Improving Public Libraries Services in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State: Strategies for Relevant Information Services for the Unreached Rural Communities

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Abstract

Public libraries are obligated to provide information services and resources to rural communities. People in the rural communities seek information to fill an identified gap in their quest for knowledge. This study, therefore, investigated the methods for improving public library services in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States as strategies for meeting the information needs of the unreached rural communities. Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. Population of the study comprised of 326 rural dwellers and public library staff in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States. This figure is made up of 50 library staff and 276 rural dwellers. A purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of 13 rural community dwellers each from the 54Local Governments in the two states. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire designed based on rural people's views. The instrument was validated by experts in the Department of Library and Information Science, University of Uyo, Uyo. The instrument titled "Improving Public Libraries Services for Rural Areas Questionnaire" (IPLSRAQ) was designed in two categories to reflect the members of the population. A total of 326 copies of the instruments were distributed and 310 were useful for data analysis. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings revealed that the unreached rural people in the two states need different types of information for their daily lives and the strategies to improve their information needs is by establishing rural library services.

Introduction

Public libraries are obligated to provide information services for the support of formal and informal education and various information needs of information users in society. It plays a major role in promoting literacy by making reading materials available to all thereby optimizing human development through education. Public libraries are ambassadors of an indivisible world of culture, information resources, and ideas focusing on removing boundaries and lowering the barriers that separate

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civilizations, enabling information seekers to breathe freely the uncensored open air of ideas. In modern society, access to information is important at all times to the citizens, as it fast tracks the level of an individual's all-round development.

Public libraries exist to serve the entire members of the community irrespective of race, nationality, gender, language, politics, etc. The institution is open to all including children, young people, adults, retirees, and all those who for whatever reasons cannot visit the library (socially disadvantaged class). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2011) described the public library as a local gateway to knowledge, which provides a basis for life-long learning, independent decision-making, and cultural development of individuals and social groups. It is viewed as a living force of the community and as one of the most democratic institutions whose doors are always open to serve every member of the community. Public libraries are generally supported by public funds (taxes) and it is governed by a board to serve the public interest, open to all rendering basic services without charge.

Habibu and Babayi (2017) argued that public libraries have basic characteristics that can be identified as being generally supported by public taxes, governed by a board to serve the public interest, and open to all and every community member to access the collection. They further emphasized that the use of public libraries is voluntary and not forced on agencies, their services are freely provided. Public libraries also provide users access to

unlimited information by providing primary and secondary sources of information. Users of public libraries are privileged to access different forms of information relating to politics, sports, agriculture, enjoyment opportunities, environment, crime reports, etc. It also provides information that helps people to adapt to new challenges, increase awareness, and enable individual users to be abreast of current issues in society. Public libraries serve as a resource for scholars, an information center for students, a means of self-education, and a center of entertainment for those who avail themselves of and use its services.

The categories of information materials represented in a public library may include the following: fiction, and nonfiction books and electronic resources for young adults, adults, and children, reference materials, databases, the Internet, local, regional, and national newspapers, community information, government publications, international organization publications, information about local administration, business information, local history, material in primary languages of the community and others.

Public libraries are obligated to provide information services and resources to the rural community. However, Oji (2018) observed that information networks in Nigeria including public libraries are biased against the lower social groups most of which are in rural communities. The author further revealed that there is information gap between the urban and rural areas which can be bridged by effective library services. It is against this

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backdrop that this paper attempts to investigate the challenges hindering public library services in rural communities and strategies for improving public library services to rural dwellers in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is focused on the information needs of rural communities; methods of improving public libraries in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States to enable the institution to provide library services to the unreached rural dwellers, and challenges hindering public libraries in meeting the information needs of rural communities. The justification of the above scope was based on the fact that they are perceived to be linked and can improve public library services to rural communities. The study covered only public libraries in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State. Akwa Ibom State was created on September 23, 1987, while Rivers State was created in 1967. The two states are located in the South-South geo-political zone and are oil-producing states in Nigeria. The idea of establishing public library services in the two states derived from the deformed Eastern Nigeria Divisional Library Board established in 1955 with the headquarters in Enugu. Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State Library Board came into existence through the Public Library Act of 1971.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

1.   identify the information needs of the unreached rural communities;

2.   identify the challenges hindering public library services to rural communities;
3.   determine the strategies for improving public library services to rural communities.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1.   What are the information needs of the unreached rural communities?
2.   What are the challenges hindering public library services to rural communities?
3.   What are the strategies for improving public library services to rural communities?

