ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on research and agricultural extension efforts towards providing adequate support for the Nigerian child. It highlights what “support” implies for children in terms of research and agricultural extension. Also the paper examines forms of child abuse and the likely effects on the Nigerian child. The paper further elaborates on research and agricultural extension support for children and concludes that there is still room for improvement in these two areas to enhance adequate support for the Nigerian child. The paper finally recommends that relevant arms of government and non-governmental organizations should provide moral and financial assistance to aid research and agricultural extension to enhance sustainable development of the Nigerian child.

Keywords: Research, Agricultural extension, Sustainable development, Nigerian child

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural extension is concerned with and based on searching for new truth, adding to existing knowledge about agricultural phenomenon and practice and preparing youngsters for future endeavours and challenges. This implies that agricultural extension depends on research results for it to be relevant. The distance between acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is so small but very crucial. This implies the agricultural extension practitioner should be able to evaluate research as it applies to a specific group of clienteles (in this paper, children). In this regard, Adedoyin et al. (1997) observed a missing link in rural farm family resources research (RFFRR). This has to do with children in farm families. This missing link”, referring to children is considered very important especially in Nigeria where a great emphasis is placed on the issue of children in a family. In any nation, this missing link (i.e. children) is the basic foundation for sustainable development. A nation that fails to research into the issues concerning children and also fails to train them in all endeavours of life including agriculture cannot boast of a bright future economically, socially, politically and technologically.

The fact that Nigerians cherish and desire to have many children has been well documented by authors. According to Oloko (2000), this expresses the high valuation Nigerian place on children. This is why barrenness and sub-fecundity are regarded as tragic and unfortunate. There are three mainly recognized ethnic groups in Nigeria – Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa. The Hausa and Yoruba from overt evidence, from their cultural practices shared a strong preference for large family sizes with the Igbos. These ethnic groups place high premium on children in kin-based societies which practice labour intensive agriculture as well as societies where infant mortality is high. It can therefore be upheld that
Nigerians love children because the intrinsic satisfaction they derive from them. This is why in some ethnic groups in Nigeria, children are perceived as economic assets.

The Nigerian agriculture is no doubt labour intensive because of low level of farm mechanization. In rural Nigeria, farmers marry many wives so as to have many children that could be used as labour. Even in schools, involvement of children in agriculture is either to compulsorily use them for labour or serve as punishment for offending pupils. Efforts in agricultural extension and research should be geared towards assisting children to resourcefully make use of farming knowledge and experience they have acquired through socialization process right from childhood to advantage.

Agricultural programmes for sustainable development of the Nigerian child should be aimed at motivating the children to participate in farming activities so as to develop the interest and willingness to continue with farming profession in their adulthood. One of the methods of achieving this objective is to encourage researchers to come up with new findings about involvement of children in agriculture and create formidable forum where such research results could be discussed by stakeholders interested in the development of the Nigerian Child. Such research efforts should be based on needs of the children and researchable problems identified by them. It is on the research results that agricultural extension efforts will rely to effectively tackle problems faced by children especially in agriculture. This paper examines the research and agricultural extension efforts that have been put in place in Nigeria to support the Nigerian child in their development towards responsible adulthood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Who is a child in the Nigerian context?

As indicated by Oloko (2000), in present day Nigeria, several definitions of a child exist. This assertion is also supported by Onibokun (2000) who stressed that in Nigeria, there is no standard definition of the word “child”. Childhood could be defined in cultural and socio-economic terms, though chronological age is the more popular indicator. There are various child ages assigned to different circumstance as indicated by Onibokun (2001). Such circumstances as education, employment, marriage, sexual activity, criminal immunity, death penalty, tort and contracts, all have specific ages assigned. For instance, according to Jomtien Declaration (1990), in Nigeria, a person is considered as a child till the age of 15 years when basic education is expected to have been completed. As regards employment, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention adopts the age of 12 years for light job, and 18 years for hazardous work. In Nigeria, legally, children under 14 years shall not engage in street trading. In terms of marriage, a person is considered able to marry even without the consent of the parents at the age of 18 years. Politically, any person below the age of 18 years cannot vote according to the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In cases of sexual activity and absolute criminal immunity, the age of 12 years is recommended. However death penalty shall not be pronounced on any child under the age of 17. For tort and contract, the law of contract states that an infant or child is a person who has not attained the age of 21 years.

In summary, the 1989 National child welfare policy defines a child as anybody
who is 12 years or below. More recently, in line with the United Nations Convention (1990), the new decree on the rights of the child in Nigeria (1996) adopts 18 years or below as the age of the child. It is the opinion of this author that programmes for sustainable development of children in farm families in Nigeria should cut across all ages from infancy to the age 18. This is because opinions and attitudes formed at this age may likely form the foundation for the future.

