



**COMMUNITY LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION CENTRES FOR POVERTY  
ALLEVIATION IN RURAL NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this paper is to bring to the fore, the role of the rural community library in poverty alleviation in Nigeria. Poverty is a condition whereby individuals do not earn enough income to satisfy the basic necessities of life – food, shelter and clothing. Relying on the available literature, three types of poverty are given as; cyclical, collective and case poverty. The causes of poverty in rural Nigeria among other factors include lack of information infrastructure such as libraries, information centres and public telephony. The effects of poverty are hunger and diseases, high rate of child and infant mortality, prostitution, increase in organised crimes, rural urban migration and, food insecurity, just to mention few. The roles of the community library in rural poverty alleviation includes such services as reference and information services, information packaging, computer training and online business learning support, special job search services to the unemployed and, as an enlightenment centre for the populace. The paper concludes that rural community library is a critical factor in rural poverty alleviation and suggests that governments at all levels should evolve a vibrant rural community library services programme.*

**Keywords:** Community Libraries, Rural Information Services, Poverty Alleviation, Nigeria

**Introduction**

Poverty has ravaged the world, especially the third- world countries of which Nigeria is one. The incidence of poverty is more in the rural areas than in the urban areas. In Nigeria, more than 70% of the populace resides in the rural area, with majority living below poverty line. The consequences of the phenomenon have alerted governments. Non- governmental organisations and the International Organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank; as a result, many policies have been initiated and, programmes undertaken, all aimed at poverty alleviation. For example, the recognition of the importance of physical, social and



institutional infrastructure in poverty alleviation has led to the provision of roads, micro-finance banks and health centres in some rural areas in Nigeria.

However, no serious recognition has been given to the roles of the community library in poverty alleviation in rural Nigeria, hence, little or nothing has been written about it in the literature of rural poverty alleviation in the country. This paper contends that the community library as an agency has some important and imperative roles to play in rural poverty alleviation. The continued negligence of these roles is one of the reasons why policies and programmes undertaken by governments at various levels towards rural poverty alleviation have recorded little or no success. The objective of this paper therefore is to bring to the fore, the roles of community library services in poverty alleviation in rural Nigeria.

### **The Concept of Community Library**

A community library is a branch of public library intended to provide advice –centre function and local information for the whole of its community rather than only offering book stock to the readers. (Hanrod's Library Glossary). From the above definition, it could be seen that the community library, apart from the traditional library functions of acquiring, organizing, storage and dissemination of information to its community, also provides advisory services to people in the community.

A community is a body of people living near one another and sharing a common way of life. (New Webster's English Dictionary). The rural community in Nigeria consists of mainly the very poor, the unemployed, illiterates, semi-illiterates, poorly paid workers, etc. Agbodike (1992) observed that other types of libraries – the public, academic, research and school libraries are inevitably and invariably located in big towns and cities like Lagos, Enugu, Owerri, etc and that it is only in exceptional circumstances that some of these libraries are found in semi urban and rural areas; and even then the rural areas rarely feel the impacts of the presence of these libraries as the interaction between the libraries and the rural people is either infinitesimal or completely non-existence due to high rate of illiteracy.

### **Concept of Poverty**

Poverty means something different in different countries and regions, depending on the general standards of the country or region. The Funk and Wagnall's New Encyclopedia defines poverty as an economic condition in which people lack sufficient income to obtain certain minimal levels of health services, food, housing, clothing and education, generally recognized as necessary to ensure adequate standard of living. The New Book of Knowledge (2006) describes poverty as being sick and being able to see a doctor; not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, not having enough cloth; not having a job, not being able to plan for the future, dying from illness caused by unclean water, not being able to choose where you live or how you live. A person is considered poor or living beneath the poverty line if he or she earns or consumes less than the amount considered necessary to meet minimum adequate levels of nutrition, shelter and other necessities.

