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Assessment of Public Policy Driven Youth Agricultural Empowerment Interventions: A Case Study of Integrated Farmers' Scheme of Akwa Ibom State

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Ekanem, J.T.
Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension,
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus, Orukanam, Akwa Ibom State Nigeria
Corresponding Author's Email: jemimahekanem@aksu.edu.ng
Nwachukwu, I.
Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
The study assessed the effectiveness of the Integrated Farmers' Scheme (IFS) initiated and managed by Akwa Ibom State government in the South-South region of Nigeria. It specifically examined the relevance of the scheme, its impacts/outcome on the beneficiaries' livelihood and wellbeing, its level of sustainability as well as the constraints faced by the scheme. A combination of primary and secondary data sources were employed in the study. Primary data were collected with the use of interview schedule and analysed descriptively. The qualitative description was complemented by field observations, critical assessment of responses from beneficiaries and researcher's value judgment. Findings showed that the scheme was effective in terms of its relevance to the needs of beneficiaries, employment generation to other youths as well as income generation but lacking in sustainability (45%). About 77% of beneficiaries identified undue political influence on the selection of target group as a major constraint to the scheme. Improper monitoring, lack of periodic supervision leading to default in loan repayment also affected the scheme's sustainability. The scheme has the potential of being sustainable in addition to generating employment and income, if the scheme's policy target is strictly adhered to.

Keywords: Effectiveness, IFS, Youth, Agricultural intervention, AKS.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria with a population of over 180 million people (NBS 2001) has an average of 8 million entering into the job market annually. Statistics have shown also that 40 percent of Nigerian graduates are in the job market with the youth unemployment rate said to have increased to 25 percent from 24 percent previously (tradingeconomics, 2017). This has triggered a call from past and present administration to focus its attention on empowering youths. It has become pertinent that any nation that needs development must first develop her youths.

Within the development agenda of the immediate past administration and the present, agriculture has been and is a dependable identifiable sector and the youths are very strategic to the success of agricultural development. Aside, unemployment rate can be reduced if the entrepreneurial and managerial skills of the young adults are enhanced through agribusiness. It will also reduce crime in our society which is caused by idleness and other social vices or ills.

Various schemes and programmes have been introduced and implemented by successive administration to tackle youth unemployment, reduce poverty and increase food production. Such schemes included the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) of 1986 which was initiated by the Federal government with the primary aim of promoting skills acquisition, self-employment and labour intensive work. The Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) which was initiated in year 2001 to benefit three (3) categories of people: the Skilled unemployed, the unskilled/Semi-skilled unemployed and the unskilled/uneducated with the intent of providing monthly stipends to 200,000 people across the country for small business start-ups. Also, the National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP) in 2001 which was structured to integrate four sectorial schemes notable among them was the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES) which was exclusively designed to provide unemployed youths opportunities in skills acquisition, employment and wealth generation which was further subdivided into Capacity Acquisition Programme (CAP), The mandatory Attachment Programme (MAP) and the Credit Delivery Programme (CDP). Again, in 2012, there was also the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWIN) programme implemented by the immediate past administration that received good feasibility reports and parted with grants as low as N1 million and as high as N10 million to each beneficiary. In 2015, the Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme (YEAP) was also launched to empower 740,000 market oriented young agricultural producers in rural areas. 20,000 school leavers and rural youth leaders were then targeted per state while 18,000 university graduates were to be developed into young agribusiness entrepreneurs called agropreneurs in Nigeria. Training was to be offered on different value chains such as aquaculture, poultry, cassava, oil palm, snailry, grass cutter and major cereals.

With the advent of the new administration, a N10 billion (ten billion) naira youth project called YES – Youth Entrepreneurship Support Project to empower youths with loan to start businesses, was launched. This project was handled by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment and it aimed at creating 36,000 jobs annually on the condition that the applicant must have gone through one-year mandatory National Youth Service with evidence of a certificate or higher education. The loan carries a single digit interest rate and has a repayment period of 3-5 years (www.premiumtimesng.com – accessed 30th March 2017.

