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RETHINKING PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR MIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: AN INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Migration continues to reshape social and economic realities across many societies, giving rise to new and evolving information needs among mobile populations. This conceptual paper explores how migration influences public library service delivery, with particular attention to migrant communities in South-East Nigeria. Adopting an information behaviour perspective, the study draws on existing literature on migration, migrant information practices, and inclusive library services to examine emerging trends. The review shows that migrants often find themselves in unfamiliar social and institutional environments, which creates pressing information needs related to employment, housing, healthcare, education, and general community integration. Despite these realities, public library services in many developing contexts have not sufficiently adjusted to meet these changing demands. Evidence from studies suggest that public libraries can support social inclusion through the provision of accessible information resources, digital services, and community-based programmes. The paper highlights the need for public libraries in South-East Nigeria to redesign their services to better support migrant populations through inclusive collections, targeted community information services, and digital literacy initiatives. Strengthening these areas can improve access to reliable information and enhance the relevance of public libraries within increasingly diverse communities.

Keywords: Migration; Public libraries; Migrant communities; Information behaviour; Social inclusion; South-East Nigeria

Introduction

Population movement has increasingly become a defining feature of contemporary societies, shaping both social and economic structures across the world. Migration whether internal or international is often driven by the search for employment, access to education, improved security, and better living conditions. According to de Haas et al. (2020), migration should not be seen only as a demographic shift but as a complex social process that influences how individuals interact with institutions, communities, and information systems in new environments. When individuals relocate, they are often required to adjust quickly to unfamiliar a setting, which increases their dependence on reliable information.

Nigeria reflects many of these broader migration dynamics. Internal migration is common and is largely influenced by economic activities, education, and livelihood opportunities. The International Organization for Migration (2024a) reported that population mobility continues to shape demographic patterns within the country. A related report by the International Organization

for Migration (2024b) further indicated that internal migration significantly influences socio-economic activities, particularly in major urban centres. Cities such as Onitsha, Aba, and Nnewi in the South-East region continue to attract migrants because of their strong commercial opportunities. While migration can improve livelihoods, it also introduces adjustment challenges for individuals navigating new institutional and social systems.

Access to reliable information becomes important in such situations. Studies on migrant information behaviour show that individuals who relocate often experience new and urgent information needs as they attempt to understand their surroundings. For example, Wang et al. (2020) noted that migrants frequently seek information to support everyday decision-making in unfamiliar environments. Du (2023) also explained that migration creates continuous "information journeys," where individuals must actively search for and interpret information in order to adapt. Within Nigerian urban communities, migrants also rely significantly on interpersonal communication and informal social networks in seeking information relating to accommodation, employment, and settlement (Echezona & Nwabueze, 2022).

Public libraries have traditionally served as important community institutions that provide access to information for diverse groups of users. The IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022) emphasized that libraries should function as inclusive spaces that promote equitable access to knowledge and lifelong learning. Bouaamri (2024) similarly highlighted that public libraries in African contexts play a vital role in supporting social inclusion and improving access to information resources for marginalized populations. Through these roles, libraries contribute to education, civic engagement, and community development. Similarly, Ogunmodede and Egunjobi (2021) emphasized the importance of community-oriented library services in addressing the information needs of vulnerable populations within rapidly changing urban communities in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, however, public libraries continue to face several structural and operational challenges. Okafor (2020) observed that inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and low awareness of library services have constrained their effectiveness. Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition that public libraries can play more strategic roles in community development. Aregbesola et al. (2023) argued that when library services are aligned with the needs of local communities, they can significantly contribute to broader development goals. Bashorun et al. (2024) further noted that unstable internet connectivity, inadequate ICT facilities, and irregular electricity supply continue to affect effective digital information service delivery in many Nigerian public libraries.

