
Facilitating Community Information Service for National Development

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Abstract

Community information comprises of services offered by libraries and information centers to provide the people with information that is relevant to their daily life. The information helps the poor and marginalized groups to improve their standard of living and contribute in decisions that affect their lives. This paper highlights the relevance of information in generating participatory approaches for community engagement and development. It examines the issues in the communities and the gaps between the rural dwellers and the duty bearers. The focus is to raise consciousness of the governed on policies and service deliveries because governance is meant to benefit every member of the society, irrespective of location or status. Many rural communities have continued to be underserved; hence, information becomes necessary in integrating the needs of the people for sustainable development. Librarians and libraries are charged with providing the information resources and outreaches to the communities to help build the bridge between the people and their representatives in the government. But the challenges before them are repackaging, restructuring, coordinating and collaborating with relevant groups that reform the community ideologies on information service. The best practices in community information need to be adopted immediately to underlie governance responsiveness at the community level so that the dwellers will function effectively.

Keywords: community information, rural dwellers, duty bearers, library, information

Introduction

Community information (CI) combines two terms that emphasize the growth and survival of the community. It engages the members of the community through libraries and information centers with arrays of news

and resources that help them harness the facilities within their environment. Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam (2013) defined CI as information required by members of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. The power

of information helps to advance the community's goals for a better community (Knight Community Information, 2013). Hence, the overall objective of CI is to generate community driven development (CDD) through effective information services in order to enable rural poor people overcome apathy and contribute in decisions that concern their development. Hence, access to information is critical in letting people know their entitlements and demand their rights as well as hold duty bearers to account. This is where libraries and information centers create the channels that enhance community engagement for total quality information services, adding values to the lives of the people as a basis for economic development which is an important ingredient in development (Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) (2012). Rural dwellers whether literate or not should have access to any kind of information because that is the only

source they can become capable and productive in their social and political obligations, becoming better informed citizens.

There are lots of people living in the rural communities that require different kinds of information for survival. Harande (2009) and Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam (2013) noted that about 75 to 80 percent of the people in developing countries live in the rural areas where the average information access is still very poor. Acknowledging this, World Resources Institute (2005) stated that the great majority of the world's poor are concentrated in rural areas. These people need to know because information is a vital resource, a product and a focal need for survival in environment in dire need of development. It is, therefore, a strong call for librarians to understand local issues and support rural dwellers to connect with the local government administrators and social agencies in addressing their needs.

The fact remains that every community is in a continual state of change – through births and deaths of citizens, through people moving in and out, through the natural growth and development of the community over time. Rural administration can truly be effective if duty bearers recognize the fact that rural dwellers deserve information on government activities for participation in nation building. This is where libraries and information centers come in to help rural people achieve development through relevant information dissemination which can actually open the door to equity and sustainability for involvement of citizens in policy making activities (Armstrong, 2013). People can really benefit and improve their standard of living, stimulating leadership potential at the grass root level for a people/community – driven participation in elections, governance and decision making (Oruonye, 2013).

Libraries and Community Information Service Delivery

Librarians know the value of information services which is the reason the public library sector engages all segments of the society and communities. Public libraries across the world are established to serve communities, giving them information as well as encouraging them to talk about issues of development and democracy. Their service deliveries help to transform peoples' ideologies, making their dealings with government easier and quicker (Plibersek, 2011). In support, AFLIA (2014) advised that community supports must involve developing policy, programs, collections and networks to address the issues that are holding a community, group or individual back from achieving their full potentials.

Today's librarians, especially in the public sector should focus on library and information services that call for increased knowledge and information sharing about

economic activities, agricultural production (Ilboudo & Castello, 2014), health services and other social justice issues. Since corporate government is now a key focus on international political scale, it behooves on the libraries and librarians to effectively record, archive and manage information centers in increasingly important preoccupation like governance. The result will be a pool of knowledge management with rich resources on rural dwellers issues and needs.

Indeed, libraries and librarians can really raise a community with good practices and approaches in building strong community engagement (Asu & Clendening, 2007). Therefore, information service delivery must be driven by the recognition that the way things are done have not kept pace with peoples' expectations or needs. So it must be re-strategized in adherence to the words of World Resources Institute (2005) that:

there must be a link to make governance more friendly to the poor, tackling issues of property rights, access to information and decision-making, adequate representation, institutional transparency, fairness in sharing the costs and benefits of resource management. These are all aspects of *democratic governance*—decision-making that respects the rights and needs of those who depend on resources.

