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Impact of USAID-Funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services on the Livelihoods and Empowerment of Women Farmers in Benue and Niger States, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of the USAID-funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services on the livelihoods and empowerment of women farmers in Benue and Niger States, Nigeria. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, employing survey questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from 342 purposively selected women farmers who were direct beneficiaries of the USAID intervention across Lapai, Paikoro, Wushishi, Otukpo, Gboko, and Ushongo Local Government Areas. Data generated were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques and thematic interpretation. Findings indicated that the majority of women farmers in the study areas derived considerable benefits from the USAID project. These included access to agricultural loans, distribution of free farm inputs such as seedlings and fertilizers, and targeted training by extension officers on improved agricultural technologies and management practices. The intervention not only enhanced the farmers' productive capacities and agricultural output but also contributed to increased income, decision-making confidence, and overall empowerment. The study concluded that the USAID-funded extension and advisory services exerted a transformative influence on women's agricultural livelihoods in the participating communities, thereby strengthening household food security and promoting gender-inclusive rural development. It recommended that relevant stakeholders particularly government agencies, development partners, and non-governmental organizations should deepen women's integration into agricultural value chains through market expansion, value addition, and continuous capacity enhancement.

Keywords: Agricultural Extension, Empowerment, Women Farmers, Livelihoods, Rural Development

Introduction

Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services (AEAS) are fundamental to rural development, particularly in Africa, where they serve as a vital link between agricultural theories and practical applications [1]. These services enhance farmers' capacities, strengthen productivity, and promote sustainability, especially among rural farming populations [2]. Increasingly, development practitioners recognize the importance of making AEAS more inclusive, particularly in addressing the long-standing marginalization of women in agricultural practices [3].

Women constitute a significant proportion of Nigeria's agricultural workforce, contributing an estimated 60 to 80 percent of food production. Despite this, they continue to face systemic and cultural barriers to land ownership, access to credit, markets, and agricultural information [4]. Such gender disparities not only constrain women's agricultural productivity but also exacerbate rural poverty and food insecurity [5]. To address these inequalities, gender-responsive agricultural interventions have become a central focus of development approaches, including those supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

USAID has implemented several agricultural development interventions in Nigeria aimed at increasing farm yields, enhancing food security, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. These interventions prioritize women's empowerment as a critical outcome, reflecting USAID's commitment to gender equality and inclusive economic growth [6]. Many of these initiatives adopt participatory approaches such as women-led extension platforms designed to strengthen women's access to agricultural information, productive inputs, decision-making spaces, and income-generating opportunities [7].

Benue and Niger States in North-Central Nigeria, both renowned for their substantial agricultural activities, have been focal points for USAID-funded programmes. Benue State, for instance, is dominated by women farmers who actively participate in crop and livestock production [8]. Conversely, Niger State has witnessed the implementation of climate-smart and women-inclusive extension models aimed at improving rural livelihoods [9]. Although existing evidence suggests that women have benefited from USAID interventions, the scope, nature, and sustainability of these impacts remain underexplored, particularly at the state and local levels.



This study, therefore, evaluates the effects of USAID-funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services on the livelihoods and empowerment of women farmers in Benue and Niger States, North-Central Nigeria. It seeks to provide an evidence-based understanding of the effectiveness of USAID and other donor-supported extension services in promoting gender equity and agricultural transformation. The findings of the study are expected to inform and strengthen policy and programming efforts aimed at enhancing the responsiveness of agricultural interventions targeted at women farmers.

Agricultural Extension

Agricultural extension remains fundamental to rural development as it facilitates the communication of knowledge, innovations, and best practices to farmers. It encompasses a range of knowledge-driven and service-oriented activities aimed at strengthening farmers' capacities, empowering rural communities, and improving decision-making processes in agricultural practices [10].

Contemporary agricultural extension practices have evolved beyond the traditional top-down model of information dissemination, in which extension agents merely transmit prescriptive messages to farmers. The modern paradigm embraces a participatory communication approach that aligns with the Agricultural Innovation Systems (AIS) framework, which promotes collaboration among diverse stakeholders—including research institutions, farmers, private sector actors, and policymakers—in co-creating and applying agricultural knowledge [11]. This transition represents a shift from information transmission to facilitation, collaboration, and adaptive learning among farmers and key stakeholders.

