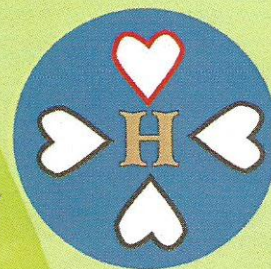


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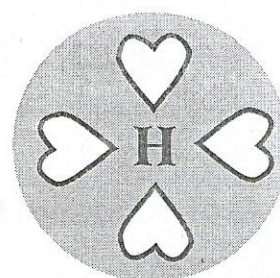
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**REPOSITIONING RURAL FARMERS THROUGH DISSEMINATION OF
AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION AND COMBATING POVERTY IN EZZA
NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF EBONYI STATE.**

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Abstract

Despite several efforts and programmes by successive governments in Ebonyi State at combating the scourge of poverty in our rural areas, this problem has persisted. This paper examined why farmers in Ezza North local government area in Ebonyi State have not benefited maximally from government intervention programmes. It was discovered that there is the information gap about how farmers and the locals can access farming inputs and imbibe new ways of farming. Agricultural information does not reach the end users. The paper found participatory communication as a veritable tool for transfer of agricultural information to reposition rural farmers to combat the scourge of hunger

KEYWORDS: *Agricultural information, peasant farmers, repositioning, scourge, poverty.*

INTRODUCTION

Rural farmers form the biggest segment of the working population of our society, their productivity and economic relevance is factored on their level of enlightenment and availability of other resources. Good information empowers, equips and helps to reposition a person for positive living. According to Reitz (2004) "Information is a term referring to facts, ideas, opinions and creative works of human intellect and imagination that have been communicated formally or informally in any form". Agricultural information therefore refers to facts, ideas opinions, which may be documented or undocumented that provide

answers to questions and resolve uncertainties that are related to agriculture (Ogbonna 2014) Rural farmers in Nigeria are bereft of useful information on new ways of farming, improved high yielding crop varieties agricultural loans, weather/climate, fertilizers etc. Lack of Agricultural information tend to hinder the productivity of rural farmers. Timely and useful information will help to reposition these farmers guide them on the best agricultural practice they can imbibe to boost their productivity. Information dissemination which is the act of spreading ideas and beliefs to people is the basic role of librarian and other information agencies (Nwali, 2014) It is a tool upon which

development and living condition is anchored. Proper agricultural information dissemination to rural farmers through various means will help to combat poverty in the society. This is because agriculture plays a critical role in the economic life of any society. Agriculture not only provide food, and raw material but also employment and investment opportunities to a very large proportion of a nations population (karuna, 2010).

Eminue (2005) Opines that poverty is State where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his basic needs of food, clothing and shelter is unable to meet social and economic obligation, lacks gainful employment skills assets and self esteem and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure and consequently has limited chance of advancing his / her welfare to the limit of his / her capabilities Ravalion and Bidarni (1994) aptly describe poverty as lack of command over basic consumption needs. It is a lack of means for meeting the basic needs of life, food, shelter, clothing, security, medical care and decent living (Onwa, 2011).

In Nigeria rural areas the lack of basic needs of life are clear indicators of poverty. Economic performance as well as the standard of living of the rural populace is usually the general factors used as indicators of poverty.

The scourge of poverty in Nigeria rural areas is endemic. It is estimated that about 70 percent of Nigerian population live in rural areas. In rural areas there is lack of infrastructure, no government presence, prostitution, superstitious beliefs, poor living conditions, etc. Agriculture in these

areas is at subsistent level. The first step towards combating poverty in these rural areas is to reposition the rural farmers through information dissemination. The library is an institution charged with the basic responsibility of providing services aimed at dissemination and distribution of knowledge to the people. To effectively do this the library adopts various methods to promote the use of library resources.

Moreover, information as a commodity is a requirement for economic enhancement, poverty alleviation and rural development. The availability and free flow of useful information to rural farmers through an effective dissemination network is a necessary precondition for the emergence of a crop of highly productive farmers. This is so because development, and prosperity have come to be knowledge based as they are also dependent upon the dissemination and application of different types of information (Nzelum and unegbu 2014). It can then be said that holistic national development cannot be achieved without carrying rural farmers along through the provision of relevant agricultural information (Okoche & Okoh 2014). Repositioning of rural farmers and combating the scourge of poverty can only be achieved through the dissemination of agricultural information to the rural populace and the information utilized properly to boost food production.

