The Role of Community Libraries in Providing Quality Information to Family Farmers: A Case of Huege Community Library in Uganda

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Abstract
The future of agriculture is in the hands of small hold and family farmers. These small family farmers produce over half of the world's food and they have the potential to produce more if the right informational services are taken nearer to them (Centeno, 2014). In recognition of this, the United Nations declared 2014 as the International Year of Family Farming (International Year of Family Farming, 2014). This is a very important recognition of the multiple social, economic, environmental and cultural functions of family farming.

Many families in Africa in general and Uganda in particular depend on farming both as source of income and food and yet they still lack the basic information to support them. To the people (family farmers) of Butaleja community, Huege community library is God sent. It processes information ready for use, it provides facilities where families would gather and view relevant agricultural videos, host discussions, hold exhibitions on agricultural related issues that affect them, which are all geared to dissemination of appropriate information for the rural farmers. As a result their welfare should improve.

The aim of this paper is to give background information and explain the strategies of Huege Community Library in disseminating agricultural information to family farmers. The paper also discusses challenges faced and the solutions to addresses them. The methods used to gather information included open ended questionnaires, open ended interviews and content analysis.

Key words: Community libraries, family farmers, quality information, challenges.

Introduction
Ever since the beginning of agriculture, family farming has been contributing significantly to global food and nutrition security. Indeed, 70% of our food supply today comes from more than 500 million family farms over the world, which is supporting rural employment in many countries (FAO, 2014).
However, despite the important role and contribution of family farms to global food production, this type of agriculture is threatened by several challenges, including competition with industrial farming. If family farming is not revitalised soon, adverse impact on future food security could be huge.

Among the different challenges that family farms are facing, the ageing farming population, the lack of youth interest and engagement in family farming as well as lack of adequate information for the farmers among others, are major concerns. Amidst the challenges, a number of questions could be posed: How can the use of libraries and application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) strengthen rural farmers’ engagement in family farming? What should be done, and by whom, to foster the use of community libraries and ICTs by farmers for the sustainability of family farms?

Huege Community Library

“Huege” is an indigenous term of the Banyole people of Butaleja district which means “Let’s Learn” states Mr. Sagula Robert, Chairperson Farmers. This term was derived from the desire for the residents to learn new ideas and the learning place, which is a Community Library. Huege Community Library is a project under Communication & Information Technology for Agriculture & Rural Development (CITARD) geared towards providing relevant academic and non-academic information to the communities around Nabiganda in Butaleja district (CITARD, 2014). The library, which has just stated is expected to be a one-stop centre for information dissemination to the community.

Communication & Information Technology for Agriculture & Rural Development (CITARD) was founded by a group of rice farmers in 2008 with the aim of improving their standard of living. It was later registered in 2010 as a Community Based Organization (CBO) with the Butaleja District Local Government under the Non-Governmental Organizations Registration Act with the registration number 136 and renewed in 2013 with the registration number 466. The organization is headquartered in Nabiganda Township in Kachonga Sub-county (CITARD, 2014).

Vision

Huege’s vision is to become a leading one stop community library in Butaleja providing access to academic and non-academic information to schools and the community as a whole. The mission of Huege Community Library initiative is to provide access to informational, educational, cultural and recreational library materials and services in a variety of formats and technologies; to be responsive to the library needs of the community; and uphold the public’s freedom of access to information especially farmers. This library is located in Nabiganda Trading Centre, Butaleja District. Nabiganda is home to Doha Irrigation rice scheme, one of the biggest rice schemes in the East African region. These private small rice growers depend heavily on knowledge and information that concerns weather, climate, market, pest and diseases, seeds and other farming in-puts. This clearly justifies need for this library.
Family Farming defined

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations FAO, (2014), family farming includes all family-based agricultural activities, and it is linked to several areas of agricultural development, namely crop and livestock production, forestry, fisheries, and aquaculture.

From the various literature sources and professional exchanges, it was observed that the definition of a family farm differs from one country/region to another in terms of farm size, type of production but there are some key characteristics in common from all the examples shared by different experts and authors.

Benefits of family farming

According to Anne-Laure, (2014), Youth coordinator at International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), family farms represent a large percentage of the total agricultural sector in most African countries. It is a means of organising agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and poultry production which is managed and operated by a family and primarily dependent on family labour, including both women and men, the elderly and the youths. This system combines economic, environmental, social and cultural functions.

