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Stimulating and Enriching Partnership with Community Based Organizations: Inclusive Participatory Platform with Libraries in Nigeria

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Abstract

It has become unimaginable for libraries and librarians to alienate themselves from other organizations and “do their own thing” without joint efforts for effective information service delivery in the communities. The importance of collaboration and partnership has removed the notion of “stiff necked professionals” to create spaces for reshaping and reinvigorating roles of the libraries beyond their physical space and immediate users. It is to enable libraries become more interactive, augmenting realities with new layers of information and content in emerging information societies. Thus, aligning with the community based organizations not only gives visibility to library and information centers but opens avenues on knowledge management, civic engagements, governance and budget documents, holistic empowerment and sustainable development activities. The rich cultural and human resources in the communities add value for total quality services which libraries aim to achieve. The question is, are libraries willing to embark on this platform? This paper is a report of the collaborative work of an information center with various community based organizations (CBOs) to fast track the implementation of knowledge and innovative strategies for sustainable development in 32 rural communities of Anambra State, South East of Nigeria. It also explored the use of invited spaces created for

integration of libraries and implications of “standing alone” in today’s collaborative exigencies. The study is both qualitative and quantitative which involved group discussion, brainstorming, community groups, NGO officials and librarians. Interviews and questionnaire were also used in data collection. This library and information service delivery activities were carried out from May, 2014 to December, 2015 under the Voice to the Peoples Project (V2P) that initiated the CBO as a powerful collaborative platform in delivering literacy services and local knowledge to communities. This study brings to the fore unique partnerships and networking opportunities that could bring libraries “out from the closet” in achieving the sustainable development goals. The “stand alone” libraries have detrimental effects on professional and personal development of their staff as they impact on efficient information service delivery.

Keywords: collaboration, community based organizations, inclusive participation, information center, library, service delivery, invited space

Introduction

It is no longer news that the world is moving towards strengthening mechanisms to further enhance social development, community and economic growth. Libraries play critical role in enhancing development because they are naturally involved with people and must be aware of community based organizations (CBO) which Lankes, Silverstein and Nicholson (2007) described as fostering greater decision and action on the topic of participatory networks and more broadly participatory librarianship. Libraries can actually leverage on the communities’ needs of livelihood, service deliveries, literacy, primary health care, water and sanitation, budget issues among others.

Librarians cannot pretend to be unable to channel development information to the needed groups, to help them manage their communities and raise their voices to be heard by duty bearers. Hence, the statement of “we are not social workers”, “we only offer core services” by a class of librarians need to be revisited (Willimen, 2014). There is need for librarians who can interact and help people grow. The professionals who will employ practical strategies in engaging all segments of communities (Guzman, 2016), not just those that reflect their personal values and lifestyles but platforms that will reach out and key into community organizations.

This is about strengthening our communities because they are the heart of counties, states and nations, where families thrive (Convoy for Hope, 2015) where children are nurtured and raised, where able bodied men and women eke out their livelihood and participate in their sustainable development. It is then not out of place that librarians should commit to working with community based organizations in building strong communities. The confirmation of enriching our communities is emphasized in SDG 11 (UN, 2016) to make them safe, resilient and secure.

What better way of attributing to this objective than libraries and information centers collaborating with the community, leveraging on created spaces to serve and become part of the functional groups. Based on this, Krolak (2016) warned that when libraries develop their own, isolated literacy initiative, there is a danger that these efforts will be ignored by decision makers, and might not have the long-term impact in a community that libraries are hoping for. Here

comes in the unequivocal essence of library to collaborate with CBOs through participatory strategies to build strong society. This study dwells more on the partnership between libraries and the culturally institutionalized CBOs in the rural communities in South East, Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

Libraries are established to disseminate information for the wellbeing of the people and improvement of the society. They are not just collections of books but also play important roles in a nation's cultural heritage with community organizations, church and private organizations (Campbell, 2015) for improved service provision. How many groups, communities, people both users and non-libraries users really know what libraries offer?

Although many people are synonymous with library and books, they need to know that they have good practices of supporting community based platforms through inclusive participatory approaches (Ballantyne, 2009). These groups if well empowered will impact societal needs and make them function effectively like citizens with rights in their own countries. The class of librarians who believe that librarianship is not about getting mixed up with the locals but concentrate on “traditional core services” of meeting the needs of only those that come to the library should have a rethink just as Vincent (2014) queried, what really are the “core” and “non-core” services? A lot has been written on engagement between the libraries and the communities but this study examined the evidence based approaches of rural information services through inclusive participation of libraries and residents.

