

**ANALYSIS OF CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES TO
AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN OKIGWE LOCAL GOVERNMENT
AREA, IMO STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the contributions of women cooperative societies to agricultural development in Okigwe Local Government Area, Imo State. It was conducted in 2012. The study employed both purposive and multi-stage sampling procedures. Data for the study were generated from the respondents using structured questionnaire. Three members were randomly selected from each of the twenty women cooperatives in the Local Government Area, giving a total of 60 respondents as our sample size. The data were analyzed using such simple statistical tools as frequencies, percentages and means. The study revealed that the respondents were young (60%), married (58.3%), literate (86.7%) and dominated by civil servants (50%). The study showed high level contributions to agricultural development by the women cooperative societies in several activities including provision of information on agricultural related activities, provision of agricultural advisory services; mobilization of farmers for active participation in farm projects, and to a relatively large extent, procurement of credit facilities for members and facilitation of adoption of modern agricultural technology. The study also showed that the respondents identified high cost of farm inputs, lack of access to land and credits as major constraints to agricultural development in the study area. Given the findings of the study, it is recommended that the government in the study area as well as other relevant agencies and institutions should assist the women cooperators in the provision of necessary farm inputs, land and credit/loan at subsidized rate.

Key words: Co-operative societies, Agriculture, rural development, women.

INTRODUCTION:

Historically, women associations in Nigeria, whether women age grades, women farm groups, "Umuada" women or women credit associations, have been known to play key roles in social and economic

activities of their communities. The women cooperative societies represent typical examples of instrumental social groups in rural communities in Nigeria. According to Ekong (2010), in rural areas, most instrumental associations are directed towards the attainment of economic ends and aim at effecting specific physical and/or social changes in the environment. As agents of rural development, women cooperative societies are known to promote agricultural development in rural areas. In this regard, Ekong (2010) had also observed that the objectives of cooperatives include instituting innovations in terms of making new and improved farm inputs available to farmers. This is more so with women farm supply cooperatives which may be involved in providing such services as purchasing in bulk and distributing such inputs as fertilizer, chemicals, seedlings and credits to their members. Similarly, women marketing cooperatives are involved in bargaining for improved prices of agricultural products for their members.

The invaluable role of women cooperatives in promoting agricultural development may be better appreciated when it is realized that agricultural activities in Nigeria operate at a subsistence level and lies in the hands of resource poor farmers, most of whom are rural women. It is argued that rural women, more than their male counterparts, are dominant in agricultural activities, making up to 60-80% of labour force.

Women in the developing world including the sub-Saharan Africa play important role in Agriculture (Imo, 1998; Nwankwo and Eboh, 1998). It has been reported that in Africa, 60-80 percent of the agricultural labour force is female, as is 40 percent in Asia and West Indies (Ani, 2004). In Nigeria, studies have shown that rural women farmers do perform about 70% or more of all agricultural food processing and utilization activities and over 60% of storage and marketing operations (Obasi, 2005).

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS**Women Agricultural Cooperatives**

Cooperatives involve mutual assistance in working towards a common goal. Cooperative is a universal form of organization found practically in all counties and used by people with very small means to improve their level of living. Cooperatives are formed in order to enable people to achieve through joint efforts what they are unable to achieve singly by themselves (Akpabio, et al, 2002), The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), in Okoroaffia (2000), defined a cooperative as an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise (Okoroaffia, 2000). Women cooperatives are those cooperative societies whose membership is exclusively women.

Agricultural Development

Development is a multi-dimensional concept that cuts across all facets of human life. Development is oriented towards satisfying the multi-farious needs of man. According to Obasi (2005).

“Development in real terms is a social process by which any group of people or society harnesses, mobilizes and utilizes all resources available to it, human and material, for the purpose of transforming their socio-physical environment for the better and ultimately improving the quality of life of its members through increased production of their needs and equitable distribution of such needs”

Essentially, the ultimate aim of development is to enhance the quality of life of people. Agricultural development, on the other hand, is one dimension of the multi-faceted complex process of development that aims at enhancing the productive capacity of the agricultural sector through the transformation of the rural economy from being a peasant, subsistence agricultural economy to modern commercialized agricultural enterprise. Agricultural development aims at sustaining a vibrant and dynamic rural economy as well as guaranteeing local food sufficiency and other products for export (Nwosu, 2010).

OBJECTIVES**The objectives of the study were to:**

- Determine the extent to which the women cooperative societies contributed to agricultural development in the study area.
- Examine the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents.
- Identify the sources of capital/finance for the respondent.
- Identify the major constraints to agricultural development in the study area.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Okigwe Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. Okigwe is one of the Local Government Areas that make up Imo State of Nigeria. It is situated on a major Federal road between Umuahia in Abia State and Enugu in Enugu State. It has common boundaries with such communities as Ideato in the South, Mbano in the East, Lokoia in the West and Uturu in the North. Most of the inhabitants of Okigwe Local Government Area are small-scale farmers, traders and artisans. Only very few of them are engaged in the civil service. The area enjoys good rainfall for most part of the year, especially, between April and October. The study involved a multi-stage, purposive, random sampling procedure. The data were generated from 60 respondents from different women cooperative societies in the study area with the aid of structured questionnaire. Such simple statistical tools as frequencies, percentages and means were used for data analysis. A five –point likert scale was used for purpose of determining the grand mean.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-economic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table I. These include age, marital status, educational status, occupational background and farm size. A greater proportion of the respondents, (70%) were aged between 15 and 45; an energetic and physically vibrant group.

