

Empowerment of Youths in Rural Areas through Agricultural Development Programmes: Implications for Poverty Reduction in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Rural youths in Nigeria have the potentials needed to participate effectively in agricultural development. Majority of agricultural policies and programmes formulated in Nigeria do not consider constraints confronting youths involved in agricultural development. Major problems encountered by youths in agriculture include lack of interest in agriculture as a result of drudgery in farm operations, lack of competitive market for agricultural products, lack of start-up capital, inadequate labour saving technologies for ease of operations, inadequate finance/credit facilities, among others. As a result, they are faced with serious economic challenges which result in undue poverty and vulnerability. This has also made youths to seek employment in other sectors of the economy in order to empower themselves economically, resulting in rural-urban migration and leaving the bulk of agricultural production in the hands of old people who often times produce at a subsistence level. In view of this, the Nigerian government has introduced several agricultural programmes such as Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme (YEAP) aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability. However, efforts made in reviving agriculture through rural youth programmes have not given the desired results. Governments at various levels are encouraged to promote youths in agriculture through creating awareness on Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme to enable young people to know about the programme and participate actively for enhanced agricultural productivity, increased food security as well as empowering them economically.

Keywords: Youths, rural areas, empowerment, agriculture, programmes, poverty, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, problem of poverty has for a long time been a cause of concern to the government. Attention was initially focused on rural development and town planning as practical means of dealing with the problem (Agu, 2013). Youths in Nigeria suffer high unemployment due to lack of opportunities, physical and psychological challenges resulting from poverty. Some youths respond to these challenges by engaging in criminal or violent behaviour while others suffer from despair or depression. Unemployment creates a wide range of social ills and young people are particularly susceptible to its damaging effects namely; lack of skills, low self-esteem, marginalization, impoverishment and wasting of enormous human resources. These problems associated with unemployment can be solved by empowering the youths through agricultural development programmes which will enable them to have opportunities for self employment in agriculture (Agu, 2013).

According to World Bank (2003), the bulk of the rural population has a high level of illiteracy and unemployment and is generally poor. Poverty as measured by low income tends to be at its worst in rural areas. The problems of malnutrition, lack of education, low life expectancy and sub-standard housing are prevalent in rural areas (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2012). This therefore means that rural areas lack all it takes in terms of infrastructure to make life comfortable and raise standard of living of people living in it.

Poverty is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision making process and in civil and socio-cultural life. It is inseparably linked to lack of access to or loss of control over resources.

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Without these resources, youths have limited access to institutions, markets, employment opportunities and public services. There is therefore need for specific measures to be taken in order to address poverty among youths. The empowerment of youths through agricultural development programmes will reduce poverty and provide them with opportunities that will enable them to be gainfully employed (Oyekale, 2011).

Since collapse of oil boom of the 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase in the incidence and severity of poverty in Nigeria, arising in part from dwindling performance of the agricultural sector where a preponderant majority of the poor are employed.

Furthermore, poverty in Nigeria has been assuming wider dimensions including household income poverty, food poverty/insecurity, poor access to public services and infrastructures, unsanitary environment, illiteracy and ignorance, insecurity of lives and properties, and poor governance. In response to the dwindling performance of agriculture in the country, governments have over the years initiated numerous policies and programs aimed at restoring the agricultural sector to its pride of place in the economy (International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), 2005).

Before the introduction of SAP in 1986, past Nigerian governments came up with different measures intended to better the lot of Nigerians, especially people living in rural areas such as youths. Such measures of agricultural projects were aimed at providing gainful employment, food for the populace and raw materials for industries, housing and educational programmes. The overall objective in the case of agriculture was to ensure food sufficiency for the country. However, programmes embarked upon included Green Revolution, Agricultural Development Programme (ADP), National Agricultural and Land Development Authority (NALDA), Seed Multiplication Programme, National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), among others (Ndem, 2008).

The poverty reduction programme being implemented by the Nigerian government in all areas of the economy now is the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), a comprehensive reform strategy geared towards addressing the economic, social and political challenges facing Nigeria. It is primarily being monitored by the National Planning Commission of Nigeria. The sub-objective of the Nigeria poverty reduction programme is to promote agriculture and rural development aimed at reducing extreme poverty in rural areas where 90% of the poor reside (Akpan, 2010).

