

Factors Affecting Accessibility and Utilisation of Public Library Services Among Rural Dwellers in Nigeria: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the factors affecting the accessibility and utilization of public library services among rural dwellers in Nigeria. However, the findings showed that centralization of library services at the local government headquarters was the main challenge faced by the rural dwellers in seeking and using information from public libraries in the area under study. Closely related, were the absence of library services in rural communities, ineffective library services in rural communities, inadequate or inappropriate information resources, absence of Community Information Resource Centres in rural areas. Other factors identified included language barrier which is generally but not exclusively associated with the literacy levels of the rural dwellers, lack of qualified library personnel, and lack of basic infrastructural facilities in rural communities, as well as economic constraints and poor telecommunication systems.

Key words: Accessibility, utilization, public, library, services, rural, dwellers, Nigeria.

Introduction

Public library services are considered to be paramount that ensure free access to information in areas such as education, employment, health, social services, politics, economy, religion, and agriculture, among others to the community (Oyovwe-Tinuoye, Omeluzor, & Emeka-Ukwu, 2015). They are expected to be at the centre of rural community-based information services (Uzuegbu, 2016). The public libraries are established to provide effective services that can meet the information needs of rural dwellers for sustainable rural development which is an integral part of national development. Without rural development there can never be any meaningful and sustainable national development in a nation.

Accessibility and utilization of public library services among rural dwellers

Public libraries are expected to ensure access to the right information by all categories of individuals in a rural community. What is more, it is a basic right of every citizen to have access to information irrespective of his/her locality (Idiegbeyan-ose et al., 2015). All library policies, activities, operations and resources are built upon the principle of information accessibility (Obasi, 2015). It should be the basic principle of public libraries in rural areas to ensure easy access to the right information by developing effective library policies meant for sustainable rural development. Rural dwellers should not only have access to information, but should also be able to effectively use the information. In line with this, Odefadehan, Akinola and Odefadehan (2016) argue that the identified information need, information availability, as well as information access, cannot make any significant impact on the lives of people, if they do not make use of the information.

Consequently, in the views of Harande (2009) and Onyenachi, Akidi & Onyekweodiri (2015), access to information is critical in that it enables people to know their rights as regards to welfare and supports to deal with social discrimination in society. As such rural dwellers need the relevant skills required for accessing the information that will enable them to fight for their rights. Most rural communities in Nigeria lack basic and social amenities, because the rural dwellers lack access to practical information that can help them in fighting for these rights. Also, access to information and advice should be regarded as the key resources for local people to maintain active and independent lives (Onyenachi, Akidi & Onyekweodiri, 2015).

Obasi (2015) opines that public libraries in Nigeria are the right institutions to ensure free access to information by all members of the community. The public libraries play a key role in collecting, organizing, and exploiting information as well as providing access to a wide range of information sources. They also provide services relevant to the needs of every individual in a society. Thus, public libraries are the reliable institutions that rural dwellers can rely on to have access to and use the relevant information sources and services to satisfy their information needs for sustainable rural development. In every community, people face some particular challenges in accessing and utilizing information from public libraries particularly in the rural areas. These challenges or barriers could be on the part of the library users, information providers, societal norms and values, or the information system itself which need to be addressed.

Absence of library services in rural communities: The absence of library services in rural communities is a challenge faced by rural dwellers not only in Nigeria but in

some other parts of the world. Issak (2000) noted that the existence of public libraries in Africa today is more in favour of urban people. Issak (2000) therefore, argued that there is a need to find a balance in the provision of public library services between urban and rural areas in the continent. In Nigeria, Opara (2008) observed that beside the public libraries established by the state government, very few local government councils established such libraries due to the absence of legislation from house of assemblies requiring them to do so. Daudu and Mohammed (2013) hold the view that public libraries and other information service providers are either non-existent in the rural areas or are performing poorly in publicizing government activities and programmes designed for rural people. Oni et al. (2014) confirmed that library-based information services such as provision of books and reading materials, SDI/CAS, reprographic, reference/referral, and lending services were almost non-existent in some rural areas in the country.

