

THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVES IN ACHIEVING HEALTHY AGRICULTURE IN NIGERIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the state of health of Nigerian agriculture. The purpose of the study was to investigate the success of some of the various efforts of Government to improved agriculture in Nigeria overtime and to recommend approach for improvement.

Government programmes and projects in the past were briefly assessed for effectiveness, sustainability or continuity. The results revealed that practically all the nine programmes and projects examined followed similar pattern in lacking commensurate success and continuity. The main reason for this was the perception of the people that the programmes and projects were those of government needing no personal commitment. Resources were not used with economics consciousness and profit orientation. Coupled with this, and more importantly was the high poverty level of the farmers which makes it difficult to procure necessary inputs for modern agricultural practices to increase production.

Hence, there is need to evolve a means of injecting capital that can be effectively utilized in Agriculture.

The paper thus recommends the involvement of cooperatives to ensure proper commitment of funds that will bring about desired results. This is borne out of the positive characteristics of cooperatives highlighted such as selflessness, ensuring equity, togetherness and provisional support for members among others.

Cooperative is a proven organ of empowerment for the people to improve their lots.

Keywords: *cooperatives, healthy agriculture, poverty, programme/projects.*

Introduction

A healthy agriculture can simply be said to be agricultural practice that is alive, productive, progressive and sustainable to the point of promising better days for the practitioners. Nigerian agriculture cannot be said to possess these characteristics. Hence the Nigerian agriculture need rescue measures to recover from this unfortunate state. Just like economic recovery does not occur by accident or magic, the recovery of Nigeria's agriculture from the present sick state will only happen through deliberate actions in the atmosphere of civic responsibility, honesty, sincerity, transparency, accountability, diligence and true interest in human and national development. Supporting requirements to these include power and infrastructural availability, financial and credit support administration, as well as right environment for private sector initiatives among others. (Adedoyin, 2013).

Nature of Agricultural Practices in Nigeria

Agricultural production in Nigeria is largely in the hands of traditional small scale farmers. Many of the farmers still practice agriculture at subsistence level using simple tools like hoes, cutlasses, axes, etc in their operations. In essence traditional technology of production entails use of unimproved seeds, local breeds, and local methods of production, with very small amount of capital. Majority of the farmers are not literate enough to easily understand improved technologies in farming thus hampering their ability to adopt them.

Agricultural production in the area is faced with a number of challenges which include insufficient funds, inadequate infrastructure such as good roads, transportation facilities, electricity, water, communication facilities, and storage facilities among others. Improved production inputs like seeds, chemicals, fertilizers, machines and tools are also lacking. The result of these unfavourable conditions is low productivity and production, poor yield and consequentially high product prices. Equally, there are marketing problems which bother on the perishability nature of the agricultural products leading to spoilage as a result of dearth of proper storage facilities. Poor pricing of the products therefore become the order of the day because of the seasonality of production. As a result of these, there is an appreciable level of poverty among the farmers and the people.

According to Adedoyin (2013) Nigeria which used to be one of the 50 richest countries in the 1970s retrogressed to become one of the 25 poorest countries at the threshold

of the twenty first century. It is therefore, ironic that Nigeria as one of the largest exporter of oil still host third largest exporter of oil still host largest number of people after China and India. A good percentage of the Nigerian population still live below poverty line.

In most developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) the agricultural and rural sector constitutes a major sector contributing significantly to the national economy. Typically such economies classified as agrarian provides employment for a vast majority of the working populace in addition to providing food, for the people, raw materials for agro industries as well as generating foreign earnings through exportation of agricultural produce. These potentials notwithstanding, Nigerian agriculture that used to be healthy in the 1960s and early 1970s has been suffering a downward trend in productivity and output. Thus the growth rate can best be described as very low. The initiative for policy dialogue (IPD), 2004 report on Nigeria country Dialogue as highlighted by Olubanjo (2007) observed that Agriculture value-added to GDP is about 37 percent. Area of land cultivated is very low and stagnant at about 30 percent while food import, as a percent of total merchandise imports, increased from 6 percent in 1990 to about 20 percent in 2005. Olubanjo (2007) therefore noted that the ugly situation has further manifested in hunger, mass poverty, poor living standard and migration of farming population from rural areas to the urban centres. With the resultant growing urbanization and population growth, the Nigerian economy had been under the pressure to attain sufficiency in food production through the country's agriculture. But Umoh and Adeyeye (2000) had rightly observed that food production in Nigeria has failed to respond adequately to food demand. Part of the factors responsible for the increasing food demand-supply gap is the peculiar characteristics of the majority of Nigerian farmers. They are numerous but are resource poor. Because of the rural-urban drift of able-bodied men, the agriculture sector is dominated by aged and less innovation-receptive operating with traditional technology that does not support large scale production apparently because of lack of enough capital to acquire improved technology that would take advantage of economies of scale in production.

According to Mayong et al (2005) small holder farmers are faced with diverse bottlenecks principal among which are poor access to modern inputs and credit; poor infrastructure; inadequate access to markets, land and environmental degradation, and inadequate research and extension services. The summary of these is that the Nigerian

farmers presently lack the capacity to adequately provide the needed food for the growing Nigerian population.

