Access to and Usage of Information among Rural Communities: a Case Study of Kilosa District Morogoro Region in Tanzania

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Abstract

The study investigates how rural communities in Kilosa District of Morogoro region in Tanzania access and use information. Specifically, the study identifies the information needs of rural people, determines the factors influencing the choice of information source, and assesses the appropriateness of the information sources based on usefulness and preference. Choice of the study area was based on the availability of multiple information sources information seekers could consult. Simple random sampling technique was employed in selecting villages to be investigated and respondents to be interviewed. Findings showed that there was a strong need for information of all types. Most of the information needed related to day-to-day problems. Information was accessed mainly through radio, television, newspapers and magazines, and also through cell phones and face-to-face communication. Choice of information sources was influenced by the respondents’ level of education, income, sex, age, occupation and the distance from the information seeker’s location to the information sources. Further, findings showed that while people accessed and used information primarily for solving day-to-day problems, they also accessed it for leisure purposes. The study recommends that it is important to have frequent rural information needs assessments before providing information services to rural areas. Information providers should repackage information in appropriate forms suitable for rural communities. Moreover, radio and television stations should have sufficient rural related programming, and it should be broadcast at appropriate times.

Key words

information needs; information seeking behavior; information sources; rural communities; Tanzania

1.0 Introduction

Information is considered a vital resource, alongside land, labor, capital and skills. People need information for their day-to-day activities and for the development of their environment and their selves. Weiss et al. (185) describe information as the cornerstone of successful socio-economic development because it plays a key role in decision making.
Human beings express diversified information needs in their day-to-day activities. Reitz (2010) defines information need as a gap in a person's knowledge that, when experienced at the conscious level as a question, gives rise to a search for an answer. After identification of information needs, the information user embarks on a search for information. The behavioral expressions collectively known as ‘information seeking behaviour’ resemble problem-solving or decision-making processes where an individual identifies possible sources, differentiates and chooses a few sources, locates or makes contact with them, and interacts with them in order to obtain the desired information (Choo 7).

Access to and usage of information is necessary for improving rural people’s livelihood (Etebu para. 8). Despite its key role in socio-economic development, very few people in developing countries have access to adequate information. HakiElimu et al. (9) describe lack of information as one of the major problems facing people in Kilosa district of Morogoro region in Tanzania. In most cases, information provision in rural areas takes place through socio-economic development projects; however, developers do not view information provision as their first priority (Meyer and Boon 174).

This study investigates how people in rural communities in Kilosa district of Morogoro region in Tanzania meet their information needs. Specifically the study identifies the information needs in rural communities, determines the relevant information sources, identifies the factors influencing the choice of information sources, and records information accessibility, evaluation and usage. The paper concludes by recommending appropriate strategies necessary for improving information accessibility in rural areas in Tanzania and developing countries at large.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Information Needs in Rural Areas in Africa

Information is facts or knowledge provided or learned as a result of research or study (Smith, 2001). It is the facts or knowledge needed to answer some question faced by people in their daily life. Every person needs information for decision making; the types of information needed range from common physiological to individuated psychological information needs. According to Lwoga et al. (387) information needs in development contexts relate closely to a person’s occupation, the level of socio-economic development, and local agro-ecological conditions. Information needs of the rural poor relate especially closely to their occupations and their basic survival goals. While physiological needs give rise to basic and often shared information needs, individual needs vary from one person to another. A number of factors including social, cultural and economic realities can influence such individual information needs. Other factors including the information seeker’s age, level of education, gender, and income can also influence information needs. Lwoga et al. (96) mention that information needs of rural people are distinctive due to varied demographic, social, cultural and economic factors. Ozowa (para. 7) describes how information needs vary with individual problems being faced by people in a particular locality.
Identifying information needs is the first step towards satisfying the needs. An information seeking process involves a number of further steps, including: identifying information sources, consulting the sources and accessing information. Mass media sources (magazines, television, radio and newspapers), books, journals, pamphlets, and web sites are some of the sources of information commonly consulted by people. Choice of information sources is always influenced by individual traits. Among agrarian information seekers variables such as farm size, years in farming, age, level of education, and gross income from farming influence the choice of information sources (Riesenberg and Gor 10). Evaluation and usage of information is likely influenced by similar factors. Knowledge of how these factors influence information seeking behavior is important for improving access and usage of information in rural areas.

