

## Role of Local Leaders in Sustainable Agricultural Production in Imo State Implication for Youth in Agriculture

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**Abstract:** The study was to investigate the role of local leaders in sustainable agricultural production as it implies to youth in Imo State, Nigeria. A multistage random sampling technique was used to select 300 farmers and 60 local leaders from the three zones that make up the State. Two sets of structured questionnaire were used to collect data from the farmers and the local leaders. The data collected were analysed using percentages, means, frequency distribution and ordinary least square regression analysis. The results show that both male and female adults are involved in local leadership and the major roles played by the local leaders are settling disputes in the local areas and organising youths and other farmers into groups for agricultural production. The result of the regression analysis shows that educational level, occupation, membership of organisation, household size, years of experience, nature of household and age are important factors in influencing the performance of the local leaders while sex and marital status did not influence their performance. Lack of finance and low educational level were identified as the major constraints to their performance. It is therefore, recommended that extra training should be given to the local leaders and social amenities also should be put in place to enhance their performance.

**Key words:** Agriculture, local leader, sustainable production, youth, educational level

### INTRODUCTION

Local leaders are people that can influence and direct the activities of a group of people towards the achievement of their target goal. They constitute a part of the power structure in the community and may also belong to one higher economic class or the other. Local leaders are those who ensure that progress is made in line with group needs. Mgbada (2002) regards the local leaders as the people who have some amount of influence in the community even though they may not hold any formal position. Other villagers look up to them for advice, consultation and others tend to imitate them. They may not be very high in the society and may not be too low either. They are sociable, generally interested in community problems and have the wills to help solve the problems. They are people with integrity and repute. This group of people are also sincere and trustworthy. Their people like them and trust them. Asiabaka (2002) posited that the attitude of local leaders would influence the success or failures of rural community development. With

their position in their communities, they are expected to help the communities, solve some pressing rural problems such as traditional farming and thus increase both food production and standard of living of farmers especially as it concerns the youth in the rural communities.

The term "Youth" has been defined in various ways using age category as the most objective of definition, but this study will adopt the definition given by (Ekong, 1989; Akinolde, 1991) which state that youth is young men and women within the ages of 18 and 30. They are those people who are sufficiently matured, but have not acquired the full rights and successes of independent livelihood. The age 18 years had been concerned as a basic from when a person can be said to be sufficiently prepared within a farming community to be gainfully involved on the farm (Kuvlesky, 1976; Akinola, 1991).

The concern about youth's development borders on the fact that they possess abundant energies and therefore, constitutes the most important segment of any society (Jobowo, 1989). They serve as a reservoir of important labour force, which can most easily become

leaders in employing and innovating modern techniques (FAO/UN, 1990). Many authors such as Mgbada (2006), Omotayo, (2002), Ekoja (2004) have found that the farmers in the rural communities constitute more of the aging adults between the ages of 45-60. This age range is a danger signal if nothing is done about it. For agriculture to continue to provide the benefits it is meant for, there should be a way to be recruiting younger (youth) farmers into the field for sustainability.

An investigation of the role of local leaders in sustainable agricultural production will provide vital information on how they can be used to motivate and encourage the youth into taking up agriculture as a vocation. Sustainability of agricultural production is very essential in Imo State in particular and Nigeria in general. The objectives of this study are therefore to: Identify the socio-economic characteristics of the local leaders and farmers in Imo State; identify the roles of local leaders with respect to sustainable agricultural production; determine the level of performance of the local leaders; identify the constraints faced by the local leaders.

**Hypothesis:** There is no significant relationship between the performance of local leaders and their socio-economic characteristics

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Imo State, located in the south eastern zone of Nigeria. It had a population of about 2.885 million people (NPC, 2005). The State is divided into 27 Local Government Areas which are grouped into 3 agricultural zones of Owerri, Okigwe and Orlu. Agriculture is the major occupation of the people and almost all the households farm either as primary or secondary occupation. The ecological zone of the state favours the growing of food crops, tree crops and nuts. The major food crops grown include cassava, yam, maize and vegetables. Most farm households keep livestock such as goat, sheep, poultry, pigs and rabbits. Non food producing activities are handicrafts, petty trade and food processing.

