

PROMOTING YOUTH INTEREST IN AGRICULTURE: THE VISION AND MISSION

S.A. Rahman, H.S. Umar and A. Yakubu

Abstract

Agriculture is one of the most interesting and lucrative professions, yet it receives relatively little attention from the youth. The high rate of unemployment among university and polytechnic graduates of agriculture has been attributed to unattractive nature of agriculture and lack of skills and competence required in practising agriculture. Agricultural education is supposed to provide young people with the good knowledge of the basic principles and techniques of agriculture and the motivation to translate the knowledge into real improvement in agricultural productivity.

Introduction

Science Students in Secondary Schools aiming to get admission into Universities or other tertiary institutions hardly apply for programmes in agriculture. Majority of students reading agriculture settled for the course because they could not get admission for the course of their choice. This implies that such category of students have no interest in agriculture as a profession; their interest is just to get the degree certificate. Such students obtain poor results and fail to apply the knowledge imparted to them in schools. The end result of this is unemployment. The high rate of unemployment among products of the educational system has been attributed to their lack of skills and competence required in the field of work (Ochuba, 2004).

Agriculture is one of the interesting and lucrative professions on which students need to be enlightened and encouraged. Agriculture is by far the most important of the world's economic activities. Yet, the study of agriculture receives relatively little attention from youths. Agricultural education is supposed to provide young people with a good knowledge of the basic principles and techniques of agriculture and the motivation with which they can translate this knowledge into real improvement in agricultural productivity (Agbede, 2004).

This write-up has the primary purpose of sensitizing the stakeholders (students, agricultural teachers in secondary schools, lecturers in faculties and colleges of agriculture, research managers, research scientists, policy makers, extensionists, NGOs etc) on the need to fully modernise agriculture and make it attractive to youths; in order to address food insecurity and achieve other numerous goals in the national economy. Educational institutions, especially universities, are required to diversify their programmes for the development of high level of manpower within the context of the needs of the economy (Okebukola, 2001).

Obviously, many students read agriculture without actually understanding how to conceptualize it, not to talk of practising it. It is from the conceptualization of agriculture that students can know and understand more about agriculture. Adequate understanding of agriculture may raise students' interest in it. It is when students have the interest that they will care to know the career opportunities in agriculture and be rightly guided into application of acquired knowledge at the end of their programmes. It is, therefore, necessary at this juncture to conceptualize agriculture for proper understanding.

What is Agriculture?

The operational or working definition of agriculture can be of great help in describing the system towards motivation of students. Agriculture can be defined as art, science, business and tradition which purposively involves cultivation of land, growing of crops, rearing of animals, preparation of

crop and animal products and marketing them for human consumption. Whatever we are learning or practising in agriculture is covered by this definition. This differs from the usual literal definition. "Ager meaning field or land, culture meaning cultivation". That is, agriculture is field or land cultivation. This kind of definition is not attractive and hinders students from understanding agriculture comprehensively. Such definition does not provide enough information that can raise students' interest in agriculture. There is no doubt that the operational definition can assist in encouraging the students to look for further information and know more about agriculture. For instance, a student may use the operational definition to ask the following questions for further information:

- i. Why is agriculture considered as art, science, business or tradition?
- ii. What fields of study exist in agriculture?
- iii. How are the fields of study interrelated in agriculture? Adequate information about agriculture to the youth can prepare them for self-employment and make them to possess necessary skills and competence which the modern economy demands. According to Agbede (2004), there is mass unemployment of post-primary youths. Also, many university and polytechnic graduates of agriculture are jobless. Olaitan (1993), lamented that agricultural education in Nigeria, past and present, had concentrated more on production of intellectuals or unskilled graduates who would not solve "the national food question".

Trends in Agriculture

Agriculture is a dynamic system, it has history and it changes. The practice of agriculture started from subsistence. Subsistence agriculture is the farm production for home consumption only. Human efforts later advanced by producing beyond the requirement of the family and by specialization. This led to other phases of development in agriculture as follows: i. Inter-household or infra-communal exchange, ii. Inter-communal exchange.

- iii. Trade by barter (exchange of commodity for commodity), iv. Monetisation of agriculture or peasantisation. This is agricultural production for both market and home consumption. This phase also possesses several overlapping stages depending on the proportion of produce sold or consumed. This is why farmers in Nigeria and other developing countries are considered as peasant farmers, v. Commercialization: The agricultural production is for market purpose only. The proportion consumed in this case by the family will be paid for or recorded to form part of assessment of the performance of the farm, vi. Mechanization: The use of machines or sophisticated equipment to reduce human labour, avoid drudgery and expand production to enable adequate supplies of agricultural produce in good quality and at low cost, vii. Computerisation: The application of device called computer to store and process information, for proper economic and managerial evaluation of farming and food industries; to control micro climate in green houses and livestock houses; and for food storage and processing. The development of the microprocessor has promoted the use of computational techniques in an expanding variety of applications to agriculture; in the areas of measurement and control (Clark et al., 1987).

