Perceived Impact of Agricultural Extension Agents and Agricultural Productivity of Rural Youths in Ogba/Egbama/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State.

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Abstract

The study considered the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents and agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State. Four objectives guided the study. The design of the study was a descriptive survey with a sample size of 333 respondents randomly selected. The instrument for data collection was four points rating scale of agreement. The instrument was validated by experts and reliability coefficient of 0.80 was established using test-retest technique. Data collected was analyzed descriptively using Mean, with a criterion mean of 2.5 as the cut-off point mark for acceptance. The study found out that agricultural extension agents advised and encouraged farmers on how to control soil water erosion on their farms, farmers were influenced by agricultural extension agent to use organic matter in their farms to increases soil fertility and also carry out land cleaning before tilling their farm lands; the farmers were influenced by agricultural agents to disinfect their store houses against pest and diseases before storage. It was recommended that agricultural extension agent's curriculum should be reviewed at all levels of education to meet up with the challenge of the modern technology, so that graduate teachers would be able to make realistic impact on farmers, and government should invest in other sectors that affects agriculture

Key words; Perceived impact, Agricultural extension, Agents, Agricultural productivity, Rural youths.

Introduction

Young people everywhere are key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovations. They have aspirations and want to participate fully in the development of their societies. Youths have the potential to overcome some of the major

constraints to expanding agricultural production in the country because they are often more open to new ideas and practices than adult farmers. Encouraging young people back into agriculture would be an appropriate way, of harnessing youths' potentials. Governments are very aware of the importance of engaging young people in agriculture, especially given the average rate of unemployment in Nigeria which was last reported at 7.96 percent in 2020.

In 2006, African heads of state signed the African Youth Charter, which recognizes the right of young people to be free from hunger and calls on governments to take measures to enhance the attractiveness of rural areas to young people; train them to take up agricultural, mineral, commercial and industrial production using contemporary systems and promote the benefits of new ICTs to gain access to markets (AYC, 2006). Through the Charter, governments also agreed to provide land as grants and access to credit and facilitate the participation of young people in the design and implementation of national development policies and poverty reduction strategies. For youth to keep practicing farming, it is necessary that agriculture becomes intellectually satisfying and economically rewarding (Anon., 2011). This was the motive for the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) in Nigeria.

Agricultural extension is an applied behavioral science, which is applied to bring about desirable changes in the behavioral complex of farming community, usually through various strategies and programmes of change, by applying latest scientific and technological innovation (Bokor, 2008). According to Iwena (2008), agricultural extension is a process whereby modern farming techniques and research findings are taking to the farmers through extension and problems of the farmers are taken to research institutions for solution. Iwena, (2008) added that, agricultural extension is an informal, out of school voluntary agricultural education involving the spread or dissemination of information, recent improved development in agriculture from researchers to the farmers through extension agents.

Agricultural extension includes the provision of timely information, the linking of farmers with sources of farming inputs and credit facilities and most importantly, the provision of education services to farmers (Frank, C Anaeto, C Asiabaka, N Nnadi and J Ajaeroj et al). Extension agents are professionals in the extension system responsible for developing individuals in the community (Oladele 2015).

The need to increase food production has been a global challenge especially in developing countries. The Government, Nongovernmental organizations as well as individuals are not

left out in facing this challenge. The agricultural sector is a key in almost every nation's economy world and has the responsibility of ensuring food security in the country. The Government in the bid to actualize this dream has established various agricultural development schemes. Some of these establishments came under the ministry of Agriculture and natural resources while some were established as independent bodies. The success stories of several developed nations transpire that their developmental stance was on the basis of firstly to develop their agricultural sector, in which case, extension programs were focal. The adoption of new technologies and improved methods of production in agriculture have catapulted these iconic nations.

While living in the midst of rapid scientific and technological development, many of the farmers in the rural communities still employ traditional methods of production. In Nigeria there is a lag of over 20 years between the discoveries of new farming practice. In order to shorten or bridge this gap as well as make the rural communities part of the dynamic social order where rapid change is characteristic, an extension service among the rural community is needed (Olayide, *et al*.).

Agricultural extension is also needed to help the clientele obtain information on sources of input and credit facilities that would enhance their level of production. In order to have a cultural compatible, socially acceptable and economically feasible technology, extension services is important to guide research development. This is because; extension will give feed back to the scientist/researcher on the development technology so as to help improve upon the earlier developed technology. Despite the fact that farmers are encouraged to increase their level of production, the issue of marketing outlet is important. Agricultural extension provides information to the farmers on marketing strategy to use to maximize their profit while it also introduce to the farmers, market opportunities to help dispose of their products as at when due.