Ozigbo (2001) defines poverty as adverse, economic, social, psychological, environmental, technological and political conditions that impoverishes man and hinders the attainment of a meaningful standard of living. He further stated that it involves a condition of



inadequate income to obtain basic goods and services; which involves the individuals' inability to meaningfully subsist and to reproduce against all forces that minimize the quality of life; a situation where substance depends on wages with which to purchase food, which often is inadequate in quantity and quality. The poor in any society depicts certain economic and social deformities in comparison to unwritten standard set by that society at that period.

### **Types of Poverty**

There are three distinct types of poverty (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981 ed.) These are: the encyclical poverty, the collective poverty and the case poverty.

*The Cyclical Poverty:* This refers to poverty that may be wide-spread throughout a population, but the occurrence itself is of limited duration. In non-industrial society, this sort of inability to provide for one's basic needs rests upon temporary food shortage caused by natural phenomenon, (for example, drought or flood) or poor agricultural planning.

*Collective Poverty:* In contrast with cyclical poverty which is temporary, collective poverty involves a relatively permanent insufficiency of means to secure basic needs – condition that may be so general as to describe the average level of life in a society, or that may be concentrated in a relatively large group in an otherwise prosperous society. Collective poverty may be transmitted from generation to generation, fathers passing their poverty unto their sons.

*Case Poverty:* This is similar to collective poverty in relative performance but different from it in terms of distribution. Case poverty refers to the inability of an individual to secure basic needs even in social surroundings of general prosperity. This inability is generally related to the lack of some basic attributes that would permit the individual to maintain himself. How severe the physical or mental handicap or how deficient the education and skill must be to make one unemployable depends on the range of jobs available in the society.

### **The Rural Nigerian**

The word "rural" means country side, as opposed to urban area (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2000 ed.). Rural settlement is a place in the country side such as an isolated dwelling hamlet or village where people make their homes (The Instant Reference Geography, 2000). They may be defined in terms of their distance from urban areas. People in rural areas or settlements increasingly suffer from reduction of services such as public transport, libraries, electricity supply, schooling facilities, health services, water etc.

Mugbalu (1992) lamented that despite the fact that an overwhelming proportion of our national population reside in the rural areas, the rural areas are characterized by depressingly meager annual per-capita income, pervasive and endemic poverty manifested by wide spread of hunger, malnutrition, poor health, general lack of access to formal education, livable housing and various forms of social and political isolation. Commenting further on the characteristics of rural Nigeria, Ogbazi (1992) cited Olatunbosun (1985) and described it thus:



*Its inhabitants are mainly farmers who maintain small holding and practice seasonal farming; their production is mainly on subsistence level and food crops are predominant over plantation crops. Productivity and standard of living are low. They are satisfied victims of preventable diseases which is derived from malnutrition. Inside the rural dwelling place, man, woman and children are herded together in conditions which defy all rules of hygiene, a condition of life so poor that it prevents the realization of man's total potentials.*

Duru (2000) citing a United Nations report on rural poverty, said that Africa and the third world constitute majority of the world's poorest of the poor. According to the report on Nigeria, adult literacy is put at 44.4% of the population. Population of people without any credible access to water is put at 49.9%; with 90% of these inhabiting rural areas of Nigeria. Idike (1992) described the main features of rural Nigeria as depression, degradation and deprivation. He pointed out that many rural villages are immersed in poverty, so palpable that the people are embodiment of it. In most rural Nigeria, basic infrastructures, where they exist are most inadequate. Physical infrastructures like motorable roads are lacking. The villagers and their livestock in rural villages depend on shallow waters or guinea –warm infested ponds. The Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS, 2004) observed that two thirds of Nigerian people are poor, despite living in a country with vast potential wealth. It further observed that in 1980, about 27% of Nigerians lived in poverty and by 1999; about 70% of the people had income less than USD \$1 a day. By now, this figure must have increased.

