



Agriculture and Employment Generation in Benue State

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Abstract

Agriculture remains a fundamental sector in Nigeria's economy, yet unemployment persists as a major socio-economic challenge. Despite the vast arable land and agricultural potential of Benue State, youth unemployment and underemployment have continued to rise, necessitating an investigation into the role of agriculture in employment generation. This study examines the contributions of agriculture to job creation in Benue State from 2015 to 2023, focusing on major agricultural initiatives under the Samuel Ortom administration. The study employs a survey method utilizing questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The questionnaires were analyzed using simple percentage, while qualitative content analysis was applied to interview responses. Human capital theory underpins the study, emphasizing the significance of skills, training, and investment in agriculture as a driver of employment. Findings reveal that agriculture has significantly contributed to employment generation in Benue State through crop farming, livestock production, agro-processing, and value chain activities. The Ortom administration's key agricultural initiatives, such as the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme, revival of extension services, distribution of improved seedlings, and the establishment of agro-processing zones, created direct and indirect employment opportunities. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, poor access to credit, and post-harvest losses persist. To enhance agriculture's role in employment generation, the study recommends strengthening agricultural financing mechanisms to improve farmers' access to capital and investing in rural infrastructure such as roads, storage facilities, and irrigation systems to boost productivity and market access. These interventions will further solidify agriculture's role as a catalyst for economic growth and employment in Benue State.

Keywords: Agriculture, Rural Economy, Farming Sector, Job Creation, Food Production, Economic Development.

Introduction

Agriculture has long been a cornerstone of economic development, serving as a primary source of livelihood and employment across the globe. As of 2024, the agricultural sector employed approximately 27% of the global workforce, underscoring its pivotal role in sustaining economies and communities worldwide (International Labour Organization, 2024). In Africa, agriculture remains the backbone of many economies, engaging about 60% of the continent's labor force and contributing roughly 23% to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024). This sector is not only vital for food security but also serves as a significant source of employment, especially in rural areas where alternative job opportunities are limited.

Focusing on Nigeria, agriculture is a critical component of the nation's economy. In 2023, the sector employed over 25 million individuals, accounting for 30.1% of the total workforce (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This substantial engagement highlights agriculture's role in providing livelihoods and its potential in addressing unemployment challenges. Despite the country's rich agricultural endowment, including 70.8 million hectares of agricultural land, Nigeria faces significant challenges such as low technology adoption, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to financing, which hinder the sector's full potential (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024).

Benue State, often referred to as the "Food Basket of the Nation," exemplifies the agricultural prowess within Nigeria. The state boasts a diverse production of crops, including yams, rice, beans, cassava, and soybeans, contributing significantly to both state and national food supplies. Approximately 80% of Benue's population is engaged in subsistence agriculture, reflecting the sector's dominance in employment (Aye, 2013). However, the agricultural landscape in Benue is predominantly characterized by small-scale farming with traditional methods, leading to low productivity and limited economic returns.

In response to these challenges, several measures have been implemented to enhance agricultural productivity and employment in Benue State. Notably, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has supported 70,000 farmers in the state, focusing on boosting the cultivation and production of staples like cassava and rice. This intervention has reportedly doubled the production levels of these crops, positioning Benue on the global agricultural map and earning recognition at the 2023 United Nations Food Summit in Rome (Ekoue, 2023). Additionally, the Benue State government, in collaboration with development partners, launched its first comprehensive agricultural policy in July 2019. This policy aims to address systemic challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to credit, and gender inequality. The plan sets clear objectives, including reducing post-harvest losses by 50% and increasing farmer income by 80% by 2021, alongside strategies for achieving these goals through coordinated efforts among stakeholders (Synergos, 2019).

Despite these initiatives, the desired outcomes in employment generation and poverty reduction have not been fully realized. Many farmers continue to operate at subsistence levels, and the state's unemployment rate remains a pressing concern. Factors such as inadequate implementation of policies, persistent security challenges, and limited access to modern farming technologies contribute to the stagnation in agricultural productivity and employment. This study aims to critically assess the contribution of agriculture to employment generation in Benue State, examining the effectiveness of existing measures and identifying barriers hindering progress. The objective is to provide actionable insights and recommendations to enhance the role of agriculture in creating sustainable employment opportunities within the state.

