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Information Services for Rural Community Development in Nigeria

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Introduction

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 on older rural people (2008:3) 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."

Information is the lifeblood of any society and vital to the activities of both the government and private sectors. Bell (1974:4) holds 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. This is because 75 to 80 percent of the people in developing countries live in the rural areas need positive, relevant and prompts attention in their daily activities.

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 areas.

Any nation that neglects the development and empowerment of the rural communities should not expect meaningful development. Alegbeleye and Aina (1985: 13) reiterated state 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 these 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 (2003:1) 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." Similarly Diso (1994: 143) holds 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". 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. 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."

Nigeria has been an independent nation for the past 45 years with policies on development of rural communities, but rural areas are still not developed and the quality of life of people in the rural areas continues to deteriorate throughout all tiers of government of both politicians and the military regimes. Diso (2005:286) added that "Nigerian people are still dominantly peasant farmers, petty traders, middle men or commission agents". The country has the potentials to develop all sectors of human endeavour more especially if information services are fully enhanced in the rural communities throughout the country. The rural communities in Nigeria are the majority in terms of population, and yet the neglect and sufferings they are encountering presently form the bases for impediment to the effective information policy implementation. Also the rural communities' accessibility to pertinent information becomes extremely difficult and impractical.

Effective information service in the rural community enhances development. Despite the conditions of the rural dwellers one may ask; in what ways can enhanced information service contribute to the development of the rural communities in Nigeria? This paper examines the current environment and attempts to answer the question.

Methodology

Empirical studies on information service use for rural communities in Nigeria and other developing countries were examined. Works by Bell (1979), Alegbeleye and Aina (1985) Camble (1994), Ibrahimah (1986), Issa (1998), Diso (2005), were thoroughly examined and found relevant. This paper which serves as an update on the condition of rural dwellers and their use of information services. The use of information by rural communities determines their level of awareness, progress, development and success in life.

Rural Information Service

Success of rural development programmes depends on effective use of information in daily activities. Information services are multidimensional and serve socially as a binding thread among different groups of rural dwellers. The condition of rural dwellers in Nigeria and indeed in the developing countries is pathetic; traces of abject poverty and discomfort can be seen conspicuously. In an acute shortage or absence of social amenities and essential commodities that will make their life bearable, rural dwellers adopt "rural-urban drift" as an alternative and solution to this terrible condition.

Nigeria has policies and plans which include rural information service, but the condition of the rural communities is degenerating instead of advancing. What could be the reason for this unwanted, unhealthy, uncomfortable, and unbearable situation? The answer is not hard to determine. A high rate of illiteracy in the rural community is the major contributing factor. People in rural areas lag behind in accessing information to attain their goals. Issa (1998:132) observes that "the rural populace suffers from acute low productivity, social and economic retrogression due mainly to ignorance which is also a direct consequence of either inadequate or total lack of information provision to them". Despite the fact that the

country is endowed with both human and natural resources; our rural communities are suffering due to absence of indices of development.

In line with the above, Diso (2005:287) comments that "the structural and infrastructural problems, official corruption, unstable political and economic policies growing insecurity, and unstable power supply hamper this development". Rural inhabitants in the present day Nigeria are not reaping from the fruits of the enormous wealth the country has. 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 the above mentioned objectives. Generally, in our rural areas, there is an acute shortage of information services. This makes the rural community incapacitated and makes it difficult to associate with other communities to develop and make progress.

Diso (1994:142) observes that "the state (Nigeria) defines information service in terms of more enlightenment activities and announcements about what the state does and plans to do for the people and justification for that. Even serious information, like disseminating agricultural research results, is often subtly reduced to persuasive propaganda to make people appreciate and accept the state's 'benevolence' and 'benignity' for providing farming inputs or new methods of cultivation". In a country that concept of information service, the rural development never be a reality. These types of services lead to a poor information environment with inappropriate services, outdated materials, tools, and technologies, unqualified, inexperienced, and very difficult information officers who have contributed to making the rural communities of Nigeria uncomfortable, disorganized, and with a narrow-minded approach to any new thing that is introduced to them.

Poverty and illiteracy are the major barriers to rural development. Who is to blame for this terrible condition? The government should take the blame completely, because it is the right of every citizen to enjoy the wealth, resources, and services rendered by the government of the country without any discrimination or neglect. Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1991:143) are of the view that "for the rural populace to be able to exercise their sovereignty and assume responsibility for development, they must have necessary resources, adequate revenue allocation from Federal and State sources and internal capacity to generate their own revenue locally as well as access to relevant and desirable information for development." Enlightenment, awareness, and development of the rural majority depend on the nature and relevancy of information they received from the government. Progressive changes depend on the nature of information consumed. Ibrahim (1986:3) asserts that "conversely, after political independence, information has been used by some progressive African states to re-socialize their people to value attitudes and goals compatible with Africa's contemporary needs". This is a clear indication that rural communities in Nigeria can be transformed into information-conscious communities that will form the bases for their development.

Information Needs of Rural Dwellers

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) have quoted Ogunshye who provided information needs categories of Nigerian rural communities, which 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 right.
- 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.

