

Promoting Women Participation in Natural Rubber Production as an Economic Imperative in Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) in Nigeria

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Abstract: The Natural Rubber (NR) industry in Nigeria plays a significant role in providing employment, rural development and foreign exchange for the country. Its activities however, have been on a decline despite its potentials. To remedy this situation, government, at various times, had made efforts at developing the NR industry in Nigeria. In the process of planning these laudable programmes, policy makers often fail to recognize important contributions of women in agriculture, particularly in food and cash crops production. This paper examined past government efforts in boosting rubber production, current trends in rubber production, and failure of some of the government interventions due to exclusion of women participation in these programmes. The paper reviewed the past role of women in food and tree crops production in Nigeria and identified areas where women needed technological resources that would enhanced their active participation and contributions to NR development. These identified issues and strategies to address them are discussed.

[Omo-Ikerodah, E.E, Balogun, F.E, Giroh, D.Y, and Mesike, S.C. **Promoting Women Participation in Natural Rubber Production as an Economic Imperative in Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) in Nigeria.** World Rural Observations 2011;3(1):34-39]; ISSN: 1944-6543 (Print); ISSN: 1944-6551 (Online).
<http://www.sciencepub.net/rural>.

Key words: Women empowerment, Gender, Natural rubber, Agriculture, Development

1. Introduction

Natural rubber ranks third as a major foreign exchange earner in Nigeria after oil palm and cocoa. Rubber plantation development in Nigeria has been largely dependent on the activities of smallholders' farmers with a few large estates owners. Available data showed that about 75 to 85 percent of the total land area planted to rubber is owned by small holders while the remaining is owned by estate holders (Aigbekaen, et al., 2000, Okwu, et al., 2005). Nigeria is blessed with a varied ecology suitable for the cultivation of rubber. It is estimated that about 18 million hectares of land is suitable for the cultivation of natural rubber. The country has about 247,000 hectares of land under NR cultivation; however, only about 154,000 hectares are under tapping. On the international scene, NR enjoys competitive advantage over Synthetic Rubber (SR) in several areas especially in heat resistant manufactured products such as tyres, tubes, bearing, bushings and even as foundation support in earthquake prone areas of the world (IRRDB 2006). Global NR prices have continued to maintain their upward trend, fetching around US\$ 3.00/kg in early 2010 (IRSG 2010). With constraints of climate change, land and rapid industrialization in Asian countries, African rubber producing countries, especially Nigeria have the challenge to tap its vast land and human resources to meet the demand in the international market. The country's rubber industry has enormous potentials for sustainable growth and development. This paper

highlights the need to recognize the women's role in food and cash crops production in order to fully utilize the total work force to make greater contribution to NR development in Nigeria

2. NR Plantation Development in Nigeria

As a result of the improvement in the world market price of rubber, there has been a renewed interest in the revival of the rubber industry in Nigeria. Policy makers and implementers are conscious of the fact that sustainable cultivation of rubber over a long term by smallholders in Nigeria, will depend on resolution of several inherent problems and lingering limitations and this prompted them at various times to implement several policies and programmes. One of the government's efforts at developing rubber in 1986 involved a very restricted rubber planting and rehabilitation programme embarked upon in the defunct Bendel state which resulted in the establishment of 150 hectares of NR. The establishment of the National Accelerated Industrial Crop Production Programme (NAICPP) in 1994 made improved planting materials available to farmers at highly subsidized rate. Similarly, with Federal Government support initiative on tree crops, about 62,000 budded stumps capable of planting 124 hectares were distributed in some rubber growing states between 2004 and 2005.