Agricultural extension also involves leadership development in the communities. This is because it worked with the whole family and involves a participatory approach where learning by doing concept is involved. In view of the nature of extension work it requires leadership. Hence agricultural extension utilizes leaders from among the people, in view of this it helps to imbue principle of leadership in the people.

Community development is another area which agricultural extension is involved. This is by mobilizing members of the communities to improve their collective resources which will invariably affect their production systems.

Considering the important role extension agents perform in the rural communities. One of the major setbacks of Nigerian agricultural development programmes is attributed to the inability of the federal government to integrate youths into the mainstream of the numerous agricultural development programmes implemented over the years (Ijere, 2005). For a country to attain economic stability the agricultural sector must be vibrant and the youths encouraged to imbibing farming as a noble profession (Ojediran, 2003). Nigeria needs a roadmap to sustainable food production and security. As a result it is necessary to encourage increased food production in the country by increasing the number of producers and the level of productivity.

The youth population is strategic to the success of these efforts to boost food production. Therefore, farming and agri-businesses must be made attractive for young entrepreneurs. The poor image of persons involved in agriculture needs to be changed and young people are the ideal catalysts for such change given their greater propensity and willingness to adopt new ideas, concepts and technology which are all critical to changing the way agriculture is practiced and perceived.

According to Iwena (2008) many farmers did not apply the knowledge which extension agents taught them. He also pointed out that majority of farmers do not know how to market their produce for profit because, farmers lack knowledge of the time when produces are more demanding in the markets.

According to Adamu (2008) many farmers in Ogba/ Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State still adhered to their old system of farming instead of the modern systems of farming, which can bring more yield in their crop production. He also pointed that many farmers in Ogba/ Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State were faced with the problem of soil management and control of erosion in their farms and they need to be shown a way out of how to control these problems, and at the same time having problem in, cultivating land for crop planting, they lack the principles involved in the mixed farming as a system of farming.

The challenge, however, is to make these agricultural development programmes sustainable so that there is improvement in the lives of the poor. Empirical evidence tend to show that for any development to achieve high level of food production and become self-sustaining, it will have to include the rural areas in general and the agricultural sector in particular (Todaro and Smith, 2015). This requires employing strategies that should be sufficient enough to generate the level of economic activity among smallholder farmers. Such strategies include sustainable poverty reduction and lessening continued

dependence on foreign aid for food security through empowering socially and economically poor farming communities. Thus, sustainability in agriculture development programmes can be achieved if the government provides strategies that build the local capacity and that empowers the smallholder farmers to sustain high levels of agricultural productivity.

Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State. The Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni is named after the three respective Igbo sub-groups who inhabit the territory, the ogba's, Egbemas' whose brothers also occupy Ohaji/Egbema in Imo state, and the Ndoni people who are affiliated to their brothers in Ukwuani in Delta State and Ogbaru in Anambra State. The indigenes are renowned as great farmers and fishermen, with a rich cultural history. The Local Government is one of the largest oil and gas producer in Rivers State.Earning substantial revenue from derivation and is expected to be positioned to eradicate destitution among natives. Despite the wealth, poverty and destitution appears to be the most social-economic problem bedeviling the inhabitants especially among the rural areas given impetus to youth's restiveness. The capital is at Omoku **, with over 16186 accredited farmers**. In addition to English, the main spoken language is Ogba Adams (2018). The questions are, will the assistance of agricultural extension agents improve soil and water management practices? Will it improve crop production practices? Help in crop preservation and storage practices? Since the scenario is to improve agricultural productivity could agricultural extension agents improve agricultural marketing strategies that will guarantee rural youth's livelihood and discourage youth's restiveness'? The answers to these questions necessitated a study of this nature.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to examine the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents and the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State. The study specifically sought to:

i. Examine the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on soil and water management practices in the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State
ii. Examine the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on crop production practices in the agricultural productivity of rural youths Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State.
iii. Examine the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on crop preservation and storage practices in the agricultural productivity of rural youths Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State.

iv. Examine the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on agricultural marketing strategies in the agricultural productiviy of rural youths Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

i. What is the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on soil and water management practices and the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/ Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State?
ii. What is the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on crop production practices and the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/ Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State?
iii. What is the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on crop preservation and storage practices and the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/ Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State?
iv. What is the perceived impact of agricultural extension agents on agricultural marketing strategies and the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State

Methodology

The study was conducted in Ogba/Egbena/Ndoni local Government Area of Rivers State. The design of the study was a descriptive survey. The target population for this study comprised of all the full time farmers in the 3 communities that make up Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers State, the numbers were estimated to be 16,186 farmers.

