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## **Agriculture as an Employment Intervention Strategy: Is it all Motion and No Movement?**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of the paper was to assess the progress made using the agriculture employment intervention programs to reduce youth unemployment. The study was conducted in three local government areas of Edo State, Nigeria. The methodology included qualitative research that used focus group discussions to generate data, which was then analysed and interpreted. The subsequent results were positive, recommending both a continuation and further application of the program. Policy improvements were also identified in relation to the difficulties found in increasing participation among urban dwellers who negatively associated the work with hard, physically demanding and stressful labour. This common viewpoint indicated that the selection of youth participants should include the criteria of rural resilience and coping abilities. The results also highlighted that the implementation of the program at times did not follow the natural production cycle for cropping and that system support was limited for the beneficiaries. It was also recommended that future programs must be well articulated, designed, resourced and piloted before full implementation, for sustainable results. Supervision and monitoring must be closely done and performance compared against expectation and the resourcing of the participants in the program must be adequate and timely. While insightful, there did exist factors that impacted the quality of the study. Most of the participants in the study had close links with the government as employee or beneficiaries of the scheme. The need to protect their employment and income left them often reserved in their opinions and comments.

**Keywords:** Agriculture and employment; Agriculture as employment intervention; Youth employment intervention program; Youth and agriculture.

### **Introduction**

Unemployment (particularly youth unemployment) is a major and worrying problem for any national government. For example, the Youth Survey Report showed that 54.0% of Nigerian youths were unemployed in 2012. Of these, the female youth unemployment figure stood at 51.9% compared to their male counterpart at 48.1% (National Bureau of Statistics 2013). These statistics are concerning and if no concrete steps are taken, will have severe socioeconomic ramifications. High unemployment has been shown to increase many socioeconomic problems including thuggery, armed robbery, insurgency, migration and pressure on urban infrastructures (Adebayo 2013). As such, governments have strong motivators to create, find and implement policy instruments to increase available jobs and to reduce unemployment.

Job-creation is the most popular method by which governments attempt to reduce unemployment and poverty, with various strategies using direct and indirect interventionist approaches. The most common interventionist approach, particularly in developing countries, involves engaging unemployed youth in agricultural production. The choice to focus on agriculture as an industry is premised on its importance to poverty reduction, which goes far beyond its direct impact of job-creation but must also take into account the increased agricultural output and subsequent lower costs to food. Furthermore, agriculture promotes the

generation of patterns of development that are employment-intensive and benefit both rural and urban areas (Department for International Development 2005).

Some governments combined agricultural and rural development strategies which use labour-intensive agricultural technologies; develop small and medium-size enterprises, and promote micro projects in rural areas. Such strategies promote self-employment, non-farm employment in rural areas, targeted employment interventions, microfinance and credit as means of employment generation, skill formation and training (Department of Economic and Social Council 2007).

The question – why is government often using agriculture as an interventionist strategy for creating employment? To answer the question, one must first assess the level of development of most countries with high unemployment level. One way to assess a country's economic progress is consider the share of agriculture in national employment and GDP. A declining in these indices relative to the increasing of others like manufacturing, finance and technology indicates a positive economic progress (Byerlee, de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2009; Timmer, 1988; Cervantes & Brooks, 2008). This type of economic development is largely due to higher income elasticities of demand for non-agricultural goods and services. As incomes grow, consumers increase their consumption of manufactured goods and services faster than their consumption of food. Paradoxically, the process is usually accompanied by rising incomes and a lower incidence of poverty among those who depend on agriculture for a living (Cervantes-Godoy & Dewbre 2010). In some economies, particularly in the sub-Sahara, the reverse is the case.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the use of agriculture as a means of creating employment and socioeconomic growth is not considered as superior to other sectors, but an essential component, particularly in the early stages of development. Other sources of generating employment and growth exist, but few can match agriculture in its ability to reduce poverty and stimulate wider economic growth. For example, mineral wealth has not provided a platform for broad-based employment, poverty reduction and economic growth, as countries like Nigeria and Zambia have shown (Department for International Development 2005). Without the increasing incomes and affordable food that a dynamic agricultural sector provides, economic transformation will be slow and economies will remain trapped in a cycle of low growth and poverty (Department for International Development 2005).