Evidence from other African contexts also highlights the realities faced by migrants. Ngwenya et al. (2023) found that, many migrants in South Africa experience unstable socio-economic conditions while trying to establish themselves in new environments. Such findings underscore the importance of accessible and reliable information systems that can support migrants during

periods of transition and adjustment. Given these developments, it becomes necessary to rethink how public libraries respond to the needs of migrant populations. An information behaviour perspective provides a useful lens for understanding how migrants recognize their information needs, search for relevant information, and make use of available resources within unfamiliar environments. This paper therefore argues that public library services in South-East Nigeria should be re-examined and redesigned in order to respond more effectively to the realities of migrant communities.

Statement of the Problem

Public libraries are expected to provide equitable access to information for all members of society. However, in South-East Nigeria, increasing internal migration into commercial and urban centres such as Onitsha, Aba, and Nnewi has created communities with diverse and often urgent information needs. Migrants in these areas require reliable information to navigate employment opportunities, housing, healthcare services, and administrative processes in unfamiliar environments. Despite these developments, public library services in the region have largely remained oriented toward traditional user groups, with limited attention to the realities of mobile populations. As a result, many migrants rely more on informal information sources, including social networks, rather than formal information institutions such as public libraries. This situation reflects a disconnection between the evolving information needs of migrant communities and existing public library services. Although migration and information behaviour have been studied in other contexts, there is limited focus on how public libraries in South-East Nigeria can effectively respond to these needs. This gap necessitates a reconsideration of public library services from an information behaviour perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to examine how public library services can be re-conceptualized to respond more effectively to the information needs of migrant communities in South-East Nigeria.

Specifically the objectives are to:

1. identify the migration and migrant communities in the South-East Nigerian Context
2. examine information behaviour of migrant communities
3. examine rethinking public library services for migrant communities
4. unravel the implications for public library practice in South-East Nigeria

Migration and Migrant Communities in the South-East Nigerian Context

Understanding migration patterns in South-East Nigeria is important for examining how migrant communities interact with social institutions and access information within the region. Population movement has continued to shape settlement patterns, economic activities, and social relationships across many parts of the country. In the South-East, migration is closely linked to commercial activities, urban expansion, and the search for improved livelihood opportunities. Cities such as Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, and Nnewi have consistently attracted individuals from rural areas and neighboring states who relocate for trade, employment, and education. As these movements increase, they contribute to population growth and place additional pressure on housing and urban infrastructure.

Empirical studies within the region highlight the impact of migration on urban development. John-Nsa (2021) examined the spatial expansion of informal settlements in Enugu and found that rural–urban migration significantly contributed to the growth of residential areas. In a related study, Nwalusi et al. (2022) reported that increased migration intensified housing demand in Enugu metropolis and created challenges for urban planning and service delivery. These findings suggest that migration continues to influence both physical development and socio-economic structures within the region. Migration is also associated with uncertainty and adjustment challenges for individuals who relocate. Ngwenya et al. (2023) observed that migrants often experience unstable living conditions, particularly in the early stages of settlement. Such conditions may include irregular employment, temporary housing, and limited access to social support systems. These challenges highlight the vulnerability that often accompanies migration and reinforce the importance of access to reliable information during the adjustment process.

Patterns of mobility within Nigeria further reflect differences in regional opportunities and socio-economic conditions. Alabi and Olajide (2023) noted that migration intentions vary across regions, depending on perceived economic prospects and social factors. In the South-East, strong commercial networks and entrepreneurial traditions have historically encouraged movement between rural and urban areas, making migration a recurring feature of everyday life. In addition, migration within the region is not limited to rural–urban movement but also involves inter-state mobility. Agbaenyi and Madubuofu (2025) examined issues related to migration and border dynamics in the South-East and found that cross-state movement contributes to both economic opportunities and administrative challenges. This broader pattern of mobility suggests that migration in the region operates at multiple levels and continues to influence policy and development considerations. Taken together, these studies indicate that migration remains a central element of socio-economic life in South-East Nigeria. The continuous movement of people across communities and urban centres shapes labour markets, settlement patterns, and livelihood strategies. At the same time, migrants must navigate unfamiliar environments and institutional

systems. Understanding these dynamics provides a useful foundation for examining how migrant communities seek, access, and use information in their daily lives.