According to Ndem (2008), there is need for poverty alleviation programmes to be implemented within the framework of economic growth with equity, sound economic management and good governance, among others. The Youth Collaborative Community Agriculture Programme (YOCCAP) of the Youth Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture (YISA) Nigeria received a support from the Government of United States through the U.S. Ambassador's Self Help Project for a community empowerment scheme in Umoda- Oju Community of Benue State. The grant award document was signed on 31st May, 2013 with the United State of America's Ambassador to Nigeria, Ambassador Terrence P. McCulley. The Initiator and National Coordinator of YISA, Comrade Ogirinye Innocent Adoga, explained that the grant is a major boost to the organization's commitment towards ensuring that unemployed youths and women in the community are given life inherent in socio-economic independence.

The grant will be used to set-up a Community Agricultural Skills Acquisition Center. Specifically, fish demonstration farm, designed to train thirty-five (35) unemployed youths and fifteen (15) rural women in fish production and best practices in fish smoking and packaging. The fifty (50) first stage beneficiaries will be adequately trained and empowered to start their own fish farm. The fish project is just one component out of the nine (9) components of the YOCCAP.

The trainees will be formed into YISA Youth Fish Farmers Cooperative and the cooperative tool shall be explored using every possible avenue to ensure that the trainees are properly empowered. The YOCCAP of YISA is designed to address the problem of youths' lack of interest in agriculture, lack of access to land and other farm inputs, start-up capital and appropriate skills required for sustainable agricultural practices. The collaboration will ensure that all production costs are shared and economics of scale is taken advantage of towards ensuring profitable agro-enterprise. Five (5) youths had been trained on poultry farming using small-scale Poultry Farm (MagPaty Farms) located in Benue State, Nigeria.

The present Nigeria Government has passion and commitment to agriculture and rural development to turn around agriculture through the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) which has special packages for youths and women living in rural areas with little or no access to job opportunities to earn a living. The federal government through the Ministry of Agriculture has developed programmes to sustain the initiative. However, more efforts on information dissemination/awareness creation about the programme are highly needed in order to enable young people and existing farmers to know about the programme and participate for enhanced agricultural productivity and poverty reduction.

Four major problems among several others accounted largely for youths' lack of interest in agriculture, namely: drudgery in farm operations; lack of competitive market for agricultural products; lack of start-up capital; and lack of Buy Back Scheme (BBC) from the government (Akpan, 2010). However, the ATA is working very hard to address all these problems through the following government initiatives that are mostly private sector driven but government enabled. Some of the programmes include Private Sector Driven Agricultural Mechanization Programme, (PSDAMP); Staple Crops Processing Zones (SCPZs); One Stop Agro-Centre (OSAC); Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme (YEAP); Growth Enhancement Support (GES) Scheme; Nigeria Incentive Based Risk sharing System for Agricultural Lending (NIRSAL); Commercial Agriculture Development Project (CADP); Fadama III; National Programme for Food Security (NPFS); Private Sector Driven Commodity Marketing Corporation, among others. In complementing the efforts of the government, Youth Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture (YISA) has embarked on Youth Agricultural Re-orientation workshop to educate Nigerian youths that agriculture is pure business and plays a critical role in the national food security. It also holds a lot of prospects for business oriented individuals who can seize the opportunities created by some of the programmes mentioned above to better their lots. YISA do not merely encourage youths to take up agriculture as a business but creates a platform for active participation through the organization's Youth Collaborative Community Agriculture Programme (YOCCAP).

The paper therefore reviews empowerment of youths in rural areas through agricultural development programmes, its implications for poverty reduction in Nigeria; agricultural development programmes for rural youths' empowerment; challenges to rural youths' participation in agricultural development programmes; and strategies to effective participation of youths in agricultural development programmes in Nigeria.

The paper is an opinion article which relied heavily on current literature from journals, Internet, books, magazines, and observations in the study area.

