

Chapter 22

Public Libraries as Enablers of Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Stakeholders of development are engaging in the United Nations' call for global sustainable development. Consequently, this chapter examines how public libraries as development agents are enabling or powering sustainable development through the three dimensions of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Based on these three factors of sustainable development, objectives were raised to guide the study. The study, which is a conceptual review of literature, employed three major databases in library and information science (Emerald Insights, Taylor & Francis Online, and Library & Information Science Source) to search for literature complimented by Google Scholar. Results of the search were filtered by year (2011 to 2021), language (English), and source types (peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, short communications, and reports). The study therefore showed strong nexus between public libraries and the dimensions of sustainable development, which are economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Nations around the world are continuously striving for development in a bid to improve the standard of life and condition of living for their populace. The focus of such development is to engineer economic growth, environmental balance and social progress. Thus, development is a multidimensional process or an act of positively changing lives and transforming the society. Development was defined by Rabie (2016) as a complete socioeconomic process to move developing nations from economic stagnation and slow sociocultural development to a dynamic state characterised by sustained economic growth and sociocultural and political change that improves the quality of life for all members of society. This definition implies that people are the main beneficiaries of every development, and as such, every development agenda should stimulate the all-round transformation of people.

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The international community began to focus keenly on development around the second half of the 20th Century. It became an agenda towards the ending of that Century; specifically in 2000, when nations around the world under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) adopted eight (8) measurable and time-bound goals, known as Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs), which should accelerate progress for the next 15 years. At the end of the timeframe, it was crucial to adopt broader and more ambitious agenda that accommodates everyone and is sustainable, taking care of the present without compromising the future. Consequently, on the 25th of September 2015, the UN proposed and adopted 17 goals with 169 targets, known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which became the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (Igbinovia, 2016). The adoption of these goals commenced a new era of global and national strive towards attaining sustainable development, with contributions from all sectors, organisations, institutions and individuals.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2021) described sustainable development as contained in the Brundtland Commission Report as development that caters for present need without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. Taylor (2016) argued that the three fundamental pillars on which sustainable development rests are economic growth, environmental protection and social equality. Consequently, Mensah (2019) averred that sustainable development is a path towards transformation that is primarily driven by economic, social and environmental elements or factors considered as the pillars or dimensions of sustainable development. Thus, sustainable development is evaluated by economic, social and environmental sustainabilities. The United Nations' Department for Economic and Social Affairs (2021) noted that the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs are integrated into these three dimensions of sustainable development. They further noted that the agenda requires global solidarity from various stakeholders, as its implementation is a multi-stakeholder venture. As a key stakeholder, the International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA) pledge its readiness to facilitate the realization of SDGs through library services and programmes. In fulfilling this pledge, it becomes crucial for public libraries operating at the grassroots, to steer sustainable development in line with the tenet of "leaving no one behind".

Given its goal to serve everyone's information/knowledge needs without discrimination, the public library has been dubbed "the people's university", funded by the people's tax. An articulate narrative of public library is enclosed in the 1876 United State Bureau of Education report in Flaherty (2015 p.97) thus:

The 'public library' that we will analyze is founded by state legislation, is funded by local taxes or voluntary contributions, is run as a public trust, and every resident of the city or town that maintains it has an equal share of its reference and circulation privileges.

The above explanation of public library strategically positions it as a tool for (inclusive) sustainable development. The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of 1994 in Koontz and Gubbin (2010) declare the public library as a local access to information and knowledge, equipping individuals and social groups with lifetime education, autonomous decision-making and cultural development, on the basis of equality. While the contributions of libraries to sustainable development has been severally reviewed in literature, there is a need to specifically examine public libraries, particularly given their 'proximity' to the grassroots and vulnerable in our societies. Most of the few studies connecting public libraries to sustainable development were done in line with the goals under the 2030 agenda. It is however also imperative to examine how public libraries enable sustainable development based on the three pillars or dimensions of sustainable development. This therefore serves as the strength of this current study, as

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