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ICTs and Information Needs of Rural Female Farmers in Delta State, Nigeria

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Introduction

Delta State is a state in Nigeria, comprising mainly Igbo (Anioma people), Urhobo, Isoko, Ijaw and Itsekiri. The whole ethnic groups that comprise the Delta State are administratively grouped into three senatorial districts namely Delta North, Delta South and Delta Central. Delta State is an oil-producing state of Nigeria, yet majority of the Deltans are farmers, which is the major occupation in the state. The population of Delta State is 4,098,291. Out of this population, females are 2,024,085 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, Official Gazette, No.24, Vol.94, 2007). Out of this female population, farmers are 1,032,013.

In most states in Nigeria, investment in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has focused mainly on the urban areas although ICTs have a great potential to help meet the needs of rural female farmers and to benefit rural communities. Minyua (2000) once asserted that agriculture is the mainstay of most African economies and occupies a pivotal position in the development of the continent. He further stated that agriculture/farming as an occupation has been neglected for too long with development growth rate of 1.7%. He further opined that female farmers constitute 70% of the agricultural workforce and produce 80% of the region's food.

Looking at the information needs of rural women in Nigeria, Unomah (1998) posits that rural people need information on how to apply fertilizers in the farm, preservation of harvested crops, and marketing of the farm produce. Information is essential for facilitating agricultural and rural development and bringing about social and economic change. but it is sad to know that most

African countries have not devoted adequate attention to providing their citizens with access to information especially in rural areas, where 70-80% of the African population residents (Youcleowei, Diallo and Spiff, 1996). Information initiatives and policies should therefore be tailored towards strengthening the grass roots, with special emphasis on women, and be developed in places without public libraries or other information resources. this may be achieved by setting up functional integrated information systems in rural and peri-urban communities, which would bring a new and diverse resources to enable female farmers to access information (Munyua, 2000).

Women in Delta State of Nigeria engage in various farming activities such as planting, weeding, hoeing, harvesting, threshing and winnowing of agricultural products as well as the processing, storage and marketing of these farm produce. Many of these female farmers in Delta State are also directly involved in the production of some important crops as yams, maize, cassava, groundnut, among others. Similarly, a good number of women in rural areas undertake many responsibilities concerning care and management of farm animals like poultry, goats and sheep (Loagun, 1998).

Literature Review

Information need is construed in the sense of data or a set of data specially required, enabling the user to make an appropriate decision on any related problem facing him or her any particular time (Solomon, 2002).

Information is needed because it affects individuals' living activities. According to Dervin (1995), information represents an ordered reality about nature of the world people live in. Research on information seeking concurs that information is tailored to individuals' jobs and to their tasks within those jobs (Ingwerson, 1996 and Zeffane and Gul, 1993).

Information as an enterprise is important for the production process especially for agricultural production and marketing of agricultural produce. Mudukuti and Miller (2002) suggested that in the information age, dissemination of information and applying this information in the process of agricultural production will play a significant role in development of farm settlements.

Similarly, Sligo and Jameson (1992) have also stressed that farm women must be given training on latest technological skills and maximize production. This study is therefore centred on identifying the information needs and preferred communication sources for seeking information related to farming.

Studies on information sources used by most farmers, especially in developing countries, have described the following variety of sources used for seeking information: colleagues, friends, neighbours, relatives and family (Kaniki, 1994, Rezvanfar and Mandape, 2000), professional and modern media (Shilaja and Jayaramuah, 1992), personal network and business contracts (Barton and Bear, 1999). Knowledge about information needs of the female farmers is crucial for affectively meeting their information needs. Understanding the type of information sources preferred by female farmers could be used for their farming techniques and standard of living.

Munyua (2000) observed that lack of reliable and comprehensive information for rural female farmers in Delta State is a major hindrance of agricultural development. They require information on agricultural inputs, market prices, transportation systems; environmental sound production techniques and practices; new agriculatural technologies; food processing and preservation; decision-making process; trade laws and trends in food production.

Unomah (1978) asserted that rural people need information on how to apply fertilizer in the farm, preservation of harvested crops, banking facilities,

weaving, hair plaiting, good source of drinking water and how to get treatment for ailments. But most available local information is packaged in a raw form and therefore difficult to access or use (Bergue and Paquet, 1996).

The importance of information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for rural farmers cannot be under estimated; the telephone for example, according to Rathgeber (2000). ICTs in this information age help to break down the isolation of individuals living in remote rural areas (Anie and Otolo, 2007).

In Africa, the radio plays a major role in delivering agricultural messages. The radio is one of the main sources of information for rural female farmers; in a study carried out in Kenya, it was indicated that 80% of the population that owned radio were male/ However, the female percentage of listeners to radio information was higher than the male (Morgan, 1993). Munyua (2000) further asserted that television, audiovisuals, print technology, etc, would also be of great help to female farmers in this information age.

