



A Review on Participation of Women in Agricultural Cooperative Societies in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper reviewed women's participation in agricultural cooperative societies in Nigeria. The paper conceptualized cooperative society as an association where persons voluntarily associate together as human beings on the basis of equity for the promotion of economic interest. The types of agricultural cooperative societies found in Nigeria includes agricultural thrift & credit cooperative society, agricultural supply cooperative society, agricultural produce marketing cooperative society and agricultural multipurpose cooperative society. However, majority of the women cooperators belonged to the multipurpose cooperative society. The paper also revealed that agricultural cooperatives particularly enable farmers, agro-processors and marketers of agricultural produce come together, thereby helping themselves in terms of accessing inputs, improved bargaining as well as influencing decision making. The women's participation in cooperative society is limited by inadequate capital, culture/custom, gender disparity and low level of education. The paper concluded that women's level of participation in agricultural cooperative activities in Nigeria was not encouraging.

Keywords: Cooperative Societies, Factors, Level of Participation, Review, Women

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cooperative society is an association of persons usually of limited means, who have voluntarily joined together to achieve a common social and economic objective (Alkali, 1991). This could be achieved through the formation of democratically controlled business organizations. These organizations can be a channel of making equitable contribution to the capital and other inputs required. It is a business jointly owned and controlled by its member patrons and operates for them and by them on a non-profit basis. Omotosho (2002), also revealed that agricultural cooperative is an organization in which many small farmers work together as a business, especially to help each other produce and sell their crops and or livestock.

Cooperatives form indispensable component of economic empowerment and development. It also serve as a foundation for bringing together relatively weak members of the society for the purpose of enhancing

their individual capacities/capabilities for collective good (Alkali, 1991). Agricultural cooperatives particularly enable farmers, agro-processors and marketers of agricultural produce come together, thereby helping themselves in terms of accessing inputs, improved bargaining as well as influencing decision making (Emah, 2006). Cooperatives promote developments as commercial organizations that follow a broader set of values which may not purely be associated with profit. Cooperatives play an important role in job creation by directly providing self-employment to members and service provision for non-members. Enterprise development and particularly the promotion of small and medium enterprises have been adopted as a pre-requisite and a strategy for job creation and economic growth in a large number of countries (Essien, 2000). Cooperatives Societies in Nigeria like their counterparts all over the world are formed to meet people's mutual needs. Cooperatives are considered useful mechanism to manage risks for members in agriculture. Ebonyi and Jimoh (2002) maintained that through cooperatives, farmers could pool their limited resources together to improve agricultural output which could enhance the socio-economic activities in the rural areas.

Aweto (2004) and Nugussie (2010) showed that in Africa, women constitute 52% of the total population, contributed 75% of the agricultural workforce, produce and market 60% to 80% of food (Kwesiga, 1999). They did this through production, processing and marketing of food (Afolabi, 2005). They assist on family farm; fetch water, and fuel wood. Most importantly, they act as health workers to their children by providing their health needs. They also provide food, clothing, and education to their children. Experience has shown that women in Nigeria have equal abilities with men and can compete favorably when given equal opportunities towards participation in agricultural cooperative activities (Azikiwe, 2002).

Women in Nigeria, were perceived as household property that join hand in economic activities of their families with regard to exchange in marriage, participation in agricultural activities and other areas that yield money (Esere, 2009). In sociological perspective, the modern day Nigerian women take part in important economic activities to the benefit of their families and the entire nation. The family is a basic social group, united through bonds of kinship or marriage that is present in all societies. Ideally, the family provides its members with protection, companionship, security and socialization (Simpson, 2007). Women thus, manage the home and at the same time, participate with their male counterpart in developing the economy of the nation.

It is generally assumed that women's participation in agricultural cooperatives is important for sustainable cooperative development. The involvement of more women in economic activities has been found to result in a more integrated production process of both food and cash crops. Agricultural cooperatives can also be an effective means to empower women in rural areas and help them to overcome the constraints they face in accessing education, knowledge and information, as well as productive assets. It also improves the social role of the cooperatives themselves, creates a safe environment for women to increase their self confidence, bargaining power and income, and enables women to exercise political leadership. This paper therefore, reviewed the level of women's participation in agricultural cooperative societies in Nigeria.

