

Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Agricultural Extension Society of Nigeria

Number: Twenty-Second Annual Conference

Theme: Mainstreaming Entrepreneurship in Agricultural Extension Practice in Nigeria

Date: 23rd -26th April, 2017. **Venue:** University of Port Harcourt, River State, Nigeria

ISSN: 1595 – 1421. <http://aesonnigeria.org/ConfProc> . **Email:** editorinchief@aesonnigeria.org

Perception of Agriculture Students Towards Farming as a Means of Sustainable Livelihood in Rivers State, Nigeria

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jae.v22i1.12S>

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Abstract

The study identified the perception of final year agriculture students of the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) and the Rivers State University of Science and Technology (RSUST) towards farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 173 respondents for the study. Data was collected with the aid of a questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings show that 57.22% of the respondents were between the ages of 22-24 years. About 73% of the respondents were willing to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. Livelihood preference of respondents in other areas of agriculture other than farming showed that the majority preferred to work in commercial banks (5.0), agricultural company (3.62), ministry of agriculture (3.23), food processing industry (3.39), agricultural bank (4.05), Non-governmental organizations (4.27) and agricultural marketing departments (4.46). The major perceived challenges of respondents in taking up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood include inaccessibility of land, high cost of farm machineries, and insufficient initial capital. It was recommended that Government agencies and NGOs should make available incentives and farm machineries for Agriculture graduates who are willing to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. Land should be easily assessable to agriculture graduates to encourage their willingness to work, this could be done through lease by the government and other governmental bodies in charge of land allocation.

Key words: Perception, Agriculture, Sustainable livelihood, students

Introduction

. Agriculture is the engine of growth for most developing countries and agricultural development is one of the most effective ways to alleviate hunger and poverty (Amungwa & Baye, 2014). Agriculture contributes immensely to the Nigeria economy in various ways, namely, in the provision of food for the increasing population, supply of raw materials and labour input to a growing industrial sector, a major source of employment, generation of foreign exchange earnings and provision of market for the products of the agrarian sector (Okumadewa, 1997).

Agriculture has also been a major source of livelihood for the rural poor and employing up to 83 percent of women as primary producers of food. In spite of its great potential, agriculture is still left to the elderly or uneducated youths (Okiror & Otabong, 2015).

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The youths need to be involved in agriculture to ensure a successive farming generation. But unfortunately, the case is different. Leavy and Smith, (2010) reported that many young people are not choosing to pursue livelihoods in the agricultural sector, especially as farmers. The rural youths apparently turning their back on farming in rural Africa has led to high and rising youth unemployment.

Despite the importance of agriculture, the problem of poverty, stunted growth and famine are still common in Nigeria because the food production is below the required quantity and quality. There is a confirmed gap between domestic food supply and food demand in Nigeria (Ajibefun, 2003). The low yield in crop production is as a result of the use of crude implements, and use of unimproved variety of propagating materials and pests and diseases. In the area of animal production, the high cost of feed, pests and diseases outbreak and poor knowledge of animal welfare have limited animal production. Most of the African farmers are between the ages of 55-70 years thus lacking farming enthusiasm and practice traditional subsistence cultivation, which gives low returns. For this reason, the young generation perceives farming as an occupation for the old, illiterate, and poor rural people (Njeru, Gichimu, Lopokoiyit, & Mwangi, 2015).

Furthermore, the poor market price regulations of agricultural produce, most farmers' income are relatively low and this has made most youth perceive farming as an occupation for the poor. It is necessary to educate the younger generation to be conversant with farming in order to encourage them to contribute to food production. This can be done by understanding their perception towards farming not only as a food production venture but as a means of sustainable livelihood.

The factors that affect the decision for livelihood include family, passion, salary, and past experiences. In addition to these factors, race and sex can also affect what field a student may choose. Some professions have greater percentages of a certain sex or race. Another thing that plays a big role in a student's decision of what field to study is the people or role models in his or her life. These role models can include a parent, teacher, or a recent employer (Fizer, 2013).