BRIEF HISTORY OF EZZA NORTH L.G.A.

Ezza North Local Government Area is one of the 13 Local government areas in Ebonyi

State. It is one of the Local government areas in the Ezza clan that was carved out of the old Ezza South Local Government Area in October 1996. It is bounded on the South by Onicha Local government area on the east by Ishielu Local Government area, on the North by Ohaukwu and Abakaliki local government area and on the west by Ezza South local government area. It has eleven autonomous communities. The local government has good arable and for agriculture.

The total population of the local government according 2006 census figures were 75,000 males and 79,487 females in the area giving a total of 154,487. About 60% of the people both male and female are farmers 25% are traders 10% are civil servants while about 5% are full time politicians (Omebeh, 2010).

According to a study by local Economic Empowerment and development strategy (LEEDS) the poverty incidence and concentration in Ezza North L.g.A. showed that over 50% of the house holds are poor, while less than 50% are non poor. About 80% of the farmers across the L.G.A do not have access to any form of Agricultural extension services. The literacy level of the people is on the average about 48% though it varies from community to community. About 5% of the population attests to availability of electricity in their areas. About 50% of the house holds across the L.G.A rely on rivers streams, pond and other stagnate water bodies as their major source of drinking water, 10% on the average depend on borehole, rain water and well, while less than 1% depend on pipe- borne water. Open

defection in log latrines, bushes, and farm lands is common in the area as many households do not have safe latrines.

Moreover, the local government area has good and favorable climate for agricultural production, shifting cultivation is widely practiced by the people. Different crops produced in commercial quantities in the area include- yam, cassava, cocoyam, maize, groundnut, potato, palm oil and palm-kernel etc. As a result of the availability of large expanse of land at different locations, the area is suitable for mechanized farming. Unfortunately subsistent and crude farming method has persisted. Social infrastructure is almost at zero level and these have negative impact on the agricultural productivity of the area. Idolatry, superstitious belief, and syncretism which tend to inhibit the assimilation of new ideas persists among the people especially the illiterates majority among them. Over 80% of the households across the L.G.A do not have access to agricultural extension services nor do they belong to any cooperative society. This area is fondly referred to as one of the most backward and undeveloped local council in Ebonyi State.

CENTRALITY OF INFORMATION TO RURAL FARMERS

Information is central to human existence, survival and development. Opara (2014) notes that information is the lifeblood of any organized society. The ability to produce information and the need to use it is very important in the very existence of man and of the simplest organized society.

Agricultural information confers on the recipients' knowledge, and understanding which if well utilized will lead to improved productivity economic empowerment, modernized agriculture and rural development. Okoche and Okoh (2014) concur with the above statement when they say that rural farmers must understand that quality agricultural information is the talisman that will release a positive turnaround to agricultural productivity in Nigeria. It must equally be noted that agricultural information can only be useful when it appears in its best form, and nature in which it will be best accessed and used by rural farmers.

Aina (1991) notes that illiteracy hampers the delivery of information to rural farmers. He suggests that information providers should be willing to interpret repackage, and apply information to the users situation and help communities act on the information they have received. This is because rural development cannot occur without developing rural agriculture, while rural agriculture cannot be developed without provision of good agricultural information. That means there is a fundamental link between agricultural information, food security, and improved agricultural production.

Information is a means for the mobilization of rural farmers and can help to alter deep rooted attitudes and opinions that have hindered rapid transformation of agricultural practices. Where effectively communicated information acts as a dynamic force that drives the recipient to action. Farming practices in rural areas for instance will require inputs such as seeds,

fertilizers, tractors, credit etc. The centrality of information to rural agriculture is that these other resources cannot be procured or effectively used without relevant and adequate information. We often hear of technology transfer or transfer of technology or innovations to farmers. Information is interdependent on the know how and hidden part of technology (Meyer 2015). While others countries of the world aim to reach the moon, we must aim for the time being at any rate to reach the farmers in the villages by providing them with necessary information (Nyerere, 1967) as cited by (Opara, 2014). This is important because the setback suffered by Nigeria agricultural sector has been mainly due to unavailability/ inaccessibility of good agricultural information by rural farmers which hampers proper implementation of government agricultural programmes.

