

**PROVIDING SUSTAINABLE
&
EQUITABLE ACCESS TO
INFORMATION:
PERSPECTIVES FROM NIGERIA**

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**'Niran Adetoro
Christopher Nkiko**



**AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION
AMONG RURAL DWELLERS IN NIGERIA: INHIBITING
FACTORS AND PROSPECTS**

Dr. A.O. Issa

Associate Professor,

Department of Library and Information Science,
Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences,
University of Ilorin, Kwara State

B.B. Amusan

Higher Library Officer,

Department of Library and Information Science,
Federal Polytechnic, Ede, Osun State

Nafisa Rabi

Assistant Lecturer,

Department of Library and Information Science,
Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences,
University of Ilorin, Kwara State

Ojokuku, B. Y.

Department of Library and Information Science,
Federal Polytechnic, Ede, Osun State

yemiojokuku@gmail.com

Abstract

This chapter focuses on factors inhibiting availability and accessibility of information among rural dwellers in Nigeria. Rural dwellers in Nigeria are mostly farmers, hunters, artisans and petty traders with very low level of education. From the related literature reviewed, rural dwellers need information mostly on agriculture; then followed by health, family, and market information needs. Information sources mostly available and accessible to the rural dwellers in Nigeria include family, colleagues and friends; community health centers, elders, traditional leaders, religious institutions, and extension officers. Factors inhibiting access to information sources among the rural dwellers include low literacy level, poor socio-economic status, poor infrastructural development and low ICT penetration. The chapter recommends effective information repackaging, resuscitation of community libraries and information centres and provision of basic amenities as parts of measures to meet the information needs of rural dwellers; to engender the desired development.

Introduction

The World Bank (2014) states that 94,165,209 (ninety-four million, one hundred and sixty-five thousand, two hundred and nine) people, representing 53.1% of Nigerian population live in the rural communities. This underscores that quite a large number of Nigerian population are rural dwellers. Relevant to the World Bank report, Chester and Leelameghan (2006), indicate that rural communities constitute larger percentage of the African population whose information and developmental needs are not adequately met. This is usually the case as government focuses more on developing urban centres.

One major characteristic of rural community that distinguishes it from urban settlement is lack of basic amenities and infrastructure. Although, ICT penetration to rural communities in Nigeria is increasing,



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One major characteristic of rural community that distinguishes it from urban settlement is lack of basic amenities and infrastructure. Although, ICT penetration to rural communities in Nigeria is increasing,

rapid development is still in an early stage. Infrastructural development in rural communities is usually slowed down due to socio-political and economic factors. Rural dwellers in Nigeria are mostly agriculturists with majority having lower level of education (Idiegbeyan-Ose & Akpoghome, 2009); while few of them venture into other trades and crafts like black-smithing, fishing, mat-weaving, and hunting.

The rural dwellers contribute to the national development in areas of food security, trade and commerce, and production of raw materials for industries. Therefore, as part of requirements to meet these and other obligations, rural dwellers seek information from multifarious sources available to meet their information needs and obtain solutions to their problems with a view to making informed decisions. However, owing to their peculiar characteristics, there are barriers on their access to needed information, which hamper their individual and communal development since information is a major ingredient for facilitating development (Issa, Omopupa, & Salman, 2012). It is against this backdrop that this paper, through evidence from available literature on the subject matter, attempts to:

- i. identify the characteristics of rural dwellers/communities in Nigeria;
- ii. ascertain the information needs of the rural dwellers;
- iii. examine the information sources mostly available and accessible to the rural dwellers; and
- iv. identify the factors inhibiting access to information among the rural dwellers.

Characteristics of Rural Communities/Dwellers

Rural population refers to people living in rural areas as described by varying standards or statistics from individual regions or countries. According to Momodu (2012), rural communities are characterized by a low ratio of inhabitants to open land and the most important economic

activity is the production of foods and raw materials for industries. There are certain attributes for describing these communities and/or their dwellers. Rural communities in Nigeria are distinguished from their urban counterparts in that they are mostly agrarian settlements with very low level of development, poor electricity supply, bad road network, no/irregular pipe borne water, poor access to mass media, library or information center, low/no ICT penetration, access to primary health care only; with major occupation as farming, fishing and hunting. Rural communities are usually occupied by people, mostly old and few youths, who do not have access to basic public amenities, civilizations and modern technology (Egbe, 2014; Uzezi, 2015).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2013), rural communities in Nigeria have low access to schools, especially at the secondary level; with only 61% of rural communities in Nigeria have access to secondary schools within 5km from the center of their community, as against 84% in urban centers. Similarly, only 57% of them have access to health centers within 5km from the center of their community, as against 80% in urban centers. Mondal (2015) gave certain essential and general attributes for identifying a rural community, which are related to rural communities in Nigeria. A typical rural community in Nigeria is densely populated, mostly due to the small size of the community, with agriculture as the main occupation. Rural population share common characteristics in terms of occupation, level of development and education. Similarly, rural communities have close contacts with nature because of the abundance of natural habitats; with a high level of social interaction and solidarity due to the closeness of family members.