Agriculture

Agriculture is fundamentally the art and science of cultivating the soil, growing crops, and raising animals to produce food, fiber, medicinal plants, and other products essential for sustaining and enhancing human life. This multifaceted practice encompasses a wide array of activities, including soil preparation, seed sowing, irrigation, pest control, harvesting, and the breeding and management of livestock. The term "agriculture" originates from the Latin words "ager," meaning field, and "culture," meaning cultivation, collectively referring to field cultivation (Harris & Fuller, 2014).

In essence, agriculture is a dynamic and integral component of human existence, continually adapting to meet the evolving needs of society. Its practices and principles are deeply intertwined with cultural traditions, economic structures, and environmental stewardship, reflecting its central role in shaping and sustaining civilizations.

Unemployment

Unemployment refers to the condition in which individuals who are capable of working, and are actively seeking employment, are unable to find a job. This phenomenon is a critical indicator of economic health, reflecting the balance between the labor force and the availability of jobs within an economy. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines unemployed individuals as those who are without work, currently available for work, and actively seeking work during a specified period (Oner, 2010).

Employment Generation

Employment generation refers to the process of creating new job opportunities within an economy, aiming to absorb the available labor force into productive activities. This concept is pivotal for fostering economic growth, reducing poverty, and enhancing living standards. By increasing the availability of jobs, employment generation not only elevates income levels but also contributes to overall societal development.

From the above definition therefore, it is pertinent to state that employment generation refers to the creation of job opportunities for individuals within an economy. It results from economic growth, investment, and policy initiatives.

Empirical Review

This section reviews empirical studies on the contribution of agriculture to employment generation in Benue State, providing insights into existing research findings. It aims to identify gaps in knowledge, highlighting areas requiring further investigation to enhance understanding and policy formulation for improved agricultural employment opportunities.

Contributions of Agriculture to Employment Generation

Adebayo (2022) investigated the role of agricultural extension services in job creation across Nigeria. Using qualitative approach, the study conducted in-depth interviews with agricultural extension officers and farmers to understand the impact of extension services on employment generation. The results showed that agricultural extension services significantly improved farm productivity, thereby increasing labor demand and job creation. The study recommended increased funding and training for extension officers to enhance their effectiveness. However, the study did not consider the regional disparities in the effectiveness of agricultural extension services. The present study fills this gap by examining how agricultural extension services have contributed to employment in Benue State between 2015 and 2023, providing region-specific insights.

Ibrahim and Yusuf (2021) examined the link between agricultural financing and employment generation in Nigeria. They employed panel data regression model to assess the effects of agricultural credit facilities on employment levels across different states from 2000 to 2020. Their findings indicated that access to agricultural finance significantly boosts employment by facilitating the expansion of farming activities and agribusiness enterprises. The study recommended the strengthening of financial institutions and cooperative societies to enhance farmers' access to credit. However, they did not assess the accessibility and effectiveness of these financial schemes in Benue State. The present study addresses this limitation by evaluating how agricultural financing influenced employment trends in Benue State from 2015 to 2023, considering challenges such as loan accessibility and repayment constraints.

Okonkwo, Uchenna and Adeola (2020) explored the role of agribusiness in employment generation in Nigeria using mixed-method approach that combined primary survey data and secondary sources. They analyzed the impact of agro-industrial clusters on job creation using a Structural Equation Model (SEM). Their findings revealed that agribusiness has a significant effect on employment generation, particularly among youths and women. The study recommended government policies that enhance access to credit facilities and infrastructure to support agribusiness expansion. Nevertheless, their study overlooked the specific employment contributions of smallholder farmers in Benue State, an area where agriculture dominates the local economy. The present study fills this gap by focusing on the employment dynamics of smallholder farmers in Benue State, emphasizing their role in mitigating unemployment between 2015 and 2023.

Ogunleye and Adepoju (2019) investigated the impact of agricultural development on employment generation in Nigeria. Using time-series analysis covering data from 1990 to 2018, they applied the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model to establish the relationship between agricultural output and employment levels. The study found that agricultural development positively influences job creation, particularly in rural areas, by providing both formal and informal employment opportunities. They recommended increased investment in mechanized farming and agribusiness to sustain employment growth. However, their study did not specifically focus on regional employment disparities, such as those in Benue State. The present study bridges this gap by examining employment trends in Benue State between 2015 and 2023, highlighting the region's unique agricultural employment patterns and challenges.