The passion of an individual towards a particular livelihood has a lot to do with the choice of the individual. Some youths today have limited knowledge about farming, many believing that milk comes merely from the grocery store rather than understanding that it comes from a cow (Boleman & Burrell, 2003). This lack of knowledge can be partially blamed on the increase in population and the move from rural communities to urban communities (Reidel, Wilson, Flowers, & Moore, 2007).

The decline in the number of students entering the field of agriculture has been on the rise over the years (Scott & Lavergne, 2004). This is largely because most people still regard agriculture as nonprofessional and less profitable livelihood option for a young graduate and anyone returning to farming after University would be regarded as a failure (Okiror & Otabong, 2015). Agriculture has been faced with declining enrolments at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. Agricultural courses are also regarded to be a reserve course for the less intelligent and less privileged and students who study

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agriculture at the University often do so by chance assignment from the selection body at the Ministry of Education rather than by choice (Okiror & Otabong, 2015).

In addition, youths have apathy for agriculture because they see it as inferior, unfulfilling and very hard, based on the challenges that their participation in agricultural activities are saddled with lack of access to land, lack of recognition for agriculture by the government, inconsistent policy implementation and non-involvement of youths in developmental planning (Ezebuio, Ekwe, Mbanao, Nwakor, Asumugha & Ewuziem, 2014).

Therefore, more emphasis has been placed on recruiting students into agriculture. Many colleges of agriculture are now striving to enrol a higher percentage of students in the field of agriculture without minding the perception of the student involved towards farming. The idea that young school leavers who are farmers are failures in life has affected the perception of students towards farming (Okiror & Otabong, 2015).

The broad objective of the study was to examine the perception of final year agriculture students towards farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. identify the socio-economic characteristics of agriculture students;
- ii. ascertain respondents' willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood;
- iii. identify livelihood preferences of respondents in other areas of agriculture; and
- iv. identify respondents' perceived challenges against their willingness to take up farming as a sustainable livelihood.

Methodology

The population of the study was all the final year students of the Faculty of Agriculture of the 2015/2016 academic session of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt. There were 158 final year students in the University of Port Harcourt and 71 in Rivers State University of Science and technology. Simple random sampling was used to select three-quarter of the population from each school for the study giving a total of 173 students for the study. Structured questionnaire was used to collect information for the study and data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics namely; mean, frequency counts and percentages.

Results and Discussion

Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Respondents from the University of Port Harcourt

Table 1 shows that 57% of the respondents were between the ages of 22-24 years. This finding is similar to Ayanda, Olooto, Motunrayo, and Abolaji, et al., (2012) which established that agricultural students of Kwara State University, Nigeria were

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adolescent with mean age of 19.6 years and the majority (51%) residing in urban centres. The result also shows that 53% of the respondents were females. The majority (34%) of the students were from Agricultural Economics and Extension department. As regards their parent's livelihood activities, it was shown that 51% of the student's fathers were self-employed while 64% of their mothers' were self-employed.

The majority (59%) of the students had farming experience before gaining admission into the university while 41% had no farming experience before gaining admission into the university. This is an indication that agriculture remains a major source of livelihood for Nigerians.

The mean farming experience of the students before gaining admission into the university was shown to be 6 years

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of agriculture students in Rivers State

Age	Percentages	Mean
19-21	9	
22-24	57	
25-27	24	
28-30	7	
31-33	2	
34 and above	1	
Sex		
Male	47	
Female	53	
Department		
AEE	34	
CPS	26	
ANS	10	
FSH	10	
FWL	9	
FST	12	
Residents		
Rural Area	8	
Town	41	
City	51	
Father's livelihood		
Self-employed	51	
Paid employed	49	
Mother's livelihood		
Self-employed	64	
Paid employed	36	
Farming experience		
Yes	59	6 years
No	41	

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Willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood

Table 2 shows the willingness of agriculture students to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. From the table, 72% of the respondents were willing to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. This finding shows an increasing interest or willingness to take up farming as a sustainable livelihood strategy when compared to the findings of Akintayo and Lawal (2015) who found out that about forty-nine percent (48.75%) of the students indicated willingness to practice agriculture after graduation while fifty-one per cent (51.25%) indicated willingness to engage in other activities aside agriculture. Results further showed that the agriculture students who were not willing to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood showed willingness to take up one or more of the farming ventures listed in the questionnaire. The majority (75%) of the students showed willingness to grow food crops, 60% showed willingness to rear livestock, 80% showed willingness to go into poultry farming while 73% indicated willingness towards fish farming. On the other hand, it was shown that 67% were unwilling to grow tree crops, 58% indicated their unwillingness to go into snail farming, 64% showed unwilling to go into mushroom production, 62% showed unwillingness towards grass cutter production, while 82% and 61% showed unwillingness to go into and ornamental plant production respectively.