2.0 CONCEPT AND TYPES OF AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

2.1 Concept of Agricultural Cooperatives

Cooperative is an association where persons voluntarily associate together as human beings on the basis of equity for the promotion of the economic interest (Bernard and Spielman, 2009). International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) (2010) also sees cooperative as an association of persons unified voluntarily to meet their common needs through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Arayesh and Mammi (2010) also viewed cooperative societies as an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and solidarity.

Agricultural cooperative according to Alufohai and Ahmodu (2005) is a type of cooperative that unites agricultural producers for production or other activities needed by members (such as processing, marketing, of output or supply of means of production). Similarly, Safarishali (2010) indicated that agricultural cooperatives are associations which aggregate purchases, storage, and distribution of farm inputs for their members, by taking advantage of volume discounts and utilizing other economies of scale. Agricultural cooperatives enable producers to realize economic benefits that they could not otherwise be achieved alone.

Agricultural cooperative is an association formed by groups of agricultural producers to improve their bargaining power in the marketplace, reduce costs by pooling capital and resources through cooperative enterprises, and make expensive services, such as marketing, that are unavailable to individuals accessible. Through cooperatives, farmers can achieve economies of scale, by reducing the unit costs of inputs and services, enabling farmers to focus on producing goods rather than finding buyers and suppliers. Cooperatives also enable farmers to improve product and service quality and reduce risks. Agricultural cooperatives can allow farmers to address common problems, develop new market opportunities or expand existing markets. Agricultural cooperatives empower farmers and improve their position in the marketplace (Ibitoye, 2012).

Agricultural cooperative, also known as a farmers' cooperative, is a cooperative where farmers pool their resources in certain areas of activity. A broad typology of agricultural cooperatives distinguishes between agricultural service cooperatives, which provide various services to their individually farming members, and agricultural production cooperatives, where production resources (land, machinery) are pooled and members farm jointly. Cooperatives provide a method for farmers to join together in an 'association', through which a group of farmers can acquire a better outcome, typically financial, than by going alone. This approach is aligned to the concept of economies of scale and can also be related as a form of economic synergy, where "two or more agents working together to produce a result not obtainable by any of the agents independently" (Adefila, 2012).

Lekachman (2007) viewed Agricultural cooperative society as an organization of people for an improved agricultural production. Agricultural cooperative societies are association aimed at organizing farmers for an improved agricultural production through tackling of individual farmers' problems, limitations and odds collectively. Agricultural cooperatives as described by Ibitoye (2006), is a medium through which services like provision of farm inputs, farm implements, farm mechanization, agricultural loans, agricultural extension, members education, marketing of members farm produce and other economic activities and services rendered to members. Regular and optimal performance of these roles will accelerate the transformation and sustainability of not only the cooperatives but the revamping of agricultural and rural economic development. Ijere (2008) further explains that it is the cooperative that embraces all type of farmers and a well-organized and supportive cooperative is a pillar of strength for agriculture in Nigeria.

Arua (2004) viewed Agricultural cooperatives as an important tool of improving the living conditions of farmers. In Nigeria cooperatives provide locally needed services, employment and input to farmers. Cooperatives also provide opportunities to farmers to organize themselves into groups for providing services which will facilitate output of members. According to Nweze (2002) cooperative societies serve as avenues for input distribution. Through their nation-wide structure, they have developed strong and reliable arrangements for the distribution of food, fertilizers, agro-chemicals, credits, seeds, and seedlings.

Bhuyan (2007) stressed that agricultural cooperatives played important role in mobilizing and distributing credit to the farmers. He further stressed that cooperative provides members with a wide range of services such as credit, health, recreation and housing facilities. Agricultural cooperatives are also useful in the dissemination of information about modern practice in agriculture. Agricultural cooperative is a legal institutionalized device through which farmers come together on voluntary basis of equity for the promotion of their economic wellbeing (Adefila, 2011). Agricultural cooperatives provide

functional education to members in the areas of production, processing and marketing of agricultural produce. The education of cooperative members could be formal where members are trained in courses like accounting and farm management. They also help to stabilize regional economies and provide a favorable climate for further investment. Agricultural cooperatives reduce inequality and promote equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of sustainable development. Cooperatives can promote democracy and the empowerment of marginalized groups- a hallmark of sustainable development and a precondition for shared responsibility.

