

AN ASSESSMENT OF CONSTRAINING FACTORS IN SELECTED AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN THE COASTAL REGIONS OF THE NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The Agricultural Sector of the Niger Delta's coastal regions comparatively has not been very competitive with the North of Nigeria where a significant scale of her food imports comes from despite being endowed with good agricultural environment. The researchers purposively focused on assessing the constraining factors in selected agricultural fields and activities as specimen areas with a view to drawing far reaching generalized conclusions. The observed constraints were many but the following were significant: Poor infrastructure, high input cost, input insufficiency, inadequate management practices and social problems. High input cost, inadequate infrastructure, social problems and poor management featured prominently as limiting factors to competitive agriculture in the coastal regions of the Niger Delta amongst others. Addressing these issues will proffer solutions to the slow pace of agricultural development and practices in the region.

Key Words: Constraints, Agriculture, food, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Agriculture in the coasts of the Niger Delta is largely an informal sector and comprise mostly of small scale ventures that have been playing significant roles in the food security policies of the region. In spite of the important roles played by the sector in the economy, it still faces difficult challenges and suffers neglect. For this sector to remain relevant in the pace and pattern of our development continuum, the constraining factors retarding the growth of the sector and its development must be addressed.

The Niger Delta plays leading roles in the hydrocarbon industry in Nigeria. However, it has not been competitive with the North of Nigeria in food production despite being generously endowed with good soil and clement climate. This is evidenced in the significant scale of food imports from the North of Nigeria. The constraints against agriculture in the region range from inclement economic environment to ethnic rivalry and strife and, hydrocarbon pollution.

In recent times, there have been reported cases in the mass media of militancy, ethnic hostilities and other forms of civil unrests. These are limiting factors to agricultural activities. Marauding herdsmen who invade and wantonly destroy people's farms and crops have added to the contending forces fighting the development of our agriculture. Significant and

thriving investment in the agriculture sector in this region will depend on peace and stability. Nwakeze (2005) noted that an atmosphere of violence and wars is unstable for a consistent policy that can encourage growth.

Oyakhilome regime in Rivers State made attempts in checking rural-urban migration and unemployment through the school-to-land program. Amaechi's government initiated the Songhai farm and Banana plantation for similar purpose. The movement of able hands from the rural to urban centres robs the farmers of highly needed labour. Fashola (2005) however thinks the trend is characteristic of developing countries in general, pointing out that there is the need to embark on agrarian reforms to achieve output expansion and increased productivity, growth in rural agriculture and its industrialization to check the trend.

The challenges in the coast of the Niger Delta are also economic and largely so. In Nwakeze's (2005) terminology, this constraint is pervasive and ranges from the source of credit, how to obtain the credit to decisions concerning the stage of production when the finance is needed. Most farmers in the region thrive on self support. There is visible evidence of inadequate government fiscal support and enabling credit environment to agriculture. These constitute major constraints and failures in the quest for agricultural transformation in Nigeria (Fashola, 2005).

Infrastructural facilities are basic to quality life in the Niger Delta. The East African Roots Crops Research Network(EARRNET) (2006) asserts that infrastructure has critical roles to play in any agricultural development strategy. Its inadequacy in the Niger Delta is pervasive. Most rural communities are sorry sights. Agricultural growth and development to a large extent depends on the availability of basic infrastructure. Its absence or inadequacy will add to the cost of doing business.

Government support policies for the agricultural sector have not been very adequate over the years in most parts of the region. The success of the critical role the agricultural sector in the region is expected to play in the quest for food self-sufficiency may depend on governments support policies. This makes it imperative to examine the sector and outline the constraints limiting it. This study may perhaps; attract the attention of the government. Objectively, and within the purview of the research, the study focused on identifying the major constraining factors

limiting competitive agriculture in the region especially food and cash crops production.

Methods and Materials

Under the supervision of the researchers, lieutenants who were conversant with the regions under study were guided to collect data. A multistage sampling method was adopted in the study. Three (3) states (Rivers, Ondo and Delta) in the present composition of the coastal Region of the Niger Delta were randomly selected. Palm oil processing was randomly selected for study in Rivers State; Yam production in Ondo and agricultural credit scheme in Delta.

Sixty Oil palm processing enterprises were randomly isolated and studied in two purposively chosen local governments in Rivers State. In Ondo, one hundred yam farmers were randomly studied in Akure North

noted for their prominence in yam production. In Delta State, three Micro-finance banks noted for being active in agricultural credits were purposively chosen and seventy five loan beneficiaries randomly isolated and studied. Data were obtained by lieutenants using structured questionnaire under the monitoring and supervision of the researchers. Likert Scaling and percentages were used in data analysis

Results and Discussion

Tables 1, 2 and 3, show the indentified constraints in palm oil processing, yam production and agricultural credit acquisition. These constraining factors were critically examined and discussed with a view to generating policy statements, suggest ways to mitigate, remediate or minimize their impacts on our agricultural development continuum. However, only the ones seen as majors were isolated and discussed.

TABLE 1: Constraints to palm oil processing in Rivers State

CONSTRAINTS	MEAN	RANK	REMARK
Bad Road network (poor infrastructure)	3.90	1 st	High
High cost of FFB (input cost)	3.80	2 nd	High
High cost of labour (input cost)	3.50	6 th	High
High cost of processing equipment (input cost)	3.67	4 th	High
Poor technology (poor management)	3.70	3 rd	High
Inadequate capital (input insufficiency)	3.80	2 nd	High
High transport cost (input cost)	3.60	5 th	High
Inadequate labour (input insufficiency)	3.20	8 th	High
Low supply of FFB (input insufficiency)	3.40	7 th	High

Source: Uche et al(2015)

FFB: Fresh Fruits Bunches

Values < 2.5 low; >2.5 high

TABLE 2: Constraints to yam production in Ondo State.