Farmers need information about climate change to enable them protect their crops against drought and take advantage of good climate conditions. Rural farmers need information about marketing of agricultural goods agric loans, and government policies. Farmers need the services of agricultural extension agents to answer their question. But studies of rural farmers in Ezza North Local Government showed that only five percent of them have access to agricultural extension services. Rural farmers have often indicated their displeasure on the level of agricultural information service rendered to them, because they required packages of information as their needs and priorities change through the production cycle

(Anunobi, Ogbonna and Osuchukwu 2012) the importance of information on marketing of agricultural goods help farmers to find what their customers needs and supply to them at a profit. This simply underlines the importance of information and communication in agricultural marketing. The rural farmer need to be "market intelligent" to make future plans for the farm.

A study carried out in Ezza North Local Government Area. shows that the rural farmers there lack adequate information about agric loans new crop varieties, pesticides, government policies, climate /weather information marketing of agricultural products etc. Agricultural products in Ezza North L.G.A are not properly marketed due to lack of big markets there as the area is doted with small evening / night markets which cannot attract financially strong customers from far places. From all these it shows that relevant agricultural information will help to-revolutionize agricultural practices in our rural areas and to check the menace of poverty in our society.

E F F E C T I V E W A Y S O F D I S S E M I N A T I N G A G R I C U L T U R A L I N F O R M A T I O N T O R U R A L F A R M E R S .

The provision of relevant information to rural farmers must first be preceded by the information providers understanding the nature and types of information, and accessibility problem encountered by rural farmers because a good percentage of them are illiterates, that was why Aina (1991)

Opines, that information providers should be willing to interpret, repackage and apply information to users situation and help communities act on the information they have received. Information should be disseminated to rural farmers in formats that suits them. Agricultural information can be provided to rural farmers through the followings channels.

(i) PUBLIC LIBRARIES:

These are libraries located at the local government Headquarters whose collections are tailored towards satisfying the broad, varying and changing information needs of the user communities. These libraries provide information materials such as wooden or metal gong, drums oral performance narratives, posters, circulars, pictures, film shows, photographs hand bill audio recordings, books, etc. these libraries a times provides mobile library services to the rural farmers and the information translated to their local language.

ii FACE TO FACE COMMUNICATION:

This channel of communication is very common within the nuclear and extended family network. Aderigbe (1990) viewed that interpersonal communication as the major means of linking rural farmers because most of them are illiterates. This can easily be done within the extended family network which is very common in the Igbo land. Through this method the barrier of language is effectively broken.

(iii) TOWN CRIERS:

Town criers are fondly called “traditional messengers” who move from place to place in rural areas, with wooden or metal gong, drums, flutes, and whistle delivering messages to the local populace. Ngwaimbi (1995) notes that traditional media (town criers) is the “live theatre” of the rural people. This is because important information are delivered to them in the most popular acceptable understandable and humorous manner. Villagers enjoy the services of town criers more than radio messages.

(iv) SOCIAL / POLITICAL MEETINGS:

Yazidu (1973) identifies social and political meetings such as town meetings, weddings, naming, funeral ceremonies, political meetings, new yam festivals as occasion for interpersonal and group exchange of new ideas and agricultural information. In such meetings agricultural information can be provided in the most acceptable and understandable manner either to group or individuals.

(V) MARKET PLACES AND CHURCHES:

Villagers go to the local markets either to buy or to sell and as such it is a very good forum for disseminating information to rural farmers. Awa (1980) observes that many issues persons and village events are discussed in market places more than elsewhere. He suggested that market places and

churches could be used to disseminate information about rural development and agriculture to the rural people faster and effectively since village people go there.

(vi) RADIO AND TELEVISION MESSAGES:

These are generally referred mass media channels and are useful in reaching a wide audience at a very fast rate. Jimma (2014) asserts that mass media particularly radio broadcasting are among the technologies which reach the rural communities faster in developing counties. Radio and television remains the most powerful and yet the cheapest mass media for reaching large numbers of people in isolated areas. Live radio programs make farmers call in and share their experiences or ask for information in their own mother tongue, which was unthinkable for years ago (JDPC 2014).