In addition, family farmers are instrumental in selecting a wide range of varieties and breeds, which are more adaptable to the diversity of the agro-ecological conditions (combination of soil, climate and altitude) faced by farmers all over the world. In doing so, family farmers are creating, promoting and conserving the biodiversity of food crops and livestock, transferring this knowledge from the current generation to the next. At the same time, many family farmers are also developing quality products not only for their self-consumption, but that could also be given value in niche markets. All these initiatives can be well supported by a good library facility. Furthermore, these undertakings can be well documented and the knowledge passed on to the next generation of farmers and researchers. This is only possible with a library in place.

Family farming is a sustainable economic model of agriculture on which most families from many developing countries have been depending on for their food security and livelihood for centuries. This model has been successful in engaging the people in farming over generations.

While the general idea is that a family farm is characterised by low levels of revenue and practised on a small-scale, it might not always be the case. According to Dr. Olu Ajayi, Senior Programme Coordinator Agricultural Research for Development Policy (ARD), family farms can also operate on large scale, with a focus on agribusiness. However, he notes that such farms are not very common to find in most developing countries and other regions of the world. Looking at the current situation, 95% of family farms globally are under 5 hectares, with low profitability. They are associated with poverty (since 70%
of the poorest in the world are family farmers and herders) and hence are not attractive to young people (Singh, 2014).

Despite this general tendency, rural people who are already involved in family farming are playing key roles in contributing to food and nutrition security, hence a need to strengthen their engagement to ensure continuity. This calls for well-established community and knowledge centres and ICTs facilities such as Huege Community Library.

**Characteristics of family farming**

Rural people are involved in several ways in family farming and have specific roles, sometimes not only on the farm, but in all segments of the agricultural value chain (Guillaumé, 2014). To mark the 2014 International Year of Family Farming (IYFF), the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), in partnership with the African Youth Foundation (AYF) organised an e-debate on “Youth sustaining family farming through ICTs” from 22nd September to 7th October 2014. The debate was regulated by subject experts and approved the following concepts as the key characteristics of family farming

*a. Youth as source of family labour*

Young people who are involved in family farming work mostly as family labour, contributing to tasks such as weeding, harvesting or spraying. Most of these youths start getting involved on family farms by helping with minor tasks, and eventually end up taking over the family farm from the elderly parents or family members.

*b. Income generation for family farming*

When working on the family farm, family members are usually not paid as employees. In addition, if they are involved in other activities outside the farm and generating income, they often invest this money into the farm.

*c. Gender specificities*

In rural areas in particular, young people especially young women have specific roles and contribution in family farming. In addition to their help on the farm, they are also involved in care-giving tasks, whereas young men help with or take charge of some of the farming activities left by the father, who is sometimes absent in search for jobs in other cities or urban areas. In both cases, some also seek paid employment to contribute toward the family's income and inversion without abandoning the domestic chores or other tasks at the farm. The elders (Men) are the heads of families.

*d. Family farming as a lifestyle*

While growing up on a family farm and having been involved in different farm activities, family farming has become a lifestyle for many homes/ families. Despite living in urban areas, a number of young people are still growing their crops in their
backyard or roof garden. Some of them even return back to the village after completing their studies or having acquired additional knowledge and skills to scale up the family business back home. For those who can’t make it for university education and settle in rural areas, they embrace family farming as their way of living daily lives.

Community Libraries to sustain Family Farming and strengthen rural engagement

Information is key in agriculture and family farming, libraries and ICTs facilitate access to timely and accurate information needed for improved agricultural production.

Community libraries can successfully be used to help address some of the challenges of rural farmers regarding information through use of mobile phones (SMS), web (or mobile) applications and Internet access in the library. The other important information may be acquired from other information containers such as books, newspapers, magazines, brochures and journals found in the library. Different categories of rural farmers will require different agricultural knowledge solutions. People especially youth and young women living in rural areas, without adequate telecommunication networks or electricity, will require other information centres where they can acquire knowledge with or without power and network.

In order to ensure effective use of information and other ICT applications by the family farmer who mainly lives in rural areas, there is the need to further translate contents or produce them in local languages, produce geographic specific content and ICT tools that are resilient and easy to adopt by the rural young farmer. All these can be possible if there is a community library to offer such services.

One specific characteristic of family farming is the rich source of local knowledge that is produced and transmitted from generation to generation. Different ICT tools (mobile phones, tablets, computers, information systems, web 2.0 and social media tools etc.) can be used effectively in capturing, documenting, disseminating and storing knowledge and skills by family farmers, including youth, thereby preserving and improving these practices and innovations to support agricultural sustainability.