The Federal Government of Nigeria also launched the N-Power programme for youths aged between 18-35 years with focus on 4 main sectors namely; the primary and secondary education, agriculture, public health and community education sectors. The programme is intended to train 500,000 young unemployed graduates and non-graduates to drastically reduce youth unemployment through skill acquisition and empowerment with necessary tools to create enterprises that will change our communities, economy and nation.

In view of these and many other programmes, youth unemployment rate is still on the increase rising from 18.8% in 2017 to 23.1% in 2018 (NBS, 2018). It is this rise in youth unemployment rate that called for the need to empower youths across the nation and Akwa Ibom State government through the immediate past governor initiated the Integrated Farmers Scheme (IFS) programme to develop their entrepreneurial and managerial skills in agribusiness and engage them by offering financial assistance for the establishment of their choice enterprises.

Scheme's Content

The Integrated Farmers Scheme (IFS) of the Akwa Ibom State was established under the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources by an edict in 1998 and signed into law in September 2003 by the state government. Initially, the Scheme focused on the youths of the state origin who could not advance their educational pursuit after leaving secondary school but were willing to turn to something substantial especially in agriculture to earn a living. Subsequently, the scheme expanded its horizon to include all youths who were unemployed but whose interests were in agriculture and were willing to meet the requirements for the Scheme. This was so to make room for proper capacity building that required 2 months mandatory, rigorous training and selection process with a view that, if a youth was already employed, such a youth will not have time for the training which was a prerequisite for selection as a beneficiary of the scheme.

The Scheme comprised selection, training, empowerment in terms of loan disbursement/inputs, monitoring and loan recovery.

The Scheme's Aims and Objectives

The Scheme as well thought out, was a strategic attempt by the government to assist the youths financially in establishing agro-businesses of their choice to reduce dependence on government for employment, generate income for self-sustenance, create job opportunities for others, and reduce frustration among the youths of the state. Specifically, the objectives were;

1. Identifying and recruiting dynamic youths who are trainable and desirous of making a career in farming;
2. Getting the educated and youthful segment of our society to farming as their means of livelihood (livelihood activities);
3. Identifying profitable farm business ventures and attracting investments in crops, livestock, fisheries and processing;
4. Promoting and dignifying farming as a business;
5. Providing employment opportunities to graduates of diverse educational qualification;
6. Stimulating the use of improved agricultural technologies and inputs such as fertilizers, agro-chemicals, improved varieties in both crop and livestock enterprise; and
7. Offering technical assistance and loan to participants (beneficiaries on milestone deliverables) to achieve the goal.

Scheme's Implementation and Methodology

The government gives approval for recruitment of youths of the state and on due publicity, applications were received from prospective applicants, shortlisted and interviewed. It is worth noting here that a candidate must show proof of land possession for project execution and two guarantors who must be senior civil servants in the state in addition to

the application. From the first to the third batch, 10 participants were shortlisted per local government area making a total of 310 per batch. These numbers were subsequently increased to 620 for the fourth batch, 940 for the fifth batch with 165 repentant militants and 1200 for the sixth batch. After the interview, the selected youths were engaged in a mandatory, intensive, camped training which usually takes place in IFS demonstration farm facility for two months. This training comprised both theory and practical and basically on the establishment and management of selected agro-enterprises usually undertaken by University lecturers in different fields of agriculture.

After the training, successful participants were issued with certificate of participation followed by loan disbursement. From the 1st to the 3rd batch, the sum of N300, 000 was given to each participant and from the statistics, about 573 youths benefitted from the scheme. About 2,696 youths including 165 repentant militants, representing the 4th – 6th batches were empowered with the sum of N500, 000 each. It is on record that, in addition to the N300,000 seed fund disbursed for the 1st batch, 10,000 stands of pineapple, six piglets (a boar and 5 sows), 2,000 plantain stands and 400 poultry birds were given to the participants. 2nd – 6th batches executed one project only while 1st batch executed 2, a crop and one livestock enterprise. However, each beneficiary was assisted to start with a poultry farm of 400 birds or a swine farm of 2 in-pigs and 1 boar. The batches that received N500, 000 however combined enterprises in small scale (Nzeh and Bassey, 2015).

