

Full Length Research Paper

Role of Smallholder Farmers in Nigeria’s Food Security

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The study reviewed the role of smallholder farmers in ensuring food security in Nigeria. Smallholder farmers are those farmers owning small-based plots of land on which they grow subsistence crops and one or two cash crops relying almost exclusively on family labor. More than 80 percent of farmers in Nigeria are small holder farmers. Agriculture is a major contributor to Nigeria’s gross domestic product (GDP) and small-scale farmers play a dominant role in this contribution. A small scale farmer depends on his efficiency in the utilization of basic production resources available to him. He makes a significant and important contribution to the national product, about 99 percent of total crops output. The small scale farmer is the main producer of 98 percent of the food consumed in Nigeria with the exception of wheat. Over the years, deliberate efforts have been made to improve agricultural production by Nigerian governments and some foreign bodies but these efforts have not yielded expected results. The Nigerian economy has what it takes to be food-secured given the enormous natural resources endowed with. What is required is a re-orientation of the agricultural sector by properly repositioning the peasant farmers who are the providers of food in Nigeria. With their immense collective experience and intimate knowledge of local conditions, smallholders hold many of the practical solutions that can help place agriculture on a more sustainable and equitable footing. To do this, they need help to overcome market failures and other disincentives for sustainable land use, including insecure land tenure, high transaction costs and weak institutional support. A major challenge will be to address the discrepancies of scale between decisions made at the farm level and impacts at larger ecosystem scales.

Key words: Smallholder, farmer, food security.

INTRODUCTION

Food security refers to household’s physical and economic access to sufficient food. It entails producing food that will go round every citizen both in quantity and quality (Oriola, 2009). Therefore, a country is food-secure when majority of its population has access to food of adequate quantity and quality consistent with decent existence at all times (Reutlinger, 1985, Idachaba, 2004). Food security is one important goal a nation must pursue with passion in order to combat hunger and malnutrition among citizens. Nigeria is blessed with 98 million hectares of arable land and 2.5million hectares of Irrigable land, out of which 83 million hectares are suitable for cultivation, but only 30 to 34 million hectares are presently under cultivation. The nation has one of the

best agro – ecology to grow variety of crops (Ashaye, 1983, Oriola, 2009). However, it has not been able to take best advantage of her climatic conditions, the large expanse of land and ever increasing teaming population to make her sufficient in food production. Despite the fact that, variety of crops thrive well with maximum yield in different Eco zones of the country, Nigeria remains one of the food-deficit countries in sub-Sahara Africa (Arthur, 2009).

In the recent time, there is a lot of concerns over the looming danger of food crisis in many nations, including Nigeria. The Food and Agriculture Organization, among others has been persistent in expressing concerns for the global food crisis over the years. There are 1.4 billion poor people living on less than US\$1.25 a day. One billion live in rural areas where agriculture is the main source of livelihood. The ‘green revolution’ in agriculture that sensitized large parts of the developing world during

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the 1960s and 1970s dramatically increased agricultural productivity and reduced poverty. Many of the productivity gains accrued to smallholder farmers were supported through research and extension services.

Approximately 2.5 billion people earn their source of living directly from agricultural production systems, either as full or part-time farmers, or as members of farming households that support farming activities (FAO, 2008a). Smallholders produce food and non-food products on a small scale with limited external inputs, cultivating field and tree crops as well as livestock, fish and other aquatic organisms. Many poor families earn their incomes in multiple ways, and productivity on farms should be viewed in the overall context of total family income (Reardon and Vosti, 1998).

There is no universally accepted definition of a small farm. 'Small' may refer to the number of workers; capital invested, or amount of land worked. Land size is the criterion most commonly employed, but given the differing potential of land in soil quality and rainfall, a single measurement hardly captures the sense of limited resources or relative powerlessness characteristic of smallholders. Overall, smallholder farmers are characterized by marginalization, in terms of accessibility, resources, information, technology, capital and assets, but there is great variation in the degree to which each of these applies (Odoemenem and Obinne, 2010). With these qualifications, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) adopted a 2-hectare (ha) threshold as a broad measure of a small farm (which is not inclusive of fishers and other small-scale food producers). The vast majority of smallholders live in rural areas, although urban and peri-urban smallholdings are an increasingly important source of supply for developing urban areas (IFAD, 2011). Women play a crucial role within the smallholder system and are commonly responsible for the production of food crops, especially where the farming system includes both food and cash crops (Koochkan, 2011). Smallholders include some 350 million indigenous peoples, who conserve many different crop varieties and livestock breeds. Their agricultural practices and techniques offer an important source of knowledge for the transition to sustainable agricultural intensification. This paper reviewed the role of smallholder farmers in ensuring food security.

