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Rural Farmers' Readiness to Access Information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre, National Agriculture Extension and Research Liaison Services ABU Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated rural farmers' readiness to access agricultural information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre NAERLS, ABU Zaria. The specific objectives were to describe the socio-economic characteristics of Nigerian rural farmers, identify the major agricultural information accessed by rural farmers from the National Farmers Helpline Centre and identify the various constraints faced by Nigerian rural farmers in accessing agricultural information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre. A random sampling technique was employed to select one thousand six hundred (1600) rural farmers across the six agro ecological zones from the National Farmers' Helpline Centre Database who usually call the Farmers' Help Line Centre of NAERLS, ABU Zaria. Percentage, and mean were used to analyse data. It was revealed that 61.2% who frequently accessed information from the National Farmers Helpline were male farmers belonging to the age group of 41 years and above (46.4%), married (75.6%) and having a household size of 6 – 10 persons (51.1%), with at least 11 – 30 years of farming experience. Thus, 45.6% of the respondents were involved in crop production while 37.5% were into animal husbandry, with the majority of them (46.9%) having acquired no form of formal education. Furthermore, the findings showed that the National Farmers Helpline Centre supplies the rural farmers with information on cultural practices (69.0%), pest and disease management (50.0%), weed management strategies (73.9%), marketing strategies (72.4%), farm tools and machineries (65.0%), seeds varieties and selection (88.9%) and information on government policies (89.0%). It was clearly identified that rural farmers are personally, infrastructural, resourcefully, mentally and managerially ready to access agricultural information from the National Farmers Helpline

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Centre. Rural and urban farmers should be committed in accessing the readily available agricultural information for a productive and sustainable agricultural productivity, likewise, reliable means of information dissemination should be adopted by the National Farmers Helpline Centre so as to ensure that both rural and rural farmers benefit from the numerous agricultural information available.

Key word: Rural farmers, access, information, NAERLS

Introduction

Rural farmers make up the majority of crop producers in any developing economy. Their level of access to agricultural information stems from the knowledge and skills they possess (Ugonna, 2020). Governments of developing countries have a major responsibility of ensuring that there is adequate rural development in their various communities and local governments which would lead to effective and efficient agricultural systems that will not only supply food and animal protein but also foster the utilization of natural resources in a sustainable manner. Lack of information on modern and efficient agricultural practices has brought about low farm produce (Anunobi and Anunobi, 2018). When the rural farmers lack access to knowledge and information that would help them achieve maximum agricultural yield, they not only grope in the dark but are driven to the urban centres in search of formal employment, as the only option for survival. According to the opinion of the work pointed out that the least expensive input for improved rural agricultural development is adequate access to knowledge and information in areas of new agricultural technologies, early warning systems (drought, pests, diseases etc), improved seedlings, fertilizer, credit, market prices etc.

Rural farmers in Nigeria are less or averagely noted to produce enough food, probably due to some constraints that lead to lack of access to timely and up-to-date information which would have enabled them to achieve optimal yield from their farmlands. Such information is highly desired by these farmers and can only be made available to them via research institute, extension workers, community libraries, state and local government agricultural agencies (NAERLS, ADP, ENADEP etc), email or the World Wide Web (WWW) in a telecentre. In this modern day of information technology, telecentres provide the rural farmers with prompt and reliable information about what is happening in areas of improved seedlings, better methods of cultivation and fertilizer application, pest and weed control/eradication, new advances in livestock production and disease control etc. Where rural farmers are not faced with constraints in accessing agricultural information, traditional media such as rural radio, print, video, television, films, slides, pictures, drama, dance, folklore, group discussions, meetings, exhibitions and demonstrations has been used in delivering agricultural massages to rural farmers

Rural farmers have mediums to access information but lack the systems to take full advantage of information sources required in their working life. The timely available

current and appropriate information helped farmers gain more knowledge to make decisions at specific times and locations. Information and knowledge are very vital in agricultural development of any community and where they are poorly disseminated as a result of certain constraints, the community's agricultural development becomes highly impeded

Achieving sustainable agricultural development is not only based on material inputs (such as seeds and fertilizer) but on the institutions and people involved (Availability of adequate information on production techniques and the application of technologies are indispensable to improving farmer's production and productivity. This is because information and technology are important inputs for agricultural development (Adetimehin *et al.,* 2018) and thus are readily available in the National Farmers Helpline Centre.

