

## Exploring the Strategies and Impediments Facing the Development of Community Information Centres for Rural Development in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Community information centres are expected to be part of the core infrastructure that are found in local communities in Nigeria. However, various literature had shown that these information centres are hardly found in Nigeria. This is a challenge, which the paper addressed. The paper examined the concept of community information centres (CIC) and their benefits, and strategic feasible ways of establishing CIC, especially through state and local governments, community self-help efforts, constituency projects of political representatives, philanthropists in the community, community projects of age groups, community members/town unions in the diaspora, and attraction of non-governmental organizations and friends of the community. The paper also explored the implications of CIC as agents for sustainable rural development, and identified challenges of establishing such centres, with possible solutions. Thus, the paper concludes that government, communities and their leaders have roles to play in factoring CIC into rural development programmes in Nigeria. In addition, CIC are also expected to be part of the priorities of government for people in the rural areas, due to various benefits of such centres to the lives and existence of rural inhabitants. Some suggestions were made on how CIC could be established and managed, so as to contribute in facilitating the satisfaction of rural dwellers' information needs and unhindered access to government programmes and services.*

**Keywords:** Community Information Centres, Sustainable Rural Development, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

The strategic role of information to the continued existence, survival and sustainability of man in the society is not questionable. This connotes that the continuous existence and operations of man in the universe would be worthless and directionless without access to and use of vital information in different areas of his need. This is because man is associated with various information needs that touch virtually all areas of his life, be it health, agriculture, business, culture or general lifestyle. Therefore, making information available and accessible to man via appropriate channels of dissemination or communication, positions him for proper planning, execution of responsibilities and overall successful living. This reinforces the submission of Esimokha (2013) that communication of information is life, i.e. to communicate is to be alive, and to be alive is to communicate. Thus, communication of information is not only a vital ingredient but also a necessity for human interactions and coexistence.

It is not negotiable that information plays a critical role in the growth and development of societies where man exists and operates. Various kinds of information, such as agricultural information, health information, business information, socio-cultural information, scientific information, technological information and legal information are needed by individuals in the society for them to make effective decisions and implement programmes accordingly. Information sources of various kinds such as libraries, including community information centres, the Internet, mass media, organizations and associations, churches and mosques, ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) of government, are also expected to be actively involved in providing information and also addressing information needs of individuals in the society (Harande, 2009; Ugwoke, 2014; Mohammed & Garaba, 2019; Dada, 2021; Mohammed & Lawal, 2022). Specifically for the rural areas, Igwe, Ndubuisi-Okoh, Akuma and Okoche (2015) identified community information centres, rural school media centres, rural information technology centres (RITCs) by the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) and community radio stations as core information infrastructure required for information delivery and development of rural communities in Nigeria.

Information needs of people lead to the exhibition of various information seeking behaviours in order to find, access and retrieve relevant information from reliable information sources that will satisfy the information needs of the people. Khayesi, Meyer and Machet (2013) argue that information need is one of the most essential concepts in information science, which appears misunderstood. Thus, unlike the need for food, water, shelter or any other primary human needs, what is required to satisfy an information need is often not known to the individuals concerned. This implies that requisite information sources and service delivery mechanisms are expected to be provided, with corresponding resources that are available and accessible for addressing various information needs of people, especially in the rural areas. Thus, sustainable national developmental programmes demand factoring information requirements of rural dwellers in various communities for their activities (Harande, 2009; Kamba, 2009; Dada, 2021).

However, in rural areas, the information needs of the inhabitants are diverse, multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. One of the key information sources that should champion satisfactory information provision to rural dwellers is libraries, most especially community libraries or community information centres. Community libraries and information centres are vital to the knowledge society (Dada, 2021), and are service delivery institutions, custodians of knowledge and centres of information dissemination, of which if such information is used and applied well could modify users' behaviour as well as encourage a more civilized and developed society (Ajegbomogun & Ajegbomogun, 2015). Unfortunately, libraries are hardly found in rural areas; and public libraries that are expected to have functional branches in rural communities are rare to be seen. Despite Kamba's (2009) case for functional information provision mechanisms through innovative community information centres that will empower rural dwellers as relevant players in the knowledge economy, it is not out of context to state that community libraries/community information centres are nowhere to be found in Nigerian society. Dada (2021) decried that the purpose of community information centres is almost being defeated thereby requiring urgent attention from the public and concerned agencies of government. Furthermore, an empirical study even revealed that government-funded library and information centres do not provide effective library and information services to rural dwellers (Anunobi, Ogbonna &

Osuchukwu, 2014; Omeluzor, Oyovwe-Tinuoye & Emeka-Ukwu, 2017). Buttressing the afore-stated facts, Emezie and Igwe (2017) reviewed other diverse and various scholarly works and reported the absence of library and information services provision to rural dwellers, as well as the absence of functional community information centres, for addressing rural dwellers' information needs in many Nigerian communities. This is worrisome, which made Uzuegbu (2016) to ask that whose job or responsibility is it to provide effective information services to rural dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigeria? This critical question is still begging for an objective answer and response in Nigeria.

