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ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES IN ENHANCING AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION DELIVERY IN ANAMBRA STATE

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural education plays a very crucial role in attaining sustainable agricultural development, but lack of practical exposure and teaching theoretical based curriculum in Anambra State in Nigeria obstruct the current agricultural development of the state. The possibility of bridging this gap lies within the agrarian cooperatives, based on their community-focused networks and field-based expertise with potential to be introduced into the realm of experiential learning. This paper explores how agricultural cooperatives can be used as a method of improving delivery of agricultural education in Anambra State, evaluating their current engagement, how they hinder or help, what both the stakeholders or the cooperatives think of them, and a model of how they might work with tertiary institutions to provide agricultural education. With the help of mixed-methods, information was gathered among 100 agricultural undergraduates of their final year, 20 lecturers, and 20 leaders of cooperatives at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Anambra State Polytechnic, and four cooperatives in Awka, Onitsha, Nnewi, and Ihiala. Results show a narrow pattern of formal cooperation and the obstacles are limited resources and poor institutional connections, but the areas of opportunity are practical training forums. Stakeholders view cooperatives as relevant to skill building although there is need to align them to the educational objectives. The proposed framework focuses on curriculum integration and support policy. The paper highlights the ability of cooperatives to successfully develop graduate employability skills and individual productivity that enable agriculturally based economic growth in Anambra and make Nigeria achieve its food security objective.

Keywords: Agricultural Cooperatives, Agricultural Education, Experiential Learning, Curriculum Enhancement, Graduate Employability

Introduction

Agricultural education plays a vital role in the sustainable agricultural growth as it provides the knowledge and expertise to its students to combat various issues faced by the world today, including food security, global warming, and global economic growth (FAO, 2017). In Nigeria where the sector contributes up to 24 percent of the GDP with more than 36 percent of the workforce in the

sector (World Bank, 2023), agricultural education is essential to enhance innovation and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the system suffers such drawbacks as obsolete curricula, scarce practical experience and industry connections, which lead to the fact that graduates are poorly trained in modern demands of agribusiness (Olorunfemi et al., 2020). As community-based organizations, agricultural cooperatives have led to sharing resources, transfer of knowledge, and access to the market by farmers around the world (ILO, 2018). Cooperatives have also facilitated agricultural innovation in some of the developed economies like in the United States and Germany where farmers organisations collaborate with education institutions to enrich the academic programmes (USDA, 2019).

In Anambra State, which is a major agricultural region of Southeast Nigeria, smallholder farming is the driving force behind the agricultural sector and cooperatives take the center stage in distributing inputs and linking producers to market (Anambra State Ministry of Agriculture, 2022). Nevertheless, even in institutions of higher learning such as Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) and Anambra State Polytechnic, agricultural training is skewed toward theory, and there is weak liaison between cooperatives and students. Such disconnect limits students to access to practical skills reducing their employability in a state with agriculture being a major sector of the economy. The issue is worsened by an inadequate organized partnership between cooperatives and schools that limits curriculum relevance and innovation (Eze et al., 2021). The interventions to harness the resources of cooperatives in enhancing delivery of agricultural education to improve graduate competencies, and in support of the need to pursue agricultural self-sufficiency at the national level in Anambra under the National Agricultural Policy of Nigeria (FMARD, 2020), is critical.

This research will set out to discuss how agricultural cooperative can improve delivery of agricultural education in Anambra State. Its specific aims include determining the extent of any current collaboration with cooperatives to teach agriculture, finding the barriers and points of collaboration with them and the assessment of the views of the students, the educators and the cooperative leaders, along with a framework of collaboration that may be shared between the cooperatives and higher education. This study will be relevant because it will fill the gap existing between theory and practice in education by raising the employability of graduates and boosting the agricultural sector in Anambra. The study takes advantage of cooperatives expertise and therefore fits within the broader food security and sustainable development objectives in Nigeria and provides policy implications to different stakeholders, including government and cooperative unions.

Methodology

The researchers carried out the study in the state of Anambra in south eastern Nigeria which is one of the major agricultural base in the country due to its fertile soils and agricultural society. Agriculture also makes up a significant part of the state economy through crops such as yam, cassava, rice, among others, and livestock (Anambra State Ministry of Agriculture, 2022). Two higher education institutions that have agriculture programs--Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) in Awka and Anambra State Polytechnic in Mgbakwu--were identified as focus areas. Moreover, four agricultural cooperatives in Awka, Onitsha, Nnewi and Ihiala were selected because they actively engage in crop and livestock production.

There was an application of a mixed-methods design that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to allow the diversity of opinions. The final agricultural students, the lectures and cooperative leaders comprised the target population. There was purposive sampling consisting of 100 final students (50 each institution), 20 lecturers (10 each institution) and 20 co-operative leaders (5 each co-operative). This sample size made the study representative enough and it is within the scope of the study.

