





# Bridging the Universal Literacy Gap

## The Role of Libraries in Providing Information Access Towards the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)

Sarah A. Gbenu<sup>1</sup> 

*Lagos State University*

Pauline Ruguru Njagi<sup>2</sup> 

*Kenyatta University*

Adebola O. Adegoroye<sup>3</sup> 

*Lagos State University*

### Abstract

Sustainable development was a key topic during the review of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2005 to help meet current demands without sacrificing the capacity of future generations to meet their requirements. In order to replace the MDGs, stakeholders, including the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), approved the post-development agenda in 2015. This chapter discusses the significance of public libraries in promoting equitable access to information, universal literacy, and public access to information by improving communications infrastructure. The chosen theory of change sheds light on the contribution of public libraries to achieving universal literacy. The peer-reviewed and grey literature published online between 2015 and 2021 will be examined to gather data. Additionally, data will be thematically evaluated to assess and summarise public libraries' contributions to closing the global literacy gap.

**Keywords:** information access, universal literacy, SDGs, MDGs.

1 Sarah A. Gbenu, Lagos State University, Nigeria; Email: gbenusarah52@gmail.com

2 Pauline Ruguru Njagi, Kenyatta University, Kenya; Email: rugurupauline@gmail.com

3 Adebola O. Adegoroye, Lagos State University, Nigeria



### Introduction

Although the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for action is a bold initiative that the United Nations adopted in 2015 in an effort to, amongst other things, end poverty, safeguard the environment, and achieve universal literacy, there is a need for alignment with functional units in society. Positive progress that benefits the human population without impairing the potential of the next generation to significantly meet present and future requirements and advance socioeconomic development is what is meant by sustainable development. The SDGs are based on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include an integrated framework for global participation from all countries and acknowledge that access to opportunity starts with access to knowledge and information (Tbaishat, 2021:124-143).

Libraries are viewed as organisations that give people a large platform to learn, innovate, and develop skills essential to sustainable development. The ability of libraries to deliver knowledge to the community will be impacted by the SDGs' actualisation because libraries are crucial tools for the development of society. Furthermore, knowledge development is influenced by information access, which reduces ignorance and the amount of environmental uncertainty. Information is a fundamental right that promotes social and economic justice as well as individual and social development. Libraries are considered effective venues for enhancing public access to information, society's capacity for knowledge generation, and information literacy skills, all of which contribute to various levels of empowerment, especially for marginalised groups and those who live in poverty and their involvement in economic development (Tbaishat, 2021:125-143).

In SDG 4, the United Nations envisioned a society where everyone has fair access to high-quality education. The ability to leave poverty and advance socioeconomically is made possible by universal access to education. Significant advancements have been made in boosting school enrolment figures for both boys and girls, especially those in developing nations, since the turn of the 20th century (Dapo-Asaju & Bamgbose, 2019:184-190). However, the 2018 SDGs secretariat report on enrolment revealed that more than half of all children and adolescents do not meet the minimum competence requirement, particularly in reading and mathematics, and that around 260 million children do not attend school. By utilising high-technology, low-technology, and no-technology ways and assisting nations in mobilising resources, the Global Education Coalition (GEC) aims to deploy creative and context-appropriate solutions to provide education remotely. Additionally, the GEC seeks to ensure that everyone has access to resources through fair solutions, prevent duplication of effort through coordinated

actions, and prevent an increase in dropout rates by ensuring 100% of the students return when schools reopen (Omona, 2020:1-19).

### Achievement of universal literacy through UNESCO Public Library Manifesto

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Public Library Manifesto, information, literacy, and education should be reflected in the fundamental services provided by public libraries (UNESCO, 2022). As a result, information specialists in public libraries should work to instil and reinforce reading habits in children from an early age and support formal and informal self-education at all levels. The manifesto also recommends that public libraries offer chances for creative growth, especially for young children. Public libraries should develop literary programmes for people of all ages, promote oral tradition, give people access to cultural expression through the performing arts, and promote intercultural conversation that supports cultural diversity (Andersdotter, 2018:777-780).