The development of countries globally cannot be achieved and sustained without the development of the rural communities and the inhabitants. Rural neglect breeds negative consequences like rural-urban migration, with its attendant problems of unemployment, crimes, insecurity, bribery, poverty, spread of diseases and over stretching of the facilities and infrastructure in the urban areas (Harande, 2009). This trend however could be ameliorated if rural dwellers have access to information for their activities thorough functional community information centres.

Furthermore, the conceptualization and implementation of so many government programmes are usually carried out in urban centres and metropolitan cities, without adequate consideration of rural communities. In addition, it appears that libraries, information and knowledge agencies, are usually neglected in various government programmes. For instance, Diso (2010) in the analysis of Nigeria's Vision 20:2020 objectives, vis-à-vis the knowledge and information input required to achieve the objectives, and the extent the library as information and knowledge repository was factored into the vision, decried that little emphasis was made on information and knowledge, but none on the library and related information and knowledge agencies. Unfortunately, Vision 20:2020 undermined itself by merely appreciating the role of information and knowledge in development, but ignored its sources, institutions and infrastructure and their incorporation as critical elements into all areas that constitute the vision's target (Diso, 2010). This is related to the fact that the emergence of e-government initiatives in Nigeria did not take into cognizance the role of libraries and associated information agencies, especially community information centres, in making the e-government programme and services available and accessible to the rural dwellers. Furthermore, the appraisals of rural development programmes and policies in Nigeria so far that recorded failure revealed the absence of integration of information agencies like community information centres and the exclusion of relevant professionals in policy formulation, planning and implementation (Ahmed, Gbadebo, Iselebor & Tokede, 2021; Adewusi, 2020). Thus, this paper argues that community information centres are change agents that can drive development. Therefore, integrating community information centres in the programmes of government in Nigeria, will contribute to sustainable rural development.

### **Understanding Community Information Centres and their Benefits**

Various scholars and authorities use rural libraries, community libraries, rural information centres, community information centres, and community libraries and information centres interchangeably to describe libraries and information agencies located in rural communities and professionally managed by library and information practitioners (librarians, library and

information officers, library assistants, digital technologists) for addressing diverse peoples' information needs in the locality (Uzuegbu & Arua, 2018). The agitation for the establishment of community information centres in rural areas in Nigeria as drivers of rural literacy development and capacity enhancement among the inhabitants continues due to the strategic importance of the centres in addressing diverse categories of the information and knowledge needs of the rural populace (Aguolu, 1989; Kamba, 2009; Mohammed & Lawal, 2022). The community information centres drive information access and distribution, serve and ensure provision of the diverse information needs of community dwellers where they are located (Dada, 2021; Otolu, 2022).

According to Shrestha (2013), with their changing roles as centres for sustainable development, community information centres act as vehicles for social and economic transformation in rural areas, with diverse facilities like library, information and communication technology (ICT) outfit, women empowerment section, early childhood section, multimedia and communication section, as well as training/meeting hall. The community information centres are expected to have current/up-to-date print-based information resources (like books, newspapers, magazines, encyclopaedia, dictionaries, etc), as well as functional ICT components (like computer systems with Internet facilities, printers, fax machines, photocopiers, television, and telephones). Momodu (2012) notes that such community information centres have the capacity to meet the information needs of rural dwellers in areas of agriculture, education, health, politics, socio-economic information, culture and recreation. Such rural dwellers include farmers, traders, artisans, teachers, community leaders, school children, out-of-school children, women and women groups, private businesses in the community, non-governmental organisations, community-based organizations, and local government authorities. Thus, the community information centres provide up-to-date and unhindered free flow of information on community programmes and services, serve as agents for driving poverty alleviation programmes in rural areas (Okite, 2014) and are usually committed to building a better world for rural dwellers for actualizing rural development (Adewusi, 2020).

