



Youth and Farm Children as Invaluable Assets in Sustainable Agricultural Development

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Authors' contributions

Three lecturers co-authored this work. The work was designed by authors IUU and JTE. Author IUU wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author JTE edited the manuscript. Author KKN handled the literature search. All authors read, approved and responded to the reviewers' comments.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviewed the capacity and potentials of youth and farm children to sustaining agricultural development. Their knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour when nurtured and utilized are invaluable assets in the implementation of sustainable agricultural programmes. Findings revealed that majority of agricultural policies/programmes formulated for youth do not consider challenges confronting their participation in agricultural development. Nigerian youth and farm children perceive agriculture as hard, back breaking, dirty jobs with very little self-esteem and a profession of drudgery. Because of this perception, they seek employment in other sectors of the economy in order to empower themselves economically and attain social prestige. The effect has left bulk of agricultural production in the hands of aged farmers who produce at subsistence level that cannot sustain their families. In view of this, Nigerian government has introduced numerous agricultural programmes such as Children in Agriculture Programme (CIAP), Youth Employment in Agricultural Programmes (YEAP), etc. which aimed at reducing poverty and better the standard of living. However, efforts made at reviewing agriculture through youth programmes have not yielded the desired results. The paper therefore recommends need assessment of youths before programme planning and implementation and capacity building through extension education programmes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globally as the population continues to grow, there is an urgent need to increase agricultural production. Agriculture is an important sector in the economic development and poverty alleviation drive of many developing countries. In West Africa, agricultural sector offers a 'double-dividend' as it supports employment opportunities and food security. According to [1] a strong and effective agricultural sector would enable a country to feed its growing population, generate employment, earn foreign exchange and provide raw materials for industries. Nigeria is a country blessed with good climate conditions that favour agricultural production but it is passing through socioeconomic and technological changes that are separating rural development from agricultural development. According to [2] the nation's progress and growth in a developing economy like Nigeria, depends to some extent, on the growth, modernization and development of their rural areas. This is because a large proportion of the population in many developing countries live in the rural areas at such no development can be possible except the rural communities are also developed. According to [1], many studies have revealed that a large proportion of the population live in the rural areas, and that, farm children and the youth constitute the highest percentage of the rural population [2].

Generally, youth comprise of young men and women, in-school and out-of-school, working and unemployed, married and unmarried, with children or still children themselves. There is no agreed definition of "Youth" but according to Population Reference Bureau (PRB) youths are those in the 10-24 years age group, to them, the youth include pre-teens and teenagers (10-19years) and young adults (20-24years). [3] defined youth as people within the age group of 15-24 years; "Adolescence" covers the age between 10-19 years while 10-24 years of age are referred to "Young people". In this context, we consider farm children and youth to belong to 10-24 years of age which is referred to as "Young people" by World Health Organisation. Population of young people in the world today is becoming vast and varied. About three billion people in the world are under the age of 25, and in many developing countries these age group make up nearly one-third of the population. Studies have it that 60% of children within age

brackets of 5 to 17 work in agriculture around the world and this translates to more than 129 million boys and girls, 67.5% of which are unpaid family members [4]. Report from [5] has estimated 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 working in developing countries of the world. About 75% of these children live in rural areas and 25% in urban areas [6]. This implies that most working children are located in rural areas that have agriculture as the major occupation. Report by International Institute of Tropical Agriculture [7], states that farmers rarely employ children from outside their families to help them in farming activities. Rather they prefer their children mostly in the age range of 7-15 years to operate as labourers in majority of the farm operations. According to [8], some cultures enforce children working in the farms as a natural condition for which they are born or raised. This study was affirmed by [9] that children involvement in farming is a normal process to promote continuity and sustainability of farming culture in most African countries. In a typical African family, male children are expected to assist their fathers in farming activities while female children are to assist their mothers in processing and marketing of farm produce. In south-western Nigeria, study by [10] reveals that the father gives a small portion of land to the son at the age of 10-12 to practice farming on his own during his spare time. He further reported that the process lasts between the ages of 15 – 18 years. Several studies have confirmed that majority of the rural children in rural communities started farming activities at a tender age of four. [11] Submits that children work in various activities in the agricultural sub-sectors, such as crop and livestock farming, fishing and fish farming, cattle herding and forestry and these activities have contributed enormously to food security and rural household survival. In essence, this has translated into improved level of food sufficiency, survival of agro-based industries and a level of increase in foreign reserves [12]. Studies by [13], revealed that of all the family resources, labour is the most crucial and it is a major factor of production that produces capital and entrepreneurship. He further emphasized that family labour still performs roles in providing manpower for production and distribution within agriculture and other sectors of the economy despite specialization of function as the society advances and becomes more complex. Young people are therefore described as powerhouse for attaining