Objectives of the study

The central objective of this study is to assess the collaborative and participatory activities of an information center with various community based organizations (CBOs). Particularly, the study:

1. Identified the community based organizations in the pilot communities
2. Explored the use of invited and open spaces
3. Harnessed the inclusive participatory approaches for integration of libraries and CBOs
4. Examined the lessons learnt from the activities.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative and quantitative research. It is exploratory in nature which focused on processes that can inspire change through inclusive participation with community-based organizations (CBOs) on Voice to the People's Project (V2P) pilot communities in Anambra state. It was a funded project by Department for International Development (DFID) United Kingdom with support from Christian Aid Nigeria but implemented by Justice Development and Peace Commission (JPDC) an NGO in Onitsha, Anambra State. This study was carried out in Igbo speaking communities of South East, Nigeria, covering eight local government areas where the thirty two pilot communities (twenty seven upland and five riverine communities) were chosen. There are one hundred and seventy seven communities in the state.

For this study, four out of the eight pilot LGAs (one community each from each LGA) were used to enable us have a relative view of participation from May, 2014 to December, 2015. The LGAs were Anambra East, Anambra West, Ayamelum and Idemili South with their communities: Umuoba Anam, Orometiti, Anaku and Akwaukwu, respectively. Data collection instruments used were:

- I. Group discussion and brainstorming: These targeted the needs assessment of different CBOs with generation and creation of knowledge management. It helped us to understand the socio-economic context of the residents. During brainstorming at the convenient locations found by the groups, different issues were raised with problem solving techniques. The participants were open and we “learnt” from them.
- II. Interviews: They were carried out with leaders of the CBO to help establish and confirm the group discussions.
- III. Questionnaire: It was designed to find out the various types of CBOs and areas of interests. It was duly filled and collected back.
- IV. Physical facility assessment: Some members of CBOs, librarians and the project team went round the communities to observe the schools, hospitals and water holes which accentuated the joint activities and solidified the cordial relationship among the participating groups.

The Communities were visited severally during the course of the project so it was easy, stretching the interviews and meetings to fit into their traditional market days of gathering. One of the researchers, a staff of the NGO leveraged on the project management and created spaces for interested librarians as volunteers during the project life cycle. Thus, seven librarians (4 from public and 3 from academic libraries) participated in the project. 120 members of CBOs participated in the discussions while 24 CBOs leaders were interviewed. 80 copies of questionnaire were distributed, duly filled and returned because we were there to pick them. The sample population represented all the four communities used in this study. All discussions were carried out in the local dialect which the team speaks with fluency and a little of Pidgin English. The findings were presented in tables and figure.

Literature review

CBOs are recognized and acknowledged groups that play vital roles in community development with each group having primary functions in protecting the interest of its members. Ikwuba (2010) described it as rural or grassroots based, formed, funded and managed by the community members themselves based on their felt needs. In the same, National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) (2016) portrayed it as organization, public or private nonprofit (including a church or religious entity) that is representative of a community or a significant segment of a community and is engaged in meeting human, educational, environmental, or public safety community needs. They are truly committed to community development and citizen participation. This is the reason they are in most rural communities made up of men, youth, women, Christian women, etc (Ihem-Avoaja, 2013, Onyeozu, 2010).

Studies have shown that some libraries have collaborated with CBOs. One example was by Saumby and Fields (2016) who stated that Richardson public library collaborated with CBO on adult literacy and has celebrated 25 years of partnership. Others are Harris County public library on underserved populations in Houston and Dallas public library that supported communication between local literacy organizations, among others. Struck, et al (2014) also reported that Rondo library in urban neighborhood in Saint Paul, Minnesota changed the ways in which community organizations collaborated and the ways adult team members of these organizations participated in the creation, partnerships and facilitation of the Createch workshops.

These are positive outcomes of collaboration with CBOs which have actually improved educational experience, community long life learning, health service deliveries, livelihood developments, civic involvement and demand for good governance (JDPC, 2014). Engagement with the CBO has really provided the right conditions for generating the growth for more knowledge (Abegunde, 2009). The professionals now tap into key community (Regional Centers of Expertise (RCE), 2013) players that have already been created, seeking spaces in the regularly scheduled meetings and using it as a forum for disseminating information.

