

Recreating Agricultural Information Services for the Rural Communities: Challenges for Rural Public Libraries

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to examine how agricultural information services can be used to promote agriculture for overall national development. The paper also addresses challenges facing libraries and librarians and other stakeholders and recommends strategies for overcoming the challenges and for the promotion of rural agricultural development through effective agricultural information services.

Approach: The researcher critically examined the concept of agricultural information services and other relevant concepts as well as the state of agriculture in the rural communities. The researcher also employed the exploratory approach in revealing the strategies for repositioning rural public libraries for recreating agricultural information services for the rural communities:

Findings: Public libraries should employ the use of marketing of library services to encourage the use of information services and regularly organize workshops, book talks, discussion groups and seminars for rural dwellers, rural agricultural researchers and other stakeholders in rural agricultural development. Information resources and services should be provided in various varieties and formats to meet the needs and requirements of the rural dwellers.

Practical Implications: The rural communities are the main producers of agricultural produce of a nation. Yet, they are the more neglected, disadvantaged and underdeveloped, mainly due to their relative distance to the seat of government. The findings of this study will place the rural populace in a vantage position both as a contributor and a beneficiary of economic and national development.

Key words: Rural public libraries, agriculture, information services, rural communities.

Paper Type: Conceptual

Introduction

A rural public library is a library located in the rural communities with an organized collection of information resources established to meet the varying needs of its heterogeneous public – for information, education, entertainment or leisure so as to help in their socio-economic emancipation, development and growth. Essentially, rural public libraries, variously called rural libraries, grassroots libraries, community libraries or branch public libraries, are usually branches of state public libraries which are located in the rural areas and serving the members of the area and other members of the public. They are maintained from the public fund while their services are offered free to all and sundry without discrimination (Dike & Amaechi, 2008). The major beneficiaries of rural public libraries are the people at the rural

communities irrespective of their sex, age, religious or political affiliation.

The rural population is characterized by a preponderance of ordinary people in society. They are usually not in positions of authority and in many cases the more disadvantaged group in terms of access to social facilities. These are made even worse by the neglect of the government and other governmental and non governmental organizations due to their relative distance from the major cities. Majority of the rural dwellers are engaged in agriculture (Mbwana, 1987), which is also an important sector of the economies of the developing countries. Ezeani (2005) has observed that very few countries have experienced rapid economic growth without a corresponding growth in agriculture. It is the backbone of the economy of

Africa with about 90% of her people depending on it for a living. It is also the main foreign exchange earner of the various countries that make up the continent (Mbwana).

However, in Nigeria, the oil boom of the 1970s resulted in the neglect of agriculture as government shifted its attention and support from the agricultural to the oil sector. This had adverse effects on the development of agriculture in Nigeria. There has been perennial low agricultural production (Aina, in Mabawonku, 2001), continuing poor food supply and food security, continuing poor agricultural development and poor economic and consequently, poor national development in Nigeria and other ever-present problems of the agricultural process. Unfortunately, the rural communities have been at the receiving end, being the major producers and consumers of agricultural products. The rural dwellers are predominantly agriculturists, which made Mbwana to argue that there is an interrelationship between agriculture and rural development. Despite the importance of the rural population in agricultural production and the indispensability of agricultural information services in enhancing agricultural production and development, not much seem to have been achieved in the area of promoting agricultural information services for the rural population in Nigeria. This is the concern that this paper has set out to address.

The work describes the concepts and characteristics of rural populace as well as the interconnection between the rural population and agricultural production. It also describes ways agricultural information services can promote agricultural production in the rural communities. The paper also addresses challenges facing libraries and librarians and other stakeholders and recommends strategies for overcoming the challenges and for the promotion of rural agricultural development through effective agricultural information services.