Information hunger is prevalent and biting hard on our rural communities, which has resulted in poor living conditions, illiteracy, and poverty. Diso (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 constitutes the major reason for the underdevelopment. Borchardt (1977:403), in discussing the need for rural information services, remarked that "None of the thousand of projects in the developing countries can be executed without the fundamental conditions of the establishment of a literate and numerate (rural) society, and a system for continuous provision of exchange of ideas, thought and knowledge on which the (rural) society, and can feed and use with suitable modifications to constructions own cultural and industrial destiny". Rural dwellers need relevant, efficient, and current information. Camble (1994: 105) commented 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".

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.

Recommendations

Enhancement of services will form a solid base for development of the entire rural setting in Nigeria. Enhanced and effective information service needs a rural information policy. The Nigerian government must implement its rural development policies. Diso (1994: 144) observes anomalies in existing development plans, in which information services are divided into two categories: information services (public information), including all information from the government in the form of enlightenment programmes or propaganda disseminated by the government, and information services provided by such agencies as libraries, documentation and information centers, archives, and agricultural and health extension services. Emphasis is on the first category, in financial allocation, projects, and policies. One should not be emphasized at the expense of the other. The government should create a program to eradicate illiteracy in rural communities. Many nations have waged a successful war against illiteracy. Albert (1970) comments that "Russia tackled the problem (of illiteracy) in 1919 after the Bolshevik Revolution which gave education priority and Lenin referred to illiteracy as 'enemy number one.'" In Cuba after the 1959 Revolution, Fidel Castro declared war on illiteracy, which accounted for about 70 percent of the population. Sri-Lanka also tackled these problems at the early stage in a project reported in 1959 at a UNESCO seminar in 1959. The objective of the scheme was to take "to the people in the rural areas the knowledge which they need for a successful life in the place where they are". Extra efforts should be made to implement effective information services in rural areas, which would serve as a major solution to the unwarranted influx of rural dwellers into urban centers.

Enhanced rural library programmes should be introduced to empower information services. The libraries, given the necessary attention, will play a great role in advancing the level of awareness of the people in developing countries, especially rural dwellers. Saunders (1974) observes that "in any developing country, a literacy campaign is incomplete, and will falter, without the back up of an effective public library service to develop and carry on from where the school leaves off". This, statement has clearly shown that rural libraries are very important in the enhancement and advancement of the rural communalities. Kibat (1991) says that, "realizing the growing complexities of present day society and the increasing demands for information, a new dimension is recommended to supplement traditional library services in developing nations. This is the Information and referral service (I&R) that is familiar in the United States, United Kingdom and certain other European Union Countries. This service is variously called Community Information Service or Community Information and referral service."

Nigeria and other developing countries must begin to use Information and Communication (ICTs) to address the multidimensional problems of the rural communities. Diso (2005) says that "the way to democratize access to ICTs is to give priority to education generally and literacy and mass education to growing adult population, especially in rural areas." Nigeria cannot escape globalization. The success of globalization in Nigeria and other developing countries depends largely on the development of the rural populace.

Rural communities must be enabled to deal positively and decisively with the environmental problems confronting them, pursue a wide range of activities to increase their productivity, and be more enlightened to promote greater attitudinal change and skills. Diso (2005) states that "the roles ICTs play and their influences on our lives have become so diverse and pervasive that it is almost inconceivable to do anything without them". Rural inhabitants should be fully incorporated into effective use of ICTs.

The Nigerian government has spent millions for ICTs, mostly in urban areas. The national Information Technology Development Agency (NIDA) should design and implement programmes for rural

communities. These communities must not be left out of the positive transformation. In 2006, the Federal government of Nigeria launched a multimillion US dollars wireless Internet network in Abuja (the capital city of the country) for enhancing communication activities. *This Day* newspaper (2nd January 2006) reported that "Suburban launches \$5m wireless Internet the school leaves off". The development must not be concentrated on urban areas only. Rural dwellers should also benefit. This will help tremendously in reducing rural-urban migration. The provision of basic necessities of life and effective rural libraries are very important in the enhancement and advancement of rural communalities.

Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones. ICTs for rural development could be introduced in line with these zones for easy and successful coverage of the entire nation. Ghana did something like that in their effort to enhance the rural communities. Abissath (2008) says that, "Ghana, like Malaysia, Singapore and other technology minded countries, is today gradually but steady 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."

Finally, the government must fully introduce the effective use of solar power for rural development. Solar cells could be used to provide well water, which would reduce the sufferings of rural communities, especially farmers. Recently, an attempt was made by the Energy Research Centre to use solar power to generate electricity for a sampled population of rural inhabitants, which included parts of the Usmanu Danfodiyo University community. The attempt was successful, and some villages like Kwalkwalawa and others in Sokoto are enjoying solar-powered electricity. A similar attempt was made in Kebbi state by Professor Gulma, where a village is using solar power. In addition, renewable energy sources are another important and relevant tool for enhancement of rural communities in Nigeria and other developing countries.

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