

Strategies for Promoting the Role of Public Library' Information Services in Agricultural and Rural Development in Nigeria

Mole A. J. C.

Department of Library & Information Science
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
And

Dim C. L.

Nnamdi Azikiwe Library
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

This paper examines the role of rural public libraries in the promotion of agriculture and rural development through. The paper also examined agricultural and rural development challenges of rural areas, ways rural public libraries can help reduce the challenges, factors that can hinder the libraries, as well as, and suggests ways the libraries can be helped. These include, extension services, regularly organising workshops, book talks, discussion groups among others.

Key words: Public libraries, Rural public libraries, Information services, Agricultural development, Rural development, Rural populace.

Introduction

Nigeria is characterized by a preponderance of rural population. Majority of the rural population are engaged in agriculture (Mbwana, 1987), which is also an important sector of the economies of the developing countries. 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). Ezeani (2005) has observed that very few countries have experienced rapid economic growth without a corresponding growth in agriculture.

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 (Jimba & Yakubu, 2006). It helps in raising both the economic

fortune and standard of living of the rural population.

Unfortunately, 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. These have resulted to poor national development in Nigeria and other ever-present problems of the agricultural process. Unfortunately, the rural dwellers 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. In view of this, there is urgent need to reexamine the strategies for solving agricultural problems and promoting agriculture for rural development in Nigeria. One way of achieving this is through effective information services through the rural public libraries. How rural public libraries can achieve this effectively in Nigeria is the focus of this paper.

Public library is a collection of books and other forms of records housed, organized and interpreted to meet the broad and varying needs of the people for information, recreation and inspiration. They are maintained from public funds and serving the members of the public without bias to age, race, status, educational background or religion.

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. (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.

Information is an indispensable, most valuable and vital resource, a commodity, a management tool having potential to control all other resources in the world. It is growing exponentially and plays an

important role in all spheres of human activities. (Maheswarappa, Tadasad and Vijayalaxmi, 1999). It is also an essential resource for individual growth and for survival (Ayanyemi, 2006). 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 defined as the theory and practice of providing services that link information seekers to library services (Whittaker, 1997). In this context, it is 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. 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.

The paper, therefore, deals with

- The role of agricultural in rural development;
- agricultural and rural development challenges of rural areas
- ways rural public libraries can help reduce the challenges
- Factors that can hinder the libraries, and
- Ways the libraries can be helped

The Role of Agriculture in Rural Development

The rural areas form a significant proportion of a nation's geographical landscape and human population and form the bedrock of a country's economic development. The rural dwellers constitute one of the important and significant segments of a country. They are predominantly agriculturists, which made Mbwana (1987) to argue that there is an interrelationship between agriculture and rural development. Agriculture is also an important sector of the economies of the developing countries.

Rural communities form the bedrock of a country's economic development. They are also

characterized by such social ills as poverty, illiteracy, child abuse, insecurity, lawlessness, inter – communal clashes, land disputes, poor health care, poor social services, unemployment and militancy (Nwankwai, 2003). The preponderance of these social vices is, partly, a result of government neglect of the grassroots. Incidentally, these problems have posed a very serious obstacle to welfare and development of the rural dwellers.

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. 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 (Egwuatu, 2002). Therefore, agricultural development should be encouraged and sustained to promote the economic fortunes of the rural communities and by extension, the nation. One veritable tool for achieving this is the rural public libraries.

However, agricultural development by its nature and direct importance to economic develop-

ment, requires up-to-date information and information resources. This is so because of the explosion of information in the scientific disciplines in the world today, the ever-present problems of the agricultural process, and the fugitive nature of the agricultural literature (Satter & Lancaster, 1994).

Agricultural and Development Challenges of the Rural Areas

The following are the agricultural and development challenges facing the rural areas in Nigeria:

1. Government Neglect of The Rural Communities:
2. Preponderance of and Vulnerability to Social ills:
3. Perennial Low Agricultural Production
4. Neglect of Agriculture
5. Denied Access to Relevant Information
6. Relative Low Standard of living:

Government Neglect of The Rural Communities: The rural population are usually not in positions of authority and in many cases the more disadvantaged group in terms of dividends of governance and are more vulnerable to national and global challenges and deprivations. These are due, mainly, to the neglect by the government and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations due to their relative distance from the major cities. They constitute the main producers of

agricultural produce of a nation and constitute the supply base of nation's manpower, yet, they are the more neglected, disadvantaged and underdeveloped. Planning and policy making most times do not involve the rural populace. National development plans are usually not based on their needs and condition (Oyeranti and Olaiyiwola, 2005).