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES FOR RURAL YOUTHS' EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

According to Oyekale (2011), youths have great roles to play in agricultural development in Nigeria as they are considered to be the active working group. The various governments in Nigeria have in the past introduced various agricultural development programmes for the benefit of all citizens, especially youths. Umeh and Odo (2002) noted that various states in Nigeria have designed and executed several self-empowerment programmes to enhance the economic empowerment of youths.

These programmes include Farm Settlement Schemes (FSS) intended to increase commodity output and create employment for young school leavers;

- River Basin Development Authorities (RBDAs) for the purpose of harnessing water resources for farmers;
- Green Revolution Scheme (GRS) which encouraged all Nigerians in both urban and rural areas to go into agriculture for both commercial and provision of food for home consumption;
- Fadama programme which was initiated in 1992 to enhance food self sufficiency, reduce poverty, and create opportunities for employment for youths in the rural areas; and
- Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs), among others (Oyekale, 2011).

It is unfortunate that young farmers club and farm settlement scheme are no longer functioning effectively in involving youths in agriculture. In the past, myriad of non-challant policies and programmes of youths' development were initiated by various successive administrations in Nigeria with the aim of uplifting the living standards of youths and make them self-reliant by establishing

their own businesses independently, but unfortunately all efforts put in place by the predecessor administration were hampered by time constraint. As a result of this phenomenon, thousands of youths are left to hang around and search for what to do to survive with their families. In view of this, government has embraced the culture of training the youths to do certain work or to teach them how to handle farm implements or machines to learn how to become specialists on fish pond farming; livestock and poultry production; and irrigation as well as related dry season farming in order to be self-reliant after graduation (World Bank, 2003).

CHALLENGES TO RURAL YOUTHS' PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

It was reported by Adebayo (1999) that youths are not only energetic with the ability to replace the older generation in agriculture, but are filled with new innovations and technological competence to carry out commercial and technological agriculture. Despite these attributes, youths in Nigeria particularly rural youths have been ignored for a long time in agricultural policies and programmes.

One of the major setbacks of agricultural development programmes is attributed to lack of the federal government to actively involve youths in numerous agricultural development programmes implemented over the years (Daudu, Okwoche and Adeboye, 2009).

In spite of attempts by successive regimes to improve the lot of Nigerian youths, the condition of Nigerian youths still leaves a lot to be desired. A lot more needs to be done in order to empower, re-energize and get them seriously involved in the task of nation building and socio-economic development (Adebayo, 1999). Past attempts at addressing the problems of the youths were characterized by much rhetoric and little in terms of concrete action. Even the little that was being done lacked focus such that the results were minimal, when not counterproductive. Problems associated with agricultural development activities in Nigeria are the same as the problems faced by youth's development projects. These problems are:

1. lack of adequate funding;
2. lack of basic facilities/infrastructures;
3. execution of sub-standard projects;
4. fraud, dishonesty, and corruption in the society;
5. politics, rivalries and envy;
6. inability to accept change in traditional and cultural practices;
7. difficulty in accessing resources such as land, finance and market information; and
8. Natural hazards such as flooding, among others.

The major reasons for the failure of agricultural development programmes in Nigeria aimed at reducing poverty include programme inconsistency, poor implementation, corruption of government officials and public servants, poor targeting mechanisms and failure to focus directly on the poor, especially youths (Egware, 1997).

Literature indicates that there are economic, social and environmental factors affecting rural youths' involvement in agricultural production in Nigeria. Economic factors include inadequate credit facilities, low farming profit margins, and lack of agricultural insurance scheme, initial capital and production inputs. Social factors include public perception about farming and parental influence to move out of agriculture. Environmental issues include inadequate land, continuous poor harvests and soil degradation (Echebiri, 2005). Economic push factors include poor physical infrastructure and social amenities in the rural areas, search for education and skills acquisition, and the absence of desirable job opportunities. Echebiri (2005) also noted other factors such as a general dislike of village life or expulsion from rural communities resulting from the commitment of an offense or crime. Akpan (2010) reiterated that factors constraining agricultural performance of youths include technical constraints, resource constraints, socio-economic constraints and organizational constraints.