Furthermore, modern agricultural extension systems increasingly address cross-cutting issues such as climate change adaptation, gender equity, and youth engagement. These emerging priorities require extension services to go beyond the dissemination of technical information, toward fostering knowledge capital, enhancing market access, and promoting behavioural change. Consequently, there is a growing demand for gender-sensitive extension personnel capable of addressing the specific needs of women farmers and ensuring equitable access to resources, training, and decision-making opportunities [10].

Livelihoods

The concept of livelihoods has become central to contemporary development discourse, particularly in efforts to understand poverty, vulnerability, and rural resilience. A livelihood is broadly defined as the means through which individuals or households secure the necessities of life, encompassing their capabilities, assets both tangible and intangible and activities required to sustain well-being [12]. It extends beyond mere income generation to include access to food, shelter, education, health care, and social protection, thereby representing a multidimensional and dynamic construct.

The livelihood approach is especially relevant in rural contexts, where households often engage in diverse activities such as farming, petty trading, remittance

utilization, and off-farm employment to mitigate risks and enhance resilience [13]. It also highlights the influence of external interventions such as agricultural extension services and development programmes in shaping livelihood opportunities and constraints. Importantly, gender remains a critical dimension of livelihood analysis, as men and women frequently encounter differentiated access to assets, resources, and opportunities, with significant implications for intra-household relations, empowerment, and poverty outcomes.

Women Empowerment

Women and gender scholars argue that empowerment must extend beyond access to resources, to encompass women's ability to exercise power and control over their lives, as well as to participate equally in decision-making processes that affect them an outcome often referred to as *women's empowerment*. This empowerment entails transformation at both the individual and collective levels: women must develop the capacity to make autonomous decisions while also challenging and altering the broader systems of oppression that perpetuate gender inequality [14]. Thus, women's empowerment should not be confined to improving access to resources and opportunities; it must also strengthen women's agency to confront and transform discriminatory gender norms and power structures that sustain inequities [15].

USAID Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project

The *Feed the Future Nigeria Agribusiness Project* is a five-year initiative funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to enhance the agricultural business environment and stimulate private sector investment in Nigeria's agriculture sector. The project seeks to integrate thousands of smallholder farmers into profitable value chains for rice, maize, soybean, aquaculture, and cowpea, thereby empowering them to become competitive commercial actors. It was implemented across eleven states Kaduna, Niger, Kebbi, Benue, Delta, Ebonyi, and Cross River among others covering approximately 2.5 million hectares of farmland and supporting over 400,000 farmers. Gender equality constitutes a central pillar of the project, anchored on a robust gender mainstreaming framework. The initiative is guided by the *Gender and Youth Integration Framework (GYIF)*, which recognizes the persistent disparities between men and women in Nigeria's agricultural sector. It adopts a *Gender and Youth Integration Strategy* as an operational tool to promote women's and youths' participation in agricultural value chains, while addressing inequalities in access to, control over, and benefits derived from financial services and investment opportunities. To realize its gender mainstreaming objectives, the project conducted regular training sessions for both state and non-state actors, focusing on bridging policy and institutional gaps. It also employed participatory communication approaches including social media engagement, group meetings, advocacy, and awareness campaigns to educate and mobilize women for active participation in agribusiness activities [16].

USAID-Funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services



An evaluation report [17] revealed that USAID's *Feed the Future* programmes in East Africa significantly enhanced farmers' knowledge of climate-smart agricultural practices through strengthened extension services. The interventions led to a 22% increase in maize yields among participating farmers. The report further recommended the adoption of participatory approaches that actively engage farmers, extension agents, and other key stakeholders in the design and implementation of extension activities.