Eteng (2005) regarded rural communities in Nigeria as abodes of diseases (due to poor health care), poverty, lethargy, low income and low productivity; underscoring the fact that the poor state of affairs among the Nigerian rural dwellers is primarily due to government non- sustainable policy action towards rural transformation. Government is so much concerned with urban development and urban renewal programmes to

the neglect of these areas. Inhabitants of rural communities are mostly farmers, fishermen/women, hunters, potters, artisans (black-smithing, tie and dye, and mat-weaving and petty traders who are mostly illiterates, (Issa, 2003) and very few *expatriates* who mostly work as teachers or government officials (but hardly stay there). Idiegbeyan-Ose and Akpoghome (2009) and Olujimi (nd) share similar view stating that majority of rural dwellers in Nigeria are crude farmers whose poverty and lack of awareness of the modern farming techniques characterize their life style; while majority of them use primitive tools and farming techniques, and low yield seedlings, which give them low harvest yield. Olujimi (nd) points out further that "rural dwellers are majorly low income... socio-economic handicapped people. The people lack the technology and know-how to improve and manage effectively the world around them. Majority of the rural dwellers are children and elderly people. Rural dwellers are associated with housing stress (lack of modern amenities, poor quality housing etc), lower educational background, lower employment rates, persistent poverty, population loss... insufficient policing, fire hazards, poor healthcare services, reduced access to information and technology, and reduced access to resources and supplies such as lack of electricity, portable water supply, and health education among others".

Anele (2012) also opined that the level of government presence in these areas is unacceptably low, giving the impression that rural dwellers are second class citizens who should not be afforded modern amenities for comfortable living. The author noted that epileptic power supply is common feature of the rural areas; while poverty will not enable many of them to afford the cheapest generating sets as substitutes. They lack good road networks and portable water supply, and industries-small, medium or large scale. Thus, they are faced with myriads of everyday challenges; which often expose them to outbreak of deadly diseases and poor healthcare service delivery. These were largely responsible for why many of the productive youths have continued to migrate to the urban areas.

Information Needs of Rural Dwellers

According to Hossain and Islam (2012), information is needed for a variety of reasons, as it is instrumental to planning, decision making, completing of a given task, as well as useful in entrenching necessary self and communal development; and also appropriate information empowers people towards actions that can transform lives, and allows for a greater sense of independence. Similarly, Hog (2012) posited that information plays a central role in achieving a sustainable rural development stressing that an informed and knowledge-empowered rural people are the ones that push forward towards ensuring socio-economic development for their environment. Information is, therefore, a major input to transform and bring about the desired development. Research on information needs of rural dwellers in Nigeria abound. Rural dwellers, as part of the larger society, need information on daily basis. Information is sought from various available sources for planning and decision making. However, there are certain factors that drive information needs of individuals or group of people.

These factors include occupation, sex, age, marital status, education, religion, socio-economic level, weather, security, state of health, and geographic location. However, researches had established that the major drive for information is occupation (Hossain & Islam, 2012; Issa, Omopupa & Salman, 2012; Anuobi, Ogbonna. & Osuchukwu, 2014; Mtega & Ronald, 2013). In the case of rural dwellers, who are mostly farmers, information on agriculture tops the list, being their major occupation (Issa, 1998, 2003). Information needs of rural dwellers can be broadly grouped as appeared in Table 1 (but in no particular order of importance).

