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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4:

HOW DO WE PROMOTE A SYSTEMIC READING CULTURE IN NIGERIA?

Introduction

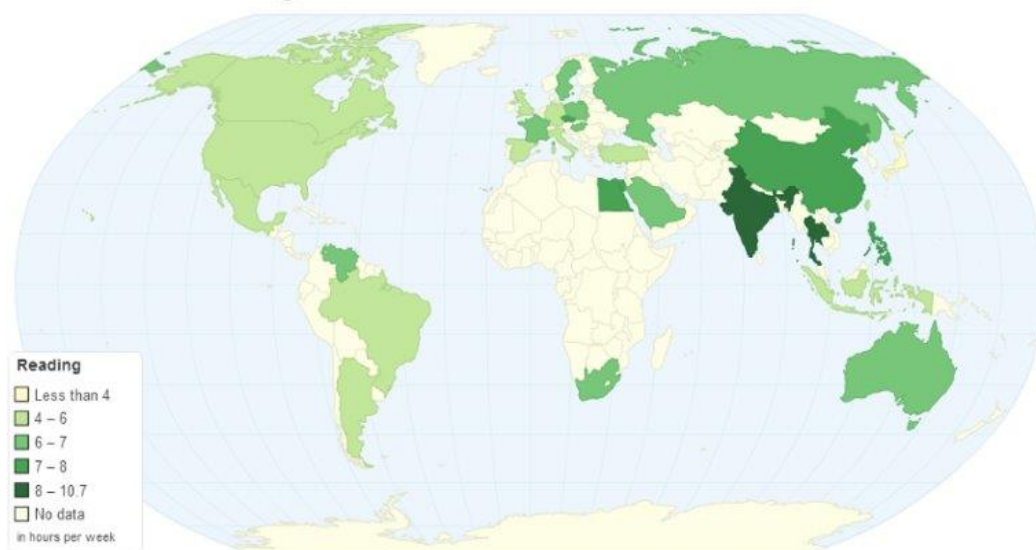
Over the years, interest in books and literary endeavors has been on a steady decline in Nigeria. Apart from being the most populous country in Africa, with a population of more than 200 million people, it has produced many great figures in various disciplines. It is also a nation founded by learned individuals whose politics were driven by sound ideologies.

However, over the years, the country seems to have embraced other priorities not so favorable to books or the encouragement of a reading culture. The youth population appears to be the most affected by this development, as the shift in national priorities might have made them settle for soft mental stimulants for leisure and the pursuit of self-actualization as against the hard cores of reading and learning.

According to the World Culture Score Index, the average reading time in Nigeria is less than four hours a week. Considering the popular sayings which emphasize the importance of reading such as “knowledge is power”, “readers are leaders” and “reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body”, this index betrays a nation falling short in upholding the value of

knowledge acquisition. Therefore, the issue of poor reading habits is one that could become a big problem in the future if it continues to be left unaddressed.

World Culture Score for Reading



Source: Work Culture Score for Reading, NOP World Culture Score(TM) Index Examines Global Media Habits.¹

Of more concern are also recent statistics from the country's Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education which states that about 38% of the population is non-literate, while four in every 10 elementary school children cannot read for comprehension.²

Further, UNESCO in a recent release reveals that there are more than 20 million out-of-school children in Nigeria.³ A number that represents about 50% of the 40.8 million population of school-age children in the country.

¹ Source: [Work Culture Score for Reading, NOP World Culture Score \(TM\) Index Examines Global Media Habits.](#)

² Akinfenwa, K., (2019) 'Lagos and the Promotion of Reading Culture in Nigeria.'

³ 263 Million Children and Youth Are Out of School | UNESCO UIS. (n.d.). Retrieved September 29, 2022, from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/news/263-million-children-and-youth-are-out-school+>

Over the years, scholars have conducted studies to examine the phenomenon of poor reading culture among the Nigerian populace, with a particular focus on the youth and schoolchildren. Some attribute the cause of poor reading culture in the country to harsh economic realities.⁴

Others have also listed the following as part of the reasons interest in reading is on a downward spiral. These include a change in the nation's value system, astronomical prices of books and information materials, and the high cost of publishing books, among others.⁵ Little wonder the National Bureau of Statistics in its latest report details a consistent decline in the number of candidates that obtained a minimum of five credits in the WASC exams across the 36 states of the federation.⁶

Resolving this problem requires the development of a series of systematic and structured interventions to first cultivate an interest in reading and then foster healthy reading habits among the citizens over time, starting from children in elementary schools to adults across various life interests.