Similarly, a study [18] on the gender impacts of USAID-supported extension initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa found that, although both male and female farmers benefited from such interventions, women continued to face structural barriers including limited access to land, credit, and social networks that constrained their participation and benefits. In the same vein, another study [19] examining the USAID-funded *MARKETS II* project reported notable improvements in productivity and income levels among rice and cassava farmers, with a particularly positive effect on women's economic empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Feminist Communication Theory as its analytical framework. Since its emergence in the 1970s, the theory has evolved to interrogate how gender shapes communication practices and to explore the social, cultural, and political implications of these interactions. Scholars such as [20] argue that the theory challenges systems of oppression and discrimination through critical analysis, advocacy, and transformative communication. Central to its framework is the recognition of diverse and inclusive voices as essential to advancing the empowerment of marginalized groups particularly women by expanding opportunities for participation, dialogue, and self-expression.

In this study, Feminist Communication Theory provides a lens for analyzing how communication processes within the USAID project facilitate women's participation, agency, and voice in agricultural activities. It further enables an exploration of how women's communicative experiences and empowerment are shaped not only by gender but also by intersecting factors such as ethnicity,

age, and socio-economic status within the Nigerian agribusiness context. By situating women's engagement in the project within this theoretical framework, the study underscores the role of communication as both a catalyst for empowerment and a mechanism for dismantling structural inequalities in rural agricultural communities.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the impact of USAID-funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services on the livelihoods and empowerment of women farmers in Benue and Niger States, Nigeria.

A sample size of 396 respondents was determined from a study population of 44,900 women farmers using the Taro Yamane formula. For the quantitative component, a structured survey was administered to 345 randomly selected women farmers. These respondents were drawn from six communities in each of the three Local Governments: Lapai, Paikoro, and Wushishi in Niger State; and Otukpo, Gboko, and Ushongo in Benue State, with 57 participants per community. All participants were beneficiaries of USAID-supported agricultural extension and advisory services.

To complement the survey data, the study employed qualitative methods through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A total of 54 women farmers nine purposively selected participants from each of the six communities were engaged in FGDs. These participants were selected based on their active involvement in the USAID extension project, to elicit detailed experiential insights.

The survey questionnaire and FGD guide were both structured in alignment with the study's research objectives, ensuring thematic coherence and comprehensive data collection. This triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a robust, multidimensional analysis of the impact of USAID-funded agricultural extension and advisory services on the livelihoods and empowerment of rural women farmers in the study areas.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Benefits Derived from USAID Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	3	0.87
Female	339	99.12
Other	-	0

Have you received any support, training or services from Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services?

Yes	342	100
No	-	0

Types of Benefit Derived (Increased Knowledge of modern farming practices)

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	100	29.24
Significantly	242	70.7

**Increased crop yield or productivity**

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	125	36.55
Significantly	217	63.45

Increased house hold income

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	50	14.62
Significantly	292	84.38

Better access to farming inputs (seeds fertilizers)

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	140	40.94
Significantly	202	59.01

Improved decision making in farming activities

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	-	0
Significantly	432	100

Enhanced access to markets

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	110	32.16
Significantly	232	67.84

Improved food security at household level

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	170	49.71
Significantly	172	50.58

Increased access to credit or financial services

Not at	-	0
Slightly	190	55.56
Moderately	152	44.44
Significantly	-	0

Better record-keeping and farm management practices

Not at	-	0
Slightly	-	0
Moderately	168	49.12
Significantly	174	50.88

In your opinion who benefited more from USAID Agriculture Extension Services in your community

Men	3	0.88
Women	339	99.12
Both equally	-	0
Not Sure	-	0

If you believe there is a difference, why do you think one gender benefited more? (Select all that apply)

Better access to information	11	3.22
More available time to participate	331	96.78
Gender preference by extension agents	-	0
Cultural or religious limitation	-	0
Differences in decision making power	-	0
Other	-	0

Source: Survey Data, 2025

All respondents (100%) reported receiving support and training services from Agricultural Extension and Advisory

Services, indicating that women farmers in the studied communities were direct beneficiaries of the USAID



project. This suggests that the project successfully reached its target population and provided foundational agricultural guidance.

