

# THE LIBRARY AND NATIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the role of the library within the framework of the theme of this conference which is "The Place and Role of Ministries of Information (Public Information) in a Presidential system of Government". It is pertinent at this stage to mention the fact that the Presidential system of government is new to Nigeria and what we have learnt from the system so far came to us in the form of "Information". Therefore "Information" in a wider sense is international; hence any attempt to localise information without taking its international perspective into consideration will not do justice to the whole concept of "Information".

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Before attempting to assess the existing information supply arrangements and whether or not they meet the present and potential needs of users, it is essential to consider the nature of information. In doing this therefore let us consider the following practical situation:

It is the desired objective of the Government to ensure that its balance of payments is on the credit side. On examining its accounts it discovers that it is on the debit side. A decision has to be taken to rectify this situation. Before a decision is taken the reasons why a deficit arose in the first place have to be established; secondly, the government may wish to be guided by measures taken by other governments who found themselves in a similar situation in the past. Armed with this, a decision is taken to ban certain items of imported goods even though certain members of the public desire these items and have to be educated on why the Government took the measure.

In analysing the above example the following facts emerge:-

- (a) Balance of payments is on the deficit side - factual information.
- (b) Reason for the deficit is known - research information.
- (c) Actions taken by other governments in similar situation is found out - educational information.
- (d) Decision taken by Government - executive information.
- (e) Public informed of the reasons why Government took the action - Public information.

From the above we can easily perceive that every human activity is based on one form of information or the other and each activity generates information for future consumption, be it for educational, commercial, recreational, scientific, cultural and policy-making reasons.

## INFORMATION STORES

Having gone thus far let us now identify the various stores where we can obtain our information before we can determine whether or not they are effective before looking for ways of improving them for the Presidential era:

- (a) **Libraries, Documentation Centres, Archives:** These represent the principal stores where most of the formal and informal literature, pictures, maps, etc., are collected, indexed, stored and made available for retrieval. Their role varies with the type of institution to which they are affiliated and the following groups are of importance in that respect:
  - National libraries
  - National archives
  - Academic libraries
  - Public libraries
  - Special libraries
  - Newspaper archives
  - Institutional archives
  - Document collections and documentation centres.
- (b) **Information Centres:** This type of information store is not necessarily identical in its characteristics with the type of store mentioned above. Frequently, information centres principally have switching and reference functions, often incorporating data collection and dissemination activities. Principal types are:-
  - National Information Centre with general and specific functions;
  - Specialised information centres, mission and subject - oriented;
  - Industrial information centres or services; information analysis centres.
- (c) **Government Information Sources:** Important segments of the national information infrastructure are located in government and public services, and also in services of semi-public or even of an international character. Statistical, managerial and administrative data, legislative information, policy and decision papers, surveys, experts reports, etc., are found in:
  - Offices and various administrative units of government;
  - The legislative and the judiciary;
  - Offices of the President and State Governors;
  - Regional, State and Local administrative units;
  - International agencies and foreign embassies.
- (d) **Societies:** Various types of associations are sources of information through the expertise which their members can provide, and also



through the various services which they frequently offer. Principal types are:

- Professional societies;
- Humanitarian societies (including funding Organisations)
- Academic Associations (e.g. Academy of Sciences)
- Technical Associations (e.g. building contractors)
- Economic Associations (e.g. Chambers and Commerce)
- Trade Union and Labour Organisations.

- (e) **Publishing and Printing Industry:** Whether operating on a profit-making basis or for any other purpose the printing and publishing industry is an important information source in its own right as well as by its relationship with kindred organisations inside the country or abroad. Principal types of products emanating from this source are:

- Newspapers and magazines;
- Professional publications of any type - journals, tracts.
- Books - monographs, treatises, compensation.

## **INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND EXPLOITATION**

The list quoted above shows the diversity of agencies locations, which produce or store information in various forms. The separation between Libraries, Documentation Centres and Archives, as listed in the first group, and other sources of information inside and outside the sphere of public administration may tend to obscure the fact that information functions in the various governmental agencies listed as well as in associations or business firms are also organised in the form of library sections, archives or registries and documentation services. Therefore a check list, which attempts to distinguish among the different sectorial functions, could be established along the following lines:

- (a) **Library services:**
- National libraries
  - Academic libraries
  - Public and school libraries
  - Special libraries
  - Departmental and institutional library services
- (b) **Archives and records services:**
- National archives
  - Departmental archives, record centres and registry services (serving one or various government departments)
  - Regional and State archives and record centres
  - Institutional and business archives
  - Radio-television and sound archives
  - Newspaper archives
- (c) **Information and documentation centres:**
- National information centres with general and specific functions

- Specialised information centres, mission and subject oriented
- Industrial information centres or services.