Table 1 shows that not all the participants of the scheme received the seed fund for the establishment of any enterprise. Data show that about one hundred and sixteen (116) participants of the training did not collect the funds and never established any enterprise. Again, from the number of persons empowered, a total of one billion five hundred and nineteen million, nine hundred thousand naira (N1, 519,900,000) only has been expended with fifty-four million naira (54,000,000) remaining un-utilized (un-expended).

Table 1: Distribution Based on Number of Beneficiaries and Amount Disbursed

Batches	Number of Participants	Number of Beneficiaries	Total Amount Disbursed
1st	310	151	45,300,000
2nd	310	183	54,900,000
3rd	310	239	71,700,000
4th	620	620	310,000,000
5th	940	898	449,000,000
6th	1200	1178	589,000,000
Total			**1,519,900,00**

Source: Field survey, 2017

The scheme has existed for over 12 years therefore, long enough to undergo an evaluation of its effectiveness in line with its objectives of employment generation, income generation and sustainability. The study therefore sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme, its impacts on the livelihood activities and the wellbeing of the youth beneficiaries, its level of sustainability and the constraints its faced.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Akwa Ibom State lies on the coastal plain between latitudes 4°32'and 5°33' North and longitudes 7°35' and 8°25'East. The state

covers a total land area of 7,249 Km² with three distinct vegetation zones namely: the saline water swamp forest, the fresh water swamp forest and the rain forest. It is made up of 31 Local Government Areas with a projected population of 5,450,758 people (NPC, 2006). About 1,901,061 persons are youths constituting about 36 percent of the population. The main economic activities of the people are farming, trading, fishing, artisanship with two distinct climatic conditions; the wet and the dry seasons. (akwaibomstate.gov.ng;nigerianstat.gov.ng; NBS,2016).

Sampling Procedure

The study population comprised all the youths of Akwa Ibom State who participated in the Scheme. A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify 330 beneficiaries in the 6 batches empowered by the scheme from 2000 – 2011 as shown in Table 2. 10% of the beneficiaries of each batch was used in the study.

Table 2: Distribution of Beneficiaries in Batches from 2000 – 2011

Batch	Year	No. of participants	No. of Beneficiaries	No. Sampled
1st	2000	310	151	16
2nd	2002	310	183	18
3rd	2006	310	239	24
4th	2009	620	620	62
5th	2010	940	898	90
6th	2011	1200	1178	120
Total		**3690**	**3269**	**330**

Source: Field survey, 2017

Study Approach

The study used interviews and field visits to gather data for the work after the secondary data that was accessed from IFS database and related literature. During field visits, field observation was employed to adjudge functional and non-functional or abandoned projects. A functional project was considered a sustainable project while a non-functional or abandoned project was considered unsustainable because of the length of time. Scheme outcome was measured by project expansion, generation of other livelihood activities, income and employment generation. This was derived from the responses of the beneficiaries on a 14-item outcome scale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relevance of Scheme's Concept

The concept of the scheme was found to be in line with the sustainable development goals of the United Nations since it trained and funded. The training was believed to develop the skill of beneficiaries in management of agribusiness venture while building their capacity towards establishing agribusiness. The focus was on youth unemployment reduction, poverty reduction through income generation and employment generation for other non-direct youth beneficiaries. From the responses of all the beneficiaries, the concept was very relevant and well appreciated. Majority of the beneficiaries believed that it has been the best scheme so far carried out in the interest of the youth. The scheme has the potential of building the capacity of youths to becoming agro-entrepreneurs in 9 different agricultural enterprises, through a two month all camped, intensive theoretical and practical training at an IFS demonstration farm facility of the state. It had the potential of keeping the youths self-employed, engaging their minds in meaningful venture,

generating income for the youths, creating employment for other community members and promoting peace and security among the people of the state.

