



AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES: A MEANS FOR IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Umar Adamu MADU^{1*}; Abba Mohammed WAKILI² & Mahmood H.UMAR³

¹**Agricultural Economics and Extension Department, Adamawa State University Mubi, Nigeria**

**E-mail of correspondning author: umaradamu24@yahoo.com.*

²**Agric. Education Department, Federal College of Education Yola, Nigeria**

³**Agricultural Economics and Extension Department, Taraba State University Jalingo, Nigeria**

ABSTRACT

Agricultural extension can serve as mechanism for empowering the rural farmers by developing skills, attitudes, and scientific capacities in rural community members to produce enough food and raw materials for local consumption and export. The need to realize significant and immediate increase in productivity calls for efficient functional and sustainable extension programme that will train the farmers for a rewarding business in farming. This paper draws our attention on why the need to empower the rural communities. The paper also focuses attention on the rural communities, causes and consequences of rural poverty. Finally it high lights on the role of extension services in improving the lots of the rural communities.

Key words: Agricultural Extension, Role, Quality of life, Rural Community.

INTRODUCTION

Improving agricultural production is a major strategy in the fight against world hunger and poverty. It aims at improving rural livelihood and increasing economic growth. The World Development Report of the World Bank (2008) argued that growth in agricultural sector contributes more to poverty reduction than any other economic sector. Within the last decades, serious efforts have been made to make the ordinary Nigerian self-sufficient in food production.

Agricultural extension services can play an important role in addressing this challenge. Perhaps, there is no agency at the ground level, other than agricultural extension services that can provide knowledge support to farmers and other intermediaries who are supporting farmers and at the same time support programme implementation (Ani, 2007; Sulaiman, 2012). Considering the changing nature of agriculture and the evolving challenges, producers currently need a wider range of support, including organisational, marketing, technological, financial and entrepreneurial. To be successful, farmers require a wide range of knowledge from different sources and support to integrate these different bits of knowledge in their production context.

While a production led strategy was the sole focus of extension earlier, this needs to be expanded to include a market led strategy to deal with the new challenges (Sulaiman, 2012). To play this role effectively, extension need to expand its mandate beyond disseminating information on technologies so that it can better respond to the evolving demands for support and services of farmers. This includes, organizing user/producer groups, linking farmers to markets, engaging in research planning and technology selection, enable changes in policies and linking producers to a range of other support and service networks (Sulaiman and Hall, 2004; Sulaiman, 2009).

There is no doubt that agricultural extension is fundamental in the transformation process of agricultural production activities in many parts of the world. Agricultural extension is crucial for sustainable agricultural development (Umar & Mahmood, 2007). Extension education provides farmers with needed skills and technical information to enable them take effective farm management decisions to enhance their farm practices. Effective extension service is therefore, an essential factor for improving the lot of rural farmers, particularly in the developing countries (Ani, 2007). This paper therefore, focuses on the role of agricultural extension in improving the quality of life of the rural communities.

The Rural Communities

It is difficult to give a clear-cut definition of a rural area to the acceptance of developed and developing countries. This is because of constant change in the physical and socio-economic reality of places. What is termed rural in developing countries may not go for developed countries. Irag (1986) referred to rural areas as geographical locations away from large urban settlements and towns which are inherited by rural people. This definition may reflect on what constitute rural in the developed nations, but not the true picture of what constitute rural in the developing countries. In the United States of America, for instance, rural areas are termed as a large isolated area outside a city or town, usually with a low population density. Rural area is described as a country side.

