

An Appraisal of Agro-Tourism Knowledge Among Extension Officers in Abakalki, Nigeria

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Abstract

The goal of the study was to assess the agro-tourism knowledge of extension officers in Abakaliki, south-eastern Nigeria. Quantitative method was applied, whereby a structured questionnaire was used to obtain relevant information. Results show that extension officers have high-level knowledge of agro-tourism, acquired mostly through 'on-the-job trainings', workshops and conferences; but not from the classroom. However, the high-level agro-tourism knowledge has not translated into significant participation of local farmers in agro-tourism, as very few extension officers have engaged in educating farmers on the potentials of agro-tourism. The implication is that farmers have not got much support from extension officers, thus, they are yet to benefit significantly from agro-tourism. The paper raises the need for extension officers to be properly informed on agro-tourism as a factor for farmers' participation in agro-tourism. Equally, the paper exposed deficiency in agricultural extension curriculum of Nigerian tertiary institutions, for the fact that extension officers did not acquire agro-tourism knowledge from the classroom. Thus, an upgrade of curriculum to address this deficiency is highly recommended.

Keywords: Agro-tourism; agro-tourism knowledge; extension officers; farmers; Abakaliki

Introduction

The term 'agriturismo' (meaning agricultural tourism, agro-tourism, agritourism, farm tourism) originated in Italy in the 1980s and was adapted for use globally to address issues concerning farm viability and development of rural communities (Lamie et al., 2021). Agro-tourism, according to Schimdt et al. (2022), is a critical farm diversification strategy for farmers to enhance income and profit potential with benefits related to rural community development, increased awareness of sustainability practices, and local heritage preservation. Essentially, agro-tourism refers to visits or travels that are triggered by the relationship between agriculture and tourism. At the centre of agro-tourism are farmers, especially local farmers, who are expected to diversify their resources and generate income by engaging in agro-tourism activities. Nevertheless, it is quite unfortunate that in developing nations, including Nigeria, local farmers have not been able to tap into the opportunities of agro-tourism.

One factor, which is often left unnoticed in the analysis of farmers' poor participation in agro-tourism is the knowledge level of agricultural extension workers on agro-tourism. Since

the role of extension officers have proliferated in recent time due to increased awareness of the multifunctionality of agriculture, extension officers should keep farmers abreast with various aspects of on-farm and off-farm activities, including those related to agro-tourism. Indeed, extension workers are expected to disseminate agro-tourism information to farmers and