

Rice Farming in Afikpo, Ebonyi State, 1980-2015

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges and prospects of rice farming in Afikpo, Ebonyi State Nigeria, 1980-2015. Using primary and secondary sources, the study investigates the current state of rice farming in Afikpo, the challenges faced by rice farmers, and the strategies adopted by farmers to overcome these challenges. The findings reveal that rice farming in Afikpo is characterized by low yields, high production costs, and limited access to credit and market information. The study identifies a range of challenges faced by rice farmers, including poor soil quality, inadequate irrigation facilities, pests and diseases, and limited access to inputs and technology. However, the study also shows that rice farmers in Afikpo have developed a range of coping strategies, including intercropping, crop rotation, and the use of traditional knowledge to improve soil fertility. The study also highlights the impact of rice farming in Afikpo. The study observes that some government policies and initiatives have had positive effects, such as the distribution of improved seed varieties and the construction of irrigation facilities, others have been less successful, such as the provision of credit and the establishment of rice mills. Overall, this study provides insights into the challenges and opportunities facing rice farming in Afikpo, and suggests strategies for improving the productivity and sustainability of rice farming in Afikpo. The findings have important implications for policymakers and stakeholders involved in agricultural development in Nigeria, and contribute to the broader literature on smallholder agriculture and rural development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Rice, Economy, Afikpo, Agriculture, History

Introduction

Rice farming is an important agricultural activity in Nigeria, and it is one of the major staple foods in the country. Nigeria is the largest producer of rice in West Africa and the third-largest in Africa, after Egypt and Madagascar. Rice farming in Nigeria has a long history, dating back to the colonial era when the British established rice farms in the country⁵. However, the commercial production of rice in Nigeria started in the 1960s, after the country gained independence. The government established several irrigation projects and provided incentives to farmers to encourage rice production¹

The major rice-growing regions in Nigeria are the Niger Delta, the Sokoto-Rima Basin, the Jos Plateau, and the basins of the Benue, Kaduna, and Cross Rivers. The rice varieties grown in Nigeria include upland, lowland, and irrigated rice. Rice farming in Nigeria faces several challenges, including poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, poor access to credit, limited access to mechanization, and high post-harvest losses. The Nigerian government has taken several steps to address these challenges, including the establishment of the Presidential Initiative on Rice and the Anchor Borrowers' Programme, which provides credit to farmers and processors to boost rice production in the country²

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in rice production in Nigeria, and the country has reduced its dependence on rice imports. This has led to an increase in local rice consumption and the development of a thriving rice processing industry³.

The place of rice in any modern economy- developed and/or developing- can rarely be underemphasised. However, one of the most contending issues that has faced the economics of rice in Afikpo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State since 1980 is the fragmentation of data on its production, marketing, distribution and even consumption from the historical perspective. Thus, except for few relevant materials as preserved in the form of projects and theses in such disciplines as Crop Science, Agricultural Extension and Management, not much (except if there exist any) has been documented from the historical point of view. It's against this backdrop that this study delves into filling this lacuna.

The principal purpose of this paper therefore, is to:

- i. Investigate how the industry has, directly and indirectly, affected the living standard of the people, and
- ii. Consider the challenges that face the rice industry in an attempt to make useful recommendations that will likely improve yields.

The study, in terms of geography, covers the Afikpo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, which is made up of Ehugbo, Amasiri, Akpoha, and Unwana. The range of this study is very much narrowed down to the Afikpo rice farming activities.

In terms of period, the research covers from 1980, when Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the first executive President of Nigeria, launched the Green Revolution Programme for self-reliance in food crop production across Nigeria which included rice production, to 2015, when President Muhammadu Buhari's administration reviewed the Agricultural Transformation Agenda to Agricultural Promotion Programme to meet the agricultural needs of the country.⁹ On the whole, the study is concerned with rice production in the Afikpo Local Government Area as well as its effects on the economy of Afikpo, generally.