Role of smallholders in global food production

Smallholder farming systems are very diverse, and contribute considerably to global agricultural output of a variety of crops. Smallholders produce the bulk of food in developing countries, and in many instances their contribution is growing (IAASTD, 2009a). They produce 70 per cent of Africa's food supply (IFAD, 2003) and an estimated 80 per cent of the food consumed in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa together (Dan-Azumi, 2011). In Latin America, smallholder farmers occupy almost 35 per cent

of total cultivated land (Altieri and Koochkan, 2008). There is substantial variation among smallholders according to livelihood assets and strategies; the share of crops produced for subsistence and for local and export markets (Nagayets, 2005, Faber and Wenhold, 2007).

Smallholding can address one specific aspect of well-being very effectively: nutrition (Wenhold et al., 2007). Smallholders farming potentially impacts human nutrition by providing a variety of foods in sufficient quantities to enable all household members eat a nutritionally adequate diet. Greater and more-sustained yields may increase access of households to a larger food supply. The availability of a greater variety of nutritious foods at community and household levels can be increased through the introduction of new crops, the promotion of underexploited traditional food crops, and home gardens (FAO, 1997, Faber and Wenhold, 2007).

Despite their importance in global and regional food production, smallholder farmers comprise the majority of the world's undernourished population and those living in absolute poverty (UN Millennium Project, 2005a). Not all studies linking agricultural development and poverty address the role of smallholder farmers specifically, but their importance as food producers and the fact that they comprise such a large proportion of the world's poor indicate that their development significantly helps reduce poverty and hunger. These may be noticeable in terms of positive impact in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Smallholders manage over 80 per cent of the world's estimated 500 million small farms and provide over 80 per cent of the food consumed in a large part of the developing world, contributing significantly to poverty reduction and food security. Increasing fragmentation of landholdings, coupled with reduced investment support and marginalization of small farms in economic and development policy, threaten this contribution, leaving many smallholders vulnerable to poverty.

The productivity of smallholder agriculture and its contribution to the economy, food security and poverty reduction depend on the services provided by well-functioning ecosystems, including soil fertility, freshwater delivery, pollination and pest control. Smallholder farming practices, in turn, affect the condition of ecosystems. These impacts are not always negative, but poverty and immediate needs can drive smallholders to put pressure on ecosystems, for example through habitat modification, over extraction of water and nutrients, and use of pesticides.

FOOD SECURITY

According to Food and Agriculture Organization, food security obtains when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Bank

2001). The main goal of food security therefore, is for individuals to be able to obtain adequate food needed at all times, and to be able to utilize the food to meet the body's needs. Food security is multifaceted. The World Bank (IFAD (2007) identified three pillars underpinning food security. These are food availability, food accessibility, and food utilization. This means that a nation whose food production level is unable to satisfy these criteria is said to be food insecure. Supporting this assertion, Maxwell in (Nana- Sinkam, 1995) stated that a country and its people are food secured when their food system operates in such a way as to remove the fear that there will not be enough to eat. He further stressed that food security requires that the poor and vulnerable have secure access to the food they want. The World Food Summit plan of Action (IFAD, 2013). states that, food insecurity occurs when People experience a large reduction in their sources of food and are unable to make up the difference through new strategies. The prevalence of malnutrition is abnormally high for most time of the year in food in secured country, and this cannot be accounted for by either health or care factors. In these areas;

-) A large proportion of the population or group is using marginal or unsuitable strategies, and
-) People are using coping strategies that are damaging to their livelihoods in the longer term or incur some other unacceptable cost, such as acting illegally or immorally.

Role and Constraints of Smallholder Farmers in Nigeria's Food Security

Nigeria's situation on food security is highly precarious and pernicious as a significant percentage of the population is food in-secured. Haruna, a member of the House of Representatives in an emotion laden speech said, People are dying and the hunger is simply unbearable (Inoni et al., 2007) and Nigeria in the present circumstance can be said to be food insecure.