2.2 Accessibility of Information Services in Rural Areas in Africa

Most information services in Africa are focused on urban areas, neglecting the rural areas where the majority live. In Tanzania, in 2008, approximately 90% of print publications circulated only in urban centres, serving less than 17% of the population (Shetto 6). This distribution limits the opportunities for rural people to productively participate in socio-economic development. Moreover, limited information services among rural communities has contributed to low literacy levels, poor economic status and has restrained people in more rural communities from exercising legal and social rights.

Limited information accessibility is caused by a number of factors. Kamba (6) mentions inadequate basic infrastructure (electricity, telecommunication, roads and transportation), low literacy levels, lack of suitable information services and lack of technical competencies as among the barriers to delivery of information services in rural areas in developing countries. Most rural areas in Africa are not electrified, reducing access in most rural communities to information and communication technologies. For example, in 2009 farmers in Kasulu and Songea rural districts in Tanzania did not even think of owning television sets due to lack of electricity in their areas (Lwoga 50). Moreover, the private sector has dominated the provision of information services including telecommunications. A study by Mureithi (1) found that the private sector has exacerbated the information divide by delivering most information infrastructure in urban areas.

Communication and information infrastructure established by the government has also been concentrated in urban areas. Rural roads in Africa are often impassable during the rainy season, making it difficult for timely delivery of print information resources needed for day-to-day decision making (Mahwasane 2). Worse, the timely delivery of print information services is of limited value due to the high illiteracy levels. A 2010 study by UNESCO (6) shows that Sub-Saharan Africa had 153 million people who lacked the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed in everyday life. In Uwezo Tanzania (4), the majority of children lack basic literacy and numeracy skills even after seven years of primary education – a reality that will contribute to high future adult illiteracy levels. Hakielimu (5) describes how illiteracy levels in Tanzania increase from urban to rural
areas. This is mostly due to high disparities in accessibility of social services between urban and rural areas in the country. There are a number of social, cultural, individual and institutional realities which have resulted from the current imbalance. An in-depth knowledge of how these factors influence information service accessibility is necessary for delivering effective services to rural people.

2.3 Information Usage among Rural People in Developing Countries

An effective information seeker accesses relevant information from appropriate information sources. Accessed information can only be useful when effectively interpreted. Information usage may be limited by accessing irrelevant information and by poor information evaluation skills. A study by Dorsch (para. 3) identified lack of time, inadequate access to information sources, lack of skills, cost of information and geographical isolation as the major barriers to effective use of information. Moreover, poor reception quality of instruments used and difficult technical languages limit the usefulness of audio-visual information services. Literacy levels of information seekers also limit the usage of information. For effective information usage among rural communities, it is important to investigate in detail how specific groups of rural people access and use information for meeting their daily information needs.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The study employed the Information Needs, Access and Use model (the author’s proposed model) which discovers how people go about accessing and using information. The model assumes that people have various information needs and that there are multiple information sources people can consult. Decisions about appropriate information sources are influenced by the social, economic and cultural background of the information seeker.

Figure 1: Information provision and usage model
Moreover, the ability to access, evaluate and use information is impacted by such variables as well. People with unsatisfied information needs will restart consulting the information sources again for the purpose of accessing appropriate information.

3.0 Research Methodology

The study was conducted in Kilosa district of Morogoro region in Tanzania. The district has seven divisions, two of which were involved in the study: Kilosa and Kimamba. The choice of divisions was based on the availability of multiple information sources that information seekers could consult.

The study employed a simple random sampling procedure in selecting the study wards, villages and respondents. The sampling technique was chosen because it ensures that each element in the population has an equal chance of being selected (Kothari 15). The sampling technique is suitable as the target population is homogenous. Since all of the seven wards in the two divisions had similar information infrastructure, three wards were selected, namely Kimamba B, Chanzuru and Magomeni. Five villages, namely Magomeni, Kimamba B, Madoto, Chanzuru and Ilonga were randomly selected from the three wards.