The study made use of two source materials namely primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include oral history. This involves in-depth interviews and the recording of personal testimonies delivered in oral form as well as archival sources. Secondary sources made use of published and unpublished works, newspapers, magazines and journals obtained from Ebonyi State Ministry of Agriculture, Agriculture Department Afikpo Local Government Area and the University of Nigeria Nsukka Library.

In the course of this study, several works, which have some relevance to the research, have been consulted. Extant literature exists on local rice production and agriculture, although in different dimensions. However, researchers are generally confronted with the problem of inadequate literature with respect to the challenges of local rice production and local rice farming centres like Afikpo. For instance, Onwuka N. Njoku, in his *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th and 21st Centuries*, assesses the pre-colonial economy of Nigeria, colonial and post-colonial economy. The volume is a deep study on Nigeria's local industries before the coming of the Europeans and their various performances. In the twelfth chapter of the work, where the author surveys the government's agricultural policies and program, he underlines that:

President Goodluck Jonathan's Transformation Agenda, 2011-2015 has agriculture as one of its areas of focus. This was made evident in the launch of the Agricultural Transformation Action Plan (ATAP) on 14 March, 2012. ATAP is targeted at increasing agricultural production efficiency and productivity along the value added chains of 12 selected key commodities; namely, cotton, cocoa, oil palm, maize, soya bean, onion, rice, livestock, fisheries, tomato and sorghum.⁴

The book does seem to have deemed it necessary to consider the challenges and how to plan strategically to achieve the set goal of Mr. President, especially concerning rice production.

Dehane E. Welsh's "*Rice Industry in Abakaliki Area of Eastern Nigeria*" is an unpublished Ph. D dissertation at Michigan State University. The D.E. Welsh argues that the introduction of Asian rice in the area was an accident.⁵ This is because until the 1940s, the colonial government in Nigeria did not deem it necessary for the local farmers to produce food crops for themselves. Rather, it was a design and result of the food crisis in Europe during the world wars that compelled the European colonialists

to encourage the production of food crops. Welsh observes that in 1932, rice was introduced in Abakaliki. In a similar vein, it was also introduced in Afikpo about the period.⁶

In his Ph. D dissertation entitled “*Rice in the Economy of Abakaliki, 1940-2011.*”, carried out at the Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria, Kingsley Agu analyses the worldwide history of rice starting from the Asian, American, African as well as the origin of rice in Abakaliki; K. Agu further argues on the marketing of rice in Abakaliki, institutional structures, challenges, impact and prospects of rice farming in Abakaliki.⁷ The volume is a very relevant reference for this work.

Despite the effort made by governmental and Non-governmental Organisations to stabilize rice farming in Nigeria, the country is yet to attain the standard level that is expected of her, more money needs to be invested in the farm if the said goal of self-sufficiency in rice production must be achieved.

Afikpo is a town located in the southeastern part of Nigeria, specifically in Ebonyi State. It is one of the oldest and most historic towns in the Igbo-speaking region of Nigeria⁸. Afikpo has a rich cultural heritage, with a history dating back to the pre-colonial era. The town is known for its traditional rulers, who have played important roles in the governance of the community over the centuries. The people of Afikpo are predominantly farmers and traders, and their economy is based on agriculture, trade, and commerce. They are known for their skilled craftsmanship in areas such as weaving, carving, and pottery. In the 19th century, Afikpo became an important center for European trade, particularly in palm oil and rubber.⁹ This led to the establishment of several European trading posts in the region, which greatly influenced the local economy and culture. During the colonial era, Afikpo was part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, and it played an important role in the struggle for independence.¹⁰ The town was a major center of the Nigerian nationalist movement, and many of its citizens were involved in the struggle for independence. Today, Afikpo is a bustling town with a population of over 100,000 people. It is known for its vibrant culture, rich history, and beautiful scenery, and it attracts visitors from all over the world.¹¹

Afikpo is well known for its rich cultural heritage and agricultural practices. Rice is one of the staple crops grown in Afikpo, and it has been cultivated in the region for generations. The origin of rice cultivation in Afikpo dates back to the pre-colonial era when the early settlers discovered the fertile soil and favorable climatic conditions in the region, which made it suitable for rice farming¹². The Afikpo people developed a unique rice cultivation system, which involved clearing the forest and using slash-and-burn techniques to prepare the land for farming. The cleared land was then flooded to create wetlands, which provided a suitable environment for rice cultivation¹³.