Agriculture in Nigeria used to be the most important sector of the economy from the standpoint of rural employment, food and fibre production and export earning prior to the discovery of Petroleum. It now generates employment for about 70% of Nigeria's population and contributes about 40% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with crops accounting for 80%, livestock 13%, forestry 3% and fishery 4% (International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (2006). At independence in 1960, little was known of petroleum as a source of revenue to the country. There was sustained emphasis on agriculture to the extent that Nigeria was a major exporter of such agricultural produce as palm oil, cocoa, groundnut, cotton and rubber. In addition, food crops like yam, cassava, maize, millet, sorghum and soya beans are cultivated. There was no

need for food importation. Hitherto, agriculture accounted for over 60% of the Nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, in the early 1970s, petroleum became the country's major foreign exchange earner and agriculture was grossly neglected (Oni, 2008).

Small holder farming system characterizes Nigeria's food production system. The system is operated on small farms, family-owned, rented, or leased as a dominant form of agriculture. The major staple foods produced are sorghum, yam, millet, cassava, and maize. It may, in some families, be coupled with live stock rearing giving majority of Nigerians the amount of calorie and protein they need. Small holder farmers constitute a significant proportion of farm holdings in Nigeria and have continued to feed the nation and its people even though, the system receives inadequate support and improper attention from government. Small holder farming mostly utilizes family labour often augmented with minor hiring of labour and labour exchanges with other farmers at peak seasons. The essential factors of production – land, labour, and capital are provided by the family. The system does not make adequate use of modern farming techniques, capital input, advisory services and market information. There are inadequate infrastructural facilities for maximum production. Peasant agriculture takes care mainly of the food needs of the farm family and produces little surplus for sale.

Smallholder agriculture involves about 95% of Nigerian farmers, while the corporate and government supported large-scale farms account for the 5 percent. However, efforts in promoting agriculture in the country prioritize the 5%, possibly due to their alliance and proximity to government agencies thereby giving less attention to the greater percentage of the farming population. The imbalance results in rural-urban migration for alternative to, or supplement to rural farming and consequently, there may be a decline in food production and dwindling agro-industries. When these agro-industries in both rural and urban centers are unable to sustain production and there is a steep drop in food production, hunger and poverty will mount up. The problem could be aggravated and compounded, considering 70% of the population of Nigerians living on less than N100 (US\$0.7) per day and high youth unemployment (Oni, 2008). This was further evident from the 1973-74, Sahelian drought which made Nigeria a recipient of food aid [3]. What has recently turned out to be food insecurity problem in Nigeria is the persistent neglect of the smallholder farmers and of the food crop sub-sector. Nigeria possesses the capacity to be food secured if the enabling environment is created for the peasant farmers to operate in their farming activities through the following strategies.

Rural development

Rural development is the quantitative change or upliftment in the standard of living of people in the rural

areas, brought about through integrated approach, by both governmental and non-governmental agencies and the people themselves. However, the integrated approach to Rural Development suggests some multi-sectoral efforts by the state involving the provision of infrastructural facilities like roads, dams, schools, electricity, the introduction of new techniques of farming, establishment of banks.

Easy access to basic farm inputs

As reported by FAO, 1996 in its country evaluation, agriculture and rural development are crucial to the Nigerian economy. Around 45 per cent of GDP is generated from agriculture and almost 70 per cent of the poor live in rural areas and derive their livelihoods primarily from small-scale agriculture agencies as well as organizing and mobilizing people for productive activities.

Smallholder Farmers Education

Peasants as the farmers are and rural as their environment may be, there is the need to educate them on how to use the farm inputs that are available to them. They need to be properly informed of the introduction of new improved crops and seedlings, different kinds of fertilizers and their uses as well as timeliness of use, the storage systems under which different post-harvest farm produce can survive over a relatively long period of time, the basic technology that can enhance their farming activities, and the marketing system they can adopt to dispose their produce. These would not only boost their farm yields but also boost their income. It could also be attract unemployed urban dwellers to assist the rural environment.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian economy has what it takes to be food-secured given the enormous natural resources endowed with. What is required is a re-orientation of the agricultural sector by properly repositioning the peasant farmers who constitute the majority of the food producers in Nigeria. Nigeria could be food-secured if it adopts and faithfully implement the strategies suggested above. This is because these strategies do not only encourage farmers but also promote their activities. With their immense collective experience and intimate knowledge of local conditions, smallholders hold many of the practical solutions that can help place agriculture on a more sustainable and equitable footing. They need assistance to overcome market failures, disincentives for sustainable land use, insecure land tenure and weak institutional support. A major challenge will be to address the discrepancies of scale between decisions made at the farm level and impacts at larger ecosystem scales.

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