Provision of Information Literacy as an Antidote for Socio-Economic Growth of the Rural Dwellers in Nigeria.

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Abstract

On a daily basis, problems are arising and becoming more difficult to solve because people lack access to meaningful information vital to good decision making and developmental needs. The budding numbers of people who are victims of the ugly scenario are often the rural communities who have no common means of becoming information literate due to their economic and information deficiencies. The thrust of the paper is that providing appropriate information literacy will strengthen and empower the socio-economic development of the rural dwellers in Nigeria and make them to become critical and effective information users who will be able to participate actively amongst global actors in the information –based economy. Against this backdrop, the paper advocates the provision of information literacy as a veritable resource that will enhance the socio-economic development of the rural communities in Nigeria. The paper further highlights the role of information literacy in the developmental needs of the rural populace, identifies some inherent challenges in the provision of information literacy to the rural dwellers and way forward were identified on how to medicate the challenges of providing information literacy to the rural dwellers.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Rural Communities, Socio-economic Growth,

Introduction

Rural communities in Nigeria though formed the bulk of the population; have for long suffered from socio-economic and informational deprivations. Aptly put, Chester&Neelameghan (2008) maintains that rural communities constitute the larger percentage of the population whose information and developmental needs are not adequately catered for resulting in their being unable to productively participate in the development process and enjoy the benefits thereof. Yet in an information society all people should have the right to information which can enhance their lives. Out of the superfluity of available information, people need to be able to obtain specific information to meet a wide range of personal and business needs, which are largely

driven either by the desire for personal economic growth and advancement or by the rapidly changing social, political, and economic environments of the society. Bruce (2006) stresses that to promote economic independence and quality of existence, there is a lifelong need for people to be informed and being up-to-date. Therefore, how the rural communities deal with the realities of the Information Age will have enormous impact on their socio-economic way of life and on their ability to compete favorably in a globally information based - economy.

Within the rural communities' information society, there exists the potential of addressing many long-standing social-economic developmental inequalities. To address the situation, people as individuals and communities must be information literate. To be information literate, according to (ALA, 1998) a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and effectively use the needed information appropriately. Producing such a citizenry will require that we must appreciate and integrate the concept of information literacy into the learning programs and that the governments play a leadership role in equipping individuals and communities to take advantage of the opportunities inherent within the information society.

Rural communities from the time past have not been able to enjoy economic boost due to lack of access to meaningful information. Collaborating to this fact, Kamba (2009) revealed that rural communities in Africa have suffered from enjoying any meaningful development largely because of lack of information and policy implementation gap artificially created by the African governments and leaders. The consequence of this neglect, he noted, is that rural communities lack access to basic needs such as water, food, education, health care, sanitation, information and security, leading to low life expectancy and high infant mortality. These conditions, according to him are considered harsh by the majority of the rural dwellers, which in most cases is the reason for their massive migration into urban areas in search for greener pastures, and formal employment, as the only option for survival.

Moreover, information literacy is quite low amongst the general populace and whereas information is the catalyst for meaningful socio-economic development without which people are likely to be dependent on others for access to knowledge and information and no nation can propel itself into the modern information based-economy. The emergence of information literacy in the information and knowledge society is a significant intervention with the potential to ensure and make rural communities to become lifelong learners, who need to know not just how to learn, but how to teach the skills. They must acquire the skills necessary to be independent, self-directed learners which are very imperative for achieving meaningful economic growth. The relevance of this revolution is supported by Balit (1996) who pointed out that the least expensive input for rural development is information literacy. Knowledge and information are basic ingredients of making one to be self-reliant and are essential for facilitating rural development and bringing about socio- economic changes. The paper is of the view that providing appropriate information literacy will strengthen and empower the economic growth of the rural communities and make

them become critical and effective information users who will be able to participate actively amongst global actors in the knowledge –based economy.

Concept of Information Literacy

Attempts to define Information Literacy have been made for several years, mostly by Librarians and professionals related to Library Science. Thus, many definitions of Information literacy abound, although with similar connotations. One classic and most commonly cited and used information literacy definition is the one adopted by the American Library Association (ALA, 1998:12) which says that to be information literate a person must "be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information". Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how to find information, how information is organized and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are the people prepared for lifelong learning because they always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand (Bruce, 2006:8).

According to Wesleyan's Librarians (2012:10), it involves recognizing when information is needed and being able to efficiently locate, accurately evaluate, effectively use, and clearly communicate information in various formats. It refers to the ability to navigate the rapidly growing information environment, which encompasses an increasing number of information suppliers as well as the amount supplied, and includes bodies of professional literature, popular media, libraries, the Internet, and much more. Increasingly, information is available in unfiltered formats, raising questions about its authenticity, validity, and reliability. This abundance of information is of little help to those who have not learned how to use it effectively. To become lifelong learners, we need to know not just how to learn, but how to teach ourselves. We must acquire the skills necessary to be independent, self-directed learners. It enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information sources, but it also enables them to become producers of information in their own right, and thereby to become more powerful participants in society. Information literacy is about developing people's critical and creative abilities.

