Adopting a Pragmatic Approach to Rural Information Systems and Services Delivery for Sustainable Community Development in Nigeria

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Abstract:

The availability and access to rural information systems and services in rural communities in Nigeria and elsewhere have been recognized as an essential public service utility that can rapidly cause unprecedented development of rural communities. This paper attempts to chronicle the state and condition of rural information systems and services provided in rural Nigeria and their connections to community development. The essence of the paper is to provoke discussion on the relevance of rural information services and to offer direction on the essentials of strengthening and enhancing information systems and services in rural communities. It was argued that library and information professionals especially librarians should assume new roles and strategies to strengthen and enhance rural information systems and services through a pragmatic approach. A pragmatic approach will allow every major key player to compliment ideas with actions. The need for government and other major players accept their responsibilities and also appreciate the invaluable place of building well-informed rural communities as a panacea to developmental challenges confronting Nigeria as a nation is advocated.

Keywords: Rural Information Systems; Rural information Services; Sustainable Community Development

Introduction

It is no doubt that in Nigeria, rural communities constitute the largest population in the country. According to the United Nations (2020) "Nigeria's rural population stands at 48.0% of the entire population". This population has significantly suffered serious neglect in terms of the provision of functional rural information systems and services. This sheer neglect by the government at all levels and community development partners have tremendously retard the pace of rural development and transformation across rural Nigeria. Consequently, it has further slowed down the overall development strides of Nigeria as a nation due to the ever increasing and widespread communal development challenges bedeviling our rural and urban areas. Aboyade (1990) cautioned that "the well-being of the greater percentage of the population depends on the benefits of rural development, which in turn radiates national development".

Today, it is believed that rural communities in Nigeria have continued to experience some critical development challenges arising from acute information poverty due to the absence and poor rural information systems and services. Kamba (2009a) noted that history has shown that rural communities in Africa have suffered from enjoying any meaningful development largely because of the policy implementation gap artificially created by the African governments and leaders. This ugly trend has led many rural dwellers to move massively to the urban centers in search of jobs and other means of livelihood.

To address these problems associated with rural community development, rural information services have very significant roles and influence. Regrettably, in Nigeria, information systems and services such as libraries community information centers,

telecenters, Internet Cafes, community radio and TV stations, etc. have not been accorded their due relevance and recognition as veritable institutions for rural transformation and development. It is therefore the focus of this paper to provoke discussion and chart a new course of action to strengthen and enhance the existing rural information systems and services as a viable instrument for community development in Nigeria.

Understanding the Basic Concepts

For better comprehension of the contents of this paper, it is considered noteworthy to provide explanations of the major concepts raised by this work. Some of these concepts include the concept of Rural Area; Rural information Systems and services and Community Development.

Concept of Rural Area

The concept of rural area or community has been conceived differently by several scholars depending on the varying context. Within the context of this paper, a rural area can be defined as "a geographical area characterized by primary activities such as farming, extraction, and gathering among others", (Raheem and Bako, 2014). In a similar perspective, Mobogunje (1980) "sees the rural part of Nigeria as representing the preserve of much what is left traditionally underdeveloped in the socio-economic life of the country". The implication is that it can be rightly argued that a rural area constitutes those segment of the population that lives in villages, hamlets, and hinterlands who are largely dependent on peasant farming, fishing, hunting, black smiting, trading and also do not enjoy basic social services like good hospitals, quality education, food security, water supply, electricity, good road networks, information infrastructures and so on.

Concepts of Rural Information Systems and Services

Essentially, rural information system and informal), entities and facilities (traditional and modern) designed and deployed to the rural settlements to generate, process, distribute, store, preserve and disseminate information for the improvement of the wellbeing of the rural people. Examples of these rural information systems include but are not limited to public/rural libraries which may be mobile or fixed; community information centers; reading rooms, community radios, and TV stations; Internet cafes, and a host of many others that may be available. Contextually, concepts like community library, rural village library, and community information centers will be taken to connote rural information systems.