The majority of respondents (70.7%) reported a significant increase in knowledge of modern farming practices as a result of the USAID project. This demonstrates that the training component of the intervention effectively enhanced technical skills among women farmers. Additionally, 63.45% of respondents experienced increased crop yield and productivity, indicating that the knowledge acquired translated into measurable improvements in agricultural performance.

A substantial proportion of respondents (84.38%) indicated an increase in household income, highlighting the economic benefits derived from participation in the project. Furthermore, 59.01% of respondents reported improved access to farming inputs such as seeds and fertilisers, while 40.94% experienced moderate access. These findings suggest that the USAID project contributed to both economic empowerment and enhanced resource availability for women farmers.

All respondents (100%) reported improvements in decision-making related to farming activities, reflecting enhanced agency and empowerment in agricultural management. In terms of market participation, 67.84% of respondents indicated significant access to markets, demonstrating that the project facilitated better integration of women farmers into local agricultural value chains.

Approximately half of the respondents (50.58%) reported significant improvement in household food security, while 49.71% experienced moderate improvement. Access to credit and financial services was less pronounced, with 55.56% indicating slight increases and 44.44% moderate increases. This suggests that while the project positively influenced food security, its impact on financial inclusion was more limited.

More than half of the respondents (50.88%) reported significant improvement in record-keeping and farm management practices, while 49.12% experienced moderate improvement. These results indicate that participation in the USAID project fostered better organisational and managerial practices on farms, consistent with [17], who observed that USAID's Feed the Future programs in East Africa improved farmers' knowledge of climate-smart practices and increased maize yields by 22%.

Finally, nearly all respondents (99.12%) indicated that women benefited more from USAID Agricultural Extension Services, confirming that women were the primary beneficiaries in the studied communities. In addition, 96.78% of respondents noted that women constituted the majority of project participants due to greater availability of time, suggesting that women's engagement in the project was higher than that of men.

Thematic Analysis of Focused Group Discussions Access to Farm Inputs and Financial Support

Participants across all communities consistently reported that women farmers were provided with farm inputs such

as seedlings, fertilizers, and insecticides through the USAID project. In addition, participants indicated that loans were made available to women farmers, although they noted that these were insufficient to fully address all farming challenges. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that the financial support contributed to achieving some level of progress in their agricultural activities. This theme highlights the project's role in enhancing resource accessibility for women farmers, a critical factor in agricultural productivity.

Enhancement of Agricultural Knowledge and Practices

All participants across Lapai, Paiko, Wushishi, Otukpo, Gboko, and Ushongo communities affirmed that the USAID project significantly improved their agricultural knowledge and practices. Participants reported that the trainings provided by project officials enhanced their understanding of farming techniques, farm management, and the agricultural value chain. This suggests that the project successfully strengthened women farmers' technical capacities, enabling them to adopt improved farming practices.

Role of Extension Workers and Gender Considerations

Participants in Lapai and Wushishi communities specifically emphasized the importance of extension workers in facilitating learning. While recognizing the contribution of male extension workers, participants noted a preference for female extension workers, explaining that women trainers were more effective in reaching female farmers due to greater availability and cultural acceptability. This underscores the relevance of gender-sensitive approaches in agricultural extension services to enhance participation and knowledge transfer.

Perceived Benefits for Women Farmers

Overall, FGD participants across all study locations consistently affirmed that women farmers were the primary beneficiaries of the USAID project. The combined provision of farm inputs, access to loans, and technical training was reported to have improved women's knowledge, productivity, and engagement in agricultural practices. This indicates that the project was instrumental in empowering women farmers and enhancing their capacity to contribute meaningfully to agricultural production within their communities.

The thematic analysis of the FGDs demonstrates that the USAID project had a multi-dimensional impact on women farmers. By improving access to resources, enhancing agricultural knowledge, and adopting gender-sensitive extension practices, the project contributed to increased empowerment and capability among women in the studied communities.

Results and Discussion

The findings from both the survey and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) indicate that the USAID-funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services project had a substantial positive impact on women farmers in the studied communities. All respondents (100%) reported receiving support and training services, demonstrating widespread participation among women farmers. Nearly all respondents (99.12%) indicated that women were the primary beneficiaries, with 96.78% attributing this to



women having more available time to engage with the project than their male counterparts. These results reflect the gendered dynamics of participation and highlight how targeted communication strategies within the project successfully reached women, consistent with Feminist Communication Theory, which emphasizes amplifying marginalized voices.

