Agricultural Communication and Food Security in Nigeria: The Mass Media Role

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Abstract: Before the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956, agriculture was the mainstay of Nigeria’s economy. As time went on, the country gradually drifted away from agriculture to a total dependence on oil. The cocoa plantations in the west, the groundnuts of the north and the palm products of the east all gradually gave way for full concentration on crude oil production. Today, crude oil constitutes about 95% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Just recently, the world woke up to announce the Reality of Global Food Crisis, which was immediately Followed by Global Economic Financial Meltdown. This work examines the role of the mass media in accelerating the pace of agricultural development in Nigeria. It takes a look at the situations affecting agricultural development and preservation of farm produce in Nigeria. Of course, it is a known fact that despite the country’s abundant, manpower and natural resources, food and animal production have continued to be on the decline. This study tries to find out the causes, the consequences and most importantly, the cure, using the potent and potentials of the mass media.

Key words: Agricultural Communication • Food Production • Food Security • Nigeria • Mass Media Role

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies suggest that that nearly 240 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, or one person in every four, lacks adequate food for a healthy and active life (Food and Agriculture Organisation 2010). Food prices and drought are pushing more people in Africa into poverty and hunger more than wars and diseases join together Adeyanju and Mbibi [1]. Ashong, et al. [2] in Suleiman Salau [3] argues that despite the Nigeria’s massive wealth, especially the wealth generated from oil over the past 50 years, about one in three of Nigeria’s 140 million people goes to bed very hungry every night. This submission is supported by the United Nations Report (2000), as recorded in Onah [4] that:

a grave food crisis is afflicting the people of the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where most of the world’s hungry and mal-nourished live and where more than two-third of the world’s population produce about one-third of the world’s food. Currently, the population growth rate in Africa stands at 3.5 percent while food production is growing at 3.0 percent.

This imbalance in food production, experts warn, has portent political, socio-economic and environmental implications for Africa, especially central, eastern and southern Africa. In view of the above scenario, agricultural scientists have argued that agricultural development is the key to sustainable development in Africa. Agricultural development is a process that ensures adequate food Production as well as the establishment of national, regional and household food security systems that would guarantee adequate availability of and reasonable prices of food at all times, irrespective of periodic fluctuations and vagaries of weather (seasons). Onah [4] in Imoh (2007, p. 192) [5] however opines that unfortunately, only crude and out of tune techniques of production, harvesting, processing and distribution are at their disposal. According to him, “most farmers are compelled to utilise “brawn” rather than “brain” power to execute their farm activities”.

The mass media as part of its social responsibility to the society play a vital role through the constant planning, packaging and disseminating of information aimed at agricultural development. Agricultural communication therefore, entails any form of communication strategy channeled towards agricultural development.
Closely related to agricultural development is food security. This is because most agricultural produce in Africa are seasonal. To ensure availability of such produce all year-round requires preservative measures. This study examined the contributions of the mass media in agricultural development and food security in the Nigerian and indeed, African context.

Agricultural Communication: the Nigerian Situation:
Rural development according to Godswill [6] is as recent as the early twentieth century when developing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America began to gain independence from decades of colonial rule. Nigeria gained her own independence in October, in 1960. The country is a big nation blessed with abundance of material resources. The land is fertile and almost all crops can grow well in the country. This means that to feed the population effectively should ordinarily never be a problem. For many years, Nigeria relied almost exclusively on cash crops such as cocoa, groundnuts, rubber, palm oil and kernel for its foreign exchange earnings. In addition to material resources, the country is again blessed with adequate manpower that could be trained and deployed for effective management of the nation and its natural resources. According to Ladi Sandra [7], agriculture accounted for the nation’s 70% G.N.P and was the mainstay of the country’s economy before the discovery of oil. Its exports constituted mainly of agricultural product such as cocoa, groundnuts, cotton, rubber, palm oil and kernel as well as timber which altogether accounted for 85% of the nation’s foreign exchange earnings.

By the end of 1970’s, agricultural exports had fallen below the 1960 level to about 35%. Palm oil which had been the country’s major foreign exchange earner suddenly had to be imported. It was a kind of shock to Nigerians, when, on Tuesday, November 2, 1982, the news agency of Nigeria (NAN) reported that Nigeria had imported up to 102,000 tons of palm oil from Malaysia in 1981. Malaysia, a country which had to borrow palm seedlings from Nigeria to experiment on Malaysian soil only a decade earlier. According to Ladi Sandra [7], the neglect of agriculture was due largely to the increasing role of oil in the economy. Between the periods 1970 to 1971, the share of oil in the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 33.1%, while in 1974-75, it was 45.5%. The growth rate of the GDP in real terms rose from an average of 5% in the 1960s to 7.6% during the period 1970-1975 and to 10.3% in 1976-1977 [8].