On the existence and accessibility of rural information systems in Africa, Nwokocha and Chimah (2016) reported that "rural, village or community libraries are found in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, Mali, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Burkina Faso among other countries". To buttress this assertion, Rosenberg (1993) traced the development of rural information centers "during the 1960s, when the concept of rural information centers was being discussed by professionals and others in Africa who recognized the need for access to information by rural peoples and as a result village and local reading rooms projects began to appear".

On the other hand, rural information service involves the provision of measurable tangible and intangible information outcomes originating from rural information systems established for rural community development. Simply put, rural information services can best be described as those information-related activities and outcomes geared towards improving the standard of living and fortunes of the rural people. Umar (2018) viewed Library and Information Services (LISs) as "encompassing all series of coordinated activities, functions, and operations that are been carried out in libraries and information centers". He further posited that these LISs are: promotion of access to information and knowledge; connection of people and ideas; commitment to the promotion of literacy and information literacy; creating a well conducive learning environment; procurement of relevant information resources and services; deployment of relevant information and communication technologies; reference information services; community engagement, agricultural extension services, etc.

More so, LISs have been recognized as a critical element for the growth and development of our communities. Conversely, LISs especially in the rural areas "are not well recognized either by government or community development agencies who seems to perceive rural library services as a non-essential luxury", (Namhila, 2012).

Concept of Sustainable Community Development

Community development is a process conducted by community members. It is a process where local people can not only create more jobs, income, and infrastructure but also help their community become fundamentally better able to manage change. Kenny (2011) defines community development as "a method for empowering communities to take collective control and responsibility for their development". The main focus of the sustainable community development approach is to promote collective action rather than an individualized approach and thus can be differentiated from approaches that focus on individual well-being. It is noteworthy to note that human beings can only achieve their full potentials in society only if they have access to a variety of timely and relevant information resources and services.

Also, Ife (2013) argued that "community-based solutions are needed to address contemporary social issues such as poverty, hunger, illness, crime, and violence". Thus, developing sustainable community-based structures such as rural community libraries, community information centers, and telecenters can serve as a viable opportunity for the rural populace to find lasting solutions to their communal issues and challenges.

In a nutshell, sustainable development is a comprehensive process for managing community change that involves citizens in a dialogue on issues to decide what must be done, to share their vision of the future, and then to involve them in implementation activities.

Information and Sustainable Community Development

The concept of information is directly connected to development. Development is concerned about the ultimate positive change in the state of mind of community members towards their self-actualization, empowerment, and community development as a whole. To achieve this, individual members of the community have to rely on the availability, accessibility, and utilization of information at their disposal. In a society that is adequately informed, its citizens are in a better position and state of mind to actively make sound decisions and participate in the overall development processes of their respective communities and country as a whole. With information access and use, "the citizens are empowered to understand their environment and be able to interact with it effectively", (Nga'ang'a, 2004).

On this note, Kamba (2009b) argued that not only does information expand the possibilities of social, political, economic, and educational development of any country, but it also facilitates awareness and empowerment of its citizenry. He further submitted that rural communities in Nigeria are invariably lagged or marginalized behind in terms of basic development as a result of inadequate or poor provision of information and awareness on the importance of information.

Accordingly, Meyer (2004) stated that "information is a key resource that can facilitate development". However, McNamara (2003) argued that "providing access to information alone is unlikely to empower communities and aid development. He stressed that "information needs to be focused and targeted towards problem-solving to be effectively utilized for improved productivity". This in my view is a clarion call to librarians to rethink and interrogate their existing practices, operations, and functions in line with the best information business models of placing the information needs of their customers as a top priority.

In the same vein, it has been noticed in clear terms that having access to the right information at the right time, in the right place, in the right format, and for the right people can greatly reduce if not eliminate the worrisome issues that impede sustainable community

development in Nigeria. By implication, this healthy situation can as well, improve and guarantee chances of survival against the menace of abject poverty, diseases, crimes, terrorism, kidnappings, armed robbery, street begging, and armed banditry that have now become recurring decimal and lucrative business ventures in our communities. "With unhindered access to relevant information resources and services, libraries often help empower, enrich, orient, inform and develop the citizens by way of inculcating in the national values, the right attitude, sense of national pride, discipline and loyalty to their nations", (Umar, 2018).

