EXPLORING AGRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP POTENTIALS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: TOWARDS WOMEN AND YOUTH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Efficient utilization of the entrepreneurship potentials in agriculture towards women and youth empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be overemphasized. Poverty is a malady that incapacitates its victim economically and indirectly subjects them to a state of destitution, voicelessness, powerlessness and even violence. Unfortunately, the most affected sex being women and children. Harnessing the potentials of agriculture is essential not only for self-reliance but also for meeting the food and nutritional security of the people, to bring about equitable distribution of income and wealth in rural areas as well as to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life. Available potentials in this sector include; livestock, crops and agro-allied among others. Initiatives in Nigeria towards entrepreneurship development includes: National Directorate of Employment and the Better Life for Rural Women among others. This article reviews their constraints and reiterates the importance of sustainable utilization of the enormous entrepreneurial potentials of agriculture.

Keywords: Agriculture, entrepreneurship, poverty, women, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value and that all people irrespective of gender and status need to live a healthy and productive lives, there is the need to educate and empower people and give them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. It is therefore necessary to ensure that all people especially women and youth with fewest resources have access to the opportunities they need to succeed. There is a great potential to inspire, educate, and shape rural communities through the opportunities provided by agriculture, particularly by simply providing simple technology, economic empowerment and other incentives.

Agriculture is the backbone of overall growth for the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and is essential for poverty reduction and food security but poverty alleviation cannot be sustained without economic growth and economic growth cannot be sustained in non-competitive industries implying that agriculture must become competitive for small scale farming to succeed in addressing poverty and food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa. As pointed out by the 2008 World Development Report, the failure to exploit the potentials of agriculture has significantly compromised the role agriculture could play in reducing poverty.

In developing countries, women do up to 80 percent of the work on farms. Yet in most areas in sub-Saharan Africa, women are afforded less status than men, have less access to resources, and have greater responsibilities given their dual roles as mothers and farmers in rural households (Anon, 2009). Strengthening the role of Africa's women, both on the farm and in laboratories, is an essential step in helping poor farmers feed their families. Many researchers have shown that poverty is a malady that incapacitates its victim economically and indirectly subject him/her to a state of destitution, voicelessness, powerlessness and even violence (World Bank 2000; Okojie, 2002) Unfortunately, the most affected sex by the above incapacitation are women and children.

The UNDP (1995) estimated that, about 60% of the world-poops are women. Women are poorer because they are more vulnerable economically. Entrepreneurship development therefore is a crucial tool for women's economic empowerment. Economic growth and poverty reduction, undoubtedly, are two of the most challenging development issues in the Third World today. Sustained economic underdevelopment and rising poverty became dominant features of Nation's development profile (Iyoha and Igbatayo, 2008). This unenviable trend has resulted in an economic crisis characterized by low per capita real income, low
economic growth, high inflation and unemployment among others. Often the poor are known to have inadequate consumption, they are illiterate and with short life span and cannot satisfy their basic health needs (World Bank Report, 1995).

The benefits derivable from empowering the women folk are far reaching, starting with family advancement and eventually touching on the national and global economic advancement. According to one time Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Hajiyah H. S. Bungudu, the latest Nigerian census revealed that women constitute 49.9% of the nation’s population. Therefore underrepresentation of women in development issues such as business and investment renders over 40% of the population inadequately positioned to contribute to the economic growth of the country. This is the prevailing situation in most developing Countries.

AGRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP POTENTIALS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy of most Countries in sub-Saharan Africa because of its high share in employment and livelihood creation. It is also an important source of raw material and demand for many industrial products, particularly fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural implements and a variety of consumer goods. However, in some Countries like Nigeria, it has been very difficult for this sector to perform at its best due to over-reliance on oil. The result of this neglect is a situation whereby according to Kpakol (2006) more than 70% of Nigerians were said to be in poverty by 1999.

The agricultural sector is endowed with quite a number of resources which if properly and efficiently utilized can bring about the much needed economic empowerment, poverty alleviation, improved livelihood as well as overall economic growth of developing nations. Available potentials under this sector include among others; horticulture and allied activities, animal Husbandry and dairying, fisheries, sericulture, fruits and Vegetables, floriculture, aromatic and herbal and crops as well as spices.

Making the best use of these resources through agro-entrepreneurship development is essential not only for self-reliance but also for meeting the food and nutritional security of the people, to bring about equitable distribution of income and wealth in rural areas as well as to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life, bearing in mind that this type of development will have a positive impact on other sectors, leading to the spread of benefits over the entire economy and the largest segment of population.

CHALLENGES OF AGRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In substantial parts of the developing world, rural households have not shared the poverty-reducing economic growth that has occurred elsewhere. Insufficient investment in developing and commercializing technologies, as well as in improving rural infrastructure and human capacity are key causes of this stagnation (Anon, 2008). Small farmers in sub-Saharan Africa have been recipients of various forms of agricultural support over the years not withstanding their situation does not appear to have improved very much. Careful examination reveals certain challenges that have contributed to the poor performance of small scale farming and the lack of improvement in farmers’ situations. First the supports they have received and continue to receive does not address the totality of their needs. For instance farmers have been supported with productive inputs and technology, with infrastructural support, with credit and market information or with support with processing and storage. All these projects and programmes however may be scattered in different geographic locations in any one country at a point in time, totally de-linked from each other thus denying farmers the synergies that different levels of support could offer. The lack of continuity in the chain of support, with production level support being subsequently complemented with support with processing and then with marketing has contributed to denying small farmers the benefits they should derive from their farming activities.

