

Youth Participation in Agriculture for Sustainable Food Security in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Food security has been a source of concern globally. The paper underscores the need to promote youth participation in agriculture as a gateway towards achieving sustainable food security particularly in South-East, Nigeria. It proposes that by integrating youth perspectives and capabilities into agricultural practices, Nigeria can pave the way for a more resilient and prosperous agricultural future. These young people can bring new ideas and technologies to agriculture, leading to more food being produced. The paper is grounded in empowerment theory. It also discusses the impacts of youth participation in agriculture and their roles in achieving sustainable food security in Nigeria. The challenges confronting youth participation in agriculture were highlighted. The paper further examined the strategies as a way forward to enhance effective youth participation in agriculture for food sustainability. These include: changing the perception of people towards agriculture as a low pay and unattractive career, government to increase access to resources such as land, microloan and grants to support the youth, government to create jobs and empower the youth, among others. The paper concluded that by overcoming the challenges and adopting the proposed strategies, Nigerian youth can become active participants in securing the nation's food supply.

Keywords : Youth, Participation, Agriculture, Sustainable, Food Security

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, a nation with a rapidly growing population faces a critical challenge of ensuring sustainable food security for its citizens. The persistent challenges of hunger, inflation, and the general increase in the prices of goods are no longer news to an average Nigerian. Despite boasting a vast agricultural sector, millions of people still struggle with hunger and inadequate access to nutritious food. There is no gain saying that the traditional agricultural practices in Nigeria is dominated by old people with limited capacity to adopt new methods and technologies. This stagnation hinders progress towards a more efficient and productive food system. However, a powerful solution lies within Nigerian's youth participating in agriculture. Agriculture as a concept is defined as the planting of crops and rearing of animals. According to Merriam- Webster Dictionary (2024), agriculture is defined as the science, art, or practice of cultivating the soil, producing crops and raising livestock. Ismail (2021) viewed agriculture as farming; it is the art and science that reshape a part of Earth's crust through cultivation of plants and crops as well as raising livestock for sustenance or other necessities for human being and economic gain. The author stressed that agriculture is the backbone of economic system for developing countries and a crucial livelihood for many Africans.

Agriculture, therefore, encompasses crops and livestock production for human use and economic purpose. Studies have shown that when young people get involved in agriculture, they bring new ideas and technologies leading to increased productivity and sustainable food security (Afolabi, 2018; Oloko & Adebayo, 2017). Food security is the state of having sufficient and accessible food for man. According to World Food Summit (1996, as cited in World Bank,2023) food security is a situation when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meet their dietary needs and food preference for an active and healthy life. This issue on food security was brought to the fore in 1974 during the world food conference when the governments realized globally the need to strategized on how best to improve the

agricultural sector so as to match the per- capita need of the population. The World Development Indicators (WDI) as cited in Metu, Okeyika and Maduka (2016) estimated that about 60 percent of Nigerians are living on less than 1 dollar per a day and majority of the people live below the poverty line with hunger and malnutrition being the order of the day due to inadequate food security. This situation becomes more difficult and impossible for the country to achieve Goal 1 of Sustainable Development Goal of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere before the year 2030. The Four dimensions of food security identified by FAO (2002) includes; availability, accessibility, utilization and stability.

Food availability- entails making food available to all in order to meet the basic nutritional standard needed by the body. Accessibility- this is the tendency to make the food reach everyone in the country. Utilization - is the ability to make use of the food by everybody. Stability - the process of not making the food scarce or short in supply. When all these, are put together, to have sustainable food security. Sustainable food security is the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable and nutritious food (FAO,2002). Sustainable food security therefore, is a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all. This encompassing from the processing, packaging and transporting of food to the consumers. The United Nations SDG 2 is also concerned with seeking sustainable solutions to end hunger and achieve food security in all its forms by 2030. The aim of this goal is to ensure that everyone has enough and quality food to live a healthy life.

