

Strategies for Enhancing Sustainable Agricultural Practices Among Rural Households In Nigeria: Implications For Information Services

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to examine how information services can be utilized to empower rural based households in Nigeria to overcome their challenges and enhance sustainable agricultural development in the country. The paper addresses the challenges facing rural households in Nigeria; the current state of agriculture in Nigerian economy and the agricultural development challenges facing rural-based households as well as information services can be utilized to help overcome the challenges. The paper also makes general recommendations for overcoming the challenges and enhancing sustaining agricultural development in the country. Among them are that information services should be provided in various varieties and formats to meet the needs and requirements of the families; rural public libraries should employ the services of librarians and resource persons who are well versed in the content and method of agricultural and rural development, and adequate awareness has to be created among members of rural populace including rural households about the role and potentials of library information services. At the same time, member of rural households should make effort to acquire information literacy and library use skills and create time to use the libraries. Government on its part should ensure full documentation of their agricultural policies, programmes and reforms and make them conveniently accessible to libraries for dissemination to the rural dwellers.

Key words: Information, Services, Public libraries, Agriculture, Sustainable development, Rural communities, household.

Introduction

Nigeria is characterized by a preponderance of rural population. Majority of the rural population are engaged in agriculture. They constitute the main producers of agricultural produce of Nigeria and constitute the supply base of the nation's manpower. This made Mbwana (1987) to argue that there is an interrelationship between agriculture and rural development.

Agriculture is the science or practice of farming. But it goes beyond farming. It is a generic term that covers the science, art and process of supplying human wants through the products of the soil and the associated industries. It involves the cultivation of the soil, the raising of food crops, the breeding and raising of livestock, etc. It is a very important sector of the economies of the developing countries. Ezeani (2005) has

observed that very few countries have experienced rapid economic growth without a corresponding growth in agriculture. Agricultural development is a cardinal point of the four national development programmes of the federal government of Nigeria. These include the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), the 7-point agenda, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the vision 20-20:20 (Mole, & Dim, 2012a).

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations Commission on Environment and Development, 1987 cited by Chike-Obi, 2012). Sustainable agricultural development simply refers to agricultural development that can continue to provide the present agricultural needs as well as guarantee the future agricultural needs of the people. One critical stakeholder in sustainable agricultural development is the family.

A household involves any two or more persons related by birth, marriage or adaptation and residing together. A household may include all members of a family or other persons related in in one way or the other, including blood, culture, religion, etc., living together and interacting mutually with one another (Lamina, 1991). A household goes beyond sexual expressiveness or parent-child relationship in which people usually related by ancestry, marriage or adoption. In a household, people live together with commitment to one another; form an economic unit and mutually care for one another and feel securely attached to the group.

A household is usually made up of members of a family or families.. The family is the only legally recognized agency for exchange of affection; companionship, intimacy and social security. In fact, the family is the life wire of the entire society since it provides the people, who in turn provide the activities and services from which the society gets its income, support and power. Individual human beings are inextricably tied to their families.

The family has been endowed with peculiar responsibilities of catering for its members, by ensuring their survival, safety, shelter, growth, and statutory heights/obligation, providing education, moral, social and legal developments among others. According to WHO as cited by Mbagwu (2005), the family is an index of the social status of the entire society. The family is the first school of socialization, which lays the child's foundation of knowledge, character, virtue, and religion. Even the education of the child starts from the home, and then extends to the larger society.

The household has a single most important influence in all the crucial stages for human development. However, this fundamental unit of the society is presently facing challenges from numerous directions. Some of these challenges include: food insecurity, degrading living condition, malnutrition and other agriculture-based challenges. These challenges impact on the family in various ways and obviously pose serious threats to the very existence and survival of the family and consequently the society. In Nigeria today, the increasing rate of poverty, unemployment, and so many social problems can be attributed to the inability of households to cope with the challenges of sustainable agricultural development. There has been perennial low agricultural production (Aina, in Mabawonku, 2001), continuing poor food supply and food security, continuing poor agricultural development and poor economic and consequently poor national development in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the rural dwellers, symbolized by the family have been at the receiving end, being the major producers and consumers of agricultural produce (Mole & Dim, 2012b).

Therefore, the need for change is very desirable and necessary for the country to achieve sustainable agricultural development. In view of this, there is urgent need to examine the strategies for overcoming the challenges facing rural based families in achieving sustainable agricultural development in Nigeria. This can be achieved through sound library information services. Information Services, which are the provision of specific facts and information to library users is offered to mediate between library users' information needs and the information resources of the library. The purpose of information services, according to Okiy (1998), is to get the content of library collections to the clientele.

