

*Full Length Research*

# **Librarians and Reference Information Service Provision for the Grassroots and Vulnerable: The Imo State Public Library in Perspective**

<sup>1</sup>Ogechi Ndulaka and <sup>2</sup>Rosemary Uju Eweama

<sup>1</sup>University Library, Kingsley Ozumba Mbadiwe University, Ogboko, Imo State

<sup>2</sup>Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Nekede Owerri, Imo State Nigeria

\*Corresponding author's E-mail: [ogechi.ndulaka@komo.edu.ng](mailto:ogechi.ndulaka@komo.edu.ng)

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**This paper focuses on librarians and reference information service provision for the grassroots and vulnerable: the Imo state public library in perspective. The role of the libraries and librarians need to be strengthened in line with developments at the global level. Libraries and librarians are key players in the development of an informed and knowledgeable society, not just as providers, but also as storage and information retrieval centres. The extension of reference information service for the grassroots and vulnerable enhances socio-economic and educational development of the nation. An informed and knowledgeable society cannot be established without a comprehensive integrated information services. The library and information centres remain a significant element of the source of information.**

**Keywords:** librarians, public library, reference information service and information centres

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Public library is established to provide unrestricted access to information resources free of charge to all the citizens of a given community. They are established by the state government and supported with tax-payers' money. Public library provides access to knowledge and information to all members of the community regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic status, employment status and educational attainment. Public library can be said to be an "ordinary man's school", "a university of the people" and "a library for all. According to Aiyebilehin, Onyam and Akpom, (2018), public libraries are agencies that

promote education and eliminate illiteracy among the people by providing educational, social and political information to people in a particular community. Hence, it is the local information centre; making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users. The grassroots are the ordinary people in the society in the rural areas. It could be the common or ordinary person living in the rural areas who find it difficult to meet up with life endeavor. Vulnerability refers to the inability to withstand the effects of hostile environment. A window of vulnerability is a time frame within which defensive measures are diminished, compromised or lacking. The vulnerable populations include; the economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities; the

uninsured, low-income persons, the elderly, the homeless, HIV patients, refugees and health disordered persons.

Librarianship is an aspect of reference information provision and dissemination that deals with the effective and efficient provision of information on demand and in anticipation to its users. Librarians render reference information services to users who are not knowledgeable in effective library search. Reference information services are personal assistance given by libraries to users who are in pursuit of information. Its services rendered to its users include reader education, meeting users request for specific information and assistance, and the management of the use and loan of library materials and equipment (Dhar, 2010). The library's reference section headed the reference librarian, is an important section that houses and takes care of important information resources that cannot be given to users on loan. These information resources include Encyclopedias, Biographies, Gazetteers, Dictionaries, Maps, Almanacs, Newspapers and Journals (Atanda and Uchendu, 2017).

### Reference Services Provided in Libraries

The following are the reference services provided in the libraries.

- **Information Services:** This service can also be called Referral Service. This is the process of identifying resources and agencies with special services or information needed by library users or information seekers, and the ability of the libraries, from time to time, to refer these users to these agencies or organizations for the purpose of satisfying their information need. Libraries from time to time receive a good number of reference and information enquiries whose range is usually very long i.e. from general to specific. Majority of reference and information queries by users received at the reference desk can be answered through ready reference tools such as dictionaries, directories, encyclopedias, handbooks and manuals, atlases and gazetteers, indexes and bibliographies etc.

- **Bibliographic verification and documentation services:** In organizing reference services, bibliography and documentation services should also be made available. According to Madu (2010) in Madu and Ezeani (2010), bibliographic verification is the use of bibliographic tools for purpose of verifying the correctness and completeness of the used information. He further stressed that these verifications provide information about publications, and to achieve this reference librarian consults and searches both manual and electronic versions of standard bibliographic works. Some bibliographic tools may include abstracts and

indexes, gazettes, encyclopedias, almanacs, catalogues, bibliographies etc. while documentation services may include monthly list of additions, reading lists, documentation list, subject bibliographies etc. on the topics of seminars, conferences, research projects etc; and documentation list of contents (Dhar, 2010).

- **Inter-library loan and document delivery services:** these services are important services due to the rising document prices and budgetary constraints on libraries, which makes them unable to purchase more and new documents. This service is closely related to the bibliographic verification and documentation service. A library that does not have certain required documents among its collection may borrow, through the inter-library loan, from other libraries in the neighbourhood and supply or make available to the users at the earliest and required time. In other words, no single library or information centre can boast of having in its collection all the resources that can be demanded of them. They, to this regard, appreciate the need to look for co-operation from other libraries or information centers in order to provide services to their clientele. After the library has identified its area(s) of need it places a request after a verification done manually in many libraries both within and outside Nigeria. The borrowing and lending process can also take place in the internet for both requesting for and the delivery of inter-library loan materials. In the inter-library loan and document delivery services, periodical articles can be transmitted instantly. The library can also enjoy the services of inter-library loan in order to enrich the collection and provide improved and qualitative services to users.

