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Email: [editorinchief@aesonnigeria.org](mailto:editorinchief@aesonnigeria.org); [agricultural.extension.nigeria@gmail.com](mailto:agricultural.extension.nigeria@gmail.com)

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## Perception of Agricultural Extension Workers on Privatization of Agricultural Extension Services in Ondo State, Nigeria

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### Akinagbe Oluwale Matthew

Department of Agricultural Extension & Communication Technology,

Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State.

Emails: [omakinnagbe@futa.edu.ng](mailto:omakinnagbe@futa.edu.ng) ;

[wolaxkins@yahoo.com](mailto:wolaxkins@yahoo.com)

Phone: +2348035399151

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0377-0671>

Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State.

Email: [ejigashadrach@gmail.com](mailto:ejigashadrach@gmail.com)

Phone: : +2348166680878

### Akinbobola Tolulope Paul

Department of Agricultural Extension & Communication Technology,

Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State.

Email: [paultolulope24@gmail.com](mailto:paultolulope24@gmail.com)

Phone: +2348063023311

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6159-5154>

### Ejiga Shadrach Agada

Department of Agricultural Extension & Communication Technology,

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## Abstract

*This study assessed the opinion of agricultural extension workers on the privatization of agricultural extension services in Ondo State, Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was used in collecting primary data from 90 out of 112 extension workers in the Ondo State Agricultural Development Programme, through the use of a validated questionnaire. Data were analysed using percentage and mean statistics. The majority (55.6%) of extension professionals asserted that agricultural extension services should not be privatized. The major reasons adduced to this were the fear that privatization could lead to the loss of jobs among the extension professionals (100%) and also the belief that it is the responsibility of the government to cater for farmers (100%). The average amount proposed by the few respondents if extension services should be privatized, ranges from a minimum of ₦100 - ₦400. The proposed areas where extension should be privatized are where and when to sell their products and technical advice on farming activities (crops and livestock). Since farmers will be the ones to bear the consequences of privatisation, the government should ensure total overhauling of the extension system before experimenting with the payment for extension services in phases and with utmost caution.*

## **Introduction**

The pivotal position of agriculture as a driver of the national economy in most developing countries and Nigeria specifically, coupled with the need to attain food security and sustainability makes research on agriculture and extension services imperative. The agriculture sector in Africa is known to be one of the essential sectors, given its contribution to the overall economy, as it is the most significant single contributor to GDP (Matthew *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, in Nigeria, the report of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reflected the import of this sector through the recorded contribution of 24.46% to the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the year 2022 (NBS, 2023). Moreover, there is a global increase in the quest for food, and feeding the ever-growing human population has become a global problem for humanity (Osabohien *et al.*, 2020). Hence, the instrumentality of agricultural extension in improving the productivity of smallholder farmers cannot be overemphasised.

Crucial to the enhancement of the performance of smallholder farmers is the role of extension agents among other stakeholders. According to Akinwale *et al.* (2023) the optimum performance of farmers demands farmer-centric services and information provision and articulated collaboration with service providers. Undoubtedly, the major players of the farmer-centric information provision are the extension agents. According to Davis *et al.* (2019), extension agents are more important than ever in dealing with today's issues, such as climate change and globalisation and extension is no longer viewed as a straight line in the chain of technology transmission, but rather as a broker and facilitator within complex agricultural innovation systems. Agricultural extension agents work to increase productivity and accomplish social and economic objectives at the same time through several methods and channels.

Extension delivery system takes different forms and shapes in different countries. Since the pre-independence era, the extension service has been publicly funded and implemented in Nigeria. Since the withdrawal of the World Bank component of the tripartite funding arrangement (with Federal and State Governments) for the ADPs in Nigeria, most of the ADPs have been unable to cope with their primary responsibilities of providing agricultural extension services in their domain (Chimaroke and Nwafor, 2022). Several factors have been attributed to the failure of public sector extension, including poorly motivated staff, a preponderance of non-extension duties, insufficient operational funds, a lack of relevant technology, poor planning, centralized management, and a general lack of accountability in the public sectors. The public extension services were perceived as ineffectual and inefficient in comparison to private or non-governmental organizations, which were the main drivers for privatization (Petros *et al.*, 2022). This poor state of agricultural extension in Nigeria has stimulated several opinions among agricultural development enthusiasts and scholars that there is a need to adopt a pluralistic extension delivery system or solely privatize the extension delivery system in the country.

