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Social and Solidarity Economy

Cooperatives and Eradication of Poverty and Hunger in Rural Communities in South East Nigeria through Inclusive Sustainable Agricultural Development: Issues and Challenges

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**Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals:
What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?**

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Abstract

The quest by world leaders including Nigeria to end poverty and hunger was one of the major reasons for the initiation and implementation of Millennium Development Goals which lasted between 2000 and 2015. The effort to sustain the achievements recorded by this program necessitated the emergence of Sustainable Development Goals. In line with the objectives of these programs, Nigeria has continued to initiate various national programs aimed at ending poverty and hunger, but it seems as if the more these programs evolve, the more the level of poverty and hunger continue to rise despite the available abundant human and natural resources. Government has been accused of not involving informal sectors in its efforts. This study investigates the role of cooperative societies in ending poverty and hunger in Nigeria, with focus on women rice farmers' cooperative societies. After analyzing the generated data, the findings reveal that farmers' cooperative societies have the potential to end poverty and hunger in Nigeria but have been neglected by various agencies concerned. Recommendations were made on how cooperative societies could be assisted to contribute more to end poverty and hunger in the rural communities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Cooperatives, Poverty and Hunger, Rural Communities, South East Nigeria.

Bio

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Introduction

This paper is focused on the contribution of Social and Solidarity Economy to addressing Sustainable Goals 1 and 2 that have posed a great challenge to world leaders. The effort to find an end to the perpetual problem among other problems beseeching the world, brought the world leaders together to initiate and implement the Millennium Development Goals (Okpata, 2009). At the end of the program in 2015, and in an effort to sustain the gain achieved so far, the world leaders converged again to establish the Sustainable Development Goals, with the principle aim of wiping away poverty and hunger in the globe. However, while other countries of the world especially the developed countries have made remarkable efforts in ending poverty and hunger in their countries, the problem seems not to have made any remarkable impact in developing countries especially Nigeria (Elem, 2018).

Nigeria is endowed with abundant human, natural and material resources and maintains the 6th position in the world in oil production, yet the country continues to occupy the first position as the country with the highest number of its citizens living below poverty line, with over 70% of the population under the grip of poverty as noted by Adekola, (2017). Efforts to tackle this problem has seen Nigerian government at different levels by different administration initiating and implementing numerous programs aimed at reducing poverty and hunger. Okpata (2009), explains that such programs include, Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support program, National Poverty Eradication Program, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, Vision 2020, You Win Program, Subsidy Reinvestment Program (Sur-P). Despite the implementation of these programs, Elem (20017), argues that the living condition of over 70% of the citizens continues to worsen, and seems as if the more these programs evolve, the poorer the people become. Studies show a very high level of unemployment, high maternal and infant mortality rate, high level of illiteracy, lack of access to healthcare facilities, sanitation, while many die as a result of outbreak of epidemics, while those willing to go into farming have no access to means of production such as land, capital among others. Life expectancy is put at 46 years, while many go to bed on daily basis without food, and most recently, Nigeria has been assumed to have overtaken India as a country that has the greatest number of its citizens living below poverty line.

Since Nigeria has not fully embraced the micro economic activities in the society such as the artisans, small scale farmers, cooperative societies, enterprises and organizations involved in the production of goods and services, collective organization of producers and consumers and users among others, these numerous government programs seem not to be achieving the desired objectives (Agbo, 2006). As a result of the above, it has become imperative to examine the role of Non-State economic entities involved in the production of goods and services and in the redistribution of income in contributing to end poverty and hunger in Nigeria. This view is in regard to the present understanding of leading actors across the world including the United Nations (UN), International Labour Organization (ILO), European Union (EU), International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), African Union as well as Economic Team in Nigeria that Cooperative as a form of Non-State economic entities with local ownership and control and redistribution of income or profit among members and users, are being regarded as the enterprises that will be used to end poverty and hunger (Ezekiel, 2014).

Cooperative societies, especially the ones involved in farming, such as the Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies are seen as important vehicle to end poverty and hunger in Nigeria, and as such, this study is focused on Women Rice farmers Cooperative Societies, in order to examine their role in the war against poverty and hunger, and the roles of State actors in embracing their activities. Interestingly, women constitute half of the Nigerian population and with this

number, it becomes obvious that their roles in economic activities in eradicating poverty and hunger cannot be neglected. Apart from taking care of the children and household activities such as cooking for their husbands and children, washing of cloths and keeping the house clean, they have been engaged in farm work, by forming group work where they go in turns to clear the bushes for their husbands to cultivate their yams and other crops, since culture restricts them from owning land, have access to credit facilities or get employed outside domestic activities. They equally engage in such other duties as basket and mat weaving, pot making, dying of cloths, weeding peoples' farms for payment, harvesting of grains and crops, buying and selling food stuffs, vegetables among others, and as well sow such other items in their husbands farms such as cocoyam, pumpkin, cassava, garden eggs, okro, etc. All these activities are done with special permission from their husbands, as they don't have right on their own to embark on such economic activities. It was from this system that the women started coming together to form cooperatives through which they assist their members. Despite all these known contributions of women and their informal activities in the socio-economic development of Nigeria especially in the rural communities, Awotide (2012) maintains that women are still being discriminated against, as they are never given equal opportunities with their male counterpart to participate and fully contribute to the economic development of the country.