The Importance of Reading

Reading is perhaps the most influential of the four major communication skills in the development and refinement of the individual. Reading, like

⁴ Ashom, Maisamari M. & Akintunde, Femi A. (2018): *The Making of a Reading Society: How to Reawaken and Sustain the Reading Culture in Nigerian Learners*; Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education, University of Abuja, Abuja

⁵ Fabunmi, F. A., & Folorunso, O. (2010). Poor reading culture: A barrier to students' patronage of libraries selected secondary school in ado local government area of Ekiti-State, Nigeria. *African Research Review*, 4(2).

⁶ National Bureau of Statistics. (2022, August). *WAEC results statistics (2019-2021)*. <https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/clibrary/read/1241213>

listening, is a receptive communication skill that is done by ingesting information into the mind through the means of the eyes, the ears, or the fingers in the case of braille. There is no gainsaying the fact that the depth of learning one possesses is relative to the amount of reading they have done. The more you read, the better, improved, enhanced, and versatile you will become.⁷ Little wonder someone rightly said, “You will be in five years the sum total of the books you read and the people you are around.”⁸

We cannot talk about reading without mentioning books. Books are the main objects in a reading context. A scholar sums up the importance of reading in achieving personal growth and national development thus: “Inasmuch as education is the backbone of...development... the book is the principal element in the educational process... The book is a passport to the world, an indispensable vehicle of science, a storehouse and conveyor of culture and information, and a vital ingredient for development. The importance of books in the development of man and in the fulfillment of his potential can never, therefore, be overstressed.”⁹

In agreement with this position, a prominent business philosopher also affirms that reading can make us rich, healthy, happy, powerful, sophisticated and successful in every aspect of life.¹⁰ On the political outcome front, great leaders of history whose thoughts, words, and actions have vast influence on humankind and who recorded lasting impacts on

⁷ Oladele, B. (2016). ‘Utilizing Communication Skills for Personal and Professional Development.’ University of Ibadan

⁸ Charlie ‘Tremendous’ Jones

⁹ Adesanoye, F.A. (1995). *The Book in Nigeria: Some Current Issues*. Ibadan: Sam Bookman

¹⁰ Rohn, J. (2005b). “Read All the Books”. www.jimrohn.com

national and global landscapes have been established to be devout readers with a healthy appetite for books and learning new ideas.¹¹

Addressing the Issue

This issue advisory presents three ways that the problem of reading culture can be addressed such that the people of Nigeria, young and old, can be reunited with books and by so doing provoke an interest in reading that will ultimately lead to the birth of a vibrant reading culture and a long-term, sustainable national development.

Each of the recommendations in this guide represents a unique social context for tackling the problem of poor reading culture with different ideas on how to go about this.

Each of the propositions has a unique set of tradeoffs and drawbacks that will need to be considered in our deliberation. Nevertheless, it will not be out of place for people to agree with certain elements in all three options.

In considering the different approaches, we will be answering the following questions:

- Should we even be talking about reading culture in Nigeria at this time?
- How relevant is a reading culture to our current socio-political climate?

¹¹ Neace, C. (2015). "Reading Is A Political Act." <https://bookriot.com/reading-political-act/>

- Do books and reading culture have any direct or indirect bearing on career advancement and national development? If yes, how?
- What are the roles of entities such as the government, the private sector, and the family in cultivating a healthy reading culture?
- Will the propositions in this discussion have any bearing on reading culture in Nigeria or introduce new ideas that we did not anticipate?
- Could there be some unintended consequences in following any of the approaches?

It is pertinent to note that the propositions we will be discussing are not the only possible options, nor are the questions above the only ones we would cover. But they represent good starting points for us to weigh solutions with the aim of arriving at a sound judgment.

OPTION ONE: Reading at Home.

Having dedicated schedules for reading as a family is arguably the most effective way of instilling a reading habit in children from a tender age. This will ensure it becomes part of their daily habits as they grow up. The family has been described as the first school and the most important agency of socialization.¹² So making reading a family habit will go a long way in building it into the consciousness of the children and the society.

Similarly, parents encouraging their children to read by buying them books and getting the older children as well as other relatives to engage the younger ones in reading will instill the habit in the children.

¹² Alice Sterling Honing

A Primary Drawback

In a metropolitan city such as Lagos, and other urban areas in Nigeria, where commuters contend with traffic gridlock and several hours on the road to and from work, returning home to engage in reading after a tiring day at work and hours on the road may not be a feasible idea for many. In addition, economic hardship may prevent parents from being able to buy the books that would help jumpstart the interest of their children in reading.