Table 3: Distribution based on Beneficiaries' Perception of Scheme's Relevance

S/n	Statement	Mean	Remark
1	The scheme is line with the needs of the youth	3.29	Relevant
2	The camping idea enhances participation	2.91	Relevant
3	Theoretical trainings were very much interesting	2.90	Relevant
4	With experience gained during the practical sessions, I can now own and manage a good farm	2.70	Relevant
5	The scheme has the capacity to equip youths for income generation	2.84	Relevant
6	Youths benefiting from the programme can be self-employed and self-reliant	2.04	Relevant

Source: field survey, 2017.

Employment Generation

From figure 1, as the number of beneficiaries increased, the rate of employment generated increased, at first three batches, at an increasing rate and started declining even with increase in the seed fund. However, some reasons were advanced as to why the noticeable trend.

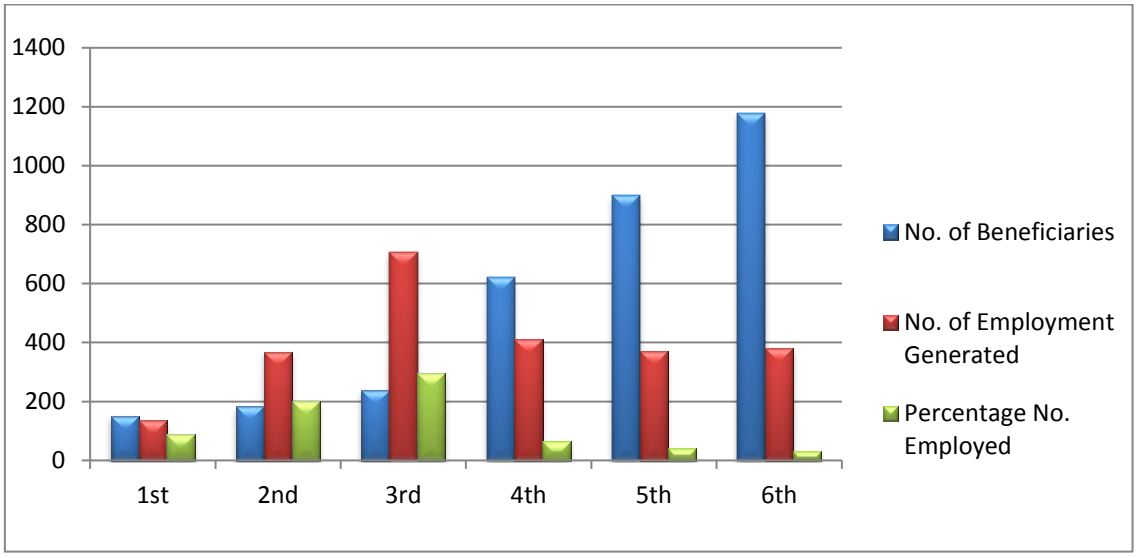


Figure 1: Number of Beneficiaries & Employment Generated in Batches

Outcomes of IFS

The scheme has been beneficial to the youths in many ways as attested to by the responses as presented in Table 3. All the beneficiaries (100%) agreed that it was an empowerment venture as it provided start-up capital for them to do business. 96% of the beneficiaries agreed that the scheme provided food for them, link them to other farmers within and outside the state and therefore is the best scheme ever carried out in the interest of the youth. 95% of the beneficiaries attested to the fact that the scheme has improved their living standard while 92% of them stated that through their enterprises, other livelihood activities have been generated. 79% agreed that through the training received and the

practice, their entrepreneurial and managerial skills have been developed while 75% stated that the scheme has helped them in the payment of their children's school fees and also generated employment for other people therefore, the scheme has achieved its purpose.

