

# **Rural Information Supply and Nigerian Agricultural Libraries**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the roles Nigerian agricultural universities and research libraries could play in the supply of agricultural information to the rural areas of the country. It posits that in the absence of effective rural library services, the existing agricultural university and research libraries should work closely with extension agencies to bring agricultural and other vital information nearer to rural dwellers. The nature of information required by the rural dwellers is examined, bearing in mind that most of the projected beneficiaries are not literate in the western sense and therefore need to rely on oral traditions more than the written word. Recommendations are proffered for the integration of library services into the extension programs of the universities and research institutes so as to bring development information nearer to the rural dweller.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is a third world country characterized by insufficient agricultural production to ensure food security for its teeming population of more than 100 million. Over 75 percent of the population live in rural areas and are largely engaged in subsistence farming. As a result, there is widespread rural poverty. This poverty is not only limited to material things, but also includes information poverty. Rural dwellers hardly have access to modern infrastructures such as pipe-borne water, electricity, health services, good roads and information facilities, such as rural libraries, which are taken for granted in more developed societies.

To tackle this endemic problem of rural poverty and deprivation, the federal, state and local governments in the country have, over the years, put in place various measures to ensure improvement in rural living conditions with a view of increasing agricultural production. Among such measures taken are: the establishment of ministries of agriculture and rural development at both federal and state levels; several agricultural training institutions at the tertiary level, including faculties of agriculture universities to train the

required manpower; and agricultural extension agencies to work closely with the rural farmers to improve their farming techniques.

In spite of all these measures, rural poverty has continued to stare the country in the face despite the billions of dollars the country makes from its almost two million barrels a day export of crude oil to western countries. Most of these earnings are taken by the military and political leaders and hardly affect positively the lives of the rural dwellers. In the final 15 years of military rule, some cosmetic attempts at rural poverty alleviation were made. They included the “Better Life for Rural Dwellers Program” and the “Rural Family Support Program” (both of which were scrapped by the succeeding regimes), and recently, the “Poverty Alleviation Program” of the current civilian administration.

Also, in the late 1980s, the government, in acknowledgment of the failure of its rural development programs, established three agricultural universities in the country’s three ecological zones with the intent to improve agricultural training, research, and production. However, almost two decades into the establishment of these programs, very little has been achieved in transforming the lives of Nigeria’s rural dwellers.

It is a well-known fact that information is at the heart of development. Consequently, the information and resource rich societies of the west have developed at an incredible rate in comparison to the poor countries of the south which are wallowing in abject poverty and debt (Hughes, 1991). In view of the importance of information to development, and the failure of the conventional rural library idea to succeed in this country, this paper sets out to examine how the Nigerian agricultural universities and research libraries can fit into the existing programs of the extension projects for the provision of agricultural and developmental information to rural dwellers.

## **The Public Library Scene**

Before the area now known as Nigeria was formally colonized by Britain in the late 19th century, the culture of the Nigerian people was largely oral. The only exception was in parts of the north where contact with the Arabs since the 11th century lead to the introduction of Arabic scripts mainly for religious purposes. This notwithstanding, the idea of the written word and the library was completely alien to most Nigerian people. With the beginning of British colonialism, however, western education was introduced through Christian missionaries and was embraced warmly by the south, and reluctantly by the north. Alongside the introduction of western education was the establishment of libraries mainly to cater to the needs of the expatriate colonial officers and the few educated elite in Lagos, then the capital of the country (Nnaji, 1986).

The main impetus for the establishment of public libraries in Nigeria was when the 1953 UNESCO/Federal Government of Nigeria organized the "First Regional Seminar on the Development of Public Libraries in Africa" (UNESCO, 1954). As a result of this seminar, the first public library law in the country was passed in the Eastern Region of Nigeria in 1955 (Nigeria, 1963). This was followed by the launching of a bookmobile in 1958 and the establishment of public libraries in the major cities of Eastern Nigeria. The other two regions, the Western and the Northern, followed suit with the establishment of public libraries in their capital cities and bookmobiles to serve the rural areas and schools.

The proliferation of states in Nigeria in the last 40 years from just three regions in 1960 to 36 states and 774 local governments in the year 2000 has helped to increase the number of public library authorities. Virtually each state now has its own public library board charged with the responsibility of establishing statewide library services. These services are, as they were in the 1960s, mainly limited to the capital cities. The 774 local governments that are nearer to the rural populace provide few library services due to poor funding and lack of interest. The effect of this is that a rural library in the truest sense of the word is hard to find in Nigeria today. Gone are the days of bookmobiles serving the rural communities as in the 1960s, since even the public libraries in the cities find it hard to survive because of the government's seeming disinterest in library provision.

Rather than pay attention to rural libraries, the government has concentrated on building other information infrastructures such as rural television viewing centers, community halls, and the extension of radio broadcast transmission to rural areas. Evidently, these information facilities preferred by the government are seen as sufficient to fulfill the information needs of the rural areas.