The question that comes to play is: How real and achievable is this goal? A critical look at the situation in the country can attest that Nigeria is still far in achieving the said goal. FAO (2024) reported that around 26.5 million Nigerians are at risk of hunger in 2024. This vulnerability is particularly acute in rural areas where dependence on agriculture is high. This is more predominant in the South-East of Nigeria where the youth are more inclined to business than farming. Many of them do not even know their way to the farm as the older generations are ageing out. This is a source of worry to all and sundry. More so, Reliefweb as stated by Akande (2022) estimated that 2 million children under five years are likely to be pushed into malnutrition in Nigeria. However, by fostering youth participation in agriculture, Nigeria has the potential to not only secure its food supply but also create a vibrant and modernized agricultural sector. The youth possess the potential energy and technological aptitude to revolutionize the agricultural sector to bring about a sustainable food security in Nigeria, hence, the need for this paper. The paper is divided into sections: following the introduction is the Empowerment theory and the impact of youth participation in agriculture for sustainable food security. The third section discusses the role of youth in achieving sustainable food security, while the fourth section looks at the challenges to youth participation in agriculture in Nigeria. Section five covers the strategies as a way forward to enhance youth participation in agriculture and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Empowerment Theory

The theoretical underpinning of this paper is grounded in empowerment theory. Paulo Freire in 1970 laid the ideological and philosophical foundation in his book titled: **“Pedagogy of the Oppressed.”** This theory is rooted in Paulo Freire’s concept of education for critical consciousness and liberation. It posits that individuals and communities can acquire power and control over their lives. Empowerment theory emphasizes providing people with access to key resources as land, credit, training, and markets, along with the ability to make informed choices and decisions. In this context, when young people are empowered through access to such resources, they are better positioned to take ownership of agricultural activities and drive innovation toward sustainability.

The Impact of Youth Participation in Agriculture for Sustainable Food Security

Youth participation in agriculture for sustainable food security cannot be underestimated. Youth as a concept is defined as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood. Youth are people who have passed childhood stage and have grown into adulthood (Obidile & Uzoekwe, 2018). According to National Youth Policy in Nigeria (2019), youth are citizens of Nigeria aged 18-29 years. In the context of this paper, youth are people aged 18- 35 years. These young people are energetic, full of potential and are ICT compliant that can effectively change the narrative in agriculture. On the other hand, participation means involvement or engagement. Youth participation in agriculture simply means, engaging young people in agriculture or farming, which is synonymous with agriculture. Participation of youth in agriculture is crucial in sustainable

food security in Nigeria. AgroNigeria (2023) maintained that youth engagement in agriculture offers job creation, increased food production, poverty reduction and sustained economic growth.

In the same vein Kote, et al (2024) averred that youth participation in agriculture enhances entrepreneurial activities, involvement in value chains, policy formulation, and advocacy in food system structures. It is pertinent to state that youth unemployment poses a significant challenge globally, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2023), the unemployment rate among youth was 8.6% in 2023. The NBS further stated that Nigeria's youth unemployment increased to 7.2 percent in the second quarter (Q2) of 2023. More so, Boye, et al (2024) buttressed that the unemployment crisis in Africa is associated with an increasing population, a stagnating economy, many unskilled workers, and the aging and deteriorating agricultural sector. The authors further revealed that the unemployment rate among young people in the African region in 2022 was 12.7%, which exceeded the global average of 11.5%.

It is also higher than the unemployment rate among adults in Africa, which is 10.9%. This is an indication that youth unemployment will continue to increase geometrically if efforts are not made to address the issue. It is a known fact that the growing prevalence of unemployment and poverty has forced the youth to engage in unlawful behavior or embark on risky journeys to developed countries in search of better opportunities. Engaging youth in agriculture could reduce unemployment, rural to urban drift and enhance food productivity. Babu, et al (2021) corroborated that youth engagement in agriculture is a vehicle to address problems of rural unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity. However, the paper proposed in addition to the literature reviewed some of the key areas where youth participation in agriculture could make a positive impact in sustainable food security in Nigeria as thus:

1. **Innovation and Technology Adoption:** Youth are often more receptive to new ideas and technologies than older generations. Their involvement in agriculture can lead to the adoption of climate-smart practices such as agroforestry, conservation agriculture like practicing crop rotation, smart water management, precision agriculture techniques, and other advancements that can improve yields. Traditional practices and limited access to modern technologies often lead to low agricultural yields. This gap between production and demand contributes to food shortages and price instability.
2. **Sustainability and Environmental Consciousness:** Many young people are passionate about environmental issues. Their involvement in agriculture can promote sustainable practices such as organic farming, soil conservation, and water management, contributing to long-term food security. In addition, youth involvement in agriculture can foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility for the land, leading to practices that can reduce pollution and protect ecosystems.
3. **Entrepreneurship and Market Linkages:** Young people often have the energy and drive to pursue entrepreneurial ventures in agriculture especially online linkages and platforms. This can create new businesses, connect farmers to markets, improve the overall efficiency of the food system, as well as ensuring better access to nutritious food for all. Strong market linkages are essential for the success of agricultural enterprises. Youth-led agribusinesses can play a pivotal role in connecting farmers to markets, reducing post-harvest losses, and increasing farmers' incomes. By establishing effective market linkages, young entrepreneurs can ensure a steady demand for their products and improve the livelihoods of rural communities.
4. **Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:** Youth can act as a bridge between traditional farming knowledge and new technologies. They can share their expertise with older farmers and help build capacity within rural communities, promoting knowledge transfer for continued food security. They can facilitate knowledge sharing between different regions or communities and also act as extension agents that provides access to relevant information and resources.
5. **Community development:** Youth participation in agriculture can be a catalyst to community development in different ways. It brings about youth empowerment through enhancement of their self-esteem, leadership skills, and decision-making abilities. It also serves as an avenue for income generation. Successful agricultural projects can increase household incomes, leading to improved living standards.

Role of Youth in Agriculture for Sustainable Food Security in Nigeria

The role of youth in agriculture is pivotal for achieving sustainable food security in Nigeria. The following are some of the roles in youth participation for achieving sustainable food security:

Enhanced Agricultural Productivity

Youth involvement in agriculture can significantly boost agricultural productivity through innovation and adoption of modern farming techniques. According to Afolabi (2018), young farmers bring energy and creativity to the sector, driving improvements in crop yields and livestock production. By leveraging technological advancements and sustainable practices, youth-led initiatives can enhance efficiency and resilience in agricultural systems, thereby increasing food production to meet growing demands.

Economic Empowerment and Poverty Reduction

Engaging youth in agriculture offers opportunities for economic empowerment and poverty reduction. As highlighted by the World Bank (2023), agriculture remains a crucial source of livelihood for many Nigerians, particularly in rural areas where poverty rates are often higher. By investing in youth-led agricultural enterprises, providing access to financial resources, and promoting entrepreneurial skills, policymakers can foster inclusive economic growth and reduce youth unemployment rates.

Preservation of Agricultural Heritage and Knowledge

Youth participation in agriculture plays a vital role in preserving Nigeria's agricultural heritage and traditional knowledge. As noted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2024), passing down farming practices and cultural traditions from older to younger generations ensures continuity and sustainability in agricultural practices. By encouraging younger generations to embrace agriculture, Nigeria can ensure the continuity of agricultural heritage while adapting practices to meet contemporary challenges such as climate change, soil degradation etc.

Environmental Sustainability

Youth engagement in agriculture promotes environmental sustainability by encouraging the adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices. FAO (2020) emphasizes the importance of sustainable land management, water conservation, and biodiversity preservation in agricultural activities led by youth. By promoting agro ecological approaches such as planting of trees, the use of animal manure and cover crops. This will enrich the soil with organic matter and nutrients and reducing the sector's environmental footprint, youth can contribute to long-term ecological balance and resilience in food production systems.

