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FARMERSGROUPS GROWTH TREND IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Our society is made up of many groups and we function in groups. These groups include family, ethnic, religious, political clubs and national groups. Recent years have witnessed the formation of groups such as farmers groups like farmers' cooperatives, farmers association, farmers' unions, etc. These farmers' groups are regarded as self-help groups.

These farmers' groups may be regarded as socio-economic groups. They may be so regarded because they are developed to accomplish some common social and economic goals in relation to their farming activities. The achievement of their common social and economic goals translates into enhancement of their standard of living. Agriculture is a sure pathway towards reduction of poverty, improved income distribution, rapid industrialization and diversification of foreign exchange earning (Iwala *et al* (2006).

There are some functions that cannot be carried out alone individually, but can be carried out in groups. For instance, these groups form sources of credit facilities for the members. According to Ofuoku *et al*

(2008), in such groups, members harness their financial resource for the benefit of members. These groups also constitute access to agricultural information. Ofuoku and Urang(2009) opined that as a result of the dearth of field extension agents, extension activities are now carried out in groups.

In their study, the most important reasons for subscribing to such farmers' groups is access to credit facilities and information. These factors are very much indispensable in the farming business of the group's members.

In spite of these ubiquitous farmers' groups, the level of production among farmers is still inadequate. For instance, Iwala *et al.* (2006) stated that there is decline in oil palm produce over the years. Nigeria, up till now is yet to achieve 5% total caloric intake of non-starchy crops recommended by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Unless there are strong farmers' groups that create access to adequate amount of credits and relevant information for the farmers, agricultural production targets will not be met and efforts toward poverty alleviation among farmers will be inhibited.

This study was therefore set out to investigate the growth trend of farmers' groups in Delta State, Nigeria with the view of unveiling its implications for sustainable agricultural production and extension services. Specifically, the growth indicators – membership strength for the past ten years; trend in financial subscription; members perceptions on access to credit and inputs and frequency of extension service/information by the groups for the period were considered. It was thus hypothesized that there are no significant differences in membership strength as one of the major growth indicators of the farmers' groups for the past ten years.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Delta State, Nigeria. Delta State, despite its petroleum wealth, is a predominantly agricultural economy. Farmers here cultivate both annual and perennial crops. Livestock and fish farming are important sub-sector of the agricultural sector of the state. These farming activities are supported by both the climatic and other environmental factors prevalent in the state.

Data for the study were collected from the records of 20 of the 63 farms' groups registered with the

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Delta State Agricultural Development Programme. The 20 groups were randomly selected with the application of the lottery method of selection. Primary data on frequency of extension contact and level of access to credit and cheap farm inputs were collected from randomly selected members of the groups that were selected on the basis of 20% of membership.

The data were analyzed with the use of contingency tables and percentages. The hypothesis was addressed with the use of analysis of variance (ANOVA). Code numbers FG₁ to FG₂₀ were used to represent the farmers' groups to maintain the anonymity required by the secretaries of the groups who gave the authors access the required records in strict confidence.

The limitation encountered was that none of the groups released information on amount of credit given to farmers and the profit made.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Membership strength

Table 1 indicates that 85% of the farmers' groups experienced increasing trends in membership

growth between 2002 and 2006, but between 2007 and 2011 they started experiencing a decreasing trend in membership enrolment. This is an indication that in the last five years, most of the groups experienced loss of members due either to death or dissatisfaction. Individuals have needs which they want to satisfy through group membership. Ofuoku *et al* (2008), Ofuoku and Urang (2009) discovered that farmers would like to remain in their various groups if their needs are satisfied by the group. Once the individual farmers' needs are satisfied the group remains cohesive. Cohesiveness is the extent to which members of a group want to continue as members of the group.

Members of these farmers' groups subscribe to them for the reason of accessing credit, cheap inputs and extension information. The reason for dissatisfaction and loss of membership of the various groups is attributed to weakness of the leadership. Ogionwo and Eke (1999) averred that democratic leadership which facilitates groups' performance and attainment of group and individual goals enhance group cohesiveness.

Table 1: Membership Strength of Farmers' Group (2002 – 2011)

Farmers' Code	Membership Strength										
	Code no.	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
FG ₁	33	33	31	31	35	34	32	32	30	30	-9.0
FG ₂	15	18	21	21	29	25	21	20	19	17	13.3
FG ₃	25	25	27	27	30	28	27	24	21	19	-24
FG ₄	21	21	23	24	26	24	24	24	23	21	0
FG ₅	35	34	35	36	39	36	34	28	26	26	-25.7
FG ₆	18	23	25	26	26	24	22	22	20	17	-5.6
FG ₇	26	27	27	28	29	28	24	21	20	19	28
FG ₈	32	33	34	26	28	27	26	26	26	21	-34.4
FG ₉	30	30	32	30	33	31	27	23	24	21	-30
FG ₁₀	27	26	29	29	35	33	29	24	21	19	-29.6
FG ₁₁	24	26	26	28	31	27	26	23	22	21	-12.5
FG ₁₂	21	21	23	26	28	27	24	23	20	18	-14.3
FG ₁₃	23	22	24	25	29	25	22	20	20	20	-13.0
FG ₁₄	29	29	31	31	34	30	27	26	24	22	-24.1
FG ₁₅	22	24	25	28	37	34	31	28	21	21	-4.5
FG ₁₆	28	30	31	33	34	32	31	30	23	20	-28.6
FG ₁₇	31	31	32	35	35	30	26	21	27	23	-25.8
FG ₁₈	24	26	26	29	28	24	23	23	20	20	-16.7
FG ₁₉	16	19	20	25	29	29	25	23	17	14	-12.5
FG ₂₀	19	19	21	23	27	22	21	21	19	16	-15.8

