

**An Evaluative Study of Community-based Library and Information Services in Mbaitoli LGA of Imo State, Nigeria.**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This study explored rural-based library and information services. The location was Mbaitoli LGA in Imo State of Nigeria. Descriptive research method was used while the purposive sampling technique was adopted. Data obtained from copies of questionnaire returned in useable condition were collated, categorized, interpreted and presented in tables and percentages followed by discussion. Results show that although information services exist in different forms in all the communities surveyed, rural libraries were almost none-existent in twenty-nine (93.5%) out of thirty-one villages covered and, so have not played the expected role in rural information dissemination. Most of the available information agencies are not properly coordinated to suit the peculiar information needs of rural communities. It was also found that poor funding, absence of information infrastructure (i.e. rural libraries, community radio/television, rural newspapers, etc) and high cost of information materials are amongst the several problems which impede the effectiveness of community-based information services. Several recommendations were made, prominent among which are, that: (i) Rural libraries should be established, properly funded and adequately equipped; and (ii) Different information-generating and dissemination agencies in the rural areas should be effectively coordinated. It is also recommended that community radio and rural-focused print media should be established in the Local Government Area (LGA).

**Introduction**

Information has become one of the most important factors of production in the contemporary and emergent global village. In fact, some analysts and commentators posit that information is the single most important factor of production. Berezi (1981) stretched the argument further when he submitted that information has been recognised as the fifth factor of production while Onu (2005) refers to it as the oil that greases the wheel of governance, programmes and activities of government, organisations and individuals. Information services and the right to these services is one of the basic features of liberal and development conscious societies. Access to information services and resources in the urban and rural areas, is among the much trumpeted dividends of democracy. The relevance attached to information services is evident in the increasing number of researches and publications in various aspects of information services. It is, therefore, not contestable that information service provision is counted amongst the largest and fastest growing industries in the world.

Governments, institutions, and people in various parts of the world are sparing no efforts in ensuring that information services are packaged and delivered to the masses, as long as it matches their target. Liberalisation of access to information and expansion of information services have had positive multiplier effect in the developed and democratic First World countries. On the contrary, the authoritarian leadership of most under-developed countries try to restrict access to information. That is why today, countries of the world are classified as either

advanced or backward, based on several universally-accepted criteria, including; the quality of the information service and the ease with which their subjects access information resources.

The foregoing disappointing performance of under-developed societies in information generation, dissemination and utilization betrays the lack of commitment of their leaders and governments to the provision of information services. Several conferences and workshops have been organised to raise the consciousness and awareness of stakeholders in developing countries towards the appreciation and utilization of information in their planning and decision-making processes (Kegan, 1999). These efforts to entrench information culture seemed to have failed to achieve the desired result (Admorah, 1983).

**Mbaitoli LGA: A Socio-Historical Analysis.**

Mbaitoli LGA is one of the 27 local administrative districts in Imo State of Nigeria. The history of Mbaitoli dates back to 1955 when it started as a Rural District Council with Nwaoriubi as headquarters. It became a full-fledged District Council three years later, precisely, in October 1958. Following the military putsch of 1966, it was renamed County Council. With the dissolution and scrapping of all County Councils nationwide as an aftermath of the Dasuki-reforms of the mid-1990s, Mbaitoli became one of the two districts amalgamated to form the newly-created Mbaitoli/Ikeduru LGA. Mbaitoli became a distinct local administrative authority when the defunct Mbaitoli-Ikeduru LGA was dissolved on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, 1989. Nwaorieubi has remained the

administrative headquarters of Mbaitoli people till date. The Local Government Area has a landmass of 238 square kilometres. It shares boundaries with six other LGAs as follows: Oru-East, Njaba and Isu on the North; Owerri-West and Owerri-North on the South; Oguta on the West and Ikeduru on the East. It is the most populous LGA in Imo State with a population of 221,514 people, by 2005 estimates (IMSG, 2006). Mbaitoli LGA has a total of 31 autonomous communities and 17 electoral wards which is about the highest in Imo State. There are markets, schools, churches, town halls/village squares and other rural information institutions in each of these communities (and electoral wards) in Mbaitoli LGA. There are also a variety of cultural activities and festivals. The Local Government Area is neither urbanised nor highly industrialised. Infact, Mbaitoli fits, in several ways, into Odewale's (1986) classification of a rural area as that with, among other features: a low level of literacy or a high level of illiteracy; limited educational and economic (including, jobs) opportunities; strong cultural, tribal and religious adherence and absence of large business and commercial institutions. Yet, it consistently receives the largest revenue allocation from the Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) among the LGAs in Imo State. This is a testimony to its large population and expansive geographical size.