CONSTRAINTS	MEAN	RANK	REMARK
Inadequate storage (input insufficiency)	3.80	1 st	High
Insufficient fund (input insufficiency)	3.80	1st	High
Poor technology (poor management)	3.70	2nd	High
High transport cost (input cost)	3.40	3rd	High
Pests and Diseases (poor management)	2.10	5th	Low
	3.10	4 th	High

Source: Uche et al(2015)

Mean> 2.50 high <2.50 low

Table 3: Constraints to credit acquisition by farmers in Delta State.

CONSTRAINTS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
High interest rate (input cost)	38	52.80
Inadequate fund from Banks (input insufficiency)	5	6.70
Delay in loan approval (poor management)	23	30.70
Banks aversion to agric loan (Social problem)	9	12.00

Source: Uche & Osemeke(2015)

The observed constraints can be segregated into five groups viz: poor infrastructure, high input cost, input insufficiency, inadequate management practices and social problems. It should however be

noted that the intensity of these constraints are both location and enterprise specific. This study intends largely to draw attention to their existence with a view to provoking both policy and actions geared

towards remedial activities by the concerned authorities

Poor Infrastructure: The dearth of adequate infrastructure (Roads and electricity largely) arguably may have contributed to the region not been competitive in food production and distribution. Lianto (2014) thinks that while opinions may vary and evidences of contrasting empirical findings among researchers about the link between infrastructure and growth, the available evidence seems to show that inadequate supply of infrastructure or the unreliability of infrastructure services may constrain investments of productive capital and lead to a restricted or reduction of output. Fashola (2006) also, believes that agricultural growth and development to a large extent depend on the availability of basic infrastructure and its absence will add to the cost of doing business.

While the availability and quality of rural infrastructure are not alternatives to good macroeconomic and agriculture-specific policies, neglect in the implementation of such policies and inadequate infrastructure can be significant constraints to growth and productivity (Lianto, 2012). Respondents responses suggest a connection between infrastructure and competitive agriculture in the Niger Delta and consistent with popular assumptions.

High Input Cost: The notion that the Niger Delta is a significantly rich region is ironical. This region incidentally showcases some of the most pervasive forms of poverty in the country. Events suggest this assumption has affected the cost of living and price indices. Informed minds believe the vagaries of the economy of the region have impacted the agricultural sector in terms of input cost (on comparative grounds, outside Abuja the federal capital territory, cost of living is higher in the Niger Delta especially Rivers State).

High input costs may have affected profit and rendered the agricultural sector unattractive. Rising cost of inputs have effects on the performance of any enterprise especially direct costs. These may have added to the farmers' average and marginal costs and by implication affected the profit.

Input Insufficiency: The study cum survey showed evidence of limited supply of labour and capital to the farms. These are major inputs in agricultural production and distribution. Input insufficiency, all things been equal will also limit output. The rural - urban drift is a suspect in inadequate labour supply to the farms. Financial inadequacy on the other hand will not only limit other input acquisition but also the size and scope of farm holdings. Tollens (2001) suggests that input supply and product market constrain agricultural supply responses, particularly in developing countries.

Poor Management: Bloom (2007) stated that firms that have good management practices will perform significantly better than those that do not because

improved management practices are some of the effective ways for a firm to do better than its competitors. The study revealed inadequate management practices as one of the constraining factors in agricultural production activities in the Niger Delta in some sectors. Efficient management practices have always been issues of internal policy in any enterprise. Management patterns and practices of any enterprise will always have reasonable effects on its ability to perform and Bloom (2007) believes that a strong correlation exist between management practices and a firm's productivity.

Social Factors: Rural-Urban drift is suspected of robbing the farms of needed farm labour and results in some sectors agree with this position. The Niger Delta region in recent times has also witnessed significant proportion of ethnic and inter-ethnic rivalry. All these do not favour agricultural activities. Nneozi et al (2012) established in their study in Cross River State the existence of a significant but negative relationship between agricultural GDP and conflict. However, one wonders how significant agricultural activities and income generation would be taking place in an environment overcast by social conflict. Conflicts will always affect the supply of inputs, distribution of outputs and dislocate the general market system. This line of thought is in agreement with the position and findings of Mwangi et al (2014) who stated that Mali and Nigeria are two countries in West Africa whose potentials have been impacted by severe episodes of internal conflict which have negatively influenced agricultural productivity and investment.

Summary/Conclusion: Though endowed with good agricultural soil and climate, the Niger Delta has continued to perform far below her optimal in food production. This limitation is partly self inflicted and partly reactionary to the contemporary economic and social realities and government policies. A reversal of these will definitely induce a reversal in our food producing potentials. A paradigm shift in government policies and social re-orientation in the Niger Delta will definitely produce the anticipated expectation of being self-sufficient in food production since nature has graciously endowed us with what it will take on the average to be relatively independent in food production.

Recommendations

With respect to the findings in the field, the following remedial measures are recommended:

1. The government should develop and upgrade infrastructure and other public utilities to reduce the cost of doing business especially in the transport and energy sector.
2. Single digit interest loans be given to the farmers guaranteed by the various state governments.
3. The agricultural sector should be appreciably mechanized by the state governments. Low cost machines should be made available on loan to the farmers. This will reduce drudgery, make farming

attractive to the youths and make them gainfully employed, reduce social vices and encourage large scale agriculture.

4. Visible and realistic attention be given to the farmers by the various state Agricultural Development Programs (ADPs) with a view to enhancing their entrepreneurial and management abilities.

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