



Agricultural Extension Agents and Privatization of extension Service Delivery to Root and Tuber Crop Farmers in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the views of agricultural extension agents on the privatization of services delivery to root and tuber crop farmers. The study was carried out in Benue State, Nigeria. Sample size of 96 respondents (extension agents) from the Benue State Agricultural Development Project (BNARDA) was used in the study. Data for the study were collected through the use of structured questionnaire and analyzed using frequency counts, percentage, mean score, and Chi-square. Majority of the respondents (67%) were male, mean age of 45 years, 89% were married and 42% had Ph.D as the highest educational qualification, while the average working experience was 10 years. Also, 65% of the respondents were in agreement that privatization can ensure root and tuber farmers have greater access to new and improved varieties, 59% agreed that privatization will improve efficiency and effectiveness of extension agents, while 57% agreed that privatization will improve employment opportunities for trained extension personnel. Personal characteristics of extension agents and their perception on privatization of service delivery towards rural cassava farmers were not significant ($P > 0.05$). The study therefore concludes that issues on privatization of extension should be given adequate consideration by policy makers, stakeholders in extension service delivery and the government before final decision is taken on whether or not to privatize agricultural extension services in the State.

Keywords: *Agricultural Extension, Privatization, Roots and Tubers*

Introduction

Agricultural Extension refers to an education system that provides farmers with technical advice required to increase farm output and income including; advice on credit, other inputs and marketing. It also provides research institutes and credit institutions information about farmer's conditions (Bello and Salau, 2009). The role played by extension service in every sector of agricultural production cannot be over emphasized; for the prominent role it plays in dissemination of vital agricultural information. The responsibility of making farmers aware of research findings to increase their productivity is that of extension service providers. From government perspectives, whatever priority is given to agricultural production extension will remain a key policy tool for promoting ecologically and socially sustainable farming practices (Yusuf, Omokore, and Musa 2011). Privatization involves ending of total or substantial ownership and operational control from the government to the private sector. It also involves the development of new partnerships and association capacities between government agencies and non governmental and private sectors (Connolly 2004).

The World Bank component of the tripartite funding arrangement (with Federal and State Governments) for the ADPs in Nigeria ceased in 1995. Most of the ADPs have been unable to cope with their primary responsibilities of providing agricultural extension services in their domain. Many of them have developed coping strategies such as staff reduction, irregular Monthly Technology Review Meetings (MTRM), forth night training (FNT), and are still unable to cope. In Nigeria, agricultural extension services are provided free of charge by the government through the Ministries of Agriculture (Ajie, Agwu and Anyanwu, 2008). Anderson and Feder (2003) observed that despite the fact that public financing for extension is often justifiable, the general trend towards fiscal restraint and a reduced role for the public sector has led to financial crisis in many extension services. Since the 1990s, inadequate funding has led to the virtual collapse of research and extension institutions that provided services to small farmers and rural communities in Nigeria (Omotoya, 2004). Agricultural Extension requires billions of Naira for its operations, which can

no more be adequately delivered by the Federal or State Governments. Governments have found that they are less able to continue providing all the services. There has been a call for private sector involvement in the provisions of extension services as a result of government's dwindling development budgets and extremely poor progress in rising economic and social well-being of the populace through public extension services (Amungwa, 2007).

Privatization is based on the assumption that there is relevant technology to disseminate, because if not, a change in service provider can do nothing to increase the effectiveness of extension (Matanmi, Adesiji and Omokore, 2008). It is therefore obvious that financial capability to pursue extension activities when external funding has come to an end is a problem. Government has therefore realized that they are unable to continue providing all the extension services expected of them as a result of financial limitations (Agbam, and Okagbare, 2005). Agricultural extension still remain the most crucial and critical means to reach farming households in the rural areas and globally (Adejo, Okwu and Ibrahim, 2012). In reaction to the worrisome performance of the agricultural sector, the Federal Government has embarked on various programmes and schemes aimed at returning the sector to its enviable position in the Nigerian economy (Alabi and Mafimisebi, 2004). There are changing trends and challenges facing agricultural extension delivery in Nigeria which has necessitated the growing campaign for increase in private participation and funding (Oladoja, 2004). The decline of government in funding the agricultural sub-sector affected the extension services which used to be effective in carrying of innovation to farmers to improve their level of agricultural production; there is urgent need to stem this dangerous tide (Agwu and Chukwuome, 2005).

