

Stimulating and Enriching Partnership with Community Based Organizations: Inclusive Participatory Platform with Libraries in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose - This paper assesses the collaborative work of an information center with various Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in creating knowledge and innovative strategies for sustainable development in rural communities in Nigeria. It identifies the CBOs, explores the use of invited spaces in information dissemination and harnesses the inclusive participatory approaches for integrating libraries into CBOs' activities.

Design/methodology/approach - This is qualitative study. There were group discussions, brainstorming and physical assessment of facilities with CBOs, NGO officials and librarians. 120 participants were involved in the activities. Interviews were held with 24 group leaders.

Findings - Successful and effective partnership between information professionals and community based organizations can be achieved at the grass root. Identification with CBOs in their meetings opened innovations in community engagement which helped to form unique partnerships and networking opportunities for libraries. CBOs have human and knowledge resources that are useful in establishing knowledge management bases.

Research limitations - The study and results are based on rural CBOs in South East, Nigeria. There are various community based organizations in other societies that can impact on library activities and services.

Practical implications - This highlights the need to connect and engage with CBOs for effective information service delivery in order to remain relevant and survive in the competitive world of information platforms. If librarians continue to revel in the comfort of library buildings and relegate themselves to the background, they would deny themselves the global participation and social services to the communities.

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Originality/value - This is a unique study that shows practical engagement and collaboration in a real life environment that draws a model for information service development strategies.

Paper type - Research

Keywords - Collaboration; Community Based Organizations (CBOs); Inclusive participation; Library and information services; Invited space.

Introduction

It is no longer news that the world is moving towards strengthening mechanisms to enhance social development, community and economic growth. Libraries play critical roles in enhancing development because they are naturally involved with people which can easily create awareness for Community Based Organizations (CBO). This role was described by Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson (2007) as fostering greater decision and action on the topic of participatory networks and more broadly participatory librarianship. Hence, librarians can actually leverage on the communities' needs of livelihood, service deliveries, literacy, primary health care, water and sanitation, budget issues among others.

Librarians cannot pretend to be unable to channel development information to the needed groups, to help them manage their communities and raise their voices to be heard by duty bearers. Hence, the statement of “we are not social workers”, “we only offer core services” by a class of librarians need to be revisited (Willimen, 2014). There is need for librarians who can interact and help people grow. The professionals who will employ practical strategies in engaging all segments of communities (Guzman, 2016) not just those that reflect their personal values and lifestyles but platforms that will reach out and key into community organizations.

This is about strengthening our communities because they are the heart of counties, states and nations, where families thrive (Convoy for Hope, 2015), where children are nurtured and raised, where able bodied men and women eke out their livelihood and participate in their sustainable development. It is then not out of place that librarians should commit to working with community based organizations in building strong communities. The confirmation of enriching our communities is emphasized in SDG 11 (UN, 2016) to make them safe, resilient and secure.

What better way of attributing to this objective than libraries and information centers collaborating with the communities, leveraging on created spaces to serve and become part of the functional groups. Based on this Krolak (2016) warned that when libraries develop their own, isolated literacy initiative, there is a danger that these efforts will be ignored by decision makers, and might not have the long-term impact in communities that libraries are hoping for. Here comes in the unequivocal essence of library to collaborate with CBOs through participatory strategies to build strong society. This study dwells more on the partnership between libraries and the culturally institutionalized CBOs in the rural communities in South East, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Libraries are established to disseminate information for the well-being of the people and improvement of the society. They do not just collect books but also play important roles in a nation's cultural heritage with community organizations, churches and private organizations (Campbell, 2015) for improved service delivery. How many groups, communities, people both users and non-library users really know what libraries offer?

Although many people are synonymous with library and books, they need to know that they have good practices of supporting community based platforms through inclusive participatory approaches (Ballantyne, 2009). Community groups if well empowered will impact societal needs and make them function effectively like citizens with rights in their own countries. The class of librarians who believe that librarianship is not about getting mixed up with the locals but concentrate on “traditional core services” of meeting the needs of only those that come to the library should have a rethink just as Vincent (2014) queried, what really are the “core” and “non-core” services? This study examined the evidence based approaches of rural information services through inclusive participation of libraries and the community dwellers.

