

## **An Assessment of Youths Participation in Agriculture and Rural Development, Benue State, Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** The study was to assess youth's participation in agriculture and rural development in Benue state. A total of 200 youths were stratified and randomly interviewed. Frequency distribution, percentage, Likert-scale and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the data. The result showed that 85% of the youths were literate. In participation in agriculture and rural development, 96% of youths were in various schools ranked 1st and 72% were involved in religious and marketing activities ranked 2nd and 70% in agriculture production ranked 3rd among other activities. There was significant relation between the socio-economic characteristics and participation age ( $r = -0.200$ ) ( $p < 0.05$ ); extension education ( $r = 0.223$ ) ( $p < 0.05$ ) and educational status ( $r = 0.379$ ) ( $p < 0.05$ ). The study concludes that the extent of youth vitality, responsible conduct and their participation in community activities is positively correlated to the development of their area. It is therefore recommended that the government should deliberately formulate policy to integrate youths in agriculture and rural development programmes.

**Key words:** Comparative, gender, off-farm, activities, poverty, reduction, Nigeria

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the major setbacks of agricultural development programmes is attributed to the inability of the federal government to integrate youths into the mainstream of the numerous agriculture development programmes implemented over the years (Daudu *et al.*, 2009). For a country to attain economic stability the agricultural sector must be vibrant and the youths encouraged imbibing farming as a noble profession (Daudu *et al.*, 2009).

Youths have the potential to overcome some of the major constraints to expanding agriculture production in developing countries such as pest control, feeding, genetic improvement and protection against predators because they are often more open to new ideas and practices than adult farmers. They play an important role in awareness rising on different subjects (Daudu *et al.*, 2009) mobilizing the youths for national development is a common phenomenon amongst the Western and developing countries. In such countries as Great Britain, Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, the United State of America and Tanzania, the involvement of youths in agricultural production through youth programmes had contributed significantly to agricultural development and empowering the citizenry and youths to always meet the

full needs and deep seated aspiration to be self sufficient in food production (Daudu *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, since the youths are the future of any country, it is useful to develop them into patriotic citizens, future progressive farmers and better citizens.

Globally, youth is described as the period in an individual's life this runs between the end of childhood and entry into the world of work (Onuekwusi and Effiong, 2007). Youth is seen as universal stage of development. According to Nigeria's National Youth Development Policy, the youth comprises all young persons of ages 18-35 who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Some writers focus on youths from the point of view of behavior, arguing that's young people themselves through anti-social attitudes and activities are a threat to society.

The United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. When dealing with youth employment, youth includes those persons between the minimum ages at which work is allowed, according to national laws and 24 years. It is estimated that this group makes up 18% of the global population and 25% of the total working age population.

During FAO World Food Day, the theme youth against hunger was given considerable attention together with the significant role that youth can play in food

security. An important message of this event is that given adequate training, education and support, young people can be active partners in helping to meet the World Food Summit of halving the number of hungry by the year 2015. Youths programme play a vital role as a technology transfer mechanism (FAO, 2008).

Skuzza (2005) stated that youth is an important and vital segment of human resources which not only today but in future will have to shoulder the responsibility for the development including agriculture and rural sectors. Youth not only the future is also the present. To produce enough food for the world's 6 billion inhabitants with the aim to give a voice to the world's 1 billion youth (15-24 years old) who with better opportunities for education, trainings and employment could funnel their youthful idealism, energy and determination into a positive force for change Nigeria is a developing country and agriculture is the mainstay of its economy. Its contribution to GDP is nearly 20.9 and 43.4% of the total employment is generated from agriculture. This sector not only fulfils the daily living requirement of population of the country but is also the main feeder of raw materials to all industries.

Ferry (2006) believes that the interdependence of family, school and community played critical roles in shaping the youth's occupation selection. Agriculture as a career choice is burdened with misperceptions and a lack of information and awareness. This is mostly due to uncompetitive wages, the physical aspects associated with work in the sector and the lack of awareness of what careers in the agriculture sector have to offer.