In the libraries, spaces are created for dwellers to gather, explore, interact and reason together. It succinctly expresses the mission of librarians by Lankes (2013) that they improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in the communities by promoting democracy/education, access to materials, reference questions and story time. Thus, effective library and information services should aim for community development through needs assessment activities.

The concept of needs assessment is to identify the desires of the people. Abolaji (2009) recommended that peoples' needs

must be based on the activities that affect their daily life and well being. Every community has needs that are distinct to its location and people. Apart from the basic needs of health, shelter and food, people ought to be able to follow and understand the decision-making process (Good Governance Guide, 2012). These are the dynamics associated with the social, political and cultural sectors. According to (Billah, 2007) citizens face unparalleled need for information to tackle long-term unemployment, hunger and social exclusion in order to function effectively. Moreover, Harande (2009) emphasized that information is needed on political rights of the people and how they can exercise such right. Libraries and librarians must understand the purpose of community needs assessment; select the assessment tool and the best methods of disseminating the information.

Rural Administration and Essence of Community Information

Rural administration is the government at the grass root that has the responsibility of making the lives of the rural people better by reaching them through effective service delivery. It is a strategy designed to improve the socio-economic life of the people living in the rural areas. It should be recalled that the world leaders at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at Geneva in 2003 declared their commitments in enabling individuals, communities and people to achieve their full potentials in promoting sustainable development and improving their quality of life (WSIS, 2014; Internet Society, 2013). What this means is that people at the rural communities are part of government interest in accountability and information policies.

The rural poor are the target for this notion but often times, there is a breach because of lack of information service. For instance in Nigeria, there are 774 local government areas (LGAs) charged with effective rural

administration (Nigerian Elites Forum, 2015) (Online Nigeria, 2015) but some of these LGAs are so underserved that people live in poverty and apathy. Oruonye (2013) stated that poor medical facilities and personnel, unavailability of potable drinking water, poor road network and connectivity, poor finance, inadequate skilled workers, lack of participation and involvement of the local people and general indiscipline among the local government workers affect service deliveries.

The experiences of the two-and-a-half-year project of Voice to the People (V2P) in 48 pilot communities in Anambra state indicated that apathy, ignorance, non-participatory and non-contributory of people hamper development and improvement of living (Voice to the People, 2015). This represents real life situation of people whose daily challenges include bad roads network, inaccessible water and poor sanitation, electricity, health care facilities, abandoned

and non-functional projects cited in their communities. They lack information on policies stipulating the provision and maintenance of these sectors. There are many government projects cited in the communities which the people do not access nor take ownership of. For instance in Nigeria, the government health care facilities are provided with free drugs for pregnant women and children under 6years, there are free malaria drugs and treated mosquitoes nets meant for the dwellers. But many people do not know these. They instead patronize birthing homes and chemists shops for treatments (JDPC, 2014). Libraries should create spaces for this awareness and encourage communication channel between the duty bearers and the dwellers.

Furthermore, rural dwellers do not know that they have rights to visit local government secretariats and ask questions, constituency offices to engage duty bearers

and demand the presence of the people representing them in town hall meetings (V2P, 2014). They do not know they can access agricultural loan and demand for interface with their representatives. How could they know when they lack information on the rights of citizens, roles of the local government and the members that represent their wards and constituencies? Hence, it is expected that the resources of information on community development should emanate from the libraries because information is everything to the rural dwellers. It is the only way that they can make governance work for them.

Challenges of Library and Information Service Delivery to Rural Dwellers

Inadequate funds

News of global recess has heightened stringent budget cuts to library development programmes and services. Hence, rural information service delivery from the public

sector becomes a problem. Ebiwolate (2010) reported in his study of public library service to rural areas in Niger Delta that inadequate fund affects effective information service deliveries. Fund is needed for transportation to the rural communities, for regular contacts and procurement/duplication of resources for dwellers, for facilitating and organizing information activities.

Lack of resources

The type of resources needed to integrate community dwellers into enhancing their knowledge and participation in decision making process (Armstrong, 2013) are usually not on the stock of public libraries. They include budget document, policy document, procurement policies and other government resources. These documents are not purchased from the booksellers but are gotten from government printers and ministries, departments and agencies. Some of them are downloaded, analyzed and

packaged according to local government issues and communities. So it needs strategies and initiatives to package them for specific users. Librarians must go out of their ways to get them and this is where the challenges are.

