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Library and Information Services for Rural Community Development in Africa: Problems and Prospects

Udo Nwokocha

Department of Library and Information Science, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria

E-mail address: (udoyes@yahoo.com)

Jonathan Ndubuisi Chimah

Library & ICT Unit, National Centre for Energy Research & Development, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nigeria.

E-mail address: (jonachim2000@yahoo.com)



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Abstract:

The African population is still predominantly illiterates and rural dwellers. That majority of these group of people are not educated does not imply that they do not have information needs. The information service delivered to the grassroots in Africa is poor and adversely affects their life pattern. Librarians, particularly those in public libraries that might have received adequate training in library schools on community information service are therefore challenged. Libraries in Africa provide information in order to educate, inform, entertain, recreate, and enlighten the users. Their social, cultural, craft and technological needs are identified through their information seeking behaviour. Libraries facilitate the provision of information needs for development of the rural communities by the involvement and use of human and material resources. However, the satisfaction of information needs of the rural communities depends on the extent or adequacy resources and effectiveness of staff in utilizing available resources. This ultimately enable the users acquire greater skills and experiences for development of the rural communities. Adequate provision of library services is a fundamental determinant of the extent to which information needs are provided for grass-root development of every rural community in Africa. Rural dwellers have need for information services which will impact their social, cultural, demographic, educational, craft and technical challenges to promote community development at the grass-root level. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to explore rural libraries in Africa with a particular reference to history, characteristics, challenges and prospect of library services towards socio-economic development. Subsequently recommendations based on findings are made for enhanced library and information services in the community libraries which eventually will foster socio-economic development in Africa.

Introduction

The main thrust of this paper hinges on the fact that information is a key factor that is needed for a sustainable development of the rural communities in Africa. The critical nature of information makes it a strong pillar that must be utilized in order to realize a sustainable rural development as we could hardly imagine the current civilization without information and globalization. Dent, Goodman & Kevane (2013) note that around the world, in developed as well as developing countries, libraries play an important role in the dissemination of knowledge. The availability of information resources can often mean the difference between poverty and prosperity, particularly in underdeveloped African communities.

Conceptual clarification has been necessitated by the fact that so many terms have emerged the literature which are related to rural establishments, and these libraries are sometimes interchangeably referred to as “rural village libraries”, “rural libraries”, “community libraies”, “rural community libraries”, and “village libraries”. According to Dent (2014) the distinction between these types of libraries and the public library are often based on governance and affiliation (local, national library service, NGO) and funding (local tax, local philanthropy, national government, international philanthropy, and so on). Generally, the terms “community library, “rural village library” and “rural library” will be used interchangeably in this paper.

The concept of development could be conceived using different viewpoints because scholars in different disciplines have explained the concept using different paradigms. Simply put, development is any noticeable movement out of a perceived stagnation. Okorosaye-Orubite (2005) in El-Kalash and Ahamed (2014) asserts that development does not necessarily end with economic prosperity, but transcends this one indicator to include psychological, social, political and environmental change for the betterment and well-being of society. According to Omotola (2006) sustainable development is a development that lasts and does not crumble in the face of formidable problems: it does not roll back or recede even in the face of threatening reversal waves. In the opinion of Giddings, Hopwood and O’Brien (2002), sustainable development have to do with meeting the present social, political, economic, cultural, etc., need of both the nations and the individuals living in those nations without compromising the development and needs of the future generations.