### **Causes of Poverty**

Many factors some of which are social, political and environmental are responsible for the poverty condition of the rural areas in Nigeria. Some of these factors are as follows:

*Political Factors – Denial of Political Rights:* Simmons (1995) opines that poor people and poor nations are trapped in a vicious circle in which they remain poor because they cannot claim their rights. In Nigeria, one of such rights that are denied the masses, especially in the rural areas is the political rights to vote freely and elect a leader of their choice. These denials come in the forms of political violence and snatching of ballot boxes at the pooling stations by party tugs; falsification of electronic results by party agents and some electoral officers at the collation centres and buying of voters' cards from the rural masses, etc. Politicians who eventually emerge as leaders through this system most often turn blind eyes towards the plight of the rural dwellers, as they use public money meant for development for their selfish aggrandizements, thereby impoverishing the rural masses.

*Bad Political Leadership:* Okey (2009) said that the unfortunate poverty status of Nigeria today is because of the consistent bad leadership of the country. He lamented that 50 years of the country's existence as an independent nation, the country's leadership has not been able to provide dividends of democracy to the people. Similarly, Ezekwesili (2009) asserted that in order to check poverty in Nigeria, government should prioritize quality spending on such human development areas as health, education, agriculture, fisheries as well as rural and urban



infrastructures. In the same vein, Etim (2009) lamented that “our leaders have personalized money that would have been use for the development of the country, create job and conducive environment for private investors to thrive as well as provide basic amenities like health, education, water, reliable public transportation system and others.

*Environmental Factors:* Environmental degradation is another factor that contributes to the depilating poverty in rural Nigeria. The poor across the rural area depend on the land for their sustenance and to meet their basic needs, and any act of degradation affects them negatively. For example, in the Niger Delta, the people depend on the rivers and streams as their main source of water, rivers and streams serve as their economic main stay and the land for agricultural purposes. But oil exploitation in the last 50 years has made the water no longer portable, destroyed aquatic lives and rendered the land barren. In the Northern parts of the country, desertification has laid waste the land. The problem of gas flaring has also caused untold destruction to the environments in the Niger Delta areas (Etim, 2009).

*Social Factors: Lack of Information and Communication Infrastructure:* Information infrastructures include library and information centres, public television viewing centres, post offices, public telephone and internet services. We are in the age of information. The economic and social developments of any community depend to a large extend on the quantity and quality of information produced and consumed by that community. The rural Nigeria suffers from serious lack of information infrastructure. Lack of the right information at the right time deprives an individual or a whole community the opportunity to take advantage of certain opportunities even when such opportunities are right there at their door steps.

*Lack of Rural Infrastructure:* Olujim (2001) citing Idachaba (1985) classified rural infrastructure into:

- (1) Physical infrastructure which comprises roads, bridges, flood control and water development facilities;
- (2) Social infrastructure which comprises health and educational facilities and Rural utilities;
- (3) Institutional infrastructure such as cooperative societies, agricultural extension and training facilities, and rural financial institutions among others. He stressed that these facilities are necessary for the economic and social vitalization of the rural areas. The lack of them is one of the reasons the rural areas remain poor.

*Unemployment:* Duru (2002) noted that wide spread unemployment is another cause of poverty. He pointed out that the cause of unemployment is lack of saleable skills. Others are geographical factors such as ethnic discrimination, nepotism, and inappropriate or lack of healthy government programmes that could generate job opportunities. The above factors worsened the already impoverished rural Nigeria.

*Illiteracy:* We noted earlier that the United Nation’s study of Nigeria literacy study puts the percentage of adult literacy in the country at 44.4%, which means the majority (55.6%) are illiterates. No doubt, majority of these illiterates live in the rural areas. a person who cannot



read or write will be unable to be employed in any good paying job either in private or government establishment. If he/she engages in agriculture, it will most likely be at the subsistence level. Illiteracy condemns one to poverty. Illiteracy breeds ignorance, ignorance breeds poverty and disease.

