

PROMOTING URBAN AGRICULTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES FOR APPROPRIATE EXTENSION POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The increasing spate of rural-urban migration has remained a critical issue with far-reaching consequences on the agricultural and national development. Several policies guiding extension service delivery have focused primarily on the rural sector since agriculture has been recognized as a rural industry. This paper takes a look at promoting urban agriculture for sustainable poverty alleviation in Nigeria with special focus on appropriate policy to enhance extension service delivery for urban agriculture. It examined the roles agriculture is expected to play in poverty alleviation in Nigeria and further identified workable ways of promoting urban agriculture through effective extension service, tailored to attract the interest and patronage of Nigerian urban poor. It was therefore recommended among others that extension agencies should organize an effective urban extension services that guides and assists smallholder urban farmers with needed information on what types of food products in demand in urban areas so that they can respond appropriately.

Keywords: Urban Agriculture, Sustainable, Poverty Alleviation.

INTRODUCTION

At present, the global population is half rural and half urban, but the world's cities are swelling (Wilson, 2001). However, in the next 12 years, ninety per cent of the projected 6.8 billion people in developing countries will live in the cities (Garrett, 2001). The implication of the above trend is posing serious concern and challenges among policy makers, scholars and development experts in developing countries. It might also be the main reason behind agricultural and rural development policies in developing nations like Nigeria. This becomes more critical when viewed against the alarming rate of rural-urban migration witnessed in Nigeria over the last three decades. Many Nigerian cities have presently imploded as evidenced by the growth of slums and shanty settlements (refuge for urban poor) with its attendant hazards and implication on national development. Majority of these migrants with agrarian culture often lack employable skills necessary for urban sector employment and so are vulnerable to unemployment, poverty and other forms of human misery. Although several measures aimed at alleviating poverty such as: skill training, micro-credit/loan schemes, job creation policies, etc have been tried in Nigeria, there appear not to be an effective solution to the poverty pandemic. Another option to reverse the ugly trend is for government to invest in the agricultural sector not just as a rural occupation (Wilson, 2001). This therefore positions urban agriculture at the forefront.

Urban agriculture refers to the farming of small plots of land available in urban environments or on the perimeter of the cities (Wilson, 2001). According to Ogunbameru *et al* (2004), urban agriculture is the practice of farming in a city environment. It embraces the cultivation of crops, rearing of livestock, harvesting, processing, storage, marketing and distribution of agricultural products and by-products. It demands sound agronomic principles

and practices including adoption of innovations for increased agricultural productivity. Urban agriculture could be practiced on rooftops, backyards, community garden and vacant public spaces (Aipira, 1996). Also, open balconies, veranda, undeveloped plots of land, unoccupied plots, urban outskirts, squatter plots, etc offer great opportunity for urban farming practice.

Urban agriculture could serve as a source of supplement to the family food while providing a steady source of income to the family. Garrett (2001) noted that in large, congested cities, urban poor might have a home garden or raise small animals as part of a coping strategy. As a result, urban farming is lifting hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty and improving nutrition and health standards around the world (Binns and Feredy, 2004). Despite the above benefits and favourable opportunities for urban farming, its practice has been limited, uncoordinated and unexploited while the energies of the urban poor are yet to be geared towards productive agriculture as safety net for poverty alleviation in Nigeria. This might be due largely to lack of policies to guide and encourage urban agricultural practice through appropriate extension service delivery in Nigeria. In view of the above background, this paper examined ways of promoting urban agriculture for poverty alleviation in Nigeria, identifying effective extension policies to attract the interest and patronage of Nigerian urban poor for urban farming.

Agriculture as a Key to Poverty Alleviation

The prevalence and dimension of poverty in Nigeria does not need further explanation and debate. This is because such terms like:- absolute, abject, extreme, etc. have all been used to qualify the poverty situation in Nigeria. However, what appears new is the geographical dimension and locational concentration of the poor in modern day Nigeria. In recent past, most of the poor people in Nigeria were found in rural areas. But the rapid rural-urban migration has led to a higher prevalence of poverty in urban areas, an ugly trend that calls for spirited effort toward addressing the first of the eight Millennium Development Goals (to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty by the year 2015 AD). However, evidence suggest that the key to alleviating poverty in many parts of the world is a more productive and profitable agricultural sector (Fritschel and Mohan, 2001; World Bank, 2006). This is because agriculture paves the way for economic growth in poorer nations (FAO, 2000; Akinlo, 2001). World Bank (2006) averred that income redistribution and economic growth are the two economic mechanisms for reducing poverty while significant increases in agricultural productivity were a critical early step in building sustained economic growth. This will result in reduced food prices, increase in wages and subsequently lower poverty. Imperatively, policies aimed at poverty alleviation must be directed at small-holder agriculture as noted by Narayanan and Guleti (2002), that over 90% and 40% agricultural output in Sub-Saharan Africa and India respectively, comes from small-holders (who account for nearly three-quarters of the poor). It is obvious that agriculture provides increased on-farm and off-farm employment opportunities capable of raising incomes of the poor household and their purchasing power. With specific reference to urban poor, Garrett (2001) observed that agriculture could complement household incomes and improve the quality of urban diets. In this vein, World Bank (2006) noted that increased growth of the agricultural sector offers direct benefit to poor farmers such as income and food, contribution to broader food security objectives and helps to establish forward linkages with high value-added industries. While affirming that agricultural linkages to the non-farm economy generate considerable employment, income and growth in the rest of the economy, Pinstrip-Andersen and Pandya-Lorch (2001) adduced four reasons why agricultural growth and development should be vigorously pursued. They include to:

1. alleviate poverty through employment creation and income generation;
2. meet growing food needs driven by rapid population growth and urbanization;

3. stimulate overall economic growth, given that agriculture is the most viable lead sector for growth and development in many low-income developing countries; and
4. conserve natural resources.