Other types of ICTs that would be useful to female farmers include e-mail, news groups, file-transfer protocol, telecentres, CD-ROMs, Internet, electronic conferencing and networking. Information derived from the above ICT sources would help female farmers to enhance agricultural development and their standard of living.

Methodology

The instrument used for collection data for this study was questionnaire. It was made up of two sections. The first section sought demographic data while the second section contained structured items that were developed through extensive review of literature in order to ensure content validity of the instrument. The population was made up of all female farmers from the three senatorial districts that made up Delta State. Three communities were selected to represent each of the senatorial districts. The researchers administered the questionnaire at Idheze, Emede and Aviara (all in Delta South) on the 3rd May, 2009. Isele-uku, Idumogo and Obonpka (Delta North) were visited and the questionnaire administered on the 10th May, 2009, while Oteri, Ododegho and Abraka (Delta Central) were visited and the questionnaire administered on the 17th May, 2009. Sundays were chosen as a favourable day to administer the questionnaire because that is the only resting day for the farmers. The questionnaire was designed to collect data on ICTs and information needs of the female farmers between the age group of 45-65years. 730 responded out of the 1000 copies that were administered. It is important to note that some of the respondents could neither read nor write.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Data of the Correspondents

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Respondents as par their Demographic Character

S/N.	Item	Frequency	%
1.	Age in years	97	13.28
	Under 25	120	16.43
	26-35	150	20.54
	36-45	280	38.35
	46-55	83	11.36

	56 and above		
2.	Marital Status	112	15.34
	Single	520	71.23
	Married	83	11.36
	Widow	15	2.05
	Divorced		
3.	Educational Attainment	420	57.34
	No formal education	215	29.45
	Primary school only	95	13.01
	Secondary school only		

Table 1 reveals that the majority of the respondents (38.35%) are within the age rage of 46-55, indicating that female farmers are no longer in their middle age of life. We have few middle aged female farmers because of the introduction of free education in Delta State in the year 1983 by the government of Ambrose Ali, the then governor of the defunct Bendel State. this afforded most of the middle aged women the opportunity of going to school, which in turn resulted to the reduction of the middle aged female farmers in Delta State. It was also discovered from table 1 that the majority of the respondents (71.23%) are married. Also more than half (57.53%) of the respondents had no formal education.

Information Needs of Rural Female Farmers in Delta State

Table 2: Areas of information needs of Rural Female Farmers

S/N.	Item	Frequency	%
1.	Crop production	324	43.83
	Pest control	215	29.45
	Treatment of animals	215	29.45
	Economic information	160	21.91
	Health information	168	23.01
	Preservation of farm produce	215	29.45
	Religious information	167	22.87
	Political information	17	2.32

As evident from table 2, the item on crop production was placed first with 324 (43.83%) of the respondents. 215 (29.45%) were of the opinion that their information needs are in areas of preservation of farm produce, pest control and treatment of animals. The next items in which rural female farmers in Delta State needed information were in the areas of religion, health and economic matters. Respondents were less keen to know about political matters. Some of them attributed their decision to the nonchalant attitude of the local, state and federal governments towards their socio-economic needs. It can be concluded that the rural female farmers were very keen to know more about crop production. This is because crop production is the major source of their income.

Preferred channels of information by rural female farmers

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Channels of information

S/N.	Channels	Frequency	%
1.	Husband, neighbours and friends	202	27.67
2.	Personal experience	100	13.69
3.	Educated individuals	54	7.39
4.	Extension officers	2	0.27
5.	Written sources	51	6.98
6.	Radios and televisions	56	7.67
7.	Internet	53	7.26
8.	Community leaders	212	29.04

Table 4 reveals that 29.04% of the respondents rely mainly on their community leaders for acquisition of information. Rural dwellers hold their community with high esteem, especially when such leaders are doing well in the profession. A good number of others, to be specific 27.67% rely on husband, neighbours and friends for information. Only very few of them declared educated people, indicated written materials, Internet, radio and television as sources of information.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is very interesting to observe in some of the rural areas, the use of Internet services by the rural female farmers. A new specie of pepper was discovered in the Internet and the whole community is now into the production of such cash crop. This shows that the significance of ICTs can never be over emphasized. The rural farmers were made to know about the activities of the ministry of Agriculture in Delta State and were compelled to form Rural Farmers Agricultural Cooperative Societies. And through this unions, most of them have benefited from agricultural loans and the distribution of fertilizers and other farm implements by the state government.

It is therefore highly recommended that:

1. Adequate training and awareness given to the rural female farmers should be promoted by the government.
2. Link roads should be constructed to help the rural female farmers to market their farm produce.
3. Preservation of farm produce should be the concern of the state government at the rural areas to avoid economic depression in times of harvest.
4. The state government should engage the services of veterinary doctors to assist poultry female farmers with minimum charges or subsidized amounts.
5. Distribution of fertilizers and farm implements should be done without political bias.

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