In a similar mode, Camble (1994) commented that "the success of rural information programs rests squarely on the availability and use of quality information by rural development workers and rural people and that many rural development programs have failed in developing countries because they were planned with insufficient relevant information". This statement underscores the relevance and indispensable place of information as a critical factor in the planning, designing, and implementation of any rural and community development programs. It also placed on record the rightful place and strategic position of rural information systems and services as veritable gateways for information access, use, and dissemination for sustainable community development. Thus, it behooves on the community development agencies (Government and NGOs) and other relevant stakeholders to understand and recognize the twin relationship between information and sustainable community development as no meaningful development of the rural areas can take place without proper and adequate utilization of information services by the rural community members. This perhaps has been one of the major reasons why many community development programs such as Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution (GR), Directorate of Food Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DIFFRRI), Mass Mobilization for Self- reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), The Better Life for rural women Programme, National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Family Support Programme (FSP), National Poverty Eradication Programme

(NAPEP), to mention but a few introduced by successive governments have not yielded the desired outcome. Worst still, present government agencies seem not to have learned lessons from the previous governments of excluding rural information systems and services as a key player in sustainable rural community development.

State of Rural Information Systems and Services in Nigeria

The provision of information systems and services in form of public libraries, community information centers, community radio and TV stations, and telecenters in rural Nigeria have left much to be desired in terms of their structure, resources, facilities, services and ultimately meeting the information needs of the rural dwellers. Adimorah (1986) and Okiy (2003) reported that "the provision of library and information services in Africa have focused more on urban areas, hence, there is a serious neglect of rural non-literate masses". Also, Ochogwu (1999) observed that "a great deal of the services currently being rendered by public libraries in developing countries are not based on any community analysis". This is why Mchombu (1993) in his analysis of rural information services, called for "a reexamination of the direction and dimensions of providing library and information service to the rural populace in African Countries".

Regrettably, a cursory look into the public/rural libraries in Nigeria revealed the continuation of this ugly trend despite many rural community development programs initiated and introduced by successive governments at all levels and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) aimed at empowering the rural people across the States of the federation. Sadly too, rural information systems and services in Nigeria by their structures, resources, and functions are still a prototype of western nations without taking into cognizance of the socio-cultural and educational peculiarities, imbalances, and local histories of the rural people. This scenario perhaps prompted the widespread consensus of scholars such as Chijoke (1989); Dube (1998); Sturges and Neill (1998) and Tise (2000) that despite lofty ideals,

"African libraries have failed in their designated mission and are currently not perceived as significant players in the process of national development".

However, this is not to say that there are no notable success stories regarding rural information services provision in Nigeria. To this end, it becomes crystal clear from the above discussions that rural information systems and services are in dire need of rebranding and remodeling for improved efficiency and effectiveness in such a way that they can satisfy the information requirements and expectations of the members of rural communities. In this regard, many scholars have long ago advocated for different models and ideas aimed at repositioning rural information service provision in Africa and Nigeria in Particular. The next preceding subheading shall provide further details on that.

Strengthening and Enhancing Rural Information Systems and Services through Pragmatic Approach

As earlier stated, the role of rural information systems and services is no doubt connected to the survival, growth, and rapid development of the rural communities which in turn radiates to national development. Hence, the need for redefinition, redesigning, and repositioning of the rural information systems and services for optimum performance in line with the emerging trends and realities of the 21st-century information environment.

Several scholars in the Library and Information Profession, have at different times recommended for the remodeling and repackaging of the existing rural information systems and services taking note of the advances in innovative technologies. For instance, Kamba (2009a) and Daudu & Mohammed (2013) have all advocated for the establishment of integrated Innovative Community Information Centers (ICICs) that serves as information gateway where information can be organized, stored, accessed, and utilized either manually or electronically. On the other hand, Mohammed (2017) commenting on the dynamics of information, advocated "for the necessity to establish and sustain 'Smart

Neighbourhood Information Commons' (SNIC) for communities and societies in the Local Government Areas. By design, the SNIC systems are digitally/electronically or hybrid driven, properly furnished and equipped with state-of-the-art furniture and ICTs and aesthetically beautified".

