Constraints Perceived by Farmers' Community Organizations Affecting Roles of Extension Agents in Okigwe Agricultural Zone of Imo State, Nigeria

Echetama, J. A.
Ani, A. O.
Opara, I. U.
Ojo, O. U.
Oguegbuchulam, M. N.

ABSTRACT

This study assesses the constraints perceived by farmers' community organizations affecting roles of extension agents in the Okigwe Agricultural Zone of Imo State, Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the socio-economic characteristics of the farmers, identifies major sources of agricultural information available to the farmers, ascertains the roles of extension agents, determines the perceived level of satisfaction with the roles and identified the perceived constraints to the effectiveness of extension agents in the study area. Multistage sampling technique is used to select a sample of 120 farmers. Data were collected using structured questionnaire and were analyzed using mean, frequency counts and percentages. Results show among others that the farmers were satisfied with the creation of awareness on agricultural innovations and helping farmers obtain loans. Shortage of well-trained extension agents, inadequate extension visits and low involvement of farmers in programme planning were some constraints militating against the effectiveness of extension service delivery in the Zone. It is recommended among others that more extension agents should be recruited and deployed to the rural areas to improve extension service coverage.
Keywords: Constraints, Roles, Extension Agents, Farmers, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Today's farmers are under unprecedented pressure. The world's population is closing in on seven billion, and it is projected to reach nine billion by 2050 (Towery and Werblow, 2010). Poverty eradication and food security have moved to the centre stage of the global development agenda. These are the greatest global challenges and their redress is an indispensible requirement for sustainable development in developing countries, particularly in Africa (Booms and Ahaikan, 2002). The state of rural areas is determined by a combination of factors involving unavailability of physical and institutional infrastructure,

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low standard of living resulting in low agricultural productivity as their main source of income, substandard education and poor health services among others (Shiru, 2008). This, in a bid to solve the individual farmer's problem and that of the society at large, the government opened up an agency (Agricultural Extension Service) in the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MANR). According to Nwachukwu (2005), this agency is responsible for extending scientific knowledge, improving the skills and changing the attitude of rural farmers as well as increasing their income and enhancing their living standard by their own efforts, using their own resources, efforts and manpower.

Agricultural extension has often been conceptualized as an educational process which promotes learning. It uses the combined findings of biological sciences and principles of social science to bring about change in knowledge, skill and attitude, in and out of school setting (Levbooye, 2004). According to Christoplos (2010), various extension methods and approaches have been employed to ensure that technology gets to its user. He points out that one important function of the extension agency is to produce competent and well-informed agents, who will regularly and frequently visit farmers with relevant technical messages and bring back farmer's problems to research. Bringing farmer's problems to research and taking inventions to farmers is better achieved when the farmers are organized.

Farmers' community organizations are groups of rural farmer producers coming together to form organizations based on principles of free membership to pursue specific common interest of their members – developing technical and economic activities that benefit the members and maintaining relations with partners operating in their economic and institutional environment. According to Ekong (2003), community is a locality or aggregation of families habitually living together within a definite geographical location. Also, Aguirre and Namdar (1992) view community as a group of people sharing a common understanding, who reveal themselves by using the same language, manner, laws and traditions. Ekong (2003) defines organization as a corporate group embedding structural interaction within some identifiable boundary and some divisions of labour in carrying out its functions. Organization, according to Long (1992), is a group of people or other legal entities with explicit purpose and written rules.

Farmers' organizations are sometimes organized by extension service to serve as a link, through which individual farming members could be helped to accept improved technologies on a suitable basis. It is assumed that extension agents perform quite a large number of roles ranging from advisory services, technology transfer, organizing farmers, training and educating farmers and linking them to financial institutions among others (Totilola, 2008). But their roles are not being performed effectively due to a number of reasons. Obviously these reasons are regarded as constraints and constraints are limitations or restrictions to performing certain tasks effectively. Their mandate is clear as they focus mostly on data collection and limited in advisory work without engaging in other activities related to their field of work, shortage in the extension agents available. Arekoyo (2009) also points out that several issues ranging from non availability of necessary facilities for effective implementation and functioning of extension work to poorly motivated staff, resulting