The National Farmers Help was established by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture to increase productivity for sustainable agricultural development in the country across the six geo-political zones which involves the use of Information Communications Technology (ICT) in order to have a greater penetration to cover a wide area and the target beneficiary in every aspect of agriculture, to facilitate efficient and effective agricultural extension services to farmers through the dissemination of good agronomic practice electronically, using the latest ICT and to also serve as a medium for dissemination and delivery of improved technologies, market linkages and other agricultural information and advisory services to farmers to compliment traditional extension agents/farmers interface in Nigeria (Bashir, Goni, Abdulkadir, Umar, Suraj, and Francis, 2020).

The agricultural extension workers play an important role in linking researchers and farmers. This ensures that agricultural information resulting from agricultural research is utilized by farmers for agricultural development. However, most of the extension approaches employed in the government extension programmes are not participatory but top down in many matters knowing that in many developing countries, too little attention is paid to the understanding of farm level realities (Always, there is a wide gap between those responsible for preparing and carrying out development plans and the farmers themselves. Frequently farmers in developing countries, who constitute extension clients, are never involved in planning the extension programmes but rely on the superficial observation of field officers or armchair deductions and rely on generalization of programme planners. Over the years, rural farmers depend on indigenous or local knowledge for improved farming system/animal husbandry. Such knowledge (indigenous or local knowledge) refers to skill and experience gained through oral tradition and practice over many generations. Acquisition of such primitive skill by rural farmers has not helped to improve agricultural yield; all that is witnessed in our rural agricultural system ranges from poor farm yield and animal diseases, resistant plant weeds and pests that attack farm crops, old farm implements, poor quality fertilizers etc. Agricultural

information are always meant to get to rural farmers via extension workers, community libraries, radio, television, film shows, agricultural pamphlets, state and local government agricultural agencies etc. Rural farmers in their effort to access these agricultural knowledge and information from available sources, for better farming system and improved agricultural yield, are confronted with certain constraints.

It is based on this foregoing that the study attempted to examine farmers' readiness to access agricultural information from the National Farmers Helpline Center NAERLS, ABU Zaria. Specifically, the study sought to;

i. describe the socio-economic characteristics of Nigerian rural farmers who frequently access information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre,;
ii. identify the major agricultural information accessed by rural farmers from the National Farmers Helpline Centre;
iii. examine the farmers level of readiness to access various agricultural information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre.

Methodology

The study was carried out at the National Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Service National Farmers Helpline, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria. The Institute has 6 Zonal Offices, one in each of the 6 agro-ecological zones of the country – Umudike (South-east), Ibadan (South-west), Maiduguri (North-east), Badeggi (North-central), Kano (North-west), and Port Harcourt (South-south) (https://naerls.gov.ng/, 2019). NAERLS has 6 programme areas namely: Agricultural Communication Research, Agricultural Extension and Economic, Agricultural Performance and Evaluation, Training and Outreach, Agricultural Information Management, and Agricultural Policy. There are also specialized departments, which include e-Extension, Crop and Forestry, Livestock and Fisheries, Agricultural Engineering and Irrigation, Agricultural Extension and Economics, Food Technology, and Agricultural Media. The Institute has over 500 employees, including over 90 Extension Specialists, and requires an annual operating budget of more than 2.5 billion naira or 7.8 million dollars.

A random sampling technique was employed to select one thousand six hundred (1600) rural farmers across the six geo-political zones of the country from the National Farmers' Helpline Centre Database usually those who called the Farmers' Help Line Centre of NAERLS, ABU Zaria. These selected farmers were interviewed through mobile calls with sets of questionnaires to replicate on paper their responses. These farmers were also interviewed using Hausa, English, Igbo and Yoruba languages respectively. Thus, three hundred and sixty-eight (368) respondents from the North East, three hundred and twelve (312) from the North Central, two hundred and eighty (280) from the North West, two hundred and twenty

three (223) from the South East, two hundred and seven (207) from the South West and two hundred and ten (210) from South-South respectively. The uneven selection was based on the accessed respondents in the various zones.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria

	Geo-Political Zones	Respondents Accessed
	North Central	312
	North East	368
	North West	280
	South East	223
	South West	207
	South-South	210
Total	**6**	**1600**

Source: Field Survey, 2020

Data collected were analysed using percentage distributions to describe their socio-economic characteristics and agricultural information accessed by rural farmers, mean and rating scale of High (3), Low (2) and Not at All (1) were used to measure the farmers level of readiness to access agricultural information from the National Farmers' Helpline Centre, ABU Zaria.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic characteristics

Table 1 reveals that the majority of the respondents (61.2%) were male farmers, 46.4% belonging to the age group of 41 years, married (75.6%) having a household size of 6 – 10 persons (51.1%), with at least 11 – 30 years of farming experience. Thus, 45.6% of the respondents involved in crop production while 37.5% were into animal husbandry, with the majority of them (46.9%) having only acquired primary education. This is in line with the findings of Oluwasanya *et al.,* (2019) on the influence of socio-economic characteristics on rural farmers' food consumption in Ogun State, who reported that 79.5% of the farmers are male while the female

farmers are 20.5 % only. Majority 78.0% of the respondents' falls within the age category of <30 and 50 and the mean age is 41 years. The large percentage (48.2%) of the respondents had between 5 and 8 and the mean household size is 6. Mbakwe *et al.,* (2016) on the socio-economic characteristics of farmers to determined their perceptions on climatic variables and adaptation options in Imo State found that majority (31.67%) of the farmers fell within the age bracket of less than 40 years. It also showed that (28.33%) of the farmers fell within the age bracket of 51 to 60 years, 23.33% of the farmers fell within the age bracket of 61 years and above, while 16.67% fell within the age bracket of 51 to 60 years. The mean age was 43.24years.

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics

Aspects	Option	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	61.2
	Female	38.8
Age	< 18	5.4
	19 – 30	13.1
	31 – 40	35.1
	41 and above	46.4
Marital status	Single	18.8
	Married	75.6
	Divorced/Divorcee	5.6
Farming experience (Years)	< 10 years	19.3
	11 – 30 years	63.0
	31 years and above	37.0
Farming system	Crop production	45.6
	Animal husbandry	37.5
	Both	16.9
Educational level	Primary education	21.1
	Secondary education	18.9
	Tertiary education	13.1
	None formal education	46.9
Household size	< 5	31.6
	6 – 10	51.1
	11 above	17.3

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Source: Field Survey, 2020

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Major Agricultural Information Accessed

Figure 1 shows that about 69%access information on cultural practices, 50.0% access information on pest and disease management, 73.9% access information on weed management strategies, 69.9% acquires information on weather and climate, 72.4% access information on marketing strategies, 43.8% on post-harvest activities, 65.0% accesses information on farm tools and machineries, 88.9% on seeds varieties and selection while 89.0% access information on government policies. On this point, the findings clarifies that the National Farmers Helpline Center NAERLS is a gallery of information that every farmer requires to be productive.