Going by the above recommendations, it is instructive to note that they are functional, implementable, and very professional recommendations.

However, one wonders why these laudable ideas have not been implemented? The answer to this question is not farfetched, because, it is natural for any idea no matter the degree of its viability and relevance to remain not implemented if such idea was not complemented with appropriate and timely action plans. This is why it is the opinion of the researcher that a pragmatic approach needs to be adopted by major stakeholders to strengthen and enhance rural information systems and services across the rural communities in Nigeria. Also, in like manner, Kamba (2009a) opined that "the unhealthy situation of rural information service provision in Africa warrants immediate action of the information workers, professionals, governments, and specialists to bring about lasting and favorable solutions so that information can be fully accepted and utilized as resources contributing to development".

The Need for the Adoption of a Pragmatic Approach

By pragmatic approach, it implies the use of methods, patterns, and new thinking which appears best suited to the course of action of reshaping and restructuring rural information systems and services provision for sustainable rural community development. Using this approach, librarians will have the freedom to apply their professional judgment and competencies to use any inclusive method, technique, and procedure that suits the existing conditions and situations rather than sticking to fixed theories, ideas, roles, and customs that are no longer yielding positive outcomes.

To adopt and implement a pragmatic approach as a solution to revitalizing the rural

information systems and services in Nigeria, it is, therefore, instructive to recognize and highlight the indispensable role of librarians as major key players in strengthening and enhancing rural information services for sustainable community development. It can be rightly argued that librarians occupy the center stage in driving the new agenda of an inclusive pragmatic approach to rural information services provision. Without committed, dedicated, and innovative blended librarians, LISs will remain stagnant with little or no impact on the lives of the rural populace.

Expectedly, to accomplish this onerous task, librarians in partnership with other relevant professionals must become master strategists and highly consummate lobbyists, if they are to achieve inclusiveness and pragmatic response from other key stakeholders. These qualities and tendencies will reawaken and galvanize mutual understanding and support from relevant authorities, government agencies, development partners, community leaders, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

In a similar mode, librarians must accept responsibilities to protect and project the image, identity, status, as well as the relevance of the Library and Information profession as a functional and indispensable profession in nation-building. This can simply be achieved by way of reinventing, rethinking, and retooling their ways of doing things, by making their voices heard, and by taking appropriate well-coordinated actions and programs that will stimulate quick intervention by government and other developmental partners and agencies. Some of these actions are outlined as follows:

- Advocacy campaigns
- Active community engagement
- Organizing town hall meetings on the relevance of information services
- Formation of strategic alliances and partnerships with allied professionals
- Organizing rallies and lectures to sensitize community members and its leadership
- Information Outreach programs to strategic places, interest groups, and communities

Education and Training of Library and Information Professionals

The implication for the relevance of innovative technologies on Library and Information services vis-à-vis the changing dynamics of the information environment point to the urgent need for Library and Information Science (LIS) schools in Nigeria to re-interrogate their curriculum contents to incorporate these emerging technologies into their curricular. This development will enable the LIS schools to produce LIS professionals that are well blended to exploit the opportunities offered by these innovative technologies in the provision of rural information services for sustainable community development. In this regard, it is pertinent to mention that LIS schools in Nigeria have long ago realized the need for continuous review of their curriculum contents to reflects the dynamics of innovative disruptive technologies.

Also, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) to streamline and produce a uniform curriculum as a minimum benchmark for LIS schools in Nigeria. This in my opinion is a giant stride aimed at repositioning the training of LIS professionals on one hand and library and information services delivery on the other.