Over time, the Afikpo people developed various other techniques to improve their rice farming practices. They learned how to select the best rice varieties, prepare the soil, and control pests and diseases. They also developed irrigation techniques to ensure that their rice fields had a constant supply of water¹⁴.

Today, rice farming is still a major economic activity in Afikpo, with many farmers continuing to use traditional methods to cultivate their crops. However, modern agricultural practices and technologies have also been introduced, which have led to increased productivity and improved yields.¹⁵

Challenges of Rice Farming in Afikpo

Below is an analysis of the challenges of rice farming in Afikpo:

Lack of advanced machinery for farming and processing

Rice production in Afikpo is dominated by small-holder farmers using traditional manual methods that are fraught with drudgery and a lot of problems. Land preparation is done manually, with traditional hand implements such as cutlasses and hoes. This is usually very tedious and time-consuming, and limits the cultivable area.¹⁶ The various machines that are used for rice grinding and the method of parboiling and processing do not give birth to a clean and attractive production and this is what determines the marketing value of the goods. During the process of beating the rice which is done

manually, it mixes up with sand and stones, and it is obvious to say the least that this has been and continues to be a very big challenge that confronts rice farmers in Afikpo.¹⁷ Besides, the machines that are used in grinding the rice almost break all the seeds into smaller particles and this becomes a very big challenge as it does not give the rice a good appearance and it equally reduces the market value of the grain.¹⁸

Lack of Institutional Support for Rice Production

To attain self-sufficiency in rice production in Nigeria, effective and purposeful support systems should be established and should be seen to be working. Such support systems include (but are not limited to) functional credit facilities, improved and timely input delivery, provision of better market channels, development of irrigation facilities and active extension services¹⁹

Agricultural production in general has been affected by the ineffective use of loans acquired for specific purposes and by the non-repayment culture of the Nigerian farmers. Credit institutions like the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank (NACB), the People's Bank and Community Bank involved in loan disbursements to beneficiaries, should be more prudent and conversant with the cash requirements of individuals and groups of farmers seeking loans. In this way, the correct use of secure loans will contribute to the overall increase in rice production²⁰.

Input delivery systems, especially for fertilizer, have been faulty over the decades. Intermediaries have reaped benefits, which could have accrued to farmers, from the provision of fertilizers. The government's recent removal of subsidies on fertilizer is yet to have visible results on farmers' rice productivity. It has, however, at least eliminated intermediaries from fertilizer procurement and distribution.²¹ On the other hand, the sudden high cost of the commodity has encouraged farmers to seek alternative sources for rice nutrition. The overall effect of this on rice production in Afikpo will become clearer in the years ahead.²²

When rice imports were banned decades ago, rice farmers in Afikpo did not gain in the resultant rice production benefits that arose because intermediaries acquired them at the farmer's expense. This probably resulted from a lack of effective marketing channels²³. Effective marketing systems should be provided at the village markets through cooperative groups that fix appropriate prices for rice, which can also be offered to member farmers directly. In this way, more farmers will be involved in rice production and, by implication, national productivity will be increased as farmers get better prices for their rice because of the better marketing channels that have become available to them.²⁴

In recent years, the floodplains of several river basins have been developed for increased rice production through the construction of dams and canals. These facilities are designed to ensure year-round cropping of rice.²⁵ Active extension services are key to passing developed technologies on to rice farmers who are the end-users. In this regard, new agricultural technologies such as the 51 rice varieties developed by research, along with other management practices, should be disseminated effectively and rapidly by extension systems so that they can be adopted by farmers in Afikpo.²⁶ The agricultural development programs and the recent Research-Extension-Farmer Input-Linkage Systems (REFILS) of the National Agricultural Research Priority Project (NARP), which was introduced in 1995, have been instrumental in extending recently developed technologies to rural rice farmers in Nigeria. For instance, REFILS has implemented agricultural technologies and improved the delivery of research findings on rice farmers, with the active participation of national agricultural research institutes (NARIs), the Federal Agricultural Coordinating Unit (FACU) and State ministries of agriculture as well as Agriculture Departments across the local government areas²⁷. This led many farmers to adopt improved rice varieties with a resultant increase in output. However, the quality of rice that is produced is very much dependent on the variety that was planted by farmers. Many varieties of rice exist but the varieties of rice cultivated in Afikpo include Kporu-Kporu, Akujie and Mars²⁸

