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AGRICULTURAL LAND USE IN PERI-URBAN COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW

J. O. Ajaero¹, E. C. Matthews-Njoku¹ and N. C. Ehirim²

¹Department of Agricultural Extension, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

²Department of Agricultural Economics, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Corresponding author: J. O. Ajaero; E-mail: ajaero_joseph@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: *This paper reviewed the emerging problems of agricultural land use in Nigerian outlying communities. The outlying communities are known to be major sources of agricultural products to nearby urban areas. However, agricultural activities are under the threat of being abandoned due to the transfer of arable land to other uses apart from agriculture. This was found to be due to the increased economic value (price) of land, which makes land a source of immediate income to escape chronic poverty. The emerging scenario is the replacement of traditional communal landholding by individual arrangement in the outlying agrarian rural communities to facilitate permanent alienation so that individuals can dispose of their farmlands to other uses. This would have the effects of forcing a significant population engaged in agriculture to the unemployment market, the emergence of landless farmers and compound the problem of resource accessibility by disadvantaged group like women farmers. It has also led to the increase in land rates for agricultural purposes and unabated decrease in farm size among farmers. The paper suggests that farming layouts should be mapped out and given equal attention as accorded to industrial and residential areas by urban development authorities. It concludes that extension service activities should be directed towards the dissemination of innovations like vegetable and small ruminant production, which does not require large expanse of land and compatible with land situations in these areas.*

Keywords: Land, agriculture, Peri-urban, population, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Land is an important resource, which was previously erroneously held as an abundant natural resource among the subsistence farmers of sub-Saharan Africa. Nwanuobi (1992) noted that land has always been a major factor in traditional African economy regardless of whether the socio-economic system is that of hunters and gatherers, nomadic, pastoralists, sedentary horticulturists or even fishing communities. According to Udoh *et al.* (2002) and Reinjntjes *et al.* (1995), increased food production in agro-ecological regions was found to depend on expansion of land at the expense of restorative bush fallow. This traditional agricultural system was conceived as stable and self sustaining until the recent phenomenon of rapid population growth. This is the general situation in Nigeria and in southeast in particular especially in the peri-urban rural communities where peasant farmers are facing progressive decrease in farmland holdings and farm size due to the demographic and environmental pressures.

In addition, competition for land for other purposes such as road construction, industrialization and residential areas have further compounded the availability of land for agricultural purposes, which remains the major livelihood activity of the people in rural areas. Agriculture in the peri-urban areas has been noted to be the source of agricultural products to the urban areas (Upton, 1996). Farmers here take the proximity advantage over the remote rural producers to supply urban markets with animal products, vegetables and other high value crops. However, these smallholder farmers in the peri-urban settings are also confronted with decreasing farm holdings and the threat of being thrown into the already swollen unemployment market. Onweremadu *et al.* (2006) observed that the establishment of municipalities in Aba, Orlu, Onitsha and Enugu has led to contraction of farmlands and denaturing of soil and soil resources due to unsustainable land use in those areas of southeastern Nigeria. The above development thus, changed the perception of land from the toga of "abundance" to a resource with economic "rivalry and "exclusive" features in southeastern Nigeria (Ebo, 1999). Economic rivalry implies that once a unit of a resource has been used for a purpose, that particular unit is then not available for other uses. For instance, if land is used for industrial purposes that land ceases to be available for agricultural use. The concept of "exclusiveness means that other people are prevented from using the commodity which an

individual has procured. When Mr. A acquires a piece of land, the land becomes his own and he could choose not to make it available to other people even when the said land is idle from use. Farmers in the outlying rural communities at the fringes of urban areas have become the victims of this competition for land.

THE DYNAMICS OF AGRICULTURAL LAND USE IN OUTLYING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Agricultural and rural development scholars are in agreement that demographic pressure is a major reason for the decreasing farm size in sub-Saharan Africa. As population, increases the size of holdings invariably reduces due to physical nature of land. This is the situation in outlying agrarian communities in Nigeria, especially in the densely populated southern Nigeria, where communal land tenure is dominant.

