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Employability, National integration and public libraries: case of the Beyond Access/IREX intervention in Nigerian public libraries

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Abstract

National integration is driven by inclusiveness, a sense of belonging and a strong confidence in the existence and future of a country. Nigeria has been bedeviled by numerous clashes, conflicts and challenges which depict the absence of national integration. Unemployment as a means of satisfaction of human basic needs as typified by Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been fingered as one of the major causes of lack of social cohesion, feelings of marginalization and confidence in the country as an entity. Studies have pointed to a gap in the set of skills acquired in schools and what 21st century employers' need. Beyond Access/IREX intervention in 70 Nigerian public libraries trained librarians with different modules that will enhance the employability of their users by imparting the missing skills. Using frequency counts and simple percentages, it was revealed that 71% of the libraries teach basic computer skills, 54% operate job search centres while 46% provide access to e-government services. Electricity and Internet connectivity were identified as major challenges in the provision of these services.

Keywords – National integration, unemployment, employability, public libraries

Introduction

Beyond being a political and geographic entity, citizens of a nation are meant share a common sense of identity, purpose, destiny and belonging undergirded and sustained by national institutions and values. National integration is the engendering of perceptions of oneness in a nation state despite cultural, religious and social differences and diversities. It breeds a sense of common identity, nationhood, unity and patriotism in the citizens of a country. National integration fosters the development of common national values, strong confidence in the existence and future of the country and a compelling obligation and sense of duty to the nation. It also promotes inclusiveness and a sense of belonging as people identify and cohere to shared values (Makosso, 2014). Considering the different conflicts, ethnic clashes, political challenges and economic instabilities that have engulfed Nigeria since the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates into a nation in 1914, it is quite evident that the country seriously needs to explore fresh avenues in achieving national integration (Ojo, 2009).

Ethnicity, nepotism, political and economic challenges have been identified as the deeply entrenched issues which work against national integration in Nigeria (Fageyinbo, 2011). It has been suggested that to achieve national integration in Nigeria, the different ethnic, religious, social and political groups need to discuss and agree on perceived thorny national issues such as zoning of political posts, indigene-settler disagreements, resource control, youth restiveness and militancy and religious fundamentalism and intolerance (Onifade and Imhohopi, 2013). Alapiki (2005) had pointed out that the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme, the Unity Schools, the Federal Character Principle, and State Creation exercises all illustrate national policies specifically made to achieve national integration. However, these measures have seemingly failed to achieve their objectives.

The inability of citizens to be gainfully employed has been fingered as a major factor to be considered in national integration as one of the ripple effects of unemployment in a society is lack of interest and cooperation in nation building. A high rate of unemployment presupposes the existence of inequalities in the country. This is exacerbated by the lack of social welfare schemes which cater for the unemployed and which most importantly serves as an indicator of social and economic rights which all members of the nation community are entitled to. This absence of a clear baseline of socio-economic rights means that the unemployed as a group of people is marginalized from partaking from the commonwealth of the country. This works greatly against national integration as nation building cannot work where poverty, lack of basic needs and marginalization thrive (Gambari, 2008).

Public libraries are well positioned to help as pertains to unemployment as well as in assisting people to acquire 21st century 'hard and soft skills'. Rooney-Browne (2009) had noted that communities expect more from libraries in the times of unemployment as people demand more 'job-related' services from their public libraries. According to Richard (2009), a downward turn in economy pushes people to use public libraries as 'something like an office' where they can use computers, have Internet access and even take classes to gain more skills including digital literacy skills. Lynch (2002) had made the same observation that unemployment occasioned by a downturn in the economy

seems to drive people to seek for more information on economic opportunities in public libraries. The role of public libraries in enabling people to become employed therefore needs to be critically assessed in the search for national integration in Nigeria. The Beyond Access/IREX intervention in Nigerian public libraries is focused on equipping Nigerians with skills that will enable them find jobs or become self-employed as well as become more productive in their current workplaces. This is important as most jobs in the 21st century require basic computer skills, including word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, email and social media operations. Most schools are not teaching these skills thus young people who are entering the workforce need to acquire these skills in order to increase their employability quotient.

Objectives

This paper therefore aims to examine the Beyond Access/IREX project which took place in 2015 - 2017 in Nigerian public libraries. Specifically, the study aims;

- To identify the different modules that were used to teach librarians as pertains to making people employable,
- To ascertain how many services and programmes were devised based on the trainings acquired through the Beyond Access/IREX project as pertains to making people employable,
- To determine the challenges faced by the libraries as they provide services that promote employability.