Social Cohesion and Community Development

Youth participation in agriculture fosters social cohesion and community development by strengthening local food systems and enhancing food access. Through initiatives such as community gardens, farmers' cooperatives, and agribusiness ventures, youth can contribute to food sovereignty and improve nutrition outcomes within their communities (World Bank, 2023). By engaging youth as agents of change in agricultural development, Nigeria can build more inclusive and resilient communities. Despite the numerous roles played by young people in achieving sustainable food security, there are enormous challenges confronting their participation in agriculture.

Challenges of Youth Participation in Agriculture for Sustainable Food Security

Youth engagement in agriculture in Nigeria faces multifaceted challenges as follows but not limited to:

1. **Limited Access to Resources:** Young farmers often lack access to land, credit, and other resources needed to start and grow their businesses. Olaniyi and Abegunde (2020) maintained that access to fertile land is a major constraint for young farmers, particularly in densely populated areas where land

ownership is often concentrated in the hands of older generation. Also, having funds to start farming and purchase of equipment such as fertilizers and other inputs is often difficult for young people, thereby, discouraging them from participating in agriculture.

2. **Perceptions of People about Agriculture:** There have been wrong perceptions among people in some regions like south-East Nigeria, that agricultural work lacks profitability and prestige and is seen as a low paying and unattractive career choice compared to urban employment opportunities and businesses. Olagunju, Dawodu and Olumilua (2002) corroborate with this assertion that agriculture is seen in Nigeria as a poor and low pay profession. This negative perceptions discourages the youth in engaging in agriculture and a big challenge and threat to sustainable food security in Nigeria. Many young people would choose going to urban areas in search of white-collar jobs than getting themselves involved in agriculture.
3. **Poor Infrastructure and Market Access:** Poor infrastructure and market access is another challenge to youth participation in agriculture. Poor road networks make it difficult for young farmers to get their produce to markets, leading to post-harvest losses and reduced profits. In the same manner, lack of access to proper storage facilities can lead to spoilage of produce, thereby, discouraging youth from investing in agriculture as observed by (Olaniyi, & Abegunde, 2020).
4. **Youth involvement in “Yahoo Yahoo” (Internet Fraud):** Nigerian youth involvement in yahoo yahoo business especially in the South-East to get rich quick rather than farming is a serious impediment to sustainable food security (World Bank, (2019). Instead of the youth investing their time and creativity in farming, they are drawn to illicit activities. This leaves agriculture in the South- East and Nigeria as a whole in the hands of the older generations with little or no knowledge on modern technology, which invariable leads to poor yield. This contributes to food insecurity in Nigeria. This view was supported by Anyodele, Oyedeji and Badmos (2022) who found that youth engaged in internet fraud mainly to support themselves financially rather than investing in agriculture.
5. **Limited Government Policy Support:** There is a dearth of policies explicitly targeting youth involvement in agriculture. Existing policies often overlook the unique challenges and aspirations of young people. Even when policies exist, their implementation is often inconsistent, with limited resources allocated to youth-focused agricultural initiatives. This discourages young people who desire to invest in agriculture.
6. **Educational Disconnect:** Agricultural education taught in the traditional system may not adequately equip youth with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in modern agriculture which heavily relies on technology, data analysis, and sustainable practices. This disconnect creates a significant challenge for youth participation in agriculture. Hence, those who choose agriculture may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to operate efficiently and competitively in the modern market.
7. **Insecurity:** Insecurity is a significant impediment to youth involvement in agriculture, a sector crucial for Nigeria’s food security. Many farmers including young people are often targets of attacks, kidnapping, and even killing by armed groups (example, Fulani herdsmen and Boko Haram terrorist), particularly, in the northern states. This creates a climate of fear that discourages young people from venturing into rural areas for agricultural activities. Furthermore, insecurity leads to the destruction of farmlands, equipment, and livestock, resulting in substantial financial losses for young farmers, this disincentives agricultural pursuits. It is also pertinent to state that insecure conditions hinder the transportation of agricultural products to markets leading to reduced income for farmers and discouraging youth participation.

Strategies/Way forward for Enhancing Youth Effective Participation in Agriculture for Sustainable Food Security in Nigeria.