The benefits of community information centres in rural areas cannot be over-emphasized because it is the fulcrum on which grassroots development all over the world is driven. It is also a major indicator of national growth, development and literacy. The Nwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (1967, cited in Aguolu, 1989) in his days of *Ujamaa* revolution quipped “while other countries in the world aim to reach the moon, we must aim for the time being - - - to reach the villages by providing them with necessary information”. This is where community information centres come in, of which if well-articulated and established functionally could eradicate ignorance, enhance literacy development and provide enlightenment on social, political and cultural objectives for the development of the entire community (Kamba, 2009; Mohammed & Lawal, 2022).

The establishment of community information centres arouses a peculiar consciousness in a rural community that creates an intellectual climate that stimulates the people to look at their own current practices and future perspectives. A community can advance further in knowledge and skills development if they recognize and use information as part of their vital tool for development. Mchombu (2003) notes that the lack of access to adequate and right information at the right time to inhabitants of rural communities undermines the efforts at improving the living

conditions of the rural people by both governments and non-governmental organisations. Community information centres therefore help to get information to the rural populace at the right period for necessary developmental needs in the society. Community information centres also help to improve chances for livelihoods. Various farming systems, including the small-scale type, are not left out, as they have a lot to benefit from information centres with requisite facilities in rural areas (Aina, 2007). Farmers have increased income because they belong to cooperatives that can respond appropriately to changes in market forces. This is achievable only through the existence of viable community information centres. Kamba (2009) reports that the social networks of such farmers are strengthened because the people continue to develop themselves with information acquired from the information centres.

Societal needs are satisfied through various kinds of activities, each of which requires information as input. Information, if well articulated and packaged for rural communities will eliminate poverty, ignorance and gives enlightenment on how to achieve economic, social, political, educational and cultural objectives towards the development of the whole society. The provision of community information centres and their promotion would enable rural dwellers to acquire digital literacy skills and access e-government programmes and services, thereby giving them a sense of digital inclusion that are lacking in surveyed rural communities in Nigeria (Okocha & Dogo, 2023). Community information centres have a strategic role to play in disseminating the change mantra of the government as championed via “Change Begins with Me” campaign (Umar, 2018). Despite all these benefits associated with such centres, however, their establishment remains a challenge in Nigeria, thereby demanding exploration of feasible ways of establishing the information agencies.

### **Strategic Feasible Ways of Establishing Community Information Centres in Rural Areas in Nigeria**

Various strategies and ways could be adopted for establishing community information centres in rural areas in Nigeria. These include:

- i. ***State and Local Governments:*** The structure of the Nigerian political system is such that the development of rural areas rests on the states and local governments. States and local governments can establish community information centres as part of government projects and programmes. Most importantly, the states should create a definite plan on setting up state-of-the-art community information centres in all political wards of the state as part of the dividends of democracy. The two hundred and fifty hybrid multimedia libraries that are part of the 250 smart schools project of the Enugu State Government of Nigeria for all political wards of the state is a good example of having information centres extended to rural areas (Enugu State Government of Nigeria, 2024). It could also be established as part of public libraries system through library boards as owned by state governments. Although the laws establishing state library boards sometimes terminate with establishing only local government branches, it is advised that such considerations should be extended to the hinterlands for effective coverage of concerned communities. This will stem rural-urban migration, mitigate rural-based crimes and youth restiveness in rural communities.
- ii. ***Community Self-Help Efforts:*** Community self-help efforts play significant roles in improving the general well-being of rural dwellers, by reducing poverty, satisfying basic rural needs, and facilitating the level of development of concerned areas (Tyagi,



Vishwakarma, Yadav & Stanislavovich, 2020). Town unions and community development associations could agree to come together and develop projects that will be beneficial to the majority of the inhabitants of the community. Such projects have existed in areas of schools, community healthcare centres, markets, town halls, feeder roads, pipe borne water, electricity and palm oil processing mills (Tamuno & Iroh, 2012).. Such self-help projects could be the establishment of community information centres that would contribute in the educational and literacy development of rural dwellers. Adding community information centre to the list of self-help projects will to a large extent place the intellectual and scholarly quest of such a community on a higher pedestal.