Literature Review

Information Needs of Rural Communities

The development of any nation can hardly be achieved without the development of the rural segments. Librarians are aware of the roles they can play in this development process, basically as they reckon that the library is a major vehicle for the dissemination of information. They therefore, advocate the need for rural libraries and information services to support and sustain the educational, cultural, economic, social, political, and other programmes designed to improve the standard of living of the rural populace (Iwuagwu, 2014). Similarly, Islam (2016) affirmed this and added that to develop people's capability to participate in an

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evolving knowledge-based society, there is a need for the establishment of rural libraries or rural information resource centers. The author further pointed out that this is because rural libraries play a vital role in providing rural information services. Establishing rural libraries is one of the ways of spreading information to people to improve their living conditions and quality of life and to infuse awareness among rural people of the sources of information and encourage them to make use of the information available in the library (Nwachukwu, 2010). Ebiwolate (2010) posited that the growing recognition that library services, particularly public libraries are an integral part of national socio-economic development and improvement of the general quality of life, hence the success of rural dwellers depends on effective use of information in their daily activities. Oji (2018) explained that information networks in Nigeria are biased against the lower social groups most of which are in rural communities, and that library services are essential to the educational, political, and social development of the rural population. The author further revealed that the information gap between the urban and rural areas can be bridged by effective library services.

The information needs of rural dwellers which is based on their activities include those which help them attend to health, agriculture, social, political, trading (petty trading), food processing, textile, pottery and other crafts, entertainment, as well as other public affairs, aesthetic and cultural matters (Ogurumbi, 2015, Anunobi, Ogbonna & Osuchukwu, 2014; Abolaji, 2009). In the same vein, Alegbeleye and

Aina cited in Ezeh (2020) added that information needs of rural communities include: agriculture and allied occupations, education, housing, employment, transportation, religion, crime and safety, the neighborhood, health information, welfare and family matters, legal matters, policies and government, land and others.

Challenges Hindering Public Library Services to Rural Communities

Providing relevant services to unreached rural communities may be hindered by several factors, some of which include: insufficient professional librarians. Omotosho and Okiki (2012) observe that the insufficiently trained staff in public libraries cannot meet the demands of their users including the rural communities. Non-professional librarians cannot function properly in the library environment because they lack the skills and competencies. This situation has led to underdevelopment of libraries both in function and in the services they render.

Funding public libraries is one of the major challenges hindering the institution from rendering effective services to the unraveled rural communities. The dwindling funding of public libraries in Nigeria is one of the numerous challenges facing the formation sector (Udo-Anyanwu & Wagwu, 2017). Supporting this assertion, Okafor (2020) affirms that the problems of inadequate funds in public libraries have adversely affected library service delivery and its operation. In the same vein, Elaturoti (2015) added that the bane of public libraries has been poor funding resulting in scanty, outdated, and

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irrelevant collections to meet public needs, inadequate and /or outdated physical structure.

Public libraries are established and funded by the government through public funds however, the government is not presently able to provide adequate funds to support the operations of the library for one reason or the others. Nwosu (2013) posited that public libraries in Nigeria have not been given maximum and increasing attention, and this may be because the library is not a profit-making organization.

Public libraries in the information age are expected to be equipped with modern facilities like information and communication technologies (ICTs) to function effectively. The utilization of (ICT) facilities in public libraries such as the Internet, X (formerly known as Twitter) and social networking would provide new opportunities for public libraries to reach out to the unreached in rural areas, thereby creating a revival among them. Abel and Issa (2011) revealed that no public libraries in Nigeria have attained a significant level of adopting technological tools for service provision.