Despite government's commitment and past interventions, agriculture sector has been unable to realize its full potential due to inadequate supportive infrastructure such as poor storage facilities, poor road network, inadequate supply of electricity; inadequate budgetary provisions; environmental degradation due to erosion; natural disasters such as flooding; weak producer organizations; lack of

collateral and access to credit facilities; absence of a saving culture; ineffective marketing information; and lack of adequate and quality breeds of livestock and improved varieties of crops. Other major hindrances are inadequate research–extension linkages; illegal, weak monitoring control and surveillance systems (Adebayo, 1999).

However, youth participation in agriculture sector in Nigeria is very low, largely because the sector has been made highly unattractive due to risks, costs, lack of funding and incentives, inadequate information, technology, policy inconsistency, ineffective marketing, inefficiency and its labor-intensive nature. As such, motivating the youths to view agriculture as a career opportunity will require a multilevel intervention. In the first instance, those within the school system must be targeted. Secondly, those outside the school system must be lured and sensitized. How should this be done? They should be taught by delivering age-appropriate information inside and outside the formal school system, adequate training is also necessitated. The absence of agriculture from the curriculum, particularly at the compulsory levels of education should be addressed (Adekunle, Oladipo, Adisa, Fatoye, 2009).

Constraints to agricultural development effectiveness also include policy instability, policy inconsistencies, narrow base of policy formulation, poor policy implementation, and weak institutional framework for policy coordination (IITA, 2005). Funds meant for agricultural production hardly get to the grassroots for use by the beneficiaries. Such funds are diverted or put into personal pockets for solving individual problems rather than used for agricultural development.

A review of past government policies in agriculture show that in the pre-structural adjustment period, sector-specific agricultural policies were designed to facilitate agricultural marketing, reduce agricultural production costs, and enhance agricultural product prices as incentives for increased agricultural production. Major policy instruments included those targeted to agricultural commodity marketing and pricing, input supply and distribution, input price subsidy, land resource use, agricultural research, agricultural extension and technology transfer, agricultural mechanization, agricultural cooperatives, agricultural water resource and irrigation development (Akpan, 2010).

It should be noted that previous poverty reduction programmes in Nigeria did not fully achieve their objectives. It is also important to note that poverty problem in Nigeria is largely a rural phenomenon. Also, higher incidence of poverty profile in Nigeria's rural areas have been traced to some environmental problems associated with agricultural production, high vulnerability to health hazards, low level of education, high infertility rate, lack of access to improved seeds and inputs, and poorly developed social infrastructural facilities, among others. Similarly, due to lack of appropriate insurance against income shocks, rural poverty is often worsened because farmers dispose their productive assets such as land, livestock, etc. in order to meet immediate consumption needs (Adekunle et. al, 2009). Also, farming households face serious risks from inadequate rains/drought, floods, degraded land, input shortages, disease outbreak and low prices for agricultural products.

STRATEGIES TO EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF YOUTHS IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA

Many of the government initiated programmes aimed at reducing poverty had various impacts on poverty alleviation. For example, the establishment of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) was not only a radical departure from the previous programmes, but also recognized the complementarities associated with basic needs such as food, shelter, potable water, etc. DFRRI had tremendous impact in rural areas of Nigeria. For instance, between the time of inception in 1986 and 1993, DFRRI had completed over 278,526 km of roads. Over 5,000 rural communities benefited from its rural electrification programme. DFRRI also impacted positively on food production (Akpan, 2010).

Poverty reduction programmes will have to adopt a holistic approach involving the three tiers of government and the civil society for it to be sustainable. Given the nature of the social structure in rural areas, government, NGOs, international agencies, organized private sector and households (including individuals) could play active part in the provision of basic social services (Adebayo, 1999).

The institutional framework for poverty alleviation in the country need to be revisited. Although the present government had done a lot in this direction by rationalizing some of the institutions involved.

The response is to encourage partnerships with the education sector to integrate agriculture into primary and secondary school curricula. Its broad-based and compulsory inclusion with the appropriate resources will help to motivate youths towards having a more favorable view of employment opportunities in the agriculture sector. Similarly, youths outside the formal education system must also be targeted and encouraged to take up agriculture as a business. This may be done through a comprehensive, national out-of-school livelihoods project designed to meet the needs and expectations of today's youths (Suriname, undated).