The major lessons learned from the past extension programmes in Nigeria is that it is not possible for government alone to support extension programme in all its ramifications. The private sector needs to play a more active role in both funding and physical transfer of the available improved technologies (Ogunbameru, 2005; and Omotoya, 2004). There is agitation for privatization of extension services as done in developed Countries. Advocates of private extension services believe that it improves efficiency, public finance, encourages competition and private sector participation. However the adoption of privatization of extension services to root and tuber crop farmers is expected to call for agitation from these services provider whom are the extension agents. As a result of this problem, this study sought the opinion of Agricultural Extension Agents on the Privatization of service delivery to root and tuber crop Farmers in Benue State, Nigeria.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Benue State, Nigeria, Benue is a State in the North Central zone of Nigeria, with a population of about 5,741,800 people (NBS,

2016) and total land area of about 34,059km². Benue State falls within longitude 7°47', 10°0'E and latitude 6°25', 8°8'N, and share boundaries with five other states in Nigeria; Nasarawa State to the North, Taraba State to the East, Cross River State to the South, Enugu State to the South-West and also with Kogi State to the West, and also share International boundary with the Republic of Cameroon to the South-East (Onyemma *et al.*, 2019). Benue State is one of the biggest states in Nigeria, it is also seen as richest in the country in terms of food; blessed with a lot of food produce, hence the State is referred to as the food Basket of the Nation, since it is known for its large food production throughout the year. The state has three Agricultural zones, namely North-East Zone, North-West Zone and Benue South Zone mostly referred to as zones; A, B, and C. The study purposively selected all the extension agents in Benue State ADP from the Director of extension to the village extension agents. In all a total of ninety-six (96) respondents were sampled. Data were collected by means of questionnaire, and analyzed by the use of frequency, percentages, means and Chi-square.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic characteristics of BNARDA extension agents

Table 1 show that 66.7% and 88.5% were male and married respectively, this implies that majority of the extension agents in BNARDA are male who are mostly married. This is in agreement with the assertions of Ogunremi, Faturoti and Oladele (2012) who reported higher percentage of male and married extension staff. The mean age of extension agents was 41.5, implying that extension agents were in their middle ages. About 42% had Ph.D, 10.4% BSc. while only 22.9% had HND. The result shows that there is need for frequent in-service training in order to upgrade the extension practitioners' knowledge and skills for effective performance, especially in interpretation and comprehension of research. Forty eight percent (48%) of the agents had spent at least 10 years in service; it is assumed that the perception of the extension agents was based on their years of experience.

Extension agents' views towards privatization of extension services to root and tuber crop farmers

Table 2 presents the extension agents' views towards privatization of extension services to root and tuber crop farmers. Many (54.2%) of them indicated that privatization will improve extension delivery, while 49.0% that privatization cannot improve extension delivery, 64.6% agreed that privatization can ensure root and tuber crop farmers have greater access to inputs also, 59.4% that privatization will improve efficiency and effectiveness of extension agents, 57.3% are of the view that privatization will improve employment opportunities for trained extension personnel, 55.2% that privatization is good, while 5.2% disagreed that privatization will improve employment opportunity for extension agents. Similarly, Bawa, Ani and Nuhu (2009) reported high number of respondents who are of the opinion that privatization will increase employment

opportunities for extension agents. It implies that the extension agents are well disposed to privatization of extension services to root and tuber crop farmers as against the general believe that privatization should not be encouraged in public agencies. Privatization of extension will be effective if there are well trained personnel who are willing and able to respond to farmers' requirements; considerable public sector investment in education and training (Chapman and Tripe, 2003).

Relationships between personal characteristics of extension agents and perception towards privatization of extension services

Table 3 shows the results of the relationship between personal characteristics of extension agents and perception towards privatization of extension services to root and tuber crop farmers. The result showed that there is no significant relationship between extension agents' perception of privatization and their personal characteristics. This indicates that variables such as age, educational level and work experience of extension agents affects their perception towards privatization of extension services to fish farmers.

Conclusion

The study concludes that privatization is becoming an accepted organizational change and response that can offer alternative opportunities for efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in extension service delivery. Policy formulation and implementation by the government on agricultural extension should be a collaborative effort involving all stake holders. It should also include the operational linkages and partnership between extension, farmers and other relevant service institutions such as related to research and information technology. In so doing, there is the tendency of achieving higher productivity in root and tuber sub-sector in the country.