As a result of growing concern for the industry which later in 2005 started to show new prospect following a rise in world

consumption/utilization of NR with corresponding rise in price in the world market, the government inaugurated the presidential initiative on rubber production, utilization and export. The overall objective of this initiative is to increase both local production and utilization of NR to a point where Nigeria can export and have enough for domestic use, generate rural employment, increase farmers income and standard of living as well as ensure food security. Among the several strategies for development of estates and smallholdings is the intercropping immature rubber trees with food crops like cassava, cowpea, maize, melon, plantain, pineapple and others crops before canopy closure. It is recognized that farmers need to continually cultivate arable crops to satisfy their food priorities and need for sustained income. None of these interventions was targeted to women as women contributions were not integrated into the programmes. It has been noted that gender inequality is a major obstacle to meeting the MDG target. According to FAO (1999), achieving the goals will be impossible without closing the gaps between women and men in terms of capacities, access to resources and opportunities. Participation and empowerment of women in rubber development need to be critically considered as women are the backbone of agricultural sector accounting for 70 percent of agricultural labour force and being responsible for 60 percent of agricultural production and 80 percent of food production (FAO 1999). Studies have shown that many agricultural programmes often fail to work as planned due to lack of integration of women contributions. For example, experience from the field in South Nigeria showed that cultivation of some of the rubber intercrops (specifically, cooking banana) was abandoned due to lack of knowledge of its processing. For rubber development in Nigeria to attain maximum success, women's role and contributions in agriculture needs to be considered. They need to be integrated into government programmes and policies in line with their abilities and needs.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals poses quite a challenge to the Government in Nigeria and particularly for its male-dominated agricultural sector. A number of agencies focus attention on women's issues, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs (established in 1985), the Ministry of Millennium Development Goals (established in 2001), and the National Council of Women's Societies (established in 1960). In 1985, Maryam Babangida - the wife of former Head of State established the program, called "A Better Life for Rural Women," encouraging the development of cooperative societies for women, whereby they could access funds from rural community banks. The

country's primary policy to promote gender equality is through gender mainstreaming. In Nigeria, gender mainstreaming has featured in numerous governments intervention programs. In addition, Nigeria has benefitted from the input of international organizations and programs focusing on women, including United Nations Development Fund for Women (NIFEM) and the World Bank-assisted Fadama Development Program. These interventions have benefited mostly the agricultural sector dedicated to food crops production and women education. More efforts in the improvement of women participation in tree crops production are needed.

3. Overview of Women Role in Food and Tree Crop Production in Nigeria

Women play greater role in food and cash crop production than is commonly recognized. In some cases, women earn income by producing or processing cash crops either alone, with their husbands or as wage laborers (FAO 1999). Udele (1981) and Umoh (2006) reported the involvement of women in all farm operations irrespective of labour requirement for planting, weeding and harvesting. In cocoa-food crop farming system, women do own cocoa land and manage cocoa farms, both with own labour, hired labour or on share cropping basis. They constitute a large labour force for specific tasks on male-managed cocoa farms. Estimate of family labour contributions on cocoa farms show that 56 percent of total labour required on cocoa farm in a year was provided by the farm family itself (Olayide and Olatunbosun 1972). Cocoa cultivation was distinctly gendered; men initiated cultivation and took responsibility for bush clearing, tree felling and bush burning, while women participated in their usual roles of weeding, harvesting and, transporting. More importantly, the planting of cocoa rested heavily on the labour of women and their children either as wives or hired workers (Akanji 1999).

In the oil palm production system, the role of men as managers of the production phase and women as managers of the processing phase has been severally highlighted and largely accepted. But recent involvement of men in various phases of mechanized processing and aspects of marketing are beginning to come to light (Mbanefor, 1995). Men did the initial harvesting as it was considered a taboo for women to climb palm trees in most places. The children and wives of the farmer, gather the cut bunches of palm fruits to a nearby collection place. Stripping of the fruit from bunches was usually done by men, women often assisted in the case of a small harvest. The rest of processing task is carried out mostly by women (Akanji 1999).

In kola nut production system, women dominate all aspects of the kola trade. The processing of kola nut is a laborious task which male producers refused to do. Hence they sold the kola nut to women who process and take them to market for sale (Akanji, 1999).