The objective of this paper is to examine how information services can be utilized to empower rural based households in Nigeria to overcome their challenges and enhance sustainable agricultural development in the country. The paper addresses the challenges facing rural households in Nigeria; the current state of agriculture in Nigerian economy and the agricultural development challenges facing rural-based households as well as information services can be utilized to help overcome the challenges.

State of Agriculture In Nigerian Economy

Before the discovery, exploration and wholesale dependence on petroleum products in Nigeria, agriculture was the mainstay of the economy. From agricultural resources, such as cotton and groundnut in the North, cocoa in the South West and palm products in the South East, Nigeria became a potential and actual exporter of these agricultural products. For instance, in 1971 alone, Nigeria produced a whopping 257,000 tones of cocoa, as the world's second largest producer after Ghana (Olugunagba, 2003). These agricultural products were produced beyond subsistence level.

It is a very important sector of the economies of the developing countries. It is the backbone of the economy of Africa with about 90% of her people depending on it for a living. It is also the main foreign exchange earner of the various countries that make up the continent (Mbwana, 1987). Ezeani (2005) has observed that very few countries have experienced rapid economic growth without a corresponding growth in agriculture. Agriculture also provided employment and source of livelihood for the increasing population and accounting for over half of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Nigerian economy at independence in 1960.

It is however unfortunate that the discovery of petroleum and the resultant oil boom of the 1970s resulted in the neglect of agriculture as government shifted its attention and support from the agricultural to the oil sector. The reserve accruing to the country, in addition to other sources was spent on the exploration of petrol and related sources such as gas and kerosene. This had adverse effects on the development of agriculture in Nigeria. This neglect caused Fadiji to prophesy in 1996 that the much publicized aspiration of food for all by the year 2000 would be an unrealizable dream. Today, his prophesy has come to reality. Today, the current food supply is inadequate to meet the needs of the over 140 million people resulting in the continuous dependence on importation of even staple food products like rice and beans. Nigerian agriculture has been stagnant, or at best, in recession (Omeje, 2004). Agriculture has been reduced to below subsistence level and the country has since then relied on mass importation, not only of agricultural products but also refined petrol, the crude of which it produces massively and which made it to abandon agriculture.

There has been perennial low agricultural production (Aina, in Mabawonku, 2001), continuing poor food supply and food security, continuing poor agricultural

development and poor economic and consequently, poor national development in Nigeria and other ever-present problems of the agricultural process. These problems could be attributed to dominant place of the oil industry, the inadequate financial and human resources allocated to the agricultural sector by the government (federal, state and local), the lip service paid to the agricultural development, the dwindling interest of the populace to agricultural production, and the rate of technological advancement and poor response to such advancements by the governments of the developing countries.

More than 50% of the Nigerian populace and labour force is in the agricultural sector, even though the contribution of this sector to the GDP of the developing countries is very low. Despite the dwindling interest of the populace in agriculture, the number of people in agricultural production is still high. Many of the labour force are in agriculture due to unemployment. The result is that the less developed countries have continually failed to produce enough food crops for home consumption let alone production of industrial and export crops.

Agricultural Development Challenges Facing Rural Households in Nigeria

The major challenges facing the Nigerian rural households in sustainable agricultural development include the following:-

According to Oyeranti & Olaiyiwola (2005), the incidence of poverty among the rural households in Nigeria is on the high side, with 70% of the total population classified as poor. Families find it very difficult to fend for themselves. Salaries of people in the rural areas are inadequate and irregular. Many people have no jobs at all. The consequence is that many Nigerian rural households lack the needed financial wherewithal to engage in sustainable agricultural development because it requires finance to begin and sustain.

Agricultural sustainability relies on sound agricultural development and this also relies on agricultural information. To a large extent, this has been hampered by illiteracy. Many members of Nigerian rural households lack access to qualitative education (Mole & Dim, 2010). This has affected acquisition of required skills for economic survival and importantly for sustainable agricultural development.

Most of the youth and adult who form the major manpower base for agriculture practice

lack appropriate skills to engage in sustainable agricultural development (Garba, 2010). This has in many cases, resulted in poor agricultural productivity and consequently, poor agricultural development. Even children who are supposed to be the engine house for sustainable agricultural development are either forced into street hawking in the urban areas, trafficked for money, “leased” out as house maids where they are usually exposed to harsh and inhuman treatment, or other forms of child abuse to obtain money for their upkeep (Nwankwai, 2003). Many unfortunate ones become victims of rape to hoodlums; fall into gangs and perpetrate crimes of all sorts- robbery, kidnapping, arson, prostitution, trafficking in human persons etc.