2.2 Types of Agricultural Cooperative Societies

Cooperative societies are very popular in Nigeria. Onuoha (2002) in his study of cooperative history in Nigeria states that, there are formal and informal cooperative societies. The formal cooperative societies started in the country as a result of the Nigerian cooperative society law enacted in 1935 following the report submitted to the then British colonial administration on the possibility of introducing cooperatives into Nigeria. In 1935, an administrative officer (E.F. Haig) was appointed to study cooperation abroad and eventually became the first Registrar of cooperative societies. By 1936, few African staffs were appointed and the control of cooperatives was gradually transferred from agricultural department to the cooperative department. The first registered cooperative society in Nigeria is the Gbedun cooperative produce and marketing society limited, named after a village near Ibadan. Gbedun C.P.M.S. was registered in 1937. Thereafter, formal cooperatives spread rapidly from the western part to other parts of the country.

Onuoha (2002) further maintained that the informal cooperatives are traditional organizations which were in existence before the advent of formal cooperatives in Nigeria. Self help from outside the family used to be an important feature of agricultural activities. This was due to the use of ineffective farm tools. Services provided by these organizations are economic, social and cultural in nature. Among such organizations are the *Owe* and *Gayya* which are community age-groups common in western and northern states of Nigeria respectively. The groups engage in assisting members cooperatively in farm work by providing labour rotationally in members' farms. Credit institutions (*Esusu Ajo* – Yoruba and *Adashe* –Hausa) accumulate capital through member savings and provide credit to interested members. He revealed that typical characteristics of informal cooperatives include:

- They are traditional mutual aids associations.
- They are informal organizational structure.
- They are usually small in size.
- They are localized in scope.
- They are not registered hence without legal backing.
- They are familiar to all within their area of operation being indigenous associations.

Different types of agricultural cooperative society exist which are organized to satisfy the identified needs of members. Aweto (2004) identified various types of agricultural cooperatives which are important and are common to all.

2.2.1 Agricultural Thrift and Credit Cooperative Society

Onje (2003) reported that this type of cooperative society accumulate capital through member's shares, savings and external loan when necessary. The society encourages thriftiness amongst members and helps to save members money. Fund is disbursed to members as credit for productive purpose. Ebonyi and Jimoh (2002) reported that the major benefit of this type of society is that members have easy access to credit facilities. The lending policy is devoid of the numerous bottlenecks prevailing with other formal financial institutions. They further maintained that Guarantors are within the reach of members as any member of the society is eligible to guarantee another member.

2.2.2 Agricultural Supply Cooperative Society

Ijere (2008), reported that this type of cooperative pools members resources together to procure production inputs such as farms tools, agro-chemicals, improved seeds and seedlings and retail to members at fair prices. The supply of input is also made to tally with seasonal requirements. Onje (2003) revealed that this type of cooperative society takes advantage of economies of scale and discount given for bulk purchase. This arrangement ensures easy, timely, and regular supply of inputs to the farmers at lower price.

2.2.3 Agricultural Produce Marketing Cooperative Society

Agricultural produce and marketing cooperative society collects members produce and sell same on the market at the best possible price. The proceeds is passed on the farmers. Through this collective effort, marketing cost is minimized, better prices are obtained, activities of middlemen are reduced and member's income enhanced (Omotosho, 2007). On their studies on cooperative movement in Nigeria, (Ebonyi and Jimoh, 2002) revealed that originally, marketing cooperative was organized only for cash crops (e.g. cotton, cocoa, groundnut, coffee and palm kernel. Cooperative has however developed to embrace food crops such as rice and beans.

2.2.4 Agricultural Multipurpose Cooperative Society

This is organized by farmers with the objective of providing more than one service. Onuoha (2002), in his study of the history of cooperative in Nigeria, revealed that MPCS performs at least two functions. It promotes integration of economic activities such as mobilizing capital to provide credit and inputs of production to members. It also assists members with storage, processing and marketing of produce. The range of services provided by the society is determined by the members and the society's capability.

3.0 WOMEN'S LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES IN NIGERIA

Women are the majority in the rural areas and are involved at all agricultural enterprises. They are responsible for about 80% of all food items produced and 50 percent of the domestic food storage in the country (Mgbada 2002; Rahman, 2004). In addition, they form an active and reserve labor force, suggesting that the position of women in agricultural development cannot be over emphasized.