Table 1: Information Needs of Rural Dwellers in Nigeria

Factors Determining Information Needs	Types of Information Needed
Occupation (Farming, Hunting, Fishing, Pottery, Handcrafts, Lumbering)	Information on weather (to know when to start planting), soil classification/preparation, weeds and pests control; how to get and care for tractors and other farm implements; how to get high yield seedlings; what to plant; method of nurturing crops for high yield; how to control post-harvest pests/post-harvest preservation techniques; general information on getting affordable and quality farm inputs; new methods/technologies for farming to maximize production; how to practice crop rotation; prevention of plant diseases; kind of fertilizer to apply and how to apply it; irrigation, new technologies/ implement for hunting, black-smiting, tie and dye, tanning of leather, fishing.
Health	Food and nutrition; ante/post natal care; first aid treatments; personal hygiene; water treatment; prevention/cure from diseases/sickness; family planning; environmental sanitation; where to/and cost of receiving better health care in the city; immunization; prevention from HIV/AIDS; tuberculosis, cholera, malaria; traditional/ herbal medicine.
Politics	How to participate in politics: how to vote, who to vote for; fundamental rights of people; government programmes and policies for rural development; political situation in the country; how to get basic amenities and infrastructure from government or corporate social responsibilities from private institutions; citizens right, duties and obligations.
Market information	Price of commodities (to determine when to sell); market opportunities for raw materials; distribution of agric products; petty trade opportunities; market opportunities for local crafts (leather wares, tie and dye, fishing nets); transportation.

Empowerment	Securing government/private loan and repayment plan; how to get fertilizer at subsidized rate; establishing small scale industry for processing agricultural products; how to start and run cooperative societies/esusu; capacity building/training; how to start petty trading.
Animal husbandry	General information on rearing of domestic animals; prevention of animal diseases; improved breeds: animal feeds, fishery.
Education	Child education; progress report on schooling children; adult literacy programme/continuing education; self development; scholarship opportunities.
Religion	How to participate in pilgrimage to holy lands; spiritual rejuvenation; religious tolerance; dates for important religious festivities (date to commence general religious fasting).
Family	How to deal with domestic violence; new cooking methods/menu; childcare; information on good parenting; child abuse; family planning; sex education; how to solve domestic problems.
Community (Geographic location)	Community development; conflict resolution; community security; self-help projects; how to contact government for assistance.
Disaster management/ security	How to respond to natural or man-made disasters; crime prevention; how to report crime; roles of various law enforcement agents.
Culture	Cultural integration; culture of other people; how to promote and sustain their culture; history of the community; biography of past kings or chiefs; local crafts and customs.
Legal matters	Land use act, taxation; how to get a legal redress; how to enforce their rights under the law.

Source: Issa, Amusan, Rabiou and Ojokuku (2016)

Information Sources Available and Accessible to Rural Dwellers

Information products are packaged using different media including oral, written or multimedia, which are transmitted or disseminated to end users through necessary channels. For instance, oral information is usually transmitted through family, neighbours, and radio; while written/ documented one is disseminated through books, pamphlets, manuals, and posters. Also, multimedia information products are mostly disseminated through television, Internet, films, and documentaries. Rural communities in Nigeria are known to have strong oral cultural background, where information is mostly disseminated through oral medium (spoken words) and stored in people's memories only. It is mostly shared through one on one interaction and remains within the boundary of the community, unless they interact with people from other communities, or use telecommunication technologies. Anuobi, Ogbonna, and Osuchukwu (2014) found that rural dwellers' sources of information are predominantly oral as they usually source for it mostly through professional colleagues/ trade masters, churches, promotions by motor advertisers, TV and radio. This is in sharp contrast to the documented print and video sources, usually provided by library and information centers.

Apart from the oral sources of information, many other information sources are available to rural dwellers in Nigeria, though with varying levels of accessibility based on several factors discussed in the next section of this article. These sources, if available and accessible to rural dwellers, are capable of instituting desired self and communal development. Access to relevant and diverse information is necessary to engender desired development. According to Harande (2009) and Hossain and Islam (2012), effective development can only be achievable, if rural dwellers have access to relevant, diverse information for their activities. This underscores the vital and important role played by unrestricted access to necessary information on timely basis. Thus, information is needed for rural dwellers just like every other person, to access information for their own social, economic, political, and cultural development. Just like

Nwalo and Madukoma (2012) also argued that the availability, accessibility and utilization of information sources are very important issue, which should be given undivided attention for development and sustainability of the nation, especially in the rural areas. This is because unrestricted access to timely information goes a long way in empowering people to make informed decisions for transforming and developing their individual lives and immediate community.