The UNESCO manifesto was a major catalyst for the growth of public libraries across the world, but especially in the emerging nations of Africa (Dapo-Asaju & Bamgbose, 2019:184-190). General tax dollars sponsor public libraries and have the legal right to provide free services equally to everyone in the neighbourhood. Because they provide timely access to accurate information and sufficient knowledge, public libraries are better positioned to meet the SDGs, particularly those relating to excellent education. Unrestricted access to high-quality information enables people to take advantage of economic possibilities and empowers them to make decisions that could improve their standard of living. Knowledgeable people are better able to reduce poverty and inequality, progress agriculture, maintain excellent health, promote culture, and boost the economy through research and innovation.

Based on this, the following research questions were chosen:

1. What is the role of public libraries in promoting inclusive access to information?
2. What telecommunication infrastructure should be implemented in public libraries to enhance universal access to information?
3. What are functional approaches to the achievement of universal literacy?

### Theoretical Framework

#### *Theory of change*

The theory of change was developed by Weiss in 1995 and offers interventions based on ad hoc examination of the available data that lead to a particular

development. The model is helpful in developing solutions to problems that successfully address the root causes of problems that impede progress and guide decisions regarding the best course of action. With a timetable for completion, the SDGs establish a shared set of developmental objectives for all communities worldwide by 2030 (Dapo-Asaju & Bamgbose, 2019:184-190). Change in information agencies could contribute to a workable strategy for actualising the SDGs, particularly knowledge acquisition to eliminate ignorance, as libraries are significant institutions that provide a channel for knowledge access, information literacy skills, lifelong learning, and research for economic development (Pinto & Ochôa, 2020). In addition, it is challenging for public libraries to campaign for significant and long-lasting support without strong associations, partnerships, networks, and clear, feasible plans. Decisions that affect policies may help garner support from local, national, regional and international entities, since libraries are regarded as powerful agents of change. Furthermore, broad access to information is necessary for significant development. Therefore, public library personnel should put into practice the many suggestions, such as promoting the sustainable development aim of universal literacy and facilitating access to information, by providing high-quality information services pertinent to community requirements (Mansour, 2020).

### Methodology

In order to arrange, collect, and analyse data samples for a reliable research result, the study used a secondary research strategy to systematically investigate online peer-reviewed and grey literature produced between 2015 and 2021. The layout makes it easier to analyse patterns found in earlier studies and use the knowledge to understand the process that leads to the implementation of the SDGs through a public library platform. The consulted material focused on the global contribution that libraries provide to realising universal literacy (SDG 4).

### Observation and discussion of key themes

#### *Discussion*

#### **Public library role in bridging literacy gap**

According to Okuonghae and Igbinovia (2019), public libraries can help to realise the SDGs by fostering information, and digital and media literacy. Additionally, bridging the information gap and promoting universal literacy by assisting diverse institutions, including the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and corporate organisations, to grasp local and indigenous knowledge (Bradley, 2016). Adopting the necessary

infrastructure to improve digital inclusion and unrestricted access to knowledge is necessary since the general public funds libraries through special levies (Tbaishat, 2021). States dedicated to closing the literacy gap and reducing levels of population ignorance have made significant investments in public libraries to increase knowledge collecting and dissemination (Poluru, 2020).