In the face of high transaction costs and market failures, the participation of small holder women farmers in the agricultural cooperative activities and the extent to which they benefit from their participation are very low (Assefa and Tadesse, 2012). Agricultural cooperatives play a crucial role in curbing these problems by providing services ranging from making credit and modern inputs available to creating market opportunities and selling members' output. Although agricultural cooperatives are intended to serve as a basis and a platform for bringing together the economically weak members of the society and thereby enhance their individual capacities (Alkali, 1991), in most developing countries such as Nigeria the participation of women, who contribute much to the agricultural sub-sector, is very minimal (Idrisa *et al.*, 2007).

Since cooperatives, like other forms of enterprise, reflect the broader society in which they operate, it is not surprising that gender imbalances do exist, despite the cooperative principles and values that proclaim equality and equity. Among the most important gender issues in cooperatives today are women's low level of active participation and their under-representation in decision-making and leadership. As observed by Awotide (2012) women, especially in developing countries, are confronted by formidable constraints that block their active participation in cooperatives.

In many parts of Nigeria, women lack access to land, credit or production inputs. Their level of education is lower than men's and their business experience and knowledge of cooperatives is very often limited.

Because of their low level of participation in cooperatives, they seldom enjoy the benefits that cooperatives and their support structures often provide to their members such as credit, education and training, production inputs, technology and marketing outlets (Sivaram, 2000).

In most sub-Saharan Africa, women are the backbone of the rural economy with about 80 percent of economically active women being employed in agriculture and accounting for 70 percent of food production (Assefa and Tadesse, 2012). Although there is growing recognition of women's contributions within Africa and the international community, not only in their households but also in the food production systems and national economies, this recognition has not yet translated into significantly improved access to resources or increased decision making power. The dynamic role that women play in the social and economic lives of their communities is not reflected when it comes to their participation and leadership in different communal organizations such as agricultural cooperatives.

In Ethiopian, cooperative membership is generally very low. According to Bernard and Spielman (2009), only 9 percent of smallholders were members of agricultural cooperatives and only 40 percent of rural households have access to cooperatives within their communities. Even in communities where cooperatives exist only around 17 percent of households were found to be members in 2005. The same study indicates that the most important determinants of cooperative membership are farmers' education and landholding. Moreover, as in most developing countries including Nigeria, women's participation in agricultural cooperatives, although growing, is very much limited: the national average of women membership is only seven percent (Assefa, 2007). Moreover, the participation of women in the leadership position of cooperatives is almost nonexistent.

4.0 CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES NIGERIA

According to Benzabih (2008) and ICA (2001) women, especially in developing countries are confronted by formidable constraints that block their active participation in cooperatives. Similarly Ekesionye and Okolo (2012) noted that the participation of women in agricultural cooperative activities at all level is hampered by numerous constraints which include among others:

4.1 Culture/ Customs: Idrisa *et al.*, (2007) in a study conducted on socio-economic factors affecting women's participation in agricultural cooperative in Gwoza Local Government Area, Borno state, affirm that culture/customs was the main barrier to women participation in agricultural cooperative activities. In some cultures, women are restricted from conducting business independently or without their husband's consent. This poses a serious challenge to participation in cooperative activities. Even though in some cases, women's legal rights may be stipulated in the constitution of the cooperative, they may not necessarily be enforced or they may be superseded by customs. It is in line with this view that Ashanti (1993) observed that lack of social, economic and legal rights explains women's low participation in cooperative decision-making and leadership positions. Besides cultural issues, women, especially in developing countries, are confronted by formidable constraints that block their active participation in cooperatives activities. These include the traditional role of women in society and the prevalent misconception that women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities constitute their main role. However, Eboh (2008) recognized that despite women's major responsibilities in the household health and nutrition, women's role in agriculture cover all facts of agribusiness including food production, livestock production, fishery as well as farm management.

4.2 Low Level of Education: The poor performance of women's participation in agricultural cooperative activities is attributed to inefficient management capabilities of members and elected representatives. Ogunbameru *et al.*(2010) revealed that low level of education was the most important factor constrained the participation of women in cooperative activities as indicated by (56. 67%) of the respondents in the

study area. Similarly, Onyemauwa (2006) revealed that more than half (58.6%) of the respondents reported low level of education as the constraints to women's participation in cooperative activities in Imo state. Women willing to form cooperatives may lack knowledge of what to do and how to go about it. Illiteracy and lack of adequate education have been identified as part of the major factors militating against institutional support towards agriculture (Nwaru, 2007). Low level of women education is an important factor that explains the prevailing low level of women participation in agricultural cooperatives. Idrisa *et al.*, (2007) stressed that, the most significant socio-economic factor that determines women's participation in agricultural cooperatives is their level of education. Women who have attained a higher level of education are more likely to be members of cooperatives.