Concepts of Agricultural Information Services and the Rural Communities

Information is fact, data, and opinion acquired or obtained by individuals on an issue, event or even other individuals so as to provide background knowledge, better understanding or knowledge of recent developments and serve as a guide or tool for decision making between two or more choices or alternatives. Supporting the

above claims, Ayanyemi, (2006) posited that information is an essential resource for individual growth and for survival. Thus, there is often the need for individuals to obtain, timely and relevant information. An informed mind is an enriched mind and if one is not informed he will be deformed. Every rational person needs some form of information for his/her day-to-day existence and well being.

Information services are the provision, through relevant methods, of required information or knowledge on an issue, event or person so as to satisfy the information needs of the recipient. Rettig (1993) refers to it as the provision and receipt of facts and opinions during the course of daily life. Relating it to the library, he sees it as the provision of specific facts and information to library users. It is offered to mediate between library users' information needs and the information resources of the library. In the same vein, Whittaker (1997) defined information services as the theory and practice of providing services that link information seekers to library services.

The purpose of information services, according to Okiy (1998), is to get the content of library collections to the clientele. It is intended to change libraries from a mere storehouse of information to a gateway to information. Similarly, Morgan (1999) noted that information services are aimed at enabling the users to make effective use of the resources of the library. In the same vein, Whittaker (1997) asserted that information services must as a matter of necessity be provided, else the flow of utilization of library information resources would either never take place or take place inefficiently. Many library users are not well versed in the library information resources and organization and may not be able to make adequate use of the library without help.

Agriculture has been the mainstay of the Nigerian rural communities. Agricultural development is therefore a panacea for the development of the living condition and wellbeing of the rural dwellers. Mbwana (1987) argued that sound agricultural development depends on research and the success of such research depends on access to current information. The first step to efficient and result-oriented agricultural development is the provision of and accessibility to relevant and accurate information services. Information services in this context involves providing

adequate knowledge about agriculture and having access to adequate information on the methods and practice of agricultural practices, innovations, and development. Agricultural information services are indispensable for effective and result oriented agricultural production.

Agricultural information services are provided and promoted in various specialized institutions, including public, academic, national, and special libraries and agricultural research institutes. However, public libraries are prominent in providing these services to the rural populace because of their more relative closeness to the rural areas. The rural communities form the bedrock of a country's economic development. Agriculture is of paramount importance not only for the economic development of the rural areas but also for the general development and sustenance of their populace. It helps in raising both the economic fortune and standard of living of the rural population.

Role of Rural Public Libraries in Meeting the Agricultural Information Needs of the Rural Communities

Suffice it to say that rural public libraries are the best strategically placed agency for facilitating agricultural information services for agricultural development. This view is justified by the strategic and sensitive nature of their services to the socio-cultural life of the people; their strategic location at the rural community; the multi-dimensional nature of their services cutting across various needs and services; and the even accessibility of their services by all categories of the people in the rural areas.

The Library Association (1980) distinguished between three kinds of information provided by public libraries, namely: reference, local, and community information. Community information services are services which assist individuals and groups to participate as full and equal members of society. Literate and illiterate individuals at the grassroots need equal access to information on the local needs of the people including agriculture and food security. Rural public libraries through their Community Information Services (CIS) should serve as gateway to rapid agricultural development through effective agricultural information services. The rural public libraries need to provide these services by building basic collections on subjects of relevance to the agricultural needs of the people including, crop

production, animal husbandry, soil management and efficiency, agricultural engineering, pest and disease control, food security, etc. Materials like posters, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, filmstrips, VCDs, radios and cassettes are veritable tools that will assist the rural librarians to provide agricultural information services to the rural dwellers.

Additionally, public libraries have over the years adopted the practice of international comparative studies in their service delivery. This is the practice of securing information on what is being done in other countries, including their farming system and land management practices. This is a very important ingredient of agricultural development among the rural dwellers. Rural public libraries can utilize these studies and their comparative analysis to make recommendations on how to overcome common agricultural problems in the country.