Objectives of the study

The purpose this paper is to explore:

- i. History and development of rural/community libraries in Africa
- ii. Characteristics of the rural communities in Africa
- iii. Information needs of the rural dwellers
- iv. Information seeking behaviours of people in the rural communities
- v. Strategies for rural community development in Africa
- vi. Role of information services in rural community development
- vii. Problems encountered by Rural libraries in Africa
- viii. Strategies to overcome challenges facing rural libraries

Literature Review

The term ‘development’ can simply be defined as something which changes a situation for the better. Melkote (1991) sees development as the satisfaction of needs, indigenous self-reliance, and life in harmony with the environment. Development, according to Obetta and Okide (n.d) is generally seen as a process by which man increases or maximizes his control and use of the material resources with which nature has endowed him and his environment. It is a multidimensional process that involves change in social structures, attitudes, institution, economic-growth, reduction of inequality and the eradication of poverty (Servaes, 1996). When applied to the rural areas, it means that rural development cannot be achieved without building the capacities of the rural people whose involvement is critical in any effort to transform their lives. Rural development therefore means the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in the rural areas.

The phrase ‘Community Librarianship’ is defined by Feather and Sturges (2003) as “the provision of library and information services of special relevance to a particular community, at community level. Provision focuses particularly on social, domestic, health or educational facilities, details of local cultural activities, clubs and societies, and the range of local authority or governmental services.” According to them,

“public libraries have long accepted this as a major responsibility, providing community information and meeting facilities, but it may also be provided via a special unit set up by a local authority, a voluntary agency or an advice group. Community librarianship has come to have a higher profile in recent years as a mechanism by which libraries can contribute to overcoming problems of social exclusion” [p.94]

Community information enables individuals to make informed decisions relating to themselves, their dependents and their communities, and can promote participation, social inclusion and access to the democratic process. A variety of mechanisms have evolved to disseminate community information effectively and in a timely and accessible way, with perhaps the most effective and sustainable being a community-centred, ‘bottom-up’ model. This paper equally highlights the importance of traditional African methods of providing information to rural dwellers for sustainable development.

History and Development of Rural/Community Libraries in Africa

The history of the rural community library in Africa is closely related to the need for a more organic service to meet the information needs of rural peoples. These small libraries often operate in areas without electricity, paved roads or running. They serve rural communities who have no other access to reading materials. Rural village or community libraries are found in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Stilwell, Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, Mali, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Burkina Faso among other countries. According to Rosenberg (1993), during the 1960s, the concept of “rural information centers” was being discussed by professionals and others in Africa who recognized the need for access to information by rural peoples, and as a result, village and local reading room projects began to appear. For instance, Kenya’s quest for independence during the 1960s was punctuated by an interest in the development of libraries in rural areas.

Eldoret Municipality was one of the first in the region to set up library services for local peoples. As rightly observed by Dent and Yannotta (2000) community Libraries can be found throughout Africa. They include the Village Reading Rooms in Botswana, the system of barefoot librarians in Tanzania, the Osu initiated libraries in Ghana, and the Kitengesha Community Library in Uganda. They differ from public libraries in that they are created by and for a local population and usually are not supported with government funds. They may be organized by a school, church or community group, but the needs of the community at-large are of the utmost importance and the collection and services of the library represent those needs. These libraries also often provide informal educational services, such as literacy instruction (Raseroka 1994).

There are other ways that community libraries differ from public libraries, including the role of the librarian. The community librarian is one who lives in the community and has close personal relationships with the users. The community librarian can identify the needs of the community and how to provide for those needs in a way that is best suited to the user. Needs assessment has been identified as a major contributor to the success of a library. Determining what collections and services are needed by the community is imperative to providing relevant library services. Unfortunately in most public libraries needs assessment is not done because of inadequate funding, a lack of staff and a shortage of research skills to carry out an assessment. In community libraries, however, needs assessment is the foundation on which the library's collection and services are based.

Characteristics of the Rural Communities in Africa

The rural populace suffers from an acute low productivity, social and economic retrogression due to mainly ignorance, which also results from either inadequate or total absence of information dissemination. There arises the need to reappraise the problem of literacy among the rural communities since it affects their accessibilities to, and utilization of information. There will therefore be the need for innovative approaches towards this end. Indeed, rural information dissemination should emphasize for change and be dynamic. If, in addition to this, there could be a prototype information support system for the rural development projects, which takes policy-makers, researchers, change agents and the rural people themselves into account, the lots of this rural populace is bound to appreciate. In a similar vein, former President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania once admonished that "while other countries aim to reach the moon, we the third world countries must aim, for the time being at any rate, to reach the village". This is typical of our inability to rise up to the needs and challenges of effective rural information dissemination.