Information Behaviour of Migrant Communities

Migration does not only involve physical movement; it also reshapes how individuals recognize and respond to their information needs. When people relocate to new environments, they are often required to make sense of unfamiliar social systems, institutions, and everyday practices. The information behaviour perspective provides a useful way of understanding these experiences by focusing on how individuals identify information needs, search for information, and make use of available sources within specific contexts. Jach et al., (2022) explained that information-seeking behaviour can be influenced by individual's situations and when they are faced with uncertainty or change. In a related view, Savolainen (2023) emphasized that everyday life conditions shape how people approach information seeking. Migration creates new patterns of information needs and information-seeking behaviour as individuals attempt to adjust to unfamiliar social and economic environments. Migrants often require information relating to employment opportunities, accommodation, healthcare services, transportation, education, legal documentation, and social integration. Du (2023) explained that migration represents an ongoing "information journey" in which individuals continuously search for knowledge that can assist them in adapting to changing realities. Similarly, Wang et al. (2020) observed that migrants rely heavily on information to support everyday decision-making, especially in unfamiliar environments where familiar support systems may no longer be available.

Within Nigerian and African contexts, migrants frequently depend on both formal and informal information channels in order to survive and integrate into their new environments. Echezona and Nwabueze (2022) observed that migrants in Nigerian urban communities rely significantly on interpersonal communication, market associations, family networks, and social interactions for information relating to employment, accommodation, and settlement. In many cases, these informal communication structures become more accessible than formal information institutions. Similarly, Nwalusi et al. (2022) reported that increasing urban migration in South-East Nigeria has created more complex information needs among mobile populations, particularly within commercial and densely populated urban centres.

Information behaviour is also shaped by the social and economic realities surrounding migrants. Ogunmodede and Egunjobi (2021) noted that socially vulnerable populations in Nigeria often experience difficulties accessing reliable and timely information because of poor information infrastructure, low digital literacy, and limited institutional support systems. These conditions make migrants more dependent on informal sources of information, which may not always provide accurate or sufficient guidance. Bashorun et al. (2024) further found that unstable internet connectivity, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and irregular electricity supply continue to affect effective access to digital information services in many Nigerian public libraries. Such limitations

reduce opportunities for migrants to benefit from digital information resources and online support services.

Public libraries are increasingly recognized as important institutions capable of supporting migrants through equitable access to information resources and community-based services. Serra and Revez (2023) emphasized that libraries can support migrants through information provision, digital access, language support services, and community engagement programmes. In African societies, public libraries also contribute to social inclusion by providing educational and informational support for underserved populations. Bouaamri (2024) explained that libraries in developing societies can help marginalized groups gain access to knowledge resources needed for social participation and personal development. Similarly, Issak (2021) argued that African libraries have an important responsibility in promoting inclusive access to information for disadvantaged and socially excluded populations.

Migration experiences and information needs often vary across different categories of migrants. Kainat (2025) observed that migrant women frequently seek information relating to healthcare services, employment opportunities, legal rights, and social welfare support. The study also showed that migrants combine multiple information channels, including digital media, interpersonal communication, and institutional sources, depending on accessibility and personal circumstances. This demonstrates that migrant information behaviour is dynamic and strongly influenced by environmental, economic, and social conditions.

Despite the growing literature on migration and information behaviour, limited attention has been given to how public libraries in Nigeria respond to the information needs of migrant populations, particularly within South-East Nigeria where commercial mobility and urban migration continue to increase. Much of the available literature has focused more broadly on migration experiences without sufficiently examining the role of public libraries in supporting migrant access to information. This gap highlights the need to rethink public library services from an information behaviour perspective in order to improve inclusive information access for migrant communities

Rethinking Public Library Services for Migrant Communities

The changing realities of migration require public libraries to reconsider how their services are designed and delivered to diverse populations. Traditionally, public libraries have focused on providing access to books and general information resources for the wider community. However, increasing population mobility and urban migration have created more complex information needs that require libraries to adopt more inclusive and community-responsive approaches. Migrants often require practical information relating to employment opportunities, healthcare services, accommodation, legal documentation, education, and social integration. Addressing these needs requires public libraries to move beyond conventional service models toward more user-centred and socially responsive information services.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of inclusive library practices in supporting socially vulnerable populations. Serra and Revez (2023) observed that public libraries can support migrants through accessible information services, digital inclusion initiatives, language assistance programmes, and community engagement activities. Similarly, public libraries in African societies have increasingly been recognized as important institutions for promoting equitable access to information among underserved populations (Issak, 2021). These roles are particularly important in developing societies where migrants often experience limited access to reliable information and institutional support systems.