Review of related literature

Nigeria as a multicultural nation is bedeviled with diverse problems that threaten its survival and continued existence as an entity. National integration appears to have become an intractable problem for Nigeria even after decades of nationhood. This has caused underdevelopment despite the huge natural resources available in the country. Many solutions have been proffered as the country seeks ways out of the predicament. Bello (2012) argues that the proper use of the 'Federal Character principle' will ensure fair and equitable representation of the different ethnic groups at the centre of power and give every

group a sense of belonging and possibly quash conflicts and clashes. Falade and Falade (2013), propose the transformation of attitudes through social mobilization and the adoption and imbibing of core values of oneness and trust for the attainment of national integration. Sifawa and Kurah (2016), opine that education especially the inclusion of history in the curricula at all levels of schooling is a veritable tool for fostering unity and peaceful coexistence in the country.

National integration could also be achieved through economic stability and the creation of jobs for all. According to Open Society Foundation (2012), being employed does not only endow with the means to fend for one's self and dependents, it also gives fulfillment, a sense of responsibility and most importantly it delivers economic benefits and helps to strengthen social cohesion which is a prerequisite for national integration. Functionalism which is one the main three major perspectives of sociology explains how stability which is necessary for national integration could be achieved in a society. The Functionalist theory views every fragment of society as interconnected in terms of how it contributes to the overall stability of the whole community (Mooney, Knox and Schacht, 2007). The viewpoint espouses the belief that one of the means of achieving national integration is through economic development whereby a country is typified as an organism with interconnected parts that can achieve harmony, balance and equilibrium when the economy which is a vital and necessary component, is healthy (Crossman, 2017). The most critical need and function of any group of people is the provision of security and welfare. It follows then that if any group of people gets a reasonable amount of what they want and ought to have then, they will be peaceful and there will be stability (Frank and Ukpere, 2013).

Furthermore, Maslow's (1943), hierarchy of needs theory postulates that human needs fall into five categories that are placed in a hierarchical order and that an individual can satisfy a need in a higher category only if he has satisfied the lower needs. The first four levels of the pyramid are elementary and are referred to as "deficiency needs" - esteem, friendship and love, security, and physical needs. If the most basic of these "deficiency needs" are not met, one will not only will feel anxious and tense but also have physical

reactions. The first category of Maslow's hierarchy of needs at the bottom of the pyramid are physiological needs. These are the very basic needs such as air, warmth, water, food, stimulation, and activity. It can generally be assumed that the ability to have resources that will enable one to procure food for one's self and dependents is the most fundamental of basic human needs and fulfilling that need is a prerequisite to the peace of mind and body. The second category in the hierarchy of needs is safety. Being gainfully employed in order to provide the physiological basic needs gives a sense of safety and security and this drives economic development in any community (Ozdalgar, 2015). Meeting the lower needs of a people in the hierarchy of needs will empower them financially and psychologically to value the society that enriches them and their needs will move up higher to respect, connect and accept others which are essential components of national integration and nation building (Asaba, 2017).



Fig. 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – Ozdalgar (2015)

Unemployment has been identified as one of the indicators that militate against national integration as promoting the well-being of the individuals who make up a nation is a fundamental issue. since The rate of unemployment in Nigeria has continued to go up even as more and more people enter the labour market either through acquiring relevant qualifications from educational, technical and vocational institutions/bodies or attaining the age of 15 to 64 years and are willing and able to work. According to the National Bureau

of Statistics (2016), the economically active population or working age population (persons within ages 15 and 64) in Nigeria increased from 106.69 million in the second quarter of 2016 to 108.03 million, this represents a 1.26% increase over the previous quarter and a 3.57% increase when compared to the third quarter of 2015. The labour force population (that is those within the working age population -15-64yrs willing, able and actively looking for work) increased from 79.9 million in the second quarter of 2016 to 80.67 million in the third quarter of 2016, representing an increase of 0.98% in the labour force during the quarter.

Furthermore, during the third quarter of 2016, National Bureau of Statistics (2016) recorded the fact that the number of unemployed Nigerians in the labour force, increased by 554,311 persons, resulting in a steady increase in the national unemployment rate to 13.9% in the third quarter 2016 from 13.3% in the second quarter, 12.1% in the first quarter of 2016, 10.4% in fourth quarter of 2015 and 9.9% in third quarter of 2015. The number of underemployed in the labour force (those working at jobs not commensurate with their qualifications or those not engaged in fulltime work and merely working for few hours) increased by 501,074 or 3.25%, resulting in an increase in the underemployment rate from 19.3 % in the second quarter of 2016 to 19.7% (15.9 million persons) in third quarter of 2016. Furthermore, the unemployment rate in Nigeria has risen for nine (9) consecutive quarters moving from 13.9% in the third quarter of 2016 to 14.2% in the last quarter of the same year (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

When an estimated 27.12 million people in a country are jobless or are under-employed, it shows that a sizable percentage of the citizens are unengaged, unproductive and most likely angry, sullen and resentful and this is a grave impediment to national integration as unemployment has negative multiplier effects (Uwa, Chuke and Elton, 2016). Brookings Institute (2017) had identified a 'skill-set' gap between what is taught in schools at all levels of education and the requirements of the 21st century employers and workplaces as the most plausible reason for the high rate of unemployment in Africa. The critical areas include IT and information literacy skills, team work and problem-solving skills amongst

others. Digital literacy skills have been highlighted as needful for job seekers in the 21st century as more and more jobs are getting automated; not just manual duties but also those that require routine cognitive skills such as the duties of lawyers and accountants among others (Winthrop and McGivney, 2017).