- **Current Awareness Services (CAS):** These services are provided for researchers to acquaint them with recent publications that might help them in their research work. The reference Librarians duty is to make its users aware of latest information relating to their work field. Current Awareness Services (CAS) can be re-packaged to suit the information needs of the users/clientele. Its services can be introduced in the routing of periodicals, abstracting or indexing of documents, circulation of accession lists of newly acquired documents, library bulletin containing all types of useful information etc.

- **User Education:** It is necessary that the library organizes user education through the reference section. The basic objective of this service is to infuse information seeking habit among the user so they can independently and without help from the reference Librarian, search the information sources in the library.

- **Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) Services:** This is another form of reference service

provided in the library. In some cases, it can be referred to as Current Awareness Services (CAS). It is a user packaged reference services that keeps users abreast of latest information. Many libraries use computerized service methods for disseminating the selective information for the users so as to keep them well informed. This service is mainly for researchers. The Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) alerts a user that a document/material of his interest has been received in the library information centre.

- **Reprographic Services:** The reprographic facilities in the library fulfills the basic reference and information services such as preservation of reading materials issued on poor quality paper, providing reading materials issued on poor quality paper; reduction of storage problem; increasing the accessibility of documents which are unique or a few in number; providing a means of publication for specialist material that are uneconomic to commercial publishing; and the content of a newly received periodicals may be duplicated (or reproduced in many copies) and sent to the readers for their information.

- **Computerized Reference Sources:** The internet in this 21st century is an excellent medium for accessing and using reference sources. In a short period of time, the internet has become popular as a source of information in that one can get any information he wants within a short period of time. Madu (2010) in Madu and Ezeani (2010) posited that with the use of computers and telecommunication in information handling, we now have access to electronically retrievable information in a wide variety of disciplines. Online reference sites or resources play a very significant role in providing reference and information services to users (Dhar, 2010:186).

### Challenges of Public Library Services in Imo State

The challenges facing public libraries in Imo State in their effort to provide services to their users include:

- **Poor Funding:** Poor funding is a serious challenge affecting the activities of public libraries in Imo State. The government does not fund the public library adequately and this has caused a lot of problems. It hinders effective and efficient service delivery. This problem can be likened to lack of political will; and this has resulted to government negligence to fund public library properly; non-approval of budget; and non-release or non-implementation of budget (where approved). Poor funding has led to poor condition of services, shortage of professional staff; poor human resource management; extreme dilapidated structures and facilities; obsolete resources; difficulty in extending services to the rural

areas, inadequate ICT facilities and others. The level of patronage of the existing public libraries in Imo State is low, less relevant materials are acquired; awareness and understanding of the public library concept by the community is poor, bureaucratic in-orderliness and lack of zeal to introduce new services.

- **Poor ICT Infrastructure and Staff with ICT Skills:** Today's era, it is vital to have robust technological infrastructures within the library system. Unfortunately, the situation in Imo State public library is disheartening. As a result, opportunity for users to use ICTs information access is limited. Poor ICTs in Imo State public library has resulted in continuous provision of outdated information resources. Majority of the public library staff in Imo State lack ICT skills.

- **Nepotism:** This problem globally exists in different degrees not only in public library in Imo State. Today, people are not employed based on confidence and merit but on "connections". This causes drawback in action and inefficiency in an organization like public libraries in Imo State bearing in mind that one cannot give what he does not have.

- **Poor Conditions of Service and Prospects:** In Imo State public library, there is insufficient staff simply because of poor conditions of service. Young librarians usually prefer employment in federal government-owned establishments for the following reasons: better salary, frequent promotion and study leave with pay which is not obtainable here. Poor conditions of service lead to poor staff employment which can hinder service delivery.

- **Lack of Library Policy:** This is the major downfall in Imo State public library. A library policy is supposed to offer guidelines for actions and decisions to be taken within the library. Thus, without written guidelines, it would be difficult to have effective public library programmes. The policy should act as the roadmap to public library management practices.

- **Library Location and Difficulty in Extending Services to the Rural Areas:** In Nigeria, public libraries are located in urban areas. As a result, their services are limited to people who live in urban areas. The rural dwellers are not benefitting from public library services hence bookmobile services. Bookmobile was established to serve the public and disseminate knowledge to all, especially to those who find it difficult to resort to standard libraries due to social or geographic reasons or health issues or old age. The government established bookmobile services in the '60s and '70s however, this was not sustained in Imo State public library due to certain factors like bad roads, long distances and use of dilapidated vehicles. These services were kept in

abeyance and they create negative effect in public library service delivery.

