

AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF N-POWER AGRO ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's socioeconomic stability faces a significant threat from youth unemployment, which reported rates have reached alarming heights. Understanding the importance of youth employment for the country's development, the Nigerian government has put in place programs like N-Power, which has an agricultural component called N-Power Agro that is expressly meant to alleviate youth unemployment in the agricultural industry. The main objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the N-Power Agro programme in creating sustainable youth employment in Kogi State, Nigeria. The study relied on Rachmad's (2022) Empowerment Theory as its framework of analysis. Qualitative research design that combined phenomenological and case study was utilized. The sample population for the study was 43. This was purposefully arrived at by ensuring representation across demographic representation and among the 3 Senatorial Districts of Kogi State. Data were collected using both in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the collected data was conducted using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the programme's main challenge is the lack of access to resources like land and capital, inadequate training in business insight, and limited post-programme support and mentorship. The paper recommended that authorities in charge of the programme should facilitate access to resources, provide in-depth instruction, finance agricultural infrastructure, build solid mentorship and post-programme support networks, and promote inclusive community involvement.

Keywords: Impact, N-Power Agro, Youth Employment, Empowerment Theory, Sustainable Livelihoods, Agricultural Development.

1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is a serious threat to Nigeria's socioeconomic stability. The National Bureau of Statistics (2020) and Adaka (2024) reported the rates have risen to alarming levels, topping 53% in 2020 and continuing to rise into 2021. Economic recession, population density, a lack of education, and a lack of job opportunities have been attributed to this issue, which hampers the expansion of the national economy and results in poverty and social unrest. However, innovation, entrepreneurship, and Nigeria's demographic advantage can only be achieved if the world's youth are active and productive. Opportunities for employment not only foster social stability and improved living standards but also alleviate poverty.

In recognition of the significance of youth employment for the nation's progress, the Nigerian government has implemented programmes such as N-Power, which includes an agricultural component called N-Power Agro, specifically designed to reduce youth unemployment in the agricultural sector (Adaka, 2024). According to Ogunmodede et al. (2020), N-Power Agro aims to provide youth with temporary employment, teach them essential agricultural skills, and assist youth-led agricultural enterprises in order to boost agricultural production and food security.

By comprehensively evaluating the impact of N-Power Agro on youth employment in Kogi State, this study aims to fill the knowledge gap. Kogi State stands to benefit from this study given its rich agricultural potential. In spite of this, the actual impact of N-Power Agro on youth employment in the state remains understudied. Such knowledge gaps are particularly concerning regarding the programme's ability to create sustainable employment opportunities, the specific challenges faced by participants in securing and maintaining employment post-programme, and the long-term impact on the livelihoods and economic empowerment of youth. This study specifically seeks to answer the following questions: (i) how has the N-Power Agro programme assisted in creating sustainable Employment? (ii) What are the main barriers Kogi State's N-Power Agro participants have in finding and keeping a job in agriculture? (iii) What effects would the N-Power Agro programme have in the long run on the economic empowerment and standard of living of young people in Kogi State? This study will help policymakers and program implementers in Kogi State and across Nigeria in addressing youth unemployment and sustainable agricultural development.

2. Review of Related Literature

The concept of economic empowerment embraces improving access to resources, encouraging self-reliance, and empowering young people to make substantial contributions to the development of society (Owuna (2015), UNESCO (2015), Emejuru (2017), and Ebelechukwu et al. (2021)). The N-Power programme, and especially its subcomponents, N-Power Agro, seeks to empower marginalized populations, modernize agricultural methods, and bridge rural-urban divisions (Odey & Sambe, 2019; and Ekwe, 2014). This comprehensive mandate supports the overall objective of reducing youth unemployment in the agricultural sector.

N-Power Agro gives young people the opportunities they need to succeed in the agriculture industry, as proven by empirical research. In their study, Animola et al. (2019) were of the view that a significant positive correlation exists between entrepreneurial skills development and self-employment among N-Power beneficiaries in Kogi State. Even though this result indicates that the program can, in fact, facilitate the creation of jobs through skill development, the stability of these job prospects was not adequately covered in this study.

Both successes and challenges are shown by studies on the wider impacts of N-Power programs, such as those conducted by Bello and Michael (2022) and Akujuru and Enyioko (2019). Even though these studies support the program's ability to reduce poverty and promote economic empowerment, they also highlight important implementation challenges, such as payment delays, corruption, and logistical problems. Although the current study identifies fundamental implementation issues, it is not specifically designed to investigate the

unique challenges encountered by those involved in the agriculture industry in Kogi State. For instance, certain agricultural problems like obtaining land, acquiring the necessary equipment, or managing certain regional pests or illnesses are not meticulously studied.

