

Library and Information Support for New Partnership for Africa 's Development (NEPAD)

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Introduction

Despite abundant human and natural resources, Africa is adjudged the poorest region of the world. It has 34 out of the 44 countries in the globe classified as “least developed”. In trying to solve the problems of underdevelopment, African leaders have a determination to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in globalizing world. No one, no matter how benevolent, can identify and seek lasting solutions to the continent's impoverishment except Africans. It behooves our leaders to galvanize all available forces to redefine our external relationships, strengthen internal dynamics, and harness collective talents and will for making life more meaningful.

Bukarambe (2004) avers that Africa is the poorest and most marginalized of all continents, with about half of its population living below the poverty line on less than \$1 a day. There is impatience among a vanguard group, the rank and file of Africa, to reverse this hardship and to create a standard of living comparable to other continents.

NEPAD is one of the most efforts to address the issue of sustainable development on the continent. Izeze (2004), citing the African Development Bank, defines NEPAD as a holistic, integrated, strategic development plan to enhance growth and poverty reduction in Africa by focusing key social, economic, and political priorities in a coherent and balanced manner. African leaders formed a common vision and a shared conviction that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and place their countries on a path of sustainable growth and development and participate in the world economy and body politic.

It is designed to tackle the challenges facing the African continent. NEPAD is a programme of cooperation, not dependence. Kufour (2004) describes NEPAD as the beginning of a new order that requires patience and persistence to realize its lofty ideals. According to him, the days of warlords and coup-makers are passing away, while constitutional democracy is fast crystallizing in Africa, thus creating an atmosphere conducive to true emancipation.

Kairos (2004) claims that NEPAD proposes to continue using old neo-liberal models of development that have failed Africa, and does not offer any hope for a turnaround of poverty, further

asserting that NEPAD will create a situation in which poor countries like Malawi continue to suffer economic exploitation by larger economies in the name of regional development.

Kwinjeh (2004), in the same vein, contends that Zimbabwe is not among the core-group of 16 African countries driving the initiative and appears to have been excluded from its scope by the sponsors. She advocates that Zimbabweans reject NEPAD, describing it as illegitimate and offering no solutions for their political and economic development.

The NEPAD initiative would allow some expensive projects in the region to be pursued jointly and be cost effective. It will also promote direct foreign investment. Nevertheless, the dissenting views in Africa as exemplified above must not be ignored. Transparency, wider and grass root participation are imperatives for the success of the project.

Objectives and Strategies of NEPAD

This new framework represents Africa 's doctrines and strategies to develop and positively re-establish it in world affairs. The core objectives of NEPAD are:

- Accelerate the eradication of poverty
- Promote accelerated growth and sustainable development
- Halt the marginalization of Africa in the globalization process
- Accelerate the empowerment of women

Melber (2002) reports that for the achievement of its broad objectives, NEPAD has identified these measurable goals and tasks:

- Strengthen the mechanism for conflict prevention, management, and resolution and ensure that they are used to restore and maintain peace;
- Promote and protect democracy and human rights by developing clear standards of accountability, transparency, and participative governance
- Restore and maintain macroeconomic stability by developing standards and targets for fiscal and monetary policies and appropriate institutional frameworks;
- Revitalize and extend the provision of education, technical training and health services (with priority to HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other communicable diseases).
- Promote the role of women in social and economic development
- Build the capacity of the states in Africa to set and enforce the legal framework and maintain law and order
- Promote the development of infrastructure, agriculture and its diversification into agro-industries and manufacturing to serve both domestic and export markets.

NEPAD's clear departure from past initiatives is its emphasis on peer review. This is a situation where all African heads of state have agreed to the common value of good governance and accountability and would call to question any of them who is found wanting in the discharge of his responsibilities as a leader. Obasanjo (2002) opines that this mechanism seeks to hold political leaders accountable. This is a laudable ideal although it is difficult in practice.

Criticisms of NEPAD

Skeptics have argued that the production and export base of most African countries is typically undiversified, thus limiting the extent to which they can take advantage of the real and potential benefits of improved market access.

Omoweh (2004) argues that NEPAD has committed a conceptual error by equating the state with the government. The nature of African states is such that the system allows officials use their power to extract what they can from those in inferior positions. The state precipitates endemic mass violence stemming largely from authoritarian rule, exclusion of minorities or majorities from governance, social and economic deprivations, inequity, and injustice.