Many Nigerian rural households lack agricultural culture and do not generally appreciate

agriculture (Ejiofor, 2010).. Many prefer to rely on buying directly from the market. This explains why the demand for agricultural produce is far higher than the supply, resulting in continuously increasing rise in the prices of these produce (Garba, 2010). Many youth, for instance, do not know how to plant maize which is one of the easiest crops to plant. This problem seems to have stemmed from the government’s neglect of agriculture in

favour of the oil sector since the 1970s. Even the government agricultural policies have not helped matters because they have continued to pay lip service to such policies making agriculture to be relegated to the background.

The feeling of inequality and economic marginalization resonate with certain sections of the public. This has created underlying climate of tension and hate, and potential for violence, waiting to be ignited and to explode. In all these, rural households are at the receiving end. Many rural households rely on the government for grant and other forms of financial assistance to enable them proceed with their agricultural activities (Raju and Raju, 2010). As a result of their poverty, location or even socio-political affiliation, Many rural households are denied access to required finance to carry out their agricultural activities. The rural areas are also characterized by such social ills as insecurity, lawlessness, inter – communal clashes, land disputes, poor health care, poor social services, unemployment and militancy (Nwankwai, 2003).

The entire nation depends on the rural population for supply of agricultural production.

This puts a lot of pressure on the rural dwellers to meet the challenge. As a result of this pressure and coupled with poor motivation and incentives from the government, some of the rural dwellers are compelled to migrate to the urban centres leaving only a depleted population in the rural areas (Mole & Dim, 2012a)

The neglect of agriculture in the rural areas has resulted to wide disparity in income and standard of living between rural and urban dwellers (Federal Office of Statistics, 2001). Such disparity is dangerous as it contributes to disorderly migration from rural to urban areas and depletes the manpower in rural area resulting in continuing low productivity and underdevelopment.

Despite constituting the main producers of agricultural produce of a nation and the supply base of nation's manpower, the rural households are the more neglected, disadvantaged and underdeveloped. Planning and policy making most times do not involve the rural populace. National development plans are usually not based on their needs and condition (Oyeranti and Olaiyiwola, 2005).

Information is of paramount importance not only for the agricultural development of the rural areas but also for their general development and sustenance (Aboyade, 1991). Unfortunately, the rural dwellers are often denied access to relevant information needed to facilitate their agricultural and overall development (Oyeranti and Olaiyiwola, 2005). The Internet facilities and other access facilities are either scarcely located, not readily available, or not optimally functional in Nigeria (Ayanyemi, 2006).. The rural libraries, in view of their location, have poor or no access to online services such as the internet and are therefore constrained to rely on the print sources which are usually inadequate and outdated.

Ways Information Services Can be Utilized to Overcome the Challenges

Information services can be utilized as a veritable tool to overcome the challenges and enhance sustainable agricultural development. This can be done through provision of and accessibility to relevant and appropriate agricultural information services. There are now many rural-based agricultural information services and sources, depending on individual library policies and the needs of the clientele of the library in question. Such services can be provided through a variety of channels including the Internet, government documents such as press releases, newsletters, periodicals, and

technical reports; audio visual and vertical file collections. Through these services, libraries provide or disseminate information to the rural dwellers especially on issues that affect them deeply such as agriculture. (Dike & Amechi, 2008). Among other things, this service will be aimed at getting the people well informed on the various contemporary methods of farming. Information resources should include books, pamphlets, vertical file collections, periodicals such as newspapers and magazines (Mole & Dim, 2012c), and various kinds of reference materials, including handbooks, encyclopedias, biographies and yearbooks.

One very useful area of education and knowledge dissemination is government programmes on agriculture. Library information services must be utilized as a tool for public awareness on the programmes and policies of the government, especially on agricultural development. In giving the grassroots a sense of belonging, effort must be made to avoid discriminatory tendencies, because it is a major source of crisis in the society today. Measures must be taken to avoid a lag in information dissemination between the urban and rural dwellers. Disparity in income and standard of living between rural and urban sectors must be reduced through sound agricultural development enhanced, through effective information service delivery.

Provision of up-to-date and relevant information is of particular importance. This would help to avail the rural populace of adequate access to information on current trends and innovation in agriculture and help them meet up with global best practices (Jimba, and Yakubu, 2006). This would help to emancipate Nigeria from her perennial low agricultural production, enhance food security, restore agriculture as the main foreign exchange earner, support the federal government's poverty alleviation programme, promote rapid economic growth, and enhance the overall national development of the nation. One effective way of making agricultural information available is through Community Information Services (CIS). These are services which assist individuals and groups to participate as full and equal members of society. Literate and illiterate individuals at the grassroots need equal access to information on the local needs of the people including agriculture and food security. Community Information Services (CIS) serve as gateway to rapid agricultural development (Okoli, 2005). The rural libraries need to provide these services by building basic collections on subjects of relevance to the agricultural needs of the people including, crop production, animal husbandry, soil management and efficiency, agricultural engineering, pest and disease control, food security, etc. Materials like posters, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, filmstrips, VCDs, radios and cassettes are veritable tools that will assist the rural librarians to provide these services to the rural dwellers. In order to gain **access to global best practices**, public libraries must adopt and utilize international comparative studies in their service delivery (Okoli, 2005). This is the practice of securing information on what is being done in other countries, including their farming system and land management practices. This is a very important ingredient for sustainable agricultural development among the rural dwellers (Mole & Dim, 2010). Rural public libraries abound in Nigeria. They can utilize these studies and their comparative analysis to make recommendations on how to overcome common agricultural problems in the country.