Studies by Ogunmodede et al. (2020) and Adaka (2024) noted that there is a good trend in the assessment of N-Power Agro's particular influence on employment and revenue generation. A rise in participants' income was seen by Ogunmodede et al. (2020), indicating that the program can successfully improve economic outcomes. It is observed that these studies do not address the long-term effects on standard of living and economic empowerment, which this study seeks to resolve.

Most studies employ a cross-sectional approach, capturing the impacts at specific points in time. Notably missing are longitudinal studies, which follow beneficiaries over long stretches of time. Due to this absence, there is a substantial knowledge vacuum on the program's long-term impacts on Kogi State youths. Furthermore, the wider community impacts are not measured. Further to this, it was revealed that in Minna Metropolis, there was no significant relationship between the N-Power scheme and employment generation, poverty alleviation, and skill acquisition (Dauda et al. 2019). This shows that the N-Power program does not have a uniform effect across the nation.

Despite the fact that the studies that have been reviewed thus far offer important insights into the goals and immediate effects of the N-Power Agro program, there are still a number of noteworthy gaps. To have a more complete picture, long-term, thorough research is required that focuses on the sustainability of job opportunities, the unique difficulties faced by the participants in Kogi State, and the long-term impacts on livelihoods and economic empowerment. The purpose of this study is to fill these gaps and provide guidance for future policy decisions by providing a more accurate and nuanced evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on empowerment theory. According to Rachmad (2022), empowerment enables us to explain how empowering individuals can improve their well-being and performance. The theory highlights the significance of active engagement, autonomy, and resource accessibility as the key constituents of empowerment. It has been observed that many people lack motivation and a sense of power because they believe they have little influence over significant parts of their lives. Hence, employees who feel they are marginalized when decisions that affect them are made may perform poorly and be less satisfied with their positions. The operational ideas of empowerment theory involve several important processes, which involve fostering an environment that encourages active participation, provides necessary resources, and fosters trust through open and honest communication (Rachmad, 2022). Therefore, creating an environment that promotes active engagement, offers the required resources, and cultivates trust via candid and open communication are all crucial steps in the operational concepts of empowerment theory (Rachmad, 2022).

The relevance of this theory to the study is that it provides a practical and thorough viewpoint for studying youth empowerment programs such as N-Power Agro. By underscoring involvement, control, and resource availability, the theory helps us identify factors that promote empowerment, investigate the complexities of youth development, and create environments that effectively address the needs of young people.

3. Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative research design that combines phenomenological and case study approaches. The sample population for the study was 43. This was arrived at carefully, selected by ensuring representation across demographic representation and among the 3 senatorial districts of Kogi State. Data were collected using both in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews delved into specific areas, including participants' perceptions of the program within the Kogi context, the practical application of acquired skills in the local agricultural sector, the challenges and opportunities encountered in the state's labor market, the perceived impact on lives and communities, and a comparative analysis of experiences between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. This was complemented by field notes. The analysis of the collected data was conducted using thematic analysis.

4. Discussion

This discussion section delves into the findings of this study, which examined the N-Power Agro programme's contribution to sustainable youth employment in Kogi State. In a region where youth unemployment presents a significant challenge, the programme's effectiveness is of paramount importance. This section will analyze the data gathered from interviews and focus group discussions, exploring the programme's impact on career paths, skill acquisition, and overall economic empowerment. By comparing the experiences of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, this discussion aims to provide a comprehensive and balanced evaluation of the programme's successes and shortcomings, ultimately highlighting key areas for improvement.

4.1. How has the N-power Agro programme helped to create long-term job prospects for youths in Kogi State's agricultural sector?

Assessing the contribution of N-Power Agro to sustainable employment requires a thorough examination, including the perspectives of both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The central research question, "How has the N-power Agro programme helped to create long-term job prospects for youths in Kogi State's agricultural sector?" necessitates understanding the programme's long-term effects. Sustainability, in this context, entails not just initial placements but enduring economic activity and career progression.

