



## THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE PROMOTION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Public libraries have historically served as inclusive gateways to knowledge, providing equal access to information regardless of socioeconomic status, race, religion, or gender. In particular, they play a vital role in reaching vulnerable community members unaware of societal developments. Public libraries contribute to cultural diversity and social inclusion by offering both human and physical resources, including language learning programs and culturally relevant initiatives. These programs foster dialogue, cultural exchange, and integration, helping individuals participate fully in society. This paper examines the contribution of public libraries in Nigeria, known for its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, to promoting cultural diversity and social inclusion. Using a literature-based approach, the study explores how public libraries facilitate access to diverse cultural resources, support community sensitization, and offer inclusive programs that meet the varied needs of their users. Findings reveal that public libraries in Nigeria help bridge cultural divides by providing access to multilingual and multicultural materials, sensitising individuals to their rights, and empowering communities through educational and cultural services. The study recommends that public libraries receive adequate support to strengthen their roles as agents of inclusion and cultural understanding. It concludes that public libraries are essential in creating equitable societies by promoting access to knowledge, cultural development, and community integration, especially in diverse and multi-ethnic settings such as Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Public library, Diversity, Cultural Diversity, Social Inclusion, Nigerian Society

### Introduction

Libraries are institutions that assist in promoting the reading culture among citizens. It is a service-oriented institution with set goals to be achieved within the resources made available to it. As gateways to knowledge and culture, libraries offer countless learning opportunities that can fuel

economic, social and cultural development. Libraries can help eliminate barriers to access by providing collections and programs which accurately and authentically reflect the cultural perspectives of diverse communities. In this information age, Libraries have been recreated to serve the purpose of meeting the information challenges faced by individuals in society.



Marwiyah (2019) states that the library has an important role in promoting social inclusion with its function as an institution to implement education for all. Wiyono(2021) stated that libraries known as social inclusion-based libraries provide facilities to their community, enabling equal participation by developing potentials based on cultural diversity and empowerment. With adequate information, members of a society will have opportunity to participate in community activities that will make them more well-informed.

The public library as a community library is seen as institution of learning for everyone in society irrespective of age, sex, race, status, and culture. The public library provides materials in the appropriate media to support formal and informal learning processes (Kelechi,2020). Aiyebilehin, Onyam, & Akpom, (2018) in contribution opine that 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.

Public libraries are founded wholly with government grants in developing countries in agreement with the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1972), which states that: a public library should be maintained by public funds, and no direct charge should be made to anyone for its services. To fulfill its purposes, the public library must be readily accessible, and its doors open for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, colour, nationality, age, religion, language, status, sex, or educational attainment. Public libraries, as stated by UNESCO are a local gateway to knowledge, providing the foundation for lifelong learning, independent decision-making, cultural development and social cohesion within a

community. The public libraries are the heart and soul of any community they serve, allowing everybody, irrespective of their age, caste, race or social background, to have easy access to the widest possible range of knowledge and information services for a speedy social inclusion process. The public library is a community information centre; it provides information irrespective of format, space and time. According to the American Library Association (2012), libraries play a key role in creating and cultivating readers. They are information centres responsible for organizing activities, meetings and services for citizens of all ages in their lifelong learning and helping sustain their independent development (Boucher & Lance, 1992). Public libraries help in the provision of library information resources and services for cultural transformation and educational development.

Communities that have access to timely and relevant information are better positioned to eradicate poverty and inequality, improve agriculture, provide quality education and support people's health, culture, research and innovation (IFLA, 2013). It is no wonder, therefore, that many national and international organizations have focused on working with and supporting public libraries in their bid to engender transformation in various countries. Greenhalgh et.al in Arko-Cobbah (2005) describe the features of a public library as:

- “the historical principle of “the right to know”, civic rights, the freedom of knowledge and the idea of human betterment;
- democratic, non-partisan, above-sectional interests, inhabiting the “value-free” world of scholarship and general interest;
- the espousal and encouragement of early childhood literacy and the enjoyment of reading, seen as a welcoming entry for the young into civil society and “the great book of life”; and
- a “window of the world”, where newspapers can be read, the events of the day absorbed and followed and the latest reference books and novels keep the local community in touch with the wider world.