Table 4: Outcomes on Beneficiaries' livelihood activities and Wellbeing

S/N	Statements	Agree	Disagree
1.	Scheme has empowered willing youths	330(100)	-
2.	It has provided start-up capital for me	330(100)	-
3.	It has provided food for my family	316(96)	14(4)
4.	It has generated other livelihood activities	302(92)	28(8)
5.	Established link with others farmers in and outside the state	316(96)	14(4)
6.	It has improved the living Standard of youths	314(95)	16(5)
7.	Scheme has developed my skills in Agribusiness	260(79)	70(21)
8.	It serves as a yardstick to measure my progress in life	130(39)	200(61)
9.	It has boosted my financial status	232(70)	98(30)
10.	It helps in payment of my children's school fees	249(75)	81(25)
11.	All my achievements in life are from scheme	130(39)	200(61)
12.	It has generated employment for other people	249(75)	81(25)
13.	Scheme is the best ever	316(96)	14(4)
14	The scheme has achieved its purpose	205(62)	125(38)

Source: Field Survey, 2017; *Numbers in bracket are in percentages

Sustainability

The study was able to evaluate four project types as against nine that the beneficiaries established. As shown in Table 4; For 204 cassava enterprises established by the scheme, 10 were evaluated and non was functional, 84 out of 1599 poultry enterprise established was evaluated out of which 21 were functional and 63 non-functional, 214 piggery projects out of 932 were evaluated, 121 were functional while 93 were not and for 167 fishery projects established, 22 were evaluated and only 7 were functional. According to IFS's analytical data report, 2012, the number of non-functional projects for the 1st – 5th batch was put at; Cassava- 19, Poultry – 327, Piggery – 350 and Fishery – 19. The 6th batch was still very new for assessment as at that year. In comparison therefore, from figure 2, percent non-functional projects as at 2012 stood at: Cassava -9.31%, poultry – 20.5%, piggery- 37.6% and fishery – 11.4% while that conducted by this study shows cassava as 100% non-functional, Poultry -75%, piggery – 43.5% and fishery as 68.2%. Piggery enterprise had the highest percentage of non-functionality followed by poultry, then fishery and cassava in 2012 but 5 years later (2017), cassava recorded the highest with 100% non-functionality, followed by poultry with 75%, fishery with 68.2% and piggery with 43.5%. A number of factors may be responsible for the disparity observed some of which are that: the IFS evaluation was done without the 6th batch as the batch was still young for that assessment as at five years ago; again, projects were still newly established and so were bound to survive; also, the sample size used in this study may contribute to it. However, about 55% of the projects studied were not functional.

In a related study conducted by Ekanem and Nwachukwu (2015), individually managed projects were more sustainable than those managed by community project committee for communities. These were individually-owned projects, one wonders why there should be

incidences of non-functional projects. From the findings, the projects have about 45% sustainability over a minimum period of six years and a maximum period of seventeen years unlike other public enterprise implemented schemes. It therefore means that these onetime enterprises implemented for the youths can go beyond them to their adulthood and will still be engaging them gainfully if properly managed.

Table 5: Distribution based on Project Types Evaluated

S/N	Project Type	Number of Projects	Number studied	Functional Freq.	%	Non functional Freq.	%
1	Cassava	204	10	-	-	10	100
2	Poultry	1599	84	21	25.0	63	75.0
3	Piggery	932	214	121	56.5	93	43.5
4	Fishery	167	22	7	31.8	15	68.2
Total		**3269**	**330**	**149**		**181**	

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Constraints to the IFS Sustainability

From the responses of the beneficiaries on Table 5, there were some constraints to sustainability of the projects and the scheme. Beneficiaries agreed that there was a deviation from the scheme's original target by compromising the selection process. This constituted a constraint incidence of 0.79 indicating that sustainability of the IFS was highly hampered by this particular constraint.