However, following the passage of *Imo State Law on Local Government Creation of 2003*, the present Mbaitoli LGA was split into three distinct Local Government Development Areas (LGDAs). (Emenator and Akanwa, 2007:315). These LGDAs are Mbaitoli North, comprising Afara, Eziam-Obiato, Orodo and Ogwa; Mbaitoli South made up of Umunoha, Ifekala, Ogbaku and Ubomiri; and Mbieri comprising all communities in Mbieri clan (Emenator and Akanwa, 2007:315)

#### **Statement of the Problem.**

Notwithstanding the low level of information services in Nigeria and other developing countries (Aboyade, 1990; Mchomba, 1992 and Kaane, 1997), available literature points to a disequilibrium in the level of attention paid to the information needs and services in urban and rural areas (Kegan, 1999 and Amaral and Angelica, 1995). Infact, while the literature is replete with research reports on the information services at the urban centres, there is, at best, sporadic commentaries on the state of information services in the rural areas. It has been established in a previous study that most ruralists or community-residents are poor, semi-literates, absorbed in the daily struggle for economic survival

and unaware of the information services which could assist them in that struggle (Chijioke, 1989). This limited attention to information services in Nigeria's rural areas, is what this paper sets out to examine. The choice of Mbaitoli LGA as study setting underlines the impossibility of covering all the 774 local administrative areas in the country. However, the justification for this choice could be found in the fact that these Local Council Areas share similar characteristics. The result from this study location would easily mirror the correct state of community-based library and information services in other parts of Nigeria.

#### **Research Questions**

In the light of the problems which this paper was designed to provide insight into and remedies to, the following question have been fashioned to guide this investigation:

1. What are the major information needs of people in rural communities in Mbaitoli LGA?
2. What are the information sources used to satisfy these needs?
3. Are there community-based information agencies in the area?
4. What are the available community-based library and information services in the study location?
5. What are the constraints to community-based library and information services in Mbaitoli LGA?

#### **Some Related Studies**

The need to study and ascertain the exact information requirements of people living in the rural communities has been widely acknowledged by several researchers (Onohwakpor and Akporido, 2006). Many scholars including Okigbo (1989), Akong'a (1988) Kaane (1997) and Ajayi and Akinniyi (2004) have studied the dissemination of various facets of information to rural dwellers in different parts of Africa. Aboyade (1990) buttressed the need for sustained study of community-based information services. According to her well-considered submission, the plight of rural people boils down, largely, to their lack of access to timely information due to the inefficiency of available community-based information services. A study of the information needs of rural people and the matching services conducted by Mchombu (1992) identified health, agriculture and income-generating activities as areas of most need. Researches by Uta (1993), Kaane (1995), Bii and Otikey (2003) and Ajayi and Akinniyi (2004) have revealed that majority of rural people obtain information through

conversation with other people, listening to the radio and watching the television.

The centrality of health information needs to community-based information services has been proved in a number of studies. Typical examples can be found in the works of Mwaro, (1996) and Waswa, (1998). However, several scholars have identified a series of barriers to effective dissemination of information to people in the rural areas. Some of these constraints are evident in Aina's (1989:49) submission that: "lack of successful transfer of science and technology to the majority of the rural population in the developing countries and the failure to provide the right information impede agricultural work". Discussing the challenges of information services to rural women, Bassey (1996) and Opeke (2000), in separate researches, stressed that rural women should be well-informed about development programmes relevant to their improvement in the society. Other factors that militate against efficient information services in rural communities include: lack of co-ordination among the providers on the type of messages; bad timing of radio programmes; use of the wrong languages; poor quality messages and high cost of radio receivers, low level of literacy and underdeveloped infrastructure (especially, electricity networks) in the rural areas (Bii and Otike, 2003).

It is therefore evident that information services to rural dwellers in various communities in Africa, nay Nigeria, have neither been adequately studied nor given the required attention. Lack of interest in the study of this group of information users has been identified as part of the problem. Marden and Nicholas (1997) gave insight into this weakness when they observed that, "... the information needs of consumers or the general public have been wholly neglected by information researchers .... researching the consumer seems to have been abandoned to market researchers and researchers from other disciplines". In supporting the above observation, Sturges and Chimseu (1996) argued that information service itself has neglected what is basically a non-literate society. Information scientists, according to them, have specialized in researches on coherent user groups that can easily be defined. This excessive attention on the information needs of coherent, pin-down-able and compliant user groups, according to Marden and Nicholas (1997), is a big weakness given that the rural general public constitutes the largest percentage of the population in most countries of the world, more so, in developing countries.

