

A Survey on the Perceptions of Co-Operators on Gender Disparity and Financial Viability of Agricultural Cooperative Societies in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender disparity has been a highly debated topic in many discusses and opinion circles for a very long time, yet, this contentious topic continues to re-vibrate every now and then in many debates. How gender disparity has affected agricultural cooperative activities in Rivers State has not yet been captured in any literature. More so, the viability of these cooperatives has never been a front burner in the government's agricultural policies over time. This research work was designed and aims to deliberately draw the attention of stake holders to the contentious topic of gender disparity and financial viability of the agricultural cooperatives that may have retarded its growth and development in the state. A multistage approach was adopted in data collection and analysis. 30 agricultural cooperative societies were randomly sampled from the registered council of Nigerian farmers and some unregistered cooperative societies of agric bias using structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics such as averages and percentages were employed in analysis. The result showed evidences of gender disparity and financial insolvency. The injection of credit and elimination of gender disparity were suggested as the way forward.

Keywords: Cooperatives; Agriculture; Gender; Viability

Introduction

All humans are gendered beings; this gender differences has also resulted in the creation of structured social responsibilities. Gender relations are the instituted norms in different cultures that determine the functions and responsibilities of each gender. The gender factor considers the impact of gender on peoples' social roles and interactions. It is an integral component of every aspect of the economic, social and daily lives of individuals and societies and; of the different roles ascribed by society to men and women [1]. These roles many describe as discriminatory and in extreme terms as oppression because it tends to favour the male gender more and unduly, pushing the female gender into playing the role of a second fiddle.

These gender based segregation/discrimination between men and women are often cited as gender inequality in traditional settings and looked at as oppression by most feminist campaigners. Frye [2] opines that it is a fundamental claim of feminism. But, to what extent does this presumed oppression exists and affects the hierarchical placement of women in the leadership of agricultural co-operatives? Leadership and decision making in the co-operative organizations may not have escaped these mechanisms where cultures or societal norms determine the functions and responsibilities of each gender despite its democratic and non-gender bias settings, policies and principles. The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and the International Labour Organization [3] have reported that the value of self-help mutual responsibility, equality and equity are held in common by all Co-operators but policies of equity and equality for both men and women may differ. They assert that true equality may not in reality exist observing that in nearly all countries in the world, the percentage of women members in agricultural co-operatives compared to men is notably lower and practically non-existent at the decision making levels. Genna [4] seem to confirm this report. She noted that women who do sit on board of directors or hold management positions admit that they feel alone, outnumbered and more often afraid to speak up or fully realize their leadership roles. Ultimately, such gender barriers

in co-operatives reflect the larger societal contexts in which they exist in Rivers State and its decision making organogram? This is the major quest of this research, and to understand its effect on the functioning of the institution.

On the other hand, can these cooperative societies despite gender disparity problems survive economic crises which are common features in many economies in contemporary times? However, this study did not intend to be empirical for now but to create indices that will reveal research factors such as sustainability, solvency, profitability, internal rate of returns, etc to ascertain their true economic and financial viability. This study will also generate facts that will have policy implications and guide our policy makers in their quest to salvage this vital sector of our agricultural development continuum.

Financial viability no doubt remains a pre-requisite in the survival of any business. Agricultural Cooperatives nonetheless cannot exist or succeed without financial viability. Financial viability assessment evaluates the ability of business ventures to withstand risks and challenges. By definition, financial viability is the ability of an enterprise to generate sufficient income to take care of its operating expenses and financial obligations and also provide rooms for future growth [5]. DEEA opined that the following questions ought to be answered when assessing the financial viability of a business: Is

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the business currently performing better or worse than it was in the recent past? Is the business generating enough income to support ones personal needs? Can you always find the cash to pay your creditors on time? Do you have any outstanding debts owed to you by debtors? Do you borrow money to keep the business going? Can your business survive if unexpected events negatively affect sales? If your business is not currently profitable, do you see it becoming so in the future? How can you continue operating while at loss? Considering all the money, resources and effort put into your business, do you think that it is worthwhile continuing into the future? These are credible questions that must be answered in assessing the viability of any business venture. The Australian Tax Office (ATO) [6] corroborates some of these views and asserts that the ability to survive is linked ultimately to financial performance and position. They affirm that a business is viable where either it is returning a profit that is sufficient to provide a return to the business owner while also meeting its commitment to business creditors and has sufficient cash resources to sustain itself through a period when it is not returning a profit. The case of survival should not be a short term concept in practical considerations. The viability of a business is measured by its long term survival and ability to have sustainable profits over a time period. The longer a business can remain profitable, the better the prospect for viability. Fox-wood Associates [7] narrows business viability factors to three core attributes: positive cash flow operations, positive earnings and sustainable future growth. Are our agricultural Co-operatives in tune with these concepts?