Source: Various farmers' groups

FG = Farmers' Group

b) *Trend of financial subscription*

It was observed that the rate of financial subscription in all the self-help farmers' groups was not fixed, but depended on the perceived capability of the individual subscriber. Each subscriber fixed his/her own subscription (Table 2). Follows the same trend as recorded in table 1. There were increasing trends between 2002 and 2006, while the groups experienced decreasing trends between 2007 and 2011. This is attributed to dissatisfaction of the members of the groups. They expressed their dissatisfaction by withdrawing; however, some did by reducing their subscriptions. The dissatisfaction was as a result of delay in receiving loans applied for and sometimes when received the desired amount is not released at a time. Some of the leaders also did not carry their members along in accessing cheap inputs through

group purchase and extension services, especially with respect to cheap input supply. According to Ofuoku *et al* (2006), fish farmers subscribed to self-help groups in order to have access to cheap inputs and credit, among other reasons. The credit is to enable them expand and improve on their holdings. Ofuoku *et al* (2006) discovered significant difference between scale of production of fish farmers who subscribed to cooperative societies and those that were not members of cooperative societies. This difference was as a result of the access the subscribers had to cheap inputs and credit facilities. In situations where members of the groups do not have easy access to such credit and cheap input, the members are bound to express dissatisfaction by withdrawing their membership which translates into withdrawal or reduction of subscriptions.

Table 2: Trend in financial subscription (2002-2012)

Farmers' group code	Financial subscription (million naira) (US\$1=Nig N150)											
	Code no.	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	% difference between 2002 & 11
FG ₁		2.30	2.30	2.10	2.10	2.40	2.35	2.20	2.20	2.0	2.0	-13.0
FG ₂		1.10	1.26	1.40	1.40	2.03	1.70	1.40	1.30	1.20	1.19	8.2
FG ₃		1.76	1.75	1.80	1.80	2.01	1.90	1.81	1.60	1.40	1.33	-24
FG ₄		1.47	1.47	1.60	1.68	1.80	1.60	1.60	1.60	1.55	1.40	-4.8
FG ₅		2.45	2.48	2.50	3.20	5.50	3.20	2.48	2.12	2.09	2.09	-14.7
FG ₆		1.28	1.32	1.77	1.39	1.38	1.40	1.45	1.45	1.30	1.20	-6.3
FG ₇		1.80	1.80	1.80	1.91	2.03	1.80	1.58	1.42	1.33	1.31	-27.2
FG ₈		2.28	2.30	2.36	2.12	2.28	2.0	1.91	1.93	1.91	1.40	-38.6
FG ₉		2.20	2.20	2.21	2.20	2.29	2.10	1.80	1.62	1.62	1.39	-81
FG ₁₀		1.82	2.09	2.22	2.22	2.48	2.43	2.22	2.16	2.01	1.93	6.0
FG ₁₁		1.65	1.93	1.95	2.10	2.15	1.92	1.94	1.60	1.43	1.40	-1.5
FG ₁₂		1.45	1.46	1.80	2.13	2.18	2.10	1.93	1.65	1.58	1.45	0
FG ₁₃		1.66	1.64	1.67	1.69	1.74	2.65	1.63	1.35	1.33	1.33	-19.9
FG ₁₄		2.33	2.36	2.38	2.38	2.42	2.37	1.83	1.69	1.58	1.41	-39.5
FG ₁₅		1.45	1.53	1.57	1.61	2.11	1.99	1.96	1.63	1.40	1.40	-8
FG ₁₆		1.95	2.10	2.11	2.14	2.15	2.13	2.11	2.10	1.81	1.69	-13.3
FG ₁₇		2.16	2.16	2.18	2.21	2.21	2.14	1.95	1.44	1.51	1.42	-34.3
FG ₁₈		1.63	1.68	1.68	1.72	1.70	1.64	1.61	1.61	1.58	1.58	-3.1
FG ₁₉		1.20	2.22	1.25	1.34	1.46	1.48	1.33	1.29	1.26	1.24	3.3
FG ₂₀		1.33	1.33	1.46	1.47	1.51	1.48	1.44	1.46	1.32	1.25	6.0

Source : Various farmers' groups

c) *Members' perception on access to credit and cheap inputs*

Most (54.5%) of the respondents were of the opinion that they rarely have access to credit (Table 3). The same trend was discovered with access to cheap farm inputs as 58.4% of them reported that cheap farm inputs were rarely accessible. These are attributed to weakness on the part of the leadership. The implication is that the members were not satisfied as their needs were not being well met. This trend is counter productive and will lead to low cohesiveness of the

groups. The higher the degree to which a group fulfills the needs of its members, the more cohesive the group will be (Ogionwo and Eke, 1999). This finding is at variance with that of Ofuoku and Urang (2009) who discovered that members of farmers' cooperative societies in Delta State were highly satisfied with release of credit to the members. This finding is also at variance with an earlier finding by Ofuoku et al (2008) who observed that members of fish farmers' group in Southern Nigeria were highly satisfied.