Agriculture, thus remains vital for sustainable development, poverty reduction and food security. At the same time, among the young generation, interest in agriculture in general and in pursuing careers in Agricultural Sciences seems to be low and young professionals largely seem to be missing in strategic and policy debates on agricultural research for development. Along with recently-renewed international attention for agriculture as a driver of economic development in countries in Africa, new attention is thus also required for engaging young people in the future of agriculture and rural development. The role of agriculture cannot be over emphasized in any nation building. It plays a major role in provision of food for the entire populace, provision of raw materials for all agro-based industries, serves as foreign exchange and most importantly provides employment opportunity for the people. It is a vocation that has stood the test of time amongst the old inhabitants of any nation (Olujide, 2008). The developing world's youth is the generation of economic and social actors and they can be agents of change in favour of sustainable development.

Youths are found to possess certain characteristics required for sustainable development. Despite these facts, Nigeria witnesses a lot of migration of young people to the cities for white collar job. This makes the bulk of work in agricultural production which is the major work engaged in by residents in rural areas lie on old senile men who engaged in subsistence farming and are characterized with the use of crude implements and local seeds thus resulting in low productivity, low income and vicious cycle of poverty.

The effort to restore the past glory of agriculture through the creation of institutions, programs and projects has not yielded the expected results. It is disheartening to note that young farmers club and farm settlement scheme are no longer effectively in place, the people are currently witnessing an ageing farming population coupled with migration of rural youth to urban centre to take a glimpse into what is going on. This situation is likely to deteriorate if a significant effort is not made to improve it. It is therefore, pertinent to research into those factors responsible for participation of rural youth in agriculture and rural development activities:

- Identify the socio-economic characteristics of rural youths
- Identify type of agriculture and rural development activities involved in by rural youths
- Examine the attitude of rural youths towards participation in agriculture and rural development activities
- Identify the constraints faced by rural youths in agriculture and rural development activities

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Benue state is the area of study. It is divided into three zones A-C by Benue state Agriculture and Rural Development Authority for easy administrative purposes. It has a population figure of 4.2 million people. Agriculture is the mainstay of the state economy. It has vast agricultural development potentials and the major crops produced are yam, cassava, rice, sesame, maize, sorghum, millet groundnut, soybeans, fruits and vegetables.

The state has a tropical climate made up of wet and dry seasons. The rainy season starts from the month of April to October and the dry season starts from November to March. The average annual rainfall varies between 1250-1750 mm from the Northern part to the Southern part of the state. The temperature ranges from 30 and 38°C. The state stretches across the rainforest and savannah vegetation double-stage stratified random sampling was

used to select the respondents. From each of the zones, 5 local government areas were selected, making 15 local governments areas in total. In each of the local government areas, 10 respondents were interviewed, i.e,  $15 \times 10 = 150$  as the total sample size. The data collected were analyzed using frequency distribution, percentages Likert-scale and Pearson product moment correlation.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In Table 1 socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents shows that about 55% of the respondents were between 26-30 years old, 29% which were between 21-25 years old and 17% of the respondents were between 15-20 years old. This mans that most of the rural youth in the study area were between 26-30 years. It therefore implied that most of the rural youth are in their active years and the implication is that they are energetic, innovative to participate more in agriculture and rural development activities.

Table 1 also shows that majority of the rural youth 65% were single, 28.0% were married, 3% were divorced while the rest 3% of the respondents are widowed/widower. It further shows that most of the rural youth were male with 60.7% while 39.3% were female. This is probably because males are stronger than female and they

participate in tedious activities more than female. It is evident from Table 1 that 15% of the respondents had no formal education this may be deduced from the inability of their parent to send them to school because of financial constraints, 33.3% had FSLC/SSCE/WASCE, 35% had ND/NCE and 17% had HND/Degrees. This is probably because youth in these categories are older and stronger which will make them participate more in agriculture and rural development activities. It also reveals that majority of the respondents 61% were part time farmers while 39% were full time farmers. This implies that among the rural youth interviewed in the study area, only few of them that participate fully in farming activities; others did not give adequate attention to farming. This could be as a result of their commitment in other area such as studies, civil/public service, etc. It is evident also that among the respondents only 10% of them received extension contact weekly, 17% of the farmers received extension contact twice a month, 21% received extension contact once a month while 51% of them had no visit at all.

