

THE ROLE OF RURAL LIBRARIES IN THE ATTAINMENT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper examines the role that rural libraries could play in the attainment of rural development with a view to accelerate growth in all areas of human endeavors in rural areas of Nigeria. The study took cognizance of inherent problems that undermine the establishment of rural libraries such as funding, illiteracy, clientele problem and inadequate manpower requirement. The paper concludes by proposing some pragmatic reforms that could hasten rural development in Nigeria. Essentially, it was noted that it would be an oversight to ignore professional librarians in the formulation and implementation of policies that have direct bearing on rural development in Nigeria. By their training, professional librarians have access to important information that could assist rural dwellers and government in rural development issues.

Introduction

Rural libraries facilitate community development in any country of the world. There is therefore a compelling need, on the part of government at all levels, to provide rural libraries in public schools and even construct community libraries in rural areas to accelerate development. Vital information on various needs of the people in different areas such as housing, health, education, infrastructure and other things that can be of great importance to rural dwellers should be available in the rural areas. A rural Library can be a link between the government and rural dwellers by disseminating information on various policies of government to local communities.

Rural can mean many things in terms of living configurations. In general, low population density makes an area, country, or region rural. For example, it can mean a single family living on a farm a few miles from the next building or person, a small dispersed community with limited community services, pockets of families and ethnic groupings, or a small town that has experienced economic and population decline, just to have a few. A rural area is not simply a physical place but a social place as well. This idea carries implications for service delivery because it suggests that we may need to adopt an approach that is sensitive to the cultural characteristics of rural populations. Otite, O (1990) suggests that the rural

sector has a physical existence, though it is changing through networks of road and other communication systems and a spate of new architectural forms. We can equally define rural in terms of certain exclusion from social amenities and services that are available in urban areas but are lacking in rural areas.

What is a rural library?

A rural library is supposed to be an organized place where pupils and the entire community can find collection of books, reference materials, audiovisual materials and all other forms of educational aids to stimulate learning in all its entirety. According to Ogunsola (1998) there is no particular place that can be called rural library in our villages and communities. In fact, rural library is alien to an average pupil in any community in Nigeria; this is why most students in tertiary institutions have problem in doing independent research. Smith (1990) reasoned that rural library is not tied to particular buildings but a collection of books. A rural library need not be a big structure. It can be a single room but the main task lies on the librarian. The way he improvises the available materials in relation to the needs and expectations of the people matters a lot. In a rural setting, projectors, television sets and radio cassettes can be used to transmit information especially in the evenings when the villagers /people are relaxing. Rural library can also house books /materials relevant to primary education, information for domestic matters such as cookery, hygiene, childbearing, family planning, vocational skills and other related concerns. Rural librarians can train people in various trades that can alleviate poverty in the rural areas. Efforts can be made to train people in the following trades: fine art, sign writing, computer, envelope making, business/trade, animal production, fishery etc. The fact that illiteracy is still prevalent in our rural areas suggests that it would be advisable to make use of television sets, projectors, and radio cassettes for topical issues using local languages. The collections may be kept in the house of the village head, in the school, village center, or in the house of someone appointed to take charge. Rural libraries are important when it comes to the issue of finding appropriate information to meet exigent needs of the community. For instance, vital information in all facets of life such as health, economics, education, and others should be available in the rural library, just as it is done in developed countries. It should be noted that such libraries are not just places where you have collection of books, they are learning centers where users can obtain important information to meet their needs such as job opportunities, training programmes, community programmes or entertainments like film shows, sports, concerts, bazaars, musical shows, children varieties and other programmes. It is obvious that rural libraries are important to stimulate growth in rural areas if well funded

and adequately utilized. Rural dwellers can be greatly assisted by linking them with investors and Donor Agencies through relevant publications.

Rural Libraries and Development Programmes

Rural development is the social foundation on which all round self sustaining development should be built. The failure to lay this foundation is the root cause of problems in many developing countries. According to Obadare (1998), rural development, in a way, hinges on all efforts, whether from government or private individuals, aimed at transforming rural areas. This development might be in the area of health, politics, and economics or in the provision of infrastructures such as roads, electricity, telecommunications and piped water that will make life worth living for the rural dwellers. Developing countries are mostly rural and predominantly illiterate. This makes it difficult for most people to comprehend government policies, and this in turn impairs growth. Rural development has been defined differently according to the different perceptions of the people on the issue. Some people believe that rural development is the provision of better roads and electricity in the rural areas while some opined that it is the citing of industries in the rural areas. However, rural development transcends an ordinary expression, it is basically all efforts aimed at improving the lots of rural people. The development of the people themselves should be the focus; this is what UNDP called Sustainable Human Development (SHD).