The relevance of Professional Associations

Nigerian Library Association (NLA) as a professional body for librarians has a unique and pragmatic role in advancing and enhancing rural information systems and services across the villages and hinterlands of Nigeria. NLA was essentially established to primarily promote the development of libraries and library and information services in general. To its credit, NLA since inception has centered most of its activities on capacity building of librarians through conferences, workshops, and seminars. It is therefore expected that more activities such as advocacy campaigns, lobbying, outreach programs, and regular press and media conferences should be strategically coordinated and executed by the NLA at the National and State chapters. Arguably, these programs and many more will spur interest and attention on

the indispensability of library and information services in general and rural information systems and services in particular as catalysts for national development.

Deployment of Innovative Technologies

Another important strategy for strengthening and enhancing rural information services in Nigeria is the role of innovative technologies. These technologies cut across computer technologies, mobile technologies, information and communication technologies (ICTs), web technologies, social media technologies, artificial intelligence technologies, etc. that can be deployed to strengthen and enhance the provision of rural information systems and services. Mohammed (2017) asserted that "the emergence of ICTs have further opened varieties of landscapes and vistas for effective and efficient management and exploitation of the dynamics of information globally without restriction to location and time".

Information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, are transforming all human activities dependent on information, including those in rural areas. Access to information on agriculture, health care delivery, education, security, and peaceful coexistence can now be facilitated by the deployment of these innovative technologies in our rural communities. Librarians are therefore challenged to employ pragmatic strategies to acquire these technologies to strengthen and enhance rural information systems and services in Nigeria. Part of this pragmatic solution might perhaps require urgent intervention and collaboration with the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) and National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) who are fully equipped and have the mandate to deploy and promote the use of ICTs in Nigeria.

Government and Community leaders Involvement

Notwithstanding the pivotal role of librarians in driving the movement for strengthening and enhancing rural information systems and services across rural Nigeria, government at all levels remains a strong force and indispensable in the overall development of functional rural information systems and services in Nigeria. Expectedly, the government should through its relevant agencies and community leaders expedite actions to revitalize rural information services provision. Some of the actions include but not limited to the following:

- Formulation of National Policy on Rural Information Systems and Services under the Federal Ministry of Information and culture;
- Integrating rural information systems and services provision as an integral component of rural community development programs of the Federal Government.
- Provide adequate budgetary allocation towards the further establishment and strengthening as well as enhancing the existing rural information infrastructures in Nigeria. This is because a majority of Nigeria's citizens live in rural areas across the States of the federation. This should also apply to both the State and Local Governments respectively.
- Direct its relevant agencies such as NCC and NITDA to as a matter of urgency deploy relevant innovative technologies suitable for rural information services provision.

Integration of Oral Information and Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is "home-grown and cultural knowledge of a specific society. It is a way of life, skills, experiences, culture, insight, and values embraced by people in the local community", (Adebayo & Adeyemo, 2017). Every society or community has her local knowledge which cuts across all aspects of human living on which livelihood and survival depend. These include but are not limited to health, fashion, food preparation, education, agriculture, religion, festivals, recreation, norms and values, institutions, politics, and technology. Hence, the term Indigenous Knowledge has different synonyms such as traditional knowledge, local knowledge, community knowledge, rural peoples' knowledge, farmers' knowledge (Mahalik and Mahapara, 2010).

However, integrating IK into rural information systems and services is necessary to give the rural people a sense of belonging and ownership of the information resources and services being provided in their community centers. It will also serve as a motivating force that will bring back the rural people who feel that their local histories, cultures, and stories are not adequate and professionally represented. It is therefore expedient and necessary for librarians to give much attention and priority in the collection, processing, storing, preservation, and dissemination of oral information and indigenous knowledge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes obvious that the concept and roles of rural information systems and services globally have been disrupted due to advances in innovative technologies. This development has ushered in a new paradigm shift in the way and manner librarians conduct their business of information provision to the rural communities, which in turn requires a more inclusive pragmatic approach, as a solution to ensuring that rural communities in Nigeria have continued to survive, grow, develop and above all remain active participants in the discourse of nation-building. It is hoped that the government and other major players will accept their responsibilities and also appreciate the invaluable place of building well-informed rural communities as a panacea to developmental challenges confronting Nigeria as a nation.

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