Table 2 shows the extend of youths involvement in the various types of agriculture and rural development activities in Benue state in a descending order where schooling recorded the highest level of participation (96.0%) followed by religious activities (72.0%), agriculture activities (72.0%), marketing (70%), teaching in schools (68.0%), transportation (motorcycle) 64.0%, civil service (64%), roads and housing construction (56.0%) mobiles phone business (52%) and health (50%), respectively. The high level of rural youth involvement in church activities must have been connected to the fact that Christian population is quite high in the study area and the rural youth who engaged in church activities might have come from Christian families. That of water works could be as a result of its essential needs for human and natural resource. The low level of rural youth's participation in these latter activities is obviously due to the high demand of the activities in terms of skills, strength and safety.

In Table 3, constraints faced by rural youth in participating in agriculture and rural development

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents according to their socio-economic characteristics (N-150)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
15-20	25	16.7
21-25	43	28.7
26-30	82	54.6
Total	150	100.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	59	39.3
Male	91	60.7
Total		100.0
<b>Marital status</b>		
Widowed/widow	5	3.3
Divorced	5	3.3
Married	42	28.0
Single	98	65.3
Total	150	100.0
<b>Educational status</b>		
Non formal education	22	14.7
PSLC/SSCE/WASCE	50	33.3
ND/NCE	53	35.3
HND/Degree	25	16.7
Total	150	100.0
<b>Occupation</b>		
Part time farmer	91	60.7
Full time farmer	59	39.3
Total	150	100.0
<b>No. of extension contact</b>		
Weekly	15	10.0
Twice a month	26	17.3
Once a month	32	21.3
No visit	77	51.4
Total	150	100.0

Field survey, 2011

Table 2: Distribution of the respondents according to their participation agriculture and rural development activities

Activities	Frequency	Percentage	Ranking
School	144	96.0	1st
Religious	108	72.0	2nd
Agriculture	108	72.0	2nd
Marketing	105	70.0	4th
Teaching in school	102	68.0	5th
Transportation (motor cycle)	96	64.0	6th
Civil service	96	64.0	6th
Road and housing construction	84	56.0	8th
Mobile phone business	78	52.0	9th
Health	75	50.0	10th

\*Multiple responses; Field survey, 2011

Table 3: Mean distribution of constraints facing the respondents in participating in agriculture and rural development

Constraints	Mean±SD
Inadequate publicity	2.69±1.03
Poor organization by youth leader	2.66±1.00
Inadequate finance	3.13±1.05
Unavailable of labour	2.71±1.03
Many personal commitment	2.57±1.08
Lack of cooperative among youth	2.80±1.15
Poor government commitment	3.05±1.07
Inadequate land for project execution	2.36±1.18
General lack of interest	2.65±1.16
Lack of technical skills	2.65±1.11
Personality conflict power	2.53±1.17

Field survey, 2011; Very serious constraint = 3; Serious constraint = 2 and not serious constraint = 1

activities in the study area were revealed and serious among they include: inadequate finance (X = 3.13), followed by poor government commitment (X = 3.13), lack of cooperative among youth (X = 2.80) unavailability of labour (X = 2.71), inadequate publicity (X = 2.69), poor organization by youth leader (X = 2.66), general lack of interest (X = 2.65) lack of technical skills (X = 2.65), many personal commitment (X = 2.57) and personality conflict power (X = 2.53). While inadequate land for project execution (X = 2.36) is said to be only not serious constraint that affect youths participation in agriculture and rural development. What can be inferred from the Table 3 shows that youth in the study area are facing serious challenges and this could be the reason for their low participation in agriculture and rural development despite the sufficient availability of land for project execution in the area.

Table 4 shows that the following attitude of youths toward future participation in agriculture and rural development activities were regarded as very important and important: participation of youths in agriculture and rural development activities is necessary and desirable for the achievement of development goals and objectives (X = 3.25), participation of youths in agriculture and rural development is a prerequisite to effective development programme (X = 3.17), youths participation in community development projects will improve their socio economic standards (X = 3.13), relationship between youths and government will be enhanced if youth participate in agriculture and rural development activities (X = 2.93), agriculture and rural development activities are too costly and difficult to do on our own (X = 2.94), the government should be responsible for agriculture and rural development activities (X = 2.87) among other prospects. Describing the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable (level of youths participation in agriculture and rural development activities), Spearman's correlation was used which is in Table 5. Table 5 showed that there is significant relationship between age

