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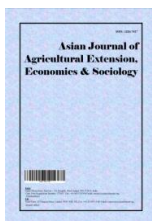
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Effect of Covid-19 Lockdown on Farmers in Rivers State, Nigeria: Positive Perspective

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The fight against Covid-19 has so far become tight with more strict policies to curtail the spread of the virus across the state and Nigeria at large. This review was done with the sole aim of determining the effect of Coronavirus lockdown on few active farmers in Rivers State, Nigeria as a state which less attention is paid to farmers and farming because of crude oil and its exploration. 20 farmers and 10 market women were interviewed in few villages and markets (Rumuokoro, Slaughter, Oil-Mill) between April and May, 2020 in Rivers state respectively, which showed that few active farmers were positively affected as they sold out their produce with high profit and low to zero loss.

Keywords: Covid-19; lockdown; Rivers State; active farmers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rivers state was created 1967 out of then Eastern region. As it is now, The State has over 6 million people spread in 23 Local Government

[1]. According to [2], the state produces 100 percent of gas supply and about 60 percent of crude oil supplies in Nigeria, Its rich in Agricultural potentials, and was the major source of palm produce in Nigeria before oil boom [2],

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and this has shifted everyone's attention from agriculture as its income is meager compare to that of oil. The state is divided into main land and riverine areas and has only one urban city, Port Hacourt, with a high level of urban employment and intense rural poverty amidst a high concentration of petroleum and oil production activities [3].

Nigeria is listed by Food and Agriculture Organization among nations that are at the moment technically unable to meet their food needs from agricultural production at low levels of inputs and appear likely to remain so even at intermediate levels of inputs between 2011 and 2025 [4,5], and about 70 percent of Nigeria population depend on agriculture and its related activities for the provision of their basic needs and they may react and interpret commercial agriculture in different ways [6]. It becomes a thing of concern when about 70% of Nigeria population who depend on agriculture are restricted or stopped from going out as result of this pandemic disease and left to depend on the few active farmers who live in core rural areas to feed them.

The core objective of this study is to determine the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown on the few active farmers in Rivers state as an oil hub state in which oil has taken over agricultural activities, and environmental degradation has led to a substantial decline in local food production [7].

2. LOCK DOWN IN RIVERS STATE

Since the outbreak of Nole coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic disease, many countries have shut down its economic activities and ordered their citizens to stay at home and observe precautionary measures as advised by World Health organization to curtail the spread of the pandemic disease.

It became dawn on Nigerians that we are not exception to the pandemic disease when first case was recorded at Lagos state, Nigeria on 27th February, 2020 and it became obvious that the disease is not currently in our locality but imported by aliens visiting the country, and later from our brothers and sisters who were returning from countries highly infected by the disease or where its thriving.

On the above premise, The Government of Rivers state knowing that the state is highly vulnerable as the state is an oil hub state where

people from different part of the world visit day in and day out, and the only state in south-south and south-east extraction of the country its international airport is operational, ordered the complete shutdown of airport operations (domestic and international wing) on 25th march, 2020 following the federal government shut down of the international wing of the Port Hacourt airport on 20th march that took effect from 21st march, 2020 [8].

The state government went further to order the closure of all the Rivers state surrounding land borders on the same 25th of march, 2020 and shut down of all major and minor markets in the state till further notice on 26th of march, 2020 [9].

According to [9], Rivers state recorded her first case of Covid-19 on 26th March 2020 which is a young model who visited epicenter countries (Italy, France, Greece) for covid-19 before returning to Nigeria and her second case was a retiree who returned from United Kingdom and now the state have total of twenty-one (21) cases with two (2) death and four (4) discharged [10].

The Rivers state Government has further tightened the state borders as the cases increases irrespective of the measures adopted earlier to curtail the spread of the virus and further issued total lockdown in two local Government "Obio/Akpor and Port Hacourt Local Government" on 4th May 2020 to take effect from 7th May till further notice [11]. The two totally locked local Government is the capital of Rivers state.

3. AGRICULTURE IN RIVERS STATE

Rivers state people were majorly known as farmers, which was their major occupation before the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in 1951; which implies that agriculture was the main source of survival to everyone in the state then [12].

According to the sample survey carried out by the federal ministry of agriculture and natural resources, about 40% of the rural inhabitant were committed to farming in 1983 and 39% (760,000 hectares) of the state total land mass particularly in the upland area is suitable for cultivation [13].

Major cash crops produced are oil palm products, rubber, cocoyam, rafia palm, jute and other crops grown for food such as vegetables, mango, pepper, banana, plantain, cassava etc; But at the

discovery of the oil in commercial quantity shifted the attention of the masses and even the government to oil and this made agricultural activities to suffer set back, and the farmers were not really encouraged as they preferred the imported agricultural produce from neighbouring state over the native produce [13].

According [14], Rivers state is one of the oil-producing and agro-ecological area in Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, a region with abundant natural resources including good weather and fertile land for agriculture.

Although the level of agricultural production is very low given abundant of resources endowment, it is the largest oil producing zone in the country [14]. Food scarcity worsened as a result of the oil boom which gave rise to the shift of labour from the agricultural sector [15].

This is to say that, production of agricultural produce in state is very low to meet the need and demands of the occupants of above 6 Million [16,17,18] in this total shut down market and border closure.

4. EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON AGRICULTURE

The shutdown of markets and border closure has affected active few farmers in the state positively as the information gathered from the farmers and market women have it that agricultural produces prices have been inflated so high such as

- A. 50 kg of Garri usually N18,000 is now N25,000 and still increasing and basin usually sold for N2000-2500 depending on its quality now go for N6000 and above.
- B. Tomatoes usually 5-8 fruits for N200 is now 3-4 fruits for N200.
- C. Plantain usually for about six fingers for N400 is now 3-4 fingers for 400 and so has its effect on other agricultural produce.

This has even lead to farmers harvesting premature produces for sales, and all these unexpected high profit will lead to food crisis in the later days as the farmers are harvesting without sufficient cultivation/planting as they are no laborers to hire as result of stay at home to curtail the spread of the pandemic disease Coronavirus and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported before the outbreak of Coronavirus in Nigeria that about seven million Nigerians will experience food shortage between

June and August, this year (2020), as 16 northern states and federal capital territories (FCT) have been identified to face food and nutrition crisis [19]. This implies that states which cannot produce sufficient food to feed its resident will equally face this crisis plus the impact of the spread of the pandemic disease on the citizens who believe on working to earn money to buy food and the farmers who cannot cultivate enough as result of lack of laborers.

5. CONCLUSION

Though, its too early to conclude the effect of the lockdown on farmers, but base on the above information and first hand encounter in the market, I would say that the COVID-19 lockdown has affected the active few farmers in the state positively as they have sold off a lot of their produce with very high profit as not expected and it also averted regular waste of locally produced agricultural produce as a result of the consumers regular attitude of preferring the imported produce from the neighbouring state over the native produce but negatively affecting consumers as they are few farmers working to satisfy the demand /need of the many consumers.

Now, consumers have little or no option of preferring the imported produce over the native produce and the farmers are the Price determinant pending on the force of demand.

This lockdown has further revealed that Agriculture have not gotten a required attention in Rivers state since the oil boom, Irrespective of the government speeches over the need for diversification of economy in Agriculture.

I recommend the Government start investing in farming and encourage rural farmers with funds and inputs to ensure availability of food during post covid-19 era and to also ameliorate the forecast of food scarcity by FAO this year 2020 plus the sudden distortion the pandemic diseases has caused to agricultural production sector.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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