Governments have adopted several agricultural schemes and programs to counter unemployment; some of which were direct and others indirect. Programs like communal farm, graduate farming and school-to-land have been implemented and in most cases the desired results have not been met. For example, the government of Rivers State, Nigeria initiated the School-to-Land Agricultural Program in 1985 to create employment and reduce poverty. The program, over the 27 years between 1985 and 2012, witnessed a sharp decline in its activities, starting with 12 sites and now down to 2. It is pathetic that with the enormous potential resources that can be generated in terms of farm outputs and income, the program became moribund (Nwanyanwu, Chuckwuemeka, & Amadi 2014).

According to Akande (2014), government policies aimed at tackling youth unemployment faced diverse challenges ranging from poor financing, lack of good administration and unqualified resource personnel, poor implementation strategy to poor responses from participants. Despite these shortfalls, it is assumed that the impacts of the programs, in reducing poverty and unemployment should be better than the available results would suggest.

The failure of intervention programs and increasing unemployment place cost burdens on the individuals and governments. Costs that include direct costs to the government, depending on the extent of support programs, such as unemployment insurance, public intervention programs, and costs related to the economic loss of investment in education, forgone earnings, savings, and aggregated demand (IEG 2013). Instead of contributing to society, unemployed youth create a direct cost estimated at \$40–50 billion annually for the Middle East and North Africa (IEG 2013), reflecting about 3 percent of the region's gross domestic product in 2010 and data which is comparable to what is found in sub-Saharan Africa.

The purpose of this study is to assess the reasons why lofty employment programs have not met the desired goals and make recommendations. The study is important considering the socioeconomic benefits that can be gained from the program if all the militating factors are addressed. Furthermore the financial and political costs to government for the failure of intervention programs are enormous and capable of setting a country backwards, especially when one considers not only the money ineffectively spent, but also the loss of the potential income generated by the youth.

## **Literature review**

### **Issues in youth employment**

Youth unemployment is a major concern for many countries because it has negative effects on the welfare of young people, and also adversely effects economic performance and social stability. Unemployed youth have no chance to build professional skills. As a result, they are more at risk for unemployment, career downgrades and lower wages later in life, and a loss in lifetime earnings (IEG 2013). In countries with positive economic growth, the labour market position of youth differs from adults. Youth are more likely to be among the working poor than adults. They are at higher risk of unemployment, underemployment, or working in jobs with low earnings, which have social consequences for the futures of their respective countries (IEG 2013).

Agriculture provides employment opportunities for young people in Asia and Africa, yet many youth are migrating to find higher earnings. Given the low earnings and growing disinterest of youth in agriculture, the lack of capacity of other rural sectors to absorb youth, particularly in Asia and Africa, these factors contribute to migration, joblessness, disillusionment, and the associated risks of social instability (Lochner and Moretti 2004; Kakwagh & Ikwuba 2010; Emeh et al. 2012).

According to Leavy and Hossain (2014), youths are interested in formal sector employment and modern urban lifestyles, and tend to look at practicing agriculture as mentally and physically challenging. Therefore young people don't consider agriculture as a way of the future, in part because of a lack of access to the required infrastructure for growth and development. This situation is complicated as young people participating in agricultural programs are drawn from different skill sets and social backgrounds, without regard to their past experiences in agriculture (Ogbeide, Ele & Ikheloa 2015). Farming First (2013) and Murphy (2014) noted that many young unemployed people from the urban backgrounds merely signify their intention to participate in agricultural employment programs in order to get the financial benefits and that increasingly, fewer young people in developing and developed countries actually aspire to live as farmers.

### **Issues in agriculture employment intervention program**

The outputs from participants in agricultural employment intervention programs are less when compared to traditional farmers. Nwanyanwu, Chuckwuemeka, and Amadi (2014) noted that traditional farmers generated more income and had better farm output than school-to-land farmers. While the reason why the school-to-land farmers output was poor was not stated, the study did argue that their attitude towards, and commitment to, agriculture were less when compared to traditional farmers. Ogbeide, Ele and Ikheloa (2015) argued that one of the reasons why agricultural employment intervention strategy is not successful is that resources are directed towards too many people that lack interest in agriculture and are not resilient enough for rural living where almost all agricultural endeavours are carried out. Collaborating the assumption, Olulu and Kalu (2013) used indicators such as rural employment, livestock and food crop production and increase in rural income generation to determine the gains of agricultural employment intervention. They argued that the selected indicators did not show improvement in the living standard of the rural communities and that the agricultural programs for creating employment have not created real employment nor reduce poverty.