- **Frequent Interference in the Operations of Public Library:** Imo State public library is owned and funded by the government. The government also appoints members of the governing Board. Apart from the fact that most of the Board members are appointed on political reasons without considering their areas of specialization, they display their novelty in issues pertaining to library development. Most of them are just interested in their sitting-allowances and show no interest in the growth of the library. They want the money allocated to the library to be spent on flourishing their houses, hotel bills and other domestic matters. Most often than not, most members of the board quarrel with Director of the Public Library Services especially if the Director is uncompromising in their dubious demands. This will result in frustrating the Director vis-à-vis the library in getting budgetary allocation released for the Development programmes articulated by the library management.

### The Way Forward

Public library services in Imo State has declined drastically over the past years as a result of adverse effects of economic, educational and political situations. Poor quality of service delivery has equally led to poor perception and patronage of public libraries by the Imo citizenry. Some of the ways to ameliorate the situation as mentioned in this paper include:

- **Collaboration:** By collaboration, the state government, and federal, international bodies and other stakeholders in the education sector should partner in a synergic manner to help change the image of public libraries in Imo State. This will enhance the economic and educational status of the Imo citizenry. The government should provide adequate infrastructure, improve funding, conducive environment and staff motivation for greater performance and improved service delivery. Provision of ICTs for easy access to information through the Internet by users both inside and outside the library building is another strategy for enhancing service delivery in public libraries in Imo State.
- **Location of the Building:** To successfully deliver public library services, physical accessibility is essential. Public libraries should be strategically located at the centre areas of community activities. Public library is a signpost to every state. They can share buildings with other services such as arts centres, museums, art galleries, community centres and sports facilities. This can help to attract users and achieve capital and operational economies.

- **Staff Training:** This involves human resource management in the public library. Staff training is a good opportunity for staff to learn and develop new competencies and upgrade their skills, especially in ICT. There should be adequate provision of training facilities, with the knowledge that the satisfaction of library users depends, not only on the space and the resources but also on the library staff. Through in-house trainings, webinars, seminars, workshops and conferences, library staff are informed about library resources and programmes and are guided on the best ways to provide and share these resources with users through marketing techniques. The techniques of marketing are strategies adopted to attract users to use a product or service. Products or services should attract users' attention. Library users are customers to the library. By sharing their experiences with non-library users, they can attract them to the library as well. This is also known as a marketing strategy.

- **Mobile Applications:** Imo State public library should introduce the use of mobile applications, through which users can connect with library services from anywhere, thus allowing them to interact with the library from any location at all times. Examples of mobile applications are MDPLS iLibrary App, Overdrive, Freegal, Mango Languages, Blio Reader, Ask-A-Librarian, Access My Library, Axis Reader and Zinio. With all these APPs, library services can be delivered efficiently.

- **Print Collaterals:** Imo State Public Library System should create an internal Graphics Department and Print Shop. This allows for the creation of collaterals including fliers, posters, and brochures for promotion of library programmes and services. These collaterals are displayed and distributed within the branches and used during outreach events.

- **Users-Focus Strategy:** This involves drawing the attention of members of the society to the values of the library, especially public libraries. Library users should be allowed to participate in the planning and implementation of public library programmes. They should be allowed to express their needs so that the efforts of the library and librarians would be channeled towards user satisfaction. Imo State Public library should provide effective and efficient information services to attract library users and promote library use.

- **Fee-Based Services:** As a result of shrinking budgets, it has become necessary for public libraries to find additional sources of funding. Imo State public library can charge fees for their services to help in fund-raising. The most common services include reprographic services, bindery, Internet browsing, sales of books, stationery and consultancy. Imo State public library

should not depend only on government subvention but to source for other avenues to generate funds internally. Public library can also raise funds by making their collections available for loan to other libraries by participating in-network through union catalogue and by classifying and cataloguing their resources according to accepted international or national bibliographic standards.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of the reference information services in the library cannot be over emphasized especially in ensuring that the grassroots and vulnerable are exposed to adequate information needed. The provision of needed reference information goes a long way in widening their horizon in technology and education more especially in a developing society like Nigeria. The extension of library services to this group of persons in the rural areas would enhance socio-economic and educational development of the nation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The users' purposes of consulting information sources are to keep up with current developments in their field, therefore, library administrators should ensure that timely, relevant and up-to-date information sources are made available coupled with the modern information technology facilities for users to use so that their academic productivity can even be better.
- ii. Librarians managers should be trained on regular basis to be abreast with current trends in the areas of library management as it affects library and information service delivery.
- iii. Most staff in the libraries are not qualified, hence their capacity to deliver efficient services to their client has been impeded. This apparently reveals the need for the heads of libraries to recruit qualified staff that will help in manipulating the available technologies and as well transformed the image of librarianship.
- iv. Librarians based on their areas of specialty must be deployed for maximum productivity. Supervisors must also be encouraged to do their jobs for works in the library to be performed optimally. Incentives and encouragement should not be taken for granted as the master encouraged the good and faithful servants.

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