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Theme: Forging partnerships between libraries and extension services for improved access to agricultural information

Information Provision to Farmers in Africa: The Library-Extension Service Linkage

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Abstract

The role of extension service in increasing agricultural productivity cannot be overemphasised especially in the African setting, where a majority of the inhabitants are involved in agricultural production and are largely illiterate. They are therefore incapacitated of benefiting from information in print word, which is the most effective way of disseminating information to various agricultural information users, especially farmers. Regular and appropriate information need to be regularly made available to them. The extension worker in a typical African setting performs the role of disseminating agricultural information to farmers through physical contact. Unfortunately, the ratio of extension workers to farmers in Africa is abysmally low. Thus, many farmers are not supplied information by extension workers in Africa. This is where the public libraries in Africa come in. The public libraries are near the farmers since a large number of public libraries are now being located in many rural areas in Africa. Given the fact that both information professionals and extension workers are concerned mainly with information, a linkage becomes important between the two agencies for the dissemination of agricultural information to farmers. This paper proposes a model of library-extension service linkage. In the model, it is expected that extension agents would make information in the form of audio-cassettes, video-cassettes and posters available to the public library.

Introduction

The predominant occupation of the majority of people in Africa is farming. The proportion ranges from about 40% in the North Africa to 70-80% in the rest of the continent. A majority of the farmers are in rural areas, which lack basic amenities, such as electricity supply, piped water, tarred roads, etc. In addition, most farmers in Africa have little or no basic education. They are mainly illiterates; they cannot read and write in any language. It is well known that whereas less than 10% of the labour force in the developed countries is engaged in agriculture, yet they are able to feed their nations and export the rest to other parts of the world including Africa. But in Africa, where an average of 70% of the labour force is engaged in agriculture, they cannot feed the continent. Most countries in Africa import food to supplement the local production. One of the major factors responsible for this ugly situation is the inadequate supply of information to farmers in Africa.

The major function of an extension worker is to disseminate appropriate information to farmers. Their role becomes crucial in the sense that farmers in Africa are largely illiterate so they cannot use the print word as a vehicle for disseminating information; rather, information dissemination is by personal contact. Unfortunately, the ratio of an extension worker to farmers is very low. For example, in the 1980s it ranged from between 1: 10,000 to 1: 25, 000 in Nigeria (Ademiluyi, 1983), although there is no current statistics on the ratio but it is certainly much worse than what obtained in the 1980s. Thus, the extension worker cannot be effective in disseminating agricultural information to farmers in Africa through personal contacts. A farmer many never come in contact within an extension agent in five years. The farmer is therefore denied information when it is needed. Even when extension agents visit farmers they usually focus their activities on the male farmers, hardly reaching out to the women who constitute a substantial proportion of farmers in Africa. According to Anholt and Zijp (2006) women make between 60 per cent and 80 percent of the agricultural labour force in Nigeria and yet extension services are focused on men and their farm production needs to the detriment of women. In order to address this problem, home economic agents have been trained to perform the functions of extension agents, because of the shortage of women trained in agriculture.

The Expected Role of the Library in Information Dissemination to Farmers

The library as a public service agency needs to be involved in providing information to farmers. Given the fact that they are located within a reasonable range in many rural areas of Africa and since their business is the provision of information to all users, regardless of status, a linkage between the extension agent and public library may alleviate the information dissemination problem of extension agent to farmers in Africa. They should be in a position to contribute positively towards disseminating information to farmers. For example, apart from personal contacts often used by extension agents in disseminating information to farmers, they also utilise other methods such as agricultural shows, posters, radio/television broadcasts, farming magazines, motion paucities/ slides, etc. These other methods are within the purview of libraries, yet there is no evidence to show that the libraries are substantially involved either directly or indirectly in the provision of information to farmers in Africa. In a study with 258 farmers in Nigeria, it was revealed that only 5% of the farmers obtained information from librarians (Aina,

1985). The need for public libraries to be involved in community information services has long been advocated for.

Katunmoya (1992) advocates for public libraries providing community information services. He suggested that public libraries should establish community information departments with the aim of providing information to rural users. Also, the community information departments should liaise with government ministries and departments. Katunmoya stated that public libraries should develop collections of pamphlets, posters and booklets on issues like health, sanitation, agriculture and civic rights. They also need to repackage relevant information produced by government ministries and departments, media organisations, non-governmental organisations and disseminating such information to users in a non-literate setting through displays, meetings, talks, etc.

