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## The Current State of Government Publishing and Access to Government Information in Nigeria

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Nigerian governmental organs and their agencies play a vital role as publishers and providers of vast amounts of information and the number of bodies generating publications is increasing. Unfortunately, however, Nigerian citizens have restricted freedom of access to government and official publications.*

*This paper will provide an overview of government publishing and information dissemination in Nigeria. I approach the subject by taking a look at the current characteristics and patterns of government publishing in Nigeria; and also, provide a review of bibliographic controls and access tools for Nigerian publications. Attention is also paid to the rapidly expanding electronic information systems and products currently generated by Nigerian government agencies. In concluding, I provide a brief overview of factors responsible for constraining access to government publications in Nigeria.*

## TEXT

Nigeria achieved full independence in October 1960, as a federation of three regions (northern, western, and eastern) under a constitution that provided for a parliamentary form of government. In 1963, it proclaimed itself a federal republic and put into effect a new constitution. A fourth region (the midwest) was established that year. The republic was overthrown by a military coup in 1966, and in 1967, civil war broke out. The four regions were replaced into twelve states. Seven new states were created in 1976, bringing the total to 19. The process of creating additional states continued until, in 1996, there were 36 states and a federal capital territory whose status is almost equivalent to that of a state. There is additional demand for bring into existence even more states. The creation of more regions and, later, states also affected the number of local governments as the country now has 774 local government areas. In addition to these, a number of parastatals and research bodies also came into existence. The creation of additional states and the changes in the names and functions of government agencies have affected the titles as well as the volume of publications generated, thus making it difficult to identify, control and access Nigerian government publications.

## DEFINITION AND SCOPE

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has defined "official publications" in the following way:

"An official publication is any document, printed or produced by any other reprographic method in multiple copies, issued by an organization that may be considered to be an official body, and available to a public wider than that body". IFLA defines an "official body" as follows:

a) "Any legislature of the nation-state, or federation of states, or of a province or regional or local sub-division which has its own revenue-earning powers.b) Any executive agency of the

central government of such a nation-state, federation, state, province or regional or local sub-division, or any court or judicial organ.

c) Any other organization which can be considered to be official or governmental in type, in the sense that it was set up by a legislature or executive agency as in a) and b) above, and maintains continuing links with that body whether through direct funding or through its reporting mechanism or its accountability.

d) Any association of which the members are national, federal, state, provincial, regional or local governments or official organizations as defined above of such governments provided that the body is considered to be official in the country concerned.<sup>1</sup>

In Nigeria, the terms “government publications, or “official publications” are often used synonymously, and there is no standard definition. According to Ogundana et al. Nigerian government documents are publications that are issued or printed at government expense or published by authority of a government body, at local, state or federal levels.<sup>2</sup> In Odumosu’s (1990) view “government publications are vital or authoritative documents issued by or on behalf of the government or its agencies.”<sup>3</sup>

From the above definitions, Nigeria’s official publication can broadly be defined as publications issued by the three branches of the national government: the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary of both the federal and state governments. In addition to the three branches of

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<sup>1</sup>In 1983, the International Federation of Library Associations sent questionnaires to university libraries to find out the level of collection of official publications. This working definition of official publications was given to guide the respondents.

<sup>2</sup>Ogundana, L.B., Olowosejeje, E.B. and Barknido, M.B. “*40 Years of Library and Information Service to the Nation: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> National Annual Conference and AGM*. June 16-21, 2002. Topo-Badagry, Lagos State: Eko, 2002, 34-43.

<sup>3</sup>Odumosu, Olu. “Types of Government Publications and Documentation in use in Government Offices: Acquisition, Management and Exploitation of Government Documentation”. Lagos, 1990: 5-8.

government, there are numerous federal and state quasi-governmental bodies, variously referred to as corporations, parastatals, companies, commissions, boards, institutions, research institutes, etc.

#### NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING: CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSTRAINTS

O.O. Omolayole, former National Librarian National Library of Nigeria, has appropriately pointed out that “government publications are a mine of information on the socio-political and economic life of any nation. To be familiar with what the government of a particular country publishes is to be aware of the direction the country is taking”.<sup>4</sup>

The volume of government publishing from Nigerian Federal and State government agencies and parastatals is quite high. In addition, a major percentage of the publications fall within the classification of grey or fugitive literature, which is currently marginal and not accessible.