A multi-stage sampling technique was used in sample selection. The state was divided into the three agricultural zones. From each zone, five local government areas were randomly selected and two communities were selected from the selected local government areas-(10 communities). From each of the ten communities, ten farmers and 20 local leaders were selected to give 100 farmers and 200 local leaders from one zone and for the three zones, the total sample size is 300 farmers and 600 local leaders. The sampling frame was the Agricultural

Development Project (ADP) registered farmers as documented in the "community listing" of Imo State (2002) and Agronomic Survey Report (2004) of the state ADP. The data was collected with the help of the extension agents in 2006 (January-October). Structured questionnaires were used to collect the data. Data were collected on variables such as the age, sex, marital status, educational attainment, household size, role of the local leaders, performance of the local leaders, their interaction with the youth, the constraints the local leaders face in trying to perform their roles etc.

**Analytical techniques:** Data were analysed by the use of descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies and percentages, as well as inferential statistics such as Ordinary Least Square (OLS) multiple regression analysis.

To estimate the determinants of role of local leaders in sustainable agricultural production, the estimated regression equation is implicitly expressed as follows:

$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5, X_6, X_7, X_8, X_9, e)$$

Where;

Y = Level of performance of the local leaders.

X<sub>1</sub> = Sex (male 1, female 0) Dummy variable

X<sub>2</sub> = Age (years)

X<sub>3</sub> = Marital status (married 1, not in marriage 0) Dummy variable.

X<sub>4</sub> = Education (No of years spent in school).

X<sub>5</sub> = Occupation (farmer 1, not a farmer 0) Dummy variable.

X<sub>6</sub> = Membership of organisation (Yes 1, No 0) Dummy variable.

X<sub>7</sub> = Household size (No of people in a house).

X<sub>8</sub> = Farming experience (No of years in farming).

X<sub>9</sub> = Nature of household (Monogamy 1, polygamy 0) Dummy variable.

e = Error term

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Personal characteristics of the respondents:** The personal characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondents by their socio-economic characteristics. The table shows that 65% of farmers are males while 35% are females. Male local leaders represent 80 while 20% are females.

The mean age of farmers was 47.4 years and majority of the farmers (75.0%) fell between the age range of 41-51 years. This is also applicable to the local leaders because 65% of the local leaders fell between 41-51 years age range. All the respondents were found to be married, but

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents by their personal characteristics (n = 300 farmers and 60 local leaders)

| Variables            | Farmers frequency                | %       | Local leaders frequency | %    |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------|-------------------------|------|
| Sex:                 | Male                             | 195     | 48                      | 80.0 |
|                      | Female                           | 105     | 12                      | 20.0 |
| Age:                 | 30-40 yrs                        | 45      | 15                      | 25.0 |
|                      | 41-51 yrs                        | 225     | 39                      | 65.0 |
|                      | 52 yrs and above                 | 30      | 6                       | 10.0 |
|                      | Mean age = 47.4 years            |         |                         |      |
| Marital status:      | Married                          | 249     | 51                      | 85.0 |
|                      | Divorced                         | 0       | 0                       | 0.0  |
|                      | Widowed                          | 51      | 9                       | 15.0 |
| Education:           | No formal education              | 24      | 0                       | 0.0  |
|                      | Primary education                | 75      | 9                       | 15.0 |
|                      | Secondary education              | 144     | 30                      | 50.0 |
|                      | Teachers training college        | 39      | 15                      | 25.0 |
|                      | Tertiary education/ university   | 18      | 6                       | 10.0 |
|                      | Occupation:                      | Trading | 12                      | 15   |
|                      | Teaching                         | 9       | 12                      | 20.0 |
|                      | Farming                          | 270     | 27                      | 45.0 |
|                      | Civil servants                   | 9       | 6                       | 10.0 |
| Household size:      | 2-7                              | 57      | 12                      | 20.0 |
|                      | 8-12                             | 189     | 42                      | 70.0 |
|                      | 13-16                            | 54      | 6                       | 10.0 |
| Social organisation: | Ministry of Agric.               | 30      | 3                       | 5.0  |
|                      | Farmers council                  | 87      | 9                       | 15.0 |
|                      | Farmers multipurpose cooperative | 99      | 27                      | 45.0 |
|                      | Age grade                        | 138     | 51                      | 85.0 |
|                      | Church organisation              | 254     | 54                      | 90.0 |