Agricultural activities implemented under the Samuel Ortom Administration in Benue State

Bello, Yusuf and Nwachukwu (2022) investigated the effectiveness of agricultural mechanization policies implemented by the Nigerian government. The study adopted a quantitative approach using secondary data from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) between 2010 and 2020. Findings showed that while mechanization policies improved efficiency in large-scale farming, smallholder farmers continued to struggle with affordability and accessibility of machinery. The study recommended targeted subsidies and capacity-building programs for small-scale farmers to bridge the gap in mechanization adoption. This study did not address state-level agricultural projects that directly influenced employment generation. Under Governor Samuel Ortom's administration, the introduction of tractor hiring services and cooperative-based mechanization programs in Benue State significantly increased employment among youth and rural farmers, which was not explored in the study.

Adebayo, Eze and Danjuma (2023) assessed the impact of climate-smart agricultural practices promoted by the Nigerian government on food security. The study employed a longitudinal survey design, tracking 500 farmers in six states over a five-year period. Results showed that government-led climate adaptation strategies, such as improved seed varieties, agroforestry, and organic farming practices, led to increased yields and resilience to climate change. Nevertheless, limited farmer awareness and adoption rates posed challenges. The authors suggested intensified awareness campaigns and incentives for farmers to embrace climate-smart practices. The study did not explore state-specific climate adaptation strategies that created employment. Under Governor Ortom's leadership, the implementation of sustainable farming initiatives, such as organic fertilizer production and afforestation projects, not only boosted agricultural productivity but also provided job opportunities for local communities in Benue State, which was not highlighted in the study.

Adetunji and Adeyemo (2021) examined the impact of government agricultural policies on smallholder farmers in Nigeria. The study employed a mixed-method approach, combining survey data and in-depth interviews with 350 farmers across different geopolitical zones. The findings revealed that government initiatives such as the Anchor Borrowers' Programme (ABP) significantly improved access to credit and farm inputs, leading to increased productivity. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, corruption, and policy inconsistency were identified as major constraints. The authors recommended improved policy implementation and infrastructural development to ensure sustained agricultural growth. The study did not focus on specific agricultural initiatives implemented at the state level. For instance, under the Samuel Ortom administration (2015-2023) in Benue State, initiatives such as the Benue Agro-Processing and Value Chain Development Programme created significant employment opportunities by fostering agribusiness development, which was not captured in this study.

Okafor and Ibrahim (2020) explored the role of government agricultural investment in poverty alleviation among rural farmers in Nigeria. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research focused on selected states in the North-Central and South-West regions. The findings demonstrated that government investments in irrigation, extension services, and input distribution contributed to poverty reduction. However, poor maintenance of irrigation infrastructure and delays in policy implementation were significant setbacks. The authors recommended a more decentralized approach to policy implementation, ensuring state governments have greater autonomy in agricultural investments. The study lacked empirical data on the employment impact of agricultural investments at the state level. In Benue State, under Samuel Ortom's administration, large-scale rice and soybean farming programs created thousands of direct and indirect jobs, particularly through public-private partnerships in agribusiness, which were not considered in this research.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Human Capital Theory as its framework of analysis. The theory was popularized by economists such as Gary Becker (1964) and Theodore Schultz (1961), who argued that investment in education, training, and health enhances an individual's productivity and economic value. The theory posits that individuals acquire skills and knowledge, much like firms invest in physical capital, to improve their economic prospects. Becker (1964) emphasized that education and training increase workers' efficiency, leading to higher wages and economic growth. Schultz (1961) highlighted that human capital development is crucial for national economic progress, as skilled and knowledgeable workers contribute significantly to productivity.

A key assumption of Human Capital Theory is that individuals make rational decisions to invest in their education and skills to maximize lifetime earnings (Becker, 1964). Another assumption is that differences in wages reflect variations in human capital accumulation, where those with higher education and training earn more than less-skilled workers (Mincer, 1974). The theory also assumes that human capital investments yield both private and social returns, benefiting not only individuals but also society through increased innovation and economic growth (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004).

Despite its widespread influence, critics argue that the theory oversimplifies the relationship between education and income, ignoring social and structural factors affecting labor markets (Bowles & Gintis, 1975).