Significance of Information Literacy in Socio-Economic Growth of Rural Communities

The importance of information literacy in the socio- economic development of the rural communities is very imperious in that information has become a requisite input for any development process. The significance of information in the overall socio-economic growth of rural dwellers is supported by Balit (1996:5) who pointed out that the least expensive input for rural development is information literacy. Knowledge and information are basic ingredients of making one to be self-reliant and are essential for facilitating rural development and bringing about socio- economic changes. Thus, Nyerere (1967:8) stated that, "While other countries in the world aim to reach the moon, we must aim for the mean time at any rate to reach the villages by providing them with necessary information". Hence, it can be said that, information, if made accessible and well disseminated could eliminate poverty and ignorance in all

ramifications and gives enlightenment on how to achieve economic, educational, social, political and cultural objectives towards the development of the entire community.

Information literacy is a basic resource which the rural communities must use to improve their conditions of living and is essential to the development process. Not only does information expand the possibilities of social, political, educational and economic development of any community, it also facilitates awareness and empowerment. Information literacy is an asset and a resource for development of communities, governments, agencies, and the target population. That is why Aguolu (1989) viewed information literacy as embodying interrelated or structured data which are required to enable one to act knowledgeably as well as to take appropriate decisions in any given setting. Information literacy provides an opportunity for nations to address the digital divide and reduce poverty while registering economic growth. Developed and some developing nations have seen the emergence of information literacy that has significantly contributed to their national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is this information literacy that should be provided and made accessible to rural communities to enable them participate actively in information based economy.

In addition, information is power and an informed community is a powerful community that is capable of overcoming socio-economic stagnation and political enslavement. Boon (1992) and Martin (1984) shared the same opinion and acknowledged that information (or knowledge) is power, according to them however; information by itself is worthless and cannot solve problems. Information has power only when used and applied appropriately and effectively. Information plays such an important role in almost every human activity; its value in the development process has been a topic of extensive considerations. This underscores the fact that no community can develop without information, and a community can only become economically and politically powerful if it identifies and uses information as its weapon for development. Studies conducted by scholars such as Makinta (1993), Mchombu (1993), Camble(1994) and Dawha (2003) and others as cited by Komba(2009) validated this fact that, rural communities in Africa have invariably lagged behind in terms of any meaningful economic development due to inadequate access to appropriate information. This constitutes to a greater extent the underdevelopment of African communities and to large extent the African nations as a whole because rural communities form the nucleus of those nations. Lack of access to adequate and right information at the right time by the rural communities undermines the efforts at improving the living conditions of the rural people by both governments and non-governmental organization (Kamba, 2009)

Information literacy is capable of liberating man from the shackles of ignorance, misconception, economic stagnation, social unrest and political instability. This implies that anybody who lacks this essential input would wallow continually in ignorance and would be unable to advance in any sphere of human endeavor, whereas having access to the right information can address major problems that hinder rural

community development and it can also enhance the chances for livelihoods. Societal needs are satisfied through various kinds of activities, each of which requires information as an input. These include, for example, education, policy formulation, research and development, personal needs, business, decision-making and mass communications. Societal needs are also satisfied at different levels, from individuals to global communities within the formation. That is why Panos (1998) Stated that "access to information is an essential condition for development". From this perspective, it could be said that information if well-articulated and packaged for rural communities, will alleviate poverty and ignorance and gives enlightenment on how to achieve economic, social, educational, political and cultural objectives towards the development of the entire society.

Today information is conceived as an important resource that contributes immensely towards the development of a nation especially in this era of information explosion and economic depression. It provides the mainstay for the development of knowledge, the foundation for innovations, the resources for informed citizenry, and as a result, becomes a key commodity for the progress of any society. Mchombu (2003) stated that, "the contradiction between the vital role of information in development and its lack of official recognition in developing countries can hardly escape the attention of information specialists". Rural people need accessible information in order to solve problems in their everyday lives. This information provides them with a sense of security, achievement and control. Belshaw (1965) and McAnany (1978), share the opinion that for any community to function efficiently and productively, a basic minimum stock of usable information is essential. Every society needs to acquire, store, and exchange this basic stock of information to allow it to survive. The view that information is central to the solution of any society's economic and social problems, and should be regarded as a factor of production, is now widely accepted. Thus, Pradervand (1980) has gone even further to insist that information is the most basic of all basic needs. This assertion collaborates with Kemp (1976) who measured information as the fifth of the human basic needs in ranking with air, water, food and shelter. This is why (Baruchson-Arbib 1996) argued that community information literacy should be viewed not only as a way to improve the quality of life of the individual, but also as a primary social concern. Information is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, to freedom of expression and the right to information and is instrumental in building and sustaining economy.

Challenges in the Provision of Information Literacy to Rural Communities

Access to information in rural communities of Africa is affected by a number of drawbacks which are evident in ways in which rural information services are coordinated. The following are some of the challenges facing the rural communities in Nigeria in the provision of information literacy:

Digital Divide.