Table 3 : Members' perception on access to loan and cheap inputs (n=77)

Facilities	Highly accessible	Accessible	Rarely Accessible	Not Accessible
Credit	6(7.8)	21(27.3)	42(54.5)	8(10.4)
			45(58.4)	11(14.3)

Figures in parenthesis are percentages.

d) *Frequency of extension contact*

Most (76.6%) of the groups met with extension agents once monthly (Table 4). This falls short of 2 time's monthly standard established by the Delta State Agricultural Development Programme (DTADP). The

reason farmers subscribe to farmers' self-help groups is access to information and extension services. In this situation where extension contact is inadequate, information access is also inadequate. Since access to extension services and information are

Table 4 : Frequency of extension/farmers' contact (n=77)

Number of times (monthly)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
None	0	0
1 time	59	76.6
2 times	12	15.6
3 times	6	7.8
4 times	0	0

extension service could lead to the willingness of members to disengage from such groups and this will mean that the groups would no longer be cohesive. This confirms the findings of Ofuoku et al (2008) who discovered that most farmers had contact with extension agents once monthly.

e) *Group related constraints of members of farmers' groups*

Most of the respondents indicated (table 5) that their group related constraints included inadequate

information on extension/farmers' group meetings (79.2%), leadership incompetence and inadequate access to credit and cheap inputs (72.7%). Another constraint pointed was time of group meetings. These confirm an earlier attribution to the falling trend observed with membership strength and subscription fees. These findings are congruent with Ofuoku et al (2008) who discovered some of these constraints among members of fish farmers' groups in Southern Nigeria.

Table 5 : Group related constraints of members (n = 77)

Constraints	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inadequate access to credit and inputs	56	72.7
Inadequate information on extension/farmers' group meetings	61	79.2
Time of group meetings	36	46.8
Leadership incompetence	57	74.0

f) *Multiple responses were observed*

The implication is that extension/farmers meetings could not be attended regularly by members of the various farmers' groups because of incomplete and belated information on such meetings, some of the

members do not find such times fixed as being conducive, considering the time they retire home from farm daily and the time they devote to domestic affairs at home and cultural activities and local market days. This is in consonance with Ekong (2003) who opined

incompetence is attributed to the way leaders steered the affairs of the groups. This is with respect to organization of the groups' activities and their responses to issues bordering on members' problems and decisions (Ofuoku *et al* (2008). According to Deckor and Nnodim (2005), one of the most important characteristics of leadership is empathy. This is the ability to share the feelings of others in your community or group. If this is lacking, the leadership is considered as being incompetent. These challenges have the implication of low level of cohesion of the various farmers' groups. Cohesiveness can only be achieved if the needs of the members of the groups are satisfied.

g) *Test of hypothesis*

The test of hypothesis indicates that there is significant difference at α 0.05 in membership strengths

Table 6 : Difference in membership strength and paid subscriptions

Membership trends	Sum of Squares	df	Mean	F	Significance
Between Groups	2352.400	19	123.811	10.758*	0.000
Within Groups	2071.600	180	11.509		
Total	4424.000	199			

* *Significant at 5% level of significance*

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the results of this study, the membership strengths of the various farmers' groups are dwindling. This has also translated into decreased or decreasing amount paid as regular subscription fees. Extension/farmers' groups contact falls short of the required/desired frequency and most of the members rarely have access to cheap inputs and credit. These developments are related to leadership incompetence. It is concluded that the various farmers' groups are not growing, but experiencing retrogression.

Bearing the above in mind it is therefore recommended that:

- The extension agents in charge of the various farmers' groups are required to sensitize, persuasively the leaders of the groups on the need to disseminate information on meetings adequately to their members and early enough too.
- The extension agents as the facilitators should help the groups to fix particular times for them to meet for extension service and should make it an important point of duty to meet with the groups as required by the extension agency (DTADP).
- Extension agents need to organize leadership training for the various leaders at regular intervals.

in the various farmers' groups in the years under study (Table 6).The null hypothesis is therefore, rejected. This is congruent with *a priori* expectation.

This trend is attributed to dissatisfaction among members of the various groups. This implies that the various groups are tilting towards low cohesiveness. The dissatisfaction among members is related to groups' leaders' behaviour. Lott and Lott (1995) discovered close relationship between the behaviour of group's leader and group cohesiveness. Group leaders who do not put up selfless service to their groups by not carrying the members along in every activity and who are undemocratic cannot nurture a cohesive group.

- Leaders of the groups should endeavour to disseminate notice of meetings of any kind to members early enough through various media that are convenient for the groups.

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