It is against this background that this study is carried out to examine how Cooperative Societies, especially Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies operating in rural communities in Ikwo Local Government Area have been carrying out these responsibilities in order to end poverty and hunger. Based on this purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. To what extent have Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies contributed to end poverty and hunger among their members and members of the rural communities?
2. What are the factors hindering Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies in contributing adequately to poverty and hunger eradication among the rural community dwellers in Ikwo Local Government Area?
3. What are the possible ways in which Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies be assisted by governments and other agencies to sustain inclusive agricultural development and eradication of poverty and hunger in the rural communities?

Methodology

This study in order to accomplish its purpose, adopted quantitative research method and applied cross sectional survey design, while purposive sampling techniques was adopted. The study was carried out in 5 principal communities in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, South East Nigeria where 2 registered Women Rice farm cooperative society were purposively selected from each of the five communities namely; Alike, Umuaka, Mgbabo, Echara and Okpuitumo communities, to give a total of 10 cooperative societies for the study. The choice of this Local Government Area and the principal communities were guided by their rural locations. With a population of 782 members in the ten registered women rice farmers' cooperatives, a sample size of 400 respondents were purposively selected, 40 representatives from each of the 10 cooperative societies. The sample size of 400 represents 51.1% of the study population.

Three research questions were formulated to guide the objective of the study, while the study made use of primary source of data collation. The instrument for data collation was a 12 items structured questionnaire titled; questionnaire on Women Rice Farmers Cooperative

Societies and war against poverty and hunger among rural community dwellers, with the response option format of 5 point Likert scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1), with values assigned to them. Face to face method was used in administering the 400 copies of questionnaire with the aid of research assistants. The total of 380 copies that were properly filled and returned were used for analyzing the result.

The descriptive statistical analytical methods involving frequency tables and percentage were employed for data analysis, while arithmetic mean was used to analyze the research questions at a decision point of 2.50. This implies that any mean value above 2.50 was considered as agree while any mean value under 2.50 was considered as disagree. Construct validity and Inter-rater reliability methods were respectively used to guarantee validity and reliability of the measurement and findings.

Result of the Questionnaire Items.

The 12 questionnaire items were designed to elicit information with regards to the three research questions, 4 questionnaire items for each research question.

Table 1. Research Question One. To what extent have Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies contributed to end poverty and hunger among their members and members of the rural communities?

Questionnaire items	Responses/ Percentage					Total	Mean Score
	SA5	A4	UND3	D2	SD1		
1. Through your cooperative society, you can feed your family members and take care of their health?	170 (45%)	160 (42%)	5 (1%)	20 (5%)	25 (6%)	380 (100%)	4.13
2. Through your cooperative society, you now train your children in school?	130 (34%)	160 (42%)	20 (5%)	60 (15%)	10 (3%)	380 (100%)	3.89
3. Through your cooperative society, Jobs have been created for the members and non-members?	140 (37%)	150 (39%)	20 (5%)	40 (11%)	30 (8%)	380 (100%)	3.86
4. Through your cooperative society you are able to provide shelter for your family?	150 (40%)	165 (43%)	15 (4%)	30 (8%)	20 (5%)	380 (100%)	4.03
Grand Mean							3.97

Source: Field Survey, 2018

SA5 = Strongly Agree with a value of 5, A4 = Agree with a value of 4, UND3 = Undecided with a value of 3, D2= Disagree with a value of 3 and SD1=Strongly Disagree with a value of 1.

Table one above shows the responses of respondents on research question one which centres on finding the extent Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies have contributed to end poverty and hunger among their members and other members of the rural communities.

The findings show that Women Rice farmers Cooperative Societies have contributed significantly to end poverty and hunger as indicated by the measured indices of poverty and hunger in the above table and questionnaire items.

This shows that Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies have proven to be the best tool for poverty reduction in rural areas as members could afford to train their children in schools, provide shelters for themselves and members of their family, take care of the health needs of their family members, feed them adequately and as well create job opportunities for both members and non-members. It goes a long way to indicate that Women Rice farmers Cooperative Societies serve as instrument for ending poverty and hunger.

Table 2. Research Question Two: What are the factors hindering Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies in contributing adequately to poverty and hunger eradication among the rural community dwellers in Ikwo Local Government Area?

Questionnaire	Responses/ Percentage					Total	Mean Score
	SA5	A4	UND3	D2	SD1		
1. Lack of education for members affect your roles to the growth of your cooperative society?	140 (37%)	190 (50%)	5 (1%)	35 (9%)	10 (3%)	380 (100%)	4.09
2. Culture and land tenure system constitute challenges to your access to land?	150 (40%)	130 (34%)	20 (5%)	50 (13%)	30 (8%)	380 (100%)	3.84
3. Lack of adequate government supportive role affect the management of your cooperative society?	170 (45%)	120 (30%)	50 (13%)	20 (6%)	20 (6%)	380 (100%)	4.05
4. Lack of finance is a major set - back to the smooth operation of your cooperative society?	140 (37%)	180 (47%)	20 (5%)	30 (8%)	10 (3%)	380 (100%)	4.07
Grand Mean							4.01

Source: Field Survey, 2018

SA5 = Strongly Agree with a value of 5, A4 = Agree with a value of 4, UND3 = Undecided with a value of 3, D2= Disagree with a value of 3 and SD1=Strongly Disagree with a value of 1.

