Gender Dimensions of Urban Commercial Farming in Lagos, Nigeria

The high rate of poverty among urban households and the growing responsibilities of women to assure household survival have caused urban agriculture to become a crucial activity in Lagos. However, inadequate access to land and water are obstacles to efficient and effective agricultural practices. In comparison to men, women are the worst affected.

Gender awareness in urban agriculture means understanding both men’s and women’s opportunities and constraints, providing greater scope and richness to solutions and avoiding a single conceptualisation of the needs, interests, and experiences of persons (Hovorka, 1998). This paper gives a situation analysis of the role gender plays in the urban agricultural context within metropolitan Lagos. It looks at the implications and also proffers possible solutions for policy options.

GENDER DIMENSIONS

More and more is now understood about the differences in urban food production by men and women in Nigeria. In Lagos, women have little access to productive resources yet they shoulder much responsibility in the provision of food and welfare for their households. Women dominate several urban agricultural activities especially those that have lower profit margins: they cultivate lower-value crops in low-quality areas.

Tackling these challenges requires appropriate, i.e. gender-sensitive and pro-urban-poor, policies. The result will not only create more jobs, but also empower women to meet up with their reproductive and productive responsibilities and achieve sustainable urbanisation. So far, past national and state programmes on poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment have not been able to achieve this.

Urban agriculture is a major livelihood asset for both men and women that enriches the nutritional and medicinal needs of the urban people. In a study carried out in Ibadan, Gbadegesin (1991) showed that agriculture offers income for many women in the city who lack proper education and training and formal employment. Urban agriculture plays an underestimated role in urban food security and a potential role in reducing dependency on urban food imports.

GENDER CHARACTERISTICS

A field study carried out by the authors in 2002 revealed that Lagos has a substantial number of farmers. The majority of the farmers are male (72%), but men and women dominate different sectors (see table). The situation refutes the common notion that women dominate urban agriculture, as is validated in cities like Nairobi, Kampala and others. Only 5% of the women respondents entered the activity more than five years ago. Most of the farmers are married (75%) and have children, but only few of the male farmers live with their families. The majority of the male farmers are seasonal migrants who come to Lagos to cultivate during certain periods of the year. Many of the women, though, reside in Lagos with their dependents (have between three and nine children and several relations) with little or no support from their spouses.

The men spend more time (twelve hours a day or even more) working on the farm than the women. This can be attributed to the fact that quite a number of them (the migrant farmers) live in detached and uncompleted buildings on the farmland. Only a few couples are land and house owners and live around the farm sites. It is also revealing to note that the majority of full-time women cultivators are widows or divorcees and thus heads of household who do not have any other sources of livelihood.

Women cultivate crops such as melon, waterleaf, spinach, tomatoes, hot pepper, maize and okra, while men more often cultivate lettuce, carrot, cucumber, aloe vera, green pepper and India spinach, which sell for higher prices, but are more demanding in terms of nurturing. Men farmers operate in all seasons harvesting some...
adoption of different farming methods, associated with adverse environmental impact and poor yields.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Urban agriculture has become a profitable enterprise which contributes to the improvement of the socio-economic status and the nutritional and medicinal well being of the people in Lagos. Women as well as men play a pivotal role in the practice and management of urban agriculture. Urban agriculture is a labour-intensive activity and land is the prime determinant. Because women are culturally responsible for the provision of food in most homes, in addition to caring for the well being of the entire household, adequate policies should aim at closing the gender gap in the access to land and facilities.

Enlightenment campaigns should make use of various media to educate and inform urban dwellers and landowners of the potentials of urban agriculture even for those who are already engaged in formal occupations. In this way, landowners would be more willing to lease unused or undeveloped land to farmers, thereby providing the farmers with more long-term security.

IMPLICATIONS

Urban farms, especially those headed by women, are often located in unsafe and insecure areas on the edges of the cities, which lack basic services such as water and electricity. Farmers sometimes have to transport water over a distance of between 100 and 300 metres especially during the dry season. Most women depend on the assistance of hired labour and family members (children), which makes the production expensive and unprofitable, and in addition affects the quantity of time the children can spend at school. Limited access to resources (land, funds, irrigation, and machinery) puts an extra burden on the women farmers, which in combination with direct and indirect pollution, theft and insecurity, makes farming a tedious and difficult task to venture into for women. With few exceptions, the volume of the production output is also higher among men than women.

Gender disparities in Lagos’ urban agriculture are such that more women hold relatively small, less fertile land that is less conducive for efficient farming practices. This has led to the adoption of different farming methods, associated with adverse environmental impact and poor yields.

REFERENCES


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Source: Field survey 2002

Gender characteristics of farmers (percentages)

Men spend more time working on the farm than the women.