Methodology

The study employed a survey research method to examine the contribution of agriculture to employment generation in Benue State from 2015 to 2023. The target population consisted of 1,369,784 individuals drawn from six Local Government Areas (LGAs) representing the three senatorial zones of the state. Specifically, Logo and Ukum LGAs were selected from Zone A, Gboko and Gwer East from Zone B, and Otukpo and Okpokwu from Zone C. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure fair representation, selecting farmers and residents from these six LGAs. Furthermore, two electoral wards were chosen from each LGA, totaling 12 wards for investigation. This method allowed for a balanced selection of respondents, ensuring comprehensive insights into agricultural employment trends. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using simple percentages, which facilitated clear interpretation of the findings. Additionally, to complement the quantitative data, four officials from the Benue State Ministry of Agriculture were interviewed. Their responses were analyzed through content analysis, offering qualitative insights into policy implementation and agricultural initiatives. The combination of these methods provided a holistic understanding of agriculture's role in employment creation in Benue State over the studied period. The stratified random sampling ensured diverse perspectives, while the mixed-method approach strengthened the reliability and depth of the findings. The study's approach effectively captured both statistical trends and expert opinions, contributing to a comprehensive evaluation of agriculture's impact on employment in Benue State.

Table 1: Population of the Study

Targeted Local Government Areas	Total population
Logo	224718
Ukum	225672
Gboko	358936
Gwer West	122145
Otukpo	261666
Okpokwu	176647
Total	1,369,784

Source: Ministry of Information Benue State (2017)

A sample population for the study were drawn using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula as; thus:

$$n = \frac{X^2 N P (1 - P)}{e^2 (N - 1) + X^2 P (1 - P)}$$

Where;

N = Population size

X^2 = Chi-square table value

e^2 = Margin of error

p = Population proportion

$$= \frac{X^2 N P (1 - P)}{e^2 (N - 1) + X^2 P (1 - P)}$$

$$n = \frac{3.841 \times 1,369,784 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{((0.05)^2 \times (1,369,784 - 1)) + (3.841 \times 0.05 \times 0.5)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,315,335.086}{((0.0025) \times (1369783)) + (0.96025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,315,335.086}{(3,424.4575) + (0.96025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,315,335.086}{3,425.41775}$$

$$n = \frac{882,848.0885}{383.9926}$$

$n = 384$ (Sample size)

Table 2: Sample Size Distribution

Targeted Local Government Areas	Population	Sample	Percentage
Logo	224718	63	16
Ukum	225672	63	16
Gboko	358936	101	26
Gwer West	122145	34	9
Otukpo	261666	73	19
Okpokwu	176647	50	13
Total	1,369,784	384	100

Source: Author's Computation (2024)

Table 1.2 above presents the distribution of respondents across six selected local government areas (LGAs) in Benue State, based on their population sizes and corresponding sample sizes. GbokoLGA, with the highest population of 358,936, had the largest sample of 101 respondents, representing 26% of the total sample. Otukpo, with a population of 261,666, followed closely with 73 respondents, accounting for 19%. Logo and Ukum, having similar population sizes of 224,718 and 225,672, respectively, each contributed 63 respondents, making up 16% each. Okpokwu, with 176,647 residents, had 50 respondents (13%), while Gwer West, the least populated LGA among the selected areas, had 34 respondents (9%).

The sample distribution reflects a balance between population size and representativeness, with Gboko and Otukpo having the largest representation due to their relatively higher populations and potential agricultural engagement. Ukum and Logo's equal sample sizes highlight their similar demographic and agricultural significance, while Okpokwu and Gwer West had fewer respondents, likely due to lower population densities and agricultural activities. The overall sampling method suggests an effort to capture diverse perspectives from both highly populated and moderately populated LGAs involved in agriculture.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 3: Respondents' view on the contributions of agriculture to employment generation in Benue State