This brief review of available published research reports on information needs, resources and services

is revealing in many reports. Amongst other things, it has shown that inspite of the increasing interest in and volumes of papers, only half-hearted attempts have been made to examine the peculiar information resources and services required by residents of rural communities in various parts of Nigeria. Further analysis shows a total absence of published reports on any part of the several rural communities and Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Imo State. This glaring gaps in the literature provides the justification fro the present study.

#### **Methodology.**

Mbaitoli was chosen for this study because it is both rural and the most populous LGA in Imo State of Nigeria. The study population consisted of residents aged 18 and above with at least the First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC). This age range and literacy level were selected because people in this bracket were considered active in communal life and so capable of assessing the level and state of information services available in their respective communities. Pre-test of instrument was done with 20 respondents (10 each from 2 of the 31 communities) while validation was by a Senior Lecturer in Library and Information Science. This left the investigators with a customised questionnaire entitled: "Data-form for Community-based Library and Information Services". The research instrument had two sections, A and B: *Section A* was meant to elicit skeletal background information from each respondent, while *Section B* contained close-ended questions on the major information needs of respondents; information sources/materials consulted; types of available information services; community-based information agencies and constraints to effective information services in rural communities. In the absence of a sampling frame, the purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 respondents from each of the 31 communities in the research setting. This gave a sample of 620 participants.

The research team (i. e. the surveyors and their assistants) visited each of the communities for familiarization, observation and questionnaire-administration between Dec., 2010 and April, 2011.. Rather than administer copies of the research instrument from one spot in each community visited, the investigators made efforts to draw respondents from different kindreds and hamlets in each community. This was to ensure even spread of the respondents across villages and settlements in the study location. In selecting these respondents, care was taken to ensure that people who met the requirements in terms of age, residency and literacy, were drawn. Completion and return of the

questionnaire were done on the spot which accounted for the 100% return rate. The huge quantities of data obtained from copies of the research instrument returned in useable condition were collated, categorised, interpreted and presented in tables and percentiles.

**Key Findings**

Analysis of *Section A* of copies of the research instrument completed and returned by respondents shows that majority of the respondents (256 or 41.3%) were 46 years and above. This was followed by those within the age ranges of 31-45 (242 or 39.0%) and 18-30 (122 or 19.17%), respectively. The 303 male respondents (48.9%) were slightly lower than the females who were 317 in number or 51.1%. In terms of the literacy or educational level of respondents to this study, summarised result shows that more than half of them (336 or 54.2%) had various ordinary level (O/L) qualifications like the West African School Certificate (WASC), the General Certificate in Education (GCE), the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) and the National Business and Technical Education Board (NABTEB). Two hundred and nineteen (219)

respondents obtained qualifications from different tertiary educational institutions while the least number (65 or 10.5%) had the First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC). In the area of the occupational/vocational distribution of respondents, it was discovered that most (321 or 51.8%) of the participants in this study were engaged in various farming activities; 168(or 27.1%) were traders while 131 or 21.1% were in different paid employment. Most of the respondents engaged in agriculture were within the ages of 46 and above which indicates that fewer youths are embracing agriculture as a profession of choice. Expectedly, an overwhelming 532(85.8%) lived in their communities while 88 respondents (14.2%) resided in various urban centres.

*Section B* of the questionnaire contained the core research questions of this study. The analysis of the findings is shown in *Tables 1 – 5* below:

*Table 1* shows that information on farming and allied agricultural activities were the most sought-after with 71.1%. On the other hand, only 44.2% of the respondents needed information in religious activities/affairs making it the least sought-after amongst respondents.