sustainable agricultural and food security in Nigeria [14]. Consequently, [15] confirmed that young people are naturally endowed to take over farm responsibilities from the present ageing farmers. Apart from these responsibilities, young people have special characteristics such as capacity and ability to produce, they are excellent source of ideas and innovation, they are skilful and can withstand high risk thus will have ability to adopt new technology faster as compared to old farmers and adults. In essence Nigerian young people are industrious, adventurous, and quick to learn at such representing both the present and future farmers and food processors of tomorrow's rural sustainability. With these characteristics and the natural endowments of replacing the ageing farmers they are thereby considered as invaluable assets in sustainable agricultural development. The paper reviews the reasons for focusing on young people for agricultural development, challenges of young people to participate in agriculture and strategies to effective participation of young people in sustainable agriculture development.

2. WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Implicit in this definition is the idea that in order to meet the social and economic needs of people today and in the future, there must be continued efforts towards poverty eradication, human rights, and equity, as well as sustainable consumption and protection of our natural resources [16]. Young people are important to our sustainable future not just because of their unprecedented numbers but because globally, fertility rates are falling. This means that the current generation of young people will have smaller cohorts of young people to support them as they themselves age. That means they must be able to support themselves and thrive as they age. There are more young people between the ages of 10 and 24 today in developing countries than at any other time in human history. Even the more developed countries as a region are projected to be home to growing numbers of people in this age group from 2021 until the early 2030s [17].

Presently, the population of this age group is slightly less than 1.8 billion in a world population of 7.3 billion [17]. To affirm this, the Population

Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [18] report has revealed a great increase from 721 million people aged 10 to 24 in 1950, when the world's total population was 2.5 billion and projects under its "medium fertility" scenario (often considered the "most likely" demographic outcome) to 2 billion by the middle of this century.

Nigeria, like most developing countries, has a youthful population structure in which more than 40 percent of about 150 million people are under the age of 20 years [19]. One out of every five people in the country today is between the ages of 10 and 19 [20]. By 2050, ageing is projected to proceed at various rates in all countries of the world. This demographic reality, tied to the ongoing shift in the balance of world population from younger to older people, creates risks as a cursory look at the global farming system depicts an ageing agricultural system. The average age today of a farmer in Nigeria is between 55 and 60 years (except for those involved in agribusiness) and by 2050, it is expected to rise to between 85 and 90 years. It is doubtful if the present ageing farmers can adopt the new technologies needed to sustainably increase agricultural productivity, and ultimately feed the projected population of 9 billion come 2050 while protecting the environment. As such there is an urgent need for targeting younger generation into sustainable agricultural development since a young person aged 10 today will have become more than 30 years in 2050, the target year for achieving the sustainable development goals. Today's youth will also shoulder the responsibility for supporting the existing and growing population of elderly persons. Their aspirations will influence our sustainable future. They have higher expectations than the generations before them for self-direction, freedom and opportunity. The information age has taught them their human rights and given them a broader vision of what their lives could be [21].

Ultimately, young people in all countries today are tomorrow's parents, workers, investors, active citizens and leaders. They have the potential to be agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation. The ways in which young people are able to address their aspirations and challenges and fulfil their potential will influence current social and economic conditions and the well-being and livelihood of future generations [22]. When fully engaged, educated, healthy,

productive and empowered to realize their full potential and enjoy their rights, young people can help stop multigenerational poverty and can contribute effectively to the preservation and strengthening of their communities and national resources.

Another factor why young people are important in sustainable agricultural development is unemployment situation amongst this group. The rate of youth unemployment worldwide remains at very high levels, both in developed and developing countries [23]. In a global report of unemployment trend of 2013, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) stated that 73.4 million youth between the ages of 15 and 24 were unemployed (about 36 per cent of the world's 202 million unemployed people). In the world's least developed countries, every year about 15 million young people enter a labour force in which the large majority of workers suffer from unemployment, underemployment, or vulnerable employment [24,25]. In addition, an estimated 6.4 million young people have given up hope of finding a job and have dropped out of labour market altogether [26]. The [27] reported that youth unemployment is a symptom of lack of employment opportunities in underdeveloped and low income countries. Given the lack of employment opportunities and consequent uncertain future, young Nigerians are forced to engage in unorthodox forms of livelihood such as indulging in criminal activities or joining armed conflict, kidnapping, prostitution, illicit drug trade, boko haram menace and others [26]. In line with this study, [28] identified youth unemployment and underemployment as a major cause of social instability and recommends job creation for youth as a precondition for poverty eradication and sustainable development in Africa.

As long as many of the youths remain unemployed, in abject poverty, they will remain vulnerable to many social vices. As the adage says, "an idle mind is a devils workshop". In order not to devastate the lives and future ambitions of our youth it is therefore necessary to embrace agricultural programme as the bulwark for job creation. Agricultural development in West Africa offers a "double-dividend" as it creates employment opportunities and food security. Agriculture also contributes to sustainable development and growth in West Africa and it's the only way to end poverty.

Today's youth (girls, boys, young adolescents and young adult) are important to the future

because the majority of them are growing up in poor countries where they are facing challenges of education and weak health systems, lack of jobs or income-earning opportunities.

Investments in human development targeting young people, including adolescents, are most critical to ensure that they have the capabilities and opportunities to define their futures, and to spur the innovations needed for a sustainable future.

3. CHALLENGES TO RURAL YOUTHS' PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURE

The major challenges of youth participation in agriculture in Nigeria include the following:

- Agriculture is viewed as a peasant occupation for the poor, illiterate and entails backwardness.
- Lack of access and control over land
- Lack of start –up capital
- Lack of financial support due to their lack of collateral and financial literacy
- Lack of vocational training and extension services
- Limited access to market and limited purchasing power which leads to lower prices on products
- Lack of storage systems
- Poor educational system
- Limited extension services
- Lack of modern farm machines/ techniques
- Poor infrastructural facilities

3.1 Other Challenges

Other factors that militate against youth involvement in agriculture activities includes; access to inputs which is fundamental to agricultural performance even though high rate of inflation causes high prices which may constrain the performance, inadequate processing and storage facilities, unsafe environments, social discrimination, homelessness and inadequate housing and socio-economic pressure.

4. STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF YOUTHS AND CHILDREN IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Many government regimes have initiated programmes aimed at involving youths in

agriculture such as Young Farmers Club, Children in Agriculture Programme (CIAP), Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme (YEAP) and Agricultural Development Programmes among others. Despite these efforts and past interventions in Nigeria, young people still have strong apathy toward agriculture. It is on this note that the following strategies are proposed to captivate youth interest in agricultural activities.

- First strategy is to emphasize the need to integrate agricultural science into primary, secondary and tertiary education curricula. Agricultural science should be made a compulsory subject both as an examination subject in secondary school level and a general study (GST) course in tertiary institutions in schools across the country.
- Both private and government schools should embark on “Rebrand Operation Feed the Nation” where schools will produce food for the communities surrounding them.
- There should be policy for school to own at least 5-7 hectares of land before such schools are approved by government.
- All the school should collaborate with ADPs located in their various states. Also, all agricultural teachers should be trained on modern agriculture by ADPs officials.
- Practical agriculture should carry 70 marks while theory takes 30 in continuous assessment of students.
- Pupils should be taught how to produce food from farm to table in their school gardens.
- Students should be taught to preserve seeds for the next season and set up a seed bank.
- School gardens should be established to teach techniques such as organic fertilizer use, harvesting and food processing among others.
- Produce grown by schoolchildren should be sold to restaurants, hotels and the local stores around their communities.
- In secondary schools, students should be exposed to opportunities in agronomy, maintenance of farming equipment, marketing and packaging.
- In higher education, connecting universities with farming communities is essential in order to broaden knowledge, increase research and development dissemination and enhancing local problem-solving.
- It is equally important to connect educational institutions with labour market opportunities and to build strong partnerships with employers to ensure that the skills of agricultural professionals respond to labour market needs so that young graduates are employable [29].
- Similarly, Youth Resource Centre (NRC), should be established in all LGAs in the country. The centres should have computers, printers and photocopiers, as well as telephones, television, radios and a small library which offers a selection of books, newspapers and magazines. In each centre, Information Management System should be installed to enable young farmers have access to information that will help them improve their production and marketing performance. Each centre should be staffed by personnel in business and agriculture including NYSC members (who have been trained in ICT) to provide training, guidance, advice and information to young farmers. NYSC is known due to its wide coverage of rural areas in Nigeria, and their primary assignment is to teach in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. They can provide a linkage between schools and resource centres. Also, they can provide the man-power and high level competence required in the management of Youth Resource Centres (YRC) and in training in-school and out-of school rural youths on ICT use for agricultural development.
- To succeed in this, concrete feasibility studies should be carried out for the labour market on the basis of which agricultural skills and products are needed most. Then, training session should commence with theme on modern farming techniques and value chain processes. Each participant should be trained on how to manage agriculture as a successful enterprise with emphasis on important aspects such as product selection, marketing and bookkeeping.
- The centre should link young farmers by e-mail, mobile phone text messages and radio to local partners such as the National Agricultural and Information service, the Nigeria Agriculture Research Institute and the Organic Producers and Processors of Nigeria. The IMS system should link young farmers to a range of agricultural services that can provide information on weather, pests and pest control, seeds,

inputs, soil testing and other issues. These linkages will enable young farmers to interact with each other and share experiences, challenges and solutions.

- Youth Resource Centre (YRC) would also collaborate with ADPs to assist youth's access to credit, providing assistance in business planning and proposal development, so that young farmers can apply for youth loans and credit.

Finally, making farming more rewarding and life in agricultural environment more attractive requires access to functional infrastructures such as good feeder roads, electricity, pipe borne water, well equipped health centres with drugs and facilities, credit institutions, small-scale agro processing technologies, agro processing etc. with all these put in place youth's migration to urban centres would be reduced and sustainable agricultural development would be enhanced.

5. CONCLUSION

Young people in remote areas migrate to cities because they do not find enough incentives, profitable economic opportunities and attractive environment to live in and work. Productive infrastructure are very necessary to reduce rural-urban drifts and transform the rural landscape and in the process bring a new picture of agriculture that is attractive and lucrative for rural youths.

Youths are the group who use ICT tools (mobile phones, computers, internets etc) extensively and the fact that these are presently being used in agriculture may help to attract youth to this sector. Education and capacity building programmes for rural youths should be redefined in a more participating way and focus on agricultural business and knowledge sharing.

From the early years of infancy and primary school, the nobility of agriculture needs to be instilled in our children by incorporating agricultural science into the curriculum and making it a compulsory science subject. Also, it should be included as general study (GST) course for all undergraduate students in the universities all over the nation.

Agriculture in Nigeria needs youth to be able to face the challenge of feeding a growing population and, at the same time, find a range of opportunities for employment that can be sustainable and profitable if some support is

provided. Therefore, efforts should be made to integrate the views of youths in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes related to agriculture.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is need to review the curriculum of both formal education and vocational education to reflect the dynamics of agricultural sector.
- Youth opinion should be engaged in decision making processes related to the information society as students and as citizens.
- Providing targeted marketing opportunities for primary and value-added agricultural products produced by young entrepreneurs through special arrangements with schools, hotels, supermarkets etc.
- Youth's needs should be assessed before targeting them for capacity building.
- There should be policy for both private and public schools to showcase their agricultural products yearly in form of workshops, field day and agricultural show.
- Competitions between schools on "who produces best" can promote agriculture if incorporated into educational policy.
- Government should provide land grants for young people who are interested in agriculture, supported by financial technical assistance and training.
- Experimental farming programmes directed towards young people should be initiated and extension services expanded to maintain improvements in agricultural production and marketing.
- States, local government and private sectors should be involved in developing the agricultural sector to enhance its sustainability.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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