Objectives of the Study

The central objective of this study is to assess the collaborative and participatory activities of an information center with various community based organizations (CBOs). Particularly, the study sought to:

1. Identify the community based organizations in the pilot communities

2. Explore the use of invited and open spaces for engagement
3. Harness the inclusive participatory approaches for integration of libraries and CBOs

Literature Review

Community Based Organizations (CBOs) are recognized and acknowledged groups that play vital roles in community development with each group having primary functions in protecting the interest of its members (Ikwuba, 2010). In the same vein, National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) (2016) portrayed it as organization, public or private nonprofit (including a church or religious entity) that is representative of a community or a significant segment of a community and is engaged in meeting human, educational, environmental or public safety community needs. They are truly committed to community development and citizen participation. This is the reason they are in most rural communities made up of men, youth, women, Christian women, and so on (Ihem-Avoaja, 2013; Onyeozu, 2010).

Studies have shown that some libraries have collaborated with CBOs. One example was by Saumby and Fields (2016) who stated that Richardson public library collaborated with CBO on adult literacy and has celebrated 25 years of partnership. Others are Harris County public library on underserved populations in Houston and Dallas public library that supported communication between local literacy organizations, among others. Struck et al (2014) also reported that Rondo library in urban neighborhood in Saint Paul, Minnesota changed the ways in which community organizations collaborated and the ways adult team members of these organizations participated in the creation, partnerships and facilitation of the Createch workshops.

These are positive outcomes of collaboration with CBOs which have actually improved educational experience, community long life learning, health service deliveries, livelihood developments, civic involvement and demand for good governance (JDPC, 2014). Engagement with the CBOs has really provided the right conditions for generating the growth for more knowledge (Abegunde, 2009). The professionals now tap into key community (Regional Centers of Expertise (RCE), 2013) players that have already been created, seeking spaces in the regularly scheduled meetings and using it as a forum for disseminating information.

The need for awareness creation informs the massive utilization of communal assemblies for engagements. Hence, the available spaces were used. Spaces are referred to as openings and opportunities given to

people to express their views and create changes in their environment. The concept of ‘spaces’ for participation and how it links to strategic information services display the extent of leverage libraries can have in the communities. Usually, the “invited” and the “open” spaces participation (Aiyar, 2010; Mundy, Green, Lingard, & Verger, 2016) are what guarantee the ability of librarians to deal with issues in the communities. The library should seek and use these spaces in becoming development practitioner, facilitator and co-producer of information (Pateman, 2014), while identifying, prioritizing and meeting community needs. Indeed, when libraries mix up and provide meaningful community service-learning opportunities, more spaces will be created for them. It is worth all the engagement as Convoy of Hope (2015) pointed out, we may not be able to change the choices people make, but we can definitely increase the choices that they have.

Today, people want to participate. Perhaps, it is this assertion that led to inclusive institutions at all levels as part of sustainable development goals 17 (SDG 17) for different organizations to come together to partner for joint activities. This goal recognizes the importance of focusing on common goals and common ambitions to strengthen communities through efforts (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2016). The indication is that librarians can actually collaborate with CBOs to improve their work, and not just merely to promote it. It is this change-oriented information and targets that will be communicated to groups, traditional rulers and marginalized community groups in response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Partnership for SDGs, 2016). Participation has become the key to open the closed doors to a more sustainable community.

It is only through inclusive participation that opportunities are given to people to contribute in situations that affect their lives. This positive change should be adopted (Olawepo, 2009) to fill the gaps in community groups’ engagement. The libraries can now begin to create spaces to participate in strengthening our societies with common understanding and improving knowledge-sharing. Nothing benefits more than working together (Community Library Hub, 2011) because as the community learns from the librarians, librarians equally learn from the wealth of community knowledge, thereby creating knowledge hubs in improving social sectors. This will ensure the enjoyment of citizens’ rights to participate and contribute in governance among others (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Ngulube, 2009). Transformation will come through this medium and change apathy into life-changing experiences in strengthening communities’ resilience.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study. It focused on processes that can inspire change through inclusive participation with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) on Voice to the People's Project (V2P) in pilot communities in Anambra state. The project was funded by Department for International Development (DFID) United Kingdom with supports from Christian Aid Nigeria but implemented by Justice Development and Peace Commission (JPDC) an NGO in Onitsha, Anambra State. This study was carried out in the Igbo speaking communities of South East, Nigeria, covering eight local government areas where the thirty two pilot communities were chosen.