(vii) LECTURES, SEMINARS AND WORKSHOP:

Lectures seminars and workshop are means of sharing ideas and passing information to people. The library can in collaboration with appropriate agricultural ministry, agencies for mass mobilization and attitudinal change, community leaders and farmers cooperative societies organize public lectures, workshops, town hall meetings, or seminars in the rural communities which can be used to enlighten the rural farmers on the best agricultural practices. For instance, it can be used to address problems peculiar to the

farmers in the area like flooding, pesticides, how to access government loans, high yielding crop varieties, fertilizers etc. Leaflets and pamphlets written in both English language and vernacular on the subject matter can be freely distributed to the people accordingly. This can serve as a forum for sensitization and mobilization of farmers in line with government agricultural programmes.

Moreover, the library can equally move a step further to repackaging information in various ways to suit the end users. Uhegbu (2007) refers to information packaging as ways of adopting information to suit the desired information need of any user. Packaging and repackaging of information could be content, medium or language repackaging or time scheduling. All these are necessary because information users in any community differ in their academic background and qualifications, cultural and religious beliefs, occupational and professional inclinations as well as their psychological and socio-economic backgrounds. These differences affect their perception and understanding of information at their different background. In information packaging, the librarian rearranges or repackages the contents of information in such a way that it would satisfy the information needs of the user, given his or her background.

BENEFITS OF DISSEMINATION OF AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION TO FARMERS.

(a) It is a means for enlightenment sensitization, education and

mobilization of farmers in our society. Agricultural information dissemination to rural farmers help the government to enlighten them about government agricultural policies, and programmes. Farmers can be educated on best agricultural practices that can boost food production.

(b) The dissemination of agricultural information help to reposition rural farmers to increase their productivity and curtail the scourge of poverty. A group of well informed farmers will know where to access loans, fertilizers, pesticides/ herbicides, agricultural equipments, high yielding crop varieties etc these agricultural inputs are those things needed to boost food production.

(c) Employment opportunities: Gainful agro business enterprises are easily created when farmers are made to be "market intelligent" as to where and when to sale their agricultural products profitably. Allied agro businesses, and investment opportunities are brought to the knowledge of the farmers and non farmers who are into agro allied businesses.

(d) Positive economic multiplier Effects:

There will be a very positive economic multiplier effect on the agro-business activities in Ezza North Local Government Area, Ebonyi State

and Nigeria. This is because increase in the knowledge base of the rural farmers will lead to increase in food production, increase in revenue accruable to rural farmers and the government and a positive turnaround on the standard of living of the people and this will invariably reduce poverty

- (e) Helps to safeguards the health of farmers and their products. Timely information about livestock epidemics, crop pest etc will help to guide the rural farmers on how to prevent livestock diseases, crop pest and enhance healthy agricultural practices among the rural farmers. It will equally help to equip them with information about how to access specific drugs for their livestock and pesticides

C O N C L U S I O N A N D R E C O M M E N D A T I O N

We live in a world driven by knowledge because knowledge is power. Agriculture as it is today is knowledge and information driven. Gone are those days when agricultural practices were done in the most primitive ways. Rural farmers are beginning to embrace changes based on information about new agricultural practices which in turn leads to increase in food production and poverty alleviation. Public libraries should endeavour to liaise with the relevant stakeholders in the agricultural sector to provide rural farmers with information about their farming

activities. Agricultural information to rural farmers has some benefits which include: increase in food production, safe agricultural practices, positive economic multiplier effects, employment/ investment opportunities in agribusiness, poverty alleviation etc.

In view of the above, this paper recommends the following.

- (i) The establishment of public libraries and information centers at villages and communities with their collections made to be rural agricultural based and librarians trained to manage the libraries.
- (ii) These should be pre packaging of agricultural information to enhance their understanding assimilation and application of these information by the end users.
- (iii) There should be collaboration among all relevant stakeholders like librarians, Agricultural ministries, government authorities, traditional rulers, farmers cooperative societies, village heads etc to ensure that rural farmers are helped to embrace innovations in the agricultural sector.
- (iv) Government agencies for mass mobilization and Adult literacy agencies should be made to help educate rural farmers on the aspect of basic literacy so that information transmission becomes easier when the average rural farmer can read and write.

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