- iii. ***Community Projects by Age Grade/Groups:*** Some studies have shown that age grade systems contribute to community development projects in some parts of Nigeria (Erim, Akpama & Asor, 2011). Many communities in Nigeria especially in the southern part operate age grade systems which are also known as age grade or age groups. The practice in some of those areas is that before an age group is recognized by the community for initiation into manhood, they are expected to develop a significant project for the community. In other areas, from the active years to the retirement period of age grades, projects are usually presented by the age groups to their communities as community services. Cases of classroom blocks in schools, total renovation/construction of new primary and secondary schools, markets, security posts (police stations), vigilante groups, civic centres/community halls, rural road construction, and the likes have been executed by age grades (Nwachi, 2021; Uzor & Ekechukwu, 2024). It is the opinion of this paper that age grades in communities should integrate as a matter of expediency the building of functional community information centres as worthy legacies for their communities. The centre expectedly could be named after the age grade.
- iv. ***Constituency Projects of Political Representatives:*** Political representatives at national and state levels are involved in the development of impactful projects for their constituencies (Ataire, Mboho & Aborh, 2021; Nnamani, Ekoh & Joe -Akunne, 2021). In this political dispensation, senators, house of representative members or state house of assembly members should be encouraged to consider establishing community information centres as their constituency projects. If communities and their leaders are resolved and resolute on this project as a pressing need, concerned politicians would definitely consider and execute in line with constituency needs.
- v. ***Philanthropists in the Community:*** The report from the African Philanthropy Forum (n.d.) shows that the ecosystem of philanthropy in Nigeria has contributed significantly to community and national development. Various individuals are wealthy and blessed with riches in various communities who sometimes look for projects that if completed could be named after them or their families. Such personalities can be approached by community representatives and leaders to establish community information centres and donate them to their communities for the benefit of all.
- vi. ***Community Members / Town Unions in Diaspora:*** Citizens of a country in the diaspora are great resources and assets that play significant contributory roles in the development of communities in Nigeria (Ursu, 2024). Developments in many communities in the recent past have been anchored by influential community members or their town unions in diaspora. Such gestures have been demonstrated in the areas of provision of health care like minor eye surgery, maternal / infant healthcare, provision of drugs, and so on. It is

- therefore, suggested that such groups could also be contacted to established information centres in their localities.
- vii. ***Attraction of Local/ Foreign Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Foundations:*** Influential community members could also help to attract both local and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations and developmental foundations that have the developments of rural communities as their major policy thrust. Such NGOs exist if properly sought for. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation could also do for our rural communities in Nigeria what they did for Rural Education and Development (READ) programme in NEPAL. Nepal got the “Access To Learning Award” (ATLA) in 2006 for its innovative approach to the provision and sustainability of community information centres (Shrestha, 2013).
  - viii. ***Friends of the Community:*** Friends of communities can adopt any of the operational approaches to community development that are people-oriented (Adekola & Uzoagu, 2022). Royal fathers and community leaders sometimes award chieftaincy titles to non-indigenes of their community. What they get in return are mere cash gifts which sometimes are not properly accounted for. It is suggested here that such friends of the community to be honored should be made to build and donate community information centres. Such gestures are legacies that could even outlive the monarch who during his tenure the projects were attracted. The community will always remember and cherish that leader.

### **Community Information Centres for Sustainable Rural Development**

The success or otherwise of government programmes will to some extent depends on the level of deployment and penetration into the rural areas. Many government-related projects can be channeled to rural dwellers via community information centres. Such community information centres should serve as access points for government services such as registration outlets, and also for facilitating the e-democratic system (such as e-voting) which are being expected in the country. Thus, Fatile (2012) argues that government should declare access to ICT services as a fundamental human right of every Nigerian, and that e-government provides a lot of hope for transforming the internal efficiency of government and the relationship of government with the citizens. The actualization of this is feasible through properly established and managed community information centres (Igwe, Ndubuisi-Okoh, Akuma & Okoche, 2015).

There is no doubt that community information centres are instruments of rural development. When situated in communities, such centres will be seen as agents of rural development. This is premised on the fact that development of people is central to all other forms of development. Developing the people will be from the angle of meeting their various information needs, ranging from agriculture, health, business, economic and social issues, among others. These will enable them in decision making and implementation for healthy living.

Community information centres, when factored into the government programme of Nigeria, can also serve as platforms for training people in basic literacy skills, digital inclusion and acquisition of digital literacy skills, facilitating adult educational programmes and could also serve as access points to open education/distance learning programmes of government educational

institutions. In addition, such community information centres could also serve as institutions for documenting and preserving the traditions, cultural practices, values and other indigenous knowledge of the people for reference purposes and the future generations yet unborn. Dialogue for community information centres ideally, should transcend government's provision of basic information needs and resources. Instead the centre's viability should determine its self-sustaining efforts that can usher tangible growth and development. The READ model of Nepal's community information centres where sections are devoted to women's empowerment and venues for community meetings and trainings is alluring (Shrestha, 2013). Apart from serving as community development centres, it could also have a strong focus on grass-roots education, economic empowerment and development, create hubs for life-changing abilities, and support other community-based activities and programmes.