Momodu (2012) also opined that rural dwellers usually have poor reading habits as a consequence of their low level of education, and equally lack access to information, which is a vital necessity for their developmental process. Therefore, availability and access to information is necessary for rural transformation and development as established by various scholars. It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any rural community to develop more than the level of information available to, and accessible by the community. However, the authors, from personal experience and observations, have identified common sources of information available to and consulted by rural dwellers nowadays, to include:

- a) *Cell phones*: These are now commonly used to by rural dwellers to ask for or share information among their family members, neighbours or colleagues that reside in their immediate community or other neighboring communities or big cities.
- b) *Personal experience*: People grow to learn and acquire new knowledge from personal experience. Such knowledge gained could be put to use anytime, or shared with friends and colleagues, who may need such for decision-making or completing a task.
- c) *Family, Colleagues and Friends*: Information relating to the community, family or occupations are shared by rural dwellers who are family members, friends and colleagues. Many of them

prefer informal sources like family and colleagues, to formal sources like pamphlets and manuals; as they are not only handy, but also relatively cheaper (Emmanuel, 2012).

- d) *Community health centers*: This is by far one of the major sources of health information available to rural dwellers, apart from health extension officers, who may occasionally visit the community. Community health centers provide wide range of information to the rural dwellers like family planning, prevention from malaria, and personal hygiene.
- e) *Religious institutions*: Rural dwellers also depend on religious institutions and leaders to furnish them with information. Such religious institutions are also used to disseminate political, health and family care information. Uzezi (2015) in a study of rural communities in Niger-Delta, Nigeria points out that churches were used for dissemination of information on immunization programme, because church services were conducted in local languages.
- f) *Political organizations*: Political parties disseminate pieces of information that are politically related to rural dwellers that are members and equally educate them on how to vote, who to vote for etc.
- g) *Trade unions/associations (Farmers' Association, Parent-Teacher Association, Hunters Union)*: Many of the rural dwellers belong to one trade association or the other. Information are accessed through these association or unions, how to secure government loan to assist their occupation.
- h) *Community social/age groups*: Similarly, many rural dwellers belong to some social/age groups, where they share information

on family issues, empowerment opportunities, and trade opportunities.

- i) *Extension officers (Agriculture, health-sanitary inspectors):* Extension officers are also very important sources of information to the rural dwellers, as they are always professional and give credible information, gathered and synthesized from various secondary/tertiary sources of information.
- j) *Elders/traditional leaders:* Elders in the community and traditional leaders are usually regarded as the custodians of traditions and culture in the rural communities. Thus, they are always *trusted* to supply information on culture and traditions, history of the community, biographies of past warriors and leaders, and land issues.
- k) *Mass media (TV and radio):* Although these sources are infrequently used (due to socio-economic factors and poor electricity supply), yet, they supply varieties of information, and equally have some programmes targeting the rural dwellers.
- l) *Community libraries/information centers/museums:* Community libraries, if available, are one of the most reliable and credible information sources available to rural dwellers. Community libraries have varieties of information services targeted at meeting various information needs of the rural dwellers. Similarly, museums in rural communities serve as a place where rural dwellers can access information, especially those that deal with the culture and traditions. Also, as a result of ICT penetration to rural communities, sports viewing centers are springing up, where rural dwellers can watch live matches and access other sports related information across the globe.

m) *Community ICT centers (if available)*: Few years ago, some community ICT centers were established by government (with assistance from World Bank), where rural dwellers can access information on the Internet. However, due to poor maintenance culture and change in governance which usually results into discontinuance of past government programmes, many of these community ICT centers are no longer functioning.

Factors Inhibiting Access to Information among the Rural Dwellers

Availability and accessibility of information in rural areas are limited by various factors. Mtega and Ronald (2013) grouped these factors into *individual factors* and *institutional factors*. They describe individual factors as those that relate to rural people themselves which may include individual income, level of education, age, gender etc. Institutional factors on the other hand include infrastructure and amenities like roads, communication networks, education system, government support etc. These factors are explained further:

1. *Literacy level/wrong medium of information transmission*: Majority of rural dwellers are illiterate, according to National Bureau of Statistics (2013). Information is usually presented in formats and languages not comprehensible to them. For instance, information targeting them that is presented in a pamphlet using English language from a credible source will likely end up not useful, unlike information presented through oral form, or in local language. Literacy increases the ability to use different sources of information. Illiterate rural dwellers may only use their phones to initiate or receive calls, and not for accessing information on the Internet due to lack of ICT skills (Ifijeh, Iwu-James and Adebayo, 2016). Similarly, the print/video sources usually presented by extension officers, library/information centers are usually written in English language, which is not understood or commonly spoken by the rural dwellers who are mostly illiterates. In most cases, information

is also pre-determined, and not tailor-made (Zaid and Popoola, 2010). This made other informal sources like family, and colleagues mostly used, as the language/technology barriers of literacy are removed.