The Nigerian federal government currently operates through 19 ministerial bodies, covering all relevant sectors of the polity; and also, through a number of parastatals, corporations, and research institutes. These include, for instance, the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission, Bureau of Public Enterprises, Nigerian Institute of Economic and Social Research, Nigerian Communication Commission, National Bureau of Statistics, Science and Technology Complex (Sheda), National Data Bank, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), National Office for Technology Acquisition and Promotion Federal Institute for Industrial Research, Energy Commission of Nigerian, Nigerian Mining Corporation, Security and Exchange Commission, etc. Publications of the Central Bank, Agricultural, Cooperative and Rural Development Bank, and Federal Mortgage Bank are also treated as government publications because the federal government of Nigeria wholly owns the banks. At the state

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<sup>4</sup>Omolayole, O.O. “40 Years of National Library Service to the Nation.” *Nigerian Library Association 40 Years of Library and Information Service to the Nation: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> national Annual Conference and AGM.*

level, Anyanwu estimated in 1992 that more than 1,740 state government agencies ministries, parastatals and agencies generate government publications.<sup>5</sup>

To access government publications emanating from the above-mentioned sources, one must be familiar with Nigeria's ever-changing Federal and State administrative structures.

Formats of the official information products of Nigeria include administrative reports, publicity and propaganda press releases, statistical data and surveys, directories, reports of commission and committees, technical papers, research reports, proceedings and debates, sessional papers, law reports and digests, bills, acts, laws, codes, treaties and other categories of publications such as official gazettes, yearbooks, and official guides.

In addition, works on Nigerian society and culture as well as biographical accounts of national leaders are published under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Culture. Periodicals in fields like science and technology, agriculture, and socio-economic planning are regularly published. Maps are also released by government agencies.

Substantial non-print materials such as films, videocassettes, audio tapes, and posters which contain information about governments' activities and policies, are also produced by the government

Increasingly, it appears that Nigerian government agencies at all levels are rapidly shifting their publications from a print to an electronic format. In some cases, internet distribution has replaced print distribution.

A survey of *NIGERIA DIRECT* ([www.nigeria.gov.ng](http://www.nigeria.gov.ng)), the official web portal of Nigeria,

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<sup>5</sup>Anyanwu, Virginia. "The Bibliographic Control of Nigerian Government Publications", *Government Publications Review*, 19, 1992: 506.

indicates that almost all Nigerian federal and state government ministries, departments, subordinate offices and government funded autonomous organizations have Internet presence and the spheres of activity, plans and programs of different ministries and departments are made public through their website. The quality and content of web portals vary from one agency to another. For example, the National Planning Commission has important plan documents and other publications on its website. Similarly, the National Bureau of Statistics has a website which contains important data and statistical information relating to social and economic activities as well as conditions of the inhabitants of Nigeria. In some cases, the websites provides access to publication lists; examples include the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Federal Ministry of Finance. It must be pointed out that the Internet opens up a new forum for access to Nigerian governmental information, but this, too, poses serious problems.

#### DISTRIBUTION AND DISSEMINATION OF GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

While the number of Nigerian government publications issued by various agencies has dramatically increased in recent years, no centralized or systematic distribution channel has yet been adopted, particularly one designed to reach large numbers of the public. In the Nigerian case, federal and state establishments each coordinate their own government printing activities and the distribution and dissemination of official publications. Edeka has noted that federal government and state government ministries may even bypass the federal and state governments printers for the printing and publishing of their official publications<sup>6</sup>. The fact that federal government ministries and parastatals make use of the federal government printer while the state governments made use of their various state government printers results in considerable difficulties in tracing, identifying, and accessing both retrospective and current government publishing output.

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<sup>6</sup>Edeka, B.E. *Introduction to Library Science*. Onitsha: Palm Publishing and Links Comp. Ltd., 2000.

