

# **The Role of Rural Libraries in Information Dissemination to Nigerian Farmers**

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## **An Abstract**

This paper traces past efforts of Nigeria's government in improving agricultural productivity. It opines that failure of earlier attempts in realizing this objective is partially attributable to failure of integrating library services into such plans. While stressing the roles of libraries in national development, it laments the deliberate neglect of libraries by planners and highlights the traditional roles of libraries and their expected roles in agriculture development. A functional education program for farmers is also suggested as a way of alleviating the problem of illiteracy. The paper also takes a look at the role of libraries as distributors of extension materials and not just as passive providers of information. Finally, suggestions are also given for improved library services for farmers and extension workers.

## **Introduction**

Immediately after independence in the 1960's and 70's, many third world countries in Africa focused their developmental priorities on how to augment productivity of agricultural small holders, increase encouragement of the production of agricultural commodities by large scale farm estates with commercial capital, and involve more participation of the indigenous people in commercial and industrial activities.

A lot of these developing countries embarked on gigantic programs of agricultural reorganization backed by new agricultural research and extension services. For example, in the western region of Nigeria (now comprising five states of the federation: Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Ogun, and Ekiti), established farm settlement schemes in selected rural towns throughout the region, not only to increase food production but also to speed up rural development. Again, several attempts have been made by the Nigerian Federal Government to boost agricultural productivity. The operation, Feed the Nation Campaign, by the Obasanjo regime, the Green Revolution, introduced during the Second Republic, and the Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), introduced by the Babangida administration were among such measures. The recent establishment of three new Universities of Agriculture in Nigeria is also an attempt to boost agricultural productivity due to the perceived failure of the existing

research institutes and faculties of agriculture in the conventional universities to meet this need. Sight also must not be lost of the rural focus of the defunct Better Life Program of the last military administration and its successor, Family Support Program, both largely rural based.

Following closely after the Universities of Agriculture is the establishment of the National Land Development Agency (NALDA), charged with the responsibility of making land available for farming purposes in over all the 800 local governments to which the country is currently divided. The emphasis of the government in rural development is not surprising in view of the fact that more than 50% of Nigeria's population and in most developing countries is engaged in farming.

However, in spite of these laudable steps and others by the government, very little success has been recorded in agricultural productivity. One of the reasons for this is non-continuing programs by succeeding governments. This is aptly argued by Adedipe (1989) who said:

“Although these agencies, programs, and projects are well intentioned, the clear impression given by the frequent changes in policy matters is that each succeeding government does not commit itself to continuity of programs....This is to such an unfortunate extent that succeeding government have come to equate progress with the creation of new institutions and programs.”

### **The Neglect of Libraries**

A local adage says, “When the head is empty, the belly is emptier.” This adage shows the basic relationship between information and food production. As already stated, looking at various attempts made at improving agriculture in Nigeria, no serious effort has been made for the integration of library services into the scheme.

This is attributed to ignorance of leaders and planners on the role the library can play in national development and in boosting agricultural productivity as argued by Abifarin (1996). Again, Akinyotu, lamenting on this trend (1982) wrote:

“.....No Nigerian government either colonial or indigenous has so far shown any concrete awareness or demonstrated by substantial appreciation the vital role of libraries in the society.”

Aleman (1982) also shares the same view when he wrote:

“The essential first step towards library development is an appreciation by the government of the vital role of the library services in national development.”

Unfortunately, this is still the deplorable situation of Nigerian library development. Stressing the importance of libraries and information in national development, an article, “Information in the Third World,” Iraset Paex-Urdaneta (1989) said:

“The governments of several developing countries undertook the organization of national development but without promoting decisive actions to foster, at the same time an adequate level of awareness about the use and value of information. This explains why, in these countries the notion of information for development had a weak influence (if any) on national planning and the modernization and expansion of local industries.”

In theory, Nigeria’s federal and state Ministries of Agriculture are expected to have libraries that should at least be of benefit not only to agricultural officers but also to extension workers as well. Only a few such libraries are in existence and are poorly stocked and grossly under-staffed with no professional librarians manning them as observed by Nekwe (1995). Ibekwe (1988) rightly attributed this failure of agricultural productivity to lack of provision of libraries at federal and state levels when he wrote:

“The role of these non-existent libraries in the States Ministries is an important one for agriculture. This is a classic example of a role that has remained in the wish category for decades, a situation that has resulted in extension agents operating without adequate information. This has no doubt contributed to the much-public failure of the extension services in many states of Nigeria.”

This view is further amplified by Njoku (1978) that it would be unrealistic to expect extension workers to achieve any appreciable system primarily because of their nature and modes of operation. It is evident that the Ministries have no effective link with universities and other research institutions from where research findings flow. This is one area the library would be useful if provided to carry out the function.

Large agricultural production requires the use of technology whose understanding requires some basic knowledge. Unless the rural farmers and their advisers can bring the results of research institutes into practical form to their doorsteps, are well-informed about the latest agricultural techniques through the provision of well stocked and well staffed libraries, no meaningful success will be recorded in boosting agricultural productivity.

### **The Need For Functional Education For Farmers**

In Nigeria, according to Aboyade (1987), a majority of most peasant farmers who live in rural areas can neither read nor write. They therefore depend solely on whatever information they are able to get from extension workers in view of the enormous roles expected of them. For example, land has to get prepared at the right time of the year, seeds have to be procured, sown and taken care of. Harvests have to be stored for future use. So the success of agriculture depends on the understanding by the farmers of these processes. In addition, the farmer has to learn new techniques of doing things and adapt them to his traditional methods. To achieve success, the modern day farmer should not only be a tiller of the land but also a prudent businessman and technician. He should know when to expect the rains; what pre- and post- harvest pests he has to fight against.