Firstly, a critical area of inquiry is the programme's influence on career trajectories. To address this, the interview question "How has your perception of agriculture as a viable career path changed since the N-Power Agro programme implementation in your community?" was raised in an interview. A beneficiary from Dekina, Paul Maha stated, "I used to see farming as occupation for the elderly but now I see it as a business enterprise". This view is not shared by a 26-year old non-beneficiary from Lokoja, Danlami Abubakar who opined that "I see

farming as too much of hard labour with little profit'' Beneficiaries and Non-beneficiaries in a Focus Group Discussion also hold diverse views. Beneficiaries were optimistic of a new found profession that is profit oriented, while non-beneficiaries expressed pessimism about a profession riddled with risk without government support. Specifically, in Okene, a 25-year-old non-beneficiary stated, "Seeing the programme's participants struggle with sales after harvest makes me hesitant to try farming." This shows that the programme changed the perception of some, but failed to do so for others.

Secondly, the acquisition and application of skills are vital for sustainable employment. Therefore, the question "What specific skills or knowledge do you believe are most crucial for success in agriculture in Kogi State, and how effectively did the N-Power Agro programme address these needs?" was asked. Beneficiaries often cited practical farming skills, while non-beneficiaries emphasized business acumen. In the view of Abu Atabo, A 28-year-old beneficiary from Idah , " I learn current farming techniques through the programme, which were useful." Kayode Baiyere, A 26-year-old non-beneficiary from Kabba-Bunu expressed, "the programme did not provide enough knowledge on how to market produce and manage finances which is more important." F GD agreed with the view above that while technical skills were valued, there was a major gap in training related to agribusiness, market access, and financial literacy. In Adogu, Ajaokuta LGA, FGD participants expressed concern over the extreme heat that made some of the farming techniques they learned impractical, and that they needed more training on heat resistant crops. A 31-year-old beneficiary from Ihima, Okehi LGA said, "The high humidity in Ihima makes certain crops thrive, but we lacked training on how to handle post-harvest preservation in these conditions." Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries agreed that more training on the business side of farming was needed. Thirdly, the transition to sustainable employment is contingent on overcoming various challenges. Thus, the question "What are the most significant barriers you perceive to securing and maintaining employment in the agricultural sector in Kogi State, and how did the N-Power Agro program (or similar initiatives) address or exacerbate these barriers?" was posed. Beneficiaries frequently cited limited access to land and capital. A 27-year-old beneficiary from Kogi LGA stated, "After the program, I struggled to find land and get a loan." Non-beneficiaries echoed these concerns, adding market instability and lack of government support. A 31-year-old non-beneficiary, Monday Akpa from Enjema, Ankpa LGA noted, "You need the resources and a stable market, Even if you have the skills." FGDs revealed a shared frustration with systemic barriers, including bureaucratic bottlenecks and the lack of post-program support. A FGD in Okene, Okene LGA, expressed that the lack of access to fertile land was a major Obstacle. In Ajaokuta, Ajaokuta LGA, a 25-year-old beneficiary stated, "Inadequate capital and high temperature makes livestock farming expensive under the programme." A FGD in Ihima, Okehi LGA stated, "The program simply ended, with no follow up, and no help with the challenges we face." Beneficiaries often said the program did not help them overcome these issues, and non-beneficiaries stated they were afraid to try farming because of them.

Finally, to gather constructive feedback, the question "What improvements would you suggest to the N-Power Agro program or similar initiatives to enhance their contribution to sustainable youth employment in agriculture in Kogi State?" was raised. Beneficiaries

emphasized the need for post-programme support and mentorship. Muhammed Umar, A 25-year-old beneficiary from Lokoja, Lokoja suggested, "We need constant support, like access to fund and market connections." Non-beneficiaries highlighted the importance of addressing systemic issues. Musa Enema, A 32-year-old non-beneficiary from Abocho, Dekina LGA proposed, "The government needs to invest in agricultural infrastructure and provide stable markets." Focus group discussions revealed a strong desire for practical solutions, such as agricultural cooperatives, improved access to technology, and tailored training programs. In Okene, Okene LGA, FGDs suggested more local cooperatives to aid sales. In Ajaokuta, Ajaokuta LGA, participants desired more training on heat-resistant technologies. In Ihima, Okehi LGA FGDs suggested more experts on local crops and preservation. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries agreed that more investment in agricultural infrastructure was needed.

4.2 What are the primary obstacles and difficulties Kogi State's N-Power Agro participants have in finding and keeping a job in agriculture?