To be effective and successful, agricultural co-operatives must continuously achieve two inter-related goals: enhance viability and improve ability to service its members and remain an economically viable, innovative, and competitive enterprise [8]. Experience has shown that co-operatives only succeed if they can meet certain basic requirements. Some of these requirements demand that there be an economically viable operation, sufficient members to make their operations economically viable and, members must have subscribed or are able to raise sufficient capital to finance the business they intend to undertake [9]. However, majority of co-operatives are in a very weak financial position, mostly as a result of their scope of operations. The strengthening of co-operative finances is particularly important in an evolving market economy [10].

In another event in Zambia, had reported that the co-operative movement has for long been burdened with serious weaknesses and problems one of which is economic viability, confirming that a feeble equity base of virtually all co-operatives was a fundamental problem that has jeopardized their ability and development potentials. A narrow economic and financial base have also made it difficult for co-operatives to effectively compete in the labour market for qualified and experienced man power which would have perhaps positioned it to be more economically competitive.

These bring to the fore the faulty structure of most co-operative societies which may need financial consolidation and rationalization in developing economies like Nigeria. This research was carried out as a financial viability perception survey of agricultural co-operative societies in Rivers State, Nigeria with a view to ascertaining their readiness to strive and survive in an emerging and competitive market driven Nigerian economy.

Materials and Methods

Study area

The study was conducted in Rivers State, Nigeria. Rivers State is

one of the six states that make up the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It is bounded to the North by Imo, Abia and Anambra States, to the south by the Atlantic Ocean and to the West by Bayelsa and Delta States. Its capital is Port Harcourt. The State lies at Latitude 4.45" north and Longitude 6.50" east and covers an area of 10,432 sq. km with a population density of 468 people per sq. km (Inemesit).

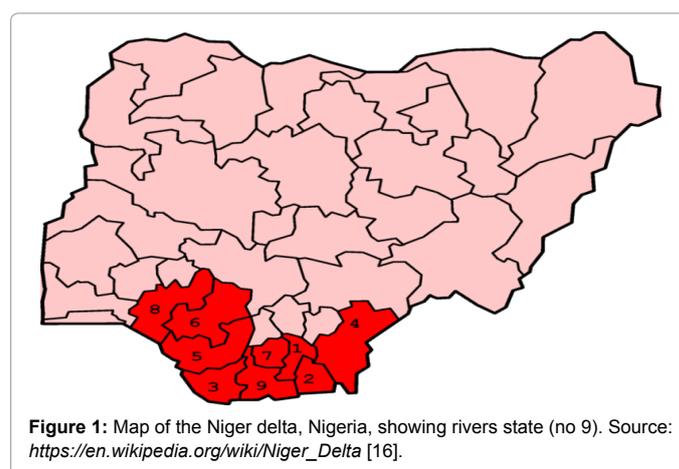
Research design

The research blue print had a survey format and designed to extract information from the co-operators. From the registered co-operative societies in the council of Nigerian Farmers and those not affiliated with this body, 30 agricultural co-operative societies were randomly selected. Purposively, the leadership of these societies were served with structured questionnaires. Descriptive statistics (averages, frequencies and percentages) were used in the analysis (Figure 1).

Results and Discussions

Cooperatives have been regarded as one of the main institutional machineries for empowering the economically weak members of the society [11]. The female gender has in many instances been seen as economically weak. However, it is not only the females that are economically weak as most campaigners would make people believe. Both genders are reasonably represented in the formation and operations of the cooperative societies in Rivers State. The word gender brings to mind socially grown roles that is considered appropriate for men and women in a given society and seen as socio-economic variable which aid the analysis of roles, responsibilities, constraints and opportunities for both men and women [12]. A gender based distribution of cooperative societies in Rivers State is shown in Table 1.

From the result, the association of both genders in the formation and operation of cooperative societies in the state seem to be the accepted norm. This arrangement has policy implications especially as it pertains to government agricultural development programme, the interest of both genders should be equally factored in in our agricultural development policies. 3.33% each of the cooperatives studied were



Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Males only	1	3.33
Females only	1	3.33
Mixed gender	28	93.34

Source: Field survey, 2015.

Table 1: Gender composition of cooperative societies in Rivers State.

either only males or females. 93.34% of those sampled preferred cooperative societies that had a representation of both genders.

Several authors and researchers have observed gender disparity in accessing social and economic benefits and inequality in hierarchical leadership placement in cooperative societies in Nigeria. Gender disparity in accessing and controlling a wide range of economic, human, social, capital assets and resources is seen to be pervasive in Nigeria. This study also confirms the evidences of gender disparity in the agricultural cooperative societies' leadership in Rivers State. The findings of the survey are shown in the Table 2.

