

Nigerian Government Agricultural Policy and Youth Empowerment

Abstract

Agriculture remains fundamental to poverty reduction and economic growth in the 21st century (World Bank, 2008). 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 behavior 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 programs 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.

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).

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).

This paper therefore reviews empowerment of youths through agricultural government agricultural policy, development programs, its implications for youths empowerment in Nigeria; challenges to youths' participation in agricultural development programs; and strategies to effective participation of youths in agricultural development programs in Nigeria.

This paper is an opinion article which relied heavily on current literature from journals, Internet, books, magazines, and observations in Nigeria over the years.

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I. Youths and agriculture

Youths are very important resources for every nation especially for sustaining agricultural productivity, an important sector for the development. The youth is a stakeholder in the development process especially in view of the great assets of youth, resilience, resourcefulness and perseverance. Unfortunately, this category of people is virtually left out in policies and programs considerations (FAO et al., 2009) even though this is a critical stage for this group of people since this is a period of transition into adulthood. For instance, the unemployment rate of this group globally ranked 12.6% compared with 4.8% as the rate of the adults in 2010 according to United Nation (UN) (2011) and this has the potential of tempting most youth to embark on migration especially to urban centers and beyond since this act creates room for accessing job opportunities. This group of people is over 1.8 billion in the world today, 90% of whom live in developing countries, where

they tend to make up a large proportion of the population and needs to be empowered since this is an important means of improving food security, youth livelihoods and employment.

There is insufficient youth participation in the agricultural sector (Mangal, 2009) even though this class of people is the most productive of any society as it contains people in the prime of their lives physically and mentally. Agriculture being one of the foundation pillars of any society can only function as such if this insufficient youth participation is reversed. For instance improving youth productivity in the agricultural sector and exploring effective livelihood diversification is imperative. Also, investing in the youth by promoting good habit is crucial if they are to realize their full potential. This is in view of the fact that the number and proportion of the older persons is growing faster than any other age group (UNFPA and HelpAge International, 2012). The youth with the dynamism and flexibility has the potential as an agent of positive change and this should be ensured by development programmes. In the most adverse and risky situations, young people have an extraordinary resilience and ability to cope, according to UNFPA (2006). As stakeholders, rural-based youth are actively engaged in family livelihood activities and play key support roles within their families and usually desire to be acknowledged, emotionally and financially, for such contributions and for the supporting role they played within their families, in addition to controlling the financial returns from their activities (PAFNET, 2010). Exposure of youths to modern cash economy and technologies that give them access to information from around the world are changing the perceived needs of young people, and this must be recognized especially by leaders, thus harnessing the opportunities and challenges thereof.

In Africa, 20% of the population aged between 15 and 24 years, comprising more than 20% of the population and a large majority lives in rural areas. Being 37% of the working-age population, rural youths who are attached to agriculture are disadvantaged and this is because consideration of the youths as future farmers in Africa has not received adequate attention. This category of people is the driving force behind economic prosperity in future decades, only if policies and programs are in place to enhance their opportunities (Ashford, 2007).

According to Dr Namanga Ngogi, President of Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), 60% of Africa's population resides in rural areas and the large majority of this population is made up of youths, and the poor participation of this group of young people in farming is a threat to the future of agriculture and rural economic transformation on the continent (Ghana News Agency, 2012).

Involvement of youth in agricultural activities has the potential of reducing the problems of the ageing farm population and increasing youth unemployment and this calls for securing the interest and participation of young people in agriculture in the form of deliberate shift in policy, training and promotion that specially targets the youth. This category of people are not only the productive backbone of every society, the major source of ideas and innovation, but also the main market for food consumption and very often the leaders and drivers of public opinion, public policy and action.

II. Agricultural Development Programs For 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 programs 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 programs to enhance the economic empowerment of youths. These programs 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 program 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 Programs (ADPs), among others (Oyekale, 2011).

It is unfortunate that young farmer's club and farm settlement scheme are no longer functioning effectively in involving youths in agriculture. In the past, policies and programs 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 YOUTHS' PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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 programs. One of the major setbacks of agricultural development programs is attributed to lack of the federal government to actively involve youths in numerous agricultural development programs implemented over the years (Daudu, Okwoche and Adegboye, 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:

- i. Lack of adequate funding;
- ii. Lack of basic facilities/infrastructures;
- iii. Execution of sub-standard projects;
- iv. Fraud, dishonesty, and corruption in the society;
- v. Politics, rivalries and envy;
- vi. Inability to accept change in traditional and cultural practices;
- vii. Difficulty in accessing resources such as land, finance and market information; and
- viii. Natural hazards such as flooding, among others.

The major reasons for the failure of agricultural development programs in Nigeria aimed at reducing poverty include program 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).

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

Many of the government initiated programs 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 programs, but also recognized the complementary 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 program. DFRRI also impacted positively on food production (Akpan, 2010). Poverty reduction programs 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 emphasis 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 programs;
- 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.

III. 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 programs related to agriculture. The use of innovative information and communication technologies (ICT's) should be promoted among rural youths. Education and capacity-building programs 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 programs should also be implemented in rural areas to change the mindset parents have about agriculture.

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XXXXXX, et. al. “Nigerian Government Agricultural Policy and Youth Empowerment.” *IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM)*, 23(07), 2021, pp. 08-13.