"Non-literate users", according to Aina (2004) "are users who cannot read and write in any language, and those that are barely skills or even acquire reading skills. Artisans, farmers and many rural people fall into this category. In Africa, they constitute the largest proportion of information users. The library often meets the needs of this group by organizing book talks, lectures, and audiovisual presentations". Public libraries often have to cooperate with the media and government information units to package information for this category of users.

The rural areas of a country lie outside the densely populated environments of towns, cities and sub-urban villages. The inhabitants such as area are engaged in agriculture and other mini commercial activities. They are generally characterized by abject poverty, low literacy level, lack of social amenities and poor environmental conditions. It is this scenario that calls for

intervention in the form of rural development. The help providers, however, will need to understand and be guided by the socio-cultural peculiarities of these people. According to Pensare (n.d.) the rural people are said to be highly conservative, traditional and dogmatic in their approach. Their social attitudes and behaviour patterns are dictated by traditions. They cling firmly to their beliefs, tradition and age-old practices. This is why Gillman (2003) notes that they are not ready for sudden change. Therefore, any effort aimed at improving their lots will require that they be involved through participatory communication and not by dumping information on them.

Information Needs of the Rural Dwellers

Information is raw material for development for both urban and rural dwellers. Prosperity, progress, and development of any nation depend upon the nation's ability to acquire, produce, access, and use pertinent information. A report of Age Concern (2008) indicates that, "Access to information and advice is a key resource for local people in maintaining active and independent lives. Access to information is also critical to letting people know their entitlements to welfare benefits and sources of support to overcome social exclusion." Development can only be effective if rural dwellers have access to the relevant, diverse information for their activities. Efforts must be made to give access to knowledge and information by non-literates who constitute the majority of rural dwellers. Okiy (2003:1) says that, "Rural development is a basis for economic development and information is an important ingredient in development process. People in rural areas whether literate or not should have access to any kind of information which will help them to become capable and productive in their social and political obligations, to become better informed citizens generally."

The diverse nature of rural communities indicates that their information needs are many and multidimensional. It is very important to determine the totality of their information needs. In Nigeria, there is no comprehensive document on the information needs of rural inhabitants. This is a case of neglect. Attempts have been made to explore the needs of individual rural communities for the purpose of research. Alegbeleye and Aina (1985) categorized some information needs of Nigerian rural communities, to include:

The neighborhood: information needs in the neighborhood include problems of water supply, electricity supply, Environmental sanitation, refuse disposal, road maintenance and drought.

Health information: on how individuals can, prevent different diseases that affect them, and awareness of available healthcare delivery and what it costs.

Agriculture and allied occupations: the greatest area of information needs by rural Nigerians is in agriculture. Such information needs include planting treated seeds, soil conservation, prevention of plants and animal disease, fertilizer application, farm machineries, recommended thinning practices, proper storage of farm products, marketing techniques, cooperative activities and other agro-cultural activities.

Education: information needs of the existing rural schools, needs of the illiterate's and semi-illiterates. They need to have relevant information that will develop in their interest and support of teaching and learning processes.

Housing: rural public need information about where they can obtain loans to build houses and the type of materials to be used and where they can be easily obtained.

Employment: rural communities need information on employment opportunities on taxation, investment opportunities, banking and other financial activities.

Transportation: they need information on the cost of bicycles, motorcycles and vehicles and where to obtain them. They need information about road construction and maintenance.

Religion, Recreation and Culture: information is required on religions, recreations and Cultural activities.

Welfare and Family matters: information is required on problems of marriage, childcare, juvenile delinquency etc.

Legal matters: information is needed on laws that affect the rural dwellers. Such law ranges from marriage to land.

