



IMPROVING RURAL FARMER SKILLS IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION THROUGH EXTENSION SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

Rural farmer in Nigerian produce over 85% of the food and fiber crops for our domestic industries. The demand for more food to meet the ever increasing Nigerian population posed serious challenges to food producers. This paper dwelt on the strong correlation, which exist between rural farmers and Extension workers which advocated for improving the rural farmers technological skills, knowledge and ideas, necessary for producing more food and changing from domestic pattern of production to advanced technological level through extension services. The education of extension workers was discussed, its objective and strategies for disseminating the information to farmers. Why extension services should be used and its co-relation. Problems inherent in extension services were discussions of the paper.

KEY WORDS: Improving, Farmer, Skill, Agriculture, Extension Services.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a developing country, where agriculture is the backbone of her economy before the oil boom of 1970s and 1980s. Agriculture employed directly and indirectly over 80% of the country's population. It has been declining over the years simply, because of lack of modern methods of farming, organizations and technologies which the farmers have not received. They were producing food crops and livestock the same way as their ancestors. That is the reason, why, Ogba, (2008) maintain that the beginning of this 21st century has relative equilibrium in Nigerians agricultural society and have been disturbing due to population expansion. This increased demand for food and raw materials for industries is a serious challenge to the human race. The traditional system of farming has not been able to satisfy the food demand by ever increasing population worldwide. Soil and pasture resources are now under great stress as a result of constant utilization and without expansion system. In another development Eze (2005) is of the view that Agricultural skills are needed by rural farmers in order to get more population employed through more efficient use of agricultural resources to reduce hunger and poverty. In a bid to achieve these positive challenges and encourage massive food production, farmers must be given access to agricultural skills, knowledge about production and marketing. Nwite (2006) stressed that rural farmers required advice and assistance to help them improve their methods of production, marketing and home living: in the same vain, Nweke (2005) revealed that rural farmers needed technical competencies to avoid learning by imitation like their ancestors. This could enable farmers manipulate their current tools, equipment and machineries meant for raising animals and growing crops. Ndem (2006) maintain that farming has undergone several stages of changes from dark ages to the period of technological

advancement. He supported that farmers still need modifications especially for rural farmers that have not acquired the needed competences, skills, ideas and knowledge for agricultural production.

Furthermore Ogba (2007) indicate that extension services are the best option for transformation of new ideas, skills, knowledge and technologies to the rural farmers for, maximum food production in Nigeria. Modern extension, traced its origin in England, where a study programmer for factory workers evolved into the London Machines institution. Eze (2005) revealed that similar groups sprang up throughout England and ultimately many machines institutes formed a national union. He stressed that in United states, the passage of the MorillAnudgramt Act gave impetus to the formal ideas of using colleges to take practical jobs for the masses. Knapp (2004) stress that a progressive agriculturist and president of IOWA state College, IOWA drafted the legislation that led to the establishment station at the state land grant institution of agricultural experiment station at the land grant institution. This is a good stimulant to agricultural extensions and growth. Settlers were brought in to demonstrate good farming practices. Demonstration farm to show how to control break out of attack to farmers' crops. That led to a co-operative extension services citizens at state, local government and community levels. Extension services expanded to all parts of the world. In Nigeria the Norwegian church Relief Agricultural project (NORCAP) (1970s) ran an indelible impact in agricultural transformation in Nigeria by establishing extension services in collaboration with the ministry of agriculture in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria. Agricultural extension which geared toward assisting people to adapt to improved method of farming. The European companies introduced extension, which aimed at first increasing production of crops and animals as primary concern to

improving the living standard of farmers. Examples of project with extension approaches were cocoa rubber, cola nut groundnut and animal productions plantation in Northern Nigeria and oil palm in Eastern Nigeria.

Objectives of Agricultural Extension in Nigeria

1. To contribute in proving abundant food and fibre crops.
2. To develop farm families to involve in an effective social and economic unit.
3. To develop systematic process of leadership within communities.
4. To persuade rural farmers to accept changes and adopt new innovations.
5. To Assist rural farmers in decision making

Based on the origin of agriculture extension is in the basic objectives of agricultural extension in Nigeria suit the purpose of this paper. Since, it aimed at improvement of skills of rural farmers and agricultural productivity. The paper tends to create changes in skill through extension services to the rural farmers; the value for the change in skill of productivity is to accept new ideas of technologies worldwide. It is only by learning agricultural skills and attitude, knowledge, ideas that the result desirable can be achieved. Attitude implies likes and dislikes which the farmers are feeling about new ideas. The question which may follow up is what are the strategies for inducing the new skills, ideas, knowledge to the rural farmers through agricultural extension workers in Nigeria.

Strategies for Disseminating necessary skill, knowledge, attitude, ideas and information to the rural farmer through extension agents

Agricultural extension workers seek to teach rural farmers better farming skills that are based on proven scientific knowledge. Oliatian (2005) opines that before extension agent will be able to effectively convey scientific research information to the rural farmers, the extension agent must first of all be good communicators and must choose appropriate methods of communications. Ugwu (2002) is of the view that the message which the extension workers want to give rural farmers are facts, ideas, skills, knowledge needed to be broken into basic constituent for easily understood steps. Based on the fact that extension is essentially learning and teaching process which utilizes individuals, groups, and masses these strategies were adopted.

1. Mass Strategies for Dissemination of Agricultural Extension:

These strategies are used when agricultural extension is aimed to reach larger number of rural farmers at the same time. The message is passed through channels, such as radio, televisions, mobile phone, film shows, newspapers, newsletters and posters. Maunder (1973) said that this method of information dissemination assist rural farmers to improve in the method of farming and techniques necessary for increasing production efficiency and income of rural farmers. In the same vein, Oliatian (2005) is of the view that extension was to describe method of spreading knowledge, and ideas from the wall of university for the benefit of the masses of the people outside. Ogba (2007) indicated that the whole idea was to ensure that knowledge should spread far

and wide among the people in different farming places where they live and work.

2. Group Strategies for Dissemination of Skills to Rural Farmer through Agricultural Extension:

These strategies utilizes channels such as meeting in the villages and communities, demonstration farm and field days where all the villages will converge in a particular area to discuss necessary skills needed for a particular crop production or livestock. Similarly Okeke (2005) reveals that group strategies will harmonies efficient rural farming skill technologically to ensure competence, for recreation needs, in rural farming, reducing hunger and poverty, to achieve successes in the millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Ngwu (2000) explain these group strategies of extension services as non-formal, education for farmers and their families as means of attaining higher standard of living for farmers for themselves. it will make rural farmers to contribute to the national development effort. Okozie (2003) is of the view that group extension work develops more positive influence in the rural farmers as well as enhancing useful information spreading and practical knowledge for the purpose of training their mental and technical skills in contributing to the social and economic development of Nigeria.

3. Individual Strategies for Dissemination of Farming skills to the Rural Farmers through Extension Services:

These strategies include personal visit to individual farmers by extension agents. Agricultural extension officers visit institutions like ADPS, RBRDAS and ministry of Agriculture Convey research finding of Agriculture to the rural farmers by using various methods. Further Ogba (2007) is of the view that individual strategies enhance faster learning for rural farmers in their work place through well trained extension agents. These agents shoulder the responsibilities of teaching farmer modern skills in farming system. He stressed that the main aim of extension is to teach rural farmers how to raise their skill and standard of living by their own effort, through wise and effective use of available resources.

4. The most Recent Strategies Employed in ADPs is Training and Visit (T&V) which involve monthly technical meetings among researchers, senior extension officers and subject matter specialist. The meeting requires important technical problems which is brought forward and possible solutions will be found. The extension officers and subject specialists in turn convey the information to the village's levels, extension staff at their fortnightly meeting for direct dissemination of the information to the rural farmers. Therefore training and extension take place simultaneously.

Odo (2005) maintained that efficient information delivery system in extension services requires technical experts desirable channels to assist the people acquire the necessary knowledge. Furthermore, Nweke (2006) said that T & V is the best and faster job in stimulating rural farmers in villages and communities to make changes and improve their standard of living. He stressed that

persuasion, gradual processes of re-education, services are necessary for rural farmers.

Reasons for the use of agricultural extension services to improve rural farmer skills for agricultural production

1. **Agricultural Extension Information is Teaching and a Learning Process:** Extension programmers are mounted to teach agriculture skills, sanitation and nutritional technologies to farmers, who are expected to adopt the new method of farming. According to Nwite (2005), extension agents are good teachers and communicators; who can teach new farming packages to the communities, first by obtaining their confidence. He stress that this can be done by approaching the community's needs before mounting the programme.
2. **Agricultural extension as a link between research and farmers:** Since extension is concerned with the dissemination of knowledge, ideas and techniques, therefore, it must develop the necessary skills required by rural farmers. It will help farmers to adopt what they have learnt easily and practice them. The knowledge and technologies have been developed from Agricultural Research Institutes. Consequently Olaitan (2005) stressed that extension has a direct link between Agricultural research and the farming communities and villages. The link is what the government or researchers want farmers to do and what the farmers wants government or researchers to do for them. The established relationship is aimed at educating the rural farmers with farming skills, ideas, knowledge and technologies necessary for improved food production and livestock for human consumption.
3. **Agricultural extension is a program for rural dwellers:** Extension has a direct link to rural people, since these people form the vast majority of people whose sole means of livelihood is agriculture. They are outside the urban society. Hence, they do not benefit from most of the investment made by government. These rural farmers suffer from illiteracy, lack modern skills, and cannot utilize scientific advances easily without careful assistance, to improve their living production system. Based on this, Okeke (2005) stressed that; to improve their standard of living cannot be done by imposing new ideas different new ideas different from their culture. Without first, giving reason for such changes in production.
4. **Extension is concerned with solving immediate problems of farmers:** Ogba (2003) opines that agricultural extension program is directed at immediate problem of the farmers in the villages and communities. He stressed that farmer's need current solution to the current problems in their farming activities and for improving productivity. In other words Odo (2005) is of the view that extension services must involve step by step, planned and systematic organization for direct information dissemination necessary for solving farmers' immediate problems. It requires mobilization of individual resources to help improve agricultural activities in the rural areas for massive food production.

Problems Of Extension Services

1. **Conflict in state and federal government roles in agriculture:** The 1963 constitution viewed agriculture as a residual item placed under regional responsibility. But the 1979 constitution placed agriculture on the concurrent list making it a joint responsibility for both state and federal governments. This perhaps reflected conflicted inherent in the Federal Government direct agricultural implementation at grass-root. For example, in 1983 there was advancement a divergent relationship between federally initiated agricultural development programs and those of the States Rivers Basin Development authorities also operated in most states, independent of the state initiated programs.
2. **Farmers and Extension Workers Ratio:** Daramola (2002) identified inadequate extension staff as one of the constraints to agricultural development program implementation. He asserted that the worst is the fact that the ratio of extension workers to farmers was too high in Nigeria. One extension worker was to cover 3,000 farmers in the Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria. The ratio of extension workers in Northern Nigeria is 1:5000 farmers. Ashby and Kincaid in Obibuaka (1983) perceive the above ratio as out of tune within meaningful extension work any were.
3. **Lack of coordination and harmonization of policies:** The strategies adopted in imparting the knowledge so after can be said to be institutional in reform. However, of each strategy was carried out in isolation without any serious plan and consideration of the policies. The results have been at best marginal in ensuring agrarian reform.
4. **Propagation of inappropriate technology:** It is undesirable that the technology propagated in Nigeria, since, independence seems to be at variance with the natural endowments of the nation. The attempt has not been directed toward competent expertise and skill manpower. For example, when land is cleared and cultivation services are needed to be provided at subsidized rates, complementary harvesting, storage and processing services are always lacking.
5. **Poor Policy Implementation:** Lack of implementation discipline and sustained political will and commitment has been a major serious cause of our persistent failures in extension services. Discussions surrounding implementation of plan documents of extension services clearly show that allocation in policy matters was not their major focus of attention.

Strategies for minimizing mis-management and frauds in extension services

The following strategies were recommended for minimizing the mismanagement and frauds in extension services.

1. Inclusion of extension services in the annual budget. This will be properly specified in the agricultural sector, to enable the three tiers of government legislate properly on the effective ways of ensuring appropriate implementation policy and enhance grassroots approach to the extension services in reaching the rural farmers. The 'Laiz faire' attitude about extension services will be eliminated and appropriate law will

arouse the interest of practitioners of agriculture in the rural areas. The expectation of the government will reach the individual farmers and ensure massive food production.

Adoption of multi-dimensional/disciplinary approach

This implies integrating approach from different sectors of agricultural development agencies like FADAMA, ADPS, Agro-Allied, marine and Fishery policy, forestry and National resources Management, agricultural agencies like World Bank, UNICEF and USAID assist in the grassroots development of agricultural sector. The involvement of the agencies will go along to boost extension services to the rural farmers.

Adoption of effective supervision management system (AESMS)

Supervision of extension agent to ensure that their primary job of teaching the rural farmers to ensure that the researched scientific package information, skills and knowledge will be achieved. It was observed from different zones and areas that some extension agents resorted to commercial riders with their official machines, meant for reaching the rural farmers at the appropriate time for immediate solutions to their problems. The senior extension officers in the agricultural developed agencies headquarters need to be supervised as well, since, the senior extension officers and subject specialist after technical meeting among researchers abandon the junior staff unsupervised. The senior officers should not use their official vehicles meant for supervision to other personal domestic works.

Adoption of effective scientific and technological approach (AESTA)

These strategies involve the use of practical application of scientific method of crops, livestock and fishery production, within their environment as a demonstration farm, site and field trips. Technological approaches involve real utilization of machines, making them available within the reach of the farmers. This will persuade them to have interest on modern techniques rather than use of hoe and cutlass. This is motivational devices for grassroots acceptance by the small farmers.

CONCLUSION

Most of the food produced in Nigeria comes from the rural farmers. The demand for more food in Nigeria daily is a continuous excise. The only ways to meet the food demand is to educate the rural farmers with the new technological skills for massive agricultural production. The critical reviews about extension, origin, objectives and principle proved the assurance of using extension to improve the rural farming skill for more food and fiber crops production. Finally, the 21st century challenge of massive food production should provoke our youths to face this threatening condition in human race by supporting both rural farmers and extension workers to achieve the target of food production through the recommended strategies.

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