In addition to population pressure, there is the competition for land for infrastructure and residential housing developments. Associated with the later reason is the creation of local government councils, leading to the emergence of quasi-urban areas and the expansion of existing ones. Onyebinama (2004) summarized that the increased demand for available land have resulted to increases in its economic value thus land sales have become very attractive as a source of immediate income to escape chronic poverty and meet pressing family needs in the outlying rural communities. Consequently, land owning groups were induced to share out their portions among members on individual basis, which has appeared to replace communal tenure land holdings. The non-permanence and non-alienation attributes of holding under communal tenure system no longer exist as land is apportioned along family lines with serious implications on agriculture, which is the dominant source of livelihood in these communities.

The effects of this development on agriculture include; the emergence of landless farmers, increase in farmland rents, fragmentation of landholdings and reduction in farm size, production of indigenous fruit crops.

EMERGENCE OF LANDLESS FARMERS

The communal tenure type customarily ensures that each member of the extended family with common ancestry is entitled to some use rights (Imoudu, 2002). However, under the individualization of holdings, social class as that depended on this arrangement for farmland but customarily inhibited from permanent use rights would be rendered landless. Among this vulnerable group are the rural women farmers and families that are missing in the ancestral lineage (Rekha, 1997).

In Igbo tradition, women are customarily excluded from landholding rights and thus depend on their husbands and adult sons for allocation for farming (Nnadi and Akwiwu, 2005). However, they could have access by renting or outright purchase. The effect of this denial of land use right would imply that a significant population engaged in farming would be forced out of agriculture and consequently reduce production from this segment of farmers (Olawoye, 1989; Uwaka et al., 1991; Ijere, 1991; Morna, 1992). This will exacerbate shortage of labor for farming activities, while shifting such displaced hands to other livelihood activities in the rural economy.

EFFECT ON FARMLAND RENT

Reduction of agricultural land area has the likelihood of raising land rent according to the economic law of demand and supply. This situation would be created by the increased demand of the available land space by landless farmers and others who would like to increase their cultivated area. It should therefore be expected that rental fees for agricultural land in this outlying rural communities will increase with proximity to urban areas (Upton, 1996). Thus, higher rental fees regime will exist in the outlying communities close to the urban areas, which will further increase the cost of production for the resource poor farmers.

EFFECT ON LANDHOLDINGS AND FARM SIZE

Farm land holding in southeastern Nigeria has been described as fragmented as every male member of a land owning group has a birth-right of being allotted land (Imoudu, 2002). The phenomenon of land individualization will further reduce size of holdings as every adult male in the land owning group lays claim to a portion of land previously under communal holdings. Nwosu

(1991), found that landholdings in such communities where there was large scale acquisition of land (whose effect could be similar to urban encroachment) reduced by 11%. The problem of fragmentation will further be compounded in this situation in the outlying rural communities close to the urban areas.

EFFECT ON INDIGENOUS CROP PRODUCTION

In the traditional cropping system, there are categories of indigenous tree or fruit crops, which serve as supplementary food during the 'hungry period'. Examples include; African native pear (*Dacryodes edulis*), Mmimi (*Denettia tripetala*) and Kola nut (*Cola nitida*) among others (Nwufo, 2005). They are usually perennials and claim permanence on their cultivated area, farmers will not be encouraged to plant and expand this enterprise of perennials because of the limited farm size and land holdings. This implies that these indigenous fruit or tree crops, which could be developed into indigenous plantation crop, face the threat of extinction unless conscious efforts are made towards their preservation in gene banks as they contribute to food security in the rural areas. In spite of the observed negative impact of individualization of land ownership rights, there are some advantages that could be explored for agricultural development. These include; effects on land value as financial capital and land conservation practices.

EFFECTS ON LAND VALUE AS FINANCIAL CAPITAL

Communal land tenure has been criticized for not availing farmers the legal document to access credit, but with this development land becomes a financial capital (that can be used as collaterals to securing loans) instead of a physical capital (Ebo, 1999).

EFFECTS ON LAND CONSERVATION PRACTICES

The redistribution of land to individual holdings would enhance long term land or soil conservation practices. Individual farmers can adopt conservation practices that would improve agricultural productivity as the 'public property' attitude inherent in the communal tenure system changes to a 'personal property' behavior.