A random sampling selection was used to select nine (9) Districts from the three communities by lottery. Three Districts were picked randomly from each community. Thus, nine (9) Districts were randomly selected, and. 333 full time farmers were selected as samples for this study

The data collecting instrument is a self-constructed questionnaire titled "Perceived Impact of Agricultural Extension Agents and Agricultural Productivity of Rural Youths Questionnaire (PIAEAAPRYQ). The questionnaire was in two sections; A & B. Section A of the questionnaire sought information on the demographic variables of the respondents while Section B contain information on subject matter. The questionnaire was sub-divided into four clusters based on the four research questions. Section (A): sought information on impact of agricultural extension agents on soil and water management practices; section

(B) examined the impact of agricultural extension agents on crop production practices; section (C): elicited information on impact of agricultural extension agents on crop preservation and storage practices;. Section (D): sought information on Impact of agricultural extension agents on agricultural marketing strategy practices.

The questionnaires were structured in the form of likert four points rating scale response pattern, such as **SA-**Strongly Agreed 4, **A-**Agreed 3, **D-**Disagreed 2 and **SD-**Strongly Disagreed 1

The instrument was subject to face and content validation to ensure appropriateness of the questionnaire. The instrument was validated by experts and reliability coefficient of 0.80 established .using test-retest technique. The administration of the questionnaire was done in the selected areas, Data collected were analyzed descriptively using, Means. Decision was made based on a criterion mean value of 2.50, it showed that mean value equal or more than the criterion mean is accepted as positive response, otherwise rejected as negative response.

Result

What are the perceived impact of agricultural extension agent on Soil and water management practices and the agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers state?

Table 1: Response of Rural Youths on the Impact of Agricultural Extension Agents on soil and Water Management Practices

S/N	VARIABLES	X	SD	DECISION
1.	Use of irrigation system in their Farms.	2.56	1.13	Accepted
2.	Control erosion in their farms	2.76	1.15	Accepted
3.	Planting of cover crops in their farms	2.82	1.16	Accepted
4.	Youths are encouraged to use organic matters in the Farm to increase soil fertility.	3.12	1.28	Accepted
5.	Construct wells for irrigation Purpose.	2.5I6	1.13	Accepted

Source; Researcher's Field Survey 2022

Data in Table 1 revealed the respondents mean responses to the impact of agricultural extension agents on soil and water management in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area. The findings revealed that use of irrigation system in their farms had a mean value of (2.36) SD (1.13) control erosion (2.76) SD (1.15) planting of cover crops in their farms (2.82), SD (1.16), use of organic matters in the farm to increase soil fertility

(3.12), SD (1.28), construct wells for irrigation purpose (2.36), SD (1.13). All the mean values were above 2.50. The finding corroborates that of David (2018) in his study titled 'Impact of Soil and Water Conservation on Cassava Tuber Production and Storage in South-South, Nigeria He stated that use of irrigation system, planting of cover crops, control of erosion and proper water management on cassava farm will improve tuber production and storage.

Impact of agricultural extension agents on crop production practices and agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State..

Table .2: Response of Rural Youths on the Impact of Agricultural Extension Agents on Crop Production Practices

S/N	VARIABLES	X	SD	DECISION
1.	Clearing before tilling the farm land	2.56	1.12	Accepted
2.	Correct spacing during planting	2.55	1.13	Accepted
3.	Use of organic fertilizer instead of chemical Fertilizer	2.6	1.12	Accepted
4.	Planting at the right time	2.58	1.27	Accepted
5.	Harvest only mature crops	2.76	1.15	Accepted

Source; Researcher's Field Survey 2022

Table 2 revealed the respondents mean responses on how crop production practices can improve agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. The finding showed that clearing before tilling the farm land had a mean value of (2.56), SD (1.14), correct spacing during planting (2.55), SD (1.13) use of organ fertilizer instead of chemical fertilizer (2.64), SD (1.12), planting at the right time (2.58), SD (1.27) and harvest only mature crops (2.76), SD (1.15).. The findings are in line with Jaycot (2017) in his work titled/"Benefits of Adopting Correct Crop Production Practices". He noted that farmers who adopt correct production practices will experience a bountiful harvest.