In Nigeria, rural communities are characterized by scattered settlements with low population density, generally poor and economically live below poverty line, agriculture is the primary occupation and major source of livelihood, the farming system is predominantly traditional using the hoe and cutlass. The farmers practice shifting cultivation, thus planting on a small piece of land for two or three years and moving to another site some distance away (Oladele, 1991). There is also absence of infrastructure, which improves the quality of life. Usually, there is absence of portable water, electricity, and good feeder roads. The inhabitants have low purchasing power and standard of living (Olayiwola and Adeleye, 2005). The school buildings are few and dilapidated, the students or pupils receive lessons under the trees and in some situations the pupils seat on the floor of the classrooms. Health care facilities are virtually inadequate and most cases absent. The physical resources, the technical and managerial skills, appropriate technology and know-how necessary for increased economic production are lacking. The basic social amenities and infrastructures are not lacking as in most African countries.

The rural areas of Nigeria are inhabited by the bulk of the nation's population; they serve as the base for the production of food and fibre. They are also the major source of capital formation for the country, and a principal market for domestic manufactures. Yet, despite the importance attached to the rural areas, they are not attractive to live in (Amadi, 2007)

Why Empower Rural Farming Communities

In most developing countries like Nigeria with overwhelming neo-colonial influence, it is imperative to develop the rural areas – for the agricultural sector to contribute efficiently and effectively to the national economy of the nation. The importance of the rural sector has been identified by Ekong (2003) as follows:

- (a) *Rural areas are predominately food and raw material producing sector.* Even in advanced, industrialized economies where synthetic food items have been successfully developed, farm products still serve as the base for such manufactured foods. Apart from food and fibre, it can be observed that nearly all national resources particularly minerals which constitute the wealth of any nation are obtained from rural areas.
- (b) *Rural areas are the seed-bed of national population.* The rural population serves to replenish the human resources of the urban centre. Studies on family size aspirations between urban and rural consistently show that rural communities desire to have many children than their urban counterparts. This excessive rural population replenishes the urban manpower needs.
- (c) *Important during emergencies and crisis.* In times of national emergencies and crisis, the rural areas are not only place of refuge but also constitute a large reservoirs for national patriotism and

- (d) manpower, owing to the fact that rural people are relatively unaffected by internationalism and pacifism flourishing among the heterogeneous people of the cities.
- (e) *Conservativeness and resistance to rapid cultural change.* The relative conservativeness of rural people and apparent resistance of rural culture to change makes rural area the conservatory of pristine cultures and tradition of the people which is often discarded in the urban areas.
- (f) *Source of stability of the urban population.* The rural population is equally a source of stability or neutralizing influence of the urban population in many respects. The rural environment also provides a necessary break to urbanite from the tumultuous activities and tempo of urban living.
- (g) *Majority of the population is found in the rural areas.* In Nigeria, the importance of rural areas also lies in the more fact it is where more 70% of the total population live and drive their livelihood. The rural areas of Nigeria are inhabited by the bulk of the nation's population; they serve as the base for the production of food and fibre. They are also the major source of capital formation for the country, and a principal market for domestic manufactures.

The Rural Poor

Who are the rural poor and how do we identify them? Chambers (1991) observed that the rural poor are scanned in misleading surveys and smoothed out in statistical averages. Studies on the poor count surface phenomena, not many reveal the actual problems of particular poor individuals because according to him, it is cheaper, safer and cost effective in terms of academic output to do urban rather than rural research.

Irag (1986) saw rural poor as a mixed group whose wellbeing can fluctuate widely. A good crop yield, or chance to work on a nearby road project may push a poor family's income to the point where they can buy a plough with a metal blade or some clothing for the children, but two years of inadequate rain or illness may cost them their land or livestock. Hence, all rural poor are characterized by low and large family size, live in rural areas or urban slumps in crowded conditions. As much as 80 percent of the poor people's income is consumed as food, consisting mainly of carbohydrates with little vegetables, meat or fish. Majority are mal-nourished which reduces their ability to work, impairs their physical and mental development and lowers their resistance to infections.