Lack of Infrastructure

Inadequate infrastructure, particularly bad roads are also amongst the challenges that face rice farming

in Afikpo. It is important to note that the state of the transport system in Afikpo can be said to be very much chaotic and deplorable. There is no tarred road in almost all the farming areas. The various roads that are found in the Afikpo farming centre are narrow, and this has caused a lot of problems for the farmers who most of the time undergo untold stress in evacuating their produce from the farms to other places where it would be parboiled, processed for consumption and sales as well.²⁹

Also, the problem of power supply in the country, which has turned out to be a "normal thing" going by the utterances of most Nigerians, is a huge challenge. This has been identified as a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the country's body fabric and goes a very long way in challenging sustainable development in the country. There is no regular power supply in Afikpo that would support the various rice mills and other power-using implements that would enhance effective and efficient production and processing to kick off. This single factor continues to be a very big problem for many as well as the economic sectors of the country.³⁰

Pest and Disease Management

Pests and diseases are important natural factors limiting rice production and, in severe cases, they account for 100 percent of crop losses. Such pest and disease challenges are inherent in upland rice which is mostly cultivated in Afikpo; leaf scald and neck blast need great attention, and recent efforts by rice breeders have resulted in the evolution of blast and ARGM-resistant rice varieties.³¹

Recommendations

Several challenges associated with rice farming in Afikpo have been identified and examined in the course of the study. Below are some recommendations:

Provision of Advanced Machines for Cultivation

At present, farming is carried out manually, according to the information received during field trips. Farmers in Afikpo make use of the traditional method of farming which involve the use of manual hoes and cutlasses for farming as well as harvesting, threshing and other related activities associated with rice farming in the area; it is only a few farmers have the finance to sponsor themselves and rent tractors for their farming activities.³² If the government is serious about the popular notion of making Nigeria self-sufficient in the production of certain crops like rice, machines should be made available to farmers to rent at a cheap rate and to help them to carry out their operations effectively for the growth and development of the country³³.

Provision of Agro-chemicals and Fertilizers

The rice plant is subjected to many pests and diseases that have the potency of reducing crop yields and quality. Examples of these pests and diseases include bacterial leaf blight, rice blast disease, insects, birds and stem borers among others. The management and control of organisms that cause harm to rice plants can be achieved through genetic, cultural, or chemical method or a combination of the three. Regardless of the methods of control, rice producers in Afikpo need to understand the disease cycle and the relationship between the pathogen and the rice life cycle to implement effective control.³⁴ The major pest that is known to attack rice is the stem borers, which are the larvae of moths. The moth lays their eggs from the junction of leaves to the stem and when hatched, the larvae bear into the stem and eat up the rice plant. This can be controlled by Gamelan "20" applied to irrigation water, 3 to 4 weeks after transplanting the rice³⁵.

The government on its part needs to provide these chemicals and devise a means by which farmers would be educated on the various ways chemicals can be applied for efficient use. The provision of agrochemicals, that is, herbicides, insecticides and fertilizer will encourage the emergence of a stable farm in the study area³⁶.

Articulated Government Policies

Most of the World Bank-assisted programmes have been a dismal failure because farmers make no input in their conception, planning and implementation. It is, therefore, high time the government went the way of professional advice or faced the grim reality of squandered hope of a better future under a

democratic dispensation. The time for lip and ad-hoc policies on agricultural development should be over. We are in the age of competitive advantage; government must come up with smallholder producer-friendly policies that will make the farmer produce good quality local rice to compete with foreign rice. The institutional support for agricultural development like credit facilities, cooperative organizations and insurance, leaves much room for improvement, and should be applied as compulsory government policies package³⁷.