Ironically the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that the economically active population in urban areas of developing countries would reach 1.7 billion in 2025 (UNDP, 1989). Consequently poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and disease are imminent.

In a bid to ameliorate the unfortunate situation, the Government of Nigeria had engaged many programmes or projects in an attempt to combat the food shortage problem. The programmes/projects include: Farm Settlement Scheme, Operation Feed the Nation programme, National Accelerated food production programme, establishment of Agricultural Development programmes; National Special programme for Food Security, National Fadama programme and National Poverty Eradication programme among others. These projects and programmes were put in place at one point or the other by the various governments as a result of the realization that the major bane of agricultural production and food supply sufficiency is poverty.

Poverty simply defined as the inability to attend to or meet up with the basic necessities of life as a result of lack of the wherewithal to do so (Aihonsu, 2011), manifest in various forms including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition, ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion (Aihonsu, 2013). Hence, addressing poverty is a major and right step in the right direction towards solving the problem of declining agricultural production and food supply insufficiency.

Unfortunately most of the programmes and projects put in place by government in the past to combat poverty have yielded little or no satisfactory result. This informs the present call for the involvement of cooperatives as a veritable agent to achieve the goal of poverty alleviation and increased agricultural and food production in Nigeria.

Highlights of past government efforts to increase Agricultural production in Nigeria.

(a) Farm Settlement Scheme:

The idea was conceived as far back as 1957, but the scheme took off in the then Western Nigeria in 1959. It drew its concept from similar scheme in Israel ('Israeli' or 'Moshav' farm settlement scheme). The objective was to achieve optimum use of land to attain increased food production and national wealth. The scheme was designed to employ young school leavers in agriculture. The design was to assemble the participants in a location called farm settlement where some facilities such as housing, water, rural roads etc were provided and land and other productive inputs made available for the settlers to engage in both crop and livestock agriculture. The scheme earned them some living and served as employment to reduce unemployment and crime among the youths. However, the scheme broke down after about 15 years, especially on the discovery of crude oil which eventually became the focal point of revenue for the government. Hence, many that hitherto been in farming started migrating to cities in search of white collar jobs which could not be guaranteed. Similar scheme also started in the Eastern Nigeria in 1960 but was also shortlived.

(b) Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) Programme.

The programme was put in place during the military government in 1976. It was intended to serve to increase food production significantly. Students of tertiary institutions (especially universities) were major participants. They were engaged in government **identified** farms during the long vacation between July and October. Such under graduates were made to work on the farms and received stipends for the three to four months vacation period. Again this programme also had its challenges among which was inability of many of the so engaged students to effectively work on the farms because they lacked knowledge and experience in farming. Eventually, the programme ended with the military administration in 1978.

(c) Green Revolution Programme (GRP)

This was embarked upon in 1980 under the civilian government. People were encouraged to utilize every available space for planting food crops and raising backyard livestock.

(d) River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA)

This is a project was launched in 1976 by the Federal Government. It was meant to encourage large scale food production especially by government establishments and to assist individual farmers in irrigating their farms. Some of the RBDAs were also involved in direct food production.

(e) National Accelerated food Production Programme (NAFPP)

This came on board in 1973 as a location specific specialized food production programme of the Federal Government to achieve sufficiency in food production. It was based on locational comparative advantage in specific food items such as grains, roots and tubers, pulses, livestock etc. The programme also passed away with time.

(f) Agricultural Development Programme (ADPs)

This started under a tripartite funding arrangement between the World Bank, Federal Government and State Governments. It centred its activities on provision of inputs, and extension services to the farmers at near zero cost. Consequent upon the withdrawal of the World Bank from the programme, farmers are to pay for the services rendered as the programme is considered to operate as a privatized entity.

(g) National Special Programme for Food Security (NSPFS)

This is a Federal Government Programme jointly implemented by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FOA/UN). The main objective of NSPFS is to achieve food security status in the broad sense and to alleviate rural poverty in the country. By implication, it is intended to better the lots of the Nigerian farmers, while increasing food production on an economically and environmentally sustainable basis.

It is targeted to bring about reduction in the year-to-year variability in agricultural production and improving the people's access to food.

(h) National Fadama Programme (Wetland Farming)

The Fadama II programme has been judged as successful intervention in promoting agricultural development in Nigeria (Adedoyin, 2013). It is estimated that over 2.3million

Fadama households have benefitted from the expansion in incomes and assets derived from previously unavailable services provided under the programme. But whether FADAM III is able to build on the gains of FADAMA II is yet to be ascertained.

(i) National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP)

The NAPEP as a Federal Government agency was responsible for the monitoring and coordination of all poverty eradication efforts of the Federal Government. It was responsible for mobilizing resources for the poor. NAPEP was able to use its abilities to challenge state governments, local governments and private sector to provide more resources for poverty eradication activities which also serves as an indirect challenge even to the Federal Government itself. NAPEP can be said to have fared well, based on its mobilization programme initiatives such as Multi Partner Matching Fund (MP-MF), promise keepers programme (PKP), the Give Back programme and the safety net approaches.