Results revealed that 77% of the beneficiaries saw undue political interference in the selection of scheme's participants as a major constraint (incidence = 0.77) to the sustainability of the scheme because through that influence people other than youths and who were already employed, who may not have had interest on agribusiness were forcefully brought to the scheme just for the purpose of collecting the money and backing off. This is so as the scheme was run in such a way that no one can combine another full-time work with it especially at the level of training which determined disbursement. This is in agreement with the views of Ogohi (2014) which stated that public enterprise most at times suffer political interference from important government officials. For some political reasons, they can force the corporation to employ persons that are not qualified for a job or position. Lack of periodic supervision and lack of monitoring after full disbursement were also major constraints reported to hamper the sustainability of IFS with constraint incidence of 0.77 and 0.70 respectively. The beneficiaries reported that as soon as disbursement was completed, monitoring ended. This did not create the consciousness of loan repayment in the mind of the beneficiaries as some may have thought it was their share of 'government cake'. 70% of the beneficiaries agreed to delay in the processing and disbursement of second and third tranches of loan as one of the constraints to the sustainability of the projects with incidence of 0.70. The beneficiaries reported that some people never collected the complete money approved for them. This was seen by Njoku and Obasi (1991) as late disbursement of loan which according to them mars scheme's functionality. About 39% of the beneficiaries interviewed stated that most of the structures used for the projects were rented and so business folded up at expiration of rent if it was not making profit. This was a function of inadequate investigation of beneficiaries' claims by IFS officials while some beneficiaries stated that some projects could not generate

income as quickly as expected therefore money taken out for children school fees, family health needs, food and other basic necessities of lives ate into the capital. Yet, 47% stated that natural disasters like outbreak of disease claimed the lives of their stock. However, this was a minor constraint to sustainability as it recorded constraints incidence of 0.47.

Table 6: Perceived constraints to project sustainability

S/N	Constraints	Agree	Disagree	Incidence	Remark
1.	Scheme deviated from original target	260(79)	70(21)	.79	Major
2.	Undue political influence	254(77)	80(23)	.77	Major
3.	Training was not from practicing agriculturist	81(25)	249(75)	.25	Minor
4.	Delay in disbursement of second tranche	222(67)	108(33)	.67	Major
5.	Lack of periodic supervision	254(77)	80(23)	.77	Major
6.	Use of rented structures	130(39)	200(61)	.39	Minor
7.	Outbreak	154(47)	176(53)	.47	Minor
8.	No monitoring after full disbursement	232(70)	98(30)	.70	Major

Source: Field Survey, 2017

CONCLUSION

The public policy driven Youth agricultural and entrepreneurial interventions of Akwa Ibom State was well conceived as it was found to be in line with the sustainable development goals of the United Nations since it trained and funded. The training was believed to develop the skills of beneficiaries in management of agribusiness venture while building their capacity towards establishing agribusiness. The focus was on youth unemployment reduction, poverty reduction through income generation and employment generation for other non-direct youth beneficiaries. From the responses of all the beneficiaries, the concept was very relevant and well appreciated. Majority (90 percent) of the beneficiaries believed that it has been the best scheme so far carried out in the interest of the youths in the State.

The scheme has the potential of building the capacity of youths to becoming agro-entrepreneurs in 9 different agricultural enterprises, through a two month all intensive theoretical and practical training at an IFS demonstration farm facility of the state. It has the potential of keeping the youths self-employed, engaging their minds on meaningful venture, generating income for the youths, creating employment for other community members and promoting peace and security among the people of the state. Though this process was marred by political interference at some point, default in loan repayment and about 55% nonfunctional projects, the scheme has engaged the youths meaningfully, improved the living standard of beneficiaries, developed their agribusiness skills, assisted them to train their children in school, provided food and have become the only source of livelihood to many such that they cannot repay the loan because the projects in existence are to maintain daily food need of the family and not as a business anymore. The scheme

was adjudged to be the best for Akwa Ibom State unemployed youth therefore one wonders why the scheme is not on-going after its last batch of recruitment in 2011.

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