Inadequate human resources

Community information services need library staff that are dedicated and have passion for community development. Studies have revealed that there are shortages of librarians in the public libraries in Nigeria where community information falls because of poor salary scale (Osuchukwu, 2015). Without dedicated staff for this purpose, there can never be initiatives to sustain the concept because as Hillebrecht (2013) emphasized, it needs individuals who go out of their way to do the extra effort beyond their normal duties until they are tired or retired. Pyati (2009) stressed they need to develop into community worker and information access

advocate. The low visibility and respect of the profession within white collar circles is a related concern.

Lack of community participation in decision making

A study of rural administration disclosed a complete lack of real participation in decision-making (Moti, 2011) by rural dwellers. There is lack of provision of basic amenities in the communities which has transcended to rural dwellers' indifference to governance and information service deliveries. Thus, their dependence on their labored efforts indicated inequality of development exigency which further creates the notion of apathy towards every service provider. This created lack of trust between the Nigerian community and the rural administrators which inadvertently weakens the effectiveness of public programs and initiatives (Warschauer, 2003).

Illiteracy

Many community dwellers are not educated; thus, lack the confidence to engage their representatives on a just cause. Sometimes their understanding is too low which can be frustrating to information givers. For instance during one of the V2P activities in Umuezeanam, it was hard to convince them to come together as one and write to the government on issues pertaining their health centers and schools. Even with the establishment of adult program in the community, some of them refuse to enroll and these make the work of the information givers difficult.

Attitude of service providers

Great challenges exist in some communities among the marginalized groups and service providers like the teachers, nurses, extension workers, etc. Sometimes, their approaches towards rural areas are dismissive, probably, because of the distance, poor financial resources, language barriers, etc. According

to (Kothari, 2005) this leads to a general lack of faith and trust in government services with disillusionment. This may affect the perception of the people to the libraries and librarians, thus, making the rural residents see information service delivery as unreliable, ineffective and unresponsive to their needs (Moti, 2011).

Poor Coordination/ needs assessment

Castello & Braun (2006) identified lack of coordinated planning, poor communication between linkage partners and absence of follow through as challenges to information services. It aptly describes the value we place on community information which contributes so much on crippling the effective dissemination and acknowledgement of information service. When particular community desires information on budget allocation and analysis and you offer updates on trade fair, there will be problem. Proper assessment

must be carried out among different communities' groups for effective information.

Conclusion

Community information should be viewed with the serious attention it deserves. This is because rural people need information to function effectively in order to participate and contribute in the community they live in. Thus, it is essential that proper need assessment is carried out to ascertain the particular information that will be relevant to the residents of a particular community. They need to have voice to demand for accountability from duty bearers. Librarians and libraries should refocus their information services to include the rural dwellers. It must always be borne in mind that when community information is modeled along the needs of the Rural people, real development will take place and effective rural administration will operate inclusive governance structure.

Libraries should begin to partner with other organizations. This is to enable them do joint activities and learn more about real issues in the communities. For instance in Namibia, Tanzania, Nigeria and South Africa lots of projects on developmental information have been going on in the communities to reduce poverty through improving lives with advancing democracy (Lahti, 2013; V2P, 2015 & Mthethwa, 2015). This is made possible through collaborations and partnerships with other funding agencies and government ministries. The ability to network and attract partners will give visibility to libraries and librarians in enhancing outreaches to communities. There are many civil society organizations (CSOs) that frequently carry out community engagement and information services in the communities (Castello & Braun, 2006). They focus on different thematic areas of community information, especially on governance and rural development.

Examples of such CSOs in Nigeria include Justice Development and Peace Commission, State Accountability Voice Initiative (SAVI), Development in Practice (DiP), International Organization of Female Lawyers (FIDA), Hope Givers, Care for the Child Organization (CCO), etc. These organizations access the communities and disseminate information in formats that are acceptable to rural people. Librarians can join the network and leverage as partners using the platform in disseminating needed information to rural dwellers.

Since lots of efforts are geared into creating innovative approaches in turning information into civic activity, libraries can use limited resources more efficiently (Rural Policy Research Institute, 2010) through working with community groups and stakeholders. Libraries are full of possibilities and can always package and

repackage information resources to suit specific rural groups and dwellers.

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