4. Role of Women in Rubber Production in Nigeria

Rubber production is a male dominated industry. (Banmeke and Omoregbee 2009) However, it has been demonstrated that women can be employed especially in tapping and nursery activities. Women are generally believed to be more adept in handling bud grafting, bud-bank maintenance, and tapping. In Nigeria, in the past, women's work in plantations was discouraged by social and cultural tenets. However, since 2005, taking example from operations in the Asian countries and with the advent of a woman as the Executive Director of Rubber Research Institute of Nigeria for the first time, women have been participating in all areas of rubber production. In natural rubber production system, Giroh et al., (2008), reported that women contributed about 6.6 percent of labour force in the tapping of natural rubber at the Rubber Research Institute of Nigeria, Benin City.

Giroh et al., (2010a) reported that women accounted for 60.61 percent labour force for the production of Hevea planting materials (skillful rubber budders). The involvement of women in rubber planting material production has also been reported by Idoko et al., (2007) who found out that most budders were married women who Socio- cultural factors might have restricted their chance of migrating to cities for jobs.

In smallholdings of rubber the participation of women in tapping is very low. Actually most women enter the field of tapping only when it is indispensable for keeping the standard of living of the family even at the minimum level. Also the educational standard of women tappers in Nigeria is very low as reported by Giroh et al (2006) that 91.67% of tappers had primary education. According to Giroh and Adebayo (2009) male tappers were found to be more efficient than female tappers. The reason being that female tappers were constrained by socio- cultural factors and the devotion of their times in household activities. On the contrary, in India, as far as tapping is concerned, performance of women tappers is better than that of men (Ushadevi and Jayachandran, 2001). However, most of the growers do not prefer women for tapping mainly due to the peculiar nature of the work. It is necessary to commence tapping early in the morning, as late tapping will reduce the exudation of latex. The

suitable time for tapping prescribed by most of the research Institutes is 5 A.M to 8 A.M. In spite of their best efforts, women tappers cannot reach the holdings within this time, because they have to attend to the household works before going for tapping. There are complaints on the part of the growers of the failure of women tappers in attending the work regularly. The burden of varieties of household engagements is a limitation in the supply side of women tappers.

General health condition of women tappers is very poor because of their continuous engagement in household works or tapping from dawn to dusk. Moreover, the gravity of occupational physical problems such as back pain, chest pain etc. is high among them.

Giroh et al., (2010b) analyzed the contribution of women in the production of Hevea planting materials and latex in the rubber belt of Nigeria and reported that engaging women in productive economic activities resulted in the generation of income with propensity to consume, save and expand the scope of production for food security.

It is believed that women involvement in rubber production will attract more participation of women in extension activities for dissemination and adoption to the womenfolk who are usually not benefiting from the male dominated extension programmes. Recent research focus is the encouragement of intercropping the immature rubber plantations with crops for maximum economic benefits to the rubber farmers. The use of yam bean, plantain, cooking banana as intercrops has created the need of processing for value addition. In this regard, women can now actively be involved as Women in Agriculture (WIA) for rubber extension activities. Women also intercrop food crops such as cassava, melon and maize with rubber in their husbands' plantation. In maintaining these intercrops, women contribute their labor in weeding.

Empirical evidence suggests gender inequality in employment and agricultural production. Men are more favoured than the women. Women are the primary labour force in Sub- Saharan Africa and their crucial roles in agricultural production has been widely reported in Nigeria (Boserup, 1970; Ogungbile et al., 1991; Egbugara, 1993; Fakoya and Oloruntoba, 2002), yet women farmers remain one of the most deprived groups in the country (Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN 1998).