The concept of support for children

Support for children comes in various forms. It will be described in terms of research and agricultural extension for the development of the child in this paper. It is generally assumed that there is a dearth of data on child abuse and neglect in Nigeria leading to under reporting, lack of concern for child abuse by parents and non-performance of law enforcement officers to address the problem. Support for children is synonymous with protection. Children need protection against physical, psychological, spiritual or moral injury in the form of abuse, exploitation, abandonment or neglect. This definition also implies the child’s rights to special protection in the context of extreme poverty among other issues.

Research and agricultural extension support for children have essentially been directed towards obtaining data about child use or misuse in special areas with agriculture as the main focus. This is with a view to developing children who will become responsible adults.

Child protection measures in Nigeria are mainly to prevent child abuse in various forms. There are measures for child development in the traditional and modern ways. In the traditional society, child protection measures were in place within the micro to the macro ecosystem of the individual child. The child was adequately protected since pregnancy when mothers were accorded special treatment and prevented by cultural taboos to do things that were considered harmful to the foetus. For example, pregnant women were not to walk around in the afternoon or late at night because these periods were considered dangerous. On delivery, the newly born baby is often regarded as the property and responsibility of his community. The community on the other hand, because of kinship, and strong neighborhood ties protect the child morally, socially, culturally and financially against any form of abuse, neglect, exploitation and oppression.

The traditional child protection arrangement is no longer widespread in application as stated by Onibokun (2000). This is because of the disintegration of the extended family system and breakdown of kinship and neighborhood ties which have rendered the traditional child protection arrangement ineffective. Current formal child protection measures are in various forms. It could be legal e.g. Children and Young Persons Acts (CYPA) 1967; Institutional e.g. Child Welfare Department existing at State and Local government levels; the National Child Rights Implementation Committee (1994) and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) e.g. UNICEF, ILO, UNDP and UNESCO. Apart from legal and institutional means, policies can also be formulated for protection of the Nigerian child. All measures towards ensuring implementation of the rights of the child in Nigeria focus mainly on child labour among other kinds of abuse.
CHILD LABOUR, FARMING ACTIVITIES AND CHILD ABUSE

As noted by Oloko (2000) one of the problems confronting children in the recent time is their involvement in economic activities. This is because income generated poverty is endemic with household income, real rural and urban wage indices declining from 1980 to date (Onibokun, 2000). While children are used for a lot of farm work in the rural areas, the exploitation of children as house maids, stewards, cooks, child minders has gained acceptance in urban areas simply because “children are paid”. Generally speaking, children work in a variety of situations, not all of which are remunerated. Traders and artisans believe that children involved in child labour are learning survival skills, self confidence and financial management skills. Such exposure becomes negative when it violates the children’s rights and exploits their dependence. Examples of work that have negative impact on children development in the Nigerian environment include excessive domestic work (child domestic workers) forced and bonded labour, commercial sexual exploitation, premature apprenticeship, industrial and plantation work.

Agriculture is highly labour intensive and the use of family labour is very prominent in Nigeria. The tendency of child abuse in the name of farm labour is also very high. In the past, as documented by several ethnographic studies of African people, the involvement of children in economic activities of their parents such as farming, fishing, cattle herding, craft work and trading were perceived as responsible training. Such training was a critical component of socialization through which important values were inculcated and children were integrated into their particular social and cultural environment. As far as farming or agriculture in general is concerned, it is assumed that those children participating in farming activities have the potentialities and the tendencies to continue with farming if their needs are justifiably satisfied and their interests are well articulated in the profession. Children participating in farming activities are considered as important factor in sustainability and food security.

Children's agricultural work, in empirical terms has been found not to be benign as it was in the past. In Nigeria, the Ijede of Benue State and Yoko people of Ogoja in Rivers State are mostly affected by child labour in plantation. In the riverine area, work involvement is so prevalent among children that 65.5%-84.5% of school age were not in schools (Ezewu and Tahir, 1997). This was because of their involvement in agricultural work. Johnson (1990) indicated that children contribute average of 240 hours per year in different farming activities in West Africa. As reported by Idu et al. (2002), children are mainly involved in bush clearing, ridging, planting, weeding and harvesting. They are moderately involved in fertilizer application while only a few are involved in spraying and watering of crops as well as marketing of farm produce.

In terms of livestock production, recent findings indicate that children are mostly involved in feeding of animals, picking of eggs, cleaning of farm house and taking out of animals for grazing. Other areas of moderate involvement as indicated by Obinne (2002) include construction of animal house, fertilizing of pond and harvesting of fish. In their study, Adeokun et al (2002) indicated that though most children were involved in fish preservation activities but their level of involvement was highest in fish catching. It was also shown that while the male children were mostly
involved in fish catching, female children dominated fish processing and marketing. While it has been established that children are actively involved in various aspects of agriculture, it should be established whether or not their involvement amounts to abuse.