There ought to be the creation of ongoing initiatives to support youths in agricultural enterprises, and opportunities to showcase their successes in order to attract more young people. There should also be the incorporation of information communication technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones, computers, and global positioning systems, associated or not with traditional communication technologies such as radio, television, print and video. With this in mind, the emerging Youth in Agriculture Strategy must demonstrate a clear understanding of the youth's affinity for technology, efficiency and a strong voice in the decision-making processes. The strategy must also emphasize the need for the incorporation of agriculture in the regular curriculum (Onwubiko, 2011).

There is an urgent need to remove all visible constraints in gaining access to land, credit, training, information and new technologies by the youths. It is also necessary to expand access to agro-enterprise knowledge to secondary and tertiary institutions so as to create and expand rural job opportunities, build capacity and promote agro entrepreneurship among the youths thus reducing migration to urban areas. Involving youths in agricultural development and decision making processes is key to ensuring sustainable development in Nigeria, and framing this within the context of ICTs and entrepreneurship provides a valuable dimension to the discourse of agricultural modernization (Agu, 2013).

Sustainable agricultural development in developing countries like Nigeria to uplift young small-scale farmers and create sustainable rural economy requires access to productive infrastructures such as land, roads, electricity, marketing facilities, irrigation facilities, small-scale agro-processing technologies, credit institutions, specialized agricultural careers across the value chains, etc. The sector is seen as highly unattractive due to ignorant assumptions which often times limit it to labour-intensive engagement; ignoring many other professional and entrepreneurial opportunities across the value chain (Obert, 2012). Promotion and support of advocacy work that is aimed at creating entrepreneurial awareness among youths about countless opportunities existing across the value chain remains paramount.

The following are some recommendations for increasing youths' involvement in agriculture:

- Improving access to training and capacity development;
- Improving training at the primary and secondary school level using best practices;
- Linking school agricultural operations with general curriculum;
- More opportunities for on-farm training for youths;
- Enterprise development training particularly in value added activities such as food processing and packaging;
- Improving easy access to resources such as land, capital, technology and information;
- Facilitating access to and encouraging the use of appropriate technologies;
- Developing a data base of agencies that can provide access to youths on information in agriculture;
- Facilitating market opportunities;
- Providing targeted marketing opportunities for primary and value-added agricultural products produced by young entrepreneurs through special arrangements with schools, hotels, etc;
- Providing motivation and improving the image of agriculture by updating policies and programmes;
- High yielding crops should be developed and disseminated to the youths for increased productivity;
- Revolving interest free loans from Central Bank of Nigeria is advocated;

- Graduates of agriculture should be engaged in championing policies, programmes and issues related to agriculture.
- Facilitating networking among youths by providing incentives to encourage collaboration and group activity of youths; and
- States, local governments and private sectors should be involved in developing the agriculture sector to enhance its sustainability.

Government will review and produce an appropriate youth development policy that outlines measures to reduce youth migration from rural to urban areas in order to sustain the agricultural human resources requirement and empower youths. In order to attract youths to agriculture, attitudes must change among rural communities to perceive it as a business and make it commercially viable.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most rural youths do not foresee a prosperous future for themselves in the agriculture sector, mostly because of lack of profitability of agricultural activities and lack of physical and social infrastructure in rural areas. These infrastructures are necessary in order to reduce rural-urban migration and keep youths in rural areas as well as promote their interests in agriculture.

Efforts should be made to integrate the views of youths into developmental efforts in order to address the actual needs of the youths, thus making agricultural development planning and management sensitive to their needs. This calls for bottom up approach to development, especially with respect to project choice that is aimed at meeting the economic empowerment needs of the rural youths.

Rural youths should be involved in the drafting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes related to agriculture. The use of innovative information and communication technologies (ICTs) should be promoted among rural youths.

Education and capacity-building programmes for rural youths should be defined in a more participatory way and focused on agricultural best practices, land laws and knowledge sharing.

Agriculture should be included as a compulsory subject in Nigerian schools starting from primary education curriculum in order to promote interest in farming among youths. Informal education programmes should also be implemented in rural areas to change the mind set parents have about agriculture.

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