

Improving Public Library Services for Rural Community Development

Sylvester O. Anie

Abstract

The public library is an institution of inestimable value supported by public fund for the benefit of the society. The use of public libraries is not restricted to any class of persons in the community but it is freely available to all. This article reviews the purpose and role of public libraries in any community. The problems bedeviling public libraries in rural areas were highlighted. The paper canvasses the use of information communication technology to improve public library services in the rural areas. Recommendations were put forward for the overall transformation of public library services culminating in the socio-political development of rural communities.

Introduction

Librarianship as a science or a body of knowledge is about the interaction between knowledge and social activity. The library as a social instrument for transformation in response to the functional problem created by the need to have adequate knowledge of the physical, biological, and social aspects of the empirical world part of which is rural community (Agbodike, 1992), cannot be over emphasized.

Rural communities in Nigeria is characterized by the economically backward areas-villages typified and handicapped by poverty, high illiteracy rate, unemployment, subsistence economy, and lack of economic and social amenities such as roads, electricity, pipe-born water, hospitals, banks, industries, rural telephony, etc.

The relationship that exists between urban and rural societies is recently concretized by the advent of ICT in Nigeria. The fact must therefore be appreciated that both social settings are components of the same larger society. They are interdependent in some ways in their interaction patterns. Agbodike (1992), stresses that the rural community provides the bulk of the food

consumed by the urban dwellers. The village farmer in Nigeria produces the food that sustains the population of the country. The urban dwellers however produced or make available modern implements, research, agro-chemicals and extension services needed to sustain a viable agriculture in the rural area. These activities are just not feasible to manage without the impact of information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Purpose and Role of Public Libraries

Public libraries are public institutions owned and funded by the public of which the services are free irrespective of age, race, sex, profession, status etc. the public library provides for the reading interest of wide range of users in the community where the library is situated. The famous UNESCO seminar of 1953, otherwise popularly known as the Ibadan Seminar 1953 set out the Objectives of public library service in Africa as follows:

- To support and reinforce programmes of adult and fundamental education.
- To provide effective services for children and young people including requisite services for schools.
- To provide needed information and reference service;
- To promote and stimulate reading for pleasure and recreation;
- To provide, whenever needed, language groups in order to ensure availability of resources on equal terms to all members of the community (UNESCO, 1953).

Not only in Africa, but also all over the world, public libraries are established for the purpose of human development by providing books and non-print materials for their clientele in their pursuit of education, information, research, recreational and cultural interests through selecting,

acquiring, organizing, preserving and making available those material as, and when required (Cassel & Futas,1991)

Peculiar Library Services for Rural development

Since the majority of the users of public library services in rural areas are illiterate, the rural public libraries are expected to make provision for books and diverse needs in order to satisfy different group of persons such as farmers, artists, cultural troupes etc. Public library can also be used as a public enlightenment centre in rural communities. The rural dwellers are enlightened through carefully selected documentary films on relevant subject, lectures in the vernaculars, posters and other audio-visual means to teach them how to live healthy lives, cultivate their crops, use simple machinery, market their products and encourage both youths and adults to see the need for education.

Public libraries in the rural areas can as well be used to promote the awareness of government programmes and achievements to the rural dwellers. This can be done by organizing rural news paper reading centres, book fairs, public library week, and local dancing troupes' competition. All these activities if properly organized and implemented will enhance the aspiration and reading habit of the local dwellers (Agbodike, 1992)

The services of rural public libraries to the illiterates and literate rural dwellers serve as a ladder for rural development. There is no development anywhere in the world without the impact of education. Education is the tool for development, without education, there will be no innovation, invention, and transformation from traditional farming to mechanization and traditional trading to international trading especially with the application of computer and information Technology (ICT).

Problems of Rural Public Library Services

Libraries in the rural communities are impeded by a lot of issues. Some of these issues include:

- Inadequate budgetary allocation: the budgetary allocations to the state library Boards and the National Library Board are very minimal and not enough to fund libraries. The financial constraints facing the public libraries stemmed from the “structural Adjustment Programm (S.A.P)”. There cannot be effective services without adequate funding to purchase library materials and organize outreaches to the rural dwellers with informative and educative programmes.
- Poor maintenance culture: lack of maintenance culture is another problem facing the public library. The vision of the federal and state governments for establishing public libraries almost in every community is to ensure that the masses have access to information materials for human resource and community development. Many young men and women, who could not afford to pay school fees, devoted their time to proper study in public libraries because the books needed were accessible and available, the reading chairs and tables were comfortably arranged, and the environment was conducive for learning and studies. But the case is different now, the books are today torn and mutilated; the reading chairs and tables broken, and the grasses have grown and covered the environment. Users are no longer attracted to use library facilities in rural areas.
- Nonchalant attitude of some public library staff especially those at the circulation desk. This is displayed in absenteeism, lateness to work and abandonment of duty post.
- Poor attitude of Nigerian policy makers towards information infrastructure: The biggest hindrance to rural community development through library services has been the

attitude of the government towards the development of IT in Nigeria. Political leaders in our present day have refused to actively wake up to the reality of IT. This is a major problem on the part of management establishments or ministries under which information centres and rural public libraries strive.

- Power problem: stable electricity system is an indispensable infrastructure in the proper functioning of rural public libraries for rural community development. In spite of this awareness, rural communities in Nigeria have been characterized by poor provision of electricity (Anyyanelue, 2006), Successful automation and the use of ICT depend on reliable power supply. The absence of these infrastructures has left many rural communities under developed in Nigeria.
- Inadequate access to information and absent of government sponsored rural public library services/programmes: the rural communities have restricted access to information due to their geographical, economic or social marginalization. The irony of the situation in rural communities in Nigeria is that although information is more available worldwide today than in any other era of human history, most of it is inaccessible in rural communities in Nigeria. This is the reason why the impacts of the improved agricultural, industrial, health, educational and communication sectors are not significantly felt at the rural community.

The Relevance of ICT in Public Library Service for Rural Community Development

The information society generates and consumes enormous amounts of information and at the same time information technology has made it easier to process, store and communicate information and knowledge in new ways. The public library is the responsibility of local and national authorities. It must be supported by specific legislation and financed by national and

local governments. It has to be an essential component of any long- term strategy for culture, information provision, literacy and education (IFLA,1999).

The relevance of information communication technology (ICT) in public library service for rural development can be noted in the following areas:

- Communication- The primary purpose of ICT in public library service for rural development must be to stimulate real communication between library users and information materials, between library users and the librarians, between rural dwellers and their friends/family members in the cities.
- Creativity: ICT also encourage creativity. Sound, pictures, animations, video and text can be put together in new and different ways to make stories more convincing and explanations clearer than they would have been without this multi-media tool especially in times of public library enlightenment to rural dwellers.
- Complementary function: computers seem to work best as tools for learning and teaching. Library users should be encouraged to compliment other teaching and learning activity. Many computer programmes for young learners can be used as sources of teaching materials such as flashcards for oral activities. Electronic reference materials such as dictionaries can be consulted when needed for writing.
- Catalysts: computers are often a catalysts for learner’s activities.unlike television, computers invite learners to be active. They can’t just sit staring at a computer screen. Working with computers offers an almost continual series of problems that have to be solved, or series of new information that are to be retrieved or down –loaded.
- Bridge building: people who stay far from one another can easily link together with wireless phones. People of the same mind, opinion, vision and interest can still interact

irrespective of distance. One does no longer need to travel from place to place before private discussions/business transactions can take place. With the advent of ICT educational discussions can take place anywhere, anytime without intrusion.

Conclusion

Rural public libraries should be encouraged and supported by the federal and state governments in order to alleviate the suffering of the rural dwellers and also reduced the drift of the rural population to the urban centres. Urgent attention of both governments (federal and state) is therefore needed to create an enabling environment for rural community development through functional rural public libraries.

The full potential of information infrastructure and information transfer in Nigeria should be harnessed and developed to overcome the impediment affecting community development through rural public library services. The rural public libraries should be connected to information data based regionally and locally to ease access to information that will enhance personal and community development.

Translation of relevant materials into local languages that can be read and understand by most of the potential rural public library clients should be undertaken. A written information policy should be formulated to serve as prerequisite for every state and local authorities involved in information provision in Nigeria. If such a written policy is already in existence, more efforts should be put in to expedite actions on the implementation of such information policies. Up-dated information resources should be provided for the rural public libraries to ease the actualization of the set goals. On the whole adequate budgetary allocation should be approved for rural public libraries to

make the libraries functional and attractive to rural dwellers that are in desperate need of information for human capacity development.

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Sylvester O. Anie is Head Readers' Services Division, Delta State Polytechnic Library, Ozoro, Nigeria