Public libraries were initially established to serve the colonial masters, families and other



elites in the societies who were trained and registered to use the information available in these libraries. According to Okojie and Okiy (2019), public library is usually established to meet the informational, educational and recreational needs of members of the public in all spheres of life. However, with the recent trends in information provision and services, public libraries impact in the societies in which they are located and making an effort in promote of cultural diversity and social inclusion. Public libraries are in a better position to provide necessary information needed by communities for improvement of social inclusion and cultural diversity. With recent clashes between different ethnic groups, public libraries can bridge the gap between various cultures through provision of books, journals and other reading materials in various languages. Therefore, the present study focused on the role of public libraries in the promotion of cultural diversity and social inclusion in Nigeria.

### **Concept of Cultural Diversity**

Culture is the customs, beliefs, acts, ways of life and social organization of a particular country or group. Culture shapes the way Individuals perceive and interact with the world around them, and influences their attitudes, values and norms. Diversity, according to the same source, is a range of many people or things that are very different from each other. Cultural diversity is, therefore, the variety of cultures and ethnicities within a society or group. It includes differences in language, religion, customs, traditions, and other ways of life. UNESCO (2001) defined cultural diversity as the harmonious coexistence and interaction of different cultures within the same society. Cultural diversity is about appreciating that society is made up of many different groups with different interests, skills, talents and needs. It is therefore important to recognize that people in society can have differing religious and sexual orientations. The concept of cultural diversity

encompasses the variety of cultural expressions that exist within a society, including language, religion, ethnicity and social practices, among others (Wang & Ruan, 2024). Cultural diversity consists of two elements: Non-material, which includes values, beliefs, symbols and language that define a society and material culture, that is, society's physical objects such as its tools and technology, clothing, eating utensils and means of transportation.

Cultural diversity in the opinion of this article, therefore, is the ways of life of different people or groups that are very different from each other. Promoting cultural diversity in Nigeria is usually a deliberate act of helping to persuade, sell and bring to service, to make a particular people or group culture popular by advertising it or offering it for emulation; to balance their different ways of life and doing things, which includes pattern relationships and possible happy co-existence. Cultural diversity helps promote peaceful coexistence among people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds in their workplace, institutions and societal settings. It helps people to acknowledge that the world comprises different types of people from different cultural settings. Cultural diversity is beneficial when coordinated by public libraries considering the range of experiences, perspectives and ideas possessed by librarians in public libraries. Public libraries embrace cultural diversity to foster mutual respect, understanding and appreciation of different ways of people's lives which in effect promotes tolerance and cooperation among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

### **Concept of Social Inclusion**

The World Bank defines social inclusion as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. It is an avenue to embrace the poor and vulnerable in society to partake in decisions that affect their lives and as such give them leverage to enjoy equal access to services, markets, political, social and physical spaces. Social inclusion is further defined as the



process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights (UN, 2010. as cited by Adhikary et al., 2019). According to Cahyaningta and Priyanto (2021), the concept of social inclusion was first coined in Paris in the 1970s as a response to the welfare crisis in Europe. Social inclusion is a concept that includes efforts and policies to promote equal opportunities for individuals from various marginalized social backgrounds (Fourie, 2007). With increase in population and complexities in the management of the nation, public libraries are expected to rise to the challenges of meeting the information needs of different groups of people in the communities so as to promote social inclusion.

Social inclusion is designed to engage poor or individuals with specific disabilities who may not have the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their rights and privileges in society. Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunity and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in society in which they live (Sanjay, Basudeb & Sarmistha, 2019) It is a common knowledge that all the elements for social inclusion such as; unemployment, discrimination, lack of skills poor health condition, poor housing, and other disability factors occur in the society today and as such the public library has a vital role in providing possible inclusion services for excluded groups in the communities since it has the benefit of being local and having a number of frequent users. Social inclusion ensures that those individuals in the community who are poor and neglected are given opportunities to access resources and facilities and at the same time fully participate in activities where their views will be recognized

and be part of decision making activities in the community. A public library as a community library, has the best opportunity to get in touch with the different community members, hence it is noted that no other public service is better than the public library to develop an environment of social inclusion.

