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**The Underserved Communities: Overview of Information  
Services in the Riverrine Areas of Anambra State, Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Very often, low services are experienced in some areas, denying some people the opportunities to be informed and empowered on improvement of standard of living. This study investigated the riverrine communities of Anambra East and West Local Government Areas (LGAs) with access to library and information services. Two hundred self designed questionnaires were purposely sampled in ten communities in the areas. Questionnaire and interview were used to elicit data from different groups of people in the communities. Data were collected and analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. The study found out that some communities are cut off and cannot be

accessed except by river. Also discovered was that the rural dwellers desire information more on health, agriculture and economic activities. The available information provisions are through the NGOs, gate-keepers and friends. There is no rural library or information centre in the areas. The challenges of information services were found out to be lack of funds, transportation difficulty, inadequate personnel and inadequacy of mobile library. It was recommended that the State Library Board should repackage its programs and collaborate with agencies in relevant information services to the dwellers. The government should also include rural communities in its priority of social services.

**Key words:** community, library and information services, riverine areas, rural dwellers service delivery, underserved

### Introduction

Every community is essential because it has people who are committed to survive and protect their environment. So this calls for rendering core values and commitments in order to inspire and empower the dwellers in underserved communities to function meaningfully and raise their standard of living. That is an ideal situation but the reality is that many rural communities are simply not included in the priority list of essential social services, especially those in remote areas. Frehywot, Mullan, Payne & Ross (2010) described these communities that require service provision in an area of national needs as “the periphery”, “rural areas” or “underserved populations”. These communities are inhabited by populations and individuals in low income communities, communities of color and underserved rural and urban areas who experience significantly inequities in health status, disease burden and mortality, Health Care Connection (2015) noted.

It is not an understatement to state that the riverine communities in Anambra state, Nigeria are underserved with library and information services (Osuchukwu, 2013). This is contrary to Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) (2014) statement that Australia is well served by libraries in all sectors with public libraries having service points across Australia, including fixed point and 76 mobile libraries. Making library and information referral services available are key resources for local people in maintaining active and independent lives (Abbisat, 2008). Information is vital to the activities of the people as it lets the users make decisions that would improve their lives and existence. The point here is maximizing outreaches to provide the resources and support for self-education, literacy and lifelong learning in the rural communities.

A lot of people reside in the rural areas - women, children, the elderly, able bodied men and people with physical disabilities (PWDs). Jones (2006) explained that these represent multi-cultural, multi-faceted client groups, with a variety of needs - including access to information relevant to them. According to International Food and Agricultural development (IFAD) (2015) about 75% of the poor, or 900 million people,

live in rural areas and depend on agriculture and related rural crafts, trade and services for their livelihoods. Adeloje (2007) asserted that more than 70% of Nigeria's population lives in the rural communities. Despite their contributions to the economic development of the nation through their agricultural activities, the basic social services have eluded them and focused on the urban areas. They now become underserved, neglected, forgotten with abandoned projects of information empowerment centers and services.

This is evidenced in their poverty, apathy, illiteracy, timidity and unresponsiveness from duty bearers. Civil Rights Concerned (2014:p35) in displaying the charter of demand of communities in Anambra State remarked that Anambra West has been heavily marginalized in the areas of infrastructural activities and socio economic amenities by the Local State and Federal governments. Every service provider posted to these LGAs refused to go, thus perpetuating their ignorance even in basic information on education, health, agriculture, water and sanitation, etc. Hence, the concepts of outreaches need to be utilized to provide rural dwellers with programs of development, policies, practices and behaviors. It is in this view that American Library Association (ALA) (2012) stressed the focus on the traditionally underserved, including poor and homeless people, ethnically diverse people, older adults, non-readers, incarcerated people, people with disabilities, and rural and geographically isolated communities.

But then, rural dwellers are not inherently poor or doomed to ignorance and disease. Dike (2005) informed that they are blessed with massive fertile land and mineral resources as well as a huge and virile labor force, which can be targeted into goods and services. The missing link however, is the absence of an effective mechanism for mobilizing them into action with a view to addressing their problems. The missing link is the lack of public library outreaches for these communities at the needed time, in the right quality and format. It is pertinent that librarians and personnel in information organizations create opportunities for this underserved population to access and utilize information sources and services (Gagnon, 2012).

