



## Enhancing the Worth of Public Libraries in Nigeria: the Digital Inclusion Imperatives

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February 25, 2024

# ENHANCING THE WORTH OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA: THE DIGITAL INCLUSION IMPERATIVES

## **Introduction**

Public libraries provide information to all persons and its users are basically the inhabitants of the community it serves. Whilst other types of libraries focus on special category of users, the public library is not restricted to any group of clientele. Indeed, it has been noted to provide information services to all kinds of people including the young, the old, the literate, the illiterate, the underserved populations and persons with disabilities. Due to this unique role of the public libraries, it is perhaps the only library which is strategically placed to reach out to all and sundry, providing access to technology and promoting the crucial necessity of digital inclusion. Digital inclusion is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in a comprehensive way that promotes employment, a better quality of life, social participation, and social integration. It refers to ways in which individuals and groups have access to and the necessary skills to use digital technologies to actively participate in society (Lee, Jeon and Kang, 2010). Digital divide, which is considered a barrier to inclusion, reflects a gap between those who have, and those who lack the access, capability, motivation, and trust needed to meaningfully benefit from the Internet.

A mere 30% of household in Nigeria have access to computers; 22% of the population have access to internet. Given that before the advent of the “digital era” one duty of public libraries was to help people in accessing and using library resources through direct support and educational activities, it seems natural to suppose that in the digital age, they have to contribute towards enhancing digital literacy in order to make users capable of efficiently using digital services. In this sense, libraries are “hybrid” (Kapitzke, 2001). Public libraries have always helped to connect everyone in society with information and knowledge. These days, that mean digital channels are as important as books and publications. For those in our communities without digital skills, there is a new role for public libraries in supporting digital inclusion. Public Libraries are ideally positioned in the heart of their communities to tackle digital and

social exclusion. The relationship between libraries and social inclusion has been widely explored in the literature (Caidi and Allard, 2005; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2008; Muddiman *et al.*, 2000). The foregoing is the situation in Nigeria's public library system which are government owned. The consensus among Nigerians is that government libraries and especially the public libraries or state libraries have not adequately responded to the information needs of all the citizens in their communities (Rita-Okeke and Owoeye, 2011). In spite of this, it has become imperative for public libraries to lead in promoting digital inclusion, helping its teeming users to leverage on technology for social inclusion.

### **The Significance of Promoting Digital Inclusion in Public Libraries in Nigeria**

Digital inclusion according to an analysis by OCLC Webjunction (2014), is important for the development of the economy and workforce, citizen participation, education, medicine, and public safety. To establish a digitally inclusive community in Nigeria, all of the stakeholders – including libraries, community groups, corporations, the government, and policy makers – must participate and support the venture. In public libraries, digital inclusion may provide a wide range of benefits including cost saving in information services provision, and securing more opportunities for social advancement. It also improves the opportunities of individuals and groups. At the individual level, users are likely to benefit from using ICT in learning and academic achievement. At the corporate level, public libraries may help clients by reducing the costs of accessing technology. In the public sector, digital inclusion is not only potentially cost-saving but also applicable to the digitization of health services. On the social level, digital inclusion may improve community engagement and integration as it enables people to express themselves and communicate with one another. Digital inclusion does not simply entail improving access to information and communications through infrastructure and technology innovations; rather, it addresses the full spectrum of human experience. Differences in income, educational level, gender, and age affect ICT utilization, but those gaps are not the sole focus of public libraries in promoting digital inclusion. The goal of enhancing ICT utilization capabilities is to create digital citizens who can pursue healthy and fulfilling lives (Noh, 2019).