### **Methodology**

The research was an opinion-based paper and did not distribute any instruments to elicit responses. The method we used was only a literature search to form ideas on the content

### **Public Libraries for Cultural Diversity**

Nigeria is a country with many diverse cultures, and as such, needs a unifying factor for progress. Public libraries a community-based library are filled with enormous task of providing information resources to meet the information needs of people irrespective of culture, religion, ethnicity, and social inclination. Public libraries have been repositioned in this 21st century for national development in respect to improving the quality and better human living standard. To achieve this they engage communities in various activities that will enhance the development of people in the community. Ologun et al (2022) affirmed these activities are achieved through preservation of cultural heritage, knowledge and histories of the past and tourist centre, collaboration and scholarship which can be sustained through readership, research and publishing output, promotion, creation and publishing of digital content through electronic databases, digital commons, repositories.

The role of public libraries in the community and society cannot be over-emphasized in accessing information and knowledge creation. They provide communal information dissemination, educational and promotion of cultural and social heritage. Because of the vital position occupied by public libraries as community libraries, they have the advantage of engaging the community due to the vast number of users and the direct contact with



the community. Public libraries have a long history of promoting social responsibility. As such Opara et al (2021), said that public libraries are a vital institution of social responsibility. They provide a range of resources that support individuals and organizations in achieving social responsibility.

Kosciogew (2020) argues that the social responsibility of public libraries involves meeting diverse communities and empowering individuals through education and access to information. Public libraries as repositories of past histories, should make access to information available to everyone in the community irrespective of class. Libraries can help achieve this by providing resources that reflect Nigeria's diverse cultures and history while supporting education through initiatives such as literacy programs. Libraries as agents in information dissemination, should create an avenue for individuals who may not have had access to certain materials or technology facilities to expand their knowledge base.

Cultural diversity poses a great challenge to national development and unity and as such library staff should be committed to providing a conducive environment for all irrespective of age, class or race. This can be in the following ways:

- a. Collecting and preserving books, documents and artefacts that reflect Nigeria's diverse heritage. This will go a long way in telling people their origin, culture, beliefs and rights as a citizen of a particular place.
- b. Access to multicultural resources should be provided. Human beings are not static in a particular environment and libraries should sensitize people on the need to access materials on other people's culture in order to fit in with other cultures. Also, programmes that showcase other people's culture and traditions should be organized from time to time.
- c. With the help of information technology, public libraries are expected to cover

events and programmes in their location so as to preserve them for posterity. This documentary will expose the new generation to their cultures and histories which they are expected to know and pass to next generation.

- d. In order to promote social inclusion and peace in their community, public libraries should engage the community in programmes through provision of cultural education and awareness and make them participate effectively in these programmes.
- e. Public libraries in the modern technology era are expected to provide information resources and access that will enable them become united. With united force, the community will develop both economically and socially. As library whose service is not restricted to a particular group, it is expected to build a cordial relationship among the citizens of different cultures within the society.

Librarians must provide books and other materials presenting all points of view concerning problems and issues of our times. Librarians have a professional responsibility to provide information materials in their collection development programme that will take cognizance of the information needs of every user irrespective of language, religion and culture as a balanced collection development promotes social inclusion.

Managing cultural diversity in a country with 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages is very necessary for social inclusiveness but requires strategies in the management of cultural diversity. Diversity has been a source of strength and weakness in the nation.

Cultural diversity can promote national unity by recognizing and respecting the differences between various cultural groups (Adebayo, 2018). The importance of cultural diversity cannot be overemphasized. Cultural



diversity promotes innovation, global adaptability and ethical practices in organizations (Himashi, 2024). He further stated that cultural diversity serves as dynamic force, enhancing societies in numerous ways as enhancing cognitive flexibility enabling individuals to approach problems from various perspectives. The public libraries in bringing to bear the cultural diversity should engage in dialogues and programs that will motivate them to share ideas on their cultural experiences and as well learn from cultural activities. Such programs not only celebrate cultural diversity but also foster a sense of belonging and community cohesion (Okomah & Arimie, 2023).