Spaces are great opportunities for engagement from local to global levels. The concept of 'spaces' for participation and how it links to strategic information services display the extent of leverage libraries can have in the communities. Usually, the "invited" and the "open" spaces participation (Mundy, et al, 2016 and Aiyar, 2010) are what guarantee the ability of librarians to deal with issues in the communities. The library should seek and use these spaces in becoming development practitioner, facilitator and co-producer of information (Pateman, 2014) while identifying, prioritizing and meeting community needs. Indeed, when libraries mix up and provide meaningful community service-learning opportunities, more spaces will be created for them. It is worth all the engagement as Convoy of Hope (2015) pointed out, we may not be able to change the choices people make, but we can definitely increase the choices that they have.

Today, people want to participate. Perhaps, it is this assertion that led to inclusive institutions at all levels as part of SDG 16, recognizing the importance of focusing on common goals and common ambitions to strengthen communities through efforts (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2016). The indication is that librarians can actually collaborate with CBOs to improve their work, and not just merely to promote it. It is this change-oriented information and targets that will be communicated to groups, traditional rulers and marginalized community groups in response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Partnership for SDGs, 2016). Participation has become the key to open the closed doors to a more sustainable community.

It is only through inclusive participation that opportunities are given to people to contribute in situations that affect their lives. This positive change should be adopted (Olawepo, 2009) to fill the gaps in community groups' engagement. The libraries in Nigeria are now creating spaces to participate in strengthening our societies with common understanding and improving knowledge-sharing. Nothing benefits more than working together (Community Library Hub, 2011) because as the community learns from the librarians, librarians equally learn from the wealth of community knowledge, thereby creating knowledge hubs in improving social sectors. This will ensure the enjoyment of citizens' rights to participate and contribute in governance among others

(Ndenje-Sichalwe and Ngulube, 2009). Transformation will come through this medium and change apathy into life-changing experiences in strengthening communities' resilience.

Findings

Table 1: Identification of the community based groups

S/N	Group	Composition	Interest
1.	Youth: Otu Umuagbo Student union Youth general	Girls that are not married Only students, usually in the tertiary institutions All youth in the community (Both girls and boys that are single)	The wellbeing of members, empowerment and livelihood Security and community development
2.	Women: Umuada Women wing of the Town Union Otu Odu and other women titled groups	Indigenes of the community, married within or outside of the community All married women in the community both indigene and non indigene Specially recognized women who were given titles (chieftaincy positions by the Traditional institution)	Guidance, general wellbeing of members and households. Welfare of women, improvement of basic amenities, empowerment, peaceful households and communities Members welfare, family and community development
3.	Men: Town union Anambra State Association of Town Union (ASATU) Ndi Nze na Ozo, Ichies	All males that are of reasoning age whether married or not All President Generals (PGs) of the whole communities in the state Titled men only	Decision, policy making, security and general welfare of the community Community development, security and empowerment Policy making and general development
4.	Religious groups in the community:	Just like in traditional community setting, every denomination in the community has various groups of women, youth and men.	General welfare of members and community

5.	General: Age grade (Otu Ogbo) Ward Development Committee (WDC) Community Development Committee (CDC) Community Empowerment Network (COMEN) Community Based Monitors (CBM)	People born within the age bracket of two or three year's interval. Made up of male and female Men, women and youths “ “	Development, community participation and contribution. Hospitals and health issues. They monitor and give reports Community development, monitoring and reporting of issues, dysfunctional units to stakeholders
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The Table above shows the existing various groups identified in all the communities studied. Each category has its distinct areas of responsibilities. It can be deduced that they all work towards one goal: development and sustainability.

The interview section with the leaders revealed that the groups, especially the Umuada, umuagbogho and the chiefs have existed as long as the community. One of the leaders stated:

They are highly respected and their words are not taken lightly.

On the general groups, it was revealed that their monitoring and reporting have helped in having ideas of what goes on in different government projects and sectors.

Table 2: Spaces used in strengthening and participating

S/N	Group	Opportunities for discussion
1.	Youth: Otu Umuagbo Youth general Student union	Village meetings at the community center usually held monthly During holidays at the village hall
2.	Women: Umuada Women Wing of Town Union Otu Odu and other women title groups	On the traditional market days (Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwor) at the house of the eldest member Monthly meeting in a designated place (members home or community hall) Annual August meetings in community hall Quarterly meetings or when the need arises in community hall or member's house
3.	Men: Town union ASATU Nze na Ozo, Ichies	Town hall Monthly in Community hall Quarterly meetings at the local government Secretariat When the need arises in Palace
4.	Religious groups in the community	In church premises usually on Sundays or special day of event
5.	General: Age grade Ward Development Committee (WDC) CDC COMEN CBM Other spaces created	Monthly meeting in community hall Community hall “ General Town Hall meeting especially during Christmas period Community festivals and events – New yam festival, Chieftaincy event

The Table shows locations and time of meetings of CBOs where we were given opportunities to engage and disseminate information. We made use of these spaces and gained their confidence.