**Table I: Major Information Needs of People in Rural Communities (N = 620).**

Information needs	Frequency	Percentage %
Agricultural information	441	71.1
Economic information	412	66.5
Health information	357	57.6
Educational information	351	56.6
Governmental/political information	316	51.1
Artisanal information	307	49.5
Religious information	274	44.2

**Table 2: Sources of Information (N. = 620).**

Information Sources/Materials	Frequency	Percentage %
Discussion	543	87.6
Radio/television	521	84.0
Town criers	486	78.4
Religious leader/church announcements	464	74.8
Village/Community officials	462	74.5
Newspapers/magazines, etc	391	63.1
Seminars, workshop, symposia, etc	256	41.3
Extension/orientation workers	221	35.6

Table 2 shows that most people (543 or 87.6%) in the rural communities obtain desired information by discussing and interacting with colleagues, and other individuals. Other major sources of information identified by respondents were radio/television (84.0%); town criers (78.4%) religious leaders (74.8%) and village/community officials (74.5%). It is evident in Table 3 that the village square/hall, church and electronic media (radio and television) play a vital role in community-based information services with frequencies of 541(87.3%), 524(84.5%) and 481(77.6%); respectively. With a frequency of

22(3.5%), it is also clear that libraries are almost none-existent in the communities studied.

In Table 4, the most prominent community-based information service had to do with public orientation and enlightenment programmes as shown by a frequency of 389 (62.7%). It is also evident that library-related information services are almost non-existent as can be inferred from the low frequencies of services like provision of reading materials (4.0%), Selective Dissemination of Information/ Current Awareness Services i.e. SDI/CAS (3.2%), reprography (2.9%), reference service (2.6%) and lending services (1.6%) respectively.

**Table 3: Community-based Information Agencies (No = 620).**

Information Agencies	Frequency	Percentage %
Village square/Community Hall	541	87.3
Churches	524	84.5
Electronic media	481	77.6
Schools	311	50.2
Print media	301	48.5
Agricultural Extension Officers	118	19.0
Bookshops/vendors	13	5
Library/Information Centres	22	3.5
Printers/Publishers	20	3.2
Others	76	12.3

**Table 4: Community-Based Library and Information Services (No. = 620).**

Information Services	Frequency	Percentage %
Public orientation and enlightenment programmes	389	62.7
Radio/television broadcast	381	61.5
Lectures, seminars, etc.	346	55.8
Film-show and exhibition	284	45.8
Agricultural extension services	112	18.1
Printing/publishing	86	13.9
Information brokerage	25	4.0
Provision of books/reading materials	25	4.0
SDI/CAS	20	3.2
Reprographic services	18	2.9
Reference/referral services	16	2.6
Lending services	10	1.6
Others	54	8.7

**Table 5: Constraints to Community-based Library and Information Service (N = 620).**

Constraints	Frequency	Percentage %
Inadequate funding	618	99.7
High cost of information materials	613	98.9
Insufficiency of current information materials	610	98.4
Unavailability of rural libraries	580	93.5
Uncoordinated community-based information agencies	531	85.6
Lack of rural-focused radio/television programmes	523	84.4
Over-dependence of oral sources	515	83.0
Absence of community-based newspapers	511	82.4
Ignorance of the existence of appropriate and relevant information	316	51.0

It is evident in *Table 5* that the most serious challenge to community-based library and information services in the study area emanates from inadequate funding (618 or 99.7%). This is followed, closely, by high cost of information materials (98.9%) and insufficiency of current information sources/materials (98.4%). It is not surprising that unavailability of rural libraries (93.5%) ranked among the four major constraints to rural-based information services since only two (2) of the communities (i.e. Afara and Ofekata-Orodo) had branches of the Imo State Public Library Board (ISPLB).

#### **Discussion of Major Findings**

Most people in the rural areas are neither adequately educated nor economically-empowered (Opeke, 2000). This, partly, explains their involvement in subsistence agriculture, petty trading and other artisanal activities. It is, therefore, not surprising that the foremost information needs of respondents to this study had direct bearing on farming, related agricultural activities, and other micro-businesses. The result of this study supports earlier reports that information need is usually determined by economic and educo-social realities (Mchombu, 1992; Ajayi and Akinniyi, 2004; Onohwakpo and Akporido, 2006, etc).

The major source of information in Nigeria's rural communities remain discussions, interaction and face-to-face oral exchanges between individuals and among groups. This is evident in the result shown in *Table 2*. The centrality of oral communication is further buttressed by the pivotal role played by town criers, religious leaders and village officials as shown in the *Table* under reference. Vital traditional/cultural, religious and governmental issues are known to have been brought to the attention of rural dwellers through each of these information gate-keepers during formal and informal gatherings. As important sources of information, these individuals, who adopt largely discussions, preachings and

briefings, are vital links in community-based information channels. While the result of this study supports earlier submissions that people in rural communities obtain and exchange information through discussions and conversation, (Uta, 1993; Kaane, 1995 and Bii and Otike, 2003), the need to make better use of government extension workers/officials must not be ignored considering that it ranked among the eight sources of information used by inhabitants of the study location.