Child abuse as stated by Kempe and Kempe (1978) and Madubuko (1990) is the intentional act that endangers physical, emotional, moral and educational interests of the child by parents, schools, government and society. As further stated by Onibokun (2000) the Social Development Policy (1989) described child abuse as a condition in which a child’s health, physical, moral or/and emotional well-being is/ are endangered by acts of a person or persons. More recently Kalu (1996) summarized child abuse as experiences which constitute acts developed or commissioned to inflict harm directly or indirectly on a participating child, to reduce the chances of that child developing his potentials as a human being and in complete disregard to basic rights of protection, participating and nurturance of the child. Child neglect involves severe disregard of general needs, and feelings of the child, through inappropriate parental conduct or actions, which interfere with or fail to provide for the development of the child.

Considering what child abuse entails, bringing into light what children’s support should be about and having earlier established that agriculture is highly labour intensive involving the use of family labour, the roles of research and agricultural extension in supporting the Nigerian child against abuse through their involvement in agriculture should be stressed.

Research and agricultural extension support for children have essentially been directed towards obtaining data about child use or mis-use in special areas with agriculture as the main focus. It is well documented that well researched papers have been presented on: social and economic perspectives of involving children-in-agriculture evaluation of children-in-agriculture and related programmes; suitability of agricultural technology for children, curriculum issues and occupational experience in agriculture; and ethical and policy dimensions of children participation in agricultural works. Problems facing children in their involvement in agriculture have been well addressed in the areas of research stated above. The general intension is to demonstrate participation of children in agriculture as a way of inculcating in them dignity of labour, self reliance, career building and leadership qualities which will make them to become better citizens rather than to be cheaply used for labour which may amount to abuse.

By article 32 of the United Nations on child abuse, the child has the right to be protected from work that threatens his or her health, education or development. Due to the large number of child workers in different spheres of life in the country, the Federal Ministry of Health and social welfare has embarked on massive awareness campaign via radio jingles, posters, talks and shows and interviews depicting explosive child labour as a social problem. In the light of the above, programmes for sustainable development of the Nigerian child should set out to convincingly demonstrate that agriculture must not be seen as one of these professions encouraging abuse of child labour.

RESEARCH SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

Over the years, a lot of development has taken place in all facets of life as a result of
research. This is because steps in research lead to acquisition of knowledge. Current findings in the field of agriculture shows quite well that available knowledge in children’s involvement is still limited giving more rooms for development. Agricultural practitioners and students alike prefer to learn about agricultural principles, theories and findings without considering the steps by which knowledge is accumulated. It is an indisputable fact that knowledge of children’s involvement in agriculture beyond that of a layman definitely requires a thorough understanding of means by which researchers in social sciences aspect of agriculture accumulated knowledge.

In the olden days, problem solving either in agriculture or other fields was achieved through customs and traditional means without consideration for data collection and scientific analysis. This situation created room for the development and application of critical and systematic method in the solution of agricultural problems. Hence, the need for research as far as children in agriculture is considered.

At the national and even the grass root levels, scientific understanding cannot remain the exclusive privilege of an intellectual elite. If citizens acquire sufficient knowledge of research to see the relationship between scientific findings and the individual and national well-being, they will be more willing to assume the responsibilities necessary to promote investigation. Therefore, all stake holders in the vanguard for development of children in agriculture including children, schools teachers and parents should embrace research for sustainable development. This is because citizens that are research informed will understand that agricultural development is not merely inevitable, but must be achieved by scientific problem solving techniques. As a result, people may support research for the development of Nigerian child. And if philanthropic, informed and enlightened people may finance basic as well as applied research for development of the Nigerian child.

Children develop within specific socio-cultural environment which may influence their way of life. Scientific inquiry should however, not be impeded by socio-cultural as well as political and religious biases. For the sustainable development of the Nigerian child, encouraging research is important, but application of each advance in knowledge towards adequate children development is paramount. As far as sustainable development of the Nigerian child is concerned, acquisition of the knowledge of research is necessary to understand and evaluate the appropriateness of research findings from time to time. This is because the state of knowledge changes with new research findings.

For sustainable development of the Nigerian child therefore, researchers should be aware of some inhibiting factors which may impede their research work. These include:

- Tradition and culture in the community where the children develop and where research is to be carried out. This may prove a powerful retarding influence.
- Lack of time, energy and resources has been a block for most researchers.
- A climate of cooperation may be lacking in the operational area.
- Research may seem to be out of step with the prevailing government’s policy on child development and people’s expectations and aspirations.
By being conscious of these impediments to research on child development, the researcher would have been on the right track to successful research efforts.

ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

It is realized in agricultural extension that the children of today are the farmers and the farmers’ wives of tomorrow. Agricultural extension programmes are therefore not meant for the adult males and females alone. It is highly desirable to develop the interest of children in better farming practices rather than using them as forced labour on the farm. In line with this, there have been lots of researches on how to develop the interest of children in agriculture right from their schooling period. Agricultural extension has over the years worked through various programmes in schools to reach out to the children. Clubs have been developed e.g. Young farmers clubs and specific government programmes actually meant for students initiated. Researches have also been carried out to examine how effectively secondary school teachers can be used in extension programmes.

One of the programmes aimed at developing the interest of children and youths in agriculture was the Young Farmers Club. The club was meant to emphasize education of youths in agriculture. Education in agriculture was taken to be a major component of Nigerian traditional informal education system. Fafunwa (1974) stated that informal education system, knowledge and skills in agriculture were acquired mainly through the apprenticeship system in which training given to children was scientific though crude. In the apprenticeship system, Olaitan (1983) stressed that the male child used to observe the father (teacher) keenly when practising agricultural operations or performing agricultural tasks through method demonstration. The female children received their training on home economics under their mothers at home. At maturity, the male child is requested to demonstrate the art of planting crops, keeping of livestock, fishing, and managing of small farms as the case may be. The female child on the other hand, is made to sell farm produce in the market.

In the formal school system, Nkajimeje (1991) remarked that education through the school, especially secondary school agricultural education can contribute to agricultural development of a nation. This can partly be achieved according to Phipps (1980), by assisting youths to develop interest, favorable attitude, understanding and abilities in agriculture. In pursuance of this goal, the young farmers club (YFC) was initiated in schools to complement classroom activities. The pace of YFC activities in secondary schools in Nigeria appears to be dying down in many states of the Federation mainly because of the misconceptions that students have about the club in secondary schools. According to Nkeyimeje secondary school students have the understanding that: agriculture is synonymous with farming using crude method and implements and that farming, planting crops and weeding are the only activities is agriculture. These misconceptions about agriculture are against the good objectives of youths organizations in agriculture internationally. These objectives according to Olaitan (1983) include to:-

- develop competent, aggressive agricultural leadership
- create and nurture a love of agriculture
v strengthen the confidence of young people in themselves and in their work
v create more interest in the intelligent choice of agricultural occupations
v encourage members in the development of experience programmes and in establishment of agricultural career
v encourage members to improve the home and its surroundings
v encourage participation in worthy undertakings and in the improvement of agriculture
v participate in cooperative efforts.

Considering need to correct the misconceptions of Youths Club in Agriculture in Nigeria and take advantage of the laudable advantages as stated earlier, agricultural extension should rise up to the challenges of re-orientating the general public in order to have the right perspective of developing interest of children in agriculture rather than using them compulsorily for hard labour on the farm.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper highlights the relatively incomplete state of knowledge in sustainable child development necessitating the acquisition of knowledge through research so as to keep pace with the needed stride of development of the Nigerian child. Conducting research without timely dissemination of acquired knowledge to intended users makes such research efforts end up in futility, hence the need for effective research, extension and clientele linkage.

In all the efforts of stake holders in sustainable child development, research remains a formidable way to make rational choice between alternative ideas and practices. This will serve to validate improvement of the child. By this, a solid foundation would have been built for effective agricultural extension practice towards sustainable development of the Nigerian child. Generally, so as not to take the risk of knowing far less than the informed layman in child development, knowledge of research methodology is important for the natural and social scientists who act as the hidden sources of knowledge and the agricultural extension practitioners who are responsible for transferring technological innovations to the clienteles.

In order to enhance research and agricultural extension support for sustainable development of the Nigerian child, it is hereby recommended that:

- relevant arms of the government and non-governmental organizations should make provisions for enough moral and financial assistance to aid formidable research work on issues relating to the Nigerian child.
- community leaders should be involved in research efforts so as to obtain cooperation of the rural target audience
- researchers should design studies that will satisfy the felt needs of the Nigerian child.
- there should be effective linkage between research and agricultural extension so that research results will have positive impact on the relevant recipients of the research results (children).
- Agricultural extension units for children's welfare should be established within ADPs in all states of the Federation just like the women-in-agriculture (WIA) programme. This should be well
funded and supplied with adequate supportive facilities to perform

- In-school programmes and clubs for youths and children sustainable development should be re-initiated and properly organized. These programmes and clubs could serve as links for agricultural extension to reach out to the children for them to benefit from research results.

REFERENCES