Actions	Drawbacks
Parents and children should make time to read as a family on certain days and at specific times of the week.	Fatigue of work, stress from traffic, and domestic chores for lower-income families may not make this sustainable.
Parents should encourage children to read in their free time, rather than watch TV.	Parents may not always be around to enforce that the children read.
Parents should make a variety of reading materials available to children, including comic books.	Low-income families may not be able to afford to buy books not recommended in the curriculum.
Parents should make their children write a daily or weekly report of their book readings with incentives for compliance.	Socio-economic realities or other pressing family priorities may make this not sustainable.
What else can be done at the family level to promote reading?	What are the trade-offs if we do that?

OPTION 2: Reading in Schools.

While students in schools across all levels from elementary to tertiary institutions by rule engage in reading activities for their grades, to make reading a national culture requires adding new dimensions to the reading process in schools. This means that participatory, collaborative, or competitive reading sessions may need to be structured into the national curriculum from elementary schools to tertiary institutions.

This option will mean incorporating a new but mandatory system of reading to be done at regular intervals in the school schedules. This reading format will also be structured to be engaging to keep the students interested. This option will ensure that apart from reading for academic purposes, students are also able to read for pleasure in a relaxed and collaborative environment.

An introduction of reading competitions in the schools will also provide incentives to encourage students to read regularly as well as something interesting for them to look forward to.

A Primary Drawback

This may involve a major change in the educational system of the country and may require adding a couple of hours to the closing time of schools during the days when the participatory and collaborative reading exercise will be done.

Actions	Drawbacks
Schools should set apart days of the week that students would participate in collaborative reading exercise.	In secondary and tertiary schools, time devoted to reading takes time away from math, science, technology, engineering, and arts/design, which provide skills that may have greater economic value than literacy skills.
Schools should organize interclass reading competitions for the students.	All the students may not be involved, except for those who have been actively reading.
Local education authorities should organize reading competitions for the schools in their district.	Mostly, the best students or the committed ones get to participate which may alienate other students.
Schools should establish reading clubs to encourage the students to participate in reading as one of their extracurricular activities.	Not all the students will want to participate, particularly if it is not compulsory.
What else can be done in a school context to promote reading culture?	What are the trade-offs if we do that?

OPTION 3: Reading in the Workplace.

Reading has been established as one of the best ways to enrich the mind as well as develop capacity. The extent to which one is learned influences their mental process, worldview, and performance on the job. Therefore, it is safe to argue that office reading will prove to be a win-win for both the personnel and their organizations, as the more refined the minds of the staff become through the acquisition of information and general or specialized knowledge, the better their work output and performance will be¹³.

To encourage reading at work, the management can create office libraries for their workers to make time to read. They can also encourage workers to do an independent reading on their own and submit a weekly report of their reading efforts. In addition, healthy competition can be organized among units and departments to see those who are taking the reading exercises seriously.

A Primary Drawback

This may be very difficult to enforce both in the public and private sectors and may even be more difficult to achieve a significant level of compliance where introduced.

Many small businesses may have the constraints of space to use for office libraries. They may also lack the budget to buy books to stock up the libraries.

¹³ Van der Sluis, L. E., & Poell, R. F. (2003). The impact on career development of learning opportunities and learning behavior at work. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 14(2), 159-179.

Actions	Drawbacks
Offices should create a scheduled timeout at least two days a week for workers to read.	It may be difficult to enforce, and if introduced, some people may not read but use the time for other non-reading activities. This option can also lead to a short-term loss of productivity.
Management should make workers submit a weekly report of their independent reading initiatives.	This may lead to plagiarism and copyright infringements as those who do not want to read can go online and copy the reviews or reports of others to pass as their own.
Management can introduce interunit or interdepartmental reading competitions to encourage reading among their workers	This may create an unforeseen gap between highfliers and those who are just catching up and may discourage the latter from picking up the interest.
Management should invest in an office library and buying books which should be distributed to their workers to read.	There may be a constraint of space for the office library and budget constraints for stocking the library or buying books for the workers.
What else can be done to promote reading culture at the corporate level?	What are the trade-offs if we do that?

About This Issue Advisory

What role does a vibrant reading culture play in national development? Will Nigeria be better off as a nation if its citizens start to commit more time to reading? This issue advisory is designed as a discussion guide for deliberation on the best strategy and policy framework that can be explored to promote a reading culture among the people of Nigeria. Three options were presented in this guide with each addressing the issue from different social contexts of engagements.

This issue guide was prepared by Babatunde Oladele for the [Literary Renaissance Foundation](#) (LRF) with guidance from Robert C. Richards, Jr., PhD, JD of the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Services, Little Rock, United States. The LRF is a nonprofit aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 of taking strategic and deliberate action to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.¹⁴

Ground Rules

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

¹⁴ *United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#)*