of information to the citizenry in helping them to:

1. exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
2. be economically active, productive and innovative.
3. learn and apply new skills.
4. enrich cultural identity and expression.
5. take part in decision-making and participate in an active and engaged civil society.
6. create community-based solutions to development challenges.

7. ensure accountability, transparency, good governance, participation and empowerment.
8. measure progress on public and private commitments on sustainable development (IFLA, 2015 cited by Bamgbose & Imaobong, 2015). The Lyon declaration respects the rights of the citizens to be carried along on the activities of the government through the running of the government in a transparent and accountable manner.

Why demand for government information in the SGD age in Nigeria

Serious-minded nations are nations with clear path for development. They are nations with the strong determination and clear path to succeed, and not nations who will sit and place heavy reliance on foreign aids while failing in their respective duties to formulate and implement programmes that will make develop their countries. Regrettably, Nigeria being Africa's largest economy does not have much to show for the wealth the nation has acquired in the past 16 years owing to mismanagement and secrecy that accompany the workings of the government. The Millennium Development Goals were ratified in the oil boom era, but despite the windfall, not much was recorded as to the progress made on the goals. Onyenjekwe, J and Bamgbose, O. J (2016) reported that indeed that corruption thrives in an environment of secrecy.

As at first quarter of 2016, the price of crude oil in the world market had crashed such that many states of the federation could not afford to pay their staff salaries not to talk of embarking on developmental / capital projects. Considering also, the shocking revelations by the current administration of embezzlement by the past government officials in the tune of billions of dollars, Nigerians cannot afford to fold their arms until 2030 before they begin to chronicle the reasons for the failure of government. Therefore, more than ever, the need for proactive disclosure of the activities of the government. For the purpose of this study, access to government information is regarded as a catalyst to achieving great success in the 17 SDGs. Therefore, express mentioning of access to government information is with implied reference to citizens' power to actualize the SDGs using information at their disposal as a tool to engage the government of specific performances on the SDGs. Access to government will reveal to citizens, how the resources set aside for development projects is spend as well as the manner in which the country is being governed. Where citizens feel disenchanted on the activities of the government, they could call the government to order through the deployment of any option regarded as lawful under the law.

As acknowledged by representatives of government of nations, including Nigeria in Cape Town, South Africa, access to information can now be viewed as right-based issue. If this is viewed alongside the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, it will be safe to conclude that Nigerians now have a legal platform to demand for the release of information by the government where such is unreasonably withheld.

Public libraries in Nigeria

As shown in the mapping recently conducted by the Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria, there are now 316 public libraries with 598 qualified librarians spreading across the 36 States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria, 2016), hence the potential of the libraries to provide services to the Nigerian populace through its branches across the six geo-political zones of the country.

However, as important as public libraries are in meeting the information needs of the citizenry, these libraries across the length and breadth of Nigeria lack basic facilities to provide quality services to their clientele, such as ICT resources.

This may even be worse in the coming months, as the revenue accruable to the government has since been on the decline due to the general reduction in the price of crude oil in the world market and the increasing unrest in Nigeria's oil rich Niger Delta.

Law librarians

Many have attempted to define who law librarians are. The American Association of Law Libraries seems to be apt in its definition of a law librarian '*as a legal information professional, who works in various legal settings, including law schools, private law firms, and government libraries*'.

In Nigeria, Law librarians are professionals who handle the law libraries. Categories of law libraries which they manage can be categorized into three different groups for the sake of easy identification:

- Specialist Library: Law libraries at commercial law firms, courts and government departments.
- Academic Library: Faculties of Law in Universities, Law Library of the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies and the Nigerian Law School.

Legal Practitioner's Library: Law libraries of law firms (Ifebuzor, 1994).

In some jurisdictions including Nigeria, law librarians may be required to have a degree in Law in addition to their qualifications in librarianship. As a result of academic training, interaction with clientele and on-the-job experience over the years, law librarians have special skills in the management of government information.

