RESULTS FROM THE FIELD

AFE BABALOLA UNIVERSITY ADO-EKITI (ABUAD)

IFAD Investing in rural people

Building Employment Opportunities for Rural Youth Through Applied Agricultural Research Annex I

TECHNICAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS TO EMPOWER YOUTH

ACRONYMS

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IITA	International Institute of Tropical Agriculture
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
RIA	Research and Impact Assessment Division
YEASA	Youth Employment in Agri-business and Sustainable Agriculture

Authors
Dr. Viviane Filippi, Hiba Nasrollah, Ashley Reynolds, Mr. Oluwasola Olanipekun

Agricultural Research for Development (AR4D) – Research Impact Assessment (RIA) Division, Strategy and Knowledge Department (SKD), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
Via Paolo di Dono, 44 00142 Roma, Italy Tel.: (+39) 0654591 Email: AR4D-EC@ifad.org
https://www.ifad.org https://www.ifad.org/en/agricultural-research-for-development

LESSONS LEARNED

The project employed an innovative approach in both recruitment and training which involved the use of ICT technology. The use of ICT was prominent in the project as it provided a lot of flexibility and reach. For example, during the COVID lockdown, instead of a total shut down of the project, management used video conferencing and online training to deliver lectures and interact with beneficiaries. However, this was also limiting for those rural youths who either did not have access to internet, a compatible phone, or lack of basic understanding of its usage. This is shown in the recruitment gap between rural and urban youths as most of the participants (52%) live in urban or peri-urban areas. This gap was reduced by IITA by going to the rural communities and doing a paper recruitment, although in smaller numbers.

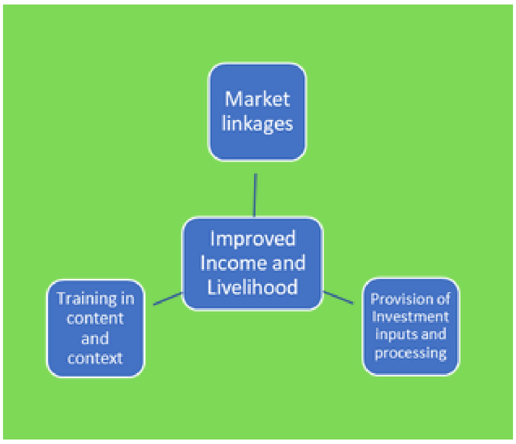
Twenty project beneficiaries were interviewed and all of them without exception said they would have benefited more from a longer duration of the training. The training was a maximum of three weeks which was considered not enough time to cover the technical parts in addition to soft skills and excel in entrepreneurship.

The monitoring unit was staffed with a very professional and knowledgeable M&E officer; however, he was overworked. He responded to all four partners, as well as the recruitment and development of over 1,000 participants. He was also recruited after the project documents had been approved. The project document surprisingly had no theory of change, so it was difficult to trace the project delivery pathway. It was also observed that the project does not have a separate M&E document, rather the M&E was subsumed into the programme document. This made it difficult to have a detailed M&E plan with indicator definitions and reporting timelines.

A grant of $500 was given to 864 participants. The grant was divided between purchase of equipment, as specified by the beneficiaries and verified by the project manager, and cash incentive for start-up or expansion. Given the rate of inflation in Nigeria, the grant was considered small. In fact, the limited leftover cash made it difficult for many of the grantees to leverage on this advantage. From the participants interviewed by the Evaluator, about 15 were able to get additional support from families and friends while one participant was able to get a microfinance loan. The challenge with family and friends financing a business in Nigeria is the share ownership nature. Family tends to claim ownership of such business which makes management a complex activity. On the other side, loan accessibility for agribusiness is a huge challenge in Nigeria mainly due to the seasonal nature of agricultural production, lack of insurance, high interest (mostly double-digit) and high collateral demand by lending facilities. Future projects should work with government partners and microfinance banks to ensure access to loans are facilitated and government can serve as guarantors of such loans while also negotiating single digit interest. Leverages can also be made to agri-financing that have been executed by the Africa Development Bank through the Ministry of Agriculture of Nigeria.

The model adopted by the project is clearly an improvement on learnings from past projects. The model includes specific crop and enterprise selection which use the comparative advantage of the partners, adequate training that include both classroom and field experience, and the provision of equipment and cash incentive. A more complete agri-based business model should include access to market as shown in Figure 1. Given that agricultural marketing is an important multiplier and a stimulant in the food production chain, the way marketing is taught and implemented should be more strategic and purposeful. Future projects should support beneficiaries with a broader range of learning opportunities and arrangements to facilitate market linkages, product assembling, storing, transporting, processing, grading of goods and financing of these activities. As stated previously, financing is central, and it would be extremely important and useful if beneficiaries could be provided with the opportunity to access a single digit loan.