The Communities were visited severally during the course of the project so it was easy, stretching the interviews and meetings to fit into their traditional market days of gathering. One of the researchers, a librarian in charge of the NGO information center leveraged on the project management and created spaces for interested librarians as volunteers during the project life cycle. Thus, seven librarians (4 from public and 3 from academic libraries) participated in the project. 120 members of CBOs participated in the discussions with 30 participants from each community while 24 CBOs leaders were interviewed. The sample population represented all the four communities used in this study. All discussions were carried out in the local dialect which the team speaks with fluency and a little of Pidgin English. The findings were presented in tables and figure.

For this study, four out of the eight pilot local government areas (LGAs) (one community each from each LGA) were used to enable the researchers have a relative view of participation from May, 2014 - December, 2015. The LGAs were chosen because of their accessibilities to the communities facilities. The LGAs were Anambra East, Anambra West, Ayamelum and Idemili South with their communities: UmuobaAnam, Orometiti, Anaku and Akwaukwu, respectively. Data collection instruments used were:

- I. Group discussions and brainstorming: These are meetings with CBOs done at different times and in different communities. It was moderated by the librarians and the NGO project teams to assess information needs. This approach helped the researchers to understand the socio-economic context of the residents. During brainstorming at the convenient locations found by the groups, different issues were raised with problem solving techniques. The participants were open and the researchers "learnt" from them.

- II. Interviews: They were carried out with leaders of the CBOs to help establish and confirm the group discussions. The CBO leaders were randomly selected and consisted of male, female and youth,
- III. Physical facility assessment: Some members of CBOs, librarians and the project team went round the communities to observe the schools, hospitals and water boreholes which accentuated the joint activities and solidified the cordial relationship among the participating groups.

These methods were chosen to reflect the inclusive participation of community groups. It also emphasized the collaborative activities of different organizations in carrying out joint activities, successfully.

Findings

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Participants

CBOs	Age				Education			Sex	
	Below 18	18-30	31-45	46 and above	FSLC	WAEC	Higher degree	M	F
Youth Group	-	15	5	--	-	12	8	8	12
Women Group	-	2	10	8	4	8	8	-	20
Men Group	-	4	15	12	5	14	12	31	-
Religious Group	-	5	10	5	2	8	10	8	12
Others	-	10	12	7	-	14	15	17	12
Total	-	36	52	32	11	56	53	64	56

Table 1 shows that the number of male participants are higher than female participants at 64 and 56 respectively. Also shown is that majority of respondents age range falls between 31 and 45 with more participants possessing West African Examination Certificates (WAEC). There are also good numbers of participants with higher degrees with only 11 participants possessing First School Leaving Certificates (FSLC). Hence the demographic data shows the different statuses of CBOs groups.

Table 2. *Identification of the Community-based Organizations*

Sr#	Group	Composition	Interest
1	Youth: OtuUmuagbo	Girls that are not married.	The well-being of members, empowerment and support to livelihood.
	Student union	Only students, usually in the tertiary institutions.	
	Youth general	All youth in the community (both girls and boys that are single).	
2	Women: Umuada	Daughters of the community, married and non-married within or outside of the community.	Guidance, general wellbeing of members and households.
	Women wing of the Town Union	All married women in the community both indigene and non-indigene.	
3	Men: Town union	All males that are of reasoning age whether married or not.	Decision, policy making, security and general welfare of the community.
	Anambra State Association of Town Union (ASATU)	All President Generals (PGs) of the whole communities in the state.	

Table 2 shows the existing various groups identified in all the communities studied. Each category has its distinct areas of responsibilities. It can be deduced that they all work towards one goal: development and sustainability of members and their communities.

The interview section with the CBO leaders revealed that the groups, especially the Umuada, Umuagbogho and the chiefs (community recognized titled men and women) have existed as long as the community. One of the leaders stated: *They are highly respected and their opinions are highly respected.*

Table 3. *Invited and Open Spaces used for Engagement*

Sr#	Group	Spaces/Opportunities for Discussion
1	Youth: OtuUmuagbo	Monthly meetings at the community center/village hall.
	Youth general	Monthly meetings at the village hall.
	Student union	Meeting at the village hall during holiday.
2	Women: Umuada	Meetings on the traditional market days (Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwor) at the house of the eldest member.
	Women Wing of Town Union	Monthly meeting in a designated place (member's home or community hall) and annual August meetings in the community hall.
3	Men: Town union	Meetings at the community Town hall.
	ASATU	Quarterly meetings at the local government Secretariat.