Table 2: Respondents' willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood

Statement	Percentages
Willingness to take up farming	73
Willingness to grow food crops	75
Willingness to rear livestock	60
Willingness to grow tree crops	33
Willingness to go into snail farming	42
Willingness to grow mushroom	36
Willingness to go into poultry farming	80
Willingness to rear grass cutter	38
Willingness to go into fish farming	73
Willingness to keep bees	18
Willingness to grow ornamental plants	39

Field survey, 2016

Livelihood Preference of Agriculture Students in Other Areas of Agriculture Other than Farming

Table 3 indicates the livelihood preferences of agriculture students in other areas of agriculture other than farming. From the table, the mean value for respondents' preference to be self-employed in the food processing industry was 3.3929, while the

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mean value for respondents' preference to work in commercial banks was 5.0226. This implies that the majority of the respondents most preferred to work in commercial banks. The least preferred livelihood option among the agriculture students is shown to working as civil servant in the ministry of Agriculture with mean of 3.2261. The result shows the high level of agriculture student's unwillingness to take up agriculture-related career options. This is a source of concern and calls for action by both government, agriculture lecturers and others involved in the training of these students.

Table 3: Livelihood preference of respondent in other areas of agriculture

Statements	Mean
I will love to work in privately owned Agricultural company.	3.6149
I will love to be a Civil servant in the Ministry of Agriculture.	3.2261
I will love to be Self- Employed in the food processing industry.	3.3929
I will love to work in Agricultural Bank.	4.0527
I will love to work in Commercial Banks.	5.0226
I will love to work in Non-Governmental Organizations.	4.2717
I will love to be involved in Agricultural Marketing.	4.4551

Field survey, 2016

Challenges Associated with Willingness to Take Up Farming As a Means of Sustainable Livelihood

Table 4 shows the respondents' perceived challenges associated with their willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. From the table, only six factors were significant challenges associated with agriculture student's willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. This includes Poor farming skills (Mean = 2.7), Continuous poor harvest (Mean = 2.9), Perception that farmers are failures (Mean = 3.2), Feelings that farmers are not respected (Mean = 3.1), Poor returns on investment (Mean = 2.8), Soil degradation (Mean = 2.6).

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Table 4: Respondents' perceived challenges associated with their willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood.

Variables	Mean
Insufficient initial capital	1.6
Inadequate credit facilities	1.8
Poor storage facilities	1.9
High cost of improved seeds, fertilizers	1.9
Inaccessibility of land	1.6
Soil degradation	2.6
High premium from insurance company	2.1
Poor returns on investment	2.8
Feelings that farmers are not respected	3.1
Perception that farmers are failures	3.2
Continuous poor harvest	2.9
High cost of farm machineries	1.3
Poor farming skills	2.7
Crop failure	2.3
High incidence of pest and diseases	2.1

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The majority of agriculture students were willing to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood. The study identified the major perceived challenges of respondents associated with their willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood as inaccessibility of land and high cost of farm machineries where high cost of farm machineries as challenges.

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There was need to create youth-in-farming policies and integrate them with other policies on youth matters such as education and investment. This will empower the youths and change their perception towards farming thus igniting their interest in agricultural activities.

Government, agriculture lecturers, agriculture entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in agriculture should encourage agriculture students to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood as this will not only increase food availability but will drastically reduce the level of unemployment in the country.

Incentives and farm machineries should be made available by government and other agencies for Agriculture graduates who were willing to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood.

Agriculture students should engage in farming activities while in school to increase their farming skills.

The perceived challenges associated with respondents' willingness to take up farming as a means of sustainable livelihood should be tackled by the government to increase food production in Nigeria.

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