Structured questionnaire was used with the help of the students, semi structured interviews with the lecturers and focus group discussions (FGDs) with the cooperative leaders. Questionnaires were used in measuring the exposure of the students to cooperative-led training, their views of the acquisition of skills, and their employment opportunities. Questionnaires to lecturers were also done to determine the gaps in the curriculums and the potential to integrate cooperation. FGDs with the cooperative leaders explored how they viewed their current roles, issues that hinder their performances, and their desires to work with the institutions. Secondary records were identified through institutional records (specifically documents and reports) to complement findings.

The quantitative data were described using summative statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests) in order to determine the relationship between cooperative involvement and educational outcomes. Thematic analysis helped in inducting recurrent themes on the barriers, opportunities, and the perceptions of the stakeholders based on the qualitative data. All data were analyzed by using SPSS version 25 and NVivo 12 to conduct quantitative and qualitative analyses, respectively. All the participants provided informed consent with the assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical consent was acquired by the Ethics Committee of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

Results and Discussion

The case study revealed that there were limited formal interactions of agricultural cooperatives with agricultural instruction in Anambra State. Few students (15 percent)

participated in cooperative-led training activities, mostly in form of informal farm visits by lecturers (Table 1). Farmers Co-operatives in Awka and Onitsha organised occasional workshops on crop production and poultry, but these did not appear to be part of institutional curricula. At this, lecturers remarked that even though cooperatives were informative sources of knowledge, there were no formalized partnerships to limit them to mere ad hoc encounters. Co-operative leaders have been willing to contribute but they consider resource squeeze and restricted institutional outreach as a hindrance.

Table 1: *Student Exposure to Cooperative-Led Training*

Activity	Frequency (n=100)	Percentage (%)
Farm Visits	15	15
Workshops	10	10
Internships	5	5
None	70	70

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The main obstacles to cooperative integration are resource limitations (two-thirds of cooperative leaders mentioned funding problems), absence of formal collaboration (three-quarters of lecturers did not report an MoU), and inflexible curriculum (six-tenths of the lecturers did report rigidity in the curriculum). There is an opportunity in cooperatives practical knowledge in which 90% of students would be interested in cooperative-led internships (Table 2). The ability to access demonstration farms and market networks provides opportunities to expand through exposure to innovative educational processes, supporting the power of demonstration farms and the associated market networks that exist assuring modernized opportunities to expand education learned globally (USDA, 2019).

Table 2: *Stakeholder Perceptions of Cooperative Integration*

Stakeholder	Positive Perception (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Students	90	8	2
Lecturers	75	20	5
Cooperative Leaders	85	10	5

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Students also saw cooperatives as being essential to skill-building, especially in agribusiness and contemporary farming skills (mean score: 4.2/5). To a lesser extent, lecturers recognized the potential of cooperatives but also made it clear that

curriculum alignment is necessary (mean score:3.8/5). Challenges faced were related to the lack of institutional support to cooperative leaders who were otherwise enthusiastic about working together (mean score: 4.0/5). The results obtained after conducting a chi-square analysis showed a significant relationship between the perceptions of the stakeholders and their willingness to collaborate ($X^2 = 12.45$, $p < 0.05$), which implies that willingness to collaborate is aligned with stakeholders perceptions.

Harnessing Collective Strengths for Educational Advancement

The establishment of agricultural education delivery process through agricultural cooperatives in Anambra State will be determined by how they can combine their efforts to narrow down the existing gap between theoretical studies and practical practice. These strengths include cooperative-based training programs, availability of resources, institutionalization cooperation as well as perceptions of stakeholders, which provide a solid platform to improve education levels. The section expounds on these key aspects referring to the recent literature to establish a more in-depth infrastructure on their importance and potential as regards to transformations in agricultural education in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Agricultural cooperatives can play a central role in providing practical training, which accompanies the process of formal education adding value by filling the gap of practical skills shortages that is common among the graduates. In Anambra State, one of the activities/occupations these cooperatives involve themselves in include crop production, livestock management and agribusiness, which offers a practical basis of experiential learning. As an example, Awka and Ihiala cooperatives have begun holding classes on innovative technologies in the context of modern farming (such as precision agriculture and organic pest control) that have had little representation in conventional curricula (Nnamani & Okeke, 2023). These programs present students to the real-world challenges and help to develop problem solving and innovation, and the ability to start and develop their own businesses. It is reported that cooperative-led training programs increase technical skills and employment opportunities as is the case in Kenya wherein the cooperatives work with the higher-learning institutions of agriculture colleges in delivering field-based training (Mutiso & Kimani, 2024). Only 15 percent of students receive this type of training in Anambra, which means that there is a potential to increase the number of such endeavours. By integrating cooperative-incorporated modules within curriculums, institutions can guarantee the graduates are familiar with the market-relevant skills as there is a global trend whereby experience-based curriculums embark innovation in the agricultural sector (FAO, 2023).