According to Akande (2014), public policies aimed at creating youth employment are faced with multiple challenges including lack of finance, the absence of good administration and implementation, unimpressive responses from participants, and unqualified resource personnel handling the programs. Often the required investigations that underpin formulation of good policies are not carried out, which can create gaps in the policies and can lessen the desired impact. Hence Olaitan (2006) notes that one of the major challenges faced by developing countries is devising appropriate development strategies that will capture the financial services needs of farmers and agriculture intervention. Good administration is also not only hindered by the difficulties of policy development, but can simply be disrupted by persistent power struggles and conflicts of roles between elected and traditional authorities. Weak institutional capacity, high turn-over of key staff like accountants, economists and other specialists; ineffective participation of the local communities due to lack of information, knowledge and skills; and inadequate financial resources all can have a part to play on the successful implementation of intervention programs (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security 2011).

Similarly, Akande's (2014) analysis of the National Accelerated Poverty Reduction Program (NAPEP) of the Nigerian government notes that the administrative/recurrent profile of the program was too large for its meagre yearly budgetary allocation. Furthermore, many of the available funds for the program went to overhead and administrative costs in offices spread over the entire country, limiting impact. On the other hand, the National Directorate of Employment had no openings of its own to engage unemployed youths, providing only vocational training to young school leavers. The program had insufficient funds to provide start-off capital for the youths who completed their training. As a result, programs for which successes were anticipated (for example in Nigeria) since the 1980s yielded poor results and have not led to drastic improvements despite modifications in later the years (Akande 2014).

Despite the budgetary flaws in the intervention program identified by Akande (2014), Nwanyanwu, Chuckwuemeka, and Amadi (2014), Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (2011) and Olulu and Kalu (2013), the selection of participants for the program also created loopholes for failure. Ogbeide, Ele and Ikheloa (2015) noted that though this approach to providing employment for the youths is good, it must take into cognisance the personal

interests of the youth and the locality where they were raised. It is not uncommon that young people indicate interest in participating in agricultural employment intervention programs without real interest or commitment to the intended outcome. For some it is a way of having their slice of the national cake (Ogbeide, Ele & Ikheloa 2015).

The importance of resilience in agricultural development at individual and community levels cannot be over emphasised. Where young people have grown up prior to their participation in the programs and how much personal interest they have in agriculture, influence their “real” adoption of agriculture as a means of employment, livelihood and as a vehicle for reducing poverty (Ogbeide Ele & Ikheloa 2015).

### **Operationalisation of the study**

The study was conducted by qualitative research. The research was planned as an interpretive study, seeking understanding of how those involved in agriculture employment intervention programs appraise the level of success and how to improve them. The objective of the survey method was to reveal the participants' range of experiences, behaviours towards the programs and the perceptions that drive them. The data for the study was gathered from farmers that have participated in the programs and agricultural staff that have been involved.

Apart from the traditional contact methods, social media and professional networks were used to source discussants. All the participants were drawn from Oredo, Ovia South West and Ikpoba Okha Local Government Areas (LGA) of Edo State, Nigeria. Seven participants from each of the LGA were selected by convenience sampling method. However, they all had a level of association with the subject matter, such as being a current or previous beneficiary of the programs, had been involved in some capacity in the management of the programs or provided facilities/supplies to the programs beneficiaries. Participants from each LGA constituted a group and three groups were formed to discuss the subject matter. Participants in the survey formed a focus group as they were an assembly of informed individuals about the subject matter, capable to individually present the views or perceptions held about agriculture as an employment intervention program. Participants had a male to female ratio of 65% to 35% respectively. The focus group discussion for participants from Oredo and Ikpoba Okha LGAs was conducted first on the same day due to the close proximity of their administrative headquarters followed by that in Ovia South West. Eleven questions were asked in total and these were summarised into three categories:

- Issues in youth employment;
- Issues in agriculture employment intervention program and;
- How to increase the success of the intervention program.