A lot of this information is unfortunately available in written form, but a majority of Nigerian farmers cannot understand them because of the low literacy level. Research findings are useless until they are eventually applied by farmers. The fact that the majority of the farmers are illiterates should not be a deterrent to making them perform.

This is a view shared by John (1994). To this end, this paper is suggesting the introduction of a functional literacy program to be held in designated centers of Farmer Training Institutes in which the library will be greatly involved.

The program will place emphasis on literacy participation, group discussion, and actual awareness by participants. The main focus of the program should be on agriculture. Farmers should be taught to read with understanding specially prepared agricultural literature aimed at increasing their produce. They should be able to react appropriately to their produce. They should respond accordingly to the literature they read in order to adopt innovations on the farm, to acquire writing skills, and to solve simple arithmetic problems that they may come across in everyday life. Once they are functionally literate, they will be able to prepare their own input needs.

Correspondence courses linked with radio and television broadcasts can also be organized. All these efforts must be supplemented by rural library services.

### **The Role of Library Services**

Improved services should come by improving the library facilities and by providing trained librarians to collect, organize and make available relevant materials. The library should now move away from its traditional role of custodian of educational materials to complement formal education to that of meeting the expected functional education.

Libraries should function as agencies which fill the gap between those involved in education and research and those expected to apply the results of the successful research. Another task of the library is the collection of data on farmers' information needs and the problems they encounter. Rural libraries should be well stocked with books mostly on agriculture, farmers' primers, circulars and handbooks in both English and vernacular languages intended to inform field staff and farmers on latest agricultural innovations and policies.

Compared with the developed countries, published materials in all fields of knowledge in the developing world are few. However, the low publications' rates and the high illiteracy rate should not be used as an excuse for poor library services to the farmers in the rural areas. The library should identify itself with developmental efforts by producing abstracts and summaries of its latest arrivals and draw the attention of extension workers and farmers to them.

### **Libraries as Distributors of Extension Materials**

Extension materials are simplified literature on how to improve farming. Apart from stocking these materials, the libraries should assist in their distribution. This can be carried out by establishing liaisons with community halls and managers in villages and depositing the literature there for transmission to farmers.

Another way of carrying out this distributory role is to send the materials to school libraries with instructions so students can choose and read them to their farming parents.

## **Suggestions**

The traditional role of libraries and their expected roles in boosting food production is enormous. In view of the expected roles of libraries to rural farmers, it is important that appropriate authorities should accord libraries their well deserved priority. This can be accomplished by providing adequate funds for their services. It is equally important to employ qualified librarians to run them. They will ensure that the materials are cataloged, classified and arranged in a manner in which the farmers and their clients will be able to utilize them effectively. In such libraries, a patron should be able to accomplish a task independently.

For now, the state of Nigeria's library development in general is very poor at the federal, state, and local governmental levels. It is therefore essential for every state government to establish well- staffed, adequately stocked, and regularly financed libraries for extension workers and farmers.

As mentioned earlier, in Nigeria there is a crucial need for the establishment of a National Agricultural Library, as it has great promise since the country has three Universities of Agriculture. A National Agricultural Library will ensure that agricultural information is effectively acquired, organized, stored, and disseminated to all spheres of agriculture. It will also serve as the initiator and motivator of rural and extension library development by formulating policies on agricultural information, generation, and dissemination at the federal, state, and local government levels. Training of manpower for rural libraries will also be one of its functions.

## **Conclusion**

Today in Nigeria rural library service is in a very deplorable state. There is a perceived deliberate neglect of libraries due to the ignorance of planners on the role of libraries in national and agricultural development. The omission of the provision of rural libraries in agricultural planning by past Nigerian regimes contributed somehow to the failure of such laudable programs.

Functional education is suggested as a way of educating the farmers who are mostly illiterates as a way of helping them to achieve a reasonable degree of literacy. To achieve success, the traditional role of libraries has to be complemented by their expected roles in boosting agricultural productivity in the Nigerian context. For this, there is the need for rural libraries

to extend their role to distribution of extension materials through community halls' managers and school libraries in order to extend their sphere of influence as far reaching to farmers in remote areas is concerned.

It is important that tremendous support should be given by government at all levels in ensuring adequate funding for acquisition, employment of qualified staff, and provision of other resources to revive this dying situation.

Rural libraries on their part should be proactive by reaching out to potential users rather than passively waiting to be consulted by the few literate users. The role of the rural library should also extend beyond lending. They should strive to work with extension workers by being involved in the distribution of free extension materials through school libraries, community centers, churches, mosques, village heads, and other rural institutions which attract gatherings of farmers.

The rural librarian should not see himself as a white collar worker manning an elitist organization. Rather, he should see himself as a sort of "barefoot librarian" who is able to relate well with his rural community and come to be relied upon as a veritable source of information on rural life. More than anything else, this will no doubt demonstrate the usefulness of his library to the community and help to cultivate the idea of the library as a permanent extension agency always there to be consulted in the absence of the extension workers.

Finally, it is believed that if the recommendations suggested are adopted and fully implemented, failure to boost agricultural productivity in Nigeria will surely be a thing of the past.

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