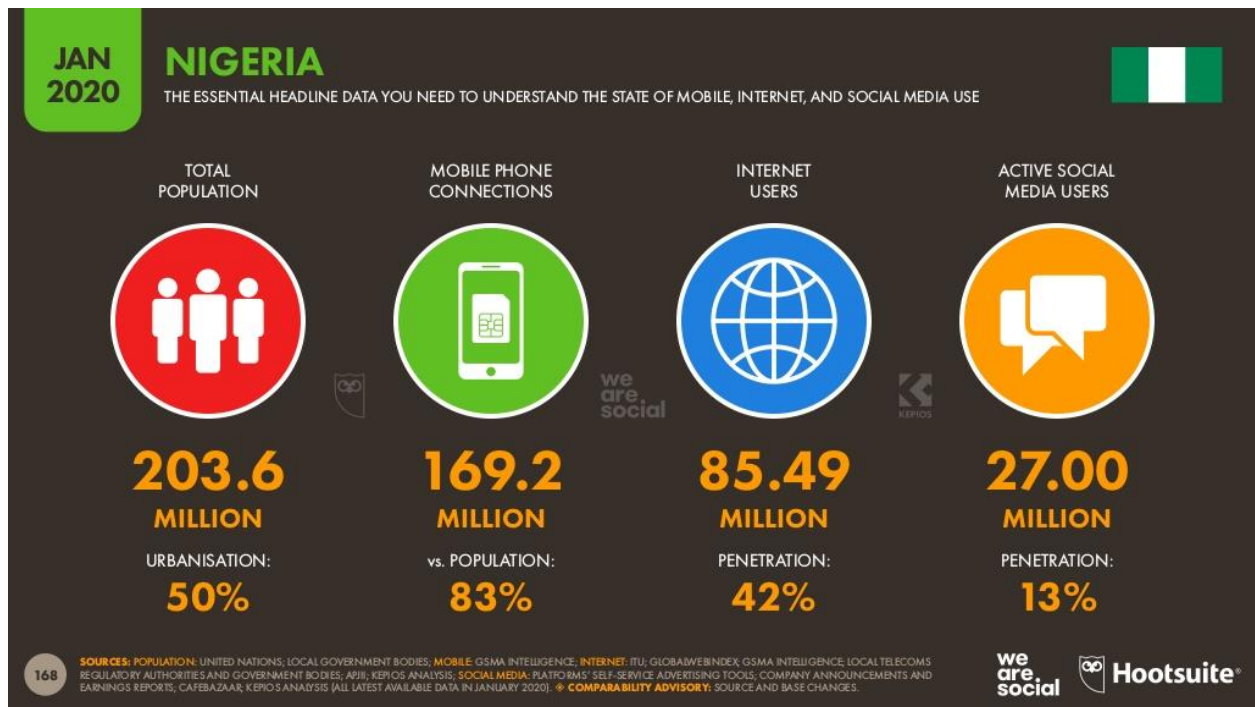
The digital Inclusion blueprint will focus on four interdependent elements that determine if a person is digitally included: motivation, access, skills and trust.

## Nigeria and the Reality of Digital Access

Nigeria's ICT facilities, to a great extent are limited to urban areas, and owing to cost and affordability, suburban areas are unable to fully participate in the emerging information economy. Digital inclusion revolves round three sequential classifications of the digital divide - opportunity (encompassing accessibility and affordability), infrastructure (network indicators and indices) and utilization (ICT usage and quality). (Ifijeh, Olu-jamea and Adebayo,2016). Nigeria falls within the countries with low digital opportunity index scores. The digital opportunity index scores released by International Telecommunication Union revealed that Nigeria was ranked 31 in the African continent with very low score of 0.41, 0.03 and 0.01 for opportunity, infrastructure and utilization respectively. In terms of ownership and access to personal computers (PCs), the National Bureau of Statistics (2016) reported that only 4.5% of the Nigerian population has access to personal computers. Access implies those who either own a PC or can derive benefits from it. According to the report, only 0.9% of the population can claim ownership of a Personal Computer. However, access and usage of the internet have greatly increased among Nigerians in recent times largely due to mobile telephony technology and social media.

### Figure 1

*State of mobile, internet and social media use-Nigeria 2020*



Source: United Nations

Internet user penetration in Nigeria saw a slight increase between the years 2017 and 2021, going from around almost 43 percent to over 51 percent. As of July 2021, there were more than 108 million internet users in Nigeria. Moreover, the share of Nigeria’s population that uses internet via any device at least once a month, is expected to grow up to 60 percent approximately in 2026 (Statista,2021).