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

The public library meets broad social needs of the people, not only on major social trends but also on techniques to identify and meet unique rural needs. A lot of strategies are available to access and meet the needs of the rural communities with information resources that match their demand. To make this easier, the [Office for Literacy and Outreach Services](#) (OLOS) (2012) identified and promoted library services that support equitable access to the knowledge and information as well as provided resources to library and information workers who serve traditionally underrepresented groups. But these approaches seem not to be effectively harnessed to bridge the gap in the rural riverrine communities. It is not known the degree of information service delivery in the riverrine communities of Anambra East and West

L.G.As. This study was aimed to examine the riverrine disadvantaged communities in terms of information service deliveries.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study is aimed at investigating the riverrine communities of Anambra East and West LGAs with access to library and information services. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Find out the characteristics of the communities and their dwellers.
2. Identify the community-based needs of the residents of the riverrine local government areas.
3. Ascertain the sources of information service available to the local government areas.
4. Determine the extent of library and information services provided for the rural dwellers.
5. Examine the challenges of serving the riverrine local government areas with information services.

### **Literature Review**

Rural dwellers in the remote areas are characterized by poverty, ignorance, diseases, high rate of illiteracy, poor living conditions and absence of social amenities (Dike, 2005). Surveys have indicated that people in rural areas have lower income than the people in urban areas. They also have a more local focus with most communities cut off and inaccessible, limited education opportunities and very limited access to social services (Camara, Wen, Diakite, Chang-hai & Xia-fang (2012). Research has also shown that the social mix in urban and rural environments is different (National Church Life Survey (NCLS), 2015). In the words of Issa, Omopupa & Salman (2011), the rural populace suffers from acute low productivity, social and economic retrogression due to ignorance which is also a direct consequence of either inadequate or total lack of information to them. This must be the reason for their development of a culture of resignation and docility, which perpetuate their degeneration instead of advancing into development.

Studies conducted on the rural dwellers have established that their information needs are many and multidimensional. The study of Harande (2009) pointed out that there is no comprehensive document in the needs of rural inhabitants. He enumerated information needs categories of Nigeria rural communities to include: health information, agricultural and allied information, education and relevant information to support teaching and learning process, housing, employment and business information on investment opportunities. In the same vein, Ogunrombi & Amadasu (2009) ranked

the information needs of rural dwellers as farming, health issues, economic issues, religious issues and politics (Saleh & Lasisi, 2011). Indeed, the rural dwellers need information in all human endeavors for overall quality of life (United States Department of agriculture (USDA), 2011). It is the absence of relevant information services that has resulted in poor living conditions of rural communities.

The absence of libraries and information centers in the communities has resulted in sourcing information from any point without regards to its credibility and reliability. This was accentuated by Ogunrombi & Amadasu (2009) which revealed that indigenous sources of information (town criers, religious announcements) accounted for 78%, information from friends and close associates 68%, agric extension workers 46%, electronic and print media 39%, cooperative societies 33.5% and political meetings 22%. In support, John-Okeke & Oweye (2011) asserted that library services are very minimal, therefore, highly impossible to meet with the needs and demand of the community dwellers. Clearly, rural areas and their dwellers are exposed to an avalanche of information.

Studies have established that many rural communities have extremely limited access to library and information. The study by Osuchukwu (2013), found out that out of 177 communities in Anambra state; only 11 communities have access to library information and services thereby, accounting to 166 localities that are not served. The study also revealed that out of twenty one local government areas in the state, only ten have public libraries. The riverrine communities of Anambra East and West have no public libraries situated in any of the communities. Chiware & Dick (2008) also pointed out that information provision and services in developing countries have revealed gaps in the demands for, and supply of information. Hence, the studies and initiatives to provide rural library services to underserved communities (Aitchison, 2006; California State Library, 2007; and Nwegbu, Echezona & Okafor, 2012).

Chiware & Dick (2008) identified the failure of information service provision as being caused by lack of needs assessment, projects that are not demand-oriented and the lack of networking among service providers in both public and private sectors. Probably, the policy makers exhibit the notion that libraries, generally are not on their priority list, how much less for rural areas (Abolaji, 2009). Thus, source of boosting rural development depends on effective use of information on daily activities as a weak economy has a profound effect on the availability and accessibility of information resources (Dute, 2009). Evidently, rural dwellers need to be served with relevant, efficient and current information if they must rise up to the indices of development.

