



ADAPTING RURAL LIBRARY SERVICES TO MEET THE CHANGING NEEDS OF COMMUNITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE IN TWO SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The study canvassed adapting rural library services to meet the changing needs of communities in the digital age in two selected African countries. This study investigated the impact of adapted library services on the community, including access to information and educational opportunities as well as examined the strategies and best practices adopted by rural libraries in adapting to the digital age. The study adopted a review of twenty related literatures to contextualize the historical review and the findings from the various studies consulted. Most of the information in the article came from several different impact studies, including one major research study of the rural libraries in Nigeria and one research study of the rural libraries in Ghana. An item-by-item analysis of the outcomes of the research works was carried out. The review shows that many rural libraries have been neglected; consequently, rural libraries made little or impact on their host communities. It was concluded that Library management should brace up for the new challenge of adaptive rural library services to meet the changing needs of their host communities in the digital age.

Keywords: Adaptive Rural Library Services, Changing Needs of communities, Digital Age, Rural Libraries adaptation, Public Library Services.

Introduction

Libraries have traditionally been an important community resource, giving access to information, education, and entertainment. Libraries are essentially social institutions that provide individuals with access to a variety of information resources. Libraries have evolved in line with the advancement of information technologies, which has substantially increased library services and enhanced their efficiency and effectiveness (Li, Jiao, Zhang & Xu, 2019) A rural library service is a public library system intended to fulfil the requirements of people living in rural areas, which often have fewer people and less access to educational and cultural materials. A rural library service aims to give all people in the

community, regardless of socioeconomic level or geographical location, fair access to information and learning opportunities.

However, as digital technology has become more prevalent, libraries have had to adapt to suit the changing requirements of their clients. This is especially true in rural regions with limited access to technology and the internet. Rural libraries have had to change and embrace new technologies and services to continue to serve their communities successfully. This has included making online resources available, giving digital literacy training, and creating new programs and services to fit the specific needs of local communities. Lamani, Talawar and Kumbar (2014) pointed out that the rural library is essential for the transmission of knowledge and information in the rural community. Rural libraries with all of the necessary facilities are needed for the benefit of rural people and to promote rural activities. Rural libraries assist the rural community in keeping their knowledge current by offering vital information about the rural community. As a result, there is a demand for rural libraries that can help the rural community. In this context, this topic investigates the challenges that rural libraries face in the digital age, as well as the techniques they have used to adapt.

Statement of the Problem

Information dissemination by public libraries seems concentrated more in urban areas in many African countries, than rural areas. As a result of this, rural public libraries in Africa have been relatively understudied when compared to public libraries as a whole. Available data show that rural libraries lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts in technology service offerings. The disparity between rural libraries and urban ones is not based on mere lack of technological knowhow alone but many such factors such as the perception of library patrons on the library services as well as information seeking behavior of rural dwellers which play a vital role in determining the extent to which rural library services meet the ever-changing needs of rural communities over the years. This study, therefore, seeks to unravel the missing gap of adapting rural library services to meet the changing needs of communities in the digital age using two selected countries in Africa as a case study. The study will not only show the impact rural library services have on their host communities, but also evaluate the methods and practices employed by African libraries in meeting the information queries of rural dwellers.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to investigate how adapting rural library services meet the changing needs of communities in the digital age in two selected

African countries. Specifically the study:

1. Identified the changing needs of rural communities in the digital age.
2. Assessed the impact of adapted library services on the community, including access to information and educational opportunities.
3. Examined the strategies and best practices adopted by rural libraries in adapting to the digital age.

Review of Related Literature

The public library as an institution exists to provide materials, which communicate experience and ideas from one person to another i.e., make easily and freely available to all people, printed and non-printed materials (Ejedafiru, 2014). The public library, which is the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision, making and cultural development of individual and social groups (UNESCO, 2004). Public libraries especially in rural areas are designed to provide information on agriculture, building, trade, healthcare and other aspects of human activities, which are required mostly by the rural dwellers because they lack access to other sources of assistance. Adimorah (1999) noted that Nigeria information services are still elitist, serving only 20% of the educated elites' group while the 80% illiterate rural dwellers wallow in information deprivation. Numerous studies, show that rural libraries offer less technology access with slower connection speeds than libraries in more populated areas. These libraries also offer comparatively less formalized digital literacy training, although rural libraries still provide invaluable informal training in this area. This section highlights discrepancies between rural libraries and those in more populated areas.