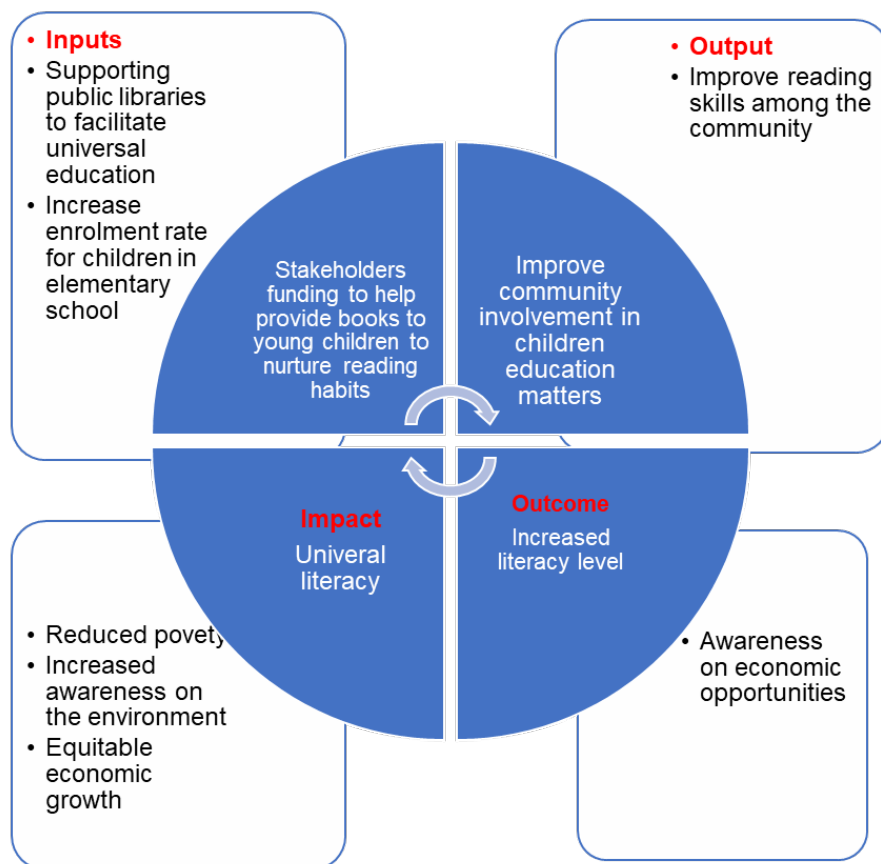


Figure 7.1: Illustrating theory of change (Researcher, 2022).

### **Public libraries as local gateway to knowledge**

According to the International Federation for Library Associations (IFLA) and the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, the library is a living force for education and culture, (Jain & Jibril, 2017). Additionally, the IFLA believes that information is a crucial tool for promoting world peace and spiritual welfare via the minds of both men and women. (Omona, 2020). Fundamental

human values such as freedom, wealth and individual growth depend on adequate education and unrestricted access to knowledge, ideas, cultures and information. Public libraries play a crucial role as the community's access point to knowledge, providing the fundamentals for independent decision-making, lifelong learning, and the cultural development of individuals and different social groups (Abata-Ebire, Adebowale & Ojokuku, 2018).

### **Role in community development**

Public libraries play a crucial function as social and cultural organisations, particularly in underdeveloped and underprivileged areas of emerging countries. The provision of information and related services to rural areas encourages the growth of knowledge, skills, and a lifelong learning culture (Okuonghae & Igbinovia, 2019).

### Conclusion

In order to accomplish SDG 4, which calls for guaranteeing inclusive and equitable access to high-quality education for everyone, libraries are essential for closing the information access gap and promoting literacy amongst all people. In addition to offering access to a variety of educational resources such as books, journals, databases, and online platforms to support literacy and education, libraries are important sources of knowledge and information. Additionally, programmes like literacy campaigns and reading clubs can assist in raising literacy rates, encourage lifelong learning, and support social and economic growth.

Public libraries should include all age ranges, linguistic minorities, and special needs groups while developing their collection. Additionally, the public library should develop its collection with specialised elements like appropriate media, contemporary technologies, and traditional aspects like print materials in order to improve universal access to knowledge and to close the literacy gap. The informational materials must reflect modern social trends, societal growth, and memories of human labour and creativity that are pertinent to the conditions and demands of the region.

However, in order to accomplish SDG 4, public libraries must be redefined; finances must be dramatically released to assist programmes promoting universal literacy; public libraries and librarians must be supported in promoting the SDG 4 agenda; and technological infrastructure must be strengthened to provide access to digital resources. As a result, it is crucial to support libraries and ensure that they have the tools, funds, and assistance required to grant everyone access to knowledge and education.

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