Most of rural communities in Nigeria as noted by Oluwaseunfunmi (2015) and Patience (2015) lack public libraries. Oluwaseunfunmi (2015) reiterated that fewer young adults in the rural areas used public library as a result of unavailability of public library services in the rural areas. Similarly, Ejedafiru and Toyo (2015) and Patience (2015) confirmed that library and information services are lacking in rural communities, despite the fact that rural communities constitute the larger population. Ejedafiru and Toyo's (2015) concurred and they commented that there were great differences between urban and rural dwellers in terms of accessibility to public library services and ability to read and write. Nkechi (2015) espoused the view that the absence of rural libraries has resulted in low levels of literacy and ignorance among rural dwellers. In most cases, the library services are concentrated in semi-urban and urban areas as the remote rural areas are virtually neglected.

Centralisation of public library services: Centralisation of public library services at the local government headquarters' is another challenge faced by rural dwellers in seeking and using information from public libraries. This challenge has been noted even in developed countries. For example, in Africa, Issak (2000) lamented that centralisation in the management of libraries is one of the major challenges confronting the provision of public library services. Harande(2009) had earlier noted that in England access to and the ability to use information and knowledge are not equally distributed between urban and rural communities. The rural residents have to travel a greater distance to reach services in the urban centres. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Arts Council (2014) confirmed that in England, there is a relative scarcity of library services and facilities in the rural communities as compared to the urban centres. Oni et al. (2014) espoused the view that distance could be a barrier to information accessibility.

In Nigeria, Nkechi (2015) observed that the establishment of public libraries was concentrated in urban centres, while rural communities are neglected. Oyeronke (2012) had earlier asserted that the people that public libraries are meant to serve are generally not fully aware of the importance of having such libraries in their communities. Nnadozie et al. (2015) noted that the establishment of rural libraries in Nigeria for the extension of public library services beyond state capitals has been a challenge over the years. In line with this, Momodu (2012) argued that to enable library services to reach the grassroots level, local government councils should establish and finance libraries in their communities. Similarly, Igwe et al. (2015) suggested that public libraries in Nigeria should be given adequate attention, decentralized to local government areas, and empowered to provide core services for the rural dwellers. Similarly, the kinds of library services provided in the areas are perceived to be ineffective considering nature of the rural dwellers.

Ineffective library services in the rural communities: The ineffectiveness of the library services is another major challenge faced by rural dwellers when seeking and using information from public libraries. Etebu (2009) held the view that in Africa, provision of information services was based on traditional methods that are only appropriate for literate people which may not be appropriate for illiterate rural dwellers. This is because majority of rural dwellers are used to oral tradition. Therefore, Etebu (2009) argued that unless information providers assess and recognize their target groups and devise the best means, they cannot disseminate meaningful information for sustainable development to rural dwellers. Momodu (2012) concurred that due to this depressing challenge, most rural libraries cannot meet with the information needs of their communities. Momodu (2012) further suggested that the libraries can disseminate information to the rural populace by way of organizing exhibitions, giving lectures and talks (Momodu, 2012).

Similarly, Nnadozie et al. (2015) noted and commented that the manual system of library service delivery, which is still prevalent in Nigeria, is fraught with shortcomings that made the system to be inadequate in meeting the challenges of information services needed in this millennium. According to Agodi and Obasi (2016), this was because public libraries in Nigeria lacked well defined programmes and policies. Agodi and Obasi (2016) added that this negated the libraries from rendering effective and efficient information services to enhance economic and educational development in Nigeria. Likewise, the information resources available in the libraries where they exist are grossly inadequate and inappropriate to the needs of the rural dwellers.

Inadequate/inappropriate information resources: The inadequacy/inappropriateness of information resources meant for rural communities have been a challenge faced by rural dwellers in accessing and using information to satisfy their needs from public libraries. Nyana (2009) observed that the major hindrances to effective provision of information and services in Africa were inappropriate collections, high levels of illiteracy, and lack of incorporating oral tradition in the provision of information services among others. Obinyan et al. (2011) noted that in Nigeria for years, public libraries in rural areas have been associated with low patronage resulting from the inappropriateness of their collection for the information needs of their clientele. Research carried out by Chinwe et al. (2014) and Ejedafiru (2015) showed that lack of adequate and relevant information resources and services and absence of literacy programmes in the rural areas were among the major challenges affecting the provision of public library services in rural areas. Similarly, Salman et al. (2017) reported that disorganized and out of date library materials, inadequate information sources, resources and facilities, non-functional library catalogues were among the challenges affecting access and use of the library services. Closely related is the absence of community information resource centers in remote rural areas.