How the Huege Community Library is improving access to agricultural knowledge/ information to family farmers

The Huege Community Library in Nabiganda trading centre acts as a one-stop centre for farmers to come and access information, which is important to them. According to Mr. Ahmed Naleba Jr, Executive Director of the project:

In the same place, we are working to setup a community library to engage school going children in primary and secondary schools to come and access books to help them improve their reading and research abilities. It’s envisioned that that in the future they will be able to practice better informed agriculture that is more beneficial to them as they become champions in their respective communities. We want to build a new generation of well informed and very productive family farmers to take on from the old generation.
The library is working on improving its ICT infrastructure. This is in light of the contributions that ICTs can offer in agriculture. ICTs can also be used to improve access of young family farmers to extension and advisory services, as well as vocational trainings. One interesting example shared by the farmers is that of Were Habbajje, a young farmer from Kachonga, who learned how to produce organic manure from a video he watched several times at the ICT centre in his village. He watched this video while attending a capacity building training in the neighbouring Tororo district. This ICT centre is a small room, whereby a TV set is installed with hundreds of satellite channels, a DVD player, and a computer with wireless Internet connection, a telephone box and a battery charger for mobile phones. All these tools are free of charge for the residents.

According to Mr Ahmed Naleba Jr, this example demonstrates that traditional telecentres equipped with ICTs such as the TV, radio and video tapes are still very relevant and useful to provide agricultural information in the rural setting. The library is looking to establish such a centre for the locals.

It’s believed that attaining sustainable agricultural development is a worldwide strategic concern. Community Libraries have a potential to contribute to achieving significant economic, social and environmental benefits. Such libraries can give a new impetus to the social organizations and productive activity of agriculture which, if natured effectively could become transformational factors. This is the main goal and objective of Huege Community library.

However, family farmers in Butaleja and in other remote parts of the country, whose welfare is huge government machinery and industry, still suffers from the absence of right information at the required time. The farmer requires timely inputs on weather forecasts, sowing time, availability and recommendations on inputs, availability of credit, expert advice on maintaining his crop in healthy condition, information on markets and on all other areas of interest to him and his family. Despite the best efforts and expenditure, the conventional apparatus cannot meet these requirements satisfactorily. Herein lies the potential of a community library and ICT resource centres which can efficiently address the concerns of farmers stationed at even remote locations like Nabiganda.

It is to be noted that, the most farmers in Butaleja are in no position to use ICT directly. The literacy levels, language barrier (as most of the application software are predominantly in English, cost of computers, poor communication infrastructure make it almost impossible for individual farmers, particularly small farmers to directly adopt ICT and access libraries resources. This according to Mr. Fabien Haumba has called for institutional efforts to harness the necessary community library based services to farmers to enable them access the right information.

In this context it may be useful to mention that Huege Community library with support from CITARD is initiating ICT based services to bridge the knowledge gap between
family farmers and researchers who are committed to ensuring rural development through information sharing for agricultural development. As one member of the community noted that the project envisions farmers with high productivity levels and better livelihoods. In support of this, Mr Ahmed Naleba Jr declared that:

…the library will contribute to the development of agriculture through creating information flow channels for farmers, as well as hands on support for increased productivity and improved livelihoods to alleviate the poverty of information among farmers.

Challenges that Butaleja family farmers face in accessing the Information they need from the community library.

1. Inadequate financial power of farmers
Inadequate financial power of farmers in Butaleja is still wanting. Butaleja districts is among the poorest districts not only in eastern Uganda but in the country as a whole. Much as it’s endowed with natural resources such as river Manafwa and many big swamps, the district still suffers from humble poverty. The family farmers did indicate that they cannot afford the information containers offered by the library. The CDs and DVDs are too expensive to buy or hire to watch from home. Beside they can’t afford the necessary hardware to view these DVDs from home. They have no TVs, DVD players in addition to power is a big problem in the area. This leads to noticeable underutilization of Huege Community Library. The rural electrification program had not fully covered the district and even the few homes with power face a difficult problems of paying for the bills and the rampant load shading in the area.