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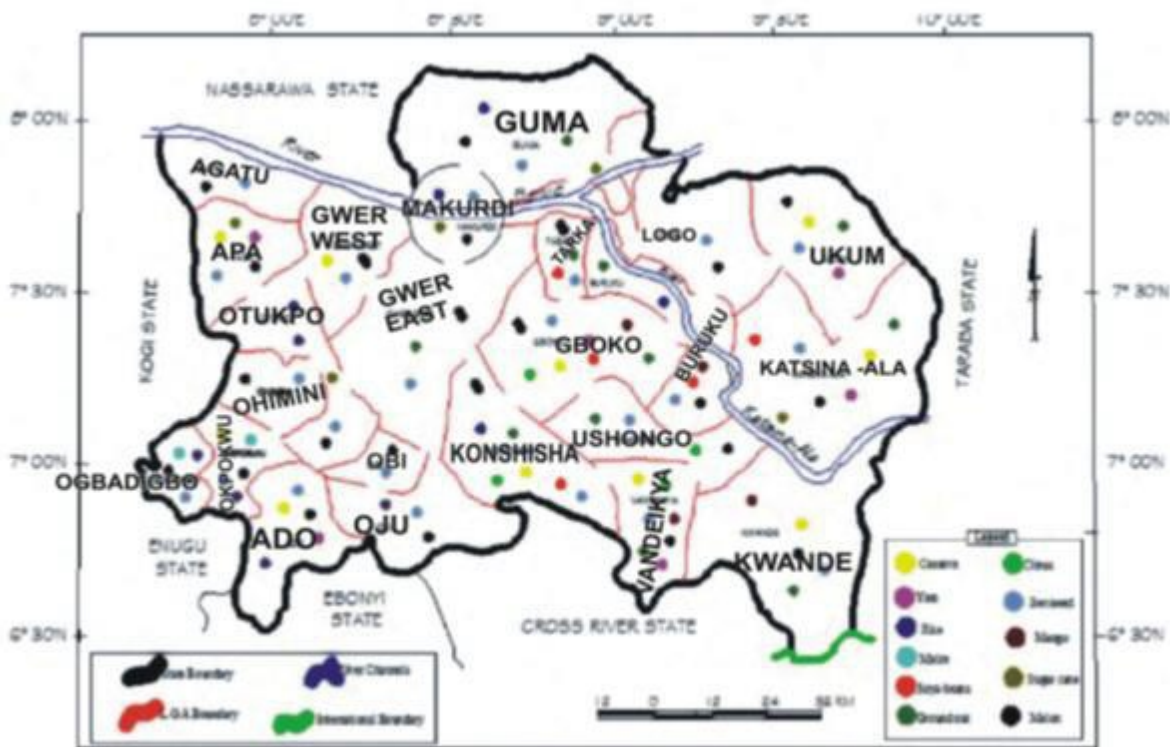


Fig. 1: Map of Benue State showing distribution of local government areas by zones

Table 1: socio-economic characteristics of BNARDA extension agents

Variables	Frequencies	Percentages	Mean
Sex			
Male	64	67	
Female	32	33	
Total	96	100	
Marital status			
Married	85	89	
Single	5	5	
Divorced	6	6	
Total	96	100	
Age			
20-30	3	3	
31-40	19	20	41.5
41-50	48	50	
>50	26	27	
Total	96	100	
Level of education			
Ph.D	40	42	
M.Sc.	10	10	
B.Sc/HND	22	23	
ND	24	25	
Total	96	100	
Work experience			
1-5 years	14	15	
6-10years	35	37	
>10year	47	48	
Total	92		

Source: Field survey, 2022



Source: Bureau for Lands and Survey Makurdi, 2015.

Fig. 2: Crop production map of Benue State

Table 2: Extension agents' views towards privatization of extension services to root and tuber crop farmers

Extension agents' views	SA	SD	D	UD	A
Privatization can improve extension Delivery	2(2.1)	3(3.1)	31(32.3)	52(52.2)	8(8.3)
Privatization cannot improve extension Delivery	5(5.2)	8(8.3)	31(32.3)	47(49.0)	5(5.2)
Privatization can ensure fish farmers have greater access to input	1(1.0)	-	28(29.2)	62(64.6)	5(5.2)
Privatization will improve efficiency and effectiveness of extension agents delivery	1(1.0)	4(4.2)	26(27.1)	57(59.4)	8(8.3)
Privatization will improve employment opportunities for trained extension agents	2(2.1)	2(2.1)	30(31.3)	55(57.3)	7(7.3)
Privatization will reduce employment opportunities for trained extension agents	4(4.2)	5(5.2)	29(30.2)	54(56.3)	4(4.2)
Privatization is good	-	3(3.1)	31(32.3)	53(55.2)	9(9.4)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentages (%)

SD = Strongly agree, A= Agree, UD= Undecided, D= Disagreed, SA= Strongly disagree

Table 3: Chi square analysis of relationship between personal characteristics of extension agents and perception towards privatization of extension services to fish farmers

Variables	X2-value	DF	P	Remark
Sex	0.338	4	0.99	Not Significant
Age	5.719	12	0.03	Significant
Marital status	9.870	8	0.83	Not Significant
Educational level	7.433	12	0.04	Significant
Work experience	8.262	12	0.03	Significant

Source: Field survey, 2022