Preponderance of and Vulnerability to Social Ills: The rural areas are also characterized by such social ills as poverty, illiteracy, child abuse, insecurity, lawlessness, inter-communal clashes, land disputes, poor health care, poor social services, unemployment and militancy (Nwankwai, 2003). The preponderance of these social vices is, partly, a result of government neglect of the rural area resulting partly from their distance from the seat of power. Incidentally, these problems have posed a very serious obstacle to development of the rural areas. In Nigeria, for instance, the activities of militant groups in many rural communities in the Niger Delta and terrorist groups in the North as a result of government neglect, unemployment among other reasons has posed a serious threat to development of the areas.

Perennial Low Agricultural Production: The entire nation depends on the rural population for supply of agricultural production.

However, there is perennial low agricultural production not only in Nigeria, but in the entire Africa. ((Aina, in Mabawonku, 2001). One of the reasons he adduced for this is the lack of empowerment and up-to-date information support to rural communities.

Neglect of Agriculture: One of the major causes of perennial low agricultural production in Nigeria is the oil boom of the 1970s which 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. This neglect caused Fadiji to state sixteen years ago (1996) that the much publicized aspiration of food for all by the year 2000 would be an unrealizable dream. Sixteen years on, his prediction has come to reality. Today, the current food supply is inadequate to meet the needs of the over 150 million people resulting in the continuous dependence on importation of even staple food products like rice and beans. Nigerian agriculture has been stagnant, or at best, in recession (Omeje, 2004). 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 dwellers have been at the receiving end, being the major producers and consumers of agricultural products. In view of this, there is urgent need to re-examine the strategies for solving agricultural problems and promoting agricultural development in the rural areas of Nigeria.

Denied Access to Relevant Information: Information is of paramount importance not only for the agricultural development of the rural areas but also for their general development and sustenance. Unfortunately, the rural dwellers are often denied access to relevant information needed to facilitate their agricultural and overall development (Oyeranti & Olayiwola, 2005). Agricultural production in the rural areas in Nigeria has been marred by lack of up – to-date information support to all the stakeholders in the sector.

Relative Low Standard of living: The neglect of agriculture in the rural areas has resulted to wide disparity in income and standard of living between rural and urban dwellers (Federal Office of Statistics, 2001). Such disparity is dangerous as it contributes to disorderly migration from rural to urban areas and depletes the manpower in rural area

resulting in continuing low productivity and underdevelopment. It also leads to overpopulation of the urban areas, resulting in high cost of living, scarcity of food, poor housing and poor living condition.

Ways Rural Public Libraries' Information Services Can Facilitate Agricultural and Rural Development

Rural public libraries can facilitate agricultural and rural development through the following ways.

Provision of and Accessibility to Relevant and Appropriate Information Services:

The first step to efficient and result-oriented agricultural and rural development is the provision of and accessibility to relevant and accurate information services through the rural public libraries. Agricultural information services are indispensable for effective and result oriented agricultural production. There are many rural public library-based information services and sources depending on individual library policies and the needs of the clientele of the library in question. However, most libraries, according to Aina (2003) and Clarke (1999), employ the following methods: literature search, current awareness services, displays, guides and notices, extension services, exhibitions, mobile library services, interlibrary loan services,

reference and referral services and translation services.

Library-based Information services can be provided through a variety of channels including the internet, government documents such as press releases, newsletters, periodicals, technical reports, audio visual, and vertical file collections. Through these services, libraries provide or disseminate information on agriculture to seekers of such information. Information resources should include, books, pamphlets, vertical file collections, periodicals, including newspapers and magazines, and various kinds of reference materials including handbooks, encyclopedias, biographies and yearbooks.

Other target audiences who may not be able to access the library directly due to such handicaps like distance and physical disabilities can be enabled to access the services through extension services, exhibitions, and translation services. Extension services may include multimedia approaches such as street theatre, drama, music, community faire and even through sensitization workshops, conferences, seminars, talk shop among others.