Absence of Community Information Resource Centres: Research conducted by Maepa (2000) in South Africa found that only 13.6% of the respondents indicated the availability of library or Community Information Centres in their villages, 80.1% indicated unavailability of library or Community Information Centres in their villages, and 6.3% indicated their unawareness on the availability or otherwise. In Nigeria, Igwe et al. (2015) noted that one of the major challenging scenarios confronting the provision of library and information services is the absence of community libraries and information centres.

Similarly, Igwe et al. (2015) buttressed that Community Information Centres (CIC) are hardly seen in Nigeria for providing information services to rural dwellers. Igwe et al. (2015) claimed that where they exist, the dilapidated nature and state of information and human resources, as well as poor infrastructural facilities, will not enable them to meet the information needs of the rural dwellers. The language used in the publication of information resources in African countries is also a barrier to their accessibility by rural dwellers.

Language Barrier: Among the problems encountered by rural libraries is the inadequacy of material in local languages. In South Africa, research conducted by Maepa (2000) reiterated that most of the books are published in English language when, in actual fact, most of the rural populace cannot even read and write in their

local dialect. In Nigeria, Kari (2007), Kamba (2009) and Idiegbeyan-Ose et al. (2015) are of the view that the majority of rural dwellers lack access to basic information services due to language barriers. Momodu (2012) pointed out that among the challenges encountered by rural libraries was the inadequacy of information sources in local languages. This was because most of the library books are published in English language when most of the rural dwellers cannot even read and writes in their native languages (Momodu2012). Furthermore, studies by Chinwe et al. (2014) and Ejedafiru (2015) observed that language barrier was one of the major challenges affecting the provision of public library services in rural areas. Moreover, study carried out by Oni et al. (2014) reported that language was one of the major barriers to information accessibility among rural inhabitants. Hence, Anie (2014) suggested that translation of relevant materials into local languages that can best be understood by rural public library users should be undertaken.

Lack of qualified library personnel: The availability of qualified library personnel in public libraries significant in the provision of effective information resources and services that can meet the information needs of the rural dwellers. However, Opara (2008), stressed that this is not achievable in Nigeria as a result of poor conditions of service in the country, which is so bad that in some states, public libraries that ought to be headed by professionals are instead headed by para-professionals or even non-professionals including the branch libraries in some local government areas. This challenge is not only encountered in Nigeria but in the entire African continent. Issak (2000) observed that lack of human resources that could run the activities of public libraries professionally has been identified as one of the major challenges that hamper the provision and utilization of public library services.

In Nigeria, Abdulkarim (2010) noted that most public libraries lack adequate and professional staff needed to manage their affairs effectively and efficiently. A study carried out by John-Okeke and Owoye (2011) on overview of public library services in Lagos State, Nigeria. The findings of the study revealed that generally libraries in the local government areas are headed by non-professionals librarians who lacked the necessary qualifications to operate the libraries. Momodu (2012) confirmed that lack of qualified personnel is one of the problems often encountered in running the activities of public libraries in Nigeria. In this regard, Igiamoh and Ogunwemimo (2013) argued that unless public librarians are adequately and properly trained with the necessary skills and knowledge that will prepare them for the task ahead, they will never be efficient in discharging their individual responsibilities.

In addition, Esievo and Adewole (2014) showed that inadequate professional staff was among the challenges that hampered the roles of library in rural

communities. Equally, Oni et al. (2014) also showed that inadequate personnel was among the major problems faced by information officers in disseminating information to rural inhabitants. A similar research by Onyenachi et al. (2015) revealed that inadequate human resources were among the major factors that militated against the provision of library services in rural communities. Likewise, Salman et al. (2017) noted that poor attitude of staff and lack of professionally qualified library staff were among the major hindrances that have been affecting the accessibility and use of library services in the country.

Poor infrastructural facilities: Rural infrastructural facilities are essential in the provision and utilization of public library services in the rural areas. They facilitate the provision of the services on the part of public libraries. Similarly, rural infrastructural facilities facilitate easy access to library services by the library users. However, in Ethiopia, Tsehay (2014) undertook research with a focus on health information seeking among rural women. The research found that the rural women under study find it difficult to access maternal and health information due to poor infrastructure in the rural areas.