In 1970, says Udomisori Onah [8] earnings from oil were N510 millions as against N445.4 millions for agriculture. In 1980, earning from oil rose by 2.55% to N13, 523.0 millions while earnings from agricultural and other exports rose by only 8% to a mere N91.9 millions. The “oil boom” enabled the government especially during the period 1970-1977 to engage in the modernisation of the country’s infrastructures. This in turn created employment opportunities and acted as stimulants that attracted young hands from the rural areas who abandoned their agricultural pursuits to urban towns in search of white collar jobs. The aging population left in the rural areas could no longer produce enough to feed the population, talk more of export. This gradually led to the decline in the agricultural sector while the oil sector witnessed astronomical rise and patronage.

Sensing the danger of agricultural decline and its effects on the nation’s development efforts, government, between 1973 and 1979 took some panicking measures to redeem the agricultural sector. In its effort to rescue the agricultural sector from total collapse, government spent vast sum of money on the purchase of agricultural inputs such as tractors, fertilizers, chemicals and pesticides. River Basins were created and major irrigation works were commissioned between 1973 and 1979 [8].

Some Government Intervention Programmes in Agriculture and Food Security: Beginning from 1960, governments in various ways have sought to improve agriculture in an effort to raise the income of farmers and thereby improve the living standard of the rural areas because governments perceive agricultural improvement as rural development. From the First to the Fourth Development plans, efforts have been made by various governments to deal with the problems of the agricultural sector. Farm settlements schemes have been established. These include: Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), The Green Revolution Programme (GRP), River Basin Development Authority (RBDA), The National Accelerated Food Production (NAFP), The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Agricultural Development Plan (ADP), Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI), National Agency for Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and in the more recent time, FADAMA, YOUWIN, SURE-P, E-WALLET, N-POWER, etc. These programmes were put in place to ensure rural food production, diversified rural economy and improved income which would ultimately guarantee quality of life for the rural population.
However, Udomisori Onah [8] observes that despite the huge financial investment in rural development, governments fail to achieve the desired transformation due to less attention attached to the re-organisation of the needs of the most developmental projects to suit rural situations. He blames the failure to the absence of formal and effective coordination of rural development activities between rural development institutions and the beneficial communities, as well as inadequate mobilization of the people to genuinely participate in projects beginning from the periods of their conception to the implementation stages. Project failures equally occurred because of gross misappropriation of allocated funds and blatant, non-challant attitudes of agents to farmers’ plights.

The use of appropriate new information technology in conjunction with other suitable media of communication would provide a formidable means of persuasive information sharing between agents and rural recipients that could lead to the breaking away from the age-long traditional methods to embracing modern methods of practicing agriculture. Udomisori Onah [8] agrees with this viewpoint when he observes that modern technological society increasingly requires the development of individuals possessing critical thinking skills. Stressing further, he adds that in predominantly rural settings, an agrarian economy needs individuals who are capable of problem-solving and creative development. People who found themselves in an agrarian environments or a self professed democracy need the tools to evaluate and re-orient themselves in a rapidly changing and highly complex technological world.

Factors Responsible for Poor Agricultural Development in Africa: The poor agricultural growth rate in sub-Saharan Africa has been attributed to multiple cause arising from historical circumstances, colonial history, foreign alien occupation and domination, racial discrimination and separation, apartheid practices of racial segregation, pattern of land ownership and domination, racial discrimination and separation, apartheid practices of racial segregation, pattern of land ownership and all forms of land ownership systems which do not lend themselves to equal social relations and opportunities and access to land, essential financial credit and agricultural mechanisation and inputs. Desai (2004) attributes this poor growth rate to deficiencies in the agricultural output; marketing and input supply systems, inconsistent government agricultural policies and slack in the existing production systems due partly to difficulty in distinguishing between marketing systems for food crops vis-a-vis commercial crops such as cocoa, coffee, cotton, etc. According to Udomisori Onah [8], both the bottom and top-down approaches to integrated rural development have not locally involved the farmers at the level of policy mobilization and programme planning. They were only called upon at the point of implementation. This way, their participation was passive.

As observed by Udomisori Onah [8], the socio-economic system operating in rural areas is often disabaling and hostile to the objectives of rural agricultural development and general improvement in the living conditions of the farmer and his family. There is need to extend the benefits of development to the peasant farmers who seek a livelihood in rural area. There is a shortage of the appropriate communication media or lack of funds and trained personnel to carry out agricultural extension. Where resources are available, they are inappropriately utilized. Quite often, agricultural policies are formulated by politicians and communicated to officials and extension workers who implement them without understanding the meaning or the implication. This one-way flow of communication has led to the failure of most agricultural development programmes and projects in Nigerian and Africa.

According to a UN Report (2000) rapid population, wars of liberation and inter-ethnic conflicts (in Congo, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda-Burundi, Uganda, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, etc), mass population, movements and displacements, poor terrain and soil conditions, flooding, drought and HIV-AIDS acting together with inconsistent agricultural policies, unfavorable land tenureship practices and inadequate agricultural inputs have also resulted in sub-optimal levels of agricultural outputs. Other limiting factors according the source include lack of political wills, political instability, illiteracy, the deplorable state of infrastructural facilities in the rural areas, poverty, cultural norms and values, among others.