Within the Nigerian context, there is growing recognition that public libraries must adopt more community-oriented service approaches capable of responding to changing social realities. Aina (2020) noted that Nigerian public libraries need to strengthen community information services and outreach programmes in order to remain relevant to vulnerable and underserved populations. Similarly, Mchombu (2021) observed that African public libraries must reposition themselves beyond traditional information provision toward developmental and socially responsive services that address emerging community needs. These observations are relevant to migrant communities whose information needs often extend beyond conventional library services.

Digital technologies also provide important opportunities for improving information access among migrant populations. Online reference services, mobile information platforms, digital library systems, and social media-based information services can help libraries reach users more effectively. However, digital inequality remains a significant challenge in many parts of Africa. Chisita and Rusero (2020) found that inadequate ICT infrastructure, poor technological investment, and unstable internet connectivity continue to affect effective library service delivery in many African countries. In Nigeria, public libraries also continue to face infrastructural challenges that limit effective digital service delivery and access to online information resources (Okafor, 2020).

Public libraries must therefore strengthen partnerships with community organizations, educational institutions, local authorities, and social support agencies in order to improve service delivery for migrant populations. Community collaboration can help libraries identify local information needs and develop targeted programmes that support social inclusion and community participation. In South-East Nigeria, where commercial activities continue to attract migrants into urban centres such as Onitsha, Aba, and Nnewi, public libraries can contribute significantly by supporting access to reliable and community-relevant information (Aregbesola et al., 2023).

Rethinking public library services therefore involves more than introducing digital technologies or expanding library collections. It requires libraries to adopt inclusive, flexible, and community-responsive service models that recognize the realities of migration and changing information environments. Through such approaches, public libraries can improve their relevance and contribute more effectively to information access, social inclusion, and community development within increasingly diverse societies.

Implications for Public Library Practice in South-East Nigeria

The increasing movement of people into urban and commercial centres within South-East Nigeria has important implications for public library service delivery. Migration continues to reshape the demographic composition of many communities, thereby creating more diverse and complex information needs among library users. Migrants often require timely and reliable information relating to employment opportunities, accommodation, healthcare services, education, transportation, legal processes, and social integration. These realities suggest that public libraries can no longer rely solely on traditional service models if they are to remain relevant within changing communities.

One important implication is the need for public libraries to develop more inclusive and user-centred information services. Libraries should ensure that their collections and services reflect the realities of different categories of users, including migrant populations. According to Aina (2020), community information services remain essential for improving access to relevant and practical information among underserved populations in Nigeria. In the same vein, Aregbesola et al. (2023) argued that public libraries can contribute more effectively to community development when their services are aligned with local social and economic realities. This suggests that libraries in South-East Nigeria should pay greater attention to the changing information needs associated with migration and urban mobility.

Another important implication relates to digital access and information technology. Many migrants increasingly depend on digital platforms and mobile technologies for communication and information access. Public libraries therefore need to strengthen digital information services through improved internet access, online reference services, digital literacy programmes, and access to electronic resources. However, infrastructural limitations continue to affect effective digital service delivery in many Nigerian libraries. Okafor (2020) observed that inadequate funding, poor ICT facilities, and unstable electricity supply remain major challenges confronting public libraries in Nigeria. Similarly, Chisita and Rusero (2020) noted that digital inequality continues to limit equitable access to information services across many African societies.