There are neither policies nor strategies for entrepreneurship development that is specifically tailored to women (Olutunla, 2008) yet the Nigerian government’s policy of promoting entrepreneurship dated back to the early 1970s. A significant amount of work has been carried out in developing countries on the potential of women in boosting food production. Boserup (1970) described Black Africa as the region of female farming par excellence. FAO (1982) estimated that the rural women contribute two-third of the time that is put into traditional agriculture in Africa. The predominance of women in the small-scale fisheries post-harvest activities: micro-fish retailing, fish processing, fish distribution and marketing, make women the major players in the socio-economic development of the West African countries.

However, despite women’s extensive and varied participation in agriculture, they continue to have less access to credit and modern agriculture inputs. Consequently, their farm works is labor-intensive, yields meager economic returns (Buvnies and Mehra, 1990) and operate mostly at subsistence level. International Labour Organization (ILO 2003) quoted in Akpera and Sunday (2008) reported that Nigerian and African women entrepreneurs in general are in the micro enterprise sector and almost invisible in the small and medium enterprise categories.

This paper reviews other developmental challenges facing women and youth in their bid to utilize the fast agro-entrepreneurial potentials in sub-Saharan Africa. They include; finance, inadequate market and marketing information, inadequate vocational education for capacity
building, lack of infrastructure and modern technology, cultural barriers, lack of assets as collaterals to get loan by Women and youth as well as inadequate or absence of research and extension services for entrepreneurial development.

STRATEGIES FOR STIMULATING AGRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime. But teach him the philosophy behind fishing and he will learn not only to fish, but to hunt and to farm as well. The livelihoods of many smallholders and rural people depend directly on their ability to produce and market agricultural products. Therefore, agricultural growth in developing regions remains for poverty reduction and food security (Joachin et al, 2008).

Quite obviously addressing rural poverty and food insecurity using agriculture requires investments in off-farm agricultural activities to complement primary production. Issues of seasonal glut of food in local markets, the very high levels of post-harvest losses, the low capacities for food processing and value addition and low market participation by small farmers are serious challenges. A very significant amount of food that is produced in Africa for instance is lost each year, negatively impacting food availability and access. In west Africa for instance, Aworh (2008) puts production losses at around 50% for perishable food commodities including fruits, vegetables, roots and tubers and about 30% for food grains including maize, sorghum, millet, rice and cowpeas. A small scale farmer who already does not produce enough, and yet loses this much of seasonal harvest cannot possible profit from farming. Rural food processing enterprises are needed to process seasonal surpluses for the markets – especially urban markets to improve on the incomes of poor farmers. In the words of Rottger 2002, small farmers cannot remain only producers of foodstuffs but have to take on the additional role of entrepreneurs in order to improve their livelihoods and move beyond subsistence farming.

Paying the required attention to the challenges identified by this review will in no small measure result in an unprecedented agro-entrepreneurship development in sub-Saharan Africa, with the expected result of a meaningful livelihood devoid of hunger, poverty, youth unemployment and above all emergence of developed Nations. To achieve this feet, the following factors must be given due priority: policy issues on entrepreneurship education and development, provision of modern equipment for processing and storage, provision of infrastructures and incentives and the encouragement of cooperative association among others.

CONCLUSION

National governments and the development community at large will have to work more seriously to overcome the barriers that prevent private investments in agriculture and the obstacles to domestic and intra-regional trade in food. Only when small farming becomes a business in practice can agriculture assume that role as a tool for development in sub-Saharan Africa. The focus therefore will be the generation of gainful rural employment with special reference to women and youth, Introduction of systematic management strategies for sustainable small scale agricultural production, encouraging increasing investments from private sector, stimulate entrepreneurship for agriculture and agro-allied sector and substitute traditional methods by the introduction of advanced technology that will develop skill among the rural farmers among others.

In order to achieve this objective, sustainable agricultural and rural development initiatives need orientation around key issues such as new technologies, farmer productivcy, key agricultural policies, and connections between smallholder farmers and markets. Meeting the complex challenge of reducing poverty and ending hunger in a sustainable manner in the light of these needs requires multifaceted economic, political and technological approaches. Without agricultural growth, it is unlikely that significant declines in poverty and unemployment can be achieved, at least in the foreseeable future. The need for broad-based agricultural enterprises development also applies to subsectors within agriculture each of which has to contribute to growth for the development strategy to be successful.

This paper reiterates how agricultural growth can be accelerated through increasing public investment on agriculture and the rural sector thereby accelerating growth for both food and export crops with immense benefit to household and the Nation generally. Achieving this target will require additional investments on rural infrastructure and rural market development. Therefore, while increasing investment in agro-entrepreneurship development, efficient management and implementation strategy should be put in place in order to avoid negative impact of such effort on other sectors of the economy.

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