

An Evaluation of Bring Back the Book Initiative of the Nigerian Government

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Abstract

Over the years, poor reading culture has been an issue ravaging Nigeria's educational system. This is attributed to many factors such as unavailability of libraries in primary and secondary schools, lack of qualified librarians in schools, absence of public libraries in rural areas, poor attitude of government to the issue, and many others. In order to address the challenge, President Goodluck Jonathan came up with Bring Back the Book initiative. However, an assessment of the objectives of the initiative and methods of its implementation shows that a lot of factors that would have served as forerunners and facilitate the success of the project were neglected. This paper therefore identified the factors and suggested result-oriented recommendations for the future direction of the initiative.

Key words: Bring back the book; Reading culture; Libraries; Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a determinant factor for the overall development of a country. A nation with functional

and qualitative educational system will no doubt boost its economy through the provision of skilled human resources that will drive other sectors of the country's economy. In Nigeria, one of the major factors affecting the development of its education sector is the poor state of reading culture in the country, especially among the youth and students at all levels of education.

The ailing reading culture is now a national issue in Nigeria that has generated various concerns from different stakeholders with perspectives from librarians, authors, teachers, editors, publishers, marketers, booksellers, parents and the readers (Ajibola & Oluyide, 2008). In addition, various factors have been attributed to this poor state of reading habits. These include total absence (and/or poor state) of libraries in primary and secondary schools, out-dated and inadequate information materials in the existing libraries, lack of qualified librarians in primary and secondary schools, dilapidated structures in public primary and secondary schools, non-existence of public libraries (community libraries) in rural areas, low level of literacy, and many others (Adetoro, 2004; Ajegbomogun & Salaam, 2011; Gbadamosi, 2011; Ogunlesi, 2011). The abysmal state of the afore-mentioned factors has also been found as obstacles to the implementation of Universal Basic Education (UBE) programmes in the country (Unagha, 2008; Sote, Aramide & Gbotosho, 2011). In a nationwide survey by Awoyinfa et al (2012) on the state of public libraries, they decried the poor, dilapidated and unflattering condition of public libraries in the country with a description tagged 'shame of a nation: problem-ridden public libraries'. According to the Registrar/ Chief Executive Officer of the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), Dr. Victoria Okojie, 'the state of school libraries in Nigeria leaves much to be desired. She further states that improving library services in schools are essential to building the reading culture of our children which will translate to improved academic performance' (Alechenu, 2012).

However, in an effort to address the poor reading culture in the country, the present government of President Goodluck Jonathan came up with an initiative tagged 'bring back the book'. An assessment of the initiative and the methods of its implementation show that a lot of factors that would have paved way for the success of the project were neglected. Thus, neglecting those factors, as aforementioned, will invariably affect the possible execution and success of the initiative. In addition, the perspective through which the initiative is being handled and executed may not yield the expected result of Mr President's aim for initiating the idea. This is the focus of the paper with a view of making recommendations on the future direction of the policy initiative.

1. BRING BACK THE BOOK INITIATIVE: AN OVERVIEW

Bring back the book (BBTB) initiative is the brainchild of President Goodluck Jonathan established with a view to develop a book reading culture in Nigeria especially amongst the youths who have lost value for reading either for educational purposes or entertainment. The initiative seeks to empower the youth for the future by preparing them for the opportunities and challenges faced by Nigerian citizens as a people by engaging in series of activities designed to encourage the culture of reading amongst the youths.

The objectives of the initiative are to revitalize the reading culture, with knowledge serving as a tool for development; and to project the nation's culture, for survival, sustenance and protection. In addition, according to initiative (www.bringbackthebook.org), the activities of BBTB include:

- Organizing book readings in educational institutions at all levels across the country;
- Establishment of Bring Back the Book Clubs in educational institutions to serve as hubs for development of intellectual capacity of the youths;
- Support for literary events and projects;
- Creation of platform for national discussion on ways to develop the educational system cum reading culture;
- Conducting research and supporting organizations carrying out related activities;
- Support the production of books locally by encouraging publishers via buying of books for distribution to libraries nationwide;
- Construction, refurbishment and stocking of libraries across the country; and
- Organizing national competitions aimed at driving the culture of book reading in the country.

The Nigerian President believes that the secrets of governance, amazing discoveries, development,

progressive management principles and every other desire of any nation are hidden in books; books written over generations and that only through reading can the leaders of tomorrow nurture dreams and values than can change society.