According to Okafor (1995) rural development is a program of activities aimed at increasing the efficiency of rural population such that rural energy is released, quality of life and productivity are enhanced, education and sanitation are promoted and resources are optimally exploited. Rural development is essentially improving living standards of the masses with low income residing in rural areas and making the process of their development self-sustaining. Some of the essential goals of rural development as enumerated by Okafor include: food production, growth with equity, fulfillment of basic needs, removal of poverty and freedom from hunger, upliftment of the poor (disadvantaged and vulnerable groups), employment and income generation, and strengthening of rural institutions. Librarians are in the vantage position to make judicious use of audiovisual resources and adapt them to local environment in order to communicate effectively with rural dwellers. It is estimated that, we have about 100,000 communities in Nigeria Babangida (1991). Librarians should be involved in the design and implementation of rural development policies in developing countries if real change is to take place in the rural areas. Librarians can make programs participatory for all-round growth and development. The beauty of using librarians is to save cost and for optimal utilization of professionals who are competent to deliver the "goods". For instance, the

cost of seeking for vital information that might not be available is a foregone conclusion with librarians since they are trained to know where to tap vital information; they are experts when it comes to information management. According to Oladeinde (1991) integrated rural development policy meaningfully conceived and comprehensively executed at the “base” holds the key to the transformation of our rural communities. It will eliminate rural poverty, unemployment, stagnation and misery among our neglected rural folks in Nigeria. Rural development should therefore be participatory.

Traditional Roles of Rural Libraries

Rural libraries are first and foremost meant to serve the rural community generally. The rural library is a place where books, materials and equipment that assist users to read, research and obtain needed information are kept. Essentially, the role of a functional rural library is to regularly disseminate information to the rural dwellers through the rural Librarian. It is supposed to assist communities and towns within and outside its domain in the area of information dissemination to special groups in the community. A rural librarian is supposed to acquire, process into retrievable forms and make the items of information available to the users. Unomah, J.I (1987) believes strongly that librarianship is about service; service to community and the public by acquiring necessary materials in form of books/journals, magazines/Newspapers and AV materials and other forms of recorded knowledge to satisfy both present and future needs.

Modern Trends in Information Delivery

Information is highly sought after by different people all the time. In the olden days, before the advent of information technology, information could not be easily searched or transmitted. Information was available only in book form or, sometimes in oral form. But, with the introduction of IT, Information has been scientifically transformed to a stage where it is easily searched, stored and transmitted. New trends in information delivery now consist of continuing accumulation, preservation, organization and use of recorded library materials that are facilitated by hi-tech information systems. For any meaningful development to take place in the rural areas, prompt attention must be given to the newly emerging innovations in information and communication system in which the core processes of a library become basically electronic in nature. In other words, rural information delivery must integrate the use of computer systems for network relationship, inter- library cooperation, online access and online searches.

Owoeye (2003) described this emerging new library as “polymedia library”, the library system that merges the conventional systems with the modern day information storage and retrieval system. Such a library contains not only conventional books but also information on videos, audiotapes, microfilms, videodiscs, compact discs, computer software and other formats. Information has shifted from being available in book form or oral to CDROM, Diskettes, Cassettes, (Audio and Video) Telephone, Radio, Television, Electronic mail, Internet and other technologies. Therefore, information can be delivered right from our various homes with ease. It is now convenient to obtain information from different locations without stress. Information that is available in rural libraries, be it in books or other formats, can be disseminated to rural dwellers through direct access, telephone or other means. Such dissemination is vital to the rural dwellers in satisfying their needs and priorities, particularly because the information obtained can be of help in their developmental efforts

Resources /tools relevant to rural development to be stocked in rural libraries

There are some resources /tools that are important and useful in the execution of rural development program. These include the following:

- (1) Internet /Online Information
- (2) Magazines.
- (3) Reference materials such as textbooks, manuals, handbooks, bibliographies, Directories, yearbooks, atlas etc.
- (4) Government documents.
- (5) Professional staff. (Librarians)
- (6) Audiovisual materials such as video recorder, cassette, Television, projector, slide etc.
- (7) Books display.
- (8) Information / posters on notice boards.

These resources are available in all public libraries and they could be readily available in rural libraries. When this happens, it is the responsibility of the rural librarian to utilize the materials for the development of the rural people. It should be understood that it is only when these materials are tailored to rural development that they can contribute meaningfully to national development. If these resources were effectively utilized, our rural areas would be radically transformed.

Rural Libraries: Problems and Prospects

The establishment of rural libraries in Nigeria has been beset with some impediments ranging from funding, illiteracy, and clientele problems to personal problems such as shortage of personnel and poor disposition of board members to rural libraries and programs, bureaucracy and ineffective communication.

