

# **Extending Library Services to Non-Literate Farmers in Ogun State, Nigeria: Problems and Prospects**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the issue of extending library services to non-literate farmers in Nigeria with particular reference to Ogun State. The existing type of library services, which are urban-based and book-oriented, becomes questionable where the majority of the people are not literate. The role of public library is discussed. Suggestions made on how library services could be extended to non-literate farmers through the establishment of rural libraries and the use of inexpensive audio-visual materials to reach the targeted audience as well as a more pro-active type of service to the rural populace.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is a developing country where more than 50 percent of its dwellers are illiterate in the Western sense. Their main occupation is farming. The task of producing food to feed the country's teeming population has been largely serviced by them. They operate under many limitations and handicaps, but still they persist. They live in the rural areas and constitute the backbone of our agricultural economy. Most of them are very poor and they have no access to good roads, portable water supply, and electricity, even though they pay their taxes like those in urban areas. Discussing rural dwellers, Ikonta (1986) once asked, "How can we teach them? How can we improve their condition so they can continue their invaluable service? How can we meet their leisure needs and thus improve their mental health? How can we improve the quality of their contributions? How can we make their efforts less tedious?" In the same vein, Seymour and Layne (1979) lamented, ". . .how do you make library services available to people who do not have a motivation and characteristics of conventional library users? How do you reach people who, if they think about their community library at all, view it as an alien and fearful world which may be perhaps accessible to their children in school, but certainly not to them?" These are the questions this paper tries to find answers to in bringing library services to the illiterate farmer.

## **The Role of the Public Library**

The main function of the public library is to acquire, select, organize, and disseminate information through books and informational materials, as may be required by the users. The public library has, among others, the responsibility of enhancing the education and social lives of the non-literate farmers. It is expected of the public library to make its services available to all categories of people in the community and thereby be accessible for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, color, nationality, age, sex, religion, language, status, or educational attainment.

Public libraries ought to serve Nigerian farmers more than any other type of libraries because they are supposed to serve all people who need their resources. The Secretary of the British Library Association (1942) wrote the following about public libraries: "The library service exists to serve . . . to give without question, favor, or limitation. It is an instrument for the promotion of all or any of the activities of its readers." Therefore, they should promote the activity of farmers who constitute a major percentage of Nigerian population.

## **Rural Libraries**

It has been argued that the library is a literacy-based facility and because of this, the rural illiterate society cannot benefit from its services. But Ochai (1987) argued he does not believe library provision to the rural community should wait until a certain degree of literacy is achieved in the rural areas. The issue here centers on the resources of such a library, since, as illiterates, the traditional bookish library has no reality for the rural community. Various ways have been used in the community to extend library services beyond the urban centers to the rural areas. Some of these extension services include mobile libraries, book boxes, postal services, and boat services. Oдини (1990) expressed the view that one common denominator in all these attempts is the end results are the same, that the benefit from rural library programming in spite of their numerical superiority. Aboluwarin (1998) advocated for a functional education program for farmers as a way of alleviating the problem of illiteracy. He suggested improved library services for farmers and extension workers. There is the need for public libraries to refuse to be content with their age-long role as repositories of knowledge and ideas only and become dynamic national institutions, which are vigorously and systematically involved in the development process. Omoniwa (1986) argued librarians and libraries must reject reference to them as mere custodians of knowledge and information and regard themselves as part of the "action center" in the development process.

## **Library Services in Ogun State**

Ogun State is one of the three states created from the old Western Region in 1976. There was no public library system at inception. What passed as pub-

lic libraries were mere reading rooms which were located in the major urban areas of Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Sagamu, and Ilaro.

In the course of sharing the assets of the old Western Region by its three constituent States (i.e. Ogun, Ondo, and Oyo States), some of the book collections of the old Western Regional Library Services were passed on to Ogun State. This collection formed the nucleus of the Ogun State Library Services that started as, and is still, a branch of the Ministry of Education in spite of the promulgation of the Ogun State Library Edict of 1991 (Agboola/Salaam 1999). The library occupied temporary quarters from 1991-1997 when it then moved to its permanent building along Kuto Road.