The last three phases are collectively referred to as modernization. These are the three phases that well described modern agriculture, it is obvious that Nigerian agriculture and that of other developing countries is not yet modernized. Traditional farming with the use of crude or simple tools by small-scale farmers dominates the agricultural sector. Agriculture as a business under this circumstance seems to be stressful and unattractive to the youths. Modernization of agriculture is only possible under adequate investment in agriculture by private investors, government and non-governmental organizations. The financing of agriculture has to reach not only production and marketing but also the teaching, research and extension aspects.

Perspectives on Agriculture

Agriculture can be described from different dimensions. The views that consider agriculture as either art, science, business or tradition (Kwarteng and Towler, 1994; Cooper, 1990 and Castle et al, 1987) are all correct. All these perspectives exist in agriculture. There is art in agriculture. Skill development through experience and training is art. Farmers develop skills in their farming practices through experience. That explains why farming experience had been identified among the factors that determine farmers' decisions, output on farms and adoption of improved technologies (Ogungbile, Tabo & Rahman, 2002; Adesina and Baidu - Forson, 1995; Edwin, 1992). Skills are also acquired by farmers

through training given to them by extension agents. The extension agents also have to be skillful in relating to farmers. They need to understand farmers and their environment; in order to know the appropriate extension methods and materials to use in their services to farmers.

Agriculture is described as science for the fact that it is a body of knowledge about the structure and behaviour of the natural, physical, social and economic world which can be proved and improved through research. There is an enormous challenge that requires a significant commitment from- research scientists who anticipate the consequences of high population growth rate and low agricultural productivity. These circumstances have already created wide demand-supply gap for food crops in Nigeria (Rahman, 2003). One of the effective means of bridging the gap is to intensify agricultural research.

The reason why agriculture is considered as a business is that it contains investment opportunities for generating incomes to individuals and national economy. Improvement of agriculture along this perspectives requires the use of economic principles to solve its problems. This is how the study of agricultural economics emerged (Adegeye and Dittoh, 1985).

There is tradition in every aspect of crop and animal production. The methods and materials being used in agriculture in some instances can be associated to particular group of people as their customs or way of life. Nomadic life which is the movement-with animals from place to place is a tradition to Fulanis.

New **Developments in** Agriculture

Agriculture is entering a period of rapid innovation and adjustment if not a major change. There are several factors deriving from quite different sources which are the agents of change in agriculture. First, (here is the continued and intense application of science and technology, amongst the most important aspects of which are biotechnology and information technology. Secondly, there is a growing awareness of the unsustainability of many existing agricultural systems and the need to remedy this situation.

Biotechnology is a general term that pertains to the harnessing of organisms, living or dead cells and cell components to undertake specific processes with applications in fields as diverse as-, agriculture, medicine and pollution control (Chawla, 2001). The selection of plants and animals and their improvement that have occurred throughout prehistory and history all constitute a form of biotechnology. There is also evidence for the harnessing of other organisms, notably bacteria, in food_ and drink production. Today, modern biotechnology has a substantial and increasing role to play in the food industry.

The veritable explosion in information technology has contributed, and will continue to contribute, to the increasing efficiency of agriculture. The information technology is concerned with the use of resources, notably land and water resources. Its objectives are to optimize productivity by improving land-use practices to monitor the environmental impact of agriculture and agricultural practices and to reduce the environmental impact of some types of agricultural practices. Information technology can be employed in many aspects of food production, from the control of irrigation to the marketing of the produce.

Recommendations

In order to address the issues raised in this text, agriculture in developing countries has to be modernised. For this dream to be realized, the following efforts are required:

- i. Workshops should be organized for all the stakeholders in agriculture to adequately train and educate them on the kind of role they should play to boost youth interest in agriculture, ii. Teachers of agricultural science in secondary schools should try to make the subject interesting to their students.
- in. All aspects of new developments in agriculture should be included in the course curriculum for agriculture students in tertiary institutions.
- iv. Government should invest adequately in agriculture; especially in the areas of credit facilities to farmers, research, extension and training.

Conclusion

In spite of the important role played by agriculture in the national economy, youths show little or no interest in the sector. Agriculture looks unattractive to them because stakeholders are not playing their roles as expected. Students are not looking at agriculture as an interesting and lucrative profession. Teachers and lecturers are not developing appropriate teaching methods to promote students interest. Governments are not adequately financing agriculture. Modern technologies are appropriately developed and extended to farmers.

Agriculture in developed countries has entered a period of rapid development in the areas of commercialization, mechanization, application of biotechnology and information technology. Youths therefore, need to be well informed on different areas of modern agriculture in order to make agriculture attractive and thereby promoting their interest and participation in this important senatorial economy.

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