Source: Survey data 2006

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by the role of the local leaders (n = 60 for local leaders and 300 for farmers)

| Role of local leaders                                 | Farmers frequency | %    | Local leaders frequency | %     |
|---|-------------------|------|-------------------------|-------|
| Dissemination of extension package                    | 45                | 15.0 | 0                       | 0.0   |
| Bringing information from extension agents to farmers | 123               | 41.0 | 3                       | 5.0   |
| Involving farmers in agricultural practices           | 39                | 13.0 | 6                       | 10.0  |
| Settling of dispute among farmers                     | 129               | 43.0 | 60                      | 100.0 |
| Organisation of farmers to form cooperatives          | 33                | 11.0 | 18                      | 30.0  |

Source: Survey data 2006

17.0% of the farmers and 15.0% of the local leaders were widowed. Majority of the respondents attended secondary school. The table shows that 67.0% of farmers and 85.0% of the local leaders attended secondary school and above while only 8.0% of the farmers and none of the local leaders did not go to school at all. This shows that for one to be a local leader he/she must be educated at least to the level of knowing how to read and write. This also highlights the importance of education in anything one is doing as noted by Ekoja (2004) that education is a very important variable in adoption of innovations by Nigerian farmers.

It has been noted that majority of the rural dwellers are farmers, this study has also confirmed that, this finding also shows that some of the rural dwellers apart from farming also do other things like teaching, trading etc. The result shows that the majority of the respondents have large households of 8-12 and many of them belong to various social organisations.

Table 2 shows the different roles played by the local leaders. The major role of the local leaders is to settle

dispute among the farmers. This key role is followed by organizing the youths into groups because 67% of the farmers and 57% of the leaders agreed to this statement and bringing information to the farmers from the extension agents as reported by 41% of the farmers and organizing them to form cooperative societies as also reported by the local leaders. Other role played by local leaders according to the respondents are involving farmers in agricultural practices and dissemination of extension information.

These roles played by the local leaders are very important towards the development and sustainability of agricultural production. Rural communities are always involved in one conflict or the other and it is said that no community in conflict progresses, therefore the local leaders are doing a wonderful job in resolving conflicts in order to allow for progress in the rural communities. Organising youths to form groups and be actively involved in productive activities will lead to sustainability of agricultural production since the youth will be gradually taught, motivated and encouraged to get involved in agricultural activity either directly or indirectly to replace the aging farming population.

Table 3: Problems hindering local leaders performance N = 60

| Problems                            | Frequency | %    |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|------|
| Lack of social amenities            | 45        | 75   |
| Lack of communication equipment     | 27        | 45.0 |
| Inadequate capital                  | 51        | 85.0 |
| Youth restiveness                   | 6         | 10.0 |
| Lack of cohesion in the community   | 15        | 25.0 |
| Low educational level of the people | 24        | 40.0 |
| Lack of transport facilities        | 30        | 50.0 |
| Inaccessibility to local roads      | 36        | 60.0 |

Source: Survey data 2006

Table 4: Results of multiple regression analysis of relationship between the level of performance of local leaders and their socio-economic characteristics explanatory

| Variables                              | Functional forms   |                   |                    |                  |          |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------|
|  | Linear             | Semi-log          | Double-log         | Exponential      | Decision |
| Constant                               | 17.5943            | 7.1094            | 9.0651             | 7.1026           |          |
| Sex (X <sub>1</sub> )                  | 9.2091(1.1346)     | 2.1168(1.0721)    | 0.0966(1.1882)     | 0.0013(1.8571)   | Accept   |
| Age (X <sub>2</sub> )                  | -7.5520(-2.4432)*  | -1.6713(-2.3323)* | -0.1053(-1.1483)   | 0.0095(-1.1047)  | Reject   |
| Marital status (X <sub>3</sub> )       | 0.1927(1.0785)     | 2.0695(1.0408)    | 0.0718(3.5369)**   | 0.0089(3.0689)** | Accept   |
| Education level (X <sub>4</sub> )      | 6.3398(2.9052)**   | 2.0422(1.0895)    | 0.0644(2.9815)**   | 0.0016(1.0667)   | Reject   |
| Occupation (X <sub>5</sub> )           | 4.1729(1.9951)*    | 2.1182(1.1316)    | 0.0127(1.0672)     | 0.0072(1.1803)   | Reject   |
| Organisation members (X <sub>6</sub> ) | 5.0814(2.4009)*    | 3.5914(3.3706)**  | 0.0829(3.8203)**   | 0.0066(2.4444)*  | Reject   |
| Household size (X <sub>7</sub> )       | -6.2217(-2.9742)** | -2.8712(-1.4358)  | -0.1047(-3.2925)** | -0.0057(-11875)  | Reject   |
| Experience (X <sub>8</sub> )           | 5.9311(3.0158)**   | 3.0907(2.7573)**  | 0.0913(2.6161)*    | 0.0061(1.1509)   | Reject   |
| Nature of household (X <sub>9</sub> )  | 10.0023(3.2233)**  | 2.6697(1.0662)    | 0.0521(1.2524)     | 0.0089(1.2361)   | Reject   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                         | 0.7136             | 0.4129            | 0.5938             | 0.3914           |          |
| F                                      | 2.7685             | 0.7814            | 1.6243             | 0.7146           |          |
| N                                      | 60                 | 60                | 60                 | 60               |          |