Crime and Safety: Information is required on how to prevent crimes, report crimes, role of the law enforcement agents etc.

Policies and Government: information is needed on political rights of the people and how they can exercise such rights.

Land: information is needed on land tenure systems, acquisition and transfer of land etc.

Information is needed by rural inhabitants in almost all human endeavors. As listed above development and transformation can only be possible, effective and relevant when information needs of the rural dwellers are met positively.

The need to adequately get the rural communities of Africa informed is quite connected to the fact that information is a veritable tool that assists humans in conducting their personal as well as civic obligations and responsibilities. Apparently, as noted by El-Kalash, Mohammed and Ahmed (2014) needed information by rural inhabitants in almost all their endeavours is quite many. As such, a sustainable rural development of the rural areas can only be attainable if effective, timely, unbiased, accessible, comprehensive and relevant information needed of their rural dwellers is met.

Information Seeking Behaviours of People in the Rural Communities

Critical information need arouses curiosity to seek and search for particular type or format of information. Preference is indeed the product of satisfaction. However, research indicates that people prefer information that is easily accessible to them and circumstances. Ukachi (2007) asserts that the urban women's information needs, search criteria and seeking behaviour may be different from that of the rural women whose information need is basically for survival, while that of urban may be for career and growth. She noted that they are generally involved in housekeeping and household works as well as farming. Regardless of the low knowledge and skill of rural women, they still have information need.

As Ekoja (2010) notes the farmer, artisan, and other less skilled workers also require information to further their practices and for their daily survival. It is probably with this category of information seekers that there would be the most major differences in terms of information needs and seeking behaviours when compared to their counterparts in the developed countries. This is so because of the big disparity in the levels of education of farmers, artisans, and less skilled workers in developing countries. He stresses that in these regions the majority of farmers and artisans are generally people with little or no education. Because of their low levels of education and general lack of exposure to a variety of information resources, they may not know how to go about meeting their information needs, or even if they know, they tend to wait passively for their information needs to be met instead of taking proactive measures to meet them.

Strategies for Rural Community Development in Africa

Ghana is doing something in their effort to enhance rural communities. Abissath (2008) argues that, "Ghana, like Malaysia, Singapore and other technology minded countries, is today gradually but steadily taking ICTs to rural communities so as to bridge the digital divide between the urban dwellers and the rural folks in the country. One strategy Ghana Government has adopted to achieve this feat is the establishment of Community Information Centers (CICs) in districts throughout the country." Other African countries should borrow a leaf by extending ICT facilities and training to rural dwellers.

For the public or community libraries to meet the information need of the rural dwellers, it is pertinent that the libraries be transformed by adopting and or adapting to several innovative options. The innovation strategy team of Moldova's Public Library (2012) lists the ways libraries will be transformed to include:

- New functions as vibrant community centers, tools of civic engagement, and promoters of local economies.
- Improved infrastructure that meets the expectations of citizens and staff.
- Modernized management principles that nurture creativity, self-motivation, and a work schedule that is responsive to the needs of citizens.
- Retrained staff that are open-minded, amiable, trustworthy, pro-active and creative in their dealings with users' and their needs.
- Excellent user service that will be accessible, free, participatory in nature, and responsive to the needs of citizens and community institutions.
- A revitalized image that will facilitate connections with public authorities, community organizations, donors, media, other libraries, and their citizens.

The role of Information Services in Rural Development

Information is central to human existence. It is therefore the lifeblood of any organized society. That is why since the dawn of civilization man has required information not only to cope with his day-to-day living but also for business and even to satisfy curiosity. The need for information and the ability to generate it is not exclusive to any culture or society (Opara, 2015). While information processing is the basis of all social interaction, the type and relative complexity of information involved may vary a great deal. This variation can be accounted for the differences in the level of information infrastructure development, as between the urban and rural areas, and the ability of the intended receiver to access and utilize information. Nonetheless, it has been noted that all societies have evolved their own means of dealing with their need for information and the methods of collecting it and transmitting it from one generation to another. It is further noted that how information is gathered, integrated into the body of societal wisdom and passed on, is intimately linked to the social structure as a whole, its institutions, culture, language, and the thinking process. This fact is what the rural development planners and policy makers need to understand be guided.