The rural public library should play a dynamic role and be fully integrated in rural development programmes in all its ramifications. Ideally, rural libraries are expected to play certain identifiable roles – educational roles, cultural roles, information and research roles (Dike & Amaechi, 2008). They could perform these roles by linking rural populace with other development and appropriate agencies which could help them out, by serving as centers of information dissemination on a variety of local interest, by serving as fora for community discussion and meetings, and by providing specialized information to various rural based governmental agencies, NGOs, occupational and trade groups as well as advisory centers.

Ways Rural Public Libraries can Recreate Agricultural Information Services for the Rural Communities

Despite their potentials in facilitating information services in the rural communities, it has been observed that there is poor provision or near lack of information and information resources and services in those areas, a situation which Ochai, (1995) noted has prevented many public libraries from meeting their objectives. The often prescribed panacea is through the process of “catching up”, by the provision of development information, particularly, at the grassroots level. There is therefore the need for public library services to support and sustain agricultural development of the people.

The modus operandi is through the use of a network of public rural libraries springing from the headquarters (centralized). It may also include the use of any of the following methods designed to bring library services to the rural area

- i. Multi-media services
- ii. Public-school library cooperation
- iii. School library programme (Omoniwa, 1986)
- iv. Mobile library services
- v. Extension services
- vi. Library services to literacy programmes
- vii. Branch library services.

Rural public libraries should see the need for multi-media services in the provision of information services to promote agricultural production and development. In view of the structure of the population of the rural communities, to benefit from library information services at that level, a new conceptualization to the design and service delivery is imperative (Ochal, 1995). Rural public libraries in Nigeria should therefore avail their users the opportunity of information provision in variety of sources, media and format. When this is realized as special responsibilities, the following are the focus, according to Okoli (2005).

- ❖ Identification of agricultural information needs of communities, extension workers, policy makers, agricultural researchers and the entire rural populace.
- ❖ Capacity building for stakeholders in rural agriculture through training workshops, book talks, discussion groups and seminars on agricultural practices and innovations.
- ❖ Production of rural information enlightenment and media such as posters, photographs, audio-visually, pamphlets etc to educate, inform and enlighten the rural dwellers on agricultural practices and innovations.

Rural public libraries should provide well stocked reference resources and wide ranging loan services based on system of branch libraries (Jona, 2003). They should be further supplemented by traveling libraries which serve outlying districts. Special and suitable facilities and services should be provided for the old, the

blind, the hearing impaired and others, and in many cases, library services should be organized for local schools, hospitals and prisons. Resources should include a wide range of information material on local agricultural needs and strategies for overcoming common agricultural problems. Information resources should include, books, pamphlets vertical file collections, periodicals, including news papers and magazines, and various kinds of reference materials including handbooks, encyclopedias, biographies and yearbooks.

The librarians should stock and make abundant information materials on the various method and innovation in agriculture and on the various segments of the agriculture, including animal husbandry, plant science, animal science, soil and water agricultural economics, agricultural engineering, food and nutrition, conservation and development.

Importantly, rural public libraries should pay great attention to the acquisition and provision of government publications. These are very important as they help to provide relevant information and education on the position and policies of government on agriculture. Such documents include: statistical reports, annual reports, technical reports, agriculture related bills, statutes, federal constitutions; and judicial resolutions on land and other related cases (Mole, 2007).

Additionally, rural public libraries in Nigeria should avail their rural communities the opportunities of the Local Area Network (LAN), Wide Area Network (WAN), Intranet and internet. (Okoli, 2005). This will greatly afford them opportunity to wide access to adequate and current information resources and services.

A new approach to the design, packaging and delivery of information services is imperative since the grassroots are predominantly illiterates and non conventional library users. Our grassroots library concept must not be deeply rooted on western culture that is based on print media. They must be planned and provided based on the needs of our rural dwellers as dictated by the local on-the-spot realities of our socio-cultural system and requirements. Thus, Ogunshewe (1984) recommended that information/media resource centres should replace our public libraries at the grassroots...identifying information sources and referring clients to centers relevant to their needs. The "library" may just be the

“librarian’s” operational base which in this case may be just his office or a “community center”, an integrated civic center, or equivalent of our village square, and consultations with the librarian could as well be meeting him on the street or in any of the above places (Ochai, 1995).