What Library and Information Professionals Must Do

Library and information professionals should avail their clientele the opportunity of information provision in a variety of sources, media and format (Okoli, (2005). In particular, library and information professionals need to set up or strengthen

the audio visual units in their localities to serve as a meeting point for a number of community based information-related activities. These units should serve as a regular television and occasional video viewing as well as radio and gramophone record listening centre. They should also serve as centres for the exhibitions of relevant posters and other bills in aid of public enlightenment on their local activities. Live programmes and activities that promote agricultural development should be shown in these units. It should provide for farmers' talks, among others.

In view of the structure of the population of the rural communities, if rural dwellers are to benefit, a new conceptualization to the design and service delivery is imperative from library information services at that level (Ochai, 1995). Rural public libraries in Nigeria should therefore avail their users the opportunity of information provision in variety of sources, media and format. (Okoli, 2005). Librarians should see the need for multi-media services in the provision of information services so as to meet the needs and literacy level of the rural dwellers and provide systematically to stimulate their interest and enthusiasm.

The librarians should stock and make abundant information materials on the various methods and innovations in agriculture and on the various segments of agriculture, including animal husbandry, plant science, animal science, soil and water agricultural economics, agricultural engineering, food and nutrition, conservation and development. Importantly, libraries should pay great attention to the acquisition and provision of government publications. These are very important as they help to provide relevant information and education on the position, programmes, and policies of government on agriculture. Such documents include: statistical reports, annual reports, technical reports, agriculture related bills, statutes, federal constitutions; and judicial resolutions on land and other related cases.

Libraries in Nigeria should avail their users, especially rural-based users of agricultural collection, the opportunities of online information services in the area of agriculture. This will greatly afford them opportunity of wide access to adequate and current information resources and services in the area (Okoli, 2005). This will afford them opportunity to wide access to adequate and current information resources and services. Moreover, library and information professionals should regularly organize workshops, book talks, discussion groups, and seminars for rural dwellers, rural agricultural researchers and other stakeholders in rural agricultural development.

General Recommendations for Overcoming the Challenges

Availability of Library Information Resources

In order to make relevant library information resources available to rural households, the following steps need to be taken:

- Identification of agricultural information needs of rural –based families.
- Capacity building for stakeholders in agricultural development through training workshops, book talks, discussion groups.
- Production of rural information enlightenment and media on agricultural development and promotion such as posters, photographs, audio-visuals, pamphlets etc to educate, inform and enlighten the rural dwellers on the need and strategies for sustainable agricultural development.
- Employment of the services of librarians and resource persons who are well versed in the content and method of agricultural and rural development. Such people should be engaged in the utilization of agricultural information resources complemented by personal knowledge to educate the rural populace.

- Creation of adequate awareness among rural – based families members, including teachers, students, adults, market women, about the role and potentials of libraries information services. They should be encouraged to use these services.

Family- Based Intervention

- Families should encourage their members on the need for regular use of library and information services. They should create time to use the libraries in view of the numerous benefits derivable from them.
- The rural – based family members, including students, farmers, peasant, opinion leaders, market women, artisans, among others, should make effort to acquire information literary and library use skills.

Government's Role

- Government should ensure full documentation of their agricultural policies, programmes and reforms and make them conveniently accessible to libraries for dissemination to the rural dwellers
- Government should provide for the libraries, necessary and relevant resources including financial, human, and information resources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that before the discovery, exploration and dependence on petroleum products in Nigeria, agriculture was the mainstay of the economy. It is however unfortunate that the discovery of petroleum and the resultant oil boom of the 1970s resulted in the neglect of agriculture. Agriculture has since then been reduced to below subsistence level and the country has since then relied on mass importation of agricultural products. The major challenges facing Nigerian households in achieving sustainable agricultural development include poverty, limited access to education and training, child abuse, illiteracy, inequalities and economic marginalization, limited access to information and communication technology (ICT), government neglect of the rural communities, and preponderance of social challenges. However, Information Services can be utilized to overcome the challenges through provision of and accessibility to relevant and appropriate agricultural information services and effective community information services (CIS) among others. Such information must also be relevant and adequately provided to be able to achieve the desired objective. However, this requires the complementary role of libraries, librarians, the government and the rural populace.

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