Mutual distrust among African nations is an area of concern. Nigeria is perceived with suspicion as tending to dominate other, smaller countries. This is often manifested in simple interstate relationships such as sports and appointment to positions in African joint projects.

Preconditions for NEPAD'S Success

Quite understandably, some have wondered whether NEPAD will be no more successful than many well-intentioned projects in the past. The conditions for the success of the project rest are:

Peace and Security: The absence of violence and unnecessary crisis in the continent will create an investment-friendly environment capable of attracting foreign investment as well as foreign capital inflows. This is *sine qua non* for the realization of the ideals of NEPAD.

Good Governance: NEPAD emphasizes the existence of a link between development on one hand, and democracy, respect for human rights and good governance on the other. Corrupt practices can distort the electoral processes and the extent to which elected leaders actually represent the interests of their constituencies. Corruption can distort the independence of the judiciary as well as the oversight functions of the legislature. The ultimate effects of such corrupt practices are the erosion of accountability and a reduction in the standards of governance. This monster called corruption must be eliminated if NEPAD is to succeed.

Self Reliance: African cannot depend on external financing for the success of NEPAD. African states must vigorously and consistently fund the project as this will confer respect and integrity on the continent. Thus, the dream of placing Africa on equal footing in global affairs will be realizable.

Availability and Accessibility of Relevant Information: Accurate, timely and relevant information is a vital resource to any meaningful and sustainable development. Information is one of the critical factors that define the progress of advanced countries. Africa must invest heavily on the generation and management of this fifth factor of production which developing nations have consistently ignored to their detriment. Information is a desideratum for the success of NEPAD in its various aspects and processes.

Library and Information Centres

Societies risk stagnation unless they make constant provision for the injection and absorption of new knowledge. Libraries and information centres are the intellectual storehouse serving as a giant memory (Madu, 2002). A society without well developed libraries is tantamount to a person without a brain and memory. These institutions function as an agency for acquiring, organizing, and preserving for use, knowledge as fixed in any recorded format.

Information is a powerful tool for personal, organizational, and national development. It is said to be an essential part of a nation's resources and access to it is one of the basic human rights; information is not only a national resource vital for scientific and economic progress but is also seen as a medium for social communication.

Muzrui (1999) notes that the distribution of real power is based not on "who owns what" but "who knows what." Gordon (1994) describes it as an understanding that steers human actions and consequently controls signals in any living organism. Information is thus a vital resource in stimulating

socioeconomic development. The high premium placed on the role of libraries and information centres by both the United States and Britain clearly illustrates its centrality in moving a society forward.

NEPAD and Libraries: What Role?

This paper seeks to identify specific roles libraries and information centres can play in the NEPAD project.

Popularizing the Initiative: As an agency of social communication, these institutions are vehicles to bridge the awareness gap between the peoples of Africa and NEPAD. The content, context, relevance, and reality of this initiative must be popularized. The collections of major libraries in the continent should be replete with all publications and documents of NEPAD. These materials must be properly displayed to create the necessary awareness. Content pages of NEPAD related journals must be adequately routed and publicized to the relevant public.

Official documents of NEPAD need grassroots understanding. Libraries and information workers have a professional duty to repackage the materials both in language and format to cater the local needs of our people. One sure way of conferring credibility and public support is the full comprehension of the imports of NEPAD devoid of vagueness and ambiguity.

The choice of NEPAD as a sub-theme at the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) conference is a step in the right direction. It provides a platform for articulating, cross-fertilising, and propagating the project. Information providers must be very knowledgeable about such current discourse and other global phenomena.

Providing a Continental Database : Networking of libraries in Africa is coterminous with any serious partnership in the continent. Since the entire globe now operates in an information-driven environment, integrated information systems for Africa will permit sharing of knowledge across partnering countries. Effective partnership among information centres within Africa makes the application of information and communications technology to information management an imperative. There should be a NEPAD library with branches in all African countries to promote cross-border cooperation and connectivity by using knowledge available in centres of excellence in the continent.

Human Development : Investment in people through education is a catalyst for a highly skilled, productive, creative, and competitive workforce. Knowledge empowers and enlightens. Libraries are powerful agencies available to NEPAD for the empowerment of the African people. Modern libraries will enhance enriched teaching and study. Continuous learning and self development can only be guaranteed through this repository of knowledge. It is only true human development that can pave the way for African's meaningful participation in the world economy and politics.

