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Rural Youth Empowerment and Participation in Integrated Farmers Scheme in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
The study investigated rural youth empowerment and participation in integrated farmers' scheme of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It described the socio-economic characteristics of the participating youths, their level of participation, and ascertained the extent of success of the project to the beneficiaries. Primary data were used in the study. Responses were obtained with a structured questionnaire; which were analysed using descriptive and chi2 analysis. The results revealed that the mean age of the participants was 27.3 years with most (42.5%) participants of post-secondary education. Majority (72.5%) were males, moderate (40.3) of participants had no extension contact and sourced information from newspapers. Out of eleven agricultural production enterprises, majority (M=2.4) of the participants were involved in cassava enterprise and the most benefit derived by participants was increased capacity base (78.6%) Also, 70.5% of the participants affirmed that participating in the programmes empowered them for increased production. The finding further revealed that there were significant relationship between age, sex and educational status at 5% level of their participation in agricultural production activities. The study therefore recommended that extension agents should be improved to enhance effective services delivery, for timely agricultural information, adequate follow-up and monitoring.

Keywords: Rural youth, empowerment, participation, agricultural production, enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

Rural youths are the future of the agricultural sector, with a growing world population and a decreasing agricultural productivity in combination with a rural exodus sustainable food

production and supply are threatened ((Idiku et al., 2012). Nigeria is still experiencing continuous food shortages and distribution problems due to limited support for agriculture and increased deteriorating infra-structure. These have led to hunger and inability of the populace to meet the average minimum of 2700 kilocalories for an active living (Nwalie, 2017). Nevertheless, Nigeria as a nation has about 65% of its population in the rural areas, where agriculture and agro-based occupations dominate the people`s livelihood (Nwachukwu, 2015). Agriculture-based livelihood activities for rural dwellers includes; crop farming, livestock farming fish farming, food processing and farm labour which aid them to raise income, building materials and food for the humanity (Downie, 2017). Agricultural sector plays a vital role in the growth and development of the Nigerian economy as it employs approximately two-thirds of the country's total labour force. Yet, 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 inconsistence, ineffective marketing, inefficiency and its labor-intensive nature. Amadi (2012) and Udensi et al; (2013) opined that the rapid decline in agricultural production is connected to the continuous decline in agricultural labour which they attributed to the continued efflux of the youth and school leavers to urban areas. Also the poor state of agricultural productivity and low esteem of agriculture as manifested in rural-urban migration, youths' low interest in farming, lack of industrial firms to process agricultural products and skilled labour, among others, have led to worsening Nigerian food deficit (Daudu, Okwoche and Adegboye, 2011). With the challenges encountered by the youth the bulk of agricultural production is left in the hands of ageing and old farm population who oftentimes produce at subsistence level. This is a wake-up call for the government of this country to engineer a sustainable agricultural development that would ensure food security both at the national and household levels and make agriculture competitive in the world market. The agricultural sector must respond to this reality and make investments that can help the youth to flourish and propel food security forward simultaneously (Akpabio, 2015); because of the growing food crisis, impacts of climate change and increasing global unemployment and underemployment rates disproportionately affect the world's youth population (Bennell, 2010; FAO, 2009).

The term ``youth'' represents the state of transition between childhood and adulthood which is characterised by agility, energy, intelligence, hope, adventure and experiment across different perspectives of life (Onuekwusi and Effiong, 2002,). Also at this stage they constitute the major resource base, have innovative ideas, which among other factors are important in any developmental process of the country (Lagun 2002). Whenever these qualities are strategically harnessed towards increased agricultural production, they serve as a critical medium for sustainable agricultural development programme. Then youth participation in agricultural activities will not only create career opportunities for the youth but also increase food production and to a large extent reduce the gap between food production and its demand in the nation (Akpabio, 2012). Youth participation according to Cornwall (2010), refers to the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and/or decision-making affecting others in an activity whose impact or consequence is extended to others i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves. Also, Muhammed – Lawal, Omotesho and Falola, (2009) noted that it is only through participation that youth develop skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources. This shows that youth participation therefore is a product and strategy of sustainable

