TOWARDS ACHIEVING FUNCTIONAL COMMUNITY-BASED LIBRARY SERVICES IN NIGERIA: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The quest to achieved democratic, socio-cultural, economic and political viability, and literate society in all localities necessitated the provision of community-based libraries services, aimed at providing books/reading materials to peoples in rural communities. In Nigeria, this flexible information services that led to availability of information to rural communities seem to be negating, and thus, fizzling away, despite its importance in our nation’s human and economic capacity development. Based on this, this paper tends to conceptualize the community-based library services, review the importance of community library services, and information needs of the community. The paper also discussed the strategies for revitalizing community-based library services, and the challenges of community library services. Recommendations were proffered in context of Nigeria.

Information is raw material for development of 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 on older rural people (2008) indicated that, “access to information 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.”

No serious, active, conscious, sensitive, and organized government would want to neglect rural communities. Lack of development has a positive correlation with the neglect of rural areas. Rural neglects brings negative consequences such as exodus of rural dwellers to urban areas, with resulting problems of unemployment, crimes, prostitution, child labour, insecurity, money laundering, bribery, poverty, proliferation of shanty living areas, spread of diseases, and overstretching of the facilities and infrastructures in the urban area.

Alegbeleye and Aina (1985) reiterated that "the third world countries have recently come to realize that unless the rural areas are well developed, hardly would any meaningful development occur in their countries.” 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) noted 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.” Similarly Diso (1994) held the view that” information must as a matter of policy, be seen as a basic resource for development if durable structures, are to be provided for effective access and utilization, which entails information capturing, coordination, processing, and dissemination”.

Knowledge Review Volume 29 No. 1, April, 2014
The developed countries undertake rural projects to reduce the gap between the urban and the rural communities to the barest level. A report on a rural project (2007) outlined that, “access to and the ability to use information and knowledge are not equally distributed (between urban and rural communities). About seven million adults in England are judged to be functionally illiterates. Affluent families are far more likely to be able to give their children access to books, computers, and the internet than poorer families. If we do not guard against it, the economic returns from knowledge and skills will go disproportionately to those groups and places that are already rich in both.”

More so, the role of library and information service in any society, community or organization cannot be over emphasized. Library and information service is very important in all phases of life. Information is very useful in decision making; its availability enables individuals, groups, or organizations to make rational decisions and reduces their level of uncertainties, (Irunegbo, Unegbu, Alahie & Opara, 2012). According to UNESCO (2008), people need information to develop their potential through education and training, to succeed in business, to enrich their cultural experience and to take control of their daily lives; Information is a key contributor to the development of individual and community. In a more affirmatives, (Irunegbo, Obialor, Igboke, Alahie, 2012) stated that over the past four decades, a large number of literacy/reading campaign initiatives and projects has been launched across the world, in an attempt to fuss-in literate and information driving society, and to overcome the problem of unequal access to information sources especially in Africa, where poverty and illiteracy is astronomically high. Library (public) is a single institution responsible for availability of information resources to all, irrespective of their color, gender, or geographical location, and a mechanism to ensure provision or access to equitable information sources.

However, to attain a viable and inclusive knowledge society, high priority should be made, to strengthen access to library services to individual community, thus, community-based library services is a choice vehicle to bring reading/information materials to rural communities. According to Mostert (1998) the services of public library that has shown great promise in providing communities with reading materials and other information services is the community library. Dent and Iyannotta (2009) contended that community library is a library built from ground-up, nearest to or within rural villages, which serves the extension services of the public libraries in providing books, information and educational opportunities to rural dwellers.

**Community-Based Library Services: Issues and Frameworks**

Community library services is synonymous with rural or grassroots’ library services, except in some “classified term” it could be used as library services to community of users. In whichever way (rural, community or grassroot) it geared towards extending public library services to the remote localities. Community or rural library services are those information services directed to the rural dwellers especially to keep them abreast of development in their places (Aina, 2007). In most of the rural areas these services are offered in various ways: book mobile (mobile library services), village hall reading and storytelling, counseling services, literacy/reading campaign, postal library services, book box, and branches of public libraries.

1. **Book Mobile Services:** This is sometimes referred to moving library, book mobile or moving book. Different nature of community settlement dictate this service; as some people dwell in coastal region (River line areas), and land (hilltop and desert), therefore, making their mode of transportation unique. Since community library services hope to meet each individual information needs, public library through a possible frame work; sea (book boat) and land (book van, donkey book, or in more advanced countries book train) they reach local communities with information. With invasion and infusion of ICT into library and information services today, public libraries easily connect rural communities via internet connectivity or remote access control, (Irunegbo, 2013).
2. **Book Box:** This is one of the major ways of making book easily available to rural communities. This is a process were by a library box is mounted along the road that connect difference villages. Through this service, books are to be kept inside the standing boxes, and people have free access to them. This kind of service are usually found in advanced countries where its citizens have high regard for reading materials and are morally minded to returned the books after used.