In Nigeria, Momodu (2012) observed that the unavailability of social amenities like electricity, good water supply, hospital and community health centres and schools often discourage people from accepting jobs in rural areas. Consequently, this adversely affects public libraries from attracting qualified personnel to work in rural libraries. Chinwe et al. (2014) in their study confirmed that professional librarians resist job offers by Community Centres due to their rural locations.

From another perspective, Anie (2014) pointed out that a successful library automation and use of ICTs depend largely on uninterrupted power supply which is lacking in the rural areas. Kari (2007), Kamba (2009) and Idiegbeyan-Ose et al. (2015) noted and commented that the majority of rural dwellers lack access to basic information services due to unstable electricity and high cost of ICTs. Several studies (Ugwuanyi & Chukwuemeka, 2013; Egbe, 2014; Anie, 2014) showed that rural areas in Nigeria lack virtually all infrastructural and social amenities like roads, medical and health facilities, portable water, and electricity among others. Emojorho and Ukpebor (2013) emphasised that the majority of the public libraries have no Internet services. Research by Oni et al. (2014) revealed that slow internet response and erratic power supply were among the major problems affecting information dissemination in rural communities.

Research by Chinwe et al. (2014), Ejedafiru (2015) and Onyenachi et al. (2015) found that lack of physical and basic infrastructure were among the major challenges affecting the provision of public library services in rural areas. Patience

(2015) buttressed that apart from the problems of little or no education, lack of good access roads, electricity, and pipe borne water, industries and other social amenities were also among the challenges that hindered effective dissemination of information in rural communities. Likewise, a research by Agodi and Joy (2016) revealed that inadequate infrastructural facilities were among the major challenges affecting the provision and utilisation of public library services in Nigeria. Research by Ezema (2016) reported that lack of power supply has been a challenge among rural women in Nigeria to access electronic information from the radio, TV and Internet. Salman et al. (2017) in their research concurred that among the major challenges that have been affecting access and use of the library services in Nigeria were irregular electric supply.

Economic constraint: Poverty and illiteracy were considered as the major barriers to rural development in any nation (Harande 2009). Due to abject poverty, illiteracy and poor living conditions, people in rural areas find it difficult to abandon their daily activities for survival and visit public libraries to seek and use information. These had significantly resulted in information hunger among rural communities in most of developing countries (Harande 2009). In line with this, Oni et al. (2014) argued that proper dissemination of information for agricultural and rural communities is essential in the fight against poverty and deprivation. Studies from Tanzania (Kiondo 1998), Nigeria (Kari 2007; Kamba2009; and Idiegbeyan-Ose et al. 2015) indicated that the majority of rural dwellers lack access to basic information services due to their low income levels. This has significantly been a barrier to access to basic information among majority of people in the rural areas.

Similarly, in Nigeria, research by Chinwe et al. (2014) and Ejedafiru (2015) found that poverty was one of the major challenges affecting the provision and utilisation of public library services in rural areas. Agodi and Obasi (2016) concurred that the poor economic, educational and political situation in Nigeria had over the years been the cause of public library services to decline. Consequently, this had led to poor perception and patronage of public library services by the society (Obasi 2016).

Conclusion

The literature established that there were a number of factors affecting the accessibility and utilization of public library services among rural dwellers in Nigeria. Some of the challenges include high illiteracy levels, poor infrastructure, poor publicity of government activities and programmes. Some information sources such as computers, libraries, and information centres were claimed to have been completely lacking in most of the rural areas.

Recommendations

1. Public libraries should be adequately funded by their respective state governments to provide effective information services there is a need for the provision of adequate, relevant and current information sources including oral information sources in the branch libraries to meet the information needs of rural dwellers. Not only should that but they should also be in formats and languages best understood by the rural dwellers.
2. There is a need for public libraries to integrate oral information sources such as town criers, extension agents and gatekeepers in disseminating information to rural dwellers.
3. Similarly, Community Information Resource Centres and Viewing Centres with effective ICTs and other audio visual facilities should be established for the extension of the services in rural villages.
4. Public libraries should be adequately funded to provide effective information services.
5. Effective policies should be put in place to guide the provision of public library services in rural communities for sustainable rural development.
6. Adequate and well-trained staff should be recruited and the existing ones should be given special training and retraining to work in rural areas, through academic programmes, conferences, workshops, seminars and other induction trainings.

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