agricultural development. The Akwa Ibom State Government having not been satisfied with the level of youth participation in agriculture established the Integrated Farmers Scheme with the goal of equipping 500 youths annually with modern skills and techniques in agriculture to achieve sustainable agricultural production by empowering youths. The Integrated Farmers` Scheme (IFS) which came into effect in 2003 focuses on unemployed youths and school leavers to reduce their dependence on Government for employment, reduce frustration among them, sustain and create new jobs and reduce poverty and hunger; the overall objective is a strategic attempt to increase food production in the State. The Youth were directly involved in farming activities through planting, weeding, livestock keeping and harvesting.

Rural youths are the future of the agricultural sector as they constitute part of the rural household, therefore, their integration in to agricultural activities is an important factor as they are more open to new ideas, practices and have potential for sustaining agricultural productivity (Daudu, 2009). This is because of their innovative behaviour, greater physical strength and a fast rate of learning, adventure, ambition among others which are positive features for their significant contribute to agricultural production. The existing literatures are limited and since the introduction of the integrate farmers scheme in Akwa Ibom State (AKSIFS), there has been a dearth of information relating to the rural youth participation in the scheme. Therefore, it is against this background that this study assessed rural youth empowerment and participation in the Akwa Ibom State Integrated Farmers Scheme (AKSIFS). It specifically examined the socio-economic characteristics of the rural youth participating in AKSIFS; assessed sources of information of participants, ascertained participants` participation in agricultural production activities and assessed perceived benefits of participants from the scheme.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State which is one of Nigeria`s 36 States with a population of over 5 million people. Multi-stage technique was used to select the sample for the study. The first stage was the used of all the six agricultural zones of Akwa Ibom State. Second stage involved purposive selection of three Local Government Areas from each of the agricultural zone due to active participants. Third stage involved the random selection of seven participants from each of the selected LGAs with aid from the list provided by the Integrated Farmer Scheme of 2013. A total of one hundred and twenty-six participants (126) constituted the sample size for the study however one hundred twenty (120) copies of the questionnaire were completely filled and returned which was used for the analysis of the study. Ninety-five percent (95%) represented the returning rate of total questionnaire administered. Primary sources of data used for study were obtained through a structured questionnaire. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequency counts and mean scores while Pearson`s correlation analysis was used to test for significance between the variables in the hypothesis of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Data on Table 1 revealed a moderate proportion of the respondents (46.7%) with mean age of 27.3years. The result suggests that respondents were in their active productive age, energetic and innovative to make meaningful impact in agricultural production when

motivated. The findings agreed with Smith (2017) and Nkeme, Ndaeyo and Okon (2019) that the respondents in this age category possess greater knowledge acquisition propensity, innovation proneness, minimal risk aversion, faster reaction rate, less fear of failure, greater physical strength, less conservative, faster reaction time, adventurous and faster rate of learning among others. The result also shows that 72.5% of the respondents were males implying that they are more energetic and knowledgeable to undertake the rigorous nature of farming. Majority (82.5%) of the respondents had above secondary level of education. The high literacy enhances the respondent`s ability to understand and evaluate new agricultural production techniques primarily to reduce food insecurity in the state in a way to make themselves employed especially, information disseminated to them during the AKIFS training. This corroborates with the finding of Ekong, (2010) who posited that education has the capacities to influence people's acceptability of new ideas and technology imparted on them through training programs. The study further revealed that most (40.9) of the respondents had extension contact once, meaning that the respondents had extension contact once in their production cycle. This is indication of shortage of Extension Agent (EA), thus resulting in inadequate dissemination of useful information on production techniques.

Farm size (in hectares) results show that most (46.2%) of the respondents had between 1 and 2 hectares with an average farm size of 2.0 hectares. This indicates that the respondents have asset to enhance knowledge impartation of the AKIFS training. This finding is in agreement with the finding of Ekong (2010) that most of the people in coastal region of Nigeria have relatively small cultivated land areas. The small farm size holders among the respondents may be attributed to land fragmentation of family land for farming. Also, their mean income is N66, 607.25 while the capital expenses incurred by most of the respondents because they are getting new improved varieties.