In a desire to inspire youth engagement in agriculture in Kogi State through the N-Power Agro, Significant obstacles in translating participation into sustainable employment has been encountered. The first obstacles relates to access to resources. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries consistently cite the difficulty of securing land, capital, and equipment. To gain more insight on this, the interview question "What are the primary resource-related obstacles you face in pursuing agricultural employment or entrepreneurship?" was posed. Beneficiaries frequently mentioned the lack of collateral for loans. A 27-year-old beneficiary, Micheal Abejide, from, Kabba, Kabba-Bunu LGA stated, "After the programme, I wanted to start a fish farm, but banks require collateral I don't have." Non-beneficiaries, Funke Moses, echoed this, adding concerns about the high cost of land. A 29-year-old non-beneficiary from, Felele, Lokoja LGA, Adama Adoga noted, "Even if you have the skills, land is too expensive, and banks would not lend to young farmers." FGDs showed a common frustration with the difficulty in land acquisition process and the strict requirements of financial institutions. In Okene, Okene LGA, the challenge revolve around dispute over land ownership and poor. In Ajaokuta, Ajaokuta LGA, participants decried the high cost of boreholes occasioned by dry climate. In Ihima, Okehi LGA, land ownership conflicts were cited as major challenge. Many non-beneficiaries also expressed fear of even trying to farm because of the huge capital outlay required (FGD, 2024).

Another critical obstacle is the significance and appropriateness of training. While the N-Power Agro programme provides training, both groups express concerns about its practical application and comprehensiveness. To interrogate this, the interview question "In your view, what knowledge or skills gaps exist in agricultural training programmes like N-Power Agro, and how do these gaps affect employment prospects?" was raised. Beneficiaries cited the need for more business skills. A 26-year-old beneficiary, Sule Abuh from Egah, Idah LGA stated, "We had training on farming methods, but not on how to sell or manage money." Non-beneficiaries expressed the need for more practical training. A 30-year-old non-beneficiary from, Anguwa, Ankpa LGA noted, "Training should be more practical, not just idea." The need for training focused towards local agricultural methods and market needs was equally underlined. In Okene, Okene LGA, participants believed that training should be tailored

towards specific crops suitable to the local soil. In Emiwo, Ajaokuta LGA, the need for training on livestock farming in arid environment was echoed. In Ihima, Okehi LGA, the importance of training on post-harvest storage and processing techniques was emphasized. Both groups agreed that more focus on agroindustry was needed (FGD, 2024).

Furthermore, post-programme support and mentorship are crucial for continued employment. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries perceive a lack of adequate support systems. To explore this, the interview question "What kind of post-programme support or mentorship would significantly improve your chances of securing and maintaining agricultural employment?" was asked. Beneficiaries emphasized the need for ongoing guidance. A 28-year-old beneficiary, Muhammed Omehi from Edeha, Kogi LGA stated, "We need tutors to guide us after the programme ends." Non-beneficiaries expressed a desire for access to agricultural extension services. A 30-year-old non-beneficiary, Helen Ahmadu, from Dekina, Dekina LGA noted, "Access to specialists who can advise us on pest control and soil management would be very appreciated." FGDs evidenced a strong desire for agricultural cooperatives and access to market links. In Okene, Okene LGA, participants suggested establishing local agricultural extension offices. In Ajaokuta, Ajaokuta LGA, beneficiaries asked for tutorship on accessing government grants and loans. In Ihima, Okehi LGA, the FG called for the creation of a local cooperative to help with marketing and distribution. Both groups stated that the program felt like it ended abruptly.

Finally, market instability and price fluctuations pose a substantial challenge. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries are concerned about the volatility of agricultural markets. To examine this, the interview question "How do market uncertainty and price variations affect your ability to plan and sustain agricultural activities?" was posed. Beneficiaries were concerned over regular fall in prices, especially during yield seasons. A 24-year-old beneficiary, Ramatu Idris from Lokoja, lamented thus, "Prices often falls, and thus, we sell at a loss." Non-beneficiaries expressed fear of investing due to market risk. A 31-year-old non-beneficiary, James Kolade from, Iluke, Kabba-Bunu LGA echoes similar view as he opined thus, "I'm scared of putting my money into farming because I don't know if I will get a good price for my produce." FGDs emphasized the need for improved market linkages and processing facilities to add value to agricultural products. In Okene, Okene LGA, participants suggested establishing local markets with price stabilization devices. In Ajaokuta, Ajaokuta LGA, beneficiaries mentioned the need for cold storage amenities to reduce post-harvest losses. In Ihima, Okehi LGA, FGs called for the establishment of processing centers for local crops to add value and reduce dependence on raw sales. Both groups desired more market information.