Eradication of Disease and Poverty through Information : HIV/AIDS has reached pandemic proportions, threatening to wipe out Africa's fragile social and economic gains. Provision of health information to forestall further spread and assuage the suffering of the infected rests on the libraries and information centres. Ignorance has tended to perpetuate this monster in Africa. Information experts are better positioned to realize this dream of NEPAD. Library users acquire requisite skills and knowledge necessary to break the yoke of poverty.

Information Brokerage and Environmental Scanning : Certain specialized information extracted from the domestic or global environment is usually deposited and locked up in the libraries. These can be presented to prospective investors and multinational corporations on a commercial basis. Similarly well-researched facts about the continent hidden in the libraries as unpublished dissertations should be made available to NEPAD in form of abstracts and annotated bibliographies.

Partnering with Multinational Firms and Extra African States: African libraries must strategize to galvanize both horizontal and vertical relationships to ensure their competitiveness and survival. Agreements should be reached with multinational corporations to invest in the development of the libraries; providing equipment, ICT, and other materials as part of their social responsibility. In order to enhance capacity-building of librarians and other information workers, overseas training and exchanges should be encouraged with a view to acquiring world class skills and exposure. There is no shying away from the fact that these advanced countries are more sophisticated in their practice. We need to understudy, catch up, and overtake them.

Standardization of Local Journals: Lopsidedness exists in the mad rush to publish in international journals whereas these foreign colleagues hardly dream of submitting articles to our local journals. We should stem this tide. NEPAD purports to halt the marginalization of Africa in the globalization process. There must be an end to this inferiority complex as it does not need to be “white to be right.” There are erudite African scholars in library and information science endowed with editorial skills and competencies. Consistency in the publication of quality journals must be ensured.

Providing Research Support: African researchers and policy-makers in member states will rely heavily on value-added information provided by libraries for meaningful investigation of socioeconomic and political phenomena as they affect the continent. Research output regarding NEPAD-related issues should be disseminated to the larger society through libraries and information centres. .

Show-casing Indigenous Knowledge: The rich heritage of Africa as expressed in arts, agriculture, medicine, music, crafts could be popularized, internationalized, and integrated into the global technologies through the activities of library and information centres. Mabawonku (2005) suggests that librarians should step up publications in this area, support the documentation and dissemination of indigenous knowledge. This information can be digitized, stored in websites of libraries, and made accessible to the global community. Such knowledge transfer has the propensity of enhancing positively the image of the continent. Books and tapes containing indigenous knowledge should be exchanged for foreign materials by acquisitions departments. List of available local materials should be circulated among universities outside Africa, requesting them to make choice and exchange with items of perceived equivalence.

Media Campaign in Promoting the Library and Information Profession by Library Associations in the Continent: Public awareness and perception of libraries, its relevance, and career prospect are pivotal to the development of the profession in Africa. The tremendous influence of both print and electronic media in shaping, sensitizing, and conscientizing the populace cannot be ignored. Constant, deliberate, and planned press interviews, writing of columns in newspapers, press coverage, video clips, are vital ways of projecting the profession. Organizations as well as associations usually budget heavily for publicity. It is therefore incumbent on library associations in Africa to intensify efforts in educating and enlightening people on the inevitable roles of library and information centres in sustainable development. It is librarians who clamour for the development of libraries. The ordinary man does not really appreciate its value. When the people are enlightened and they demand libraries and information centres as a necessity for meaningful living, then authorities must listen.

Conclusion

Library and information centres are critical in fostering real development in the continent. The NEPAD project requires the support of these institutions to thrive. Specific roles in making the initiative a reality as identified by this paper include: popularizing the ideals of NEPAD, providing a continental information database, human development or capacity building, eradication of diseases and poverty through information, information brokerage and environmental scanning, partnering with multinational firms, show-casing indigenous knowledge among others.

African leaders must ensure that public libraries are revived and the entire library system in the continent is developed to a standard comparable to those in the United States and the western world. The present situation whereby governments place libraries under the ministry of education should be jettisoned. An independent ministry of library services is long overdue. This will allow for direct funding, and much more serious attention to library development rather than window-dressing.

Spirited individuals and Non-governmental organizations like their counterparts in Europe should invest in foundations involved in library development. Governments alone are not sufficient to perpetuate the high standard required in effective modern library services.

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