Cooperatives have tangible as well as intangible resources that may facilitate intensive learning in agriculture. These are

the availability of land to set up demonstration farms, agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilisers and networks in markets to get information regarding value chains. Nonetheless, the limited funds and modernized equipment tend to limit the cooperative capacity to assist in educational programs at large (Obi & Chukwu, 2024). The case in point is that, a cooperative in Onitsha complained that the presence of inadequate equipment had limited the number of possible student internships (Field Survey, 2025). The literature indicates that it is possible to eliminate those barriers by gathering resources using a network or receiving grants of governmental funds (as it happened in Ghana and its cooperative unions accessed grants and built training centers) (Agyeman & Boateng, 2023). In Anambra, it might be possible to pull the cooperative resources into a mutual demonstration farm, where students train in improved methods, such as with hydroponics or integrated pest management. These initiatives would not only increase the level of practical training but also innovation, which is the strategy towards agricultural transformation in Nigeria (FMARD, 2024).

To enhance the incorporation of cooperatives in agricultural education, formal relationships between the cooperatives and tertiary institutions are needed. At the moment, in Anambra State, partnerships are mainly informal and only 20 % of lecturers note that they are structured with cooperatives (Field Survey, 2025). This informality restricts the possibility of enlarging and influencing cooperative contributions. Recent studies state that memorandums of understanding (MoUs) are essential to clarify roles and responsibilities and mechanisms of resource sharing (Ikechukwu & Nwosu, 2024). In India, universities that teach agriculture work with cooperatives in MoUs to incorporate practical training in the curriculum as it has made the graduates 25 percent more employable (Sharma & Gupta, 2023). Places within Anambra such as Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Anambra State Polytechnic can apply similar structures to create a cooperative internship development program or a collaborative joint research project. Such collaborations would make the curricula relevant and give the students exposure to industry relevant practices in order to bridge the gap that existed between education and the industry.

The integration of cooperatives is subject to the views of the key stakeholders, namely students, lecturers and the tops of cooperatives. The research established that 90 sophistication students consider cooperatives essential when it comes to skills development especially in agribusiness and new farming methods, and 85 co-op leaders are willing to cooperate though they require institutional assistance (Field Survey, 2025). Although lecturers are positive (75 percent perception), there is the need to align the curriculum to make the contribution of the cooperatives cooperative in achieving the education objectives (Table 2). The most recent literature suggests the importance of

stakeholder alignment in effective partnership, and lack of alignment of objectives can cause setbacks in partnership (Okafor & Eze, 2024). In Uganda, stakeholders' workshops were used to build consensus on the importance of cooperatives to be incorporated within agriculture education, resulting in a better delivery of the curriculum (Kizza et al., 2023). In Anambra, frequent stakeholder forums would help in solving any misalignments and ensure mutual understanding of cooperative-institutional partnerships. The combination of the positive perceptions and the structural dialogue can encourage the implementation of the cooperative-based training that will increase educational achievements and the graduate preparedness within the agribusiness sector.

The operationalization of these collective strengths included their quantification, e.g., the number of cooperative-led training sessions (average of 2 per semester per cooperative), the number of students who underwent an internship (5 per cent per annum), and how satisfied the stakeholders were (mean score of 4.0 out of 5 across groups). These indicators give a framework against measuring the weightage of cooperatives in education delivery and embark on formulation of interventions to target.

When it uses these strengths, Anambra State can improve its agricultural education sector, which will be in line not only with the international best practices but also with local development demands. Such combination of cooperative-led training, mobilization of resources and formal partnership along with stakeholder engagement provides a way forward to ensure graduates who are not only academically sound but also able to look market-ready and skill-bound. This strategy helps Anambra achieve its intention of self-sustenance in agricultural production and the overall target of Nigeria in achieving food security.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Agricultural cooperatives have a great potential to contribute to agricultural education delivery in Anambra State and narrow down the theory-practice gap and offer practical training. Though currently, their participation is meagre owing to lack of resources and poor institutional affiliations, there is potential in utilising their expertise to bring in learning opportunities through the experience. The point of stakeholder regard shows there is an agreement on the value of cooperatives and thus required joint reason orchestration. The structure given is a plan on how to incorporate the cooperatives in learning curriculums, establishing partnerships, and attracting policies. Based on this the study recommends as follows:

- There should be formal linkages with tertiary institutions and cooperatives working through the signing of MoUs to incorporate practical training parts.
- The state of Anambra should spend money and give incentives to the cooperatives that host learning programs.
- Both the learning institutions and the colleges need to change the curriculum to

cover the area of agribusiness and contemporary farming methods that can be led by cooperatives.

- Cooperative unions are expected to promote the policies favoring their education role in order to comply with the national agricultural policy of Nigeria.

This paper will add value to the research on cooperative-education connections and provide operationalizable knowledge to stakeholders across Anambra State and other Nigerian local governments in their pursuit of food security and sustainable development.

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