The functions of these organisations overlap, and in many countries an over-lapping between private and public services is traditional. In some countries the information systems of government agencies have evolved without any government policy concerning the role of private and public enterprises. In my mind, I should think that this conference should focus attention to ways of improving the existing information systems so as to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts which will result in the wastage of existing resources while at the same time ensuring optimum result not only for the present Governmental system but any other systems of Government that may follow. Having gone thus far into the generalities of information generation and storage this Conference should now know something about the position of Library Services within the framework of this discussion and what future plans there are for an effective network.

## **PRESENT POSITION**

Even though Librarianship as a service rendering profession is comparatively young in this part of the world if compared with countries like the U.S.S.R., U.S.A. and U.K. the past fifteen years have witnessed rapid development and progress. It is now an established fact that all the elements enumerated under the checklist "Library Services" have been established. Libraries now exist in all our Institutions of Higher Learning, in Schools, Government Departments and even in the private sector. Another important land mark was reached with the establishment of the National Library of Nigeria in 1964 by an Act of Parliament which was replaced by the National Library Act in 1970. Under this law it is the responsibility of the National Library of Nigeria to co-ordinate library services in the country, preserve the nation's heritage in publications and make available both nationally and internationally through bibliographical media this country's publications output (information).

Coming to specifics it is heart-warming that many people now recognise the important role which libraries play in their daily lives. A great deal of the information which everyone requires in carrying out his duties are available in one type of library or the other right in this country without his knowing. It is therefore necessary to bring these to our notice:

**National Library:** This is the unique library in the country storing and making available for use information relating to every sphere of governmental activity, keeping and making available for use documents relating to the activities of foreign governments and international organisations. In addition the library caters for the research and information needs of the entire spectrum of the Nigerian public.

**Academic Libraries** - All the Institutions of



higher learning have collections relating to their various disciplines of specialisation for teaching and research.

**Public and School Libraries:** At the lower levels of the academic ladder we have various sizes of school libraries serving the educational needs of pupils and there are also public libraries which meet the needs of the general public, whether for general or special information.

**Special Libraries:** Many special libraries exist in the country catering for the information needs of their parent institutions in their various areas of activities and interests. These libraries give specialized services in law, agriculture, finance, among other disciplines, and through co-operative schemes their services are made available to the public at large.

**Departmental and Institutional Library Services:** These are libraries serving Government Ministries, Departments, Research Institutes, and other government agencies to aid the officers in the performance of their official functions. The recognition given to these libraries has shown the invaluable service which they render.

## DEVELOPING THE INFORMATION PLAN

Having looked at the library's place in the general information services of the country it is now necessary to focus attention on ways of linking the various types into a network as a sub-system of the overall information framework.

Nigeria as a developing country is in a hurry to take its place among the developed nations of the world. In this pursuit therefore a great deal of effort is being made to develop the infrastructural facilities. Government activities in developmental measures are increasing phenomenally. Also in the private sector there is rapid growth in the economy. Education at all levels has been making rapid progress in the past years. The people are increasingly becoming aware of their place in this world of competition. All these activities are beginning to generate a great deal of information and creating the need for more information. The demand for books and other materials on our public and other libraries has been rising very steeply. The increase in the number of libraries attest to this fact.

No Library, however big or well-stocked, can satisfy the needs of its clientele. Similarly, no nation is self-sufficient in this field, hence the need to pool resources for the benefit of the participants. Nigerian libraries, especially the new ones, face tremendous problems in obtaining the materials essential for effective service to their clientele. Publishing in Nigeria is still in infancy as about 95 per cent of the books needed and used and other materials are imported arrive in the country. Besides, by the time the materials arrive they are already or almost out of date. In addition the funds available to run libraries are comparatively so small that an urgent need to

economize funds has become an imperative. These libraries cannot hope to acquire all that they need to give effective service in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it has become the practice to rely on each other through cooperative arrangements. This is where the National Information System (NATIS) conceived by Unesco in 1974 comes in. The exchange of information if it is to be effective cannot be handled on an ad-hoc basis but on integrated planning. Therefore, the need to start a national plan is imperative but the implementation is proposed on a two-tier basis.

At the national level, the infrastructures for a national information system is currently being laid. The first real attempt at co-operation started in 1963 with the inauguration of a National Union Catalogue based at the National Library whose aim is to facilitate the location of materials in the country and eventual promotion of inter-lending between libraries. The National Union Catalogue recording the more significant holdings of major libraries participating has been published. Even though this exercise does not aim at the examination of the National Library and its activities, a discussion of any library system in Nigeria cannot but touch the National Library by virtue of its focal position linking all library systems in the country. It is even most appropriate to mention the library in this particular context because of the role it is being called upon to play in the co-ordination and extension of the resources of all our library systems. It is also the library that will meet more promptly the demands of the presidential office.