Figure 1 **YEASA training business model**



Despite the good and hardworking staff of YEASA, the project was devoid of a business development office. This has two very important implications. The IITA project manager had to combine her function with the function of business development and helping the trainees to develop their business plan thus hindering the participants from enjoying the full service of such office, which would have also included more support for youths in the creation of market linkages.

A project of this magnitude and impact would have gained more ground if it wasn't for the lack of formal partnership with government either at state or at local level. Formalized agreements with state authorities are key to ensure actual continuity and government ownership for scaling up. Some positive involvement was observed by the government of Oyo and Ondo States in Nigeria, which provided land for farm activities, however, many beneficiaries had to buy their own farm yet due to the lack of formal agreements with the government. The project made efforts to promote policy engagement and partnership activities with state authorities in Nigeria but in possible future editions of YEASA, these linkages should be developed at an earlier stage and through a structured approach (i.e., spelt out responsibilities in a Memorandum of Understanding, MoU).

During the interview sessions with YEASA participants in the closing workshop, the Evaluator observed an age difference in business start-ups. Although participants were recruited from age 18 to 35 years, only participants older than 24 started their enterprise practices. This is not unusual in Nigeria. Most young people between the ages of 18 to 24 are still trying to decide exactly what they want out of life and so they experiment with all opportunities that comes their way. Indeed, two of them set out in Fisheries but handed over the enterprise to their parents and went back to school. The recruitment criteria should be refined to test the motivation of participants and then avoid inappropriate use of resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scale-up the project in both states and countries.

The recruitment age should be pushed up from 18 to 40 years old instead of 18 to 35. Also, the criteria should be a bit more stringent, such as having been in agriculture production or value addition before such that the training, grant, and mentoring could be used to scale up what they already started.

The grant should be increased, possibly to $1,000 with strict supervision. In speaking with the beneficiaries specializing in fabrication, it was revealed that their enterprise is highly profitable but they required heavy investment. Many of the fabricators depend on clients coming to ask for a particular product rather than being able to fabricate and sell. This makes them client dependent rather than operating a push-demand system.

The partnership structure should be expanded to include the government at the state level. Government should be encouraged to provide counterpart funding either in cash or in kind just like other partners; however, their participation in management should be limited. This will also make it possible to increase the number of participants, keeping in mind that an excessive number of participants might reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of the program.

The monitoring and evaluation function should be strengthened. Each partner should have an M&E officer who reports to the M&E central manager. Each of the M&E officers should be responsible for the daily monitoring of their partner activities, while the manager has an overall responsibility of the project performance. The M&E manager should not be recruited as an appendage to management, but rather a part of the project management who contributes to the development of project documents. It is recommended that the M&E function produces distinct M&E documents with links to the project main documents (e.g. theory of change, Logframe/result framework, indicators and its definitions and other important M&E issues).

The training curriculum should include a stronger marketing component and benefiting youth should be provided with market linkage opportunities. Both IITA and AfricaRice have plenty of experience in market creation that can be leveraged on. In addition, the curriculum should be enhanced by creating a business development manager position as part of the management staff. This way, beneficiaries will not only be able to penetrate market but also develop fundable proposals for micro financed banks.

While fish production is the most preferred enterprise among the beneficiaries, it is also among the areas which requires significant improvement. Participants expressed that they need more training in fingerling production, managing fish diseases, and hatchery management. In addition, future training should spend more time on the fish production cycle.

As innovative as the provision of grant is to the beneficiaries, enabling them to either start or expand their enterprises, the maximum benefit that could have been derived from this incentive was eroded because project designer did not take inflation rate into consideration. In future design, inflation should be factored into the grant nominal value through a mechanism to increase the amount of the grant provided to beneficiaries over time. This way, the project can avoid that the grants assigned in year 1 have a higher purchasing power than the grants assigned in the following project years.

IFAD
International Fund for Agricultural Development
Via Paolo di Dono, 44 - 00142 Rome, Italy
Tel: +39 06 54591 - Fax: +39 06 5043463
Email: ifad@ifad.org
www.ifad.org
facebook.com/ifad
instagram.com/ifadnews
linkedin.com/company/ifad
twitter.com/ifad
youtube.com/user/ifadTV

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