Creating a Sense of Belonging and Participation: In order to promote agricultural and rural development in Nigeria, there is need to address the social vices therein. There is need

to integrate the citizenry into the main stream of the society and give them a sense of belonging. There is need to provide access to appropriate and relevant information to the various categories of the people. There is need to get the people well informed on the various contemporary methods of farming in line with global best practices. Igbeka and Atinmo (2002) recommended among others that current information sources should be provided for agricultural producers and other stakeholders. This would avail them the opportunity for improved output and thus emancipate Nigeria from her perennial low agricultural production and promote rapid economic growth. The most important incentive members of the grassroots respond to positively is 'a sense of participation'. Public libraries' information services therefore can be seen as the required panacea for transforming the rural areas and giving them a sense of belonging and participation as a indispensable section of the entire country. (Weitz, 1983).

Equal Access to Information: In giving the grassroots a sense of belonging, effort must be made to avoid segregationist or discriminatory tendencies because it is a major source of crisis in the society today. Measures must be

taken to avoid a lag in rural development. Disparity in income and standard of living between rural and urban sectors must be reduced through sound agricultural development enhanced through effective information service delivery.

Provision of Up-To-Date and Relevant Information: Agricultural producers require adequate access to a wide array of information resources available in various formats and media (Jimba,& Yakubu, 2006). This would help to produce timely and appropriate research result that can be productively applied to emancipate Nigeria from her perennial low agricultural production, enhance food security, restore agriculture as the main foreign exchange earner, support the federal government's poverty alleviation programme, promote rapid economic growth, and enhance the overall national development of the nation.

Provision of Opportunity to Multiple Sources; The often prescribed panacea for promoting agricultural and rural development 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 multiple sources, including the following methods, designed to bring library services to the rural area

- Multi-media services
- Public-school library cooperation
- School library programme (Omoniwa, 1986)
- Mobile library services
- Extension services
- Library services to literacy programmes
- Branch library services.

Effective Community Information Services (CIS): 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) 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 these services to the rural dwellers.

Access to Global Best Practices:

Additionally, public libraries have over the years adopted the practice of international comparative studies in their service delivery (Okoli, 2005). 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.

Advantage of the Strategic Location of Rural Public Libraries:

Suffice it to say that rural public libraries are the best strategically placed agency for facilitating agricultural information services for agricultural

development (Okoli, 2005). This view is justified by the strategic and sensitive nature of their services to the socio-cultural life of the people and their strategic location at the rural community i.e. their more relative closeness to the rural areas. These libraries also have the advantage of multi-dimensional services cutting across various needs and services; and the even accessibility of their services by all categories of the people in the rural areas.

Factors that Could Hinder the Libraries

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.

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 governments. 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 either scarcely located, not readily available, or not optimally functional 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.

Ways the Libraries Can Be Helped to Overcome the Challenges

What the Libraries Should Do

❖ 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. (Okoli, 2005).

❖ Rural public libraries should provide well stocked reference resources and wide ranging loan services based on system of branch libraries (Jona, 2003). 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.

- ❖ The librarians should stock and make abundant information materials on the various methods and innovations 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.

- ❖ The libraries 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.

- ❖ 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.

- ❖ Rural public libraries should employ the services of librarians and resource persons who are well versed in the content and method of agricultural and rural development. Such people should be engaged in

the utilization of agricultural information resources complemented by personal knowledge to educate the rural populace.

❖ Adequate awareness has to be created among rural dwellers, including teachers, students, adults, market women, about the role and potentials of rural public libraries information services. They should be encouraged to use these services even when they are not willing to.

❖ 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. (Okoli, 2005). 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.

What families in rural areas should do

❖ Families should encourage their members on the need for regular use of the services of the rural public libraries and in fact, other types of libraries relevant to their needs. They should create time to use the libraries in view of the numerous benefits derivable from them.

❖ The rural dwellers including students, farmers, peasant, opinion readers, market women, Artisans, among others, should make effort to acquire information literary and library use skills.