4.3 Lack of Capital/Credit: Inadequate finance has remained a major problem of agricultural production. This is because capital is the most important input in agricultural production and its availability has remain a major problem to small scale farmers who account for the bulk of agricultural produce of the nation. In Nigeria, credit has long been identified as a major factor in the development of the agricultural sector (Balogun, 2007). Cash is considered the catalyst that activates other factors of production and make under used capacities functional for increased production (Ijere, 1998). It is a major factor necessary for technological transfer in traditional agriculture (Oyaloye, 2001). Farm credit can be obtained from either the formal source which include the banks and other government owned institutions or the informal sources which are self-help group, money lender, cooperatives and non-government agencies (NGO). The informal source of credit is more popular among small scale farmers which may be to the relative ease in obtaining credit devoid of administrative delay, nonexistence of security or collateral, flexibility built into repayment which is against what is obtained in the formal sources. The institutional lending system has failed to meet the objectives for which they were set up (Alufohai and Ahmodu, 2005). A study conducted in 2004 in cooperative produce marketing societies in Oyo, Ogun and Ondo states of Nigeria by Aweto, revealed that 74% of the total women cooperative members join cooperative societies with the hope of obtaining financial assistance. Out of these only 14% benefitted from financial assistance of the society when really in need of fund. Ortmann and King (2007) remarked that increased inaccessibility to credit facilities had immensely affected agricultural development in the country. Indeed, the establishment of micro-finance banks and agricultural banks has genuine interest in granting loans to prospective borrowers but the cooperatives are still finding it difficult to access the loans due to strings and conditions attached to it.

4.4 Gender Disparity: It is common knowledge that gender inequality is one of the pervasive forms of inequality; especially it cuts across other forms of inequality (Franklin, 2007). One of the most critical problems faced by women is gender inequality, especially in land acquisition, which remains a major constraint for women farmers in Africa. This has led almost exclusively to the transfer of land right to male (FAO, 2005 and 2010). This means gender inequality is a major problem in the distribution of assets in agricultural production. Since cooperatives, like other forms of enterprise, reflect the broader society in which they operate, it is not surprising that gender imbalances do exist, despite the cooperative principles and values that proclaim equality and equity. Among the most important gender issues in cooperatives today are women's low level of active participation and their under-representation in decision-making and leadership (Ekesionye and Okolo, 2012).

4.5 Fraud: Aweto (2004) revealed that, fraudulent and dishonest practices have been widely identified as the most serious ill which hinders the growth of cooperative endeavors in Nigeria. She further maintained that corruption and embezzlement could be widespread among cooperators themselves, or amongst the cooperative officials or staff and government officials who collaborate to embezzle cooperative funds. This, in consequence has made many cooperative societies or union bankrupt. Sometimes, the

administrators or cooperative personnel such as cooperative officers exploit the ignorance of the members by embezzling the society's fund. Omotosho (2007) reported that corruption can also occur if there is no adequate auditing of the society's accounts. This situation usually discourages farmer cooperators from participating fully in the cooperative activities. Apart from this, it prevents potential cooperators from being involved in cooperatives activities.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it was concluded that women are represented in various types of agricultural cooperatives societies in the study area. Majority of the women cooperators belonged to multipurpose cooperative society while others belong to marketing, producers, processing, credit and thrift cooperative society. It was also apparent from the review that women's level of participation in agricultural cooperative activities in the State was moderate. Their participation is limited by pressure from household head, inadequate capital, culture/custom, gender disparity and low level of education.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were proffered:

- i. Government should also intensify effort on cooperative education, training and public enlightenment in order to bring about increased participation and involvement of small scale women farmers in the cooperative movement.
- ii. Appropriate policies should be formulated to ensure that women farmers get access to extension services and training necessary for improved agricultural production and productivity.
- iii. The participating cooperative members should engage in income generating activities to help them finance the activities of cooperatives and not to be over dependent on government.
- iv. There is need to educate household head on the importance of allowing women (a group that is responsible for about 80% of all food items produced) to participate actively in cooperative activities.
- v. The cooperative movement should organize adult education classes for members at primary cooperative level to reduce the level of illiteracy and educate the members.

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