Table 3: Identification of groups that have used the space to engage

Who visits your group?	Respondents
Government people	✓
Community Stake holders	✓
Politicians	✓
Church people	✓
NGO	✓
Librarians	-
Other CBO leaders	✓

The groups that have given the opportunities to talk to CBO are shown in the table above. The column for librarians was not ticked meaning, they have never come to them. Interviews and group discussions confirmed it. The interview revealed that everyone is accepted as long as what they are coming to say will benefit the members. It stated:

We want the best for our people.

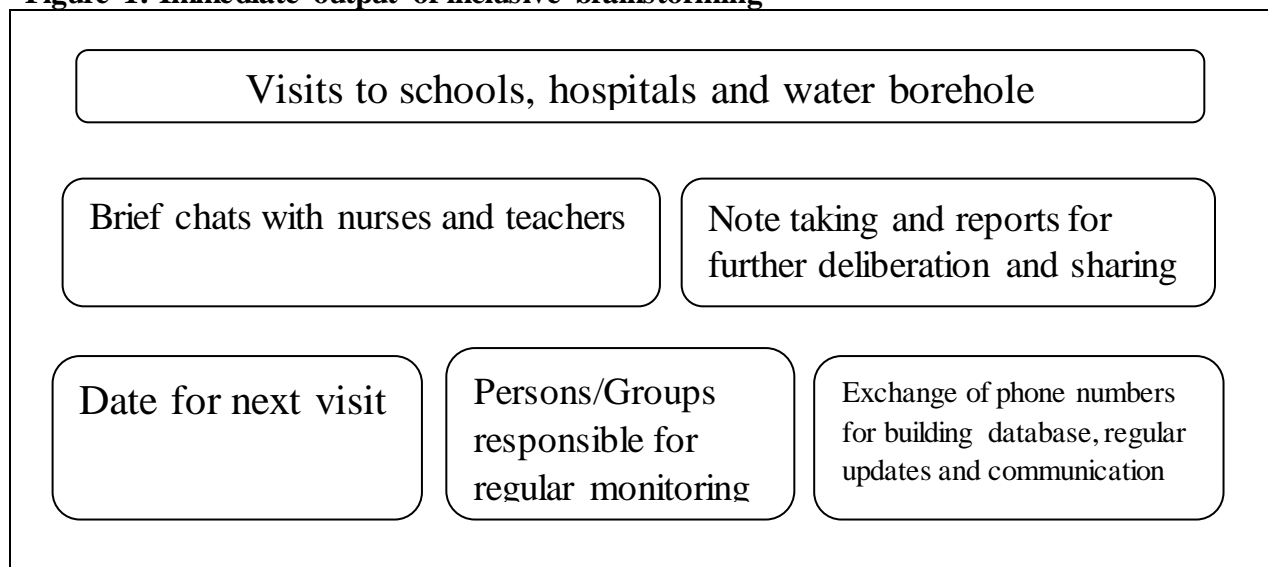
We want people to bring information, empowerment and development to us

Table 4: Inclusive participatory approach

Collaborative activity	Brain storming session	Tactical approaches on connecting with CBOs
Joint assessment of needs by CBO, librarians and NGO	Targeted needs for strengthening and enrichment	Knowledge generation and analysis of issues. Physical assessment of basic facilities
Open dialogue	Participation and contribution of all participants	Mapping and prioritization of needs Community driven development strategy Identification of other groups for supports
Sustained communication and information services	Resource analysis	Dissemination of information, education and communication materials (IEC) Best channel and medium of information dissemination social media
Strategic framework	Work plan	Drawing of action plan for information engagement

The Table shows the analysis of CBO inclusion in charting sustainable framework for enriching the community. Participants supported each other in reaching a common goal as the table shows demarcation of outlined deliberate output for information sharing. This shows that successful and effective partnership for information services can be achieved at the grass root level.

Figure 1: Immediate output of inclusive brainstorming



The figure shows the evidence based insight into the joint participation with the CBOs. Three basic facilities were visited in the communities because they are constant in every area. The brief meeting with nurses and teachers were spontaneous but it helped in assessing the effective service delivery with the conditions of the facilities. Other things that followed were reports which they went back to share with their people while we went back to build on our next strategy of dissemination. Thus, a good sustainable relationship was built for more partnering activities.