3. **Literacy and Reading Campaign:** Through public sensitization like television /radio programmes, book display/exhibition, and seminars, public librarians create awareness of their community services functions, and stimulate reading interest of the host community. Parvathamma & Reddy (2009) stated that public libraries through community programmes stimulate imaginative thoughts and expand personal horizons while making the empowerment of citizen, through educational literacy, and provision of access to a common cultural heritage a reality.

4. **Postal Library Services:** House or doorstep information services are enabled here, as librarians packaged information and send it through postal order to those who request it. Nowadays, this type of services is best discharged online using e-mailing system to forward required information to information seekers.

5. **Branch Public Library Services:** As a process to ensure secured information or open community, public library distributes its branches operation to various communities in a state. According to Osuchukwu (2011) Anambra state has ten (10) public library branches across ten Local Government of the State, with Anaocha LGA having two(2) branches, hoping to reach all communities in Anambra state.

**Importance of Community-Based Library Services (CLS)**

A well established community library is an asset to the community and the nation at large, and a way to secure a sustainable development. It yields to open society by generating the generation of reader who turns information into economic success.

(Kagan 1982) opined that community library services provide information to development agents and agencies, support formal and informal rural education programs through the provision of materials to both students and teachers, and serve as centers for community education and cultural activities. Community library services help in survival of information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, and political rights among rural dwellers. It provide working information on citizens right needed for effective participation as individuals or as members of a group in the social, political, legal, and economic process, (Joseph, 1993).

Community library services help to improve living standard of peoples in a rural areas, eradicate illiteracy and extreme information poverty, through availability of problem-solving information sources, (Islam and Mezbah-Islam, 2010).

Community or grassroot information services assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs, and their rights, and their economic survival (British Library Association, 1980).

Information is the lifeblood of any society and vital to the activities of both the government and private sectors. Bell (1974) held the view that the dependence upon information to create innovation and change, places a high premium on the ability of (developing countries) nations to
access and use information to create advances in society. The development of countries globally cannot be achieved without the development of the rural community library and information system. This is because 75 to 80 percent of the people in developing countries who live in rural areas need positive, relevant and prompts attention in their daily activities (Islam and Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2010). UNESCO (2002) held that community-based services of the public library offer to adult and children the opportunity to keep in touch with their times, to educate themselves continuously and keep abreast with progress in their subject based. Its content of information sources reflects the demonstration of evaluation of knowledge and culture; constantly reviewed, keep up-to-date and attractively presented. In this way it has helped people to form their own opinion and develop their creative and critical capacity and powers of appreciation.

Information Needs of Rural Communities

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: 13) quoted information needs of rural communities includes:

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

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

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **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.

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

7. **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.

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

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

10. **Legal matters:** information is needed on laws that affect the rural dwellers. Such law ranges from marriage to land.
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11. **Crime and Safety:** Information is required on how to prevent crimes, report crimes, role of the law enforcement agents etc.

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

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

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

**Strategies for Achieving Functional Community-Based Library Services in Nigeria**

Despite the vital role community-based library services played in creating literary, open and healthier society powered by useful and purposeful information availability, access and utilization, the life of community library services still look shallow in Nigeria. To revive this, a bold and comprehensive measure ought to be in place. Among others are;

1. Extension or distribution of public library to the rural villages. This can be achieved through establishment of wide branches (not just zonal quarters) or community-based public library branches, in other to reach-out whole communities.

2. Re-introduction and re-strategization of mobile library and the transformed return of book box will yield in accommodating remotes area.

3. Public library is the prime coordinator of community-based library services, they should endeavor to (re)trained their staff (librarians and non-librarians) on how to handle community information, and as well support their staff working condition in the community.

4. ICTs facilities with Global network system; the internet, is highly recommended for effective provision of community information.

**Challenges of Community-Based Library Services in Nigeria**

In the Nigerian context, accessibility to information by both urban and rural communities is stated in its development plans. But with emphasis to the support of government propaganda and many programmes that are not fully relevant to the development of rural communities. The information received by the rural dwellers is either not reliable or distorted in the process of transmission. This unhealthy situation constitutes a major impediment, which keep the rural communities in Nigeria and other developing countries far away from development indicators.