Table 4: Distribution of the respondents according to their perceptions towards sustainable agriculture and rural development activities

Youth's attitude	Mean±SD
Government should be responsible for agriculture and rural development activities	2.87±1.09
Agriculture and rural development activities are costly and difficult to do on our own	2.94±0.95
Youth are helpful when deciding on new development activities to embark on	2.84±1.07
Most youths are willing to participate in agriculture and rural development activities	2.75±1.07
Participation of youth in agriculture and rural development activities is a prerequisite to effective development programme	3.17±0.77
Participation of youths in agriculture and rural development activities is necessary and desirable for achievement of development goals and objectives	3.28±0.73
Youths should participate fully in community development projects in order to improve their socio-economic standards	3.13±0.76
With the present condition of youths, it is not easy to participate in agriculture and rural development activities	2.70±1.05
Government development project for rural areas are often made for the benefit of few selfish individual, hence participation is useless	2.71±1.10
Participation in community development activities is a deviation from our cultural practices	2.10±0.10
Relationship between youths and the government agents can be enhanced if youths participation in agriculture and rural development activities	2.93±0.94
We are to illiterate and not too sure to participate effectively in community development	1.93±1.03
Participation in community development activities may increase level of conflicts in the community	1.83±0.80
Actually, I do not care much about agriculture and rural development activities	1.95±0.92
Local participation in community development activity is not a means of improving the socioeconomic standards of the people	1.97±0.93
The future of community development activities in Ado local government is not bright because very few people are involved in the implementation of projects	3.25±0.85

Field survey, 2011; Very important = 4; Important = 3; Moderately important = 2; Not important = 1

Table 5: Correlation between socioeconomic characteristic of the respondent and their level of participation

Variables	r
Age	-0.200
Extension education	0.223
Education status	0.379

Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

(r = -0.200<0.05) education status (r = 0.379<0.05) and extension education (r = -0.223<0.05) of the respondents and their level of participation.

The result further revealed that there is an inverse correlation between age and level of participation. This implies that the lower, the age of the respondents, the higher their level of participation and the higher the age, lower their level of participation, i.e., youths are more agile, innovative and stronger at their early age to enable them contribute to agriculture and rural development. As for educational status, the higher the youth's level of education, the more their desire or quest for the use of improved technologies agrochemical, improved seed, etc., in contributing to agriculture and rural development.

Extension education on the other hand also enhances rural youth's level of participation in agriculture and rural development activities. It creates awareness about the needs for agriculture and rural development and the benefits inherent in the activities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Youths are one of the greatest assets that any nation can have and are legitimately regarded as the future leaders, they are potentially and actually the greatest investment for a country's development. Youths are measure of the extent to which a country can reproduce as well as sustain itself. The extent of their vitality, responsible conduct and roles in any community is positively correlated to the development of their country. Nigeria is primarily an agrarian society, recent happening has proved that agriculture is in declining stage in the country as evident in the reduction in commodities exportation over the years and increment in food importation consequently, in order to reduce food insecurity; the Federal Government should deliberately formulate policy to integrate youths in agriculture and rural development programmes.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

For the government to achieve its objective of bringing youths into economic mainstream and encourage them to participate in agriculture and rural development activities, the following recommendations are worth considering:

Youth participation should be encouraged through educational campaigns so as to improve the initiatives of youths and widen their scope of activities. As a matter of policy, youth should be identified as active participants in agriculture and rural development. Then roles should be supported by the inclusion in the national agriculture policy document.

Youths should be encouraged to choose agriculture as a way of life. This is necessary now since that most youth develop high status occupational goals at a

relatively early stage, proving adequate training on improved methods of farming. Adopt measures to ensure youth equitable access to factors of production and be provided with agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, seed agro-chemical and be encouraged; motivate and train youths to become better resources for sustainable community developments in their respective localities.

Develop mechanisms for rural youth participation in policy formulation both in the area for youths and community development. Sustained policy and commitment federal, state and local government levels which must translate literally into sustained budgetary and logistic support in order to provide for youths in rural communities to bring out the best in them.

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