2. Most local farmers are illiterate.
The literacy levels in Butaleja are still very low. Majority of the populace cannot read or write in any language. Accessing this information most of which was written in foreign languages becomes very difficult to me. A farmer noted that:

…..we appreciate the fact that information is there but it’s very hard for us to read and understand it. For example there are some DVDs there our chairman brought us from Korea. But they are in Korean and we don’t understand their language…

This is not the only farmers to have complained about the problem of language barrier. Another farmer openly criticized the library information resources. She simply put it as:

“…For me I don’t understand what they mean…”

3. Inadequate Basic Infrastructure
Family farmers in Butaleja live in areas, where there is lack of basic infrastructure, such as telephone, electricity, good road network. Butaleja is still one of the rural remote district in Uganda. The populace still suffers from severe lack of basic but yet obvious amenities such as good roads, electricity and poor network coverage. This has greatly
hindered the use of this community library because access is hard, and in most cases electricity is off for the bigger part of the year. One farmer reported that:

“…even if I went to the centre, I will find network on or power will not be there. I am just tired of this thing…”

4. Poor radio and television reception signals.

The poor radio and television coverage in Butaleja has hindered the growth and development in this area. The entire district still lacks a radio station of its own and still depends on stations from the neighbouring districts. This would not have been so much of a concern but the languages of broadcasting at these radio stations hinder the Banyole people from fully utilizing the media houses. The mobile telephone network coverage in the area is also very poor. This has made access to internet resources in the district very difficult.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen capacity and involvement of young women and youth in community

As the pillar of family labour, women and youth have to be resourced with information on production and market for decision making to consolidate the communal role in the family farming. Therefore, the capacity of rural women and youth should be strengthened, notably in ICTs. ICTs can be used to support vocational training for some of these young women as farmers in the family. The role of women and young people in extension and advisory services could also be boosted so that they better encourage young girls and boys to be involved in family farming. These are the energetic people of the community. They can easily endure long distances in search of information and other necessary commodities in society. The young people are also very interested in ICTs and information search processes. So strengthening their capacity will mean making access to information very easy.

2. Strengthen policies on community libraries

In many countries, community libraries have been introduced with the help of donor funding. However, after the funding has ended, the demise of these libraries becomes inevitable. Governments of African countries do not usually support these libraries. It is therefore recommended that policies on community libraries are strengthened, and ongoing monitoring, evaluation and learning activities should be included as part of these programmes, so as to identify what is not working and corrective actions are taken when necessary.

3. Develop ICT training and capacity building programmes for youth and rural women in local communities

Looking at the encouraging results that the of ICTs are bringing about in the lives of farmers, including youth, it is recommended that more ICT training and capacity building
programmes are developed at different levels, that specifically target youth and young women in family farming. This is expected to improve their farm production and increase profitability in a sustainable manner. For example, the use of ICTs for agribusiness, information access and exchange etc.

4. Strengthening rural tele-centres and rural ICT access points targeting farming

The strengthening or establishment of well-managed tele-centres/community ICT centres or ICT4Agric centres in rural communities can offer the rural family farmer a one stop place to practically access to ICTs and harness diverse applications to support their activities. This will reduce marketing and management communication costs, improve their knowledge and ultimately increase agricultural productivity. It will also support development of non-farms economic activities.

5. Developing and using ICT tools and applications adapted to rural conditions

When new ICT applications and tools are being developed, the rural setting and conditions under which family farms operate should be taken into account. For example, ICT Kiosks should be set-up in rural areas, applications should be in local languages, and the tools should be resistant ones that can run with low energy. Solar energy should be promoted.

6. Using ICT to support extension delivery

The potential of ICTs in academic libraries has been heavily evident. It’s hoped that the same approach can be used in community libraries to realize the full potential of rural people who depend majorly on agriculture. These ICTs in libraries can be used in e-extension service to bridge the gap of extension officer to farmer ratio which has not been fully exploited. ICT providers must focus on using the various ICT tools to bring research findings and farm innovations from the research institutions to family farms owners. Here too, the youth can play useful role by interpreting the messages to the farmers and helping them to adopt the innovations. Young women in particular can benefit of these platforms to get increased agricultural knowledge, if needed via distance learning, interactions and library visits and trainings.

7. Improve road and market infrastructures

Governments in different countries need to improve infrastructure such as rural roads. They need to be established/repaired in order to make the farms and markets more accessible. This is a major problem for farmers in general, but also affects the activities and livelihoods of people engaged in information seeking which in turn affects family farming.

Conclusion.

Family farming is here to stay. It is still practiced widely in the developed economies, albeit on a larger scale than in most of the developing countries. In agricultural focused
countries where employment in many sectors is scarce, family farming provides a source of livelihood and stability for the youth.

Family farming must also be viewed as a lifestyle. It remains a strategic model of agriculture through which the increasing quest to engage youth and women in agriculture can be achieved. It has over the decades proven that it is sustainable, as it does not largely depend on incentives from projects by governmental or non-governmental organisations. The use of community libraries supported by ICTs not only helps to make agriculture more attractive for youth and curb urban migration, but also encourages excellence and can aid in promoting rural people who succeed in agriculture.

References