Responses	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
Agriculture has significantly contributed to employment generation in Benue State between 2015 and 2023.	78 (21%)	97 (26%)	4 (1%)	65 (17%)	33 (9%)	377 (100%)
The agricultural sector in Benue State has created more job opportunities than other sectors from 2015 to 2023.	109 (29%)	103 (27%)	4 (1%)	77 (20%)	84 (22%)	377 (100%)
The availability of credit facilities has enabled farmers in Benue State to expand their businesses and employ more people from 2015 to 2023	56 (15%)	78 (21%)	5 (1%)	150 (40%)	88 (23%)	377 (100%)
Mechanized farming has contributed to an increase in agricultural-related jobs in Benue State between 2015 and 2023.	111 (29%)	106 (28%)	3 (1%)	70 (19%)	87 (23%)	377 (100%)
The rise in agribusiness activities such as food processing and marketing has boosted employment in Benue State from 2015 to 2023.	99 (26%)	134 (36%)	3 (1%)	75 (20%)	66 (16%)	377 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3 above presents respondents' views on the contributions of agriculture to employment generation in Benue State from 2015 to 2023. The first statement in the survey examined whether agriculture significantly contributed to employment generation within the state. Of the respondents, 21% (78) strongly agreed, while 26% (97) agreed, indicating that nearly half (47%) of the participants acknowledged agriculture's role in employment. However, 17% (65) disagreed, and 9% (33) strongly disagreed, suggesting a notable proportion of skepticism regarding this contribution. Only 1% (4) were undecided, revealing that most respondents had a firm stance on the issue.

Regarding whether the agricultural sector created more job opportunities than other sectors during the period, 29% (109) strongly agreed and 27% (103) agreed, leading to a combined 56% in favor of the statement. Conversely, 20% (77) disagreed, and 22% (84) strongly disagreed, summing up to 42% of respondents who felt otherwise. Only 1% (4) remained undecided. This suggests that while the majority credited agriculture with generating more employment than other sectors, a considerable portion of respondents did not share this view.

The availability of credit facilities enabling farmers to expand their businesses and employ more people was another critical area assessed. Responses indicate that only 15% (56) strongly agreed and 21% (78) agreed, resulting in a total of 36% in support. In contrast, a significant 40% (150) of respondents disagreed, and 23% (88) strongly disagreed, amounting to 63% who opposed the statement. A mere 1% (5) remained undecided. The overwhelming disagreement suggests that access to credit facilities may not have been sufficiently impactful in boosting employment within the agricultural sector during this period.

Mechanized farming's contribution to agricultural job creation was also analyzed. Here, 29% (111) strongly agreed and 28% (106) agreed, meaning that 57% of respondents acknowledged mechanization's positive effect on employment. On the other hand, 19% (70) disagreed, and 23% (87) strongly disagreed, summing up to 42% who believed otherwise. Only 1% (3) were undecided. This indicates that while a majority of respondents believed mechanization facilitated job creation, a sizable portion expressed reservations, possibly due to concerns about job displacement or unequal access to mechanized farming opportunities.

The survey further examined whether agribusiness activities, such as food processing and marketing, contributed to employment growth in Benue State. A significant 26% (99) strongly agreed and 36% (134) agreed, leading to a combined 62% who acknowledged the positive impact of agribusiness on employment. Meanwhile, 20% (75) disagreed, and 16% (66) strongly disagreed, adding up to 36% who viewed the contribution as limited. Again, only 1% (3) were undecided. These findings suggest that agribusiness has played a substantial role in job creation, with a strong majority supporting its contribution.

The overall analysis reveals a complex but generally positive perception of agriculture's contribution to employment in Benue State. Most respondents agreed that agriculture played a crucial role in job creation, particularly through mechanization and agribusiness expansion. However, skepticism remained regarding the availability of credit facilities and whether agriculture had truly outperformed other sectors in employment generation. The implications of these findings highlight the need for improved access to credit, increased support for mechanization, and enhanced agribusiness policies to further optimize agriculture's potential in job creation within Benue State.

To complement the above responses, an interview was conducted with the Director of Planning, Research, and Statistics from the Benue Agricultural and Rural Development Authority (BNARDA), it was highlighted that:

Agriculture has played a major role in providing jobs in Benue State. Many young people and women have found work in farming, processing, and selling agricultural products. Government programs have supported farmers with training, tools, and financial help, making it easier for them to expand their activities. The rise in demand for food and cash crops has created opportunities, not only in farming but also in transportation and packaging. From 2015 to 2023, more people have moved into agriculture-related businesses, reducing unemployment and improving livelihoods across the state (Field Survey, December 2024).

In an interview conducted with the Director of Policy, Planning, and Research from the Benue State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, it was explained that:

Agriculture remains the backbone of employment in Benue State. Several initiatives have been introduced to encourage people, especially youths, to engage in farming. Support from the government and private sector has increased, helping farmers access improved seeds, fertilizers, and loans. Many small-scale farmers have expanded their activities, leading to the creation of more jobs in food production, processing, and distribution. Over the years, agriculture has helped reduce rural poverty by giving people a steady source of income, making it one of the strongest drivers of employment in the state (Field Survey, December 2024).