A total of 100 respondents were randomly selected from the five villages. Since the study population was homogenous, this relatively small sample serves the purpose (Kothari,176). The decision of how many people to be included in the sample from each village depended largely on the village population size and the availability of respondents during interviews. For these reasons, among the 100 respondents, 30 were from Kimamba B, 23 were from Magomeni, while 15, 16, and 16 respondents were from Ilonga, Madoto and Chanzuru respectively. In-depth interviews and observations were used to collect qualitative and quantitative data on sources of information consulted, level of accessibility, and usage of information in the study area. Quantified data was analysed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) while content analysis was used in analyzing qualitative data.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Information Needs of People in the Study Area

An information need is a gap in a person’s knowledge expressed as a question. Usually information needs vary among individuals, communities and professions. Respondents in the study area were asked about the type of information they needed. The responses were sorted into 10 different categories: market, health, civics, political, credit, academic, farm inputs, leisure, agricultural husbandry practices and international news. The majority (more than 70%) needed health, political, civic and leisure information. Sixty-five percent of respondents needed information on agricultural husbandry practices, and 60% of people expressed a need for market information. Others (54%) needed information related to farm inputs, while some respondents (less than 35%) needed academic; credit and international news information.
Regardless of the fact that there was a strong expressed need for all categories of information, each individual respondent had specific information needs. This finding supports that of Ozowa (para. 7) who concluded that people have specific information needs which relate to the specific problems they face and the decision they have to make. It was identified that respondent’s occupation, age, and level of education influenced the need for some types of information. For instance, it was found that all of the seven teachers, a tutor and two researchers included in the study needed academic information. It was also found that the 38 farmers included in the sample (88%) needed agricultural husbandry information; others needed credit and market information. All business men included in the sample needed market information. Unlike the older people included in the sample, most young people needed leisure information from newspaper, magazines, television and radio.

On the whole, the study’s findings showed that people in rural areas have a high need for all types of information. However, the daily activities a particular person was involved in determined the type of information he or she needed more urgently. Moreover, the more general individual social and economic profiles also influenced the information needs of this rural population.

### 4.2 Information Sources Used by Rural People

There were several sources of information used by people in the study area. The information sources used included radio, television, newspaper and magazines, cell phones, face-to-face encounters, leaflets, libraries and the internet. Among them, radio
was the most commonly used, as 97% of respondents reported using it. Others (more than 60%) reported using face-to-face communication, mobile phones, television sets, and newspaper and magazines.

![Figure 2: Sources of Information Used by People in the Study Area](image)

Source: Field data 2010

It was observed that a number of radio stations had infrastructure covering the study area. These stations included Kilosa Community Radio, Radio Free Africa, Radio Abood, Radio Ukweli, Radio Iman, Okoa FM, Radio Tumaini and Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation 1 (TBC1). With the exception of Kilosa Community Radio, the rest of the stations were from urban areas and provided urban-related information. Moreover, there were five mobile phone operators (Tanzania Telecommunication Limited, Zain Tanzania, Vodacom Tanzania, Tigo, and ZanTel) with infrastructure covering the study area. There were some respondents who owned cell phones, while others either called through phone shops (phone kiosks) or borrowed phones from friends. The availability of radio and television frequencies and mobile phone infrastructure in the study area made appropriate information sources available to the people in the area. Despite the potential of these sources, the limited availability of power for charging cell phones and the cost of dry batteries reduced the usefulness of some of these sources.

Other sources, including newspapers, magazines, leaflets, pamphlets, brochures and flyers were brought in from urban areas. Most publishing houses in Tanzania are located in Dar es Salaam city which is about 200 kilometers from Morogoro municipality. Print resources from Dar es Salaam must reach Morogoro before being distributed to Kilosa district. Morogoro municipality is only a ninety minute drive from the study area;
however, due to poor road infrastructure and unreliable transport services, such resources were delivered very late. Ward and district libraries were other centres from which people could access print resources in the area. The use of these centres was very low (only 11%) among respondents.

People shared much information necessary for decision making through direct oral communication, as this was the cheapest source of information despite the information distortion this channel suffers from. People mentioned accessing information through face-to-face communication mainly in terms of contact with agricultural extension agents, religious leaders, village governments and other influential people in their villages. Another opportunity was at demonstration plots prepared for farmers by researchers from nearby research institutions.

On the whole, the study findings showed that radio, mobile phones, television sets, and face-to-face communication were used by more than 65% of the respondents in the study area. With the exception of one radio station, others (seven) were from urban areas with a preponderance of urban related contents Newspapers and magazines were also from publishers centred in Dar es Salaam city. A few other sources (libraries and Internet) were not used by the majority. For enhancing suitability of any information source in the area, it is important to increase the rural content needed for day-to-day decision making and present such information resources in the most suitable and appropriate manner for rural communities.