In view of the above roles of agriculture in poverty alleviation, the following section advances some effective extension policies for promoting urban agriculture in Nigeria.

Urban Agriculture: Issues for Appropriate Extension Policy

The misconception that agriculture is primarily a rural means of livelihood (industry) is largely responsible for lack of appropriate policies to guide extension service delivery to urban farmers. Especially with the abundant labour force that has escaped into many Nigerian cities, it becomes necessary that urban dwellers begin to respond to their own food needs instead of remaining a consumption centre. Presently, majority of urban dwellers including the poor are not aware that profitable agricultural production can be practiced in urban areas while others have a negative attitude to it. This therefore calls for policies that will bring about attitudinal change, raise awareness and interest of urban dwellers to invest their resources and energies towards agriculture in urban areas. Such policies will enable extension agencies design programmes that will accommodate urban smallholder farmers. In urban centres, spaces abound where agricultural ventures could be undertaken but what is lacking is an enabling policy. Since land is the major factor in the agricultural enterprise, policies aimed at promoting urban farming is necessary to make it mandatory for all undeveloped plots, unoccupied plots and urban outskirts to be converted to environmentally sound agricultural ventures. This should be the case pending when the owners of such plots are ready to develop them. Such policies will create the need for extension agencies to guide farmers on the choice of production alternative that best suit them.

Urban agriculture must be coordinated and managed to address important food safety and environmental concerns. For instance, appropriate policies must be put in place such that urban farmers must not irrigate edible crops with raw sewage, should not farm intensively with agro-chemicals (fertilizers, pesticides, etc) that are injurious to human health and maintaining safe distance in locating livestock farms in highly populated areas. In keeping with this policy, extension will be required to monitor and advice farmers accordingly.

Land remains an important resource in the agricultural enterprise. Unfortunately, majority of urban dwellers especially urban poor are landless tenants and squatters who lack access to land for cultivation. Therefore, policies aimed at allocating spaces to interested smallholder farmers on lease and squatter basis could be an appropriate measure for promoting urban agriculture. In the same vein, such allottees could be attached to nearby extension agency to be monitored and guided to embark on the agricultural venture that best suit their condition. This will ensure that land so allocated will not be diverted to other uses.

Credit and input availability is essential in agricultural production. In view of the fact that the urban poor lack capital base, resources and investment capacity, appropriate policy could be in place to provide agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, equipment/tools, etc. Such policies could enable extension agencies through their commercial service sub-programme to procure agro-chemicals, planting materials and extend them to the farmers. This is because according to International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) (2004), free distribution of very small quantities of inputs such as fertilizer and seed to small and marginal farmers can increase their income more effectively. In this vein, using the Starter Pack Initiative as adopted in Malawi (The Target Input Programme) for example, that provides small packs of fertilizer and seeds to all small-holder farmers could be a veritable policy initiative to promote urban agriculture and aid poverty alleviation in Nigerian cities. This strategy will also make extension relevant to this target group.

Of course, entrepreneurial skill is essential for profitable use of free agricultural inputs for improved agricultural production among urban smallholder farmers. Therefore, knowledge, skills and timely information become essential. The extension agency faces a significant challenge in organizing and coordinating the activities of these smallholder farmers. It will involve mounting training programmes for them, as well as regular and scheduled farm visits. These will be shaped properly with enabling policies and political will on the part of government to support institutional capacity to sustain honest drive on poverty alleviation.

CONCLUSION

Urban agriculture is a necessary catalyst for a broad-based economic growth and development in Nigeria. It has the capability of providing gainful employment for the abundant urban labour force and sustainable income for the urban poor. Therefore appropriate policies that will encourage effective extension service delivery is needed to promote urban agriculture as another option to address and alleviate poverty among urban dwellers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above discussion, the following recommendations are made;

1. Urban planners and local government authorities should make provisions to incorporate environmentally sound urban agriculture in their town planning.
2. Government should consider reallocating her undeveloped plots to interested smallholder farmers on squatter basis while reserving the right of occupancy. In this vein, government as principal landowner should liaise with individual and group landowners to devise appropriate mechanisms to release undeveloped plots of land within and around the cities for agricultural purposes while retaining their respective right of occupancy.
3. Extension agencies should organize effective urban extension service to guide and assist smallholder urban farmers on what types of food products in demand in urban areas so that they can channel their efforts appropriately.
4. Proper enlightenment campaign and orientation should be mounted and agricultural innovation packages provided by extension agencies to encourage the urban unemployed as well as other interested urban dwellers to channel their resources and energies to small-holder agricultural ventures. Such innovation should be geared towards backyard farming, market gardening, mushroom production, livestock production embracing fisheries, snailry, apiculture, etc.

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