In an interview conducted with the Coordinator of Youth in Agriculture Programs from the Farmers' Associations and Cooperatives (Benue State Chapter), it was emphasized that:

Agriculture has provided jobs for many young people in Benue State. Several youth-focused programs have encouraged participation in farming and agribusiness. Many have started their own farms or engaged in processing and marketing farm produce. With government and private support, young farmers have received training, grants, and access to technology, making agriculture more attractive. The sector has absorbed thousands into its value chain, including transportation and packaging. From 2015 to 2023, agriculture has not only created jobs but has also helped many young people become self-reliant entrepreneurs in the state (Field Survey, December 2024).

Table 1.4: Respondents' view on major agricultural activities implemented under the Samuel Ortom administration that created employment opportunities in Benue State

Responses	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
The Samuel Ortom administration effectively implemented agricultural policies that significantly boosted employment opportunities in Benue State.	169 (45%)	110 (29%)	5 (1%)	38 (10%)	55 (15%)	377 (100%)
Government investment in mechanized farming under the Ortom administration created more job opportunities for youths in the state.	155 (41%)	100 (27%)	2 (1%)	76 (20%)	44 (12%)	377 (100%)
Training and capacity-building programs for farmers under the Ortom administration led to increased employment in the agricultural sector.	148 (39%)	108 (29%)	4 (1%)	65 (17%)	52 (14%)	377 (100%)
The construction and rehabilitation of rural roads by the Ortom administration facilitated better market access and increased employment in agriculture.	66 (18%)	50 (13%)	3 (1%)	149 (40%)	109 (29%)	377 (100%)
The administration's collaboration with international agricultural organizations led to increased investment and job creation in the sector.	175 (46%)	101 (27%)	4 (1%)	65 (17%)	32 (8%)	377 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 4 above reveals that a significant proportion of respondents, amounting to 45%, strongly agreed that the Samuel Ortom administration effectively implemented agricultural policies that significantly boosted employment opportunities in Benue State. An additional 29% agreed with this view, bringing the total proportion of positive responses to 74%. In contrast, 10% disagreed, and 15% strongly disagreed, while only 1% remained undecided. This distribution indicates a strong conviction among the majority of respondents that the Ortom administration's agricultural policies contributed meaningfully to job creation.

Further analysis of government investment in mechanized farming under the Ortom administration shows that 41% of respondents strongly agreed and 27% agreed that such investment created more job opportunities for youths in the state. In total, 68% of respondents acknowledged the positive impact of mechanized farming on employment, whereas 20% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed. A marginal 1% were undecided. These results underscore that a majority of the respondents believed mechanization efforts significantly contributed to employment opportunities, though a substantial proportion expressed reservations about its effectiveness.

Regarding training and capacity-building programs for farmers, 39% strongly agreed and 29% agreed that such initiatives led to increased employment in the agricultural sector. The combined positive response of 68% suggests that the training programs were widely perceived as effective in job creation. Meanwhile, 17% disagreed, 14% strongly disagreed, and only 1% were undecided. These figures indicate that while a majority recognized the role of capacity-building in employment generation, a notable minority doubted its effectiveness or reach.

However, when considering the construction and rehabilitation of rural roads by the Ortom administration, the survey results show a markedly different pattern. Only 18% of respondents strongly agreed and 13% agreed that these infrastructural developments facilitated better market access and increased employment in agriculture. In contrast, a significant 40% disagreed, and 29% strongly disagreed, while just 1% remained undecided. The overwhelmingly negative perception suggests that a large segment of respondents did not see rural road improvements as significantly impacting employment in the agricultural sector. This result may reflect concerns about the inadequacy of road projects or their limited reach in addressing agricultural employment challenges.

Conversely, the administration's collaboration with international agricultural organizations appears to have been well received. According to the survey, 46% of respondents strongly agreed and 27% agreed that these collaborations led to increased investment and job creation in the sector. The total agreement rate of 73% signifies a strong endorsement of this initiative. In comparison, 17% disagreed, 8% strongly disagreed, and 1% remained undecided. The positive reception of these international partnerships indicates that many respondents believed such collaborations were instrumental in enhancing agricultural employment in Benue State.