The privatization of agriculture extension and advisory services has accumulated a lot of interest since centuries ago (1980s and 1990s), in many other countries, and numerous studies have been conducted to either support or communicate the opinions of those who were directly impacted, such as extension advisors and farmers. The privatization will permit stakeholders to determine the local needs and directions of privatization of

extension development positioned within the characteristics of an innovation, the innovation-decision process, and the environmental and social frameworks of the immediate region. In developing countries, including Nigeria, there is a lot of collaboration between the private sector, government, non-governmental organizations and international donors to address food security issues and sustainable development (Sennuga et al., 2020), hence the proposal to channel this same concept into the delivery of extension services, in a manner that the burden and sole responsibility of extension delivery is relieved from the shoulders of the public sector/government. Also, the reality of the current dwindling state of the Nigerian economy puts new pressure on the funding and delivery of extensions, giving rise to a looming agitation for privatization of agricultural extension services in Nigeria.

Therefore, it is important to measure the perception of agricultural extension professionals on the privatization of extension services because they represent one key stakeholder in this decision. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to: (i) ascertain the perception of agricultural extension workers on the privatization of agricultural extension services; (ii) identify reasons for the opinion of the extension agents; (iii) determine how much farmers should pay for the privatized extension services; and (iv) ascertain the factors that promote the privatization of agricultural extension services.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted in Ondo State of Nigeria, which lies appropriately on latitude 7° 40'N and longitude 5° 15'E 70 3'N in the South west geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The State enjoys a lowland tropical rainforest climate type, thereby making the State suitable for agricultural activities. The population of the study included all extension professionals in the Ondo State Agricultural Development Project (OSADP). A simple random sampling technique was used in collecting primary data from 90 out of 112 extension workers (made up of project managers, zonal extension officers, subject matter specialists, block extension agents and extension agents) in OSADP. The primary data were collected by the use of a well-structured questionnaire administered to the respondents. This was augmented by key informant interviews scheduled with some top management of OSAP, to elicit more detailed information and view on the subject matter.

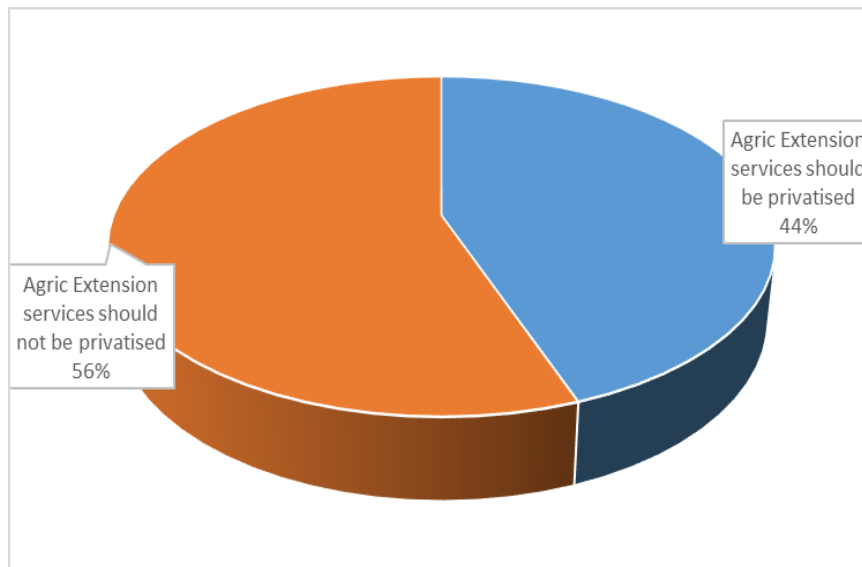
The identification of the prioritized extension services for privatization was done through a dichotomous response of Yes (1) and No (0) and cumulated to arrive at the perception of the respondents on the privatization of agricultural extension services. The amount farmers should pay for privatized extension services was measured by allowing the respondents to tick the accepted amount range from the list provided against various services and the factors that favour/promote privatization of extension services were measured through a 4-point Likert-type scale response to several statements and the mean was tabulated and presented. Frequency distribution table, percentage, mean score and graphical representation were used to achieve the research objectives.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Perception of Agricultural Extension Workers on Privatization of Agricultural Extension Services**