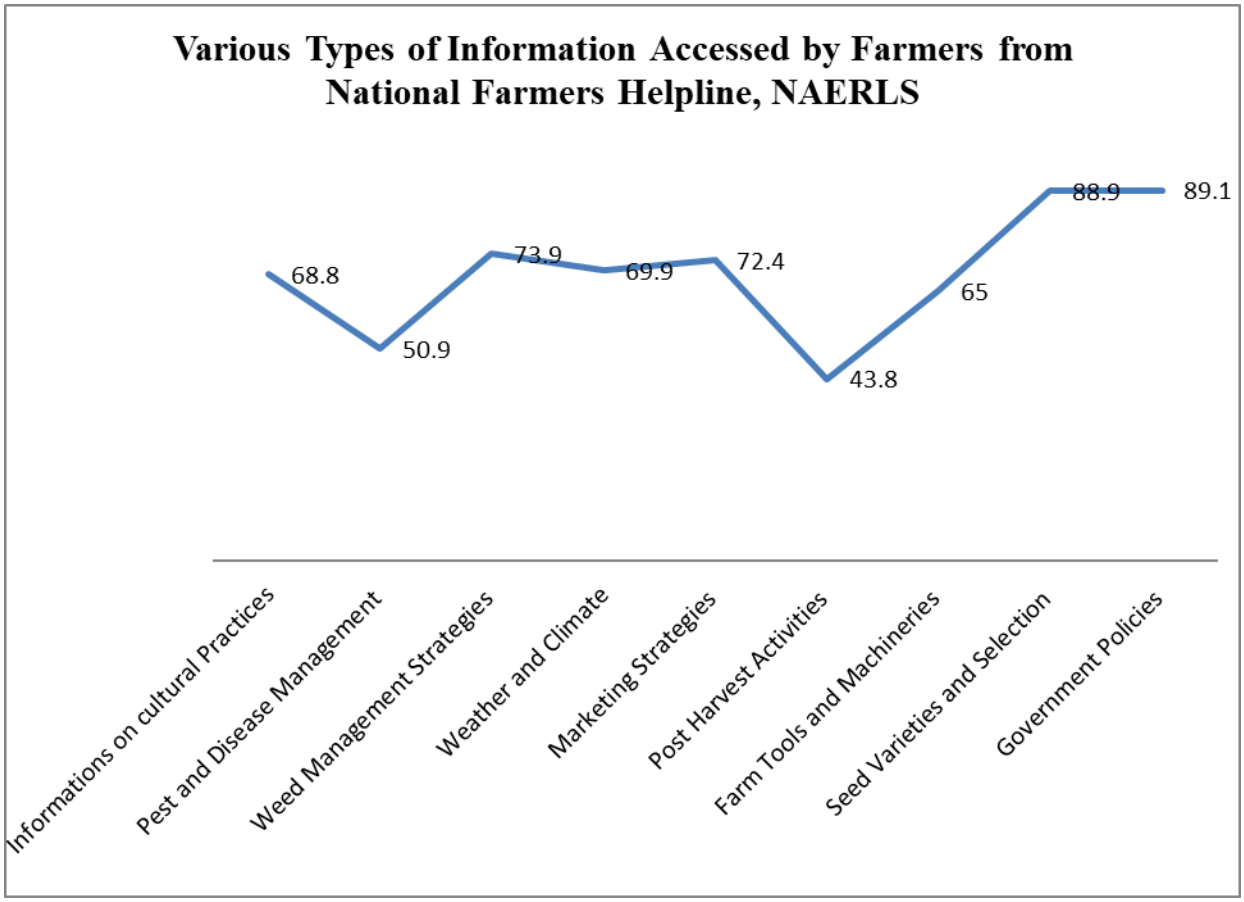

Figure 1: Various types of information accessed by farmers from national farmers helpline, NAERLS

Source: Field Survey, 2020

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Farmers' Readiness to Access Agricultural Information from the National Farmer's Helpline, NAERLS, ABU Zaria

Table 2 reveals that farmers are personally ready to access agricultural information from the National Farmers Helpline, NAERLS (the farmers know that the National farmers Helpline NAERLS can be used as a learning medium, the rural farmers are capable of managing their time in order to use information from the National Farmers Helpline, the farmers believes that enough skills can be acquired from the National Farmers Helpline, the farmers are ready to use ICTs in order to access information from the National Farmers Helpline) having a mean score of 2.7, infrastructural readiness with a mean score of 2.6 the farmers are ready to use their farmlands, farm tools and machineries to access information from the National Farmers Helpline, resourcefully ranked as the 3rd with a mean score of 2.5, mentally (2.4) indicating that the farmers believes with all convictions that informations from the National Farmers Helpline will improve their productivity as well as managerially (2.2).

Table 2: Farmers' readiness to access agricultural information from the helpline

Farmers Readiness	Mean Score	SD
Resource readiness	2.5	0.8
Infrastructural readiness	2.6	
Personal readiness	2.7	
Mental readiness	2.4	
Managerial readiness	2.2	

Source: Field Survey, 2020

Conclusion and Recommendations

Farmers were resourceful, infrastructural, personally, mentally and materially ready to access information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Due to the verse agricultural information and skills available at the National Farmers Helpline Centre, NAERLS ABU Zaria, both rural and urban farmers should be committed by dialling the National Farmers Helpline Centre to access the readily available agricultural information for a productive and sustainable agriculture in the country.

With the high level of literacy among rural farmers, individual farmers and commercial farmer should explore measures to access the readily available information from the National Farmers Helpline Centre, NAERLS, ABU, Zaria for effective productivity.

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