Table 1: Percentage distribution based on respondents' socioeconomic characteristics

Socioeconomic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentages	Mean
Age (Years)			
<21	22	18.3	
21-30	56	46.7	27.3 years
31-40	42	35.0	
Sex			
Male	87	72.5	
Female	33	27.5	
Educational Status			
Non formal	17	14.2	
Primary (6yrs)	4	0.3	
Secondary (12yrs)	48	40.0	14.2 years
Post- Secondary (>14yrs)	51	42.5	
Extension Contact			
No Visit	49	40.8	
Once	34	28.3	
Twice	20	16.7	
Thrice	17	14.2	
Farm Size (hectares)			
< 1	45	37.5	
1-2	56	46.7	
>2	19	15.8	
Capital Expense (Naira)			
<100,000	2	1.7	
100,000 -300,000	48	40.0	
>300,000	70	58.3	
Income Level (Naira)			
<50,000	6	5.0	
51, 000 – 90,000	37	30.8	
91,000 - 130,000	54	45.0	
>131,000	23	19.2	

Source: Field survey data, 2018

Sources of information on Integrate Farmers Scheme for the respondents

Data in Table 2 show that moderate proportion (45.0%) of the respondents claimed to have obtained information about AKIFS from newspaper. This means that the medium of newspaper played a vital role in disseminating information about IFS training in Akwa Ibom State. This contradicts the findings of Anyanwu *et.al.,* (2002) who reported that young farmers use friends to enhance their involvement in programme training.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents based on sources of information

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Social media (group)	12	10.0
Parents	0	0.0
Television/Radio	26	21.6
Religious	0	0.0
Friends/Relative	28	23.3
Newspaper	54	45.0
Trained farmer	69	57.5
Empowerment for increase production	51	42.5

Source: Field Data, 2018

Respondents` Participation in agricultural production activities

Table 3 revealed that out of the eleven agricultural activities only four activities namely; attendance at meetings by participants, cassava production, piggery and poultry were regarded as the main agricultural activities involved by the respondents accounting for mean scores of 2.5, 2.4, 2.1 and 2.0 respectively. Thus, majority of the participants attended meetings and the cassava production is the major agricultural activity involved in by the respondents in the study area. Hence, cassava is generally regarded as the foremost food security, its ability to make return of root yield even at extreme stress conditions, requiring minimal external inputs, highly suitable to various farming and food systems and easy to grow in comparison with yam, grains or legumes.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by level of participation in Agricultural Production activities

Agricultural Production Enterprises	Always	Seldom	Never	Total	Mean
Cassava	195	64	23	282	2.4
Vegetable/waterleaves	36	46	83	167	1.4
Pineapple	111	40	63	214	1.8
Plantain/banana	135	58	46	239	1.9
Poultry	156	44	46	246	2.0
Piggery	90	148	16	254	2.1
Fisheries	69	20	87	130	1.1
Goatry	15	30	100	145	1.2
Snail	51	24	91	166	1.3
Attendance at Meetings	222	68	12	302	2.5
Involvement in decision making Activities	129	0	77	206	1.7

Source: Field Data, 2018

Categorization of youth by their level of participation in agricultural production activities

Table 4 shows the extent of Youth's participation in agricultural production training of AKSIFS. Benefit derivable from the training enhances its level of participation (Onumadu and Inyang 2015). As revealed in Table 4 majority (73.2%) had medium level of participation. This indicates the high level of the respondents and also in agreement with the assertion of Ekong, (2010) that respondents participate more in an activity if well educated.