Agricultural Communication and Agricultural Development: For more than fifty years now, development planners have utilized communication to support and promote agricultural development policies and programmes. Using ideas drawn from instructional media, social marketing and behavioral psychology, planners have used a systems approach to communication which revolves around three elements: farmers orientation, targeted change and on integrated media network of television, radio, print and other
traditional and interpersonal channels Udomisori Onah [8]. Irrespective of the communication strategy used, it is obvious that the axis of effective agricultural communication is the farmer, his needs, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours. Any communication strategy must be based on an understanding of the farmer’s perspective, the hidden constraints a farmer might encounter in trying an innovation and to understand the incentives that will promote or inhibit adoption Udomisori Onah [8]. It involves identifying the most appropriate communication channel and language to use, most especially vocabulary, channels, timing and tone of messages recognizing that all farmers are not the same.

A comprehensive communication strategy therefore, must be based on audience segmentation and stratification of messages so as to enhance understanding of messages delivered and the benefits accruing from adopting new practices. Smith (1985) contends that such techniques should have in-built indicators and feedback mechanisms that allow mid-course modification and interventions. Because of the technical nature of agricultural innovation, messages delivered should be clean, relevant and repeated long enough for comprehension and internalisation to take place.

Using the Mass Media for Agricultural Development and Food Security: The most effective communication strategies used in agricultural development are those that utilise human, interpersonal and mass media channels in naturally reinforcing ways. Ladi Sandra (2007), Udomisori Onah [7], [8] described several strategies and approaches used in development communication for agricultural development in Africa and the developing world. These include; media based approaches, interpersonal approaches, social marketing, instructional and participatory approaches, capacity building, research and community mobilisation.

Mass Media: These are grouped into the electronic media; comprising radio, television, film, videos, etc and the print media such as newspaper, magazines, posters, pamphlets, billboards, etc, [6].

Radio: Radio has been used in several countries to create awareness and impart skills to farmers Ladi Sandra [7]. Radio is popularly used in rural agricultural communication because it is cheap and can be used in areas where there is no electricity. It serves both the literate and illiterate farmers of different ages, sexes and religion, especially in the form of “Radio farm forum” “Listening groups” and “open broadcasts” (Hall, 1978). Through this, the rural farmers are informed about new agricultural products, misconceptions and fears are clarified and new attitudes are formed [8].

Television: Though expensive, television is an attractive medium that conveys sight and sound signals. Despite its relatively low level of utilization in rural Africa, countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Senegal and Ethiopia have used it for agricultural education, using drama, discussions, news, documentaries and interviews, the same way radio does but with more persuasive power.

Films: Films have been used by agricultural extensions to deliver messages more effectively to rural farmers, because films still provide an exciting moment for villagers Ladi Sandra [7]. In some cases, mobile cinemas and movies have been used to advertise agricultural products and promote new farming practices.

Print Media: The print media have been used to convey information to the literate farmers and opinion leaders the same way radio and television do. In fact, they treat the message in detail and depth and they are available for reference. Newspapers, magazines and journals can be used for agricultural education, using its contents such as news, features, articles, editorials, cartoons and special columns. Unfortunately, the rate and frequency at which news articles on both innovative and agricultural news in Nigeria are low [8].

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Trends in recent time have shown that agriculture is very important to the overall development of any nation. In Nigeria before the discovery of oil, agriculture was the mainstay of the country’s economy. Upon the discovery of oil in Olobirin in 1956, attention has gradually drifted from agriculture to crude oil exploration. The total dependence on oil has not only affected the nation’s economy but indeed, every other sector, resulting to many avoidable problems, among them, high rate of unemployment, poverty, corruption, terrorism, fraud, armed robbery, prostitution, kidnapping, etc.

However, the media have potentials of contributing immensely to reviving the agricultural sector, using her traditional role of information, education, entertainment, mobilisation, socialisation and agenda setting. Through this they inform and educate both the urban and rural farmers on new agricultural techniques.
In view of the above, the study recommends conscientious effort from all levels of government in sensitizing the citizenry for greater adoption of agriculture for better socio-economic well-being.

Again, besides putting in place policies to enhance agricultural growth in the country, policy makers could train and use extension workers to reach the rural farmers with modern agricultural information and mechanized materials for better agricultural production.

Also, information on how to obtain credits/loans, set up cooperative societies, acquire necessary technologies and re-invest profits from agricultural proceeds should be taught the farmers in the rural areas.

Media outfits should be encouraged to devote more airtimes salient local radio programmes with pragmatic messages and should be aired at the appropriate periods to keep rural farmers abreast with good and modern agricultural practice.

REFERENCES