There are certain characteristics of information that make it a critical development resource. Meyer (2005) identifies some of them as follows:

- Act as a dynamic force that drives the recipients to action;
- Extend the knowledge base of its recipient;
- Increase and broaden the perceptions of its users or recipients;

- Enhance their competencies through the knowledge and skills they gain;
- Improve their self-esteem; and also its ability to be regenerative and versatile.

These attributes may improve the development of people's lives to such an extent that it is easy to see why information is regarded as a useful development resource. On the other hand, he explains that there are other attributes of information which if not properly handled by development providers, may render it less useful for acceptance as a development resource.

Problems encountered by Rural libraries in Africa

Rural libraries in Africa have been confronted with many problems. In examining the state of public libraries in Nigeria, Opara (2008), had observed that the tempo of public library development in the country in the years immediately after independence, and after the Nigerian civil war could not be sustained due to inadequate financial support by the establishing authorities. He identified the challenges that rural libraries in Nigeria face to include: inadequate funding, demoralized and inadequate workforce, inadequate accommodation, etc. as the challenges currently confronting these libraries.

Information hunger is prevalent and biting hard on our rural communities, which has resulted in poor living conditions, illiteracy, and poverty. Disco (1994:142) holds the view that "rural areas in Nigeria are generally characterized by poor living conditions - absolute poverty and absent of almost all amenities of life. The literacy in Nigeria is about 35-40 percent, but is much lower among women and in rural communities. Report of scarcity of learning facilities, including basic textbooks and journal, in school and libraries including academic libraries, show a critical situation". The information needs of the teeming majority are not provided for, which constitute the major reason for the underdevelopment. Rural dwellers need relevant, efficient, and current information. Camble (1994: 105) opines that "the success of rural information programmes rest squarely on the availability and use of quality information by rural development workers and rural people and that many rural development programmes have failed in developing countries because they were planned with insufficient relevant information".

Another big drawback for farmers, artisans, and less skilled workers is the lack of information in the language or form they would be able to access. Many of the developing countries in Africa have multi-ethnic groups with their own language, yet the libraries and information centres provide information mainly in colonial languages such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, etc. This poses a big challenge to the librarians and libraries in meeting the information needs of the people in the rural areas.

Strategies to overcome challenges of rural Libraries

Though the efforts of some libraries in information dissemination in rural areas of Africa have been documented, nevertheless, Momodu, (2012) observes that adequate attention has not been paid to library services in the rural areas of Nigeria. It is very important for the librarian in charge of the rural libraries to educate the rural populace on the need and the importance of the libraries. The rural dwellers need to be told the types of information they can get from the library.

Agriculture: According to Harande (2009), the greatest area of information needs by rural Nigerians is in agriculture and such information needs include planting treated seeds, soil conservation, prevention of plants and animal diseases, fertilizer application, farm machineries,

recommended thinning practices, proper storage of farm products, marketing techniques, cooperative activities and other agro-cultural activities. Though librarians may not be agriculturists but they are usually equipped to provide technical information services to experts in other fields using the language they understand most.

Education: It has long been established that most 'ruralists' or community-residents are poor, semi-literates, absorbed in the daily struggle for economic survival and unaware of the information services which could assist them in that struggle (Chijioke, 1995). Thus, education can enhance the social status of ruralists or community residents. There are various ways the library can enhance the educational development of a rural community. Rural libraries could be best used as information centre for effective use in adult education and development plans of the country. Adult literacy classes to fulfil its roles on the federal government programme on adult literacy campaign, services of retired teachers in the community can be used. Materials like books on alphabets and numbers, pictures, posters and artefacts are very relevant for this group of the rural dwellers. Documentary films and recorded cassettes in local and English languages would be quite useful. Story hour for children is an important function of the library. Pictures, easy to read picture books, simple story books could be found exciting by the children. This will help develop their interest in reading and library usage.