Strategies for Improving Public Library Services to Rural Communities

Training and retraining of librarians can enhance public library services. Obi and David-West (2014) pointed out that training will enhance the capability of workers in public libraries by maximizing their skills and in so doing achieve greater production efficiency. Also, Anunobi (2012) avers that libraries should be engaged in capacity development training to be relevant and proficient in the 21st Century information service and respond positively to changing information environments and demands. Anunobi (2010) identified the types of training the librarians and other library staff need to embrace to include: conferences, continuing education courses, on-the-job training, seminars, and workshops. Edom and Edom (2013) noted that training enables library staff to interact with colleagues outside their environment and in this way acquire more knowledge and skills required to manage official responsibilities. The goal of every training is for the new knowledge acquisition and to create a positive impact in rendering effective library services which leads to users' satisfaction with library service. Appropriate training and continuing education are needed to address the rapid social and technological changes in our library in this era of information and communication technology.

For any public library to perform its functions effectively, there must be an adequate and balanced collection of information materials. Library resources are those information-bearing materials that enable libraries to carry out their functions effectively. They are made up of print and electronic resources. Kulkami and Despande (2012) agreed that for effective service delivery by any library, a lack of resources is not at all an acceptable explanation, noting that comprehensiveness and uniqueness of collections, availability of up-to-date on exhaustive subject coverage, access to print and non-print media are some of the

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decisive factors for service delivery. For a library to satisfy the needs of users, both human and material resources must be available.

Okiy (2012) pointed out that the availability of information resources in the library encourages users, that most libraries do not make available qualitative and quantitative information resources to meet the needs of their teeming clientele. Thus, library resources and access are important determinants of quality service and an important factor in effective service delivery in rural communities. This library service is undertaken to reach out to groups and people who might otherwise be unaware of library services or those who for whatever reasons cannot visit the library. For these reasons, Nwachukwu (2010) explained that library extension services are designed to cover areas or cater for people that the library service by their design and focus could not reach. This implies that extension services could be seen as outreach programmes aimed at providing the information needs of people outside the library environment. Okiy (2012) added that mobile library services were introduced into public library services to extend library services to everyone in the state. The author maintained that extension service has reached segments of the rural population that would not otherwise have any library facilities at all and has brought improvement to rural areas by stimulating reading, increasing general reading interest and awareness on health and nutrition, child care, and family planning.

The world is increasingly becoming a global village as information and communication technologies (ICTs) have assumed a powerful and effective role in global information dissemination. Public libraries can disseminate information through web portals which will be accessible to millions of readers across the rural communities and the world over. Odeh and Akpokurerie (2010) noted that this can be used to keep users aware and up-to-date in their various areas of information needs and can help public library users access a wide range of web-based current information.

For any public library to be able to provide relevant services within and outside the library environment requires that the management system of the library must be effective. Udo-Anyanwu and Wagwu (2017) argued that the importance of public libraries can be measured by the good effect they have on society, and this depends on the efficiency of the management body. The authors pointed out that good library management would serve all the numerous user communities and bridge the gap between the rural and urban rich and poor, educated, illiterate, and semi-literate masses. Ukwuoma (2014) explained that some of the strategies to meet library users need is through adequate planning of library services to create a more radical awareness to users on the resources available in the library. For a public library to render relevant services to clientele, it must be designed in a way that each department or sub-system with its specified duties. Edoka as cited by Udo-Anyanwu and Wagwu (2017) stated that within the public library, departments and sections perform various activities to enhance effective library services to clientele.

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Fund is the life wire of any establishment including libraries. The public library is one library expected to acquire materials in all subjects, in relevant languages, and for all ages. The implication, therefore, is that public libraries ought to have unlimited financial resources to be able to acquire all manner of information materials published daily in all subject areas. Habibu and Babayi (2017) noted that no matter the amount of energy expended by librarians to put in place programmes of value to the community, if there are no funds to carry out the programs, then all efforts are in vain and all necessary information materials to meet the society needs cannot be purchased, new library furniture cannot also be acquired and in most cases, the library would not be able to acquire new books to replace old ones. Public libraries require good funding to provide better facilities and services to users. Saleh and Lasisi (2011) called on governments to ensure that minimum standard for the provision of adequate funds for libraries for effective and efficient services provision.