- ii. *Poor socio-economic status of individuals:* Individual social economic factors can affect information accessibility. Increased income increases affordability of information services and sources and vice-versa.
- iii. *Poor infrastructural facilities/basic amenities:* Many rural communities are inaccessible to information officers due to poor road networks or other transportation problems. Also, lack of basic amenities and infrastructure (like Internet, phone service and electricity) in the rural areas does not attract or encourage relevant personnel to work there. This makes information dissemination difficult, denying the rural dwellers access to needed information. According to Idiegbeyan-Ose and Akpoghome (2009), "rural farmers depend largely on agricultural extension workers through one on one contact for information on agriculture". However, due to limited number of these workers, coupled with poor road networks, which prevent the extension workers from reaching so many communities, it is difficult for farmers to access new information.
- iv. *Poor access to mass media:* Electricity problem, socio-economic status and low literacy level prevent rural dwellers from accessing information through the mass media. According to Emmanuel (2012), most farmers do not have TV, read newspapers, due to non-availability, but rather mostly rely on informal sources like family, church, and farmers' associations, to access information. As many of them do not have access to TV and radio, and most newspapers are written in English language and not easily

presented in English language, which may not be useful to the rural dwellers due to language barrier or low literacy level. Therefore, information meant for rural dwellers should best be produced or repackaged using their local language, and in a format that will easily be accessible and useful. Idiegbeyan-Ose and Akpoghome (2009) and Nwalo and Madukoma (2012) also recommend that information should be disseminated in local languages in order to achieve results; especially in localities where English language is not the medium of communication. There is also the need to integrate new technologies for enhancing the oral tradition which is mostly rooted in most of the rural communities.

The need to revive the *dead* or *dying* public libraries and community information centers is incumbent on government at all levels, due to the crucial role they play in providing access to information. Egesimba (2009) recommended aggressive use of public libraries' services to tackle problems associated with meeting information needs of rural dwellers in Nigeria; as public libraries have the largest number of diverse clients to cater for. The author stressed that the public library should repackage its services in order to reach the rural dwellers. Similarly, as Uzezi (2015) pointed out that there should be literacy campaign programmes to encourage and educate rural dwellers to enable them access information in the community information centers/libraries, public libraries have a role to play in improving the reading culture of their immediate community and assist in adult literacy programmes.

This paper is advocating for the establishment of, and revival of information centers across rural communities, as a national programme (just like rural health centers) that will provide access to basic information on all areas necessary. Rural information centers should be equipped with adequate human and material resources to be able to identify information needs peculiar to each community or rural dweller and the preferred ways of disseminating information that best meet their information needs. The information centers should also be equipped with

relevant multimedia resources for disseminating useful information in formats that will be most useful to the rural dwellers and provisions should also be made for specialists/translators that can translate/repackage information to meet their demands.

There is need for public/private partnership in establishing and financing rural information centers. Government should seek partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGO's), or international organizations like UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO, British Council, and USAID for funding, capacity building/training and information materials, as these bodies invest heavily on acquiring and disseminating information relevant for facilitating individual and communal development.

Provision of basic amenities, industries and infrastructure is paramount to developing the rural communities; as it will encourage the productive youth who usually migrate to urban centers and government officials/extension officers, who hardly stay in the rural areas to stay. By this, flow of information and technological penetration will improve thereby aiding rapid development.

Conclusion

Rural dwellers in Nigeria are mostly agriculturists. Apart from providing food security, they equally provide raw materials for industries. However, rural communities are rather backward in term of development. As several factors may be responsible for this, access to timely and credible information has been identified as very crucial to the development of rural communities. Information needs of rural dwellers vary accordingly, depending on such factors as occupation, gender, marital status, and literacy level. Informal sources such as family, neighbours, and cell phones can be deployed to access information due to their easy availability and accessibility. To effectively provide uninterrupted access to information

for the rural dwellers, information repackaging is very important. Information repackaging entails selection of related information from various credible sources and presenting them in an easily accessible and useable format to targeted users, and in a generally comprehensive language. Information providers need to first carry out users' studies to identify the information needs of a targeted community. This is to avoid giving out information that is pre-determined, and not needed at a particular time, as reported by Zaid and Popoola (2010). Finally, there is the need for governments at all levels to provide infrastructure and facilities necessary for this task, if the country truly wants to see the kind of development it desires.

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