Funding

The attitude of government to the provision of money for the establishment of rural libraries is worrisome. It is a fact that the National and state library boards, that are supposed to provide rural libraries, place less emphasis on funding. The three tiers of government do not consider provision of funds to the library as a priority. As such, they only earmark paltry sums of money to the sector, and this cannot provide any meaningful service in the rural areas. This has been the trend over the years, and unless the various governments shift grounds, provision of rural libraries in Nigeria would continue to be a mirage. The Library has to be well funded in order to cater for its needs. These needs range from acquisition of books /materials to maintenance of existing structures and staff welfare. According to Ogunsola, L.A. (2000) library services and collections are directly related to budgeting size, which may in turn be influenced by a variety of political, economic, and social factors. The present economic quagmire has also affected the annual budget on education. In fact, various governments are contemplating on how to privatize education so that the burden would be off their neck. Therefore, there are various proposals on how to involve the private sector in education. It should be noted that this effort has led to the astronomical rise in the establishment of schools from elementary to tertiary level in Nigeria. But this cannot solve the fundamental problem of funding.

Illiteracy

Nigeria is still lagging behind when it comes to education, and this affects the provision of library services in the rural areas. This manifests in the negative attitudes of stakeholders to formulation of library policies as well as in the perception of the rural dwellers to library provision. It is widely believed that most Nigerians do not appreciate librarianship let alone utilizing library services optimally. They are preoccupied with their daily routine and hardly patronize rural libraries even when it is established. Most Nigerians cannot read and write, in essence, this means that many library materials which are mostly printed, will not be relevant to them. Illiteracy is one of the pervasive problems that face rural communities in search of economic and educational fulfillment. This is not only to the detriment of the individual, but also has a significant, negative impact on the community. Functional illiteracy refers to the inability of an individual to use reading, speaking and computational skills in every day life situations. For example, a functionally illiterate adult is unable to fill out an employment application form, follow written instructions, or read newspapers. In short, when confronted with printed materials, adults without basic literacy skills cannot function effectively. Illiteracy has a significant impact on rural librarianship because the people that should enjoy the library services are in a way “impaired” due to their lack of

education. It is widely recognized that in order to make any progress in rural areas, the illiteracy problem needs to be addressed and solutions be presented.

Personnel

There is dearth of personnel in the area of information provision in the rural areas as a result of poor remuneration and lack of attractive welfare packages for those who volunteered to work there. In some instances, most of the people posted to rural areas are not interested in rural librarianship they only accept the offer out of compulsion not out of genuine interest for the job. Rural libraries need qualified personnel to live in rural areas and understand the needs and aspirations of rural dwellers with a view to assisting them to find solutions to most of their problems from time to time. It is when there are willing and adequate personnel that rural libraries can be effective because ordinary buildings even when stocked with books /materials do not make a library; it is when there are genuine professional activities going on inside them that we can say the rural library is functional.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rural libraries contribute immensely to both rural and national developments. Librarians, especially those in rural libraries are at a vantage position because they have access to vital and latest information related to rural development. They can as well avail themselves of materials available in public libraries and other research institutes to carry out their professional duties in the rural areas. However, for rural development to be fully integrated into librarianship, the curriculum developers have to include rural development into library courses in various institutions. Rural development can also be incorporated into librarianship through research grants. This will stimulate young librarians to veer in rural development studies.

Various governments should embark on enlightenment campaigns on rural development. This can be in form of talks, shows, quiz competitions, contact groups and distribution of pamphlets on rural development. Rural development can equally be integrated into library education programs so that the course content includes rural development methods, importance of rural development and proposal writing (for grants), sources of information for rural development etc. Librarians can work with agents of change such as rural development officers in local government councils, craftsmen association, cooperative societies, churches, mosques, community development councils, farmers' associations, fishermen associations, produce merchants and cultural groups.

Librarians are educators; therefore, they can embark on training of rural dwellers on mobilization and development strategies in developed countries. Rural development materials for local consumption can be made available in the audiovisual section of the rural library. Most rural dwellers need information on agricultural production, marketing, buying and selling, banking services and others. In addition the following can be implemented:

- (1) Rural development desk /section should be established in various public libraries. This will readily address the issue of rural development such that information needed by the rural dwellers can be sourced with ease.
- (2) There should be an awareness program by the public library to sensitize the public on materials /research findings and other resources that are available in their libraries
- (3) Donor Agencies and government should be encouraged to sponsor research in rural development. Librarians and other would –be scholars can take this advantage and assist rural dwellers in various communities.
- (4) Librarians in charge of rural development in various public libraries should be allowed to do extension work in form of mobile libraries in rural areas. It is a known fact that Libraries are not common in rural areas whereas rural dwellers need libraries to grow.
- (5) Librarians should not be left out in rural development policy formulation because they are effective partners in rural development.
- (6) More professional librarians should be employed into to various states Library Boards

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