A strategy is a technique in achieving a task. Some of the strategies to enhance youth participation in agriculture are as follows:

1. **Changing the Narrative of People towards Agriculture:** The perception of people towards agriculture as a low pay and unattractive profession should be changed. This is because a study carried out in South Africa by Henning, Mathias, August and Madende (2022) revealed that a significant portion of young people in Africa view agriculture as a poor man’s occupation or back- breaking work, which is also applicable to the Nigerian context. This wrong perception can be changed through image boosting, by

promoting agriculture as a modern, profitable and dignifying career through media campaigns and success stories of young agric-entrepreneurs.

2. **Enhance Access to Resources:** There should be an increased investment in youth agricultural programmes by either government, NGOs or individuals to boost productivity. Idahosa and Egwunyenga (2017) added that youth- focused credit scheme should be introduced in Nigeria, where government at all levels develop loan programmes with low-interest rates and flexible repayment options specifically designed for young people entering agriculture. More so, training and mentorship for young farmers become expedient in enhancing agricultural sustainability in Nigeria.
3. **Modernize Education and Training:** Agricultural education should be revamped at all the levels of education system (primary, secondary and tertiary) through modernizing the curricula by integrating ICT into the programme to enhance access to information, market data, and online learning resources. There should also be innovative and sustainable farming practices especially for urban young farmers. The use of digital tools in agriculture will inspire more youth to see farming as a career worth pursuing. Studies have suggested that a shift from traditional, low-income agriculture to modern, technology-driven agribusiness is essential to make the sector attractive to young people (Fawole & Ozkan, 2021; MDPI, 2020).
4. **Strengthen Policy and Support Systems:** Government should re-enact and implement agricultural policies that incentivize youth participation and long-term investment in the sector in Nigeria. More so, private companies, investors, agribusinesses and other non-governmental organizations could encourage and support young people to engage in farming by providing them with financial aid. Aregbesola and Ogunwuyi (2020) corroborated that youth- focused programmes that provide young farmers with training, mentorship and financial grants to establish and grow their agricultural businesses should be strengthened. Similarly, Obonyo (2023) added that African governments should adopt policies that encourage capacity-building for those entering the agriculture industry through the provision of property rights, technology and opportunities for value addition.
5. **Beef-up Security:** There is a need for Nigerian government to beef -up security to protect lives and property of farmers. The Herdsmen and Boko Haram terrorizing farmers in Nigeria should be brought to book and appropriate measures be put in place to safeguard those already in the business of farming. By so doing, young Nigerians who are interested in farming would be encouraged to participate without fear of molestation.
6. **Provision of Health Insurance and Social Security:** Government should provide health insurance and social security benefits to address risk factors like death or kidnapping, and long-term commitment to agriculture could play a positive role in encouraging young people to engage in agriculture.
7. **Job Creation and Empowerment:** Nigerian governments at all levels should create more jobs and empower young ones to enable them change their mindset from yahoo yahoo (Internet fraud) to agriculture or do something profitable. The agricultural sector is the largest employer of labour in Nigeria with some reports indicating about 35% rate of the total labour force in 2020 (Ogbalubi & Wokacha, 2013). This shows its immense potential to absorb the unemployed youth population. Research also highlights that investing in agriculture leads to a decrease in unemployment and, in turn, a reduction in poverty (Ayinde, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian youth hold the key to ensuring sustainable food security through their participation in agriculture. By overcoming challenges like the perception of agriculture as outdated and non-profitable career, lack of access to resources, limited government policies support, among others, young people can usher in a new era of agricultural innovation and productivity. More so, adopting the suggested strategies such as making agriculture to be attractive and lucrative, enhancing access to resources through establishing accessible microloan and grants to empower the youth, investing in agricultural education, providing access to technology and land, and fostering a supportive environment, etc, Nigerian youth can become active participants in securing the nation's food supply. Their energy, enthusiasm, and fresh perspectives are essential ingredients for building a robust and sustainable agricultural sector that nourishes the country for generations to come.

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