**Lack of Needs Assessment:** As communities change, so do the information needs of the people. A resource centre cannot continue to attract users without tailoring information and resources to meet the needs of the community. One of the most difficult but necessary activities in the provision of community library and information is the assessment of information needs. This must be done regularly, for libraries and information centres to remain relevant (Kaniki, 1994). There are a number of reasons why information needs assessments are not conducted. These include the indifference of library personnel, genuine lack of staff and financial resources, and staff reluctance to conduct such assessments. Related and perhaps more critical is lack of knowledge of assessment techniques and the difficulty of developing simple but reliable methodologies.

**Content of Library Services:** There is a gap between content of library services and the needs of clientele. Public libraries provide conventional library services such as reference, lending, photocopying, open-shelf reading room facilities, and so on. They are not providing Community Information Services which entail using information for productive life, storytelling, village hall reading programme etc in any real sense.
Lack of Understanding: Many public librarians in rural areas do not know what their community people needs is. Their understanding is related to funding or better management skills and frustration over the publics' non-use of library materials and services. As long as librarians remain book oriented, instead of information- and people-oriented, people will continue to ignore the library. Citizens may see the book as neither crucial to their survival needs nor important to their entertainment needs (Islam and Mezbah-ul-Isam, 2010).

Absence of Community Information Literacy: Rural dwellers are more of farmer and petty business oriented people. In most cases they do not know the meaning of book or the imperative of reading in their life. Thus, they lack literacy and information related skills. Community people are not aware of community information services. The fault may be lack of responds to use of information, and the public librarians who lack the pedigree for community oriented information services, thereby information literacy remain low among the rural people.

Insufficient Library Education and In-service Training: In Nigeria, the number of professionally qualified librarians in public libraries is low compared to developed countries. Community Information Services is not taught in library science courses and this leads to a lack of proper planning to introduce community information system through public libraries.

Poor Infrastructural Facilities: Obstacles such as inadequate road and transport systems, cultural and linguistic diversity, and unequal social and educational levels, lack of basic amenities like portable water, access to health care in rural villages, absent of or frequent power cut, no or poor provision of internet and telecommunication network etc make the establishment of a nationwide library service and the spread of relevant information an enormous task, not to speak of extending services where almost none exist is to ignore the realities.

Lack of Functional Information Policy: Lack of working paper (policy) on information is a weak point on development of information and literate society. Where there is no functional information policy, released fund will not have a directional impact. Also, there will be inadequate circulation, regulation, quantity and qualitative information materials. Mostert (2001) stated that a written information policy should be made prerequisite for every country involved in information provision. Where this is lacking, the country may lose vision on acquisition, organization and dissemination of information, especially as relate to national literacy achievement.

Inadequate Funding: Many libraries in Nigeria cannot afford to purchase and install computers and establish an Internet connection, especially in rural areas. Lack of funds is the greatest problem libraries face. Inadequate funding is hindering the development of public libraries in Nigeria (Nwokocha, 2002). Ajibero (2000) attributed this to economic conditions, government attitude on information infrastructure, and corruption.

Conclusion
Success and progress in developing countries lies with the development of their rural communities. Effective information service delivery and coordination is the essential ingredient for development. Information service in Nigeria's rural communities must be recognized and empowered. The paper concludes that information service has never been effective and useful to the rural inhabitants of the country since independence in 1960. The information service policy of the country was never implemented in favor of rural dwellers. The emphasis is on government activities and propaganda, which do not have any positive impact on the rural community. The policy implementers have succeeded in misinforming rural inhabitants on so many issues that have no relationship with their daily activities and are consistently making this community an "information hunger community", with hostile illiterates and poverty-stricken citizens. This has led to crime, rural-urban migration, and general insecurity in the country, (Harande, 2010). The above required that effort should be made by
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government, ministries, relevant stakeholder to strengthen community-based library services (of public library) in other to take its rightful place in rural domain, and to contribute favourably on the living standard of the rural inhabitant, or the problems already generated by absent of this crucial services in various part of the country will be left unabated, thus hindering the desired progress and development of the nation.

Recommendations

i. Good management and adequate funds should be made available for the acquisition of information resources and the provision of quality library services to the rural population.

ii. Training and retraining of staff in ICT and community-based library services should be a continuous exercise for sustainability of the system.

iii. The government should make a deliberate policy that ensures information for all is secured.

iv. Basic, social, and Information and communication infrastructure should be given urgent attention as appropriate to the present global information economy.

v. Training curriculum of librarianship should contain community studies; this should enable librarians to undertake community needs analysis and provision of right information for identified community.

References


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