The use of librarians in the dissemination of information to farmers has always been mooted. This is not surprising given the fact the function of the extension worker is akin to that of a public librarian. According to Williams (1978) one of the major functions of an extension agent is the dissemination of useful land practical information related to agriculture to farmers. In a study by Aina (1986) involving 73 extension workers and 72 literate farmers in Ibadan, Nigeria, it was found that 45 or 61.6 % of the extension workers and 56 or 77.8 % of the farmers surveyed, agreed that librarians could be used to disseminate commercial, legal and social information to farmers. In the same study, 60 or 83.3 % of the farmers and 16 or 21.9% surveyed agreed that librarians could be used to answer simple reference queries on agricultural problems.

For public libraries to function effectively in the provision of agricultural information to farmers, they would be expected to create community information resources centres which would be fully charged with providing agricultural information to farmers in rural communities.

Information Repackaging as a Method of Information Provision to Farmers

It is obvious that for libraries to be involved in the provision of information to farmers there is a need for librarians to be adept in information repackaging. Given the fact that a large number of farmers in Africa are not literate, information has to be supplied to farmers in a format that would be comprehensible to them. According to Aboyade (1987), librarians are expected to repackage information materials which have been tailored to meet the information needs of rural inhabitants in a language and format that they would understand. Information to be repackaged could be sourced from published materials, raw data collected by research institutes, government statistical service, and online information and even from people's own corpus of indigenous knowledge (Onwubiko, 1999).

Oladele (1987) believes that librarians must have the capability "to identify the sources of information of value to the farmers from financial houses, commodity boards, government policy makers or any other source but must also be capable of restructuring such information through the process of analysis, synthesis, and repackaging in a format other than print. Such repackaging should take into consideration the prevailing illiteracy, cultural divergence and idiosyncrasies of the small farmer."

Types of Agricultural Information Required by Farmers

Aina (1995) categorised the various types of agricultural information, as technical/scientific, commercial, social-cultural and legal. It has been revealed that each category is useful to the farmer in Africa. Technical/scientific information arises from research and development at research institutes, government departments, universities and international organisations. The products of this category of agricultural information include journal articles, technical reports, theses and dissertations, annual reports, etc. Commercial information, relates to information pertaining to the sales of agricultural commodities, co-operatives, export activities, etc. Newsletters, government gazettes, newspapers, government publications, feasibility reports will fall under this category. Socio-cultural information implies information on traditional agricultural practices (indigenous knowledge), labour availability, etc. Books, government publications, newspapers, etc, could contain this type of information. The last category of information, legal information, concerns any legislative information that affects taxes, land tenure, land distribution, sales of agricultural products, etc. Some of the information products would include government gazettes, government publications, newspapers, etc.

It is obvious that except for scientific/technical information, libraries could provide the other types of information to farmers without any problem.

Expected Role of Training Institutions in Information Provision to Farmers and Extension Agents

Aina (2004) suggests that library and information science schools in Africa should provide in their curriculum, courses with skills that would enable librarians to serve the rural community. He identified courses that would include the understanding the community of rural dwellers, repackaging of information into a usable form by farmers, and using appropriate channels for the dissemination of information other than printed media. Such courses would include: *community information services* – (community analysis, a study of the information needs of the community, documentation of local knowledge indigenous to the culture, transmission of information in a non-literate society, evaluation of community information, information to farmers etc.); *repackaging of information* – (ability to collect, remodel and transform printed information into usable forms to different audiences. fundamentals of writing skills); and *audio-visual resources management* – (ability to operate different types of audiovisual equipment, nature and forms of audiovisual resources, preparation of multimedia products both static (posters, photos, etc) and dynamic (sound, video and animation).

Once librarians are equipped with skills necessary for providing information to farmers and extension agents, they would be able to function effectively in a rural agricultural setting.

This paper sets out to discuss a model that would enhance effective information dissemination to farmers through extension agency-library linkage in a non-literate setting.

Library-Extension Service Linkage Model

This is a model in which a library can play a significant role in the information disseminating process to users in a non-literate setting. If the public library system could set up community information resource centres or departments within the public libraries located in the various communities. Such resources centre would collect all kinds of information products which could be repackaged and tailored to meet the needs of farmers. The repackaged information would be in a format accessible to farmers and in a language they understand. Such repackaged information could then be made available to farmers. It is expected that there would be a formal linkage between the various agricultural departments within the locality and the public library.