5. Major societal constraints militating against women's contributions to household farming decision

The three major constraints militating against women contribution to household farming decisions are:

1. Techno-institutional constraint
2. Socio-personal constraint
3. Economic/financial constraint

Techno-institutional constraint: the specific constraining variables against women's contributions to household farming decision include: lack of extension programmes for women's development, lack of awareness and access to Non Governmental Organization programmes for women's development, low technical know-how of farm women in handling mechanized equipment on the farm, insufficient knowledge of credit sources to support farm work, lack of government policies to empower women farmers, and lack of adequate information and awareness of modern farming methods for women through relevant institutions. These suggest that institutional programmes – be they extension services, technical know-how, credit sources or information – do not consider women's special needs, both at the design and implementation stage. Women therefore lack adequate access and opportunities for relevant farm information and technical training. Rafferty (1988) reported that agricultural extension programmes and other supporting services have traditionally concentrated more on educating male farmers, and hence farm women still largely depended on their husbands for information on farm inputs and other resources necessary for farm decision making. This was further supported by Eboh and Ogbazi (1990), who concluded that women suffer from institutional neglect and planner's indifference towards their plight. For the farm women to be more relevant and productive in agriculture, an effective institutional framework should be developed through programmes that address their training needs.

socio-personal constraint: This include the misconceptions that women farmers do not have farming ideas, the general belief by society that farm women are subordinate to their male counterparts in farming, domestic violence between the women and their male counterparts, the low-self confidence of farm women in taking certain farming decisions, negligence on the part of women not to become involved in farm decision making, multiple domestic responsibilities of the women (e.g. cooking, taking care of homes, caring for household members etc), and a high number of male farmers in a rubber farming household. This constraint reveals attitudinal barriers against women in farming societies. Attitudinal barriers against women as reported by Amaechina (2002) are deeply rooted in patriarchal-based socialization where men are considered superior to women in socio-economic activities,

resulting in low women presence in decision making bodies.

Economic/financial constraint: This includes low/lack of financial contribution to farm operations by the women, lack of access to credit support groups like cooperatives. This agrees with the report of CIAS (2004) that women are faced with many constraints which range from lack of access to farm credit, loans, low level of income, to shortages of input

6. Recommended intervention strategies

Based on the realization that women are unable to participate equally with men in national development due to various constraints that hinder their full integration in development there is the need for special efforts to remove all constraints in order to facilitate women's equitable participation in rubber production. Greater emphasis should be placed in integrating women into rubber development programmes to facilitate their full participation in rubber development in Nigeria. Measures that could help include the following;

1. Development of effective institutional framework through programmes that address their training needs
2. Ensuring full participation of women in constraints analyses
3. Government policies should ensure equitable sharing in the acquisition of resources and services for men and women
4. Integrated production-to-consumption chain approach to training on cultivation methods for food crops compatible with rubber.
5. Women should be provided with credit facilities to purchase inputs required for cultivation of these rubber intercrops.
6. Integrate women in all sectors of NR development in accordance with their capabilities and needs-with special attention to employment of women in budding and nursery activities
7. Efforts in increasing women's access to agricultural education, extension and training, as human capital development has been shown to be a prerequisite for increasing Agricultural productivity. Therefore, women's extension needsshould be diagnose and identified by collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data and using the results from such data for planning and implementation of policies.
8. Women farmers should be given every opportunity to participate in the planning of their extension programme and the establishment of its objectives.
9. Women farmers in each village should be selected to act as contact farmers.

Women should be encouraged to form and join 10. women development/farm groups

11. There should be an increase in the number of female agents by recruiting more and providing them with access to training, resources and logistical support equal to that of male agents.

7. Conclusion

Plantation expansion plans of the major NR producing countries have obviously been developed based on the rising trend in rubber prices. Since the global supply of NR is forecast to fall behind its consumption up to 2020, the current boom in the NR market is expected to continue. For Nigeria to benefit optimally in this current boom she has to borrow a leaf from other emerging economies from the east by embracing best practices which will involve making full and best use of all human capital available. Cultural barriers have to be scaled and the potential contributions of women in the NR industry acknowledged and embraced. Women contribution in NR production in Nigeria presently is very low. This could be tremendously improved if they had equal access to essential resources and services, such as information, land, credit and training. Eliminating the obstacles that hamper women could be the key to achieving the Millenium Development Goals (MDG). But that can only be done if policies are shaped by better information about the difficulties experienced by women, and their aspirations, as well as by the participation of rural women themselves in shaping these policies.

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01/24/2011