At present, there is no comprehensive bibliographic tool for Nigerian government publications and several scattered sources have to be consulted. Examples include occasional lists issued by government printers or individual government ministries or departments, accessions listed issued by libraries in Nigeria, accessions listed issued by the National Archives, and the National Bibliography of Nigeria published by the National Library. Other bibliographic tools for the monitoring of publications are official government gazettes. However, none of these are circulated widely nor at regular intervals, making government publishing unknown and out of control.

In a recent acquisition survey tour, I observed that effective bibliographic control over official publications by Nigerian government publishing houses is a virtually non-existent practice.<sup>7</sup> In addition, existing bibliographic tools for Nigerian official publications generally tend to have limited print runs, neither current nor complete, and are not centrally available. This situation seriously hinders national bibliographic control. In combination with the problem of short print runs is that of availability. Government printers market their publications through their own bookshops. Most of these bookshops are poorly organized and do not have current lists of publications available for sale. Older government publications, including gazettes, are difficult to procure. The most up-to-date lists of Nigerian government publications are produced by the National Library of Nigeria. As the national agent of bibliographic control for Nigerian publications, the Library produces the *National Bibliography of Nigeria*, which lists government publications originating from the federal and state governments and parastatals. The National Library Decree of 1970 mandates the National Library to collect 25 copies of each federal government publication and 10 copies of each state government publication as legal deposit. However, depository laws have not ensured comprehensive acquisition of official publications. Efforts of the National Library are independently complemented by libraries and archives throughout the country. The latest annual cumulation of the current national bibliography is 2003 which covers works from 1993-2002. For this period, government publications received

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<sup>7</sup>Batiste, Angel. *Report of an Acquisition Survey Tour to Nigeria*, September 2004, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 2004.

by the National Library are conspicuously few: 218, 242, 90, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 21, 10 respectively.<sup>8</sup>

To supplement the efforts of the federal government to have a comprehensive collection of published materials on Nigeria, some state governments also enacted depository laws, each naming its own depository. For instance, the Obafemi Awolowa University Library Ile-Ife is the depository of all published materials in Oyo, Ondo, Ogun and Osun states.

Ogunsola gives an accurate account of the problems of bibliographic control of Nigerian official publication at the publications, distribution, and service levels.<sup>9</sup> At the publication level, a number of problems occur. Although the government printer is the chief publisher of Nigerian official publications, government bodies use a number of printers and publishers and several have established their own printing and publishing subsidiaries. The fact that federal government ministries and parastatals make use of the federal government printer while the state governments make use of their various state government printers further complicates the problem of national bibliographic control of official publications.

Manpower and administrative problems at the source level also deter efficient bibliographic control. There is no well-trained staff to prepare bibliographic tools to provide access to Nigerian official publications. Distribution of government publication is also poor. Apart from the government bookshop, no other institution issues a list or catalogue of official publications available for sale. The lists issued by the government bookshops are irregular and are incomplete. Nearly 90 percent of the publications contracted to commercial printers never reach bookshops because they are primarily intended for internal distribution. Such publications escape bibliographic control and their acquisition and identification is problematic.

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<sup>8</sup>*The National Bibliography of Nigeria 2002*. National Library of Nigeria, Lagos 2003: 238, 240.

<sup>9</sup>Ogunsola, L.A. "An Evaluation of bibliographical Aids to Nigerian Government Publications. *Journal of Government Information*, 26, 5, 1999: 513-515.

At the service level, the National Bibliography of Nigeria, published by the National Library of Nigeria, is issued irregularly and is not comprehensive. In most cases, coverage is incomplete as it is based on items acquired on a legal deposit basis and not all publishers or printers of official publications abide by the Legal Deposit decree. Many printers, publishers and book distributors evade the deposit law because it is convenient and profitable to do so. Ogunbameru has noted that most publishers are unaware of these laws or can choose to ignore them because the penalties for not supplying depository copies are generally insignificant.<sup>10</sup> Aderibigbe contends that this non-compliance with the legal deposit laws can be attributed to the high cost of printing materials and to escalating budgetary constraints being experienced by Nigerian government printers.<sup>11</sup> Anyanwu has observed that publishers in the states with such laws usually deposit their publications in their university or state libraries.<sup>12</sup> The result is that publishers in those states pay little regard to their legal deposition obligations to the National Library, complaining that they lack the finances to produce materials for both state and national Library deposits.