While almost every public library offers patrons Internet access, 70.3% of rural libraries are the only free Internet and computer terminal access providers in their service communities, compared to 40.6% of urban and 60.0% of suburban libraries.⁶ The disparity between these categories becomes more striking when one considers the difference between home broadband adoption in rural and non-rural areas. According to the Pew Research Center's Home Broadband 2010 survey, only 50% of rural homes have broadband Internet access, compared to 70% of non-rural homes.

Methodology

The methodology included a review of twenty (20) professional literatures provided to contextualize the historical review and the findings from the various studies consulted. Most of the information in the article comes from a number of different impact studies, including one major research on the rural libraries in

Nigeria and one research study of the rural libraries in Ghana. In particular, the studies examined the nature of rural Library Services and the changing needs of communities in the digital age, with research light beamed at impact of adapted library services on the community, including access to information and educational opportunities and the strategies adopted by rural libraries in adapting to the digital age. After an inept analysis of the works under-study, conclusions and recommendations were made based on the findings drawn from the works reviewed.

Analysis of Major Works Reviewed

This section attempts to examine the various research works done by more than twenty authors especially the ones done by **O.M. Momodu (2012) on Nigeria** and **Kwarteng, Frimpong (2020) on Ghana**. These and many more research works were extensively examined and analyzed below:

The Changing Information Needs of Rural Communities in the Digital Age

This part of the study examines the information need of rural Africa, including geographic and demographic pictures, economic characteristics, historical challenges, and the new challenges and opportunities of the information age. This is followed by a description of the digital divide and its specific effects on rural communities. The study deals more with the small rural library, the historical and new challenges and opportunities it faces as it endeavors to continue its work as a social equalizer in the information age, and the federal and private support that work to support these efforts.

Characteristics of the Rural Communities in Africa

The rural populace suffers from acute low productivity and social and economic retrogression due to mainly ignorance, which also results from either inadequate or total absence of information dissemination. There arises the need to reappraise the problem of literacy among the rural communities since it affects their accessibility to, and utilization of information. There will therefore be the need for innovative approaches towards this end. Indeed, rural information dissemination should emphasize change and be dynamic. If, in addition to this, there could be a prototype information support system for the rural development projects, which takes policy-makers, researchers, change agents and the rural people themselves into account, the lots of this rural populace is bound to appreciate. In a similar vein, former President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania once admonished that "while other countries aim to reach the moon, we the third world countries must aim, for the time being at any rate, to reach the village". This is

typical of our inability to rise to the needs and challenges of effective rural information dissemination.

"Non-literate users", according to Aina (2004) "are users who cannot read and write in any language, and those that are barely skills or even acquire reading skills. Artisans, farmers and many rural people fall into this category. In Africa, they constitute the largest proportion of information users. The library often meets the needs of this group by organizing book talks, lectures, and audiovisual presentations". Public libraries often have to cooperate with the media and government information units to package information for this category of users.

The rural areas of a country lie outside the densely populated environments of towns, cities and sub-urban villages. The inhabitants such as the area are engaged in agriculture and other mini-commercial activities. They are generally characterized by abject poverty, low literacy level, lack of social amenities and poor environmental conditions

Life in the rural parts of Nigeria

The rural parts of Nigeria carry the burdens of developmental decadence visible in all parts of rural Africa including Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. Momodu (2012) "Rural communities have endured a continuing outflow of human capital to urban areas that have undermined their traditional social and community structures, even as their economic base has been eroded by the replacement of small and medium-sized enterprises thereby neglecting learning centres in the villages.

Rural and small-town libraries face a range of challenges that have historically made providing effective and responsive library services difficult. Funding, which is primarily the responsibility of the government remained a huge task for the survival of rural libraries. (In a late 2003 survey of rural school, tribal, and public libraries, the majority of respondents (61%) "Identified lack of money as the greatest challenge to their libraries, with old buildings, lack of qualified staff, poor collections, equipment and 'other' being the remainder" [ALA Task Force on Rural School, Tribal and Public Libraries 2014.]