Research Method

Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised 326 public library staff and rural dwellers from Akwa Ibom and Rivers State. This figure is made up of 50 library staff and 276 rural dwellers. A purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of 13 rural community dwellers from the 23 local governments in the state. The instruments for data collection were the questionnaire designed based on views and findings from related literature and was validated by two experts in Library and Information Science. The instrument was designed in two categories to reflect the members of the population. Research question one was designed for respondents drawn from the rural communities of Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State, while research questions two and three were designed for library staff. The instrument was structured on a 4-point rating scale of; strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD). Items with a mean score of 2.50 and above were considered significant while items below 2.50 were considered insignificant. The researchers engaged the services of 3 research assistants in each local government to distribute 276 copies of the questionnaires in the local government areas, while the researchers personally administered 50 copies of the questionnaires in the state's public libraries. On the whole 326 copies of the instruments were distributed and 310 were found usable for the study. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions.

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Research Question 1: What are the information needs of rural communities in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean responses of information needs of rural communities

S/N	Information needs	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
1	Employment	33	87	21	29	3.32
2	Health	124	80	32	24	3.16
3	Treatment of Diseases	121	82	32	25	3.15
4	Fertilizer application	99	76	51	34	3.15
5	Agriculture	115	71	63	11	3.11
6	Current affairs	86	92	40	42	3.09
7	Education	116	72	40	32	3.04
8	Government programme	131	64	24	41	2.92
9	Hygiene	99	75	52	34	2.91
10	Politics	93	82	47	38	2.91
11	Flood prevention	94	82	41	43	2.97
12	Pest control	121	82	32	25	2.87
13	Environment	71	82	60	47	2.85
14	Security	78	64	50	68	2.77
15	Culture/festivals	83	71	59	47	2.73
16	Food storage	80	73	61	46	2.71
17	Economy	79	76	52	53	2.69
18	Social activities	80	69	51	60	2.68
19	Customs and traditions	101	64	50	56	2.89
20	Birth control	71	65	81	43	2.63
21	Government policies	79	68	49	64	2.62
22	Crime reports	60	53	68	79	2.36
23	Sports	53	48	91	68	2.33
24	How to obtain loan	53	45	91	71	2.30
25	Drug administration	61	40	70	89	2.28
26	Sex education	42	40	94	84	2.15
27	Climate	25	41	106	88	2.01
28	Religion	32	19	112	97	1.94
30	Population	30	26	76	128	1.82

The analysis in Table 1 shows that people in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State need different types of information. These include information on employment health, diseases, fertilizer application, agriculture, current affairs, education, government programme, hygiene, politics, flood prevention, pest control, environment, security, culture/festivals, food storage, economy, social activities, customs and traditions, birth control and government policies. Their

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mean ranges from 2.62 to 3.32, showing that they use all types of information to solve their daily needs in rural communities.

Research Questions 2: What are the challenges hindering public libraries in providing services to rural communities?

Table 2: Mean responses of challenges hindering public library services to rural communities

S/N	Funding	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
1.	Poor funding	41	3	4	2	3.72
2.	Inadequate professional librarians	33	9	5	3	3.44
3.	Absence of mobile vans/boats	24	14	7	5	3.14
4.	Inadequate staff	27	12	7	4	3.24
5.	Poor government support	30	12	5	3	3.38
6.	Staff are not motivated	15	16	8	11	2.98
7.	Out-dated information resources	19	13	4	14	2.74
8.	Public libraries are not computerized	16	12	8	4	2.84
9.	Poor perception of public libraries among rural dwellers	17	15	10	8	2.84

The analysis in Table 2 shows the challenges hindering public libraries in providing services to the unreached in rural communities in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States. The result reveals that respondents accepted all the items as challenges to the provision of services by public libraries. The five most accepted challenges are; Poor funding (3.72), inadequate professional librarians (3.44), Poor government support (3.38), inadequate staff (3.24), absence of mobile vans/boats (3.14) respectively. Respondents also agree that library staff are not motivated (2.98), outdated information sources (2.74), public libraries are not computerized (2.84) and poor perception of public libraries among rural dwellers (2.84).