Digital divide generally referred to as unequal access to information and communication technology (ICT) and the gap between those who are "information-haves" and those who are "information have-nots" has raised great social problems of inequality. According to (Tien& Fu, 2008), digital divide is the shear between those with access to information and those without is now one of Africa's leading economic and civil rights issues hampering its socio-economic and political development. Those who have access to information are always informed of current developments while those who lack access to information continue to wallow in their ignorance

Lack of Awareness of Information Needs

It is agreed that information providers and experts do not know the information needs of the rural populace and as such fail to pay attention to the information needs of the various groups whereas knowing their information needs becomes vital in sustaining the information services for the socio-economic development of rural communities in Africa. Adequate knowledge of the information needs of users is imperative for government and its agencies in re-orienting the information services and activities to harmonize them with the information seeking behaviour of the rural communities. Researchers such as Correa (1997), Mchombu (2003), and Aina (2006) all established that rural communities in Africa are often left out from participating in government policies, development and other important activities because their diverse interest, literacy level, expertise, and their needed information for survival, and development are hidden from the existing information flow.

Ignorance of the Role and Importance of Information

In addition, because of policy implementation gap artificially created by African planners, developers and governments and their inability to acknowledge the role of information literacy as a basic resource and its potential value to economic growth is a major setback to the socio-economic development of rural communities in Nigeria. This revelation is in line with Alemie (2007) that observed that there is abysmal appreciation of the role of information literacy in the economic growth of the rural dwellers in developing countries.

Lack of Information and Poor Delivery of Information Programmes

History has shown that rural communities in Africa have suffered from enjoying any meaningful development largely because of lack of information and policy implementation gap artificially created by the African governments and leaders. According to Kamba (2009) the consequence of this neglect has resulted in rural communities lacking access to basic needs such as water, food, education, health care, sanitation, information and security, leading to low life expectancy and high infant mortality. In addition, the kinds of information delivered to the rural

communities is very much system oriented to which most of the rural dwellers cannot understand and benefit from it, and the provision is dependent on the availability, extent of content, government interest, format and available modes of delivery. This is particularly obvious in developing countries like Nigeria where infrastructures and development policies are minimally provided due to unplanned development efforts by the governments.

Lack of Funds.

Information delivery service is capital intensive. It requires huge sums of money to adequately and effectively provide information service delivery to all and sundry. Unfortunately, Nigeria as a country lacks the resources to handle the information delivery business and this poses a drawback in the provision of information to rural communities. Funds are not provided to enhance information delivery service because the country has not been able to appreciate the role of information in the overall development of the citizenry thereby creating informational gap.

Poor Policy Implementation

There is lack of accomplished and effective information literacy policy implementation by local States and federal governments. Governments and their agencies have not been able to formulate policies that will enhance the development of information literacy either because they lack careful and thorough understanding of the information needs, information seeking behaviour, information services and information system of the rural communities. Furthermore, governments and their agencies have not been able to formulate effective implementation policy that will make the rural dwellers to maximize the utilization of information for their daily activities. It is therefore, desirable to understand the purpose for which information is required, the environment in which the user operates, users' skills in identifying the needed information, channels and sources preferred for acquiring information, and barriers to information seeking and use

Lack of Internet Facilities and Literacy

One major problem posing a major challenge to the provision of information literacy is lack of literacy amongst the rural populace and Internet facilities. The benchmark in the development and provision of information literacy according to Alemie (2006) is largely dependent on the availability of Internet facilities, unfortunately there is near absence of Internet facilities in most of the rural communities in Nigeria. In addition, there is lack of literacy particularly in the area of computer literacy which hinders the development of information literacy skills amongst the rural dwellers; whereas computer literacy is a vital enhancer of information literacy skills and lack of it poses a serious threat to the development of information literacy.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the provision of information literacy as a catalyst for socioeconomic and political development. It has argued that information literacy has the potential to transform the socioeconomic process of the rural communities into one that will empower and give them the capacity to actively participate in the information-based economy. In a nutshell, the provision of information literacy to rural communities in Nigeria will serve as a panacea to the problems that has long time existed and hindered them from exploiting their potentialities. The challenges to the provision of information literacy to rural communities identified above should be addressed vigorously if the rural communities MUST NOT remain perpetually in ignorance, Socio-economic stagnation and informational deprivation in a globally information-based economy.

Way Forward.

Considering the challenges militating against the effective implementation of information literacy to rural dwellers, the concerned authorities and information professionals should ensure that:

i. Rural dwellers in Nigeria have access to information and communication technology (ICT) and the gap between those who are "information-haves" and those who are "information have-nots" should be narrowed because the issue of digital divide generally referred to as unequal access to information has raised great social problems of inequality.

ii. Information providers and experts should be educated on the importance of information and create the awareness of the information needs of the rural populace in order to pay attention to the information needs of the various groups since knowing their information needs becomes vital in sustaining the information services for the socio-economic development of rural communities in Nigeria.

iii. Adequate knowledge of the information needs of users is imperative for government and its agencies in re-orienting the information services and activities to harmonize them with the information seeking behaviour of the rural communities.

iv. Information service delivery is capital intensive. It requires huge sums of money to adequately and effectively provide information service delivery to all and sundry. The governments should provide adequate resources to handle the information service delivery of the rural communities.

v. Funds should be provided to enhance information delivery service because of the role of information in the overall development of the citizenry.

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