Table 4: Categorization of youth by their level of participation in Agricultural production activities

Level of Participation	Frequency	Percentages
Low participation (1-10) scores	20	16.6
Medium participation (11-20) scores	86	71.6
High participation (21-30) scores	14	11.8

Source: Field Data, 2018

Benefits derived by youth in participating in the agricultural production activities of AKSIFS training programme

Table 5 revealed that majority (77.6%) of the respondents infer that increased capacity base was the highest benefit derived from the scheme. This suggests that capacity of participants were enhanced through training from facilitators. Enhancement of family and rural food security (67.9%) was the second benefits derived by the participants from the scheme. Food security a condition where all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life (Saini and Jain 2014). The enhanced production output may be attributed to the capacity strategies of the programmes.

Table 5: Percentage distribution of perception of respondents on benefits of participation in the Scheme

Benefits*	Frequency	Percentages
Enhanced production output	68	56.6
Enhanced family/ rural food security	81	67.5
Achieved higher education	28	23.3
Farm expansion/purchased farm inputs	56	46.6
Had increase bank deposits	77	64.3
Built a house	37	30.8
Assisted relative school fees	20	16.6
Increased capacity base	94	78.3

Source: Field Data, 2018. *Multiple responses

Factors influencing youth participation in Akwa Ibom State Integrated Farmers Scheme

In Table 6 factors influencing youth participation in AKSIFS were ranked in order of importance. Youth unemployment ranked (1st), followed by environmental situation 2nd, availability of incentives (3rd) and provision of adequate credit facilities (4th). From the findings it revealed that youth suffer high unemployment, thus the need of their involvement in agricultural activities to help reduce food insecurity and the rate of youth restiveness in the study area. Since, rural areas are commonly characterised food insecurity with this environment would provoke youth involvement in agricultural practises. Provision of adequate credit facilities reduce frustration among unemployed youth, dependence on Government for employment, sustain and create new jobs and reduce poverty and hunger and the overall objective is strategic attempt to increase food production in the state. These factors could be explored in motivating youth towards participation AKSIFS training.

Table: 6 Distribution of respondents by factors influencing their participation in AKSIFS

Factors	Means	Ranking
Youth unemployment	4.31	1st
Friend and family influences	3.02	8th
Availability of incentives	4.15	3rd
Availability of agricultural inputs	3.13	7th
Provision of adequate credit facilities	4.09	4th
Interest in Agriculture	3.91	6th
Environmental situations	4.27	2nd
Adequate information	4.01	5th

Source: Field Data 2019

Determinants of respondent participation in the programme

The result in Table 7 shows that at 5 percent level of significance there is a significant relationship between respondents` age ($x^2$= 3,862), sex ($x^2$ = 0,805), educational status ($x^2$ = 8.476) and their level of participation in agricultural production activities. This implies that neither age nor sex influences respondents` participation in agricultural production activities in the study area, Educational status is favourably disposed to participating in an agricultural production activity.

Table 7: Chi-square of the relationship between respondent`s socio-economic characteristics and their level of participation in agricultural production activities.

Variables	P-values	Df	X^2	Decisions
Age	0.260	3	3.862*	NS
Sex	0.362	1	0.805	NS
Education Status	0.047	3	8.476**	S

Source: Survey data 2018. **Significant at 0.01, *Significant at 0.05

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated youth participation in Akwa Ibom State integrated farmers scheme (AKSIFS) in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Findings from the study indicate that majority of the participants had post-secondary education and were mostly males. The mean age of the participants was 27.3years with an average farm size of two (2.0) hectares. Most (40.9) participants had no extension contact of time per agricultural production cycle and mean income level of ₦6,607.25 were also observed. The findings further revealed that the categorization of youth by their level of participation in agricultural production activities scored medium participation, implying that there are still opportunities to increase youth level of participation. Employment level and interest in agriculture of the youth could be increased by improving extension agents to enhance effective services delivery (contacts) and for timely agricultural information, , upward review of the soft loan to participants in the scheme to increase agricultural production activities. Various Local Government chairmen/persons should promote youth participation in agricultural activities as sources of additional capital and information through massive sensitization campaigns to enable the youth know of programme and participate effectively.

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