LAND REFORMS AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Various governments of Nigeria from 1972 to date pursued the objective of raising agricultural productivity to improve the living standards of rural people by designing different programs and strategies in agriculture (Onu, 2005). This is because agriculture is a principal sector in economic development and engages overall largest number of labor force in the economy (Ugwoke, 2005). However, only the land use reform decree of 1978 and National agricultural land development authority (NALDA) of 1991 directly addressed the problems associated with acquiring agricultural land. This could be the reason for the poor result attained by most of these efforts when measured against the background of transforming traditional farm system to a modern agricultural system as land is a prime factor in all agricultural activities. It will be difficult to realize agricultural modernization without positively changing the present traditional value attachment to land. Attaining resource-use efficiency among the smallholder farmers, which is a consequent of mechanization may not be achieved, since the size attribute of farmland makes it reasonable for them to maintain the use of human labor (Amalu, 1998). Therefore, farmers continue the use of implements considered as basically primitive and good only for subsistence agriculture (Asiabaka, 2002). Thus, productivity will continue to dwindle or diminish as labor for agricultural purposes continue to be scarce in these outlying areas due to the existence of more rewarding alternative in non-farm employment. Mechanization is constrained in the absence of comprehensive land reform policy that encourages land consolidation among the smallholder farmers whose activities are threatened by diminishing farm sizes (Livingstone and Ord, 1981). Such changes in land policy would require a redefinition of traditional group ownership of land resource with the participation of the target beneficiaries.

FUTURE OF FARMING IN THE OUTLYING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Man from prehistoric times has been sustained by his intimate relationship with land on which he cultivates crops and rears animal as it provided him with food and raw materials for his clothing

and shelter. Then, man was just content with his subsistence level of production, but with increasing population, it became imperative that the production level must be increased to meet the needs of the teeming population by engaging more resources into production or by increasing the productive capacity of existing ones through scientific and technological innovations (Onu, 2005). To effectively midwife this transition in the rural farming communities which dominate farming in Nigeria, there is need for social, economic and cultural reformations to complement the interactive processes needed to expand production. In this regard, research activities should focus on the peculiarities of these communities with respect to limiting resource such as land in order to develop land-saving technologies suitable for such areas.

Existing technologies have not so much addressed this problem either due to their unavailability or unaffordability or both. For instance, soil improvement through fertilizer technology has been rendered prostrate due to the twin factors of high cost and scarcity (Echebiri and Okoroafor, 2006). Similarly, the use of organic manure has not gained much ground due to the insufficiency of quantity that would be required to get the expected result (Atabo et al., 2006).

Research efforts should be directed at developing crops that would yield economic returns with the limited farm size. The promotion of crops by the extension service which require large farm size to yield satisfactory economic returns in this area may not promote the case of agricultural development. For example, appropriate vegetable crops that would thrive in the soil conditions could be more rewarding.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The expansion of municipalities into neighboring rural agrarian communities has resulted in the reallocation of arable land to other uses and further contraction of farm holdings of smallholder farmers. This change has given rise to unsustainable agricultural practices through land use intensification unaccompanied by associated technologies in an attempt to at least maintain production. In addition, farmers are confronted by landlessness, increased land rent rates and the extinction of indigenous tree crops. There is the need for an intervention that will specifically target outlying agrarian communities to protect and promote agricultural activities in these agro-geographical areas.

In view of this, agricultural extension service should disseminate innovations that are compatible with the agricultural characteristics of the outlying communities. Vegetable production and small ruminant technologies that do not require large expanse of farm land should be packaged for these areas. In addition urban planning should be undertaken to effectively designate agricultural, residential and industrial areas.

Emphases have always been on industrial and residential areas, which have colonized and polluted productive arable land. This calls for immediate action especially in local governments areas that are experiencing urban pull. Lastly, government should put in place appropriate policy instruments that specifically target the outlying rural areas. This strategy would encourage land consolidation among farmers and facilitate farmers to pool their farm land together for size-effects required for mechanization and irrigation.

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