Figures in parentheses are t-ratios, \* = Significant at 5%, \*\* = Significant at 1%

Table 3 shows that the most pressing problem hindering local leaders from performing their roles is inadequate capital (85%) followed by lack of social amenities (75%) inaccessibility to local roads (60%) lack of communication equipment (45%) lack of educational level of the people (50%) and so on. These problems as identified are important and need to be redressed. Mgbada (2006<sup>b</sup>) found in her study that inaccessibility to some part of Enugu State constitute to non-adoption of agricultural innovations. Capital had been identified as one of the hindering factors to agricultural development by Mgbada (2006a), Hilman (2003) and Laper and Simeon (2004).

**Relationship between the performance of local leaders and their socio-economic characteristics:**

The result of the four functional forms of the multiple regression analysis on the relationship between the level of performance of local leaders and their socio-economic characteristics are shown in Table 4. The linear functional form produced the lead equation, since it has the highest value of co-efficient of multiple determinations (R<sup>2</sup>), the highest value of F-ratio and the highest number of significant variables.

The co-efficient of multiple determinations (R<sup>2</sup>) was 0.7136, which implies that the level of performance of the local leaders is accounted for by the joint account of factors investigated. The co-efficient for educational level (X<sub>4</sub>), household size (X<sub>7</sub>), experience of the local leaders (X<sub>8</sub>) and nature of household (X<sub>9</sub>), were positive and

significant at 1% level while occupation of the local leaders (X<sub>5</sub>) and membership of organisation (X<sub>6</sub>) have positive co-efficient and are significant at 5% level. Also the co-efficient of age (X<sub>2</sub>) was negative but significant at 5% level. This results show that these variables (X<sub>2</sub>, X<sub>4</sub>, X<sub>5</sub>, X<sub>6</sub>, X<sub>7</sub>, X<sub>8</sub> and X<sub>9</sub>) are important factors influencing the performance of local leaders in the study area. Age however, has a negative co-efficient but significant showing also that age has some influence on the performance of the local leaders. It implies that the older the local leaders, the better they perform their role.

The co-efficient of marital status (X<sub>3</sub>) and sex (X<sub>1</sub>) were not significant at 5% level showing that the variables are not important factors influencing the performance of local leaders in the study area. Therefore, the hypothesis that says, there is no significant relationship between the performance of local leaders and their socio-economic characteristics is rejected with respect to the significant variables and accepted with respect to the non-significant variables. This report implies that the higher the socio-economic status of the local leaders the higher the tendency to perform their expected roles. Kolawole *et al.* (2003) reported that socio-economic status of farmers is positively and strongly related to all the activities performed by rural dwellers, including adoption of innovations. Claudia *et al.* (2002) and BBV (2002) also established strong relationships between the performance of local leaders and rural youth development in their studies.

## CONCLUSION

The local leaders have been found by this research to be an important tool to make agricultural production in the rural areas sustainable. This is done by making way for progress through settlement of conflict in the rural areas and organising youths into groups for agricultural production and leadership development. These roles of the local leaders are very important and can be enhanced and made more effective if the following recommendation are addressed: The support of the local leaders should be sought by the extension agents and a separate training for empowerment and encouragement organised for them. Social amenities such as communication equipments and accessible road networks should be provided in the rural areas to enable them have free access to the people. The provision of these amenities will also make it possible for the youths to live in the rural areas and possibly continue with the work of agricultural production.

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