Different agencies and institutions are active in community-based information services as shown in *Table 3*. Unmistakably, village squares or community halls and churches are the foremost of these information agencies in rural areas. This is not unexpected considering that most information from various sources (government, individuals, non-governmental agencies, etc) are funnelled to the ruralists during communal meetings at the village/communities square, school halls and through announcements in various churches. The emergence of electronic media among the community-based information agencies might not be unconnected with the fact that most people now own radio sets and watch television in their search of information. The library and its services which ought to be a major information agency in rural communities ranked a disappointing and lowly eight in a scale of ten (*Table 3*). This can be attributed to the near unavailability of rural libraries and their information resources in 29 out of the 31 recognised autonomous communities in Mbaitoli LGA. The few number of rural libraries in the study location tallies with earlier reports that majority of rural communities in Nigeria are denied the benefit of qualitative public library services (Ajayi and Akinniyi, 2003 and Ogunrombi and Sanni, 2009). It is necessary to observe that the relatively few respondents that identified agricultural offices as information agencies confirms the ineffectiveness of extension workers in community-based information services in the study area.



The emergency of orientation and enlightenment programmes and radio/television broadcasts as the most utilized community-based information services (*Table 4*) is a tribute to the activities of religious and secular leaders, through whom information is usually passed-on to residents of rural communities. Besides, radio and television have become a primary household property in most parts of the world due to their affordability. It is also common to organise seminars, exhibitions and film-shows as a way of informing, educating and entertaining people in the rural areas. Whereas this paper underlines earlier research findings that agricultural extension workers have not risen to the challenges of rural-based information services (Bii and Otike, 2003 and Onohwakpor and Akporido, 2006), commercial information services (brokerage) is, at best, playing a marginal role. It is very clear that library-based information services like provision of books and other reading materials, SDI/CAS, reprographic, reference/referral and lending services are almost non-existent. This can, of course, be understood against the backdrop that only two of the thirty-one communities in the study area have branches of the Imo State Public Library Board. This tallies with Ajayi and Akinniyi's (2004) and Ogunrombi and Sanni's (2009) report on inadequate distribution of library services in Nigeria's rural communities.

It is very clear that libraries and other community-based information services are faced with enormous funding and infrastructural challenges. These problems as shown in *Table 5*, include: inadequate budgetary allocations, high cost of library and information materials, insufficiency of current information materials, absence of libraries in the rural areas, uncoordinated community-based information agencies, lack of rural-focused radio and television programmes, absence of community-based newspapers and ignorance of the existence of appropriate and relevant information. Most of these constraints have been identified in an earlier publication by Ogunrombi and Sanni (2004) in a study on Akoko-Edo LGA of Edo State, Nigeria.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Several conclusions have been drawn after a careful analysis of the findings. It is not difficult to observe that library and information services are as important in the rural areas as it is in the urban centres. The difference is in the ease of access and level of utilization in each of these areas. It is also clear that rural dwellers have distinct information needs which are satisfied, mainly, through discussions, interactions and other oral sources. Libraries in the rural areas, which are supposed to play a pivotal role

in community-based information services, have been confirmed as numerically and qualitatively inadequate in Mbaitoli LGA. This has placed village squares, community halls, and churches as the foremost community-based information agencies with considerable help from the electronic and print media. This scenario is exacerbated by myriads of problems which militate against the effectiveness of community-based library and information services. It is in the light of the foregoing conclusions that the following recommendations are made:

1. Community-based information services should be designed to meet the specific or peculiar needs of the target beneficiaries. Such carefully planned and deliberately rural-focused community information service would sensitize and mobilize the rural masses, as well as, encourage active participation of many individuals and groups in governmental and communal programmes.
2. More rural libraries should be established in each of the communities in the study location. This will help in no small measure in facilitating educo-information services. One sure way of doing this is by encouraging the Imo State Public Library Board to locate its branches in the remaining communities in Mbaitoli LGA where these facilities are presently lacking.
3. The two available rural libraries at Afara and Ofekata-Orodo should be expanded, properly staffed and stocked with current books and other information materials.
4. Establishment of a functional community-based radio and television outfits in Mbaitoli LGA due its sheer geographical size and population.
5. Establishment of functional Information Units within the Secretariat of each Local Government. Such publicity offices should be manned by competent information professionals, especially, librarians and media experts. Part of the primary responsibilities of the LGA Information Units would be the coordination of various community-based information agencies.

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