Table two above shows the responses of respondents on research question two which centres on finding the challenges hindering Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies from contributing adequately to the eradication of poverty and hunger among the rural community dwellers in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, South East Nigeria, with four questionnaire items designed to address the issue.

The results identified poor management styles, lack of capital base, illiteracy and delay in decision making as part of the plethora of problems that mitigate and hamper the effective performance of cooperative societies in Nigeria.

Table 3. Research Question Three: What are the possible ways in which Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies be assisted by government and other agencies to sustain inclusive agricultural development and eradication of poverty and hunger in the rural communities?

Questionnaire	Responses/ Percentage					Total	Mean Score
	SA5	A4	UND3	D2	SD1		
1. Your Cooperative Society members need training on the modalities of cooperative management?	100 (26%)	220 (58%)	20 (5%)	30 (8%)	10 (3%)	380 (100%)	3.97
2. Your cooperative society needs support in improved seedlings, fertilizer, insecticides etc.?	120 (32%)	190 (50%)	30 (8%)	20 (5%)	20 (5%)	380 (100%)	3.97
3. Your cooperative society needs soft loan with low interest rate for more productivity?	160 (42%)	180 (47%)	20 (5%)	10 (3%)	10 (3%)	380 (100%)	4.23
4. Your women cooperative society, needs unhindered access to land for your activities?	170 (45%)	127 (33%)	40 (11%)	20 (5%)	23 (6%)	380 (100%)	4.04
Grand Mean							4.05

Source: Field Survey, 2018.

SA5 = Strongly Agree with a value of 5, A4 = Agree with a value of 4, UND3 = Undecided with a value of 3, D2 = Disagree with a value of 3 and SD1= Strongly Disagree with a value of 1.

Table three above shows the responses of respondents on research question three which centres on finding the possible ways in which Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies could be assisted by government and other agencies to sustain inclusive agricultural development and eradication of poverty and hunger in the rural communities?

This findings above show that cooperative societies in Nigeria need assistance to sustain them in their activities for poverty reduction through training, financial base, access to land, agricultural inputs, education among others.

Conclusion

Poverty and hunger eradication remain the cardinal reasons for the establishment of cooperative societies all over the world. In line with this, Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies in Ikwo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State have made remarkable impacts in poverty and hunger eradication among the rural community dwellers. It has shown social and solidarity economy (SSE) as a core means of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in ending poverty and hunger. They have been able through their individual savings and contributions, embarked on enterprises by developing their own production and distribution channel through which the efforts of the government in sustainable development goals could be achieved.

However, despite the huge impact of this cooperative societies, findings still show that the cooperative societies are still under threat and vulnerable to sustain its activities. This stems from

the fact that they are yet to fully meet the needs of their members and members of the rural communities where they operate. This calls for more efforts as they are still numerous other such cooperative societies that have been unable to strive to this position due to various challenges. These challenges as identified in the cause of this study includes, illiteracy, culture, low income earnings, inadequate support from the government among others. These factors have made several other cooperative societies to fail, thereby stalling the contributions they would have rendered in eliminating poverty and hunger.

Since these rural women are poor, they find it difficult to contribute the needed amount required to improve their production. Presently, the efforts of Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies are limited to the poor members, with their low level of education and ignorant of cooperative management. This is coupled with the culture of the people that prohibits women from ownership of land as lands used by these cooperative societies were lease from their husbands, and these pieces of land are scattered in different areas and inaccessible to tractors. This makes it difficult to make use of tractors for harrowing, planting of rice and harvesting as the farmers depend on primitive means of planting, weeding and harvesting and threshing which they do manually.

Furthermore, these different cooperative groups could come together to form larger group with trained personnel among members to handle the administrative aspect if encouraged and assisted by government. This will enable them benefit more from their investment and equally encourage others to join in similar activities thereby rendering more to poverty eradication and ending hunger.

Recommendations

Following the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made as measures that would enable Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies and other Social and Solidarity Economy to contribute more to end poverty and hunger among the rural community dwellers.

1. Governments should establish Cooperative Institutions where rural co-operators could have access to cooperative education programs and training in Cooperative management.
2. The obnoxious culture that hinder women from owning and having access to land should be addressed by government through legislation to give women unhindered access to land.
3. States and Local Governments should establish agencies at both States and Local Governments levels to assist Cooperative Societies in the management of Cooperative Societies.
4. The Cooperative Banks that have long been neglected by Nigerian Federal Government should be revitalized to enable them assist the Cooperative Societies in the areas of soft loans with low interest rate as was the case in the 1970s.
5. Government through its agencies should assist Women Rice Farmers Cooperative Societies in the provision of improved seedlings, fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides among others for improved production.

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