STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION AND CHALLENGES OF COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMME IN RIVERS STATE, SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The study examined extension agents' and farmers' perception of government's commercial agricultural programme and identified challenges limiting effective implementation of the programme in Rivers State using Obio/.Akpor Local Government Area as case study. Structured questionnaire and interview schedule were utilized to elicit information from 15 extension agents and 80 farmers, respectively, making a total of 95 respondents. The data collected were analysed using percentage and means scores. Results of the study revealed that the commercial agricultural programme focused more on arable crops, fisheries and livestock production, but both group of respondents were dissatisfied with the agro-processing and storage components of the programme. Farmers' major constraints in undertaking the commercial farming include: lack of storage (m = 3.00) and processing (m = 2.93) facilities, poor credit facility (m = 2.81), climate change (m = 2.72), pests and diseases (m = 2.52) and poor extension services (m = 2.52). The extension agents highlighted late release of funds, irregular payment of salaries (m = 2.73), lack of allowances and poor teaching aids (m = 2.33) as major impediments of the commercial agricultural programme. It was suggested that more attention should be made on agro-processing, storage facilities and techniques to aid food security. Government should provide production inputs promptly and give adequate work incentives to enhance effectiveness of the commercial agricultural programme in the state.

Keywords: Perception, Impediments, Commercial Farming

Introduction

Nigeria is listed by Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) among nations that are at the moment technically unable to meet their food needs from agricultural production at low levels of inputs and appear likely to remain so even at intermediate levels of inputs between 2011 and 2025 (FAO, 2010). Investment in commercial agricultural has, therefore become pertinent to alleviate food insecurity for the teaming population of Nigeria. As stated by Adeye (2010), about 70% of Nigeria population depend on agriculture and its related activities for the provision of their basic needs and they may react, interpret and perceive commercial agricultural programme in different ways. Oni, (2010) sees commercial agriculture as large-scale production of crops for sale, intended for wide-spread distribution to wholesalers and retail outlets. It also include livestock production and grazing. The author states further that commercial agriculture differs significantly from subsistence agriculture as the main objective of commercial agriculture is to achieve higher profits through economies of scale and specialization, introduction of capital intensive farming techniques, labour –saving technologies and maximization of crop yields per hectare through synthetic and natural resources.

Commercial Agricultural Development Programme is basically established to improve agricultural production in Nigeria by supporting the commercialization of agriculture production, processing and market outputs among farmers (RSADP, 2011). The agency states that commercial Agricultural Development Programme is supporting the Federal Government of Nigeria Strategy options of diversifying into won-oil sources of growth and away from dependence on oil and gas. Further, explanation shows that as part of the development role of the Central Bank of Nigeria, in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Commercial Agricultural Credit Scheme was established for promoting commercial agricultural enterprises in Nigeria.

Adeye (2010) emphasized that commercial agriculture requires large capital and adoption of such mechanical system as farm tractors, farm implements and improved seeds, chemical fertilizers and favourable agricultural policies and programmes that will lift the over 60% of the taming Nigerian poor who depend largely on subsistence agriculture for survival. Inadequate funding by government and the private sector has been identified as a major impediment to Nigeria commercial agricultural programmes (Isife, et al, 2009; Okorie, 2013). According to Iheanacho (2010), 65% of Nigeria economically active population lack access to formal financial services and irrespective of the intervention of various agricultural programmes, the existence of endemic poverty among the populace still constitute quite a number of hassles for the commercialization of agriculture. The Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN (2011) notes that the challenges of financing Nigeria agriculture in respect of policies are as a result of the fact that most schemes are not adequately funded for effective performance and long gestation projects are not funded; there is due political influence on lending procedures, private financial institutions are still skeptical about government commercial agricultural programme due to cumbersome procedures, high transaction cost and inadequate infrastructure. This study, therefore seeks to examine the activities of commercial agriculture and its associated implementation challenges in Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The broad objective of the study was to ascertain the perception of farmers and extension agents and impediments associated with the implementation of commercial agricultural programme in Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the socio-economic features of the farmers;
2. ascertain farmers' level of awareness of commercial agricultural programme in the state;
3. ascertain extension agents' and farmers' perception of the commercial agricultural programme; and
4. identify the challenges limiting effective implementation and adoption of the commercial agricultural programme in the study area.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The area was chosen because of its high level of commercial agricultural activities. The local government area is made up of four districts namely: Akpor, Apara, Obio and Evo. The districts have several communities. The population of the study comprised all commercial agricultural farmers in the local government area. Also included in the population were extension agents involved in commercial agricultural programme of the Rivers State Agricultural Development Programme. Two communities were purposively selected from each of the four districts, and ten farmers from each community were randomly selected, making a sample size of eighty (80) farmers. Fifteen (15) extension agents purposively participated in the study. In all, ninety-five (95) respondents were engaged in the study.

Data were collected by the use of questionnaire and interview schedule from the extension agents and farmers, respectively. The data were analysed using percentage and mean scores derived from likert type scales. A 3-point likert type scale of highly aware (3), aware (2) and less aware (1) was developed to analyse farmers' levels of awareness of commercial agricultural activities in the study area. Also, a 4-point likert type scale of highly satisfied (4), satisfied (3), less satisfied (2) and not satisfied (1) was developed to analyse the respondents' levels of satisfaction with the various commercial agricultural projects. In addition, a 3-point likert type scale of very great extent (3), great extent (2) and less extent (1) was developed to analyse constraints affecting the implementation of commercial agricultural programme in the study area. Cut-off points were determined for the respective mean scores.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic characteristics of the farmers

Presented in table 1 are the gender, marital status, age range, educational levels, types of farm, types of labour, level of farm, farm size and farming experience of the farmers interviewed.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Farmers (n =80)

Characteristics	Frequency	%	Mean
Gender			
Male	22	27.5	
Female	58	72.5	
Marital Status:			
Single	12	15.0	
Married	48	60.0	
Separated	4	5.0	
Widow	10	12.5	
Widower	6	7.5	
Age Range			
<20	2	2.5	
20-29	16	20.0	

30-39	20	25.0	
40-49	26	32.5	40
50-59	12	15.0	
>59	4	5.0	
Educational Level			
Primary Education	40	50.0	
Secondary Education	24	30.0	
NCE/OND	8	10.0	
HND/BSc	6	7.5	
Masters	2	2.5	
Level of Farm			
Subsistence	-	-	
Commercial	80	100.0	
Types of Farm			
Crop Production	62	77.5	
Fish Farming	10	12.5	
Livestock Farming	8	10.0	
Types of Labour			
Family	4	5.0	
Hired	6	7.5	
Family and hired	70	87.5	
Farm Size			
> 1 ha	2	2.5	
1 – 2 ha	48	60.0	
3 – 4 ha	20	25.0	3
5 – 6 ha	6	7.5	
7 – 8 ha	2	2.5	
>8ha	2	2.5	
Farming Experience			
> 6	2	2.5	
6 – 10	6	7.5	
11 – 15	12	15.0	
16 – 20	45	56.3	17
21 – 25	13	16.2	
>25	2	3.5	

Source: Field survey, 2013

From table 1, majority of the farmers (72.5%) were female, while 27.5% were male. This shows that more female than male participated in the commercial agricultural programme. Most of the farmers (60%) were married, 15% single, 5% separated, 12.5% widows and 7.5% were widowers. The figures indicate that the spouses of most of the participants were still alive. About 32.5% of the farmers were within age range of 40-49 years, while other categories were below 20years (2.5%) 20-29 years (20%), 30-39 years (25%), 50-59 years (15%) and above 59 years (5%). The result indicates that majority of the farmers were still at their active age to undertake farm work. The farmers' educational attainments show that half of them (50%) had primary education, 30% secondary, 10% NCE/ONd, 7.5% HND/B.Sc, and 2.5% had masters. Their qualifications imply that they had formal education to understand and adopt modern techniques

of commercial agriculture. The table further indicates that 77.5% of the commercial agricultural farmers engaged in crop production, while 12.5% and 10% were involved in fish and livestock farming, respectively. These commercial farmers mostly used both family and hired labour (70%) for their farm work on a mean farm size of 3 hectares and a mean of 17years farming experience.

Farmers' Levels of Awareness of Commercial Agricultural Programme

Table 2 shows farmers' levels of awareness of the commercial agricultural projects. The figures indicate that the farmers were aware of arable crop projects (m = 2.73), fisheries (m = 2.22) and livestock (m = 2.10). However, they were not aware of agro-processing and storage techniques (m = 1.53). This implies that the commercial agricultural programme focused more on arable crop production projects such as cassava, rice, vegetable; fisheries such as fish ponds and artisanal; livestock such as poultry, piggery, rabbitary and grass cutter project.

Table 2: Farmers' Levels of Awareness of Commercial Agricultural Programme

Programme	Total scores	Mean (m)
Arable projects	218	2.73
Fisheries	178	2.22
Livestock	168	2.10
Agro-processing and storage	122	1.53

Source: Field Survey, 2013 $m \geq 2.0$ aware; $m < 2.0$ not aware

Stakeholders' Perception of Commercial Agricultural Programme

Table 3 depicts farmers' and extension agents' levels of satisfaction based on the projects of the commercial agricultural programme. Farmers' expression showed that they were satisfied with arable crop projects (m = 2.53), fisheries (m = 2.32) and livestock (m = 2.02). The extension agents also expressed satisfaction with arable crops (m = 2.53), fisheries (m = 2.20) and livestock (m = 2.07) projects. However, both groups of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with agro-processing and storage techniques, m = 1.03 and m = 1.20, respectively. The stakeholders were, therefore not satisfied with the agro-processing and storage component of the commercial farming programme. Table 2 has already indicated that the farmers were not much aware of agro-processing and storage activities of the commercial agricultural programme. This could be why they expressed dissatisfaction of the component. Oni (2010) and Okorie (2013) observed that one of the major challenges of commercial agriculture is high loss of products due to poor storage and processing facilities.

Table 3: Farmers' and Extension Agents' Levels of Satisfaction with Commercial Agricultural Programme

	Farmers (N = 80)		Extension Agents (n =15)	
Programme	Total scores	Mean (m)	Total scores	Mean (m)
Arable crop project	202	2.53	38	2.53
Fisheries	186	2.32	33	2.20
Livestock	162	2.02	31	2.07
Agro-processing and storage	82	1.03	18	1.20

Source: Field survey, 2013 $m \geq 2.0$ satisfied; $M < 2.0$ dissatisfied

Constraints to Effective Implementation of Commercial Agricultural Programme

The challenges faced by the farmers and extension agents in undertaking commercial agricultural programme are respectively depicted in tables 4 and 5.

In table 4, the farmers indicated that the following were limiting factors to their commercial farming: lack of storage facilities (m = 3.00), lack of processing facilities (m = 2.93), difficulty in obtaining credit and grant (m = 2.81), problem of climate change (m = 2.72), pests and diseases (m = 2.52), poor extension services (m = 2.52) and late supply of farm inputs (m = 2.42). These factors hindered their effectiveness in adopting recommended practices of the commercial farming programme. The result supports the study of Isife and Emah (2000) that found poor access to credit and other farm inputs as serious constraint to extension activities of private agricultural firms in southeastern Nigeria. Other challenges expressed by the farmers include: poor communication from the programme officers (m = 2.10), high cost of farm inputs (m = 2.41), high interest rate (m = 2.22), high labour cost (m = 2.32) and lack of modern farm implements (m = 2.22). These results clearly explain that commercial agricultural programmes are still faced with a lot of setback. This corroborates Plateau (2005) who reported that the problems confronting commercialization of agriculture in Nigeria are still many and multi-dimensional. The problem of climate variability also affect farmers' predictability of weather thereby causing food insecurity which invariably jeopardizes investment in commercial agriculture in Nigeria.

Table 4: Challenges faced by Farmers in adopting Commercial Agriculture Programme

Challenges	Total score	Mean (m)
Difficulty in obtaining credit	225	2.81
Late supply of inputs	194	2.42
Poor communication from the programme officers	168	2.10
High cost of inputs	168	2.10
High interest rate	178	2.22
Management challenges	122	1.52
Poor extension services	202	2.52
Lack of ready markets	98	1.12
Poor road network	210	2.62
High transportation cost	194	2.42
High cost of labour	186	2.32
Lack of storage facilities	240	3.00
Lack of processing facilities	235	2.93
Lack of planting materials	145	1.81
Lack of modern farm implements	178	2.22
Problems of pests and diseases	202	2.52
Problems of climate change	218	2.72

Source: Field survey, 2013 $m \geq 2.0$ Accept; $m < 2.0$ Reject

Presented in table 5 are the challenges expressed by extension agents in implementing commercial agricultural programme in Rivers State. The table reveals that late release of funds (m = 2.80), irregular payment of salaries (m = 2.73), lack of allowances (m = 2.20), lack of teaching aids (m = 2.33) and lack of cooperation of government (m = 2.13) were the main implementation problems of the commercial farming programme. These factors are administrative problems that confront most agricultural development programme and projects in

the state. Poor work incentives have been identified as serious inhibiting factors to extension agents' performance in both public and private agricultural programmes in Nigeria (Isife and Igbokwe, 1998; Isife et al, 2009 and 2010).

Table 5: Challenges faced by Extension Agents in Implementing Commercial Agricultural Programme (n = 15)

Challenges	Total score	Mean (m)
Lack of cooperation of farmers	23	1.53
Lack of cooperation of government	32	2.13
Poor salary payment by government	38	2.53
Irregular payment of salary	41	2.73
Lack of allowance	33	2.20
Lack of teaching aids	35	2.33
Late release of funds	42	2.80

Source: Field survey, 2013 $m \geq 2.0$ Accept; $m < 2.0$ Reject

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlights that the commercial agricultural programme focused more on arable crops, fisheries and livestock production with less attention on agro-processing and storage techniques and facilities. Government should therefore improve on the agro-processing component of the programme by providing modern processing and storage facilities to aid farmers' participation. Government should also make financial credit more accessible to farmers, check variability of climate conditions, strengthen extension services and provide production inputs and farm implements where necessary. The extension agents should be encouraged with adequate work incentives such as prompt and regular salaries, good allowances and modern teaching aids. Adequate consideration of these factors will strengthen and sustain commercial agriculture in the state.

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