What the Government, NGOs and Professional Bodies Should Do

❖ Government, NGOs and Professional Bodies, should ensure adequate funding of agricultural and rural development to ensure effective and efficient service delivery

❖ Government should as a matter of necessity, provide agricultural subsidy to the rural dwellers involved in agricultural. This would not only motivate the existing farmers but also encourage others who are not presently involved in agriculture to take up agriculture as a serious business.

❖ Government should ensure full documentation of their agricultural policies, programmes and reforms and make them conveniently accessible to libraries and agricultural researchers.

❖ Research results must reach the farmer not in the form of scientific papers but as understandable information. At the same time, it is important that the research workers draw his problem from the field.

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 agricultural and rural 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.

References

- Ayanyemi, O. O. (2006). The role of information in enhancing the status of women in developing countries. *Nigerbiblios*, 17(1&2), 150-161.
- Dike, C. A. & Amechi, N. M. (2008). Library and information services to rural communities and other disadvantaged group. *H-JOIS*, 2(1&2), 96-106.
- Egwuatu, B. (2002). Strategies towards strengthening poverty eradication programmes in Nigeria. In: M. J. Attaniru & W. Haruna (eds.). *The poverty eradication programmes in Nigeria: Problems and prospects*. Kano: Mambayya House, 67-71
- Ezeani, C. (2005). Re-engineering reference services to meet twenty-first century demands: the case of Nnamdi Azikiwe Library, UNN. *Coal City Libraries*, 2(1&2), 100-112.
- Federal Office of Statistics (2001). *Poverty profile for Nigeria:1980-1996*. Lagos: Federal Office of Statistics.
- Jega, A. M. (2007). *Public services and the challenges of managing poverty eradication in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum books
- Jimba, N. D. & Yakubu, E. (2006). Agricultural financing as a strategy for poverty reduction in Nigeria. *Nasher Journal*, 4(1), 223-226
- Jona, D. F. (2003). *Types of library*. In: the new Encyclopedia Britannica. Vol. 22. (P.945). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.
- Library Association (1980). *Community Information: What libraries can do*. London: The Library Association.
- Mabawonku, I. (2001). Potentials of internet use in information provision to policy makers in Nigeria. *Nigerian Libraries*, 35(2), 51-62.
- Maheswarappa, B. S., Tadasad, P. G. & Vijayalaxmi, N. (1999). Information resources management in Indian libraries: a new model. In information management in the context of the fast emerging information society : Papers (presented at the) XXII All Indian Conference of Indian Association of Special Libraries and Information Centres (IASLIC) (pp. 247-253).28-31 Dec, 1999 at Dr B.R. Ambedkar university, Agra. cacutta ; IASLIC.
- Mbwana, S. S. (1987). Meeting information needs of agricultural scientist in Tanzania. *Nigerian libraries*, 23(1&2), 82-88.
- Mole, A.J.C. & Ezeji, E. C. (2008). Repositioning teaching and learning in rural societies: The critical role of public libraries: Paper presented at the 2nd National conference of the National Association of Sociologists of Education, held at Niger Hall, UNN, Oct. 14-18, 2008.

- Nwankwai, A. O. (2003). An evaluation of poverty reduction projects in rural communities of Delta State. Unpublished masters degree these, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
- Ochai, A. (1995). Library services to the grassroots in developing countries: A revisionist approach. *African Journal of Library Archives and Information Sciences*. 5(2), 163-171.
- Okiy, R. B. (1998). Nigerian university libraries and the challenges of information provision in the 21st century. *Library Bulletin: Nigerian university library system* 3(172), 17-27.
- Okoli, A. N. (2005). Strengthening and refocusing public libraries to cope with the information needs in modern information setting. *Nigerbiblios*, 16(1&2), 108-166.
- Oyeranti, O. & Olaiyiwola, K. M. (2005). *Poverty and poverty reduction programmes in rural Nigeria*. African Economic research consortium. Retrieved on July 10, 2010 from <http://www.acrafrica.org>
- Satter, A. & Lancaster, F. W. (1994). *The role of the information specialist in the dissemination of agricultural information*. Urbana- champain, Illinois: Illinois University press
- Whittaker, K. A. (1997). Information services. In: J. Feather and P. Sturges (Eds.) *International encyclopedia of information and library science*. (pp.217-218). London: Routledge.
- Zorooster, C. D. (2000). *Funding for libraries and information centers*. Aldershot: Gower