### Barriers to Digital Inclusion through Public Libraries

There are barriers to digital inclusion which may cause problems for public libraries in Nigeria. They include among others, the cost of technology and internet connection, as well as the insufficiency of knowledge of digital technology. The main constraints to the library work are caused by the availability of public resources that do not allow the reinforcement of those activities aimed at enhancing digital inclusion (Real, Bertot, and Jaeger, 2014) Libraries have not increased their funding levels to match their visible challenges; most funding agencies have not recognized the costs or value of additional inclusive services as public libraries continue to offer traditional services to the nation. This section discusses the reasons why Nigerian public libraries

have not been able to offer the same level of service to assure digital inclusion of users in their communities

The barriers to actualizing digital inclusion by public libraries in Nigeria include:

- a) Funding Inadequacies- Public libraries face challenges from their problematic funding structure
- b) Staffing and training problems- A lack of funding and resource deficit affects not only the public libraries but also the librarians and other staffs.
- c) Technology infrastructure deficit- public libraries have less up to date technologies and technical support

### **What Can Public Libraries do to Assure Digital Inclusion?**

Public libraries in Nigeria should be at the forefront in promoting digital inclusion. First of all, libraries guarantee digital access; they play a significant role in deprived areas in relation to the provision of IT services otherwise inaccessible for the majority of users who live in the area. Also public libraries should not only provide physical access to the digital arena, they also represent "learning arenas or spaces" in which on the one hand people can find physical resources such as books, newspapers, magazines, journals, and other kind of information, on the other, they can attend several courses related to IT but also to other topics. Public libraries are to play key role in improving digital skills thus, reducing digital inequalities by organising collective training courses, but also individual activities that consider the specific needs of users such as one-to-one trainings. In fact, sometimes disadvantaged people do not have the possibility (in terms of money, time, transport) to reach the public libraries in which IT training courses may be concentrated. However, the lack of human and economic resources available to provide IT training in Nigeria's public libraries represents one of the biggest constraints to the digital inclusion.

Libraries keep their educative role by providing learning resources and study areas for individual or collective use; in particular, children use library services to learn and do their homework. However, in the most deprived areas in the country, the public library becomes a place around which the social life of the community revolves. In fact, Public libraries become a place of socialisation in which older people meet up, participate in formal and informal activities, and relax reading books. Moreover, those libraries which are collocated with other services are likely

to be more frequently visited for social purposes in relation to the number of people who use also the other services available. At the same time, public libraries should support younger population and adults who need help to use ITs to find a job. Finally, public libraries also represent a place in which people can be supported to find the information they are looking for, related for example to local council services, job opportunities, and housing services.

In addition public libraries in the nation should also consider providing the following cardinal services in ensuring the digital inclusion of its immediate environment: Motivating users, providing access to Technology, Building Tech Skills and Creating Trust

### **Public Libraries in Collaboration with Stakeholders**

It is important that public libraries build their work around community stakeholders, especially as they serve communities. Library stakeholders are in a position to provide libraries with ideas on how library services could work better in collaboration with groups and organizations toward achieving digital inclusion. Firstly, our public libraries should look in the direction of local governments for support, these governments are in a position to assist in the coordination and advocacy of digital inclusion programmes and activities. Rather than work in silos, sharing best practices between the libraries and the local government authorities, public libraries could collaborate with stakeholders in digital inclusive activities across their library services. Collaboration can also come when libraries and the local authorities, groups and organizations such as local educational institutions and health centres, collectively designate staff with the right skill set to actively develop and maintain networks and partnership through regular meetings and communications. Also, specific library staff should be assigned to manage digital inclusion activities and projects in outreach library settings, to ensure that delivery is consistent, joined-up, sustainable and quality assured. Digital inclusion will be sustainable when public libraries work in partnership rather than in competition with organisations who share the same agendas as libraries, such as schools, Non-governmental organizations NGOs, higher institution of learning, technology hubs and centres to better achieve shared agendas, aims and objectives, and to better support communities.

Public libraries are trusted, accessible community spaces that people can rely on to cultivate relationships, exchange ideas, and learn. Today, libraries need to provide essential access to digital equipment, services, and skills training. They are vital bridges across the digital divide.

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