### **Methodology**

This study was carried out in the riverine areas of Anambra East and West local government areas. A survey research method was used to elicit data from the

community dwellers. Data were collected using interview, observation and questionnaire which were randomly distributed at different interventions in the riverine communities. A total of 200 copies of questionnaire were extensively distributed in Mmiata, Nzam, Innoma, Orometiti and Umueza-anam in Anambra West LGA. Others are Umuoba-anam, Umueri, Aguleri, Eziaguluotu and Nando in Anambra East LGA. One hundred and eighty-eight (188) copies were duly completed and returned. The questionnaires were distributed during Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) community familiarization visits for mobilization and sensitization activities. Another set of questionnaire was administered during JDPC Regional meeting in Aguleri (comprising of all communities in Anambra East and West L.G.As) and the last set was distributed at information empowerment training for beneficiaries of micro credit scheme of JDPC in Mmiata, Umuoba-Anam, Umueri, Umueze-Anam, Umuenwelum, and Nando (all in the riverine communities).

The meetings facilitated the process of questionnaire administration and allowed for interviews with leaders of the groups and communities' stakeholders. Those who are literate easily filled their questionnaire while explanations were made for those who are not literate. Information for the interview was elicited in vernacular in the local dialect of the communities. This was successfully achieved because one of the researchers is a native of one of the communities under study. The data collection took four weeks so as to access the group meetings and gatherings of the local communities. Interview was scheduled with Onitsha Divisional Librarian whose jurisdiction covers the two local government areas under study. The results were collated and analyzed using frequency tables and percentages.

#### **Area of the Study**

Anambra East and West Local Government Areas (popularly known as Omambala) are made up of twenty one communities. The communities are located in the Anambra North Senatorial Zone which is often seen as the heart of Anambra state because of its citadels of the two major occupations of the state – farming and trading. Anambra West LGA has the largest landmass in Nigeria with a population of 190,600 persons covering the 613 square kilometer area. Anambra East has a total population of 101,224 covering 418 square kilometer (Ministry of Lands, Survey and Town Planning, 2011).

The two local government areas are naturally endowed with very fertile land. They are also surrounded by large bodies of water, rivers, lakes, creeks, etc which have greatly contributed to high scale farming and fishing. There are three major socio-economic groups in the zone. The first group is the government workers (teachers, staff of the local government and other civil servants). The second group is the local entrepreneurs and their workers (factory owners, small and medium scale business

owners, artisans, local contractors). The third group is the farmers and the fishermen who live further down the rural areas towards the Niger and Omambala River.

### Findings

#### Characteristics of the Riverrine Communities and the Dwellers in Anambra East and West Local Government Area

Data on the communities located in the two LGAs under study showed that Anambra East has eleven (11) communities while Anambra West has ten (10) communities, respectively. This is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of riverrine communities and the dwellers in Anambra East and West Local Government Areas

S/N	Communities in Anambra East L.G.A	Communities in Anambra West L.G.A	Igala speaking communities in the LGAs
1.	Aguleri	Ezi Anam	Inoma
2.	Enugwu Aguleri	Ifite Anam	Nzam
3.	Enugwuotu Aguleri	Inoma	Ukwala
4.	Ezi Aguluotu	Nzam	Owelle
5.	Igbariam	Orom-Etiti	Olumbanasa
6.	Ikem-Ifite Nando	Ukwala	
7.	Nando	Umueze-Anam	
8.	Mkpunando	Umuenwelum Anam	
9.	Nsugbe	Owelle	
10.	Umueri	Olumbanasa	
11.	Umuona Anam		
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>

All the communities in Anambra West are located along the riverine and must be accessed by crossing the bridge. Also discovered was that in Anambra West, only five communities speak Igbo language. The other five communities are Igala speaking, thus, creating a bi-lingual communication in the local government. There is no upland community in Anambra West. But in Anambra East, some communities are located upland.