### **Public Libraries for Social Inclusion**

Public library development in Nigeria is linked to the history of education and colonial settlement. The first established public library system in the country was in Northern Nigeria in 1952. It was located in Kaduna, in Lord Lugard Hall, which was the regional headquarters at that time (Salman, 2006). Public library is a community library whose primary role is to provide resources that will empower members of the community to become useful citizens and as well develop themselves economically and socially. Public library because of their nature of service, has direct contact with the community and in a better position to cultivate a social environment. The public library knows the target group and their information needs and as a result, they can provide avenues where individuals are expected to exploit opportunities that will make them participate in activities that will give them sense of belonging to know their fundamental right in being a citizen of the community. The contribution of public libraries to social inclusion has become a noteworthy focus. They play a role in enhancing the quality of life through information (Moran, 2021) and fostering social inclusion (Goulding, 2009).

Social inclusion refers to the process of empowering every member of society to have equal opportunity to exercise his/her fundamental right regardless of status, background and ability (American Library Association, 2020). Therefore, public libraries are expected to engage the community by sensitizing them on the benefit

of accessing information for better inclusion in society. Knowing the community's needs will help a long way in the provision of accurate and right information that will enhance the participation of the communities in asking for what is their right. In the technology world, individuals should have access to technology tools and services that will enable them integrate themselves to the best practices globally.

Having access to ICTs will bring changes in the attitude of community members towards information and other factors that promote social inclusion. Stilwell (2014) links the drivers of social inclusion to various types of capital and confirms that access to the internet through public libraries enables individuals to search for employment, access government programs, learn skills through online courses, research health issues, and interact socially. The libraries to sustain social inclusion in society, should integrate cultural diversity and social inclusion in the acquisition of library resources and services. This approach according to Okechukwu, Okafor and Chinemerem (2024) ensures that libraries serve as true reflections of the diverse communities they aim to serve but also positions them as key players in promoting social cohesion, educational equity and lifelong learning.

### **Ways Public Libraries promote Cultural and Social Inclusion**

Public libraries in Nigeria play the role of grassroots libraries as they are in the position of reaching individuals and communities at large. Public libraries as libraries funded with tax payer monies are responsible in meeting the information needs of communities irrespective of status, race, religion, sex and colour. They help in the following ways:

1. Public libraries should ensure that there is equitable distribution of information resources to community members and as well create access to information provided for them.
2. There should be integration of cultural diversity and social inclusion in the resources provided for the communities served by public libraries
3. There should be regular sensitization to create awareness of programmes that will



help in promotion of cultural diversity and social inclusion.

4. Public libraries should collaborate with cultural institutions so as to know the cultural demand of the communities and, as such, effectively provide all they need to bridge the gap in cultural diversity.

With the introduction of technology, public libraries can create digital platforms where the vulnerable can access information and benefit from the government. This platform will enable those who are not able to visit the libraries to access information from their comfort zone. Libraries contribute to economic development and empowerment by providing resources and programs that enhance skills, promote entrepreneurship and support job seekers. Access to business databases, career counseling, resumes, workshops and technology training can significantly impact individuals' economic opportunities and, by extension, the economic health of the community (Valle et al., 2022).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, public libraries play a pivotal role in fostering cultural diversity and social inclusiveness by providing open access to resources that celebrate a wide array of cultural expressions, histories and languages. Through their inclusive programmes, diverse collections and community engagement, public libraries help bridge gaps between different societal groups, promote intercultural understanding and support marginalized voices. By offering a safe, welcoming space for individuals from various backgrounds, public libraries become central hubs in the creation of cohesive, harmonious and inclusive communities. Their efforts in promoting cultural exchange not only enrich local societies but also contribute to the broader goal of a more inclusive and empathic world.

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