All these programmes and projects had some challenges and shortcomings that made most of them no more active. A major factor is that of recognizing them as government (public) projects without serious personal commitment. Injection of funds with sense of belonging and commitment is thus considered a better approach of achieving sustainable poverty alleviation and increased food and agricultural production. This can best be achieved through cooperatives whose principles are apt in achieving this objectives.

The place of Cooperatives

According to Adedoyin (2013) cooperative enterprises provide the organizational means whereby a significant proportion of humanity is able to take into its own hands the tasks of creating productive employment, overcoming poverty and achieving social integration to achieve socio-economic development.

Cooperative is said to derive its relevance to all forms of development, especially economic because of its four main dimensions namely:

- (i) Economic dimensions
- (ii) Social dimensions
- (iii) Community and environmental dimension and
- (iv) Political dimensions.

The summary of these dimensions are briefly stated:

(i) Economic dimensions

The basis of the success of cooperatives is the economies of scale that they provide. They provide institutional means whereby individuals group themselves into self help units for economic benefits. Hence, majority of cooperatives all over act as economic enterprises and they contribute immensely to productive employment and economic growth.

(ii) Social dimension

Cooperatives promote social integration and provide opportunity for participatory democracy. The principle of equality of member-patrons is entrenched to give sense of belonging to every member. Cooperatives therefore, realizing the needs of members, address issues of social integration, education, health, training, community development, gender equality and basic needs acquisition.

(iii) Community and Environmental dimensions

It has been rightly observed that cooperatives are locally-based institutions and they are naturally concerned with the communities in which their members work and live. Local economy is enhanced and protected when its businesses are owned and controlled by cooperatives in the community. Cooperative enhances essential social structure and identifies and provides settings for collaboration between government non-government and community based programmes.

(iv) Political dimension

Because they can develop priorities, strategies, action programme, form conditions with similar interest groups to generate a larger voice to call for a specific action, cooperatives provide setting to organize effective political action.

As highlighted by Adedoyin (2013) therefore, cooperatives could be positioned through its inherent factors to propel and positively accelerate the economic reforms and especially agricultural rescucitation in Nigeria. Such inherent factors include:

- (a) Efficiency of group action
- (b) Benefit of joint action
- (c) Promotion of Self help
- (d) Income effect (i.e emphasis on equity)

- (e) Economics of Scale
- (f) Cooperative is for all people
- (g) Setting for collaboration or financial opportunity for members
- (h) Advocacy role of cooperatives.

The Role of Cooperatives

Agbo (2008) observed that the role cooperatives are expected to play was yet to be properly understood and set out. But Aihonsu (2011) opined that cooperatives are known to play multi roles as institutional framework for harvesting scarce resources, stimulating economic growth and enhancing welfare. It raises the income earning opportunities and serves as a training ground for entrepreneurship. Thus, cooperatives mobilize human, financial and material resources for economic transformation thus responding effectively to the ever changing needs of people. In some countries, cooperatives are seen as leaders in promoting food safety and security and in protecting the environment. Still in others, cooperatives are building peaceful societies by promoting understanding and income backgrounds.

In Nigeria the limitation of government to address the needs of cooperative members cannot be over emphasized. The situation is worse when cooperative deductions from government workers salaries are not promptly remitted to the societies. There is therefore the need for cooperative societies and unions to assist their members in the areas of finance and education.

As a way forward therefore, Aihonsu (2013) identified some steps considered pertinent for cooperatives to assist their members to be properly positioned to fight poverty in all ramification. These are:

1. Developing human capacity through training and education.
2. Capacity building through adequate funding of projects: the gains from this will make room for better support for members requests.
3. Provision of adequate credit for the members, to serve as a way of creating economic/financial empowerment for members.
4. Assisting members with investment analysis and feasibility studies.

5. Promotion of togetherness and unity through reactivation of cultural values of being our brothers keepers.
6. Encouraging cooperatives members occupying senior positions in government and business to be active in the activities of the societies.
7. Creating avenues and means of knowing and identifying with each other.
8. Inculcating and promoting the skills of entrepreneurship in members from time to time through appropriate workshops, seminars, etc.
9. Identify and specially assist the vulnerable groups such as women and physically challenged members to have sense of belonging and confidence of ability in their disabilities.
10. Encourage increased savings by members to make way for better opportunity for I investment.

Conclusion

Nigerian economy can still be said to be agrarian and thus can be developed through agricultural and rural development. The major bane to having a healthy agriculture in Nigeria therefore centres around poverty in various shades among the majority of the small scale farmers.

The main panacea to the problem of getting a healthy agricultural practice in place in Nigeria therefore is that of eradicating or at least alleviating poverty among the people.

Hence one of the Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015 as a response to the world's main development challenges is to "Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger". Since the larger population of the Nigerians are still ruralites and by implication are farmers, this sector becomes a major one to focus on to achieve the goal.

However, efforts of government in the past in this direction have not yielded the desired result. Hence a look at the cooperatives as a weapon or instrument in this situation is considered a step in the right direction.

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