4.3 Factors Influencing Choice of Information Sources among Rural People

The choice of information sources among people was influenced by demographic, social, cultural, and economic factors. The demographic variables which influenced the choice of information sources included age, gender and level of education. Among the respondents, 69% were males and the other 31% were females. Among them, 90% were literate (had primary to tertiary education) while 10% had no formal education. The mean age of the respondents was 37 years of age.

Findings show that out of the 69 male respondents, the majority (99%) used radio as an information source. Most of them reported having a portable radio they listened to wherever they went. Only those females coming from households with non-portable radio had the opportunity to listen to radio programs. Other information sources including television sets, the internet, newspapers and magazines, libraries, agricultural extension agents, leaflets, and researchers were used by more males than females. Most of these sources were not owned by the households and were accessed at a significant distance. Most males used their leisure time to consult such sources while females had to use such time for household related activities.

It was found that ownership of information sources like television sets, mobile phones and print resources depended much on the level of income of the information seeker. Some occupational categories: researchers, teachers, tutors, accountants, a few farmers, and business men were in a better position to own mobile phones and
television sets. Those who did not own such information tools had to either borrow from friends and relatives or use paid services from phone shops (in the case of mobile phones). Some others who did not have television sets had to watch television programs in their relatives' homes or in bars and clubs. People who could not afford to buy newspapers and magazines borrowed from those who managed to buy them.

It was found that 68% of female and 62% of male respondents shared information necessary for decision making orally through face-to-face communication. It is known that face-to-face communication is highly used among people with strong social ties (Mesch and Talmud 31). Females were identified more often than males as members of social organizations. For this reason, females preferred this mode of communication because it was cheap and resulted in stronger social ties.

Generally, a number of factors influenced the choice of information sources, especially demographic characteristics, income, and socio-cultural division of labor. For the effectiveness of any rural information service, it is important to consider how each factor influences information accessibility and usage.

4.4 Information Accessibility and Usage in the Study Area

Respondents reported that after consulting appropriate information sources they used the information for solving some of the problems they faced. Respondents used information for solving problems related to their health, farming activities, for their business and marketing needs, and to address legal issues. Others reported using information for leisure purposes, accessing games, music and movies and sharing the information with fellows.

Information seekers with unsatisfied information needs had to restart consulting appropriate information sources. Most respondents reported that when they failed to meet their information needs it was due to a number of factors including the high cost of newspapers and magazines, irrelevant content available through radio and television programs, unsuitable information formats, and high telephone call charges.

Generally, people used available information sources to try to meet their information needs. Despite the availability of some information sources, the appropriate information for day-to-day rural activities was not adequate. In most cases the lack of appropriate information led to irrational decisions being made, thus limiting socio-economic development among rural people.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study found that rural communities in the study area needed all types of information. Despite these generalized information needs, each individual respondent had specific information needs related to specific individual problems. It was also found that there were several information sources which were more used by these rural communities: radio, mobile phones, television sets and face-to-face communication. With some
variation, almost all males and females reported the use of these sources. Socio-cultural, economic and demographic factors influenced choice of an information source. Income and gender roles limited some of the respondents from using some of the information sources. Moreover, difference in literacy levels prevented some people from using some information sources. Accessed information was used for solving practical problems and sometimes for leisure purposes. Despite the availability of such information sources, information accessibility was not reliable, and in most cases the sources provided inadequate information for decision making.

This study recommends that it is important to have frequent rural information needs assessment before providing information services to rural areas. Moreover, for improving information usage, providers should repackage information in appropriate forms suitable for rural communities. Radio and television stations should have more rural related programming, which should be broadcast during appropriate times. Most agricultural related programs on radio and television are broadcast in the afternoon when rural people are working on their farms. Mobile phone operators should reduce charges, as most rural people are poor. The government should strengthen the rural road infrastructure and improve the rural transport system so that print information resources can be available in these areas in a timely way. The government should have strategies to reduce and eliminate adult illiteracy. Rising illiteracy levels among Tanzanians is limiting the ability of people to access and use information in their day-to-day activities.

Works Cited