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Research Question 3: What are the strategies for improving public library services to rural communities?

Table 3: Mean responses on the strategies for improving public library services to rural communities

	Methods of Improving Public Libraries	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
1.	Establishing public libraries in rural communities	39	7	3	1	3.68
2.	Computerization of public libraries	30	10	7	3	3.34
3.	Provision of adequate fund for public libraries	26	18	2	4	3.32
4.	Training of library staff	25	16	5	4	3.32
5.	Provision of adequate library resources	32	5	7	6	3.26
6.	Providing quality management style	20	15	9	6	3.16
7.	Carrying out extension services	28	13	6	2	3.03
8.	Mounting of web-portal for public library	14	24	6	6	2.92
9.	Provision of conducive library environment	15	13	10	12	2.62

The analysis in Table 3 reveals the strategies to improve public library services to provide relevant information to rural communities In Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State. The results show that respondents accepted all the items as methods necessary for improving public libraries to provide services to unreached rural communities. The seven most accepted items are; the establishment of public libraries in rural areas (3.68), computerization of public libraries (3.34), provision of adequate funds (3.32), training of library workers (3.32), provision of adequate library resources (3.26), providing quality management (3.16) and embarking on extension services (3.03) respectively, while provision of conducive library environment has a mean score of (2.62).

Findings

The findings of the study reveal that the unreached people in rural communities in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States havedifferentinformation needs. They include information on employment, health, treatment of diseases, fertilizer application, agriculture, current affairs education, government programs, etc. The findings are in corroboration with Ogurumbi (2015) who discovered that the information needs of rural dwellers are based on those activities that affect them which include health, agriculture, social, political, trading food processing textile, poetry, craft and entertainment as well as other public affairs, aesthetic and cultural matters.

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The study also revealed that the challenges hindering public libraries in reaching out to the unreached in rural communities are inadequate funding, inadequate professional librarians, absence of vans/boats for mobile library services, poor government support, unmotivated staff, and outdated information resources. This finding validates Habibu and Babayi (2017) who discovered that no matter the amount of energy expected by librarians to put in place a programme of value for the community if there are no funds, all efforts are in vain. This means that funds are necessary to acquire information materials to meet the user's needs, as well as the new library facilities.

The study also found out that the strategies for improving public library services to rural people both in Akwa Ibom and Rivers States are the establishment of libraries in rural communities, provision of adequate funds, training of library staff, provision of adequate library resources, extension services such as mobile library, mounting of web portals in public libraries. This finding is in line with Islam (2016) who discovered that to develop people's capability, to participate in an evolving knowledge-based society, there is a need for the establishment of rural libraries or rural information resource centres.

Conclusion

The specific purposes of this research as highlighted earlier have been achieved following the findings as analyzed above. The study discovered that rural dwellers in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State need different types of information for such issues as health, employment, treatment of diseases, agriculture, current affairs, government policies and programmes, hygiene, and politics. The paper also points out some strategies to improve public library services to enable the institution to provide relevant information to people living in rural communities. Some challenges were also discovered that hinder public libraries from providing information services to rural communities; such challenges include poor funding, inadequate professional librarians, poor government support, and absence of mobile vans/boats for mobile library services, among others.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study.

1.	Librarians working in public libraries should identify the scale and diversity of information needs of rural communities in their selection, design, and dissemination of information to the rural communities.
2.	The government should put up legislation mandating all the local government councils to establish public libraries in rural areas and should appoint a Director of State Library Services who should be on the same level as the Permanent Secretary of the State Civil Service.
3.	The government should give the necessary attention to library services to play a great role in

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advancing the level of awareness of the people on government activities and programmes.

4. The government should provide adequate funds for public libraries to enable it to acquire current and relevant information resources, train staff, purchase modern I.C.T facilities, and mobile facilities.

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