There are also the religious groups and the general groups that comprised of youths, women and men for community development purposes. These groups were revealed during discussion, indicating that their monitoring and reporting activities on government facilities have helped them to assess government policies and projects. Interviews also

confirmed this. Thus, it can be deduced that CBOs have interesting human and knowledge resources which can be useful in establishing knowledge management bases.

Table 3 shows locations and time of meetings of CBOs with the opportunities created to engage and disseminate information. Identifying with them in their meetings opened up new innovations in community engagements. Thus, trust and confidence were built here which hastened the forming of unique partnerships and networking opportunities for libraries.

Table 4. *Identification of Groups that have used the Spaces to Engage*

Who visits your Group?	Participants
Government people	Yes
Community Stake holders	Yes
Politicians	Yes
Church people	Yes
NGOs	Yes
Librarians	No
Clubs and Associations	Yes

Table 4 disclosed other groups that were given the same opportunities to engage the CBOs. This was discovered during discussion and interview sections. The participants informed that other groups have visited them to talk about issues but no one from the library has come. The interview revealed that everyone is accepted as long as what they are coming to say will benefit the members. The Town Union President stated: *We want the best for our people. We want people to bring information, empowerment and development to us.*

Table 5 shows the analysis of Community Based Organization (CBO) inclusion in charting sustainable framework for enriching the community. Participants supported each other in reaching a common goal as the table shows demarcation of outlined deliberate output for information sharing. This shows that successful and effective partnership for information services can be achieved at the grass root level.

Table 5. Inclusive Participatory Approach

Collaborative Activity	Brain Storming Session	Tactical Approaches on Connecting with CBOs
Joint assessment of needs by CBO, librarians and NGO	Targeted needs for strengthening and enrichment	Knowledge generation and analysis of issues; physical assessment of basic facilities.
Open dialogue	Participation and contribution of all participants	Mapping and prioritization of needs; community driven development strategy; identification of other groups for supports and sustainability.
Sustained communication and information services	Resource analysis	Dissemination of information, education and communication materials (IEC); best channel and medium of information dissemination; the use of social media.
Strategic framework	Work plan	Drawing of action plan for information engagement.

The figure 1 shows the evidence based insight into the joint participation with the CBOs. Three basic facilities were visited in the communities because they are constant in every area. The brief meeting with nurses and teachers were spontaneous but it helped in assessing the effective service delivery with the conditions of the facilities. Other things that followed were reports which they went back to share with their people while the researchers went back to plan the next strategy of dissemination. Here, community information is much more than farming and livelihood. Their quest for participation and contributions resulted in more research on civic education and literacy. Thus, a good sustainable relationship was built for more partnering activities.