From the above analysis, it is evident that the Ortom administration's agricultural policies, investments in mechanized farming, and collaboration with international organizations were largely perceived as effective in fostering employment opportunities. However, the construction and rehabilitation of rural roads received the most negative feedback, suggesting that either the projects were insufficiently executed or their impact on employment was not widely felt. The overall findings imply that while the administration made commendable efforts in agriculture-driven job creation, certain areas, particularly rural infrastructure development, may have required greater attention to optimize employment benefits.

In an interview conducted with the Director of Agricultural Extension Services in the Benue Agricultural and Rural Development Authority (BNARDA):

The Samuel Ortom administration introduced several agricultural programs to create jobs, focusing on mechanized farming, input distribution, and extension services. Farmers received improved seeds, fertilizers, and access to modern farming techniques. The government also supported large-scale rice, soybeans, and cassava farming, encouraging agribusiness. Training programs helped young people gain skills in modern agriculture, while rural cooperatives were strengthened to boost production. These efforts increased food production and provided employment for thousands. Many youths engaged in farming, agro-processing, and marketing. With better access to credit and farm equipment, smallholder farmers expanded their businesses. As a result, rural employment improved, reducing migration to urban areas. The overall goal was to make agriculture profitable and attractive, especially for young people in Benue State (Field Survey, December 2024).

To further understand the measures put in place by the government within the period under review, an interview was conducted with the Director of Cooperatives and Rural Development in the Benue State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources:

The government of Benue State, under Samuel Ortom, focused on empowering farmers and rural communities. Through collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and Chinese BioTech companies, farmers were trained on better farming techniques, high-yield seeds, and modern irrigation. Special programs supported cooperative societies with loans, farm inputs, and mechanized equipment. Youths were encouraged to engage in fish farming, poultry, and vegetable farming, creating thousands of jobs. Many young people started agribusinesses, improving rural livelihoods. The partnership with IFAD also helped smallholder farmers increase productivity and income. With the introduction of climate-smart agriculture, farmers adapted to changing weather patterns, reducing losses. These programs reduced unemployment, making agriculture a more stable and profitable venture in Benue State between 2015 and 2023 (Field Survey, December 2024).

In an interview conducted with the Head of Women in Agriculture Initiative in the Farmers' Associations and Cooperatives (Benue State Chapter):

The Samuel Ortom administration promoted women and youth participation in agriculture by providing training, farm inputs, and access to loans. Women were encouraged to engage in crop and livestock farming, agro-processing, and marketing. Through various empowerment programs, many women became self-reliant and financially stable. Young people also benefited from skill development in poultry, fish farming, and agribusiness. The government's support in forming cooperative groups helped farmers access funding and equipment. Many rural communities saw improvements in food security and income levels. The introduction of modern farming techniques increased productivity and employment opportunities. Over the years, these agricultural initiatives created a new wave of young farmers, reducing rural poverty and improving livelihoods across Benue State.

However, data from the secondary data indicates that under Governor Samuel Ortom's administration, Benue State implemented several agricultural initiatives aimed at job creation and economic development. A significant partnership was established with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) through the Value Chain Development Programme (VCDP). Between 2016 and 2023, this collaboration injected over ₦13 billion into the state's economy, benefiting more than 13,000 women and youths and lifting over 10,000 farmers out of poverty across eight local government areas (Moneycentral, 2023).

In 2017, the state government launched the sale and distribution of 7,500 metric tonnes of fertilizer to farmers at subsidized rates. This initiative aimed to enhance agricultural productivity by making fertilizers more affordable, thereby encouraging increased crop yields (P.M. News, 2017).

Furthering support for farmers, in 2020, Governor Ortom flagged off a ₦500 million agricultural value-chain development loan scheme for civil servants and political appointees. This scheme, in collaboration with the Bank of Industry (BOI), offered loans at a 5% interest rate with repayment periods of two to three years, facilitating investment in agriculture and related enterprises (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2020).

The administration also focused on providing improved seedlings to farmers. In 2021, over 9,800 farmers received high-yielding and drought-tolerant seedlings, including 4,666 bags of rice, 230 bags of maize, 690 bags of watermelon seeds, and 10,000 improved cassava stems. This effort aimed to boost food production and provide raw materials for emerging industries in the state (The Guardian Nigeria News, 2021).