The tradition and culture of male dominance was observed in the study. Of the 30 cooperative societies studied, 90% of them were headed by males. However, the females had reasonable representation in other positions we may consider as subsidiary and perhaps directly under the control of the president or chairman as the case may be.

The leadership hierarchy of the cooperative societies in Rivers State suggests a clear evidence of gender disparity in leadership and the arrangement favoured the males in line with evident cultural norms. Gender disparity or inequality will limit economic growth and efficiency since what qualifies an individual as a leader is the individual's gender and not ability. The segregatory acquisition and exercise of power in these cooperative societies will result in segregatory distribution of benefits and privileges and limit women participation in the development of the cooperatives. The culture of male only oriented leadership scenario may rob agricultural cooperatives of meaningful and beneficial contributions in the management of the cooperative societies.

This study agrees with the findings of Akubuilu et al. where out of 150 cooperatives studied in Anambra, males had 60% of chairmanship positions, 30% of secretary, and 10% of treasurer despite the females constituting the majority in numeric values (113, about 75.33%) of the membership. Mathews-Njoku et al. [13] citing IDRC have reported that preliminary results from IDRC project in African countries show that legal and cultural constraints placed on women access to input hamper their ability to make effective contributions to agricultural production and hence household food security. Although cooperatives have policies of equity and equal opportunities, it is important that principle should be shielded from cultural and social norms that impede its application in the running of the cooperatives.

Items	Frequency	Percentage
President		
Males	27	90
Females	3	10
Vice president		
Males	14	46.67
Females	16	53.33
Treasurer		
Males	6	20
Females	24	80
Financial secretary		
Males	17	56.67
Females	13	43.33
Public relations officer		
Males	9	30
Females	21	70

Source: Field survey, 2015.

Table 2: Gender composition of the leadership hierarchy of cooperative societies in Rivers State.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Financially viable	20	66.67
Financially unviable	10	33.33
Generates enough income Inadequate income	14	46.67
Can pay creditors on time	16	53.33
Cannot pay creditors time	13	43.33
Indebted	17	56.67
Not indebted	13	43.33
Can survive financial crisis	17	56.67
Cannot survive financial crisis	29	96.67
Can hire top management personnel	1	3.33
Cannot hire top management personnel	17	56.67

Source: Field survey, 2015.

Table 3: Co-operators perceptions on the financial viability of agricultural co-operatives in Rivers State.

Co-operators perceptions on the financial viability of agricultural cooperative societies in Rivers State

Financial viability and its sustainability remains a critical consideration if cooperative societies must still be relevant in the agricultural development policy of Rivers State. Hayes [14] is of the opinion that an organisation is viable where, given normal service conditions, the organisation will produce sufficient inflow of resources to at least balance all operating cost, strategic outflows and forecasted risk to achieve the strategic plans and expectations of stakeholders in the short to medium term. Are cooperative societies in Rivers State? The perceptions of the co-operators in Table 3 tell the remaining story.

Whether they are financially viable or not remains an issue of debate since many economic variables were not empirically tested in the first place (outside the purview of the study). However, the response of 10 out of 30 cooperative societies to not being financially viable is a serious matter and has policy implications. The number of agricultural cooperatives that have reported one financial inadequacy or the other is worrisome. It could be argued that there may be financial insolvency among agricultural cooperative societies in the state. If any farmer cannot stay in business (live up to financial responsibilities), their farming systems are not sustainable. However, economic viability and profitability are not synonymous. Economic profits imply that returns exceed opportunity cost [15,16]. This may not be the case with these cooperatives.

A person or firm who cannot pay his/her debts as and when it falls due is said to be insolvent. Insolvency should however be distinguished from viability. Insolvency is concerned with the relationship between firm's assets or cash flows and the amount of debts in its financial structure. Viability is a function of the net present value of its business as a going concern. Provided that the business has a going concern value which is greater than the value of its assets sold on a break-up basis, and also greater than zero, then it is economically viable. The perception of the co-operators is a call for concern. Serious accounting diagnosis is suggested at this point it these cooperatives will continue to play commendable roles in our agricultural development continuum.

Conclusion

Agricultural Cooperative societies in Rivers State seem to retain the age old culture of gender segregation epitomised by male dominance. However, the female gender has made some marks which could be judged to be marginal in nature especially in subsidiary offices. Events suggest agricultural cooperative societies in the state are not significantly healthy. Thorough accounting examination is suggested

as this will open up avenues that would encourage sound policies that would elevate the status and relevance of these organisations in the development of the agricultural sector. Injection of credits and good management culture may be a necessary ingredient in the quest for survival and relevance these societies.

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