Public libraries in South-East Nigeria must also strengthen community engagement and outreach services. Migrants may not always be familiar with available library resources and services, particularly when adjusting to unfamiliar environments. Outreach programmes, community information centres, multilingual services, and collaboration with local organizations can help libraries improve awareness and accessibility of information services among migrant populations. Issak (2021) emphasized that libraries in African societies have important responsibilities in promoting social inclusion and equitable information access for marginalized populations. Such responsibilities are particularly relevant within communities experiencing rapid social and demographic changes.

The changing nature of migration also highlights the need for continuous staff development within public libraries. Library personnel require adequate training in digital information services, community engagement, multicultural service delivery, and emerging information technologies in order to respond effectively to evolving user needs. Mchombu (2021) observed that African libraries must increasingly reposition themselves toward developmental and socially responsive services capable of addressing contemporary societal challenges. Strengthening professional competencies among library personnel will therefore improve the ability of public libraries to support migrant communities effectively.

Overall, migration presents both challenges and opportunities for public libraries in South-East Nigeria. While increasing population mobility may create additional pressure on existing library services, it also provides an opportunity for libraries to redefine their roles within society. By adopting inclusive, flexible, and community-responsive approaches, public libraries can contribute more effectively to information access, social inclusion, and community development within increasingly diverse communities.

Methodology

This paper adopted a conceptual approach based on the synthesis and analysis of existing literature on migration, information behaviour, and public library services. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the study examined relevant scholarly publications, policy documents, and professional reports in order to explore how public libraries can respond to the information needs of migrant communities. Relevant literature was sourced from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and Library and Information Science Source. The review focused mainly on empirical and conceptual studies related to migration, migrant information behaviour, public library services, and social inclusion. Literature published between 2018 and 2025 was primarily considered in order to reflect recent developments relevant to the study. Through this analytical review of literature, the paper identifies key issues affecting migrant access to information and proposes practical implications for public library practice in South-East Nigeria.

Conclusion

Migration continues to shape social and economic life, particularly in regions characterized by high levels of mobility and commercial activity. This paper examined the association between migration, information behaviour, and public library services, with a focus on migrant communities in South-East Nigeria. The discussion showed that migrants often encounter unfamiliar environments and depend on a wide range of information sources as they attempt to adapt and participate in new settings. An information behaviour perspective provides a useful framework for understanding how migrants identify their information needs and navigate available information sources. The paper also highlighted the potential of public libraries to support migrant communities by providing access to reliable information, digital services, and community-based programmes. The study contributes to ongoing discussions in librarianship by emphasizing the

need to align public library services with the everyday information practices of users. In the context of South-East Nigeria, where migration is closely linked to economic activities and urban development, this alignment is essential for ensuring that libraries remain relevant and responsive.The findings further suggest that greater attention is required at the policy and institutional levels. Library authorities and policymakers need to recognize the growing information needs of migrant populations and incorporate inclusive service strategies into public library development plans. Strengthening infrastructure, funding, and professional capacity will be necessary to support these efforts. Rethinking public library services in response to migration is not only important for improving access to information but also for promoting social inclusion and community development. By adapting to changing user needs, public libraries can continue to serve as vital information centres within dynamic and diverse societies.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion in this paper, several practical steps can be taken to improve the responsiveness of public library services to migrant communities in South-East Nigeria.

1. Public libraries should prioritize the provision of information resources that address the immediate and practical needs of migrants. This includes information on employment opportunities, business activities, healthcare services, legal documentation, and educational options. Making such information easily accessible will support migrants in navigating unfamiliar environments more effectively.
2. Libraries should also strengthen outreach efforts aimed at migrant populations. Working in collaboration with community organizations, market associations, and local government agencies can help increase awareness of available services and ensure that information reaches those who need it most.
3. There is also a need to develop collections and services that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Providing multilingual materials and culturally relevant resources will make library services more inclusive and encourage wider participation among migrant groups.
4. In addition, public libraries should expand digital access by offering reliable internet services and digital literacy training. These initiatives will enable migrants to access online information, evaluate sources, and use digital platforms more effectively in their daily activities.
5. Finally, stronger policy and financial support from government and relevant stakeholders is essential. Adequate funding and institutional backing will enable public libraries to design and sustain services that respond to the needs of diverse and mobile populations.

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