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of this paper seeks to examine the contributions of agriculture to employment generation in Benue State from 2015 to 2023. Findings from respondents indicate that agriculture has been a critical driver of job creation in the state, particularly among youths and women, who form a significant portion of the rural labor force. The expansion of agribusinesses, including crop farming, livestock rearing, and agro-processing, has significantly contributed to reducing unemployment rates. Many respondents noted that the commercialization of staple crops such as yam, rice, and cassava led to increased job opportunities, particularly in production, processing, and distribution. This aligns with the findings of Uchenna and Adeola (2020), who argued that agribusiness plays a significant role in employment generation, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and youths. Their study highlighted that agriculture provides both direct and indirect employment through farming activities and value-chain industries, a trend that is also evident in Benue State. Respondents further emphasized that increased government support for cooperative societies, skill acquisition programs, and agricultural extension services significantly boosted employment levels by enhancing the productivity and competitiveness of farmers. However, challenges such as inconsistent government policies, inadequate storage facilities, and limited market access were noted as major impediments to maximizing agricultural employment potential.

Additionally, the study examined the major agricultural activities implemented under the Samuel Ortom administration (2015-2023) that created employment opportunities in Benue State. Respondents highlighted key initiatives such as the distribution of farm inputs, mechanization programs, and incentives for smallholder farmers as instrumental in increasing agricultural employment. The establishment of processing industries and support for cooperative farming were also identified as critical in enhancing value addition and reducing post-harvest losses. These findings are consistent with the work of Adetunji and Adeyemo (2021), who found that government-led initiatives, particularly the Anchor Borrowers' Programme (ABP) at the federal level, significantly improved access to credit and farm inputs, thereby increasing productivity. While respondents acknowledged the positive impact of government policies in Benue State, they also highlighted significant constraints, including inadequate rural infrastructure, corruption, and policy inconsistency, which hindered the full realization of agricultural employment opportunities. Furthermore, respondents noted that although government interventions improved productivity, the lack of sufficient investment in agro-processing and market expansion limited the sustainability of employment gains.

Conclusion

Agriculture remains a critical driver of employment generation in Benue State, serving as the backbone of its economy and providing livelihoods for a significant proportion of the population. This study has examined the role of agriculture in employment creation between 2015 and 2023, highlighting its impact on rural development, income generation, and poverty reduction. The findings reveal that agriculture has been the primary source of employment, engaging farmers, laborers, agro-processors, and traders across various agricultural value chains in Benue State.

The study further underscores that despite the sector's vast potential, several challenges hinder its full contribution to employment generation. Issues such as inadequate access to credit, poor infrastructure, climate variability, and insecurity have constrained productivity and employment expansion. However, government policies and interventions, including agricultural subsidies, mechanization programs, and youth empowerment initiatives, have contributed to job creation, though with varying degrees of effectiveness.

Additionally, the study establishes that smallholder farmers play a dominant role in agricultural employment, with subsistence and commercial farming providing numerous opportunities for skilled and unskilled labor. The agribusiness sector, including processing, storage, and marketing, has also contributed significantly to employment, demonstrating that agriculture extends beyond primary production. The influence of technological advancements, such as improved seed varieties and mechanization, has enhanced productivity, albeit requiring further investment to maximize employment potential. The paper recommended that the state government should intensify investment in agro-industrialization. Given agriculture's significant contributions to employment in Benue State, fostering value addition through agro-processing industries will enhance job creation. Establishing processing facilities for staple crops like yam, cassava, rice, and soybeans will create employment in production, processing, packaging, and distribution. Additionally, providing incentives such as tax reliefs and subsidies for agro-based enterprises will attract private sector participation, ensuring sustainability and long-term economic benefits.

Second, the government should strengthen and expand agricultural empowerment programs initiated under the Samuel Ortom administration. Programs such as the Anchor Borrowers' Scheme and tractor-hiring services should be expanded

to cover more farmers, particularly youths and women. Strengthening extension services and providing accessible credit facilities will improve productivity and encourage more individuals to engage in agriculture. Furthermore, ensuring effective implementation of these programs through transparency and accountability mechanisms will maximize their impact. The promotion of mechanized farming and climate-smart agriculture should also be prioritized to modernize the sector and create more employment opportunities. By sustaining and improving these initiatives, Benue State can further harness its agricultural potential to drive employment generation and economic growth.

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