Discussion of Findings

It is obvious that CBO cuts across every unit and represents the concerns of members of the community. The groups covering women, youth, men and religious residents show the wholesome strengthening of African society in enhancing community development prospects (SCHARETICLES, 2104). Viewing it from that angle emphasizes the importance of libraries as components of communities to understand the local issues, addressing the needs and roles of a community. It buttresses the assertion of Obeji, (2015) that CBO has been part and parcel of every community in Nigeria and since librarians are in the knowledge and conversation business as Lankes, Silverstein and Nicholson (2007) rightly pointed out, this collaboration is the best practice. Therefore, developing plans and strategies with clear inclusion of people will provide the needed outcomes.

This is the reason librarians must advocate and claim the spaces provided in Table 2, keying into the already existing structures (Regional Centers of Expertise (RCE), 2013), attending scheduled meetings and using them as platforms to disseminate relevant information. Of course the librarians are accepted as other groups, which leave them with choices of making things happen with the CBO, creating the relevance and synergy needed to drive this knowledge.

Inclusive participatory technique (Table 4) has shown that successful outcomes can be achieved with community dwellers and librarians. This is exactly what Olawepo (2009) meant when he informed that rural people can actually know where and how to participate in helping achieve

their development. Now, establishing a pattern of continuing communications with the community ensures the sustainability and long term relationship.

Evidently, the effect of the immediate outcome in Figure 1, aptly described what could be tagged breaking the silence of the poor and disadvantaged as it reflected the ambitions to strengthen communities through efforts as stated in SDG (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2016). This is the significance of value added and readiness of the dwellers to go beyond the group level and work for the whole community. It shows that collaboration sensitizes and motivates when combined with creative inclusive participation (INCLUDE, 2016).

It is pertinent to mention that the participatory exercise produced good results in Umueri community (Anambra East LGA) with an indigene donating cartons of new books to twelve rural primary and secondary schools (Osuchukwu and Edewor, 2016). In Anaku, (Ayamelum LGA) there was immediate repair of leaking roof of the primary health center. There were also payment of the electricity bill of primary health center and repair of the leaking over head tank of the community water bore hole by Town Union in Akwaukwu (Idemili South LGA). Also recorded was more enrollments in adult education sector in Orometiti (Anambra West LGA).

Lessons learnt

1. CBOs have interesting human and knowledge resources which are used to establish our knowledge management base
2. Working with CBOs, NGOs and librarians is highly creative that lead to new innovations in community engagement
3. Community information is much more than farming and livelihood. Their quest for participation and contribution opened avenues for more research on civic education
4. Collaboration gives libraries greater in the community
5. Community stakeholders and traditional institutions are protective of their own and desire good practices with genuine groups to offer them supports.

Conclusion/implication

Collaborating with CBOs provides great knowledge content and effective information which represents the totality of needs of the community. As everyone belongs to one group or the other, partnership with libraries and information centers creates a wholesome development. Librarians have come to the realization that information service does not end in the library building or social media. It has now become apparent that physical engagement with community dwellers is a “must” because that is one of the best practices of fulfilling the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Our cities and communities must be made strong, secure and resilience. Participatory inclusive approach must be applied for what is known must be shared for the benefit of all. It is this study that places our work in the framework of practice theory.

The implication of this study is that if librarians continue to struggle with the description of mission of library and conveniently relegate themselves to the background with the pretence of work load in the library buildings, they would deny themselves the global participation and social services to the communities. When this happens, they may face serious threats of extinction and possible eschew from sustainable development goal platform. They must really connect with the local communities as other groups are doing with more positive impact. This

research has debunked some claims like unwilling CBOs, geographical terrain, innovative approaches and project bias which may hinder effective collaboration. A librarian must not speak the same language nor be a member of the group to serve the community. It is therefore pertinent that analyses of strengths are done and should be used to the fullest.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made

1. Libraries and information centers can adopt physical and social connections with CBOs. There is need to be open and communicate effectively.
2. CBOs partnership can start with building trust and respect from each party. It is not ideal to have a mind set of superiority when engaging community people.
3. Rural librarianship skills are needed because confidence and self-worth are part of information dissemination in the community.
4. Collaboration with NGOs and other groups who are already in the community network is important if librarians want to build strong relationship with the dwellers.
5. Participatory librarianship should be adopted and implemented in all communities.

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