Table I: Distribution of Respondents by Socio-Economic Characteristics

Socio-Economic	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age			
	15-30	21	35.0
	31-45	21	35.0
	46-60	13	21.7
	61-75	5	8.3
	Total	60	100.00
Marital Status			
	Married	35	58.3
	Single	13	21.7
	Widowed	8	13.3
	Divorced	4	6.7
	Total	60	100.00
Education			
	WASC/SSSC/G.C.E O/L	11	18.33
	O.N.D / N.C.E.	11	18.33
	HND/ B.SC. BA	21	35.00
	M.Sc/ PhD	17	28.34
	Total	60	100.00
Occupation			
	Farmers	9	15.0
	Civil Servants	30	50.0
	Contractors	8	13.3
	Artisans	13	21.7
	Total	60	100.00
Farm Size (Ha)			
	>1	30	50.00
	1-1.9	9	15.00
	2-3.9	11	18.3
	4-5.9	3	5.0
	6-7.9	7	11.7
	Total	60	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2012

Similarly, a dominant proportion of the respondents (58.3%) were married. All the respondents were literate with 68.3% of them having tertiary educational qualifications. This implies that the respondents were likely to apply modern agricultural innovations. According to Okoye et al (2004), education has the capacity to influence people to accept new technology and change their attitude to the desired technology. A high proportion of the respondents (65%) had farm size of < 1-1.9 hectares which implies that a majority of the respondents were small scale farmers.

Table 2 presents a distribution of respondents according to the extent to which the women cooperatives contributed to agricultural development in the study area. The results in the Table 2 shows that the obtained mean scores ranged from 3.6 to 3.9. Five out of the seven mean scores are either equivalent to or greater than the grand mean or cut-off mean score of 3.7. This implies that the women cooperatives generally contributed highly to agricultural development in the study area.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents According to the extent to which Women Cooperatives Contributed to Agricultural Development in the study Area.

Agricultural Development Activities	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low	Mean	Remark
Provision of Advisory Services	14 (26.7)	27 (45.0)	18 (30.)	1 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	3.9	High
Provision of Information On various Agricultural Situations	16 (26.7)	21 (35.0)	23 (38.3)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	3.9	High
Facilitating access to farm input	9 (15.0)	22 (36.7)	29 (48.3)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	3.7	High
Stimulating Rural Infrastructures for agricultural development	15 (25.0)	19 (31.7)	20 (33.3)	4 (6.7)	2 (3.3)	3.7	High
Mobilizing high farmer's participation in projects	1.5 (25.0)	22 (36.7)	21 (35.0)	2 (3.0)	0 (0.0)	3.8	High
Facilitating procurement of credit	11 (18.3)	19 (31.7)	26 (43.3)	3 (5.0)	1 (1.7)	3.6	High
Facilitating adoption of technology	14 (23.3)	18 (30.0)	21 (35.0)	4 (6.6)	3 (5.0)	3.6	High
Overall mean						3.7	

Source: Field Survey 2012

Table 3 shows that majority of the respondents (76.6%) had their salaries and personal savings as major sources of capital. The result confirms our earlier observations on Table 1 that the respondents had formal education. This probably facilitated their employment in the civil service where they earned regular salaries.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to their sources of capital.

Sources of Capital	Frequency	Percentage
Bank loan	6	10.00
Salary earning	26	43.40
Personal Savings	20	33.30
Traditional money lenders	3	5.00
Friends and relatives	5	8.30
Total	60	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents According to Constraints to Agricultural Development by Women.

S/N	Type of Constraint	Frequency	Percentage	Ranking
1.	Access to land for agricultural purpose	57	95.00	1st
2.	Cost of farm inputs such as fertilizer and seedlings	54	90.00	2nd
3.	Availability of markets for sale of agricultural products	35	58,33	6 th
4.	Appropriate pricing/profit for farm products	40	66.33	5 th
5.	Access to credit/Loan	52	86.70	3 rd
6.	Training on cooperative Matters	42	70.00	4 th

Multiple Responses**Source: Field Survey, 2012**

Table 4 shows the type of constraints to agricultural development faced by women in ranking order. Access to land for agricultural purpose, cost of farm inputs, access to credit/loan and training on cooperative matters rank highest, respectively, as major constraints.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research study confirmed that cooperative societies can serve as veritable instruments for promoting agricultural development. It has also confirmed that literacy or education is an essential imperative, in fact, a functional pre-requisite for cooperative societies. The study has also highlighted access to farm land, high cost of farm inputs, access to credit/loan and training on cooperative matters as major constraints to agricultural development in the study area. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- The government, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other related agencies should provide the cooperative societies with appropriate capital/loans at subsidized rates.
- The government should make appropriate policies and legislations that would make it easier for women cooperative societies to secure land for agricultural activities without difficulties.
- The government, through her officials in relevant ministries and agencies, should organize cooperative education on a regular basis, to update the knowledge and skills of cooperative members.

- The women cooperators should also be provided with necessary farm inputs at subsidized rate.

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