## SPECIFIC NEEDS OF THE GOVERNMENTAL SET-UP

Now we should look at some urgent needs for library based information services in a presidential system. They are:-

A National Library to provide the following services:

- (a) a central repository of the nation's publications and its perpetual memory in that area featuring monographs, serials documents, posters, gazettes, annual reports, speeches, special reports;
- (b) a data bank and documentary centre for the nation's major activities for ease of reference;
- (c) a switch centre for interchange of information and materials for governmental work in policy and decision making;
- (d) a comprehensive back-up collection of official Government documents and research reports of other nations, and international organisations in numerous fields.

A legislative library service for the two federal houses stocked with:

- (a) the statutes of the country and many leading countries of the world.
- (b) the proceedings of legislative assemblies of Nigeria and other countries;



- (c) treatises on legislation and parliamentary history, practice, and work;
- (d) principles of government;
- (e) hansards, gazettes;
- (f) periodicals and journals.

A legislative reference service and facility should take prominent position, whereby legislators will have the services of searchers for specific information or authorities for instant use on demand. Facilities should also include cubicles, study carrels and comfortable lounge.

The judiciary, with the supreme court at the apex, should have a formidable library of the statutes, law reports etc. not only of the country but of other leading countries. This is in addition to the libraries of individual judges of the supreme and high courts. Treaties and the proceedings of international courts should be readily available to ensure widest visibility in the dispensation of justice.

These by no means exhaust the matter, but represent only the kernel. The point about the legislature and executive is the supremacy of authentic information, not only for the purpose of debates in law making but also for implementation of programmes. The role of the executive arm of government in the new system is different. The programmes emanate from the political source where the policies are also enunciated, and not from the career civil service level to be fed upwards as advice. This point was clearly made in the address of His Excellency General (then Lt. General) Olusegun Obasanjo, Head of the Federal Military Government to public servants on Friday, 15th September, 1978 when he said: "Traditionally, the civil service is not partisan and its main functions consist of assisting in the formulation of policy and of executing Government policies faithfully once they are formulated. But in 1966 with the advent of the Military in Government, this tradition changed and civil servants at least initially became **de-facto** formulators of policy as well as executors. This trend might be unavoidable but like the Military in politics, it was an aberration which threw civil servants into new circumstances favourable to the service". Elsewhere he further said: "During the Military administration, the civil servant has to a large extent been seen and heard. It must however be realised that it was what the time dictated and the air of anonymity which he will soon start to breathe should not be seen as derogation". Also, he warned: "It is necessary to emphasise to the public service and most especially the civil service that the political system which will be ushered in after the Military rule is completely new. The new system will not easily admit of non-performance as the executive political head must have been hopefully elected on a **Programme** (emphasis mine) will spare no effort to ensure successful implementation of his programme". The Head of State then delineated the attributes and attitudes compatible with the new system.

The point that emerges is one of considerable independence of the political leadership in the evolution of policies and programmes. They will rely on libraries and other documentation sources. Even when civil servants are brought in at ideas and policy formulation stages, data banks, of which libraries are veritable embodiments, cannot be dispensed with.

It therefore stands unassailable the Ministries and all arms of government must be fully equipped with libraries, documentation and archive services at all levels be they federal, state or local. Nigeria is developing fast, generating and accumulating formidable information in recorded form. They must be preserved and exploited. Similar products from the outside world must be identified and secured. This is a vital and inescapable way, even for the civil service to acquire the attributes and develop the attitudes described by the Head of State as "a reservoir of vision and dynamism in its outlook towards the future... a formation of courage, vision, knowledge, commitment, justice and uprightness".

In conclusion therefore the course open to the Public Service in this matter is to establish the facilities identified herein with a sense of vision and utmost despatch so that the new change may appear to have been seen ahead, and thereby save panic measures which may be not only hazardous but also expensive. The existing library of the pre-military era Federal Legislature has been utterly neglected for over a decade. Staff should be drafted there immediately and the stock quickly built up. The state legislatures should make handsome provisions for library, documentation and archives facilities in their new buildings and afford the staff essential special training. Other nations are eager to help with training. Ministry and departmental libraries should be planned on a larger scale and the present facilities optimised.

The emphasis laid on those three areas is not exclusive. The same goes for state and local government level with corresponding degrees of magnitude. The fact remains incontrovertible, judging by the experience of advanced countries that the political leadership and its public service ally inevitably have to be students, researchers and voracious consumers of the materials of knowledge as recorded in order to be able to perform their roles effectively. Nigeria need not wait to learn from bitter and perhaps expensive experience before integrating this into its socio-political fabric.

## REFERENCES

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