Ogunsola has rightly pointed out that the core problem of Nigerian official publications' bibliographic control is lack of a strong, functional national bibliographic infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> Although the National Library of Nigeria has been given powers through the 1970 Nigerian Publication Ordinance to deal with the bibliographic control of Nigeria publications, few substantive steps have been taken to carry out the decree. Government publications remain largely inaccessible, severely restricted, unorganized, often unpublished, and generally undervalued.

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<sup>10</sup> Ogunbameru ...

<sup>11</sup> Aderibigbe, M.R. "Government Publications in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects". *Government Publications Review*, 10, 1983: 263-268.

<sup>12</sup> Anyanwu, Virginia. "The Bibliographic Control of Nigerian Government Publications", *Government Publications review*, 19, 1992: 505-512.

<sup>13</sup> Ogunsola, *loc. cit.*

## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, a broad ‘culture of secrecy’ is fixed throughout all levels of government which restricts open access and the free flow of information. Under current practice, virtually all government information in Nigeria is categorized as “secret,” confidential,” or “classified.” An excessive number of repressive laws prevents civil servants from divulging official facts and figures. For example, the Official Secrets Act makes it an offence for civil servants to give out government information and for anyone to receive or produce such information. Additional restrictions are contained in the Evidence Act, the Public Complaints Commission Act, the Statistics Act and the Criminal Code. So impenetrable is the veil of secrecy that government departments often withhold information from one another. There have also been instances where civil servants withhold information from the National Assembly and other government departments under the guise of ‘official secrets legislation’. Access to government information is also restricted by cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, and by imposing unreasonable fees on access.

Nigeria’s *Freedom of Information Bill, 1999* facilitates greater access to federal, state, and local government information. The bill defines “public record” as “a document in any form having been prepared or having been or being used, received, or possessed or under the control of any public or private bodies relating to matters of public interest.” However, the bill protects an officer who refuses to release the information or record requested if it is deemed to contain information “the disclosure of which may be injurious to the conduct of international affairs and the defense of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The category of “injurious” information includes “trade secret, financial, commercial or technical information that belongs to the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria or any State or Local Government thereof.”<sup>14</sup> To promote greater transparency in the government, the bill also

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<sup>14</sup>“Freedom of Information Bill Advances in Nigeria” Open Society Justice Initiative [www.justiceinitiative.org](http://www.justiceinitiative.org).

calls for a three-year imprisonment for those who falsify or destroy official records to avoid disclosing them. Based on fears of public officials about unrestricted access to information by those who are not Nigerian citizens, the bill would provide access to Nigerians only. The bill was passed by the House in August 2004 and by the Senate in November 2005, but in April 2007, President Obasanjo declined to sign the bill into law.

The Lagos State Government is also drafting a Freedom of Information Bill. The state Commissioner of Information and Strategy has indicated plans to set up an information center where researchers can obtain information about state governance.

In the Nigerian context, it is important to point out that the national information infrastructure for the effective production, organization and dissemination of Nigerian government information is grossly inadequate. Therefore, even if Freedom of Information laws have been enacted, information may still not be accessible due to non-legal reasons. In practice, procedures and institutional mechanisms to ensure that Nigeria's Freedom of Information legislation will be effectively implemented to promote the free flow of government information continue to be insufficient. In fact, it should be noted that information institutions (including libraries, archival institutions, documentation centers, research centers and universities) and information professionals in Nigeria have had no formal and visible role in formulating the nation's freedom of information legislation, nor in implementing mechanisms of public access to government-held information.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The above discussion presents the current state of access to government publications in Nigeria. It has been observed that the core problem of access to official publications of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government at national levels, as well as publications of state-funded agencies in Nigeria is the lack of a strong, operational national

bibliographic infrastructure. Generally speaking, to the majority of Nigerian citizens freedom of access to government information is a luxury item.

To address the challenges and problems confronting government publications, the Nigerian Federal and State governments should fully realize that the vast information resources which they generate constitute an important 'national wealth'. The information sources of any government must be properly disseminated to enhance economic, cultural, scientific and technological progress. A more rationalized and coordinated national information policy for the production, organization and dissemination of these national resources is in the interest of the nation an urgent necessity.