Impact of Agricultural Extension agents on crop preservation and storage practices and agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area Rivers State.

Table 3: Response of Rural Youths on the Impact of Agricultural Extension Agents on Crop Preservation and Storage Practices

S/N	VARIABLES	X	SD	DECISION
1.	Store houses should be clean and neat	2.65	1.13	Accepted
2.	Acquire skills on crop preservation practices.	2.96	1.24	Accepted
3.	Store grains in good storage conditions.	3.02	1.23	Accepted
4.	Preserve farm produce for future use	3.07	1.25	Accepted
5.	Disinfect store houses against pest and diseases before planting.	3.03	1.24	Accepted

Source: Researcher's Field Survey 2022

Data in Table 3, showed the respondents mean responses on how crop preservation and storage practices will improve agricultural productivity of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. The findings revealed that store houses should be clean and neat had a mean value of (2.65) SD (1.13), acquire skills on crop preservation practices (2.96) SD (1.24), store grains in good storage conditions (3,02) SD (1.23), preserve farm produce for future use (3.07) SD (1,25) disinfect store houses against pest and diseases (3.03) SD (1.24). The finding is in line with Iwena (2018) in his work titled "The role of agricultural extension agents on Crop Preservation and Storage in South –South Nigerian. He noted that farmers who preserve their products in good storage houses incur less losses than those that fail to preserve their products in good storage houses.

Impact of Agricultural extension agents on Agricultural marketing strategies of rural youths in Ogba/Egebema/Ndoni Local Government Area Rivers State.

Table 4. Distribution of Respondents on the Impact of Agricultural Extension Agents on Agricultural Marketing Strategies

S/N	VARIABLES	X	SD	DECISION
1.	Studying market situations before selling produce	2.82	1.16	ACCEPTED
2.	Selling of excess produce during scarcity period.	2.80	1.16	ACCEPTED
3.	Selling to maximize profit	2.80	1.16	ACCEPTED
4	Forming cooperative societies for higher sales	2.87	1.18	ACCEPTED
5	Follow channels of marketing for selling Produce.	2.15	1.17	REJECTED

Source: researcher's Field work 2022

Data in Table 4 showed the respondents mean responses on impact of agricultural extension agents on agricultural marketing strategies of rural youths in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. The findings revealed that studying market situations before selling produce had a mean value of (2.82) ASD (1.16O), selling of excess produce during scarcity period (2.80) SD (1.16), selling to maximize profit (2.80) SD (1.16), forming cooperative societies for higher sales (2.87) SD (1.18), follow channels of marketing in selling produce (2.15) SD (1.17). The finding is in line with Olayide and Heady (2021) in their work titled "Low sales of agricultural products in Nigeria, consequence and the way forward.. They noted that farmers who sale their produce through the right marketing channels make maximum profit thereby encouraging more production and more motivation to other farmers including rural youths.

Conclusion

From the findings, it was concluded that:

Control of soil water erosion, good irrigation system, adopting planting of cover crops in their farms use of organic matter in the farm to increase soil fertility among others are the soil and water management practices, clearing before tilling their farm land, correct spacing in planting, use of chemical fertilizers instead of organic fertilizers, planting on time for seasonal crops, amongst others at some of the crop production practices. Keeping their store house clean and neat, acquiring skills on crop preservation practices, storing grains in good condition in their farm storage stalls, preserving their farm produce for future use amongst others are the crop preservation and storage practices. Studying market situation before selling their produce, selling their excess produce during scarcity period, selling when the price is high for more profits, forming cooperative societies for selling of their produce amongst others are the agricultural marketing strategies to improve productivity of rural youths.

. Farmers were influenced by agricultural extension workers to use organic matters in their farms to increase soil fertility, and farmers were influenced by agricultural extension workers to carryout land clearing before tilling their farm land.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings, the following were recommended:

1. Government should train the farmer through agricultural extension agents on the use of irrigation system in their farm, use of cover crops and use of organic matters instead of chiemcal fretilizers to improve yield and increase soil fertility.
2. Skill training programme should be organized for rural youths modern methods of clearing and tillage, correct spacing during planting of their crops and planting at the right time.
3. Government should organize agricultural workshop for rural yotuhs on good storage method and crop reservation systems against pest and diseases.
4. Young farmer should study market sitatuion before selling their produce and produce during scarcity period and they should also sell their produce when the price is high for more profit.

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