The initiative was formally launched on the 20th of December 2010 at the Expo Hall of the Eko Hotel, Lagos, Nigeria in an event that had a balanced mix of its audiences in attendance. The President took the opportunity and launched his book, "My Friends and I: Conversations on Policy and Governance via Facebook". Four months before he unveiled this project, he created an avenue for social interactions, reactions and suggestions on issues of governance with Nigerians on Facebook. On January 10, 2011, the President issued reassuring words regarding his campaign, posted on his Facebook page that, 'bring back the book is a national survival and progressive imperative that must transcend governments.... We have no choice but to read and encourage ourselves to read and read and read again' (www.facebook.com.jonathangoodluck; Ogunlesi, 2011). The President's desire to engage, communicate and learn from Nigerians necessitated the writing of the book that was launched. For Jonathan, bringing back the books, and indeed, bringing back Nigerian books, is what Nigerians desperately need to make their today count and to have a firm grip on their future. Jonathan said that the "bring back the book" will grow Nigeria's dying publishing industry and encourage a steady rise of young and talented writers. He believes that this will make the renowned Professors Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clarks and many others happier in their old age that they have worthy successors and ambassadors of writers and readers. He foresees many book clubs and libraries springing up in Nigerian communities and cities in the near future (Onwumere, 2012).

Meanwhile, the issues of concern in this paper are found in the frequently asked questions (FAQs) page of the initiative (www.bringbackthebook.org/faqs), as follows:

i. Is the initiative a government project?

Response: Bring back the book is the brain child of President Goodluck Jonathan which was informed by the ailing state of reading culture in the country.

ii. How does the initiative get funding?

Response: The initiative is funded by its partners (individuals and corporate) who contribute towards its various projects by donating books and giving monetary support.

A look at the above questions and the answers in line with the objectives of the BBTB initiative implies that the feasibility of the initiative's success is totally in doubt. How can the objectives of the initiative be meaningfully and sustainably implemented without making it a government funded policy with legal backing? There is no contradiction the fact that the success of the initiative depends on funding for the execution of its outlined activities. Depending on donations from individuals and corporate organizations as partners for its funding will not meet the objectives of the initiative. Nigerians have

a habit of showing their affluence through philanthropy, but these are hardly in favour of libraries (Nwosu, 2006), which is the major instrument that provides resources and services for the development of reading culture. Thus, there is therefore the need to modify and overhaul the modus operandi of the initiative so as to strategically execute its activities and achieve the desired results for sustainable development of the nation.

2. FUTURE DIRECTION FOR THE INITIATIVE

The implementation of the activities of the BBTB initiative and its possible success depends on various factors. These factors are:

A. Making the Initiative a Government Project: It can be seen that the launching of the initiative two-years ago has not yielded much results and the visibility of its activities yet to be seen. Rather the initiative is busy with advertisements, events and ceremonies that relate to education, reading and books. Apart from funding from its partners, there is urgent need to make the initiative a full government project with adequate funding and allocations from the federal and state governments. The National Assembly has a role to play here by legalizing the initiative, so as to make its activities and programmes sustainable, even after the government of President Goodluck Jonathan.

B. Establishment of a National Commission for Library and Information Services: It is unfortunate that Nigeria as a country is yet to have a policy framework or a regulatory body for the coordination and management of libraries across the country. There should be a national commission for libraries and information services. Such exists in developed countries like USA. India has a similar body known as the National Knowledge Commission. Policies in Nigeria like that of Vision 20:2020 and national ICT policy did not feature libraries as a contributory factor towards the development of the country (Diso, 2010). This is not healthy for a country that intends to be among the top global players in the year 2020. Such commission, when established, could be under the ministry of education, ministry of information, or better put under the presidency. The commission will serve as a national centre for the coordination and management of issues about libraries and information centres, reading culture, and address their challenges. The commission will have departments in charge of different types of libraries, and be responsible for the enforcement of standards and best practices. In addition, the government should empower the commission to draft a national policy on the standard of all types of libraries in the country.

C. Establishment of a network of libraries by State Governments: Public primary and secondary schools under state governments in the country virtually exist without libraries. This is a total neglect of the provisions

of the National Policy on Education (NPE), which sees the library as the heart of the education enterprise, thus “since libraries constitute one of the most important educational services, proprietors of schools shall provide functional libraries in all their educational institutions in accordance with the established standards. They shall also provide for training of librarians and library assistants for this service” (FGN, 2004). Proprietors of schools in this case refer to the governments at all levels. The release of N100 million (US \$650,000) by Anambra State Government for the development of libraries in 200 secondary schools across the state (Nzegwu, 2012) is a starting point. Though not enough when shared among the schools, but it is something which other states should emulate and even surpass.

The state governments in Nigeria through their respective library boards under the leadership of the state librarian should make provisions for the establishment of network of libraries in local government headquarters, primary and secondary schools. It should be done in a way that local governments will have directors of library and information services, who will be in charge of coordination and maintenance of standards and best practices in libraries under the local government. Such idea should be pursued in manner that no primary and secondary school will exist without a functional standard library, qualified library staff and library utilization periods in the school time table. The library staff should consist of at least a professional librarian (preferably an information literacy specialist), two library officers and two library assistants.