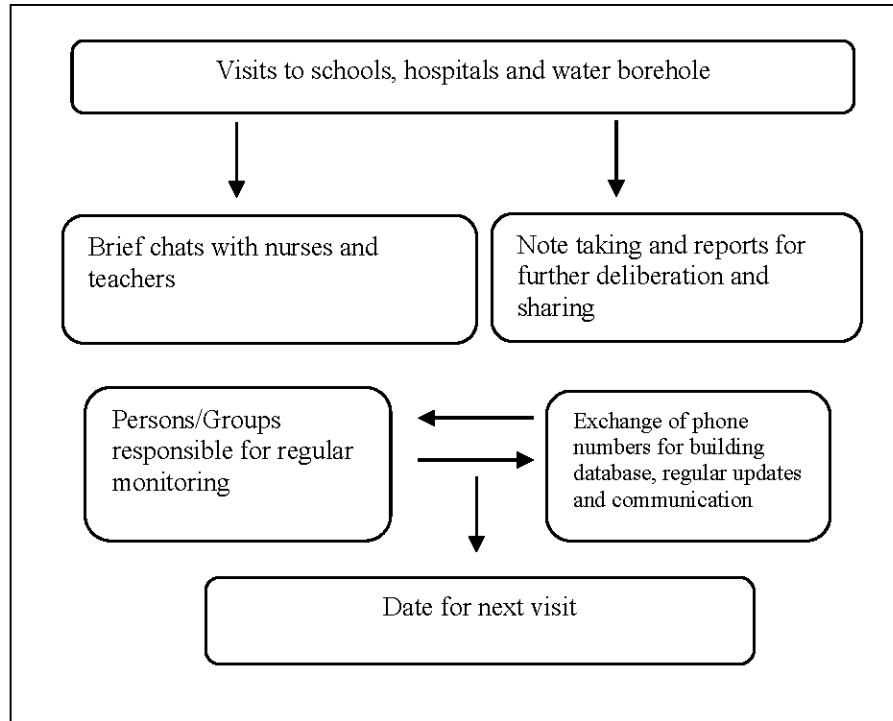


Figure 1. Immediate output of inclusive brainstorming

Discussion of Findings

It is obvious that Community Based Organization (CBO) cuts across every unit and represents the concerns of members of the community. The discovery that CBOs are made up of women, youth, men and religious residents show the social inclusion of every member of the community. The indication is that no one is left behind in enhancing community development prospects (Schareticles, 2014). Viewing it from that angle emphasizes the strength of CBOs and the reasons for libraries to understand the local issues in the communities. It further buttresses the assertion of Obeji (2015) that CBO has been part and parcel of every community in Nigeria. Since librarians are in the information business, this collaboration is good in developing plans and strategies for the needed outcomes.

This is the reason librarians must advocate and claim the spaces provided in Table 3, keying into the already existing community formal meetings (Regional Centers of Expertise (RCE), 2013), attending scheduled meetings and using them as platforms to disseminate relevant information. Of course, the librarians are accepted as other groups, which leave them with choices of making things happen with the CBOs through creating the relevance and synergy that will drive this knowledge. Hence, connecting with CBOs like other organizations in Table 4 will give visibility to the librarians as agents of information dissemination.

Inclusive participatory technique (Table 5) has shown that successful outcomes can be achieved with community dwellers and librarians. The joint activities of the CBOs, NGOs and the librarians with brain storming sessions produced open dialogue where innovations and strategies were worked out to everybody's benefits. That the approach revealed resource analysis, prioritization of needs, community driven development, distribution of IEC materials and drawing of action plan showed the extent knowledge can be generated and shared among partners. It also shows that CBOs actually know where and how to participate in helping to achieve their development with the right approaches of information services.

Evidently, the effect of the immediate outcome in Figure 1, aptly described what could be tagged breaking the silence of the poor and disadvantaged as it reflected the ambitions to strengthen communities through efforts as stated in SDG (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2016). This is the significance of value added and readiness of the dwellers to go beyond the group level and work for the whole community. It shows that collaboration sensitizes and motivates when combined with creative inclusive participation (INCLUDE, 2016).

It is pertinent to mention that the participatory exercise produced good results in Umueri community (Anambra East LGA) with a community member in Diaspora donating cartons of new books to twelve rural primary and secondary schools (Osuchukwu & Edewor, 2016). In Anaku, (Ayamelum LGA) there was immediate repair of leaking roof of the primary health center. There were also payment of the electricity bill of primary health center and repair of the leaking overhead tank of the community water bore hole by Town Union in Akwaukwu (Idemili South LGA). Also recorded were more enrollments in adult education sector in Orometiti (Anambra West LGA).

Conclusion/Implications

Stimulating and enriching partnership with community based organizations on inclusive participatory platform with libraries provided the following results: There are different types of CBOs that comprised of male, female and youths. They cut across traditional, church, social and gender groups that provide supports for their members and the community. In addition, these community groups made their meeting places and venues available and accessible for other groups to engage, indicating the readiness to work with any group that imparts wellness and development to their members. Participatory inclusive approach has shown to create impact in effective community information. The ease of partnering with CBOs and NGOs developed good working relationship and promise of continuous sustainable development.

The implication of this study is that if librarians continue to struggle with the description of mission of library without connecting with the users in their environment, other groups will replace their importance in the very communities their libraries operate. When this happens, they may face serious threats of extinction and possible removal from sustainable development goal platform. This study has shown that community groups can be connected with and accessed for partnership activities in library and information services. Every group can be penetrated in the community. Librarians must reach out beyond the people that visit their libraries alone.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Libraries and information centers can adopt physical and social connections with CBOs. There is need to be open and communicate effectively.
2. Partnership with CBOs can start with building trust and respect from each party. It is not ideal to have a mindset of superiority when engaging community people.
3. Rural librarianship skills are needed because knowledge of local contents and confidence are part of information dissemination in the community.
4. Collaboration with NGOs and other groups who are already in the community network is important if librarians want to build strong relationship with the dwellers.

5. Participatory librarianship should be adopted and implemented in all communities

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