All focus groups discussions were recorded on audiotape. The discussants from Oredo LGA vehemently opposed video recording of the discussions. For consistency, the video recording was dropped. The audio recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Office Word in window 10 and codes were assigned to every focus group discussants. Similarly, code was assigned to the individual interviews and the responses were summarised into three categories - Attitude of youths toward agriculture; Agriculture employment intervention program and; Issues in the agriculture employment intervention program.

The analysis of the credibility, dependability, confirmability and integrity of the data and the discussants was done by considering the responses of each discussant against those of their reference group through assessment of consistency of responses between locations, analysing trustworthiness of responses both by content and behaviour, and reviewing body language and nonverbal signals.

## Contextual findings

### Youths and agriculture

There were a number of reasons expressed by discussants. The most important, in terms of the number of informants referring to them, were conditional reasons. As it is the role of government to reduce youth unemployment drastically, the readymade approach was to use agriculture. However, not all the intended or involved participants were attuned with the intention of the government. The result indicated that the participants in the agriculture employment program had an attitude issue with agriculture and they viewed it as hard and difficult to practice.

*Moderator: I'd like to start with something very general. What is your impression of agriculture and as a profession?*

*Osato: (Slow to respond) it is hard work... hard on the body and mind. Well probably because it is not my preferred career since I studied sociology.*

*Steve: It is different to what I would prefer to make a living out of, I have embraced it and will try to make the best of it. ...*

*Nosa: It was hard for me to adjust to. Farming as a job was strenuous to my body and I am happy I am now out of it; now in my chosen carrier path.*

*Monday: To be factual, the financial rewards does not complement the physical and material efforts. I will encourage people to it but I don't think it is really for me.*

The results also show that individuals that have been involved in agriculture prior to their involvement in the agriculture employment intervention program have better coping abilities and are more resilient.

*Moderator: Do you think your interest in agriculture employment has any relationship with where you lived?*

*Linda: Well I think where you grow up can affect your choice of work. I have lived my whole life in the village and farming is our job. Probably living in the village helped me to be successful in agriculture business.*

*Steve: No doubt having grown up in the rural area helped to adapt to agriculture as an employment opportunity. It has been a way of life for us.*

*Osato: I think that people that grew up in the village helped their parents in farm work. So are able to do farming as their main work. ... it is very difficult to adapt to village life when you have lived in the city; it is possible but I struggled.*

*Nosa: Living in rural area helps to adopt agriculture as an employment. Youths from the city can also adapt to agricultural job. A lot of support is needed for the adaptation e.g. financial support, emotional support and technical support.*

### Agriculture employment intervention program

The result of the study indicated that the government is mainly directly or indirectly responsible for the reasons for the performance of the program. There was general support for the continuity and invigoration of the program. It was noted the supporting policies for the program must be revised. Apart from being unemployed youths, the selection criterion of participants for the program had not included other coping and penalty criteria. Furthermore the result indicated that the program implementation often was at variance with natural production cycle for cropping and system support was limited for the beneficiaries.

*Moderator: What is your perception of the success of agriculture employment intervention program?*

*Stanley: ... It is a mix bag, measuring the success is difficult but the evidence of success on ground is small. We have not done well with it in boosting food production or creating long term employment. ... The rate of drop-out from the program is high ...*

*I feel that some of the participants in the program were fraudulent – after collecting the money and the inputs which in some cases were resold to make more short term money, they disappeared....*

*Linda: Agriculture employment program is good, it helps people who have no work to do something useful with their life. I support it very well. Government should help the youth with farm jobs particularly those ones in the rural area. When they have jobs, they will not want to go to the city to look for job that is not existing.*

### **Issues in agriculture employment intervention program**

This study explored the issues in the intervention program, particularly the reasons for the high turnover of participants and general performance. While discussants agreed that the approach is good – in short the best alternative for creating jobs considering the level of development of the country, the findings indicated gaps in the agriculture employment intervention policy. The implementation was haphazard, supervision and monitoring were not well resourced and youth admittance to the program lacked the necessary selection rigour required.