Most of the food programs that are executed by the federal government and state ministries of agriculture which aim to consolidate and build the agricultural sector in Nigeria are always politically jeopardized. To put an end to this, there is need for every patriotic government that is truly committed to development in the country to set up a supervisory body to make sure that money mapped out for projects is effectively and efficiently utilized by the contractors of most projects. The solution to the problem is for Nigerians to reduce their level of rice consumption as the Director of Irrigation and Drainage, Federal Ministry of Water Resources, Mr. Joe Kwanashine has suggested; rather the solution is improving the quality of the local product.³⁸

The government is recommended to give loans or financial support to the farmers to enable them overcome their financial constraints and established agro-chemical industries that will manufacture fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides that will be sold at subsidized rate to the farmers. There is also a need to import agricultural implements and more mechanized equipment to facilitate rice farming and improve the quality of the grain.³⁹

Indigenous Solutions to Rice Farming in Afikpo

The indigenous people of Afikpo have developed several solutions to rice farming over the years, some of which include:

1. Irrigation systems: The people of Afikpo have developed various irrigation systems to ensure that their rice fields have adequate water supply. They use local materials like bamboo, wood, and clay to construct canals, dams, and reservoirs to collect and channel water to the rice fields⁴⁰
2. Crop rotation: The people of Afikpo practice crop rotation as a way of maintaining soil fertility and preventing pests and diseases. They alternate rice cultivation with other crops like beans, yams, and cassava, which have different nutrient requirements and help to maintain soil fertility.⁴¹
3. Organic farming: The people of Afikpo avoid the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides in their rice farming. Instead, they use organic manure and compost from animal waste and plant residues to maintain soil fertility and control pests and diseases.⁴²
4. Traditional methods of seed selection: The people of Afikpo have developed traditional methods of selecting and storing rice seeds. They select the best seeds from the previous harvest and store them in local granaries made of bamboo or wood to ensure that they are protected from pests and diseases.⁴³
5. Community-based farming: Rice farming in Afikpo is often done through community-based farming. The community comes together to clear the land, plant the rice, and harvest the crop. This approach ensures that everyone in the community benefits from the rice harvest and promotes social cohesion⁴⁴. These are some of the indigenous solutions to rice farming in Afikpo. These methods have been developed over generations and have proven to be effective in sustaining rice farming in the area.

Benefits of Afikpo Rice Farming Experience to the World

Rice production in Afikpo, and Nigeria as a whole, can have several benefits for the world. Some of these benefits include:

1. **Increased Food security:** Rice is a staple food for millions of people around the world, and increasing production in Afikpo can help to improve global food security. With a growing population and increasing demand for food, the world needs more rice to feed people, and increased production in Afikpo can help to meet this demand⁴⁶
2. **Environmental sustainability:** Rice production in Afikpo can be done in an environmentally sustainable way, using practices that conserve natural resources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These practices can serve as a model for other rice-growing areas around the world, helping to reduce the environmental impact of rice production and contributing to global efforts to address climate change⁴⁷.

3. Cultural diversity: Rice is an important part of the cultural heritage of many communities in Nigeria, including Afikpo. The preservation and promotion of traditional rice varieties and farming practices can help to maintain cultural diversity and promote social cohesion, which can be beneficial not only for Nigeria but also for the wider world.⁴⁸

Finally, Nigerians missed the fact that external food dependence is the most dangerous form of national security. Most Nigerians in authority and influence are more concerned with lining their pockets than with revamping the ailing sector; thus they compromise national interest for the sake of their own private gains. It is appalling to see that even though Nigeria is endowed with abundant agricultural resources capable of making her once more food secure and self-reliant, what is in existence is food insecurity and over reliance on foreign countries for food supply. If the government is can address the above issues, rice production in Afikpo and other parts of Nigeria will have the capacity to increase foreign exchanges and guarantee food security in Nigeria.⁴⁹

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