Efforts must be made to find the means of facilitating access to knowledge and information by the physically challenged, the house-bound and non literates who constitute the majority of rural dwellers (Dike & Amaechi, 2008). Innovative approaches like the use of audio visual resource, provision of materials in vernacular and group discussions can be used by the rural library as veritable avenues of disseminating modern scientific and technological information to the rural dwellers, the physically challenged and other disadvantaged groups.

The Challenges

Many rural public libraries do not have adequate and current information collection and relevant information resources and services to satisfy the information needs of the teeming heterogeneous users. This, according to Dike and Amaechi (2008) puts the libraries in deep constraint with regards to the provision of specialized information services to address the agricultural information needs of the people.

There is a persistent neglect of information services in particular and general library services in general in Nigeria by both parents and governments, especially in the area of provision of current information resources. There is also the problem of poor access to information resources. This problem is more prevalent among the rural population of Nigeria. Most library-based and non library-based information services are not readily accessible in the rural areas. The Internet facilities and other access facilities are scarcely located and not readily available in Nigeria. UNECA (1992) equally observed that there is inadequacy or low level of internet connectivity and facilities in public libraries in Nigeria. This tends to cut them off from the rest of the world. This has been made worse by the poor knowledge base in the use of the ICTs, frequent breakdown of facilities, inadequate or epileptic power supply resulting in poor access to television programmes.

Importantly, the rural libraries, in view of their location, have poor or no access to online

services such as the internet and are therefore constrained to rely on the print sources which are usually inadequate and outdated.

The above are the results of poor funding and as Zorooster (2000) noted. Without proper funding, no major activity can be embarked upon and actualized in library information service.

There is the problem of finding adequate supplies of material in the languages and at the level of difficulty that the local readers can use. This is important considering the fact that in Nigeria, for instance, there are over 300 languages spoken, with a preponderance of them at the grassroots areas (Mole & Ezeji, 2008) which has a high non English speaking population. The cost of producing reading materials in the various native languages is very high.

Strategies for Overcoming the Challenges and Enhancing Agricultural Information Services

Public libraries should employ the use of marketing of library services to bring relevant information to the door step of potential users of agricultural information even when they are not willing to come to the library. The rural populace should be encouraged to use these services even when they are not willing to. Information resources should be made adequately available and evenly accessible through extension and mobile library services. However, the rural dwellers, including students, farmers, peasants, opinion leaders, and market women, artisans, etc should be made to acquire information literary and library use skills.

Information resources and services should be provided in various varieties and formats and should be provided systematically to stimulate the interest and enthusiasm of the rural populace.

Additionally, libraries in Nigeria should avail their users, especially users of agricultural collection, the opportunities of online services and internet resources and services in the area of agriculture. This will greatly afford them opportunity to wide access to adequate and current information resources and services in the area.

Libraries should make research results reach the farmer not in the form of scientific papers but as understandable information. At the same time, it is important that the research worker draw his problem from the field. A great deal is learnt from the wisdom of experienced farmers. These

contacts also serve to boost the farmer's faith in agricultural information.

The libraries should regularly organize workshops, book talks, discussion groups and seminars for rural dwellers, rural agricultural researchers and other stakeholders in rural agricultural development, especially as it concerns the rural areas.

Conclusion

Information services can empower rural dwellers to take active and meaningful part in agricultural production and improve the quality of life of the people. Information is seen in this work as the engine house and moving force behind effective agricultural production and development. However, such information must be relevant and adequately provided to be able to achieve the desired objective. Rural public libraries have a significant role to play in this direction. It is therefore a source of concern that they are not doing enough to play that role, due to a number of constraints. Rural public libraries therefore, need to be repositioned and refocused. They need to be provided with appropriate resources and requirements. Only then, can they become the needed tool to enhance and facilitate effective agricultural information services and ensure effective access to agricultural information services by the rural communities.

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