

An Overview of the Provision of Information for Rural Development in Nigeria

By

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Abstract.

Information is universally viewed as essential commodity for development, it is important to the social, political, educational and economic development processes of any given community. Not only does it expands the possibilities of community development, it creates awareness among the members of such communities. The paper viewed Information as an asset and resources utilized for the development of general populace in any given community. It highlighted different methods through which information resources can be disseminated to rural community especially in this digital age. The paper also looked particularly at the technology infrastructure in Nigeria to determine whether CD-Rom technology, Internet connectivity and proper awareness could serve as a new strategy that is viable for disseminating information resources to rural communities in Nigeria, so as to drastically reduce the level of illiteracy and keep them abreast of all the development processes taking place in the country.

Introduction

The concept of information has been generally or universally viewed as a basic resource which all people use to improve their condition of living and is essential to development process. Not only does information expand the possibilities of social, political, educational and economic development of any country, and facilitates awareness and empowerment. Information is an asset and a resource for development of governments, agencies, and the target population. Information as Antholt (1992), points out has become as important production factor as the "classic" resources: land, labour, and capital. Agha and Akhtar (1992) regarded information as a strategic resource, along with human, financial and natural resources. According to Opeke (2004), information has received a widespread acceptance as the essential feature of production, consumption and exchange in this modern era. The world has entered an era where the source of wealth and power is increasingly from information and human mental creativity as compared to physical resources.

Over time, the concept of development has been purely identified as economic terms, social terms, and as a mix of the two. In economic terms, development is a goal achieved by raising the per capita GNP and the growth rate of the economy of any given nation. While this definition is easily quantified and assessed, it says nothing about the status of society. Amatrya (1999) defined Development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy." [Development] is a capacity defined by what [a community] can do with whatever they have to improve their quality of life and that of others. Similarly, Abubakar (1999:12) conceived development as "a multi-dimensional process that involves changes in structures, attitudes, and institutions as well as the acceleration of economic growth". Development

in this context represents the entire gamut of changes by which an entire social system tuned to the diverse basic needs and the desires of individuals and social groups within the system.

True development must mean the development of man, the unfolding and realization of his creative potentials enabling him to improve his material conditions of living through the use of resources available to him (Momodu, 2002). Development of any community (urban or rural) is generally dependent upon the use of information which allows equal participation in developmental processes of the society. This is the most promising approach for reducing dependency culture, building self-confidence and self-reliance of the people in that particular community. Information is very essential for capacity building of any nation or community. Access to it enables people to be informed and, be better able to influence and take decisions. In this situation development can be seen as a process of personal and societal improvement of quality of life through greater community participation, capacity building, and empowerment.

While rural communities possess knowledge through their culture and day to day activities and practices of their own, strategies and practices of other communities and cultures can be useful as well. Information resources can be particularly helpful, in tapping into the local knowledge, recording that for the future, and bringing in new ideas from other areas. The proper role of the information resources is to provide the rural communities with information, instruction, motivation, and the resources that can increase the effectiveness with which they plan for themselves. In this case the need for access to information is very clear for the rural community.

The Relevant of Information to Rural Development

Information enhances innovations and broadens policy dialogues. According to Robert (1983:40), "Rural development is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need. It involves helping the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas to demand and control more of the benefits of rural development. The group includes small-scale farmers, tenants, and the landless". Essentially therefore, rural development is a process leading to sustainable improvement in the quality of life of rural people, especially the poor.

Information resources in all their ramifications constitute the building blocks of civilization as observed by Swark (1971) that no society can advance beyond a certain point without an effective access to its collective memory of records. Conversely, an advanced society that loses control of its records will regress. According to Meyer (2004), information is a key resource that can aid development. However, providing access to information alone is unlikely to empower communities and aid development. Information needs to be focused and targeted toward problems. Information provision will lead to effective use when it is targeted toward issues such as new opportunities for improvement, markets and pricing, health information and valuable resources for improving productivity (McNamara, 2003). Information has both benefits and costs, that are often masked it is never a free good. An effective and efficient information environment requires investment in human, physical, financial, and technological infrastructure. Information resources do not stand alone, out of context with other resources.

It can be influential to a greater extent in developing culture which will serve as an agent of social, economic, political and educational development of any society. As an agent in both industrialised and non industrialised societies it serving as an instrument through which all organisations and functions come into contact.