### **Challenges of Establishing Community Information Centres for Rural Development in Nigeria**

Various impediments are likely to affect the establishment of community information centres in rural areas of Nigeria. These are in the areas of financial constraints, appropriate location, poor management concerns, lack of power supply, poor infrastructure, absence of core library and information practitioners in rural areas, growing insecurity in the rural areas, and poor attention of government towards rural library development (Opara, 2008; Posigha, 2010; Okafor, 2020; Rajendran & Ladan, 2020; Otolu, 2022; Uzor & Ekechukwu, 2024). In developing countries like Nigeria, paucity of funds is always the reason for not providing some basic necessities of life. The establishment of community information centres is not an exception. However, it is suggested that government should enact laws that can enable all stakeholders, government inclusive, to provide resources that can make community information centres realistic. Business companies and industrial firms could be made to factor community information centres into their community development programmes or corporate social responsibility (Emezie & Igwe, 2017).

Places to locate community information centres have always been a problem in most communities. Although government owns lands in Nigeria, but in most rural areas, families are involved in controlling lands. For families to concede land for such gestures, they often demand for proper and adequate compensation. If such demands are not promptly met, they are turned down and the land quickly sold out before government sanctions are involved. Locating community information centres in obscure and remote places have often rendered the operations and services nearly inaccessible (Okafor, 2020). As a way out, it is suggested that community leaders should provide land in centralized places where access to the centre will be easy and stress-free for all and sundry in the concerned community.

Individuals and stakeholders investing in community information centres always nurse the fear of poor management of the centre, hence, refusal to invest their funds. It is suggested that the financier or donor of such a centre should agree with the community leaders to include training a few staff in the package before official commissioning /handing over. The absence of public power supply is seen as a challenge because if a community information centre is to operate at full throttle, it requires, at least power to run its electrical appliances. Their challenge affects photocopying, tax, ICT-based services and other Internet related services.



In many community information centres, the immediate recruitment of core practitioners in the information sector, may be very difficult to come by, due to other logistics involved with hiring a certain caliber of staff. This challenge could be quickly resolved as soon as the proprietors of the centre contact nearest library association for possible assistance, and the issues involved are likely to be tabled and discussed, including where digital technologists are involved. Furthermore, cases abound where information centres were established and stocked but burgled and looted within few months. Addressing this involves increasing security presence in the premises and engage in sensitizations for the community to understand that such outfits are for their benefits and should be guarded well for posterity.

## Conclusion

This article drives how government, communities and their leaders can factor community information centres into rural development programmes in Nigeria. Rural development has always been the priority focus of any administration of national and regional governments. When facilities and infrastructure are built to support rural communities to attain social, cultural, political, economic and educational development, community information centres are usually regarded as one of such facilities. To own their kind of facility in a rural enclave therefore, affords the people a window to view and understand the world beyond them. It gives a sense of belonging and integration.

Community information centres are expected to be part of the priorities of government for people in rural areas. This is due to various benefits of such centres to the lives of inhabitants in the rural areas. These community information centres would have diverse resources and innovative service delivery mechanisms that will address information gaps related to major national and local issues like the restructuring question, elements and practice of democratic society, socio-political issues, cultural preservation and dissemination, education re-orientation, intellectual freedom, conflict resolution mechanisms, and equal participation of all and sundry in the rural areas, among others. However, the establishment of such community information centres will definitely be accompanied with challenges such as financial implications, appropriate location in the community, possibility of poor management, power supply, and absence of core library and information practitioners as well as ICT technologists for managing them, among others, which were addressed in the paper with workable solutions. Thus, the challenges and modalities for functionality of the centres are no doubt manageable and could be addressed using appropriate approach and policy framework.

In view of the foregoing, the paper suggests that:

- Appropriate policy framework should be put in place for the establishment and management of community information centres in Nigeria. Legislators at the federal and state levels should sponsor bills for establishing and managing community information centres. This is necessary, as it will contribute significantly to sustainable rural development.
- State chapters of the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) can take advantage of advocacy and lobbying of lawmakers to make them consider the establishment of community information centres as constituency projects. These state chapters could also assist

legislators in articulating and packaging ideas that will support community information centre bills for smooth passage in the house.

- Government at all levels should be made to see the need to establish community information centres as veritable tools for sustaining rural development efforts, as they should serve as centres for extending government programmes and services to the rural dwellers.

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