### **The Effects of Poverty**

*Hunger and Disease:* Tens and thousands of poor people throughout the rural communities die every year from starvation and malnutrition. The effects of poverty are very glaring. One needs no special instrument to notice a poor person or poor community. Poverty has pushed many poor women and young girls into hardship so much that they are forced into prostitution, with some of them contracting such venereal diseases as HIV/AIDS. It has stigmatized and confused many Nigerians to the extent of taking risky decisions such as obtaining illegal travel documents to Western countries. Poverty reduces human prestige and self esteem, leading to inferiority complex, low creativity and loss of the motivation for self actualization (Okonkwo, 2001). One in four of world's people today live in absolute want. They cannot afford the most basic shelter or minimum food requirement for leading an active productive life. 350, 000 children die every day because they are poor. They lack food they need to stay healthy and their parents cannot afford basic health care. 10% of children in the third world die before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. 130 million children do not attend primary school, 70% of them are girls. Their parents are too poor to send them to school. Half a million women die each year because they are pregnant and do not receive the health care they need before, during or after child birth (Simmon, 1995).

*Insecurity and increase in crime:* Etim (2009) states that poverty and hunger breeds insecurity and cited the insecurity in the Niger Delta as an example. Simmon (1995) had earlier opined that all too often, rising poverty gives rise to violent conflict, refugee crisis, increased crime, trade in narcotic drugs, environmental damage and massive increase in organized crime. Rural urban migration is yet another consequence of poverty in rural Nigeria. Most unemployed young persons move to the towns and cities in search of jobs. This has resulted in the overcrowding of most urban areas in the country, a good example is Lagos. Conversely, it has depopulated the rural areas. This has led to shortage of food supply as agricultural activities have been left for old men and women who are incapacitated by age.

### **The Role of Community Libraries and Information Centres in Poverty Alleviation in Rural Nigeria**

Rural community dwellers in Nigeria have similar political, economic, social and educational needs. Utor and Utor (2007) studied the information needs of rural communities in Vandeikya Local Government Areas of Benue State and, their findings showed that 50% of the populations studied want information on agricultural matters; 20% on health; 16% on employment and 12% on educational related matters. These areas of information needs reflect the causes of poverty in these communities. Ettong and Edem (2007) agree with Abayode (1987) that the provision of information by a library in a community has the potential for giving new knowledge, raising consciousness, strengthening links and achieving integration of



desperate groups. It is also an important means of mobilizing people for social, political, and economic development. The social, political and economic well being of any community is in-part largely dependent on the quality and quantity of information produced and consumed by the community.

### **Services of Community Libraries for Rural Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria**

The traditional library services in cities and towns among others include circulation of lending service, reference service, mobile and school library services. However, for the rural community library to effectively play its role in poverty alleviation, it will offer a mixture of what Agbodike (1992) referred to as conventional and unconventional services. These are as follows:

*Information Services:* The rural community library will undertake a community survey of the host community to enable it determine the areas of information needs of the population. This will enable it provide relevant information materials in anticipation for the satisfaction of the information needs of individuals and groups in the community. Information is power. It is a critical economic resource for national, community and individual development. It is a human economic requisite which is regarded as the fourth vital factor of production (Uhegbu 2007). The right information at the right time can make a big positive difference in the economic and financial well being of an individual, a community or a nation.

*Information Packaging and Repackaging:* This is a method of tailoring or adopting information to suit the desired information needs of any user. Packaging and repackaging of information ensures adequate utilisation of information by the consumer. In the rural communities, there are many categories of users as well as their qualifications, responsibilities, languages, education, age, sex and location. Where the information appears in a language and written format that is alien to the intended user, the information is repackaged or adapted in such a way as to meet the desired needs of the users (Uhegbu, 2007). There are various methods of information repackaging; however, three most important methods will be outlined here; according to Uhegbu (2007) they are:

- *Content Repackaging:* Here, the content of information is reassembled to suit the taste of a particular user or group of users. For example, if given information is in statistical presentation, in repackaging, some grammatical expressions could be added to make it understandable to a person who does not understand statistics.
- *Language Repackaging:* In language repackaging, information that is issued in a language that is alien to the prospective users is translated to the language the user can understand.
- *Medium Repackaging:* If the medium of information is not in harmony with the characteristics of the users, such medium is changed ( i.e repackaged) to suit the level of the users' understanding. For example, illiterate farmers cannot read instructions on the methods of applying fertilizers or herbicides presented in written formats. Such



instructions are adopted for their understanding through visual aids like the film media, posters, demonstrations and the oral media like group discussions in their local language and dialect.

*Reference Services:* Reference service is that aspect of library service in which the information user is brought in contact with the right book or information sources at the right time within the library in the right personal way. Information resources used in references resources include: encyclopedia, handbooks, Dictionaries, Bibliographies, Directories, Formulas, Tables, Abstracts, Indexes, Guide books, Yearbooks, etc. they contain information in every field of human endeavour. Thus, a person who wants to learn how to produce say, bread, cosmetics, pesticides, etc can consult a book like the “Henleys Formula for home and workshop”; a valuable reference book for the home, the factory, the office and the workshop. It contains ten thousand selected household workshop and scientific formulas, trade secrets, food and chemical recipes. This book and others like it will help somebody to start small scale production for business.

*Special Services to the Unemployed:* The library in the rural community can create a data bank of job vacancies published in Nigeria Daily Newspapers and magazines, to be consulted by the job seekers in the community. Bulletin boards can also be used to paste photocopies of such vacancies for public consumption. When such services are offered, the library should create an awareness of its existence in the community.

*Online Businesses:* The Information and Communication Technologies have brought in its wake various on-line businesses. The library in the rural communities should be equipped with computers and connected to the internet. People in the rural communities should be encouraged to not only learn how to operate the computer but also conduct one type of on-line business or the other, such as; on-line forex trading, on-line oil and gas trade, affiliate marketing, recharge cards, printing and many others. These are modern means of self employment and poverty alleviation.

*Education Support Services:* Education has been defined as the acquisition of the art of utilisation of knowledge. Educationally, rural libraries are established for the purpose of human development by providing books and non print materials for their clientele in their pursuit of education, information, research, creation and cultural interest, through selecting, acquiring, organizing, preserving and making available those materials as and when required. The rural community library will assist in adult and fundamental education by stocking materials which seek to stimulate reading, improve ability and develop creativity, constructive and critical attitude towards public issues. It will supplement formal education and provide congenial atmosphere for studies by all (Agbodike, 1992).

*Public Enlightenment Centre:* Nigeria can copy from the defunct Soviet Union, where rural libraries were used to raise the cultural level of the population, teach collective farmers how better to raise and harvest crops, to increase people’s understanding of political problems and



to lead the people into loyal and productive citizens. The rural community library can be used as a public enlightenment centre from where the library can reach the rural population through carefully selected documentary films, on relevant subjects, lectures in the vernacular, posters and other audio - visual means, to teach them to live healthy lives, cultivate their crops, use simple machinery, store and market their products.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The rural community library is a critical factor in the successful implementation of poverty alleviation programmes in Nigerian rural areas. The roles of the community library are varied; they range from the conventional library services like Reference Services, Information Services, Information Packaging and Repackaging; Lending or Circulation Services; Indexing and abstracting Services to unconventional services like on-line Business and Computer training centre, special information service to the unemployed, and centre for public enlightenment.

Lack of information, illiteracy and unemployment are among the cause of poverty in rural Nigerian communities. The library as a social agency will through its various methods of providing information combat illiteracy, fight ignorance and diseases, and eliminate unemployment, thereby alleviating poverty in the rural communities. In view of the above therefore, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- The government, both at the federal and state levels should evolve a vibrant policy of rural library services throughout the federation;
- Library schools in Nigeria's tertiary institutions should design suitable curriculum for the training of manpower in rural librarianship;
- Both State and Federal Governments should build and fund rural community libraries throughout Nigeria;
- Communities, age-grades, individuals and non-governmental organisations should be encouraged to build and donate libraries to rural communities.



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