Momodu (2012) citing Vavrek notes, "that funding is a relative matter, with some communities being able to provide a decent working budget for services and activities, while others [struggle]" "it is especially challenging in rural areas, where communities are often economically depressed, and tax bases do not provide adequate funding to support even minimal library service" (Heuertz et al. 2013,). Limited budgets result in small staff and staff with low education levels and generally little, if any, training in library science. Vavrek argues that lack of academically trained staff is the "most important factor limiting the present and

future development of rural and small-town information services" Other key issues affecting small, rural libraries highlighted by Vavrek include the rural gender gap, where women are the predominant users of rural and small town library services; the public's perception of the rural library as a place to go for books, not necessarily as a place to get your questions answered; and the traditionally conservative attitudes of rural areas and small towns that do not readily embrace

Foundation, in its final report on its U.S. Library Program, identifies five areas where libraries need ongoing assistance to sustain the service: hardware and software upgrades, assistance with Internet connectivity, access to technical support, staff training, and keeping libraries open (i.e. funding). These five areas of concern are "especially urgent problem[s]" for libraries in rural areas and small towns (Bill & Melinda Gates 2018).

The Impact of Library Services on the Community

According to Frimpong (2020), Eldoret Municipality was one of the first in the region to set up library services for local peoples. As rightly observed by Dent and Yannotta (2010) community Libraries can be found throughout Africa. They include the Village Reading Rooms in Botswana, the system of barefoot librarians in Tanzania, the Osu-initiated libraries in Ghana, and the Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda They differ from public libraries in that they are created by and for a local population and usually.

There are other ways that community libraries differ from public libraries, including the role of the librarian. The community librarian lives in the community and has close personal relationships with the users. The community librarian can identify the needs of the community and how to provide for those needs in a way that is best suited to the user. A Needs assessment has been identified as a major contributor to the success of a library. Determining what collections and services are needed by the community is imperative to providing relevant library services. Unfortunately, in most public libraries needs assessment is not done because of inadequate funding, a lack of staff and a shortage of research skills to carry out an assessment. In community libraries, however, needs assessment is the foundation on which the library's collection and services are based.

The Strategies adopted by Ghana Rural Libraries in adapting to the Digital Age

Ghana is doing something in their effort to enhance rural communities. Frimpong (2020) cited Abissath (2008) argues that, "Ghana, like Nigeria, Malaysia, Singapore and other technology-minded countries, is today gradually but steadily

taking ICTs to rural communities to bridge the digital divide between the urban dwellers and the rural folks in the country. One strategy Ghana Government has adopted to achieve this feat is the establishment of Community Information Centers (CICs) in districts throughout the country.” Other African countries should borrow a leaf by extending ICT facilities and training to rural dwellers.

For the public or community libraries to meet the information need of the rural dwellers, it is pertinent that the libraries be transformed by adopting and or adapting to several innovative options. The innovation strategy team of Moldova's Public Library (2012) lists the ways libraries will be transformed to include:

1. New functions as vibrant community centres, tools of civic engagement, and promoters of local economies.
2. Improved infrastructure that meets the expectations of citizens and staff.
3. Modernized management principles that nurture creativity, self-motivation, and a work schedule that is responsive to the needs of citizens.
4. Retrained staff that are open-minded, amiable, trustworthy, pro-active and creative in their dealings with users' and their needs.
5. Excellent user service that will be accessible, free, participatory in nature, and responsive to the needs of citizens and community institutions.
6. A revitalized image that will facilitate connections with public authorities, community organizations, donors, media, other libraries, and their citizens.

Problems Encountered by rural libraries in Africa

Rural libraries in Africa have been confronted with many problems. In examining the state of public libraries in Nigeria, Opara (2008), had observed that the tempo of public library development in the country in the years immediately after independence, and after the Nigerian civil war could not be sustained due to inadequate financial support by the establishing authorities. He identified the challenges that rural libraries in Nigeria face including: inadequate funding, demoralized and inadequate workforce, inadequate accommodation, etc. as the challenges currently confronting these libraries.