### Communities that are Completely Cut off by Water

**Table 2: Communities that are completely cut off by river**

S/N	Anambra East L.G.A	Anambra West L.G.A
		Olumbanasa (made up of seven communities)
1.	Enugwu Aguleri	Odumagu
2.	Eziaguluotu	Ode
3.		Igbokenyi
4.		Odekpe
5.		Igbedor
6.		Alla
7.		Onugwe

Information on the locations of the communities in Table 2 revealed that some communities are totally cut off from others by water. These communities cannot be accessed by road either in rainy or dry season. Any vehicle traveling to these communities must be ferried by “Pontu” (big boat used in ferrying vehicles across the river). In Anambra West Local Government Area, there are seven (7) communities under Olumbanasa while in Anambra East there are two (2) communities.

### Characteristics of the rural dwellers sampled

Another important variable on the characteristics of the community dwellers showed that the greatest number of rural dwellers is between 36-45 years while the highest age range of farmers, traders and civil servants are 36-45years, artisans have 26-35, fishermen and the unemployed are within 36-45 and 18-25, respectively. The data also showed that there are more number of female farmers and traders. Many respondents have FSLC especially the farmers, traders and other unskilled population while majority of the civil servants have higher degree. This was displayed in Table 3. Also observed was that many dwellers could not actually read or write even with the first school leaving certificate (FSLC).



**Table 3: Characteristics of the Rural dDellers Sampled**

Occupation	Age					Education		Sex		
	15-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56 & Above	FSLC	WAEC	Higher Degree	M	F
Farmers	2	36	44	16	4	88	11	3	48	54
Traders	3	12	16	7	3	17	22	2	16	25
Civil Servants	1	7	10	5	-	-	4	19	14	9
Artisans	3	7	4	1	-	6	7	2	11	4
Fishermen/women	-	1	3	1	-	3	2	-	5	-
Unemployed	2	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2	-
<b>Total</b>	11	63	77	30	7	114	48	26	96	92

#### **Community Based-Needs of the Rural Dwellers in the Local Government Areas under Study**

Results of the needs assessment of the rural dwellers showed that the respondents need health information most (94.6%) followed by agriculture (89.8%) and business information services (69.1%). Others are government & politics (61.3%), education (31.9%), social-cultural information (36.1%), religion (42.5%), employment (42%). Their information needs cross-cut various needs because they multi task in order to meet individual demands of the family. It was portrayed in Table 4.

**Table 4: Community based-needs of the rural dwellers in the local government areas under study**

S/N	Item	Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Agriculture	169	89.8
2.	Business information	130	69.1
3.	Health information	178	94.6
4.	Government/Political information	78	61.3
5.	Education information	60	31.9
6.	Social-cultural information	68	36.1
7.	Religious information	80	42.5
8.	Security information	89	47.3
9.	Employment	79	42

### Sources of Information Available in the Local Government Areas under Study

In the Table 5, while television provided information for 14.8% respondents, radio provided for 24.4%, friends and relatives provided 73.9%, local government authorities 40.9%, NGOs 55.3 % and churches 45.7%.

**Table 5: Sources of information available in the local government areas under study**

S/N	Information providers	Respondents	Percentage (%)	Medium of information dissemination
1	Library	-	-	-
2	Television	28	14.8	On air
3	Radio	46	24.4	On air
4	Friends/relatives	139	73.9	Oral
5	Gate-keepers	168	89.3	Oral
6	Local government authorities	77	40.9	Oral
7	NGOs	104	55.3	Oral, leaflets
8	Churches	86	45.7	Oral

The interview also confirmed this. The Divisional Librarian disclosed that the government has not established public libraries in any of the communities in the local government areas. Besides, the communities have not established their own information centers/libraries like other communities in other local government areas. Hence, no library services are being rendered at the moment in these communities.

A follow up question on information provision and services revealed that some NGOs provided information, occasionally, to the dwellers. The NGOs named are JDPC, DiP, CGSD and SUCCOR. Again, the churches and the local authorities relayed information too. However, information is disseminated orally in local language. Interviews by the stakeholders confirmed this. Walking round the communities, absence of government presence was observed.

### Extent of Library and Information Services in the Lgas under Study

The researcher sought to determine the degree of library services provided for in the communities. The result showed that library services are not known or acknowledged in any of the communities in the two local government areas. Many rural dwellers have heard of library but do not know what they stand to gain if it is

established in their communities. The interview affirmed this, but they are willing to accommodate any organization or institution that will provide them with information that will improve their way of life. Simple observations during meetings and sensitization showed that they really want to know and develop like others in the upland communities.