Majority of the rural poor are illiterates, their children may go to school for some times and drop out early. Chambers (1991) submitted that the household of the poor has few assets; the hut is normally made of woods, bamboos, mud, grass reeds, palm fronds and has little or no furniture; mats or hides for sleeping, few cooking pots and few tools. In some circumstances, there are no toilets. Clothes are few and worn until they are old. Food and cash acquired meet only immediate needs and are soon used up (Olukotun, 2008). Irag (1986) observed that the poor rural household is seasonally hungry and thin. Its members are weakened by parasites, sickness and mal-nutrition. Pregnancy, birth, and death are common (Smith et al, 2004).

Generally, rural communities in developing countries and their people are characterized by general poverty trap, low income, underutilized natural resources, rapidly increasing population, unemployment, low productivity of labour, low and traditional technology, high level of illiteracy, absence of social and physical infrastructure and political powerlessness.

Poverty and Rural Communities in Nigeria

Poverty is a condition of life where man lacks basic necessities of life, to a level that he is said to be underdeveloped. Poverty at the level of individual or household was described in terms such as the inability to eat or cloth oneself adequately, lack of land or gainful employment, inability to meet social obligations, or lack of kin on one could rely for support in times of crisis. In urban areas, physical insecurity, cramped housing conditions were seen as important dimension of poverty, as well as children being reduced to hawking, begging and foraging in refuse dumps. Poverty is also expressed as lack or degeneration of community resources such as inadequacy of roads, health centres, electricity, and industries (Francis et al, 1996).

Rural poverty today, appears to be pervasive in African sub-region, and this situation has drawn much attention particularly in Nigeria. Most disheartening is the fact that this problem, instead of subsiding, is worsening, at least in certain regions. One of the serious consequences of rural poverty, of course, is food and nutrition uncertainty and its attendant socio-economic and political outlay (Olukotun, 2008). A food-secure household is one that can reliably obtain food of adequate quality and quantity to support a healthy and active life for all members of the household (Francis et al, 1996).

Most affected by the worsening poverty situation are the rural areas and vulnerable groups, especially women. Nigeria experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, when the incidence of poverty rose from 46.3% of the population in 1985 to 65.5% in 1996. Majority of the poor as indicated by available data, are located in the rural areas. In 1985, 1992 and 1996 the share of the poor in the rural areas were 49.9%, 46.1% and 67.8% respectively, making poverty largely a rural phenomenon using consumption and income analysis (Olukotun, 2008) The situation in the African sub-region is that rural poverty accounts for 65-90% of overall poverty. Of serious concern is the statistic that about 77% of farmers are poor, out of which more than 48% are extremely poor (Khan, 2000).

Causes and Consequences of Poverty

The causes of poverty are difficult to determine as it differs from one place to another and from time to time. Poverty can be linked to so many factors such as exploitation, neo-colonialism, globalization, corruption, prodigal attitude, poor management of resources, government policies, illiteracy, joblessness, etc. It may also be due in part to rapid population growth or over-population, the use of poor or inappropriate technology, low growth rate of the economy, prevalence of inappropriate resource allocation, particularly in the public sector, and low rate of investment. The interface of these variables places a large part of the society in the vicious cycle of poverty (Umar, 2013). One of the causes of poverty in Nigeria is the country's production foundation that has remained narrow and weak. The economy of Nigeria has remained largely one sided, in that her economy depends on one principal product for export. The surfacing of the oil sector led to the neglect of the agricultural sector, leading to adverse penalty on the overall national economy. The various asceticism measures that were put in place by the various governments in the 1980s merely pushed many people further into poverty rather than produce the desired results. These therefore heighten the poor standard of living of the majority of the country's populace during the period, notably the rural dwellers.

The effect of poverty are evident in some families, with inability to feed well, poor health, poor housing or lack of shelter, street children due to parental neglect, high school drop-outs rate, powerlessness, lost of esteem, drug abuse etc. (Toungos and Mahmood, 2005). Poverty contributes to poor agricultural productivity, as many farmers in Nigeria cannot afford to purchase necessary farm inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and improved seeds, which would bring about increased productivity. Also, the ability of poor consumers to purchase food necessary for maintenance of health and productive life is reduced. The worsening food security in Africa since 1970 has resulted in decline in per capita consumption of food in some African regions in recent times (Ugra & Naresh, 2008).