*Moderator: What are the problems that hampered the success of the agriculture employment intervention program?*

*Steve: Like I said before, agriculture as an employment option, need commitment because it is hard, physical work at the stage we are in now. ... So youths that like farming, fishing or livestock would be better for the job. ... Most of the people in the program are those from the city that have not done farm work before, sorry to say oh are lazy and don't want to stay in the village. ... They get the job, collect inputs and money then move away from the land.*

*Eboh: As an Agric Officer, some of the issues I see that made the program not to be as successful as it ought to be are such that can be fixed. (1) The participants are not given proper training and orientation about agriculture. Government talk about the benefit of the program without alerting the participants the harsh reality of what life is as a typical farmer. Most participants have no idea of what it takes to be a farmer. You see a lot of youth embracing the program only to back out of it because they couldn't cope. (2) Everything about agriculture is about timing. Inputs were delivered most time late. This will not guarantee optimum production because you are working against time.*

*Nosa: To add to what others had said, the program is not well supervised and at times the Agric Officers collude with absentee participants and share the allowance that were provided to them ...*

### **Discussion and recommendation**

Agriculture is a good vehicle to negate unemployment particularly in developing countries with high non-working youth population. Using agriculture as an employment strategy has yielded different outcomes for different countries; providing job and better living condition for some beneficiaries while in some other countries, no improvement in agriculture employment situation can be noticed. Instead huge financial resources are being wasted. To attain success



with agriculture as an employment intervention program, it is recommended that certain measures must be put in place for success to be guaranteed.

Despite the youths constituting the bulk of the unemployed in many countries, particularly in the developing countries like Nigeria, the approach to providing employment for them must be directed to specific youth groups based on their ability and genuine willingness. Locality and culture of the youths have influence on their work interest; government effort must be directed such that the worktypes that best suit the youths are provided to them. Agricultural employment must be targeted and first be directed at the youth living in rural communities. Rural youth are more rural-resilient, better prepared and adapted to agriculture requirements. As such, youths from rural backgrounds are more inclined to consider agriculture as an employment and development path compared to those from urban settings.

Government policies that underpin agricultural employment programs are often not well articulated such that the strategies and the resources to support the programs are either not defined or inadequate for the success of the programs. Some government's policies can be tied to tenure of the executive being often limited to four years. Therefore re-elections can also have an impact on the execution of the programs. Programs are also often rolled out without in-depth analysis and piloting before full implementation. It is therefore important that agricultural programs for employment intervention should be well articulated, designed, resourced and piloted before full implementation so as to yield sustainable results.

The agricultural employment program cycle must be well defined, to such a timeframe that the youths are able to carry out the agricultural employment with minimal reliance on the program. Five years of calibrated monitoring of performance is recommended. The first two years should be considered the foundation years where all the land, inputs and support resources will be provided in a timely order. Supervision and monitoring should be closely done and performance compared against expectation. Positive or negative variance in performance must be determined and explained. This will provide the youth information about some possible uncertainty inherent in agricultural employment. The last three years should be such that the degree and frequency of monitoring will be dependent on the progress the youth have made. Once a month, quarterly or half yearly monitoring programs can be set up to ensure that progress is continuously made in a sustainable manner.

Resourcing of the participants in the program must be adequate and timely. The provision of land and other inputs must be done so that there are no delays in any of the operations. For example, if the intervention program relates to growing of crops, the land must be provided at the right time when land preparations are to take place. The seeds must be ready prior to seeding time. Adequate resources and timeliness are important to ensuring that cropping operations are carried out within the normal climatic cycle of the crop. All things being equal, producing a crop within its climatic cycle guarantees expected harvest and can minimise the issues of pathogens and pests.

### **Limitation of the study**

The study was a qualitative investigation that involved the use of focus group discussants. The discussants were previous and present beneficiaries of the program and staff of government agriculture ministry and agencies. Their participation in the focus group was to the limit they felt will not jeopardise their employment in terms of what they said and their body language. As a researcher from overseas, the participants were not very comfortable to speak their mind. Some statements were aborted half way probably due to the sensitive nature or perceived

implication. Trust was a bit of an issue despite effort made to gain it. It was suspected that the discussants held back certain information that would have been useful to the study.

As with all qualitative research the general reliability of data was an issue. There is no absolute certainty that reliability can be achieved for applicability, despite some contributions by the discussants supported the literature reviewed. The small size of the sample makes generalisation hard.

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