A significant proportion of respondents (70.7%) reported increased knowledge of modern farming techniques, which translated into improved crop yield and productivity, as confirmed by 63.45% of participants. FGD participants across Lapai, Paiko, Wushishi, Otukpo, Gboko, and Ushongo communities corroborated these outcomes, noting that the training received from USAID officials enhanced their understanding of farming practices, farm management, and the agricultural value chain. Through the lens of Feminist Communication Theory, this demonstrates that participatory and gender-sensitive communication processes can strengthen women's technical knowledge and position them as active agents in agricultural decision-making rather than passive recipients of assistance.

The majority of respondents (84.38%) reported increased household income, highlighting the economic benefits derived from the project. Access to credit and financial services was limited, with 55.56% indicating slight improvement and 44.44% moderate improvement. Nevertheless, 59.01% of respondents reported significant access to farming inputs, while 40.94% reported moderate access, and 67.84% noted improved market participation. These outcomes indicate that the project facilitated women's economic empowerment and control over resources, consistent with the theoretical emphasis on expanding opportunities and agency through inclusive communication practices.

All respondents (100%) reported enhanced decision-making in farming activities, while 50.58% experienced significant improvement in household food security and 49.71% moderate improvement. Regarding farm management practices, 50.88% reported significantly better record-keeping and 49.12% reported moderate improvements. These findings suggest that participation in the project not only enhanced technical knowledge but also strengthened women's capacity for strategic decision-making, organization, and management, demonstrating the broader empowerment potential of gender-sensitive communication.

FGD participants emphasized the important role of extension workers in facilitating learning, particularly highlighting the effectiveness of female extension agents in reaching and training women farmers. This observation underscores the relevance of culturally and gender-sensitive communication processes in creating inclusive spaces for women's learning and participation. By facilitating peer-based and responsive communication, the project enhanced women's ability to engage fully in agricultural practices and the value chain.

Overall, the USAID project contributed to improvements in knowledge, productivity, income, access to inputs and markets, decision-making, food

security, and farm management among women farmers. Interpreted through the lens of Feminist Communication Theory, these findings illustrate that structured, participatory, and gender-sensitive communication processes can empower marginalized groups by expanding their voice, agency, and participation. These outcomes are consistent with previous research, such as [17], which documented similar benefits in USAID-supported agricultural interventions in East Africa.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of USAID-funded Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services on the livelihoods and empowerment of women farmers in Benue and Niger States, Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that the project had a significant and multifaceted impact on women farmers, enhancing their agricultural knowledge, productivity, and income, while also fostering empowerment and improving household food security. Despite limitations in access to financial services, the project substantially strengthened women's participation in agricultural activities, their decision-making capacity, and their overall farming competencies. The benefits were widely acknowledged by both survey respondents and FGD participants, highlighting the effectiveness of gender-sensitive and participatory approaches in agricultural extension services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made.

- I. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO)s and government agencies at all levels (Federal, State, and Local) should prioritise the recruitment and training of female extension workers. This will enhance outreach and engagement with women farmers, particularly in communities where cultural or social norms restrict interactions between male extension agents and women farmers.
- II. NGOs and government bodies should support the formation and strengthening of farmer cooperatives to ensure long-term sustainability and self-reliance. Cooperatives can facilitate collective input procurement, marketing, knowledge sharing, and access to services, maintaining benefits for women farmers even after project interventions conclude.
- III. Development actors should invest in expanding market linkages and promoting value chain development for women farmers. This will deepen their integration into agricultural value chains and improve opportunities for income generation and economic empowerment.
- IV. NGOs, private sector actors, and government agencies should strengthen women farmers' access to financial services. This can be achieved through partnerships with microfinance institutions, rural banks, and other implementing partners to provide loans, credit facilities, and financial literacy programs tailored to the needs



of rural women farmers.

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