## **The Nigerian Agricultural Library Scene**

Over the years, Nigeria has invested greatly in agricultural research. This is evident from the number of agricultural research institutes in existence in the country which surpass the number of research institutes in all other fields combined; at last count they numbered eighteen. The history of agricultural research and extension in Nigeria has been adequately documented by Okigbo (1981) in a report commissioned by the National Committee on Green Revolution. Also, Aina and Adedigba (1989) gave a very succinct history of agricultural libraries in Nigeria from 1921 to 1995, and the story has remained largely unchanged since.

Although mostly situated in urban areas, the geographical spread of the agricultural universities and research institutes, together with their libraries,

puts them in a position to serve as nodal points for nation-wide agricultural information dissemination. By virtue of their mandate, the agricultural universities and research institutes are expected to have extension projects in the villages situated within the ecological zones they cover. This arrangement affords them the opportunity to make their presence felt in remote villages throughout the nooks and crannies of the country far more than any other formal information enlightenment system can cover.

Agricultural extension work in Nigeria largely entails the passing on of predominately oral information, and the demonstration of new farming techniques to farmers. This is done through the production of simple, illustrated leaflets, one-to-one contact with farmers, the use of the broadcast media and the village communication system. This existing agricultural extension set-up makes it feasible for agricultural libraries to collaborate with extension workers in the supply of the print and audio-visual requirements of the farming population in the rural communities.

This approach to rural information provision is in realization of the yawning gap in Nigeria's agricultural and rural development efforts, which have been identified as the failure to successfully pass on the results of agricultural research to rural dwellers. According to Adedipe (1989), "One significant gap in agricultural research and rural development efforts is the broken link between research results on the one hand, and the utilization of such results for improving agriculture, enhancing the economic base of the farming families, and the expected consequential development of rural Nigeria on the other hand." Bridging this gap will involve the utilization of all of the existing information infrastructure available including library service based on community-accepted information seeking behavior.

## **Information Needs of Rural Communities**

Over the years, several studies have been carried out on the information needs of Nigeria's rural communities both at the micro and macro levels. In one of the few books available on the subject in Nigeria, Aboyade (1987a) describes the rural population as largely agricultural and pastoral entities whose stock in trade is subsistence production of food, and who need information for the purpose of improving their farming methods.

In two other studies, Aboyade (1967b) and Atinmo and Dawha (1996) also identify the information needs of rural dwellers. According to these studies, rural dwellers need information for the enhancement of their economic status, improvement of their occupational efficiency, enhancement of their employment opportunities and solution of their day-to-day problems regarding issues such as housing, water supply, environmental sanitation, refuse disposal, etc. The studies also explored the potential of rural libraries

as the solution of rural day-to-day problems and reached the conclusion that the concept of rural libraries as known in western countries may not work in the present Nigerian milieu. Rather, they argue, librarians should make themselves part of the struggle for rural emancipation by exploring other means of reaching their potential clientele directly or indirectly. This includes involvement in the work of other information agencies such as extension workers and the public broadcast media.

One major constraint in rural library provision in Nigeria is the literacy level of rural dwellers. As stated earlier, more than 75 percent of the Nigerian population live in rural areas. In addition, the literacy level in Nigeria is less than 50 percent and the majority of those who are illiterate live in rural areas. Owing to their illiteracy, most rural dwellers are more comfortable with the oral tradition that, over the ages, has been their main medium of communication.

The effects of illiteracy on rural library provision and use has been well-flogged in the professional literature as reflected in the contributions of Iwuji (1991), Odi (1996), Olden (1985), Amadi (1981), Makinta and Dawha (1992), Aboyade (1987b) and Ochai (1995) among others. A common strand in their writings is the need to integrate the oral tradition into the rural library system so as to make the library more relevant to the targeted audience. Arguments have also been advanced as to the non-relevance of libraries to rural needs because of low literacy levels. This notwithstanding, the authors agreed that it is important that suitably packaged information reach the rural communities as soon as possible.

The question raised in these findings is how to best integrate the written and oral forms of communication needed by the rural communities, and how to make them easily accessible. At present, such information requirements are partially met by extension workers in matters relating to farming and health, with the local radio service serving as a supplementary information source. The snag in this arrangement is that these services may be untimely as rural dwellers have access to them at infrequent intervals. How can they be made permanent features of the rural areas so that rural dwellers may have access to the information needed for day-to-day activities?

### **The Librarian and the Extension Worker**

The primary function of the library, and consequently the librarian, is to assemble, organize, and make available information materials for those who need them. The extension worker, on the other hand, takes information to those who need it. Both the librarian and the extension worker are in the information chain. However, the main difference between the two is that while the former has a wide array of information to offer, he waits for his

clients to come to him, while the latter, though armed with limited information, takes it to where it is needed.