Since its inception, the State has had a Library Board between 1997 and 1998 whose presence was not felt as a result of administrative bottleneck. There has never been a director of library services. Instead the director of educational services oversees the affairs of the library. In the absence of professional leadership, there is little that can be achieved as far as the establishment of library services in Ogun State is concerned. The only public library in Ogun State at present is the Simeon Adebo Library in Abeokuta. It has no branch library in any other town or city in the state. Though some of the twenty local governments in the state have tried to set up what can at best be called "reading rooms," there are no communication links between the State Library and the reading rooms of the various local governments.

### **Library Services to Non-literate Farmers**

There are many things that librarians can do to help the farmers in Ogun State. Various governments in Nigeria have tried to promote farming by encouraging the people to go back to the farm. We have had the "Operation Feed the Nation" (OFN), which was launched during the Obasanjo military regime. The "Green Revolution" was launched during the civilian regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, "Better Life for Rural Women" during the Babangida regime and the "Family Support Programme" (FSP) of Abacha regime. The larger part of the present government's budget is on agriculture.

Various radio and television stations in the country have programs on agriculture used in encouraging farmers in their environment about the what, how, where, and when to plant a particular crop in the year. The librarian could monitor the agricultural programs that are beneficial to his catchment area and bring the attention of the people to them. He should publicize the time these programs are broadcast so they can tune in to them. Almost every farmer has a "bush radio" and they do listen to Agric Extension Programmes relayed by the Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation (OGBC) for Ogun State Agricultural Development Program (OGADEP) and such like institution. The recorded extension program could be classified and made available on request after publicizing such services.

The existence of Television Viewing Centres (TVC) in many communities in Ogun State is an indication that, given the will, information provision to the rural community could be developed to include entertainment and enlightenment in agriculture and health which are most important ingredients for rural development. Programs focusing on pest control, use of various kinds of fertilizer, mechanical equipment, cross-breeding, crop diversification and so on could be organized. The librarian with the assistance of the agricultural extension services workers could make life better for the farmers.

## **Marketing Approach**

Considering the cost implication of audio-visual aids and their use, Ochai (1987) advocated for a new strategy-a marketing strategy which should not only aim at promoting the library services or demonstrating the benefits of the library as a valuable community asset, but should also prepare the minds of the community toward the acceptance of innovation. In so doing, according to him, the library would have to take cognizance of other likely competitors in the provision of information to the rural community. For these people, the family or clan meeting, the market place, the town crier and personal contacts serve as information sources. People would only come to the library for information if the benefits of doing so are known to exceed that of the traditional sources.

Now, instead of sitting on an executive chair in an air-conditioned office, the librarian now goes to the field and “sells” his wares to the public. He has to play the role of an information consultant, broker, and linkage, (i.e. connecting people with sources of information and cooperating with others such as the agricultural extension workers in the provision of information.) In this type of set up, the library plays the role of an information and referral center. This would allow people with problems to go to a central source and find information or be referred to sources that would be useful in meeting identified needs and problems.

## **Conclusion/Recommendation**

The public library services in the Ogun State have for a long time been in a state of neglect. The non-literate in the society have not been adequately provided for as far as relevant library services are concerned. Since the traditional book oriented library has little relevance to the rural community, the librarian should bring his services to the non-literate through the use of audio-visual materials and simple picture books. The librarian should not sit and wait until users come but should go out to the field and “sell” his wares to the public. The librarian should also liaise with farming extension workers to boost agriculture in the state.

The Ogun State government should, as a matter of urgency, employ a professionally qualified director of library services, give adequate support to the

library board, and release adequate fund for the smooth running of the library services in the state. These would go a long way in improving public library services to rural dwellers in the state.

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