Summary of key findings

Despite the need for increased access to government information in the modern era and the training of librarians who will be able to work in this area of discipline, it is still possible for an aspiring librarian to go through library schools in Nigeria without being taught on the management of government information. This is because the course is not a compulsory course in most universities. Only those who elect to take the course are those who will eventually be taught. A classical example is the University of Ibadan where its curriculum for the Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) programme describes the status of course 'Government Information Sources and Systems' as an elective course (University of Ibadan, 2006).

Equally, most public libraries are constrained by funds and necessary facilities to optimally function in the ICT-age. This makes it difficult for these libraries to perform their roles as expected of them in a knowledge economy.

Law librarians have peculiar trainings in the storage, processing, retrieval and dissemination of government information to their clientele while public librarians have comparative strength in providing information to a wider range of clientele.

There are no significant partnerships between public and law librarians, except at the general meetings of the Nigerian Library Association. This then reduces the possibility of collaboration between these librarians.

A number of public libraries do not engage in the provision of government information to their clientele. This may be due to the peculiar nature of the management of the information, hence demand for degree in law /legal study.

What we propose

LIS curriculum review

The curricular of library schools in Nigeria need to be responsive to the needs of the modern world. It is important that library schools include and make compulsory, the teaching of management of government information for aspirants into the noble profession of librarianship. Fortunately, Librarianship Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) is in the process of reviewing the library and information studies curriculum which will then regulate the teaching of the course across library schools in Nigeria. It is our humble submission that LRCN should work in concert with the National University Commission (NUC) so as to achieve compliance amongst the library schools.

Partnerships

In addition to the review of the curricular of library schools to reflect the reality of today's world, it is becoming increasingly important for public and law librarians to engage in partnerships that will enhance their job performance and improved service delivery in the area of management of government information. One of the key suggestions in this area is for the observance of sabbatical year in public libraries by Law Librarians instead of going to another law library during this one year academic exercise. This approach will be beneficial to both the law and public libraries.

The partnership will position law librarians to helping their colleagues in public libraries to step-down the services which they render in their law libraries to the users of public libraries. In this symbiotic relationship, law librarians will also be able to learn more on the diverse ways in which public librarians can help meet the information needs of their clientele.

Lecturers offering courses related to the provision of government information at LIS institutions could also offer to observe their annual leave and sabbatical year at public schools. This is in view of the general constraints of funds to engage in retraining of staff. The collaboration will no doubt help scale-up, the knowledge base of the staff of the public libraries while the opportunity to work in the public library can provide up-to-date field experience for the lecturers.

More so, having multi-disciplinary research between law librarians and public librarians particularly, in the area of provision of government information will help broaden the horizon of the public librarians on how to provide the service to their clientele.

The Association of Government Libraries (AGOL) of the Nigerian Library Association should be strengthened. This unit when strengthened can also cater for the manpower development of information professionals that will work at Ministries, Departments and Agencies in attending to information requests as provided for under Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Fast-tracking of the full implementations of the outcomes of the library summits held from years 2011 as well as the Lyon and Cape Town Declarations will position public libraries in a manner in which they can successfully discharge their duties in highly professionalized manner.

Irrespective of partnerships and collaborations established between public and law librarians, for as long as the libraries lack basic working tools such as ICT facilities, then, there is limit to the extent to which the Library can function. It is simply preposterous to think that a public library will print resources in the modern age. As a matter of fact, ICT will enhance better and more efficient partnerships.

Finally, collaborations of public librarians with other professional groups like the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ) as well as the Civil Society Organization, Faith Based Organization will help public libraries to be able to function more effectively.

Conclusion

Provision of government information being a legal right is key towards actualizing the recently launched SDGs hence, the increased legal obligation for librarians, information professionals and other concerned stakeholders in the sector of information management to live up to expectations. Public library which is the gate way to disseminating government information remains critical in this engagement. While strategizing to achieve greater results, public librarians need to step-up their activities to be able to discharge their responsibilities. They need to contact, connect with law librarians and other stakeholders to achieve mutually beneficial relationship, particularly for law librarians who can borrow more tips on improving their services to their clientele on SDG and other development-related issues.

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