D. Introduction of Information Literacy Education as a compulsory subject in secondary schools: In primary education, there is emphasis on reading and writing for the pupils, but in the secondary education, both junior and senior levels, such does not exist. Then at the tertiary level emerges user education in libraries or use of library (now holistically referred to as information literacy instruction). This gap at the secondary level needs to be filled by introducing a compulsory subject tagged ‘information literacy education’. The subject, when introduced, will focus on inculcating information literacy skills in secondary students, mainly in the areas of knowledge of use of libraries and information centres, knowledge of formats of information resources and sources, reading skills and reading strategies, information search and retrieval skills, skills in evaluation of information sources, information ethics, legal and social issues in information utilization, knowledge of synthesizing information and development of new knowledge, and many others. The implementation of this will be based on information literacy standards for secondary students as put forward by American Library Association (ALA), with other additions to reflect the information environment in Nigeria. As noted by Julien and Barker (2009), it is very important to ensure that students leaving secondary schooling are

equipped with basic information literacy skills. By so doing, it will address the issue of poor reading habits of secondary students and position them for the challenges of tertiary education. It will also contribute towards mitigating the mass failure that is usually recorded in external examinations like West African Examination Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO) and Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in the country.

E. Recruitment of Librarians as Information Literacy Instructors in Secondary Schools: The introduction of information literacy education as a subject in secondary schools would require the services of professional librarians as information literacy teachers. Librarians are known to be experts in the delivery of information literacy instruction, and such would reposition secondary school students for lifelong education. Such will also serve as an avenue for the provision of more employment opportunities for librarians. In other words, there will be engagement of librarians as information literacy teachers. This is where the efforts of Abadina Media Resource Centre (AMRC) of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in training both professional and academic school media specialists in the country at the post graduate level need to be appreciated and encouraged. In addition, other university-based library schools in the country should brace up with postgraduate specialization in information literacy education.

F. Overhauling of book publication and distribution system in the country: A starting point here is the need to encourage Nigerian indigenous authors. A situation whereby bookshops and some existing libraries in the country prefer to shelve only foreign authors is not healthy for a nation that desires to be among the 20 key global players in 2020. This can be described as literary apartheid or literary neo-colonialism. Some indigenous publications are hardly seen in the country. An ugly case in point is the unfortunate experience of a Nigerian Poet and Professor of English, Niyi Osundare, who teaches at the University of New Orleans USA, thus:

"Last year, between January and May, I received about fifteen requests from Nigeria – students in different Nigerian universities asking me to help them out because they were working on my poems and they did not know how and where to obtain the books. The terrible irony again, I was in the US, these students were in Nigeria, these books were published in Nigeria, and the students were writing to me across the ocean asking me to help them out. Nothing could be more eloquent about the situation of book distribution and promotion in the country"
(Ogunlesi, 2011).

There should be a policy for the encouragement, assessment and publication of works of indigenous authors, as well as the distribution of same to schools and libraries where it will be relevant. This will resuscitate the creative minds of Nigerians and as such would contribute towards the development of the country. In addition, there is urgent need for the resuscitation of moribund paper

mills across the country and total removal of all tariffs associated with information and educational materials imported into Nigeria.

G. Sincerity with the economy and education: The level of poverty in Nigeria is getting out of hand. In a country where half of the population is estimated to live below poverty line (Ogunlesi, 2011), despite the huge oil revenue, is totally unacceptable. This will affect the desire to read and study as the emphasis of families will be on how to get what to eat. Also, the funding of the education sector had not been encouraging; as over a decade now, it has not exceeded 10 % of the total annual budgets, thus neglecting the minimum 26% UNESCO recommended for developing countries. The government at all levels needs to wake up from their slumber and live up to their responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt the fact that, bring back the book is a right initiative for reviving the poor reading habits in the country. It will help transform Nigeria by empowering its citizens to be the change agents needed to make the country a better place through discovering the strength that lies in reading. However, the initiative needs to be holistically addressed by putting various factors in place. Legal framework for its implementation, the state of libraries and adequate funding are determinant factors on the extent of success it would record. Now that the LRCN has developed a manual for the management of school libraries (Alechenu, 2012), the government should put the necessary measures in place, as recommended in this paper, make provisions for result-driven library and information services in our schools, thereby addressing the poor reading culture ravaging the nation for sustainable national transformation. Above all, Nigeria should take advantage of having Port Harcourt as UNESCO Book Capital City for 2014, and reposition its education sector and reading culture.

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