Agricultural extension as a vital component of strategies for poverty reduction has a crucial role to play in creating escape from food insecurity and poverty by improving farm income, generating employment for farm workers, reducing food prices and fueling economic growth. Boosting agricultural growth by applying new and improved technologies is one important way to reduce rural poverty.

The Role of Agricultural Extension in Improving the Quality of Life of Rural Communities

In a democratic set-up like ours, the decision to accept a technology and transform subsistence agriculture into remunerative scientific agriculture are to be made voluntarily for adoption by millions of farmers through extension services (Sulaiman, 2009). Extension is an educational process directed to bring about change in people. It is a dynamic process which brings about changes in what people know, changes in how they react to situations and changes in what they can do (Van den Ban and Hawkins, 1996). For this

reason, extension education has been recognized as the most vital means to bring about those changes. The important role of agricultural extension therefore, is to bring about material and non-material changes as summarized by ICAR (2006):

1. *Extension education makes the adoption of a new technology possible.* The first role of extension is to help farmers to accept new agricultural technology for enhanced higher yields and changing the age-old concept of low yields. The willingness of farmers to augment their farm income by adopting improved agricultural practices is to be regarded as the most remarkable change in their behaviours.
2. *Extension helps farmers to visualize farming as a profitable venture.* Extension education helps farmers to understand their own situation and resources; and critical analysis helps them to take rational decision for best use of available resources.
3. *It shows farmers to set what they want.* Once the farmers' need is determined, extension education can help them find out the necessary technical know-how as well as inputs and apply this technology for their situation. For this purpose, the extension worker should possess not only skill of extension methods, but also the ability to make their right selection according to the situations.
4. *Extension helps to train the local leaders.* There are always farmers who are consulted by other farmers as sources of valuable information. The function of extension is to identify such farmers and give them suitable training; and to encourage them to adopt modern farm technology so that through them, it may be diffused among other farmers. Beside training the farm leaders, extension workers helps to organize special training programmes for progressive farmers, farmers belonging to special interest groups, young farmers and women in agriculture.
5. *Extension helps gets necessary inputs.* The main function of extension is educating the farmers. However, extension is also required to get the necessary inputs and other requirements needed to boost agricultural production.
6. *Extension is of much help in the decision making process.* Due to introduction of the high yielding varieties, and the multiple cropping systems, there is a growing emphasis on planning individual farm production. Extension helps the farmers in studying the individual farm conditions to take rational decisions according to their needs, aspirations and resources.
7. *Extension helps to change the outlook of the farmers.* All the material development can be achieved only if there is a change in the entire outlook of the people. Extension helps to bring this change through education.
8. *Extension uses democratic method in educating the farmers.* Extension respects the individuality of people in making their own decision with the help of extension workers. By this, the people grow both in status and self-respect and are able to take rational decisions themselves.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted a discussion on the pivotal role of agricultural extension education in the transformation of the quality of life of the rural farmers and overall development of the rural communities. There is no doubt that agricultural extension is instrumental in the transformation process of agricultural production activities. A strong, vibrant and responsive extension with an expanded mandate is a pre-requisite for achieving a faster, sustainable and more inclusive growth through agriculture. The bottom line is increase in productivity and subsequently, increase in the income of the farmers which is a pointer to improved wellbeing. Functional and effective extension activity is therefore fundamental in accomplishing the objectives of improved living conditions of rural farming communities.

Agricultural extension services need to assume new challenges and reform itself in terms of content, approach, structure and processes. Extension in this context includes all those agencies in the public, private and civil society that provide a range of agricultural advisory services and facilitate application of new knowledge

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