4.3 What is the long-term impact of the N-Power Agro program on the livelihoods and economic empowerment of youth in Kogi State?

The N-Power Agro programme's long-term impact on Youth empowerment in Kogi State's agricultural sector, deserves an appraisal. Constant enhancement in income and financial stability is a primary measure of long-term impact. Understanding how the programme has influenced the financial well-being of youth is crucial. To interrogate this, the interview question "How has your economic situation improved since the execution of the N-Power

Agro programme?" was asked. Beneficiaries often reported modest upsurges in income, particularly those who established small-scale agricultural ventures. Musa Abdullahi, a 30-year-old beneficiary from Ankpa, Ankpa LGA noted, "My income is increasing steadily and I'm now saving." On the contrary, Dauda Aliyu, a 32-year old non-beneficiary from Lokoja thought otherwise as he stated, "I have not seen substantial changes in the general economic situation of youth in agriculture.". Lack of reliable income was the concern expressed by non-beneficiaries. Market instability has been singled out as the main reason dwindling revenues by the Beneficiaries. In the view of participants from Agasa, Okene LGA, fluctuating market prices have made saving a tough task. **Participants** In Emiwo, Ajaokuta LGA, blamed high production costs on reduced earnings. Participants stated that the lack of factories made it difficult to add value to their crops and increase income in Ihima, Okehi LGA. Many non-beneficiaries believed that, people were not significantly better off after the programme (FGD, 2024).

The programme's ability to train youth with skills that enhance their employability and entrepreneurial capacity was examined. Hence, the interview question "How successfully has the N-Power Agro programme helped to developing the skills or knowledge you believe are most valued for long-term economic empowerment in agriculture?" was posed. Beneficiaries frequently cited practical farming skills, while non-beneficiaries emphasized entrepreneurship. Paul Makorji, A 26-year-old beneficiary from Idah, Idah LGA stated, "I learned modern farming practices, which are useful." A 30-year-old non-beneficiary, Ajayi Alfred from Kabba-Bunu LGA stated, "I don't see enough of how to market produce and manage finances which is more essential" FGDs showed that while beneficiaries gained technical skills, both groups agreed that there was a significant gap in training related to agribusiness, market access, and financial literacy. Participants showed a strong desire for training on E-marketing for agricultural products in Okene, Okene LGA. Training in Accounting Skills is the desire of beneficiaries In Ajaokuta, Ajaokuta LGA. The need for training on manufacturing for local crops was highlighted by beneficiaries in Ihima, Okehi LGA. Many non-beneficiaries stated that they thought the programme should have concentrated more on teaching people how to manage a business (FGD, 2024).

Furthermore, the programme's impact on social capital and linkages is a crucial factor in long-term success. The ability to build and leverage relationships can open doors to new opportunities. The interview question "How has the N-Power Agro programme influenced your access to social linkages and support systems within the agricultural sector?" was raised to interrogate this. Beneficiaries frequently reported expanded networks within the agricultural community. Ada Sule, a 27-year-old beneficiary from Girinya, Kogi LGA stated, "I met other farmers and traders through the program, and we share information.". This view was not in consonance with non-beneficiaries who felt left. James Edime, 33, a resident of Dekina LGA and a non-beneficiary, stated, "I don't see how the program has widened networks for those outside of it." While non-beneficiaries felt left out and believed there was a lack of peer support, beneficiaries often developed strong networks (FGD, 2024).

5. Conclusion

The N-Power Agro program in Kogi State has the aim to address youth unemployment through agricultural programme, but its success is often mired by systemic barriers. The programme main challenge is the lack of access to resources like land and capital, inadequate training in business insight, and limited post-programme support and mentorship. These challenges exposed beneficiaries to unsteady market environment with no assistance. In order to transform the programme into a driver of sustainable youth employment, it is recommended that authorities in charge of the programme take a comprehensive approach that tackles structural challenges. This involves facilitating resource access, providing in-depth instruction, financing agricultural infrastructure, building solid mentorship and post-programme support networks, and promoting inclusive community involvement. Regular monitoring and evaluation by policymakers is required as a guarantee to make the program responsive to the changing requirements of the young farmers. By using a thorough and inclusive approach, policymakers may create a more favorable environment for young people to work in agriculture, which will enhance Kogi State's social and economic well-being.

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