Information hunger is prevalent and biting hard on our rural communities, which has resulted in poor living conditions, illiteracy, and poverty. Disco (1994:142) holds the view that "rural areas in Nigeria are generally characterized by poor living conditions - absolute poverty and absence of almost all amenities of life. The literacy in Nigeria is about 35-40 percent, but is much lower among women and in rural communities. Reports of the scarcity of learning facilities, including basic textbooks and journal, in school and libraries including academic libraries, show a

critical situation". The information needs of the teeming majority are not provided for, which constitute the major reason for the underdevelopment. Rural dwellers need relevant, efficient, and current information. Camble (1994: 105) opines that "the success of rural information programmes rest squarely on the availability and use of quality information by rural development workers and rural people and that many rural development programmes have failed in developing countries because they were planned with insufficient relevant information".

Another big drawback for farmers, artisans, and less skilled workers is the lack of information in the language or form they would be able to access. Many of the developing countries in Africa have multi-ethnic groups with their language, yet the libraries and information centres provide information mainly in colonial languages such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, etc. This poses a big challenge to the librarians and libraries in meeting the information needs of the people in rural areas.

Staffing and Training Problems for Rural Librarians

A lack of funding and resources affect not only rural public libraries, but also rural public librarians. In a study that illustrated such issues, Flatley and Wyman surveyed a random sample of libraries in extremely rural areas, with their service population baseline being 2,500 as opposed to the 25,000 thresholds noted above.⁴⁷ While the data they collected are somewhat dated (the survey was conducted in 2007), this study still deserves special attention because similar data have not been collected more recently or by other authors.

The authors found that 80% of rural libraries have only a single full-time employee, and 50% have two or fewer paid employees when full- and part-time employees are considered.⁴⁸ These employees are underpaid compared to the national average, with 72% reporting they earned N20,000 or less per hour.⁴⁹ When asked why they believed their pay was relatively low, more than half (53%) of rural librarians responded it was because their communities lacked funds, demonstrating the structure of local funding being more important than state and federal funding to librarians' salaries.

Strategies to Overcome Challenges of Rural Libraries

Though the efforts of some libraries in information dissemination in rural areas of Africa have been documented, nevertheless, Momodu, (2012) observes that adequate attention has not been paid to library services in the rural areas of Nigeria. The following strategies can be adopted in order to overcome the challenges faced by rural libraries:

1. **Users Education:** It is very important for the librarian in charge of the rural

libraries to educate the rural populace on the need and the importance of libraries. The Rural dwellers need to be told the types of information they can get from the library.

2. **Agricultural Information:** According to Harande (2009), the greatest area of information needs by rural Nigerians is in agriculture and such information needs include planting treated seeds, soil conservation, prevention of plants and animal diseases, fertilizer application, farm machinery
3. **Reaching Out to Rural Dwellers:** Most rural dwellers are not aware about library services, hence the need to reach out to them through their various age group formations within the community in order to attract them to the library
4. **Users' Queries and complaints:** A library user with a complaint should feel confident that their concerns will be taken seriously, especially in the area of the library collection development. Listen thoughtfully and respectfully in order to proffer solution to the complaints made.
5. **User's Opinion:** Any user who wants to be heard and have his opinions acknowledged. No further action is needed. If this is the case, thank the person for his or her interest, make notes about the conversation, and file them for future reference

Conclusion

Public library services are essential to the educational, political, and social development of the rural population. The information gap between the urban and rural areas can be bridged by improved library services. Also, adequate community analysis should be made before embarking rural library setting. More importantly as discovered in this study, the government has a lot to do in providing essential infrastructure that promote digital library services to enable rural libraries to adapt to the changing needs of rural communities in the digital age. By this, the lives of rural people will be better in realizing their information needs. The failure of libraries in rural areas is largely due to lack of political will, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, and inadequate human resources.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are important to library services in rural areas.

1. More attention especially resources should be directed to the rural libraries in African countries by their respective governmental authorities to meet the dire need for information by rural dwellers
2. Library management should brace up for the new challenge of adaptive rural library services to meet the changing needs of their host communities

in the digital age.

3. Mandatory training of rural librarians should be carried out from time to time for them to meet up with current trends in information dissemination
4. Adequate funds should be made available for the acquisition of information resources and the provision of quality library services to the rural population. Training and retraining of staff in ICT and related areas should be a continuous exercise in our libraries.
5. The government should make a deliberate policy that ensures that libraries in rural areas have Internet connectivity.
6. Information and communication infrastructure should be given urgent attention as appropriate to the present global information economy.

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