### **Challenges of Serving the Rural Dwellers with Library Services**

The response from the interview of the Divisional Librarian stated that there is no fund allocated for traveling to and fro these rural communities. She also stated that problem of language, locations across the river, inadequacy of resources and dearth of personnel posed great challenges. On the issue of extending library services through mobile libraries, it was revealed that the bookmobile/outreach facility cannot cover all the communities in the state.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The information on the location of communities along the riverine and the divergent language nature of the dwellers (Tables 1 & 2), showed the peculiarities of the two local government areas under study. It confirms the findings of Jones (2006) that each community has unique needs and can be multi-cultural, multi-faceted client groups with variety of needs. Again, majority of the respondents indicated as farmers and traders with low level of education relates well with the studies of Diso (2005) which revealed that rural dwellers are still dominantly peasant farmers, petty traders with high rate of illiteracy, consisting of middle men and women. The implication is that if the rural dwellers continue to experience gaps in implementing standards and services, they will never rise above poverty and ignorance.

However, results of the needs assessment of the rural dwellers showing in order of priority health, agriculture, business, etc indicated their preferences of requirements and their wishes to be served. This goes to demonstrate that rural dwellers inherently have needs and desire to be served accordingly. This is the reason Mohammed (2008) pointed out the need to create opportunities and serve them in order to achieve the basic objectives of a national development policies. This can only be achieved with effective information provision in quality education, health care, governance and other social issues. To buttress this, Health Career Connection (2015) stressed that all populations need access to culturally appropriate knowledge management and services. Hence, the rural areas have the potentials to drive the economy, create productive jobs and improve food security if given adequate information, ILO (2015) summarized.

The revelation that library services are not available in the two LGAs depicts clear indication of denial of essential services. The view to identify innovations for

accessing and improving the delivery of information as the goal of moving libraries to the forefront as information providers applies here (Reese, 2012). Thus, confirming the statement of Exlibris (2015) that libraries should reclaim their positions as preferred sources for information delivery, affirming their superior one-stop discovery and delivery solution. The effect will be provision of full capacity of collections in every type of sources and resources which is not limited to one stop objective of other organization.

Hence, the absence of existence of library and information centers as reported by Osuigwe, Jiagbogu & Udeze (2012), Nwegbu, Echezona & Okafor (2012) and Osuchukwu (2013) could be attributed to the policy makers who often exhibit the notion that libraries/information centers, generally are not on their priority list, how much less libraries for rural areas (Abolaji, 2009). The importance of rural communities in holding economic growth, high returns, productive jobs and livelihood necessitates their adequate information provision. Library services, therefore, are expected to be active and dynamic with outreach services (Long, 2005), moving to meet the residents who are anxious to exist functionally and sustain their livelihood.

The challenges of library and information services to the rural dwellers validate the findings of Camara, Wen, Diakite, Chang-hai & Xia-fang (2012) in Guinea where most communities are cut off and are inaccessible, especially during rainy season. The implication is that these rural communities are neglected and experience limited education opportunities which perpetuate their abandoned cycle. In contrast, Chinook (2012) advised that energizing and motivating staff to go beyond their comfort zones in serving the underserved will improve livelihood. To buttress this, California State Library (2015) asserted that funds should be provided for local library to develop program and initiatives to support the local communities with information services.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Because of the peculiarities of the locations of the communities, libraries should repackage information and program that will fulfill their commitments to the communities.
- Libraries can partner with NGOs, gate-keepers and other local authorities/agencies in disseminating relevant information through various media, resources and oral information service deliveries.
- The communities should be encouraged to establish rural libraries like other communities in other local government areas.
- The government should live up to its words by ensuring that rural communities are served with essential social services.

### Conclusion

The need for information provision and dissemination to every locality is imperative to social and economic developments. Librarians believe strongly in equal access to information, especially now that information is being transformed into electronic medium. Other organizations have shown that any community can be accessed and have contributed in their own ways, except the library. Thus, it becomes pertinent that rural communities be served with proper information delivery so as to help them improve their lives and achieve their goals on improved agriculture and food security.

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