Health: According to Harande (2009), health information includes how individuals can prevent different diseases that affect them; the healthcare delivery services available to them and what it costs. The library can collect information from state and federal ministries of health about various programmes dealing with health matters. Liaising with other agencies like the community health care centers, can also help in disseminating information to the rural dwellers. Lectures by community health workers on good environmental sanitation/diets and the importance of antenatal and post-natal health care to pregnant women, will surely go a long way in getting them informed. HIV and AIDS seminars can also be held for the youths especially.

Politics: Information is needed on political rights of the people and how they can exercise such right (Harande, 2009). The library can collect information on government policies and political situation in the country from radio, newspaper magazine as well as party agents. Information got from these sources can be translated and disseminated to the rural dwellers orally or in written form. Pamphlets, leaflets in English and vernacular can also be used to give information. In addition to radios and televisions, lectures are always interpreted to their local dialect in order to reach a wider audience.

Socio-Economic Information: Issa (1998) had observed that "the rural populace suffers from social and economic retrogression. In line with this, Disco (2005) commented that "the structural and infrastructural problems, official corruption, and economic policies growing insecurity, and unstable power supply hamper this development". In this regards, Harande (2009) reported that rural inhabitants in the present day Nigeria are not reaping from the fruits of the enormous wealth the country has. Reason being the fact that information services that will greatly enhance their productivity, transform their community into a lively and enlightened one, and empower their economic base, is not effective and relevant and the service is not fashioned towards it.

Culture and Recreation: The rural dwellers have great interest in the preservation of their culture. In this regard, several conferences and workshops have been organized to raise the consciousness and awareness of stakeholders in developing countries towards the appreciation and utilization of information in their planning and decision-making processes (Kegan, 1999). However, these efforts to entrench information on culture seemed to have failed to achieve the desired result (Admorah, 1983). The function of the library to expose the people to the culture

and traditions of other people through film shows, displays of photographs, posters and paintings is therefore attracting attention. Recreational needs of the rural dwellers can be met through the provision of recreational materials like games, story books, especially fictions and humorous films by the rural libraries. Organizing play and drama on areas like past history of the community could also be another way of relaxation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It has been found from studies in Africa that rural residents of rural communities need information in the following areas: health related matters, problems of daily existence, occupational concerns, government operations, education, religious matters and recreational matters. The role information plays in almost every human activity cannot be overemphasized. The values of information in the development process have been the main themes of discourse among librarians and other information provision media. Africa, like the rest of the world is experiencing change in all aspects of life: from basic cultural values to complexities of technology which changed not only the mode of communication, but also the concept of time. In Africa, there are traditional methods of providing information to the people especially those living in the remote areas. But these methods are not applied by the libraries in those areas which still maintain their foreign mode of information services delivery (mainly books and other printed resources). This is unfortunately not helping matters, as it were, especially to the illiterates who can neither read nor write.

Based on this scenario, we therefore recommend an all encompassing mode of library and information services method for African communities as follows:

- That the Moldova's Public Library innovation strategy be adopted by all community or rural libraries.
- Librarians in the public or community libraries should use the village square and their native languages to disseminate information on health, agriculture, government policies, etc.
- That only books and other library materials useful to the rural dwellers should be purchased for the semi-literate who can read English Language.
- That some books should be interpreted into vernacular language for those who cannot read or understand the English Language quite well.
- That the Local Government, NGO, or individual philanthropists should be requested to donate money for procurement of audiovisual resources with which to enhance learning of the community inhabitants and create awareness of the current happenings.
- Rural libraries should have to cooperate with the media and government information units to package information for none literature category of library users.
- Oral interviews with chiefs and elders can be taped or recorded on cassettes or CDs. Festivals, dances, songs, customary marriages can also be preserved through film documentaries for present and future generations.

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