Figure 1 presents the perception of the extension workers on the privatization of agricultural extension. It shows that the majority (56%) of the respondents thought that agricultural extension services in Nigeria should not be privatized while only 44%

accepted that extension services should be privatized. This implies that most of the extension workers did not support the privatization of extension services, rather they subscribed to the retention of the public sector in funding and delivering of extension services. This could be because of the fear of the effect of the decision on them as a major player and stakeholder in this paradigm shift, such as loss of jobs, and loss of benefits enjoyed under the public sector among several other reasons. This result is similar to the findings of Chimaroke and Nwafor (2022) that many of the extension agents do not have a favourable disposition towards the privatization of extension service delivery in Benue State, Nigeria.



**Figure 1: Extension worker's perception of the privatization of extension services**

### **Reasons for the perception towards privatization of extension services**

The result shown in Table 1 consolidates the perception of the extension agents on the privatization of extension services in Nigeria. The result presents the reasons and justification for their objection or support of the privatization idea of extension services. The result shows that the major reasons many of the extension agents had an unfavourable disposition towards the privatization idea were because privatization could lead to loss of jobs among the extension professionals (100%), and also the belief that extension delivery (catering for the farmers) is one of the core responsibility of the government (100%). This implies that many of the extension agents had a perceived negative impact of privatization on their job security; hence they did not have a favourable disposition towards this concept.

The result also depicts that their lack of interest in extension programmes and poor professional competence on the part of the extension workers were not the reasons for their perceptions. This shows that the extension agents' responses to the privatization are not borne out of their lack of interest, passion or competence in their job rather it was attached to the social, economic (livelihood) and psychological implications of the decision on them.

**Table 1: Reasons for the perception towards privatization of extension services**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Yes %</b>
Low income from farming	88.4
Privatization could lead to the loss of jobs among extension professionals	100.0
Lack of interest in the extension programme	10.1
It is the responsibility of the government to cater for farmers	100.0
Lack of clearly defined institutional framework	88.4
Poor professional competence on the part of the extension workers	21.7
Lack of anti-corruption measures to curb corrupt acts and nepotism	98.6
Poor availability of basic infrastructure e.g (good road network)	89.9
Poor enabling environment for farmers' participation in extension funding	73.9
Lack of constituted bodies to monitor and evaluate the performances of extension agents	66.7
Inadequacy of ready-made market to sell increased farm outputs resulting from improved extension services	95.7

### **Perceived Amount Farmers Should Pay for Privatised Extension Services**

Table 2 reflects the opinions of the extension workers on the range of prices that could be attached to various agricultural extension services. The result shows that the majority of the extension agents thought that many of the services should be free or range between ₦100 and ₦1000. The average amount proposed by the few respondents (44.0%) if extension services should be privatized, ranges from a minimum of ₦100 for market information on where and when to sell their products to ₦400 for technical advice on farming activities (crops and livestock) per fortnightly. However, it was observed that training on skill acquisition and improvement was rated high to be charged between ₦2000 and ₦3000. This could be because of the training cost and other miscellaneous expenses that come with training.

The result reinforced the desire of the extension agents to have extension services provided and funded by the government and non-governmental agencies. Also, another reason for the price ranking was because of the perception that most of the Nigerian farmers are smallholders and therefore, would not be able to afford expensive charges for the various activities. During the key interview with one of the extension workers, the

opinion was given for a pluralistic approach where the privatization would still have the input of the government in terms of subsidizing some things for the farmers.