Studies on how Nigerian rural dwellers obtain their information have shown that the formal library set-up plays little or no role in their information gathering habits (Atinmo & Dawha, 1996). Rather, they rely on friends and colleagues, the broadcast media, churches and mosques, hospitals and clinics, social clubs, traditional medicine practitioners and extension workers. Of all these groups, the extension workers are held in highest esteem because they affect, in one way or another, the economic life and health of the rural people. Therefore, extension workers, working closely with librarians, have the potential to positively affect the rural information supply, making more information available to the rural people.

In agricultural institutions employing librarians and extension workers, there should be collaboration between the two in delivering information to rural dwellers. By this, it is not expected that agricultural libraries should set up rural libraries per se. Rather, they should work closely with extension workers to provide materials for on-the-spot support of extension work in selected rural communities. Such materials could include illustrated extension leaflets, audio and video recordings of extension information and other materials specifically designed to enlighten the rural populace. These materials are deposited in many agricultural libraries and are hardly used because those who have access to them do not really need them.

Librarians in agricultural universities and research institutes could make these materials available to rural dwellers by depositing them through their institutions' extension workers in rural community halls, television-viewing centers and village schools. Or better still, they could be kept in local government offices located in the larger rural communities. The advantage of involving the local governments is that their staff visits the rural areas more frequently than agricultural extension officers do. Therefore, they are in a better position to positively influence the use of these materials to satisfy the information needs of the rural dwellers.

On the issue of illiteracy, it is apparent that most rural farmers have little or no use for rural libraries that are centered around books. Such institutions are seen as elitist and meant for the lettered segment of society. Therefore, when libraries do exist in a rural community, most farmers would rather encourage their children to patronize them instead of themselves. Where such a situation exists, children could be used to reach their parents by making extension literature available to such children who, in turn, may make the literature available to their parents.

Currently the broadcast media of radio and television in rural agricultural extension have gained wide acceptance among rural dwellers. Bearing this in mind, there is a need for the agricultural university and research libraries to acquire and store the tapes of these broadcasts. This

should be in addition to those produced in-house by the institutions themselves. Such tapes should be passed on to the extension agents for use in community television viewing centers. This would make informal rural information provision more effective.

## **Suggested Approaches**

These approaches assume nationwide coverage of rural communities by the existing three categories of agricultural training and research institutes and their libraries. In the first category are the three Universities of Agriculture (UOAs) located in Abeokuta and Umudike in the southern forest ecological zone and Makurdi sited in the savanna and grassland ecological zone. The faculties of agriculture of the old universities in Nigeria, i.e. the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, all in the south, and the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in the north form the second category. In the third category are the agricultural research institutes located in various parts of the country.

All these institutions at present have rural extension programs through which their extension employees transfer information concerning improved seedlings and farming methods to the rural farmers. Owing to the vastness of the country, these extension activities are mostly limited to communities within a few kilometers of these institutions. It is recommended that these pilot rural extension programs be expanded to cover more areas of the country for the purpose of rural information supply.

In addition, it is suggested that extension workers in these institutions work closely with their institutions' libraries so as to devise modalities for the cooperative supply of information to their rural communities. This will include the collation of information on:

- (a) the needs of rural dwellers in terms of different categories of information such as those relating to farming methods, health, trade, politics, etc.;
- (b) the existing methods used by the extension workers to pass on this information to rural dwellers;
- (c) the information needs of the extension workers themselves in terms of books and audio-visual materials;
- (d) library holdings that are relevant to rural needs;
- (e) facilities in the extension villages that could be adapted or integrated into rural information supplies;

- (f) modalities for the involvement of both extension workers and interested librarians in rural information supply.

Having collated this vital information, the affected interest groups should group themselves into zones and work out blueprints for cooperation among themselves. The present six-zone political structure in the country, that is the northwest, north central, northeast, southwest, southeast, and south-south, could be adopted for this purpose. The proposed Agricultural Universities Coordinating Agency (AUCA), the federal and states' ministries of agriculture, as well as departments of agriculture in the local governments, the Nigerian Association of Agricultural Librarians and other stakeholders in the agricultural sector should be involved in the project.

With the cooperation of these stakeholders, satisfactory arrangements could be put in place for effective rural information supply. This may not necessarily involve new expenditure as all the stakeholders already have on-hand the men and materials needed for the implementation of this multilateral approach to rural information supply. All that will be needed is the will to approach this task from a new perspective.

## **Conclusion**

Rural libraries are almost non-existent in modern day Nigeria. The few public libraries available are concentrated in the large cities, resulting in little affect on the lives of the rural dwellers. As the majority of Nigerian rural dwellers are not literate in the western sense, the idea of going to libraries to read and borrow books for the information they contain may not be feasible as far as they are concerned. Access to information for them is therefore limited to what is available from the extension workers, the oral tradition, and radio and television. This paper suggests that the libraries of the Nigerian agricultural universities and research institutes, the local communities, the different tiers of governments, and other stakeholders in agriculture should cooperate with extension workers to broaden the scope of agricultural information available to the rural populace.



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