Public libraries have been safe centres and platforms for formal, informal and lifelong learning, creativity and innovations where anyone in the society irrespective of age, religious beliefs, educational and social status can access, use and generate information for a multitude of purposes. The advent of the Internet and the ever-evolving technologies in information and communication has spawned the need for a new set of knowledge and skills in information usage. Digital skills are the gateway to economic, social and educational opportunities. Public libraries have keyed into this with the realization that those without the skills to navigate information in the digital landscape are quickly left behind in exploiting opportunities for advancement in the 21st century. These institutions have become essential for equipping communities and people to function fully in the 21st century as they deliver information services, teach digital skills and assist in the inculcation of literacy. Most importantly, public libraries have the capacity to help people get or improve the skills they need to get the kinds of jobs that are in demand in the 21st century (Garmer, 2014). They help people increase their employability quotient thus driving the attainment of national integration.

Having identified public libraries as information hubs and trusted institutions for building partnerships that will drive sustainable capacity building to fill this gap, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) came into Nigeria. IREX is an international non-profit organization committed to fostering a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering young people, engaging leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information (IREX, 2016). Through Beyond Access, IREX partnered with the Librarian Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF), National Information Technology Development

Agency (NITDA) and local NGOs to build up the capacity of librarians in the public libraries in the area of digital skills.

This was done with the major aim of building sustainable, inclusive access to information communication technologies and 21st century skills that will enable citizens of Nigeria to be better equipped for employment and exploitation of socio-economic opportunities online (Beyond Access, 2015). The first phase of the project (2015-16) involved 9 public libraries. The second phase of the project (2016-17) involved 70 public libraries all over the geo-political zones of the country. Different modules were used to teach the librarians including Workforce Development, Entrepreneurship, Life-skills, Advocacy, Partnerships, Economic opportunities and others. Most of the learning was targeted at how to assist people looking for jobs, to increase their skills, or to apply their skills in a way that increases their incomes thus assisting them to create and take advantage of economic opportunities. The modules also teach librarians of the importance of being aware of initiatives and programmes by government agencies, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the private sector at helping people get jobs and the need to explore avenues of working together with these bodies to complement their initiatives. Data from IREX reports that seventeen (104) people had become employed and/or had opened up their own businesses including a photocopying centre and a cake decorating concern as a result of the trainings they received in public libraries that participated in the project.

Methodology

Population of the study is made up of 70 public libraries in the Beyond Access/IREX project. Information was gathered from the monthly data submissions of the libraries from May 2015 – June, 2017. However, the MOU signed with NITDA to equip all of the participating libraries with computers and accessories fell through due to changes in the leadership of the Body. Thus, results could only be retrieved from the monthly submissions of 59 libraries in the project; that is those that had computers before the onset of the

programme. Simple percentages and frequency counts were used to analyze the findings and were presented in Tables.

Findings

The findings are presented below as pertains to the identification of the different modules taught to librarians and their applicability to making people employable. Findings as shown in Table 1 below indicate that eight (8) modules were taught – four (4) in the first phase of the project and four (4) in the second phase. Only one module did not have a relationship with making people employable.

Table 1 – Identification of the different modules taught to librarians and their applicability to making people employable

S/N	First Phase of intervention modules	Applicable to employability
1.	Digital Literacy skills	Yes
2	Life skills	Yes
3.	Entrepreneurship	Yes
4	Workforce Development	Yes
	Second Phase of intervention modules	
5	Technology in the Library	Yes
6.	Economic opportunities	Yes
7.	Advocacy	No
8.	Partnership	Yes

Furthermore, findings show that with trainings in the modules of Digital literacy skills and Technology in the library, participating libraries provide a variety of services to aid employability. Basic computer skills are taught by 42 libraries representing 71% of the total number of population studied, 29 (49%) libraries teach Microsoft Word, 20 libraries help people to open and operate emails while 15 (26%) assist people in creating professional presence online. Details are clearly presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 –Services under the Digital Literacy skills/Technology in the Library modules