**Table 2: Perceived amount farmers should pay for privatised extension services**

Services	Perceived amount farmers should pay for extension services				
	≤0 %	1-1000 %	1001-2000 %	2001-3000 %	3001-4000 %
Information on climate change	64.4	25.6	4.4	4.4	0
Information on how to access improved crop variety	64.4	27.8	3.3	4.4	0
Information on how and where to market agricultural produce	55.6	40.0	2.2	4.4	0
Technical advice on crop protection measures	58.9	36.7	1.1	2.2	0
Information on health husbandry management	52.2	43.3	4.4	2.2	0
Technical knowledge on how to raise nursery for different crops	52.2	40.0	1.1	3.3	0
Information on sources of price to hire agric implements and machinery	53.3	42.2	2.2	2.2	1.1
Advice on weed practice management	57.3	38.2	0	2.2	0
Advice on quality analysis of soil and how to improve soil fertility	55.6	45.6	3.3	0	0
Training on seed production technique	57.8	40.0	2.2	2.2	0
Information on bio fertilizers	57.8	36.7	1.1	1.1	0
Personal visit to farm	57.8	37.8	2.2	1.1	0
Farm demonstration on a particular method	56.7	41.1	1.1	1.1	0
Training on value addition	54.4	37.8	1.1	1.1	0
Organizing exhibition and display	56.7	41.1	1.1	1.1	0
Providing solutions to reported problem	53.3	43.3	1.1	1.1	0
Training on record keeping and farm diary	53.3	41.1	0	0	0
Information on how and when to source for fund and access subsidized input	50.0	43.3	1.1	1.1	0
Technical advice on handling and application of herbicides	54.4	43.3	4.4	0	0
Training on prompt decision on farm	56.7	37.8	7.4	0	0
Training on how farmers should evaluate their progress	56.7	37.8	4.4	1.1	0
Information on prevalence of disease and disease outbreak	46.7	37.8	4.4	1.1	0
Training on skill acquisition and improvement	43.3	3.3	1.1	51.1	0
Training on proper harvesting techniques	47.8	44.4	4.4	2.2	0
Training on the use of personal protective equipment for safety	46.7	52.2	1.1	0	0
Technical advice on crop establishment	47.8	47.8	1.1	2.2	0

**Source: Field survey**

### Factors that Promote Privatization of Agricultural Extension Services

Table 3 shows the factors that promote the privatisation of agricultural extension services in the study area. The results reveal that political instability ( $\bar{x} = 3.07$ ), inadequate legislation to support public extension ( $\bar{x}=3.03$ ) and accessibility of farmers ( $\bar{x}= 3.03$ ) were the top-ranked factors that promote the privatization concept in the agricultural extension system in Nigeria. Most of the policies that could help in improving extension services in Nigeria are unstable as a result of inconsistency in government policies. Some of the policies sometimes do not favour the average farm family. This implies that the extension workers agree that the political instability and inadequate favourable legislation and policies are the drivers of privatization. Also, the respondents agree that the accessibility of the farmers is another factor that promotes the agitation for the privatization of agricultural extension services in Nigeria. This could be because of the inadequate provisions for reaching the farmers and also the high farmer-to-extension agent ratio which hampers the accessibility of the farmers. This corroborates the assertion of Camillone et.al., (2021) that accessibility of farmers and the poor extension to farmers'

ration are some of the compelling challenges of agricultural extension in Nigeria, which propels the need for privatization.

**Table 3: Factors that promotes privatization of agricultural extension services**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
Political instability	3.07*	0.30
Inadequate legislation to support public extension	3.03*	0.41
Accessibility of farmers	3.03*	0.42
Unfavourable government policies	3.02*	0.40
Inadequate government guarantees	3.00*	0.60
Need to provide opportunity for neglected areas to be attended to	2.94*	0.55
Need to increase priority areas in agricultural extension	2.84*	0.61
Need to reduce government financial burden	2.83*	0.66
Need to make extension to be directed at specific needs of the people	2.83*	0.52
Insufficient trained workers	2.81*	0.44
Quest for appropriate technical information	2.80*	0.57
Poor capacity building of extension staffs	2.80*	0.44
Supply driven of extension services	2.79*	0.65
Lack of accountability	2.72*	0.94
Inadequate market	2.71*	0.95
High risk and uncertainty	2.70*	0.85
Timely and affordable input accessibility	2.66*	0.77
Irresponsiveness of public extension service providers	2.53*	0.82
Corruption and nepotism among public extension	2.51*	0.45

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The extension workers asserted that agricultural extension services should not be privatized. The study recommends that the policy makers and relative stakeholders in the subject matter (extension service privatization) should have a collaborative and concerted deliberation on the way to go about the privatization agitation. This will ensure a successful reform and alternative approach to extension service delivery in the nation while ensuring the targeted increase in productivity of the farmers.

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