It is a known fact that rural communities in Nigeria are invariably lagged or marginalised behind in terms of basic development, as a result of inadequate or poor provision of information and awareness on the importance of information. This tends to drag back the national development as a whole, despite the fact that rural communities are the heart of any given nation. Commenting on the role of information in rural community development, Shiful and Uddin, (2005) opined that

information can be considered as an important component in the strategy for the promotion of economic and social development and for the improvement of the economic and social life of the rural community. As information is vital in strategic planning for rural economic development, having quick and easy access to this information is considered very important. According to Asingwire (2000:23), "Information is a key to addressing some of the problems and consequently is a key to development". Packaging information that is relevant to local people is very vital for creating awareness, and understanding of the opportunities for the rural dwellers to harness their future development.

Disseminating Information resources to rural communities

Odini (1990) in his study identified that in the rural communities in Africa, Oral communication from neighbours tends to be the primary source of information due to a shortage of organised information services. This calls for a new approach as to information dissemination in the rural communities. The use of audio-visual materials in preference to information on the print format would be preferred for the rural communities. This is because even when the information is available on the non-print format it will be useless unless it is being presented in a way that they will understand it, especially by means of demonstrations and films show, Radio and television are very strong electronic media for information dissemination to the rural people. The Internet has emerged as the strongest channel for information and knowledge sharing since the early 1990s. Print and electronic media basically complement each other and promote interaction within a community (Development Research Network 2006).

Ochogwu (1998) noted that the professionals serving the rural communities have to under go a radical change from being the present reactionaries to proactive information providers and disseminators. This means that in order to produce the right information that will adequately serve the rural communities in this digital age there has to be rural information oriented training especially on current trends of the developments in information technology.

The Nigerian rural communities have for long suffered from low productivity, social, economic, political and educational retrogressiveness due to largely ignorance due to inadequate information dissemination. They have every citizenry right to be aware of all the events and happenings in and around their immediate environments, which will generate favourable conditions necessary to imbibe the right attitudes and culture for their

developments. Baba (1989) emphasized that by so doing they can understand and appreciate new programmes being introduced to improve their living conditions. Aboyade (1987) mentioned that illiteracy actually impedes information dissemination efforts and this calls for innovative approaches to this end. She further explained that there should emerge a prototype information support system for rural developments projects in the country, which takes into consideration, policy makers, researchers, change agents as well as rural dwellers themselves. However there is also the need to include modern scientific and technological information dissemination means, avenues, and infrastructures.

Awonbiogbon (1991) recommended that information dissemination for the rural communities must emphasise for change, must be dynamic and geared towards bettering the lots of the rural community. There is the need to assemble for use of the rural communities, the information and communication technologies which have been worked into programme using rural development strategies and approaches should include:

1. Mobilisation of members of rural communities and, dissemination of information. It has the potentials for giving new knowledge, raising consciousness, strengthening links and achieving integration of disperse groups.
2. Use of Medias for wider scope of coverage for disseminating information to rural communities,
3. Information resources distributed primarily in paper form and secondarily via some electronic medium, as documented by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Subbiah (1988) opined that mail fees, bank charges, and unreliable mail services make acquisitions difficult at best. While Susan (1990) contended that these issues relate in general to acquiring international publications. The acquisition of local information, particularly project-related documentation, is easier for the local community. Libraries could obtain materials through cooperative loan agreements. Availability of system of sharing is beneficial, it provides access to information otherwise unavailable. Using electronic means to access and share information is important.
4. Make information available for free online to the rural communities through the use of the Internet. Whenever a new developments occurred, getting the information online could be quickly and the results could also be seen virtually immediately.
5. Use of CD-ROMs for disseminating information resources to rural community because they are easy to use and contain valuable information.
6. Set up community information centre (CIC) so that information can be disseminated using audio visual aids and information repacking material and services.

Concluding Remarks

Library and information centres have been criticised at different times for being elitist and urban centred at the expense of rural community Adimorah (1996). Even though some parts of Nigerian rural community are not book oriented, they still need the services of library and information centres more than the urban communities. For example, the Northern rural dwellers need in addition the provision of libraries and information centres; because appreciable percentage of the community can read Arabic, Hausa/Fulfulde and Kanuri vernacular languages usually inscribed on sledges.

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