S/N	Services/Programmes	No. Engaging Libraries	%
1	Teaching basic computer skills	42	71
2	<u>Microsoft packages</u>		
2a.	Word	29	49
2b.	Excel	22	37
2c.	Power-point	23	39
3.	Emails	20	34
4.	Creating Professional presence online	15	26
5.	Social media	17	29
6.	Making invitations and posters	13	22

Again, findings show that forty (40) libraries representing 68% of the population studied provide help in finding and using resources as pertains to job opportunities, 46% (27) assist users with accessing e-governance services, 13 (22%) teach soft skills, 9 (15%) teach bead making, 9 (15%) help users to write CV/Resumes. Details about more services/programmes based on the training of the Entrepreneurship, Life Skills and Workforce Development modules are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 - Services Entrepreneurship/Life Skills/Workforce Development

S/N	Services/Programmes	No. of engaging libraries	%
1	Skill acquisition services		
a.	- Bead making	9	15
b.	- Shoe making	5	8.5
c.	- Paint making	1	2
d.	- Envelope making	1	2
e.	- Catering	6	20.3
f.	- others	12	10.1
2	Entrepreneurship assistance (Business plans, Strategic plans etc)	5	8.5
3.	Writing CVs	9	15
4.	Online platforms for earning income	7	12
5.	Accessing e-governance services	27	46
6.	Support finding and using resources	40	68
7	Teaching soft skills	13	22

Also, fifty-four (54) libraries representing 91.5% of the population studied have job search corners/centres, only 15% (9) of the libraries match the skills set of job seekers and

available jobs advertised online and offline as well as have a database of job seekers that use the library. Details in Table 4 below

Table 4 –Services under the Economic opportunities module

S/N	Services/Programmes	No. engaging libraries	%
1	Job search corners/centres	54	91.5
2	Database of Job seekers	9	15
3	Matching skills and jobs	9	15
4	Career Development training	15	24.5

Likewise, only 2 libraries representing 3.3% of the population studied have a service/programme under the Partnerships module that seeks to take advantage of employment opportunities through partnering with other bodies as shown on Table 5 below.

Table 5 – Services under the Partnerships module

S/N	Services/Programmes	No. of engaging libraries	%
1	Partnerships to create opportunities	2	3.3

Additionally, findings show that lack of constant electricity (100%) was the main challenge faced by the population of libraries studied. Internet connectivity was also identified as a problem as 54 (91.5%) libraries indicated that they have issues with it. Details of the challenges are in Table 7 below.

Table 7 – Challenges in the provision of services that promote employability

S/N	Challenges	No. of engaging libraries	%
1	Lack of constant electricity	59	100%
2	Poor Internet connectivity	54	91.5%
3	Inadequate computers	39	66.1%
4	Inadequate staff	28	47.5%
5	Inadequate space	20	34%
5	Non-payment of salaries	2	3.4%

Discussion

The findings of the study show that out of the eight (8) modules used in training librarians in the Beyond/IREX project, seven (7) were well suited to increasing the employability of the unemployed in different communities. The trainings spawned a variety of services that are all targeted at assisting people to get employed such as basic computer skills, job search centres/corners, creating professional presence online and support in finding and using resources as pertains to increasing chances of getting employed. Also, some of the services birthed by the Project such as Skill acquisition services, Online platforms for earning incomes and Making invitations and posters could help people start their own businesses. Findings of the study are clear indicators that public libraries can provide services that can help boost the employability of job seekers. These services show that Nigerian public libraries are well positioned to provide assistance towards building social cohesion in their different communities by ameliorating the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria.

This ties in with the postulations of Lynch (2002) and Richard (2009) that a downward turn in any country's economy is an opportunity for public libraries to provide job-related services, provide internet access and offer classes for community members to gain more skills including digital literacy skills and seek for more information on economic opportunities online and offline. However, the challenges of constant electricity and internet connectivity need to be addressed so that Nigerian public libraries can play a larger role towards national integration as they help to raise the employability quotient of people in their different communities.

Conclusion

National integration can only be built through social cohesion and the elimination of all factors that promote marginalization especially unemployment. Literature has identified a gap in the skill set of school leavers at all levels of education as one of the causes of unemployment. Nigerian public libraries through the intervention of the Beyond Access/IREX project have initiated services and programmes that fill this gap and that increase the employability of people in Nigeria as more users visit the libraries.

Nevertheless, the challenges of power and Internet connectivity need to be tackled to ensure the sustenance of these services.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby made;

1. There is urgent need to cascade training of the modules of the Beyond/Access intervention in Nigerian public libraries beyond the 70 participating libraries in the project. This will provide more opportunities for librarians in the public libraries to be better equipped to provide services that promote employability.
2. More partnerships such as that of the Beyond Access/IREX need to be sought for enhancement of services and programmes in public libraries especially as pertains to employability and building social cohesion.

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