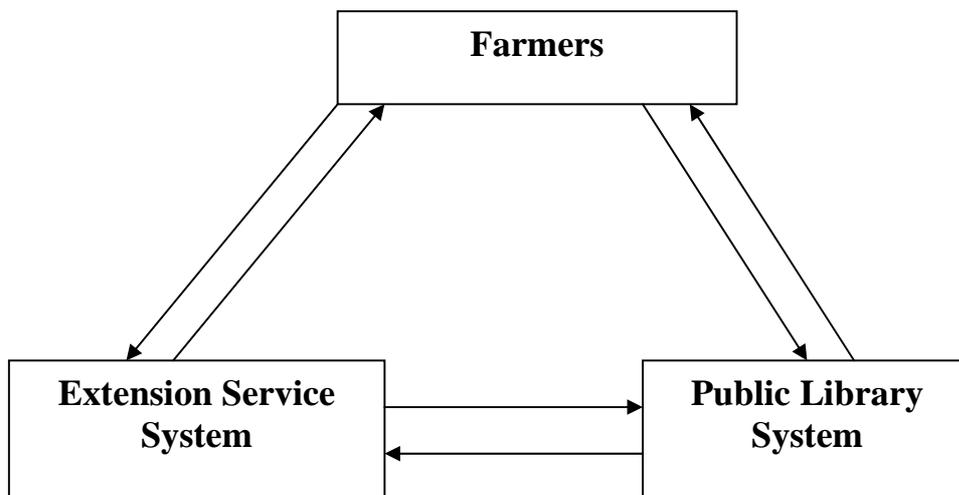


Fig. 1 Library–Agriculture Extension Service Linkage

The model being proposed involves a triangular linkage between farmers, extension agencies and libraries as depicted in figure 1. It is expected that the community information resource centre within the public library system would be utilised to make information available directly to farmers and extension agents. Extension agents could also disseminate agricultural information directly to farmers and libraries. Also, farmers could bring information related problems to the library and extension agencies. This is expected to be a co-operative venture between the public library system and extension service system in a rural setting.

Information Provision by Libraries to Farmers

It is expected that the library would collect all kinds of information materials, such as audio and video-cassettes, audio and vide-record players, films, projectors, posters and leaflets on agricultural information. This could be repackaged and then made available to farmers in a usable form. These information materials would be used for both problem solving and awareness. There may be a need for libraries and extension agents to identify information gate keepers among the rural farmers. The gate keepers, who would live with their fellow farmers, would be the first point of contact when there are problems in the farms. These gatekeepers

would be regularly supplied with agricultural information by libraries. Using the acquired information, the gatekeepers could solve common agricultural problems, but if the problem was beyond the gate keepers, the farmers might be directed by the gate keeper to contact the librarian who would bring it to the notice of extension agents or contact the extension agents directly. In a typical rural setting, a gatekeeper could be a retired civil servant, teacher or any revered personality who is always available in the community. The library would regularly provide information on any agricultural issue to the gatekeeper identified in a community. Users of the community would be sensitised to use a gatekeeper for problem solving. For information required for awareness, library officials should visit a group of adjacent communities once a week where a query and answer service, as well as referral service could be provided regularly.

Information Provision by Libraries to Extension Agents

The general information needs of agricultural extension workers often include obtaining information on the control of major pests on the farm, national prices of commodities, legislation of agricultural products, tax relief, tax laws, etc (Aina, 1989). The library is expected to be in a position to supply the necessary information materials that would meet the needs of extension workers. The libraries would normally have collected relevant agricultural materials in their collection, either in the original format or in a repackaged form, so it would be easy to provide relevant and appropriate information to extension agents through answer and query service. Libraries are also expected to create bibliographic tools of relevant and appropriate agricultural information to extension agents which they could use in the location of relevant and accurate agricultural information.

Information Provision by Extension Agents to Libraries and Farmers

Agricultural extension workers disseminate agricultural information to farmers in a variety of formats, mainly through talks, audio and video recordings, leaflets and pamphlets. These information materials could be made available to libraries. It is expected that there would be a formal arrangement between agricultural departments and libraries. The libraries, through their community information resource centres, would make the various types of agricultural information available to farmers either through the gatekeepers or through the query and answer service. Thus, the libraries would serve as a linkage between the agricultural departments and farmers.

Conclusion

As information providers the public library system in Africa must be restructured so as to get itself involved in the dissemination of agricultural information to farmers, especially the non-technical/scientific information. As a matter of priority, community information resource centres must be created within the public library system. If libraries could complement agricultural extension workers in the dissemination of agricultural information to farmers in Africa, there might be some improvement in agricultural productivity in Africa, despite the dearth of agricultural extension workers in Africa. The use of public librarians to complement agricultural extension workers in the dissemination of agricultural information to farmers would boost agricultural productivity in Africa.

Also, the LIS curriculum in African library schools must be strengthened to focus on the role community information resource centres, repackaging of information, answer and query service, and agriculture extension service so that trainees on graduation could function effectively in an agricultural rural setting.

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