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in low morale, non-unified strategy, and lack of training for extension personnel and skill upgrading in extension. Consequently, one of the possible ways of addressing these problems is to mobilize farmers' community organizations. However, the extent to which these constraints affect roles performed by the extension agents to these farmers' community organizations is yet to be validated through a systematic study. This has consequently created a gap in knowledge. It is this gap that this study strives to address, and as such ascertain why the extension system is not keeping pace with the changing demand of the agricultural sector as it concerns the farmers' organizations. Therefore the specific objectives of this study are to:

1.   Examine the socio-economic characteristics of the farmers in the area of study,
2.   Identify major available sources of agricultural information to the farmers,
3.   Ascertain the roles played by extension agents to the farmers,
4.   Determine farmers' level of satisfaction with the roles played by the extension agents and
5.   Identify perceived constraints to the effectiveness of extension agents in playing their roles.

METHOD

This study is conducted in Okigwe Agricultural Zone of Imo State, Nigeria. The population of the study comprises a total of six (6) Local Government Areas making up the Okigwe Agricultural Zone. The L.G.As are Okigwe, Onuimo, Isiala Mbano, Ehime Mbano, Ihite Uboma and Obowo. Multistage sampling technique was used to select the sample. The first stage comprises the purposive selection of all the Six (6) LGAs in the State to enhance representativeness. The second stage involves the selection of 4 communities from each of the selected LGAs to give a total of 24 communities, using simple random sampling technique. The third stage comprises the selection of five farmers from the farmers' community organizations who are members of the selected communities to give a total of 120 farmers, using simple random sampling technique. The list of communities and farmers' community organizations were supplied by community development officers and extension agent respectively in the L.G.As. Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. A set of structured questionnaire were used to elicit data from the respondents. Data were analysed using frequency counts, percentage and mean represented in tabular form. This was used for objective 1. Likert type scaling was used for objectives 2, 3, 4, and 5. The Likert scaling type measuring instrument is represented by the formula:

$$\overline{X} = \frac{\sum Fx}{N}$$

Where $\overline{X}$ = mean score

$\sum$ = summation sign

F = frequency

N = no of respondents.

x = no of nominal value of each response category

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Three different scaling statements were used namely: 'available', 'partially available', and 'not available'; 'strongly agree', 'agree' and 'not agree'; 'very satisfied', 'satisfied' and 'not satisfied'; 'very serious', 'serious', and 'not serious' for objectives 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively.

The mean of the scaling statement was found as:

This means 2 is the weighed mean of the scaling statement. Therefore any mean value greater or equal to 2 is positive while mean value less than 2 is negative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic characteristics of the farmers: Table 1 shows that majority (74%) of the farmers were males. This implies that men own lands and can easily seek for assistance from financial institutions. A greater proportion (64.2%) was within the age range of 30 – 59 years with a mean age of 47. Majority (63.3%) were married, 62.5% attended either primary or secondary education. According to Akubuiro (2008) farmers who have had formal education are more receptive to new ideas than those who are illiterates. Majority (65%) of the respondents had a household size of 4-8 people. It also shows that all the farmers belonged to one or more farmers' community organizations.

Sources of agricultural information to the farmers: Data on table 2 show the major sources of agricultural information available to farmers in the study area. Extension Agents, farmer cooperatives, friends and neighbours, radio and agric shows/demonstrators with mean of 2.87, 2.81, 2.80, 2.76, and 2.60 respectively were the major available sources of agricultural information to the farmers. This agrees with Fishbein (2002) who observes that these are major sources of agricultural information to farmers. Use of mobile phones (mean of 2.75) in recent times, as a social communication network has proved very effective means of interaction among farmers in the Zone. Hagerdstrand (1998) and Matthews-Njoku (1999) observes that agricultural research institutes with mean of 1.50, agricultural journal/publications with mean of 1.85 are not major sources of agricultural information to farmers. This implies that most of their publications are too technical to the understanding of common farmers. Posters with mean of 1.66 and television with mean of 1.40 are not major available agricultural information to the farmers.

Perceived roles played by the extension agents in farmers' community organizations: The result on table 3 shows the perceived roles of extension agents in the various farmers' community organisations. They agreed that use of demonstration methods in training and educating the farmers on new innovations and technologies, providing timely advice on availability of improved agricultural inputs with a mean of 2.37, help in coordinating farmers youth organizations with mean of 2.32, advising farmers on needs for local/ professional leaders, assisting farmers in obtaining loans from financial institutions, advising farmers on needs for formation of cooperative societies, creating awareness on new

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agricultural innovations/techniques were identified as some of the perceived, or expected roles of the extension agents. This agrees with Unamma, Owudike, Owugbute, Edeoga and Nwosu (2004) who agree that extension service creates awareness and advisory roles. The farmers disagreed that assisting farmers in resolving conflict and assisting in community development projects were some of the roles expected of an extension agent.

Farmers level of satisfaction with the roles played by the extension agents: Table 4 shows the level of satisfaction of farmers with the roles played by extension agents. These included assisting farmers in obtaining loan from financial institutes, creating awareness on new agricultural technologies with a mean of 2.40, assisting in formation of cooperative societies, using demonstration methods in training and educating farmers with a mean of 2.20. This is in agreement with the findings of Mgbada (2010). However, the farmers were not satisfied by the rate at which the extension agents assisted them in identifying local/professional leaders with a mean score of 1.60, providing timely advice on availability of improved farming inputs, conflict resolution, also the farmers were not satisfied with the assistance of extension agent in community development projects.

Constraints militating against the effective performance of extension agents' roles in farmers' community organizations: Table 5 shows the farmers mean scores on constraints the farmers considered to be limiting the performance of the extension agents' roles community organizations. Most of the variables considered as limiting their functions were considered to be serious. They included lack of proper knowledge of evaluation techniques, shortage of well trained extension staff, lack of staff motivation inadequate extension visit, top-down approach to extension programmes planning not involving farmers, lack of timely advice on available improved farming inputs, lack of leadership by extension staff and high level bureaucracy. Antwi, Erem and Fassie (2010), note that farmers who had access to extension agents are exposed to adopting new innovations which will help in improving the level of production in a farmer organization. Also, Gyasi (2003) find that inadequate access to improved farm inputs like fertilizer was a major problem facing extension personnel. This might be attributed to the problem of bureaucracy associated with public extension system which was also identified as a problem.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to socio-economic characteristics (N=120)

Socioeconomic characteristics.	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	62	74.0
Female	38	26.0
Age (in years)		
20-29	7	5.8
30-39	33	27.5
40-49	44	36.7
50-59	24	20.0
60-above	12	10.0

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Marital Status

Single	7	5.8
Married	76	63.3
Divorced	5	4.2
Separated	10	8.3
Widow	14	11.7
Widower	8	6.7

Level of education

Primary	28	23.2
Secondary	59	49.2
Tertiary	16	13.3
None	17	14.3

Household size

0-3	9	7.5
4-8	78	65.0
9-12	21	17.5
13 and above	12	10.0

Extension visits (in two (2) months)

Zero (0)	30	25.0
1-2	78	65.0
3-4	12	10.0

Farmers' Community Organization Membership

Oganiru Anara	28	23.3
Obiwuruotu Umudi	23	19.2
Ositadimma Anara	22	18.3
Otuihunanya	23	19.2
Hafon Ikperejere Ihite	24	20.0

Farming Experience (in years)

1-5	6	5.0
6-10	30	25.0
11-15	46	38.3
16-20	26	21.7
21-above	12	10.0

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to major available sources of agricultural information

Information Source	Most Available (3)	Partially Available (2)	Not Available (1)	Mean	Remarks
Extension Agent	99 (297)	16(32)	5(5)	2.87	Available
Farmer cooperative	98(294)	15(30)	7(14)	2.81	Available
Friends Neighbours	98(294)	20(40)	2(2)	2.80	Available
Agric Journal/publication	32(96)	38(76)	50(50)	1.85	Not available
Radio	97(291)	18(36)	5(5)	2.76	Available
Television	30(90)	52(104)	38(38)	1.40	Not available
Agric Shows/Demonstration	72(216)	33(66)	15(15)	2.60	Available
Posters	17(51)	46(92)	57(57)	1.66	Available
Use of Mobile Phones	89(726)	24(48)	7(7)	2.75	Not available
Agric Research Institutes	19(57)	26(52)	75(75)	1.50	Not available

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents According to Perceived Roles Played by Extension Agents in their Farmers' Community Organizations

Perceived Roles	Strongly Agreed (3)	Agreed (2)	Disagreed (1)	Mean	Remarks
Creating awareness on new agricultural innovation/technologies	40(120)	45(90)	35(35)	2.04	Agree
Assisting farmers in forming cooperatives	47(141)	45(90)	28(28)	2.15	Agree
Advising on needs for local/professional leaders	50(150)	52(104)	18(18)	2.26	Agree
Assisting Farmers in obtaining loans from financial institutions	49(90)	56(112)	14(14)	2.16	Agree
Assisting in community development projects	18(54)	25(50)	77(77)	1.51	Disagree
Using demonstration method in training and educating farmers	60(180)	45(90)	15(15)	2.38	Agree
Assisting farmers in resolving conflict	14(42)	14(28)	92(92)	1.35	Disagree
Providing timely advice on availability of improved farm inputs	59(177)	46(92)	15(15)	2.37	Agree
Helping in coordinating farmers youth organization	58(174)	43(86)	18(18)	2.32	Agree

Source: Field Survey, 2015.

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents According to how satisfied they are with roles of extension agents

Respondents	Very Satisfied (3)	Satisfied (2)	Not Satisfied (1)	Mean	Remarks
Creating awareness on new agricultural innovation/technologies	55(165)	55(110)	10(10)	2.40	Satisfied
Assisting farmers in forming cooperatives	45(135)	40(80)	35(35)	2.1	Satisfied
Assisting in identifying local/professional leaders	21(63)	39(78)	60(60)	1.60	Not satisfied
Assisting Farmers in obtaining loans from financial institutions	48(144)	56(112)	16(16)	2.27	Satisfied
Assisting in community development projects	4(12)	18(36)	98(98)	1.22	Not satisfied
Using demonstration method in training and educating farmers	44(132)	56(112)	20(20)	2.20	Satisfied
Assisting farmers in resolving conflict	9(27)	15(30)	96(96)	1.30	Not satisfied
Providing timely advice on availability of improved farm inputs	15(45)	45(90)	50(50)	1.54	Not satisfied
Helping in coordinating farmers youth organization	11(33)	24(48)	85(85)	1.10	Not satisfied

Source: Field Survey, 2015.

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents according to Constraints they consider as those limiting Extension Agents in performing their roles

Perceived Constraints	Very Serious (3)	Serious (2)	Not Serious (1)	Mean x	Remarks
Shortage of well trained extension staff	97(291)	10(20)	3(3)	2.62	Serious
Lack of Leadership skill of extension staff	80(240)	18(36)	22(22)	2.48	Serious
Lack of motivation to extension staff	98(294)	8(16)	4(4)	2.61	Serious
High level of bureaucracy	73(219)	34(68)	13(13)	2.50	Serious
Non timely advice on availability of improved farming input	80(240)	20(40)	20(20)	2.50	Serious

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Lack of proper knowledge of evaluation technique	93(279)	11(22)	16(16)	2.64	Serious
inadequate extension Visits/contacts	80(240)	26(52)	14(14)	2.55	Serious
lack of commitment of Extension staff	50(150)	40(80)	30(30)	2.20	Serious
top-bottom approach by extension staff in planning and executing programmes	82(246)	20(40)	18(18)	2.53	Serious

Source: Field Survey, 2015.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study assesses the perceived constraints associated with the effective performance of roles of extension agents by farmers' community organization in Okigwe Agricultural Zone of Imo State. The results indicate that 74% of the farmers were male and 63.3% were married. All of the farmers belonged to one farmers' community organization or the other. The farmers obtained agricultural information from cooperative organizations, extension agents and mobile phones. The respondents agreed that extension agents played the role of creating awareness on new innovations and use of demonstration methods in training farmers. Farmers were not satisfied in the role of extension agents assisting in community development projects. Perceived constants identified by the farmers included lack of extension visits, insufficient extension staff, and non timely advice on availability of improved farm inputs. The farmers did not see the extension agents performing their roles effectively since all of the constraints were identified to be serious and the study therefore recommended that enough extension staff should be employed as it takes care of the low extension staff visits to farmers, timely advice should be given to the farmers on availability of improved farming inputs, top-bottom approach in planning programmes by extension planners should be avoided by incorporating farmers in planning programmes and projects. Also most of the extension agent should possess good leadership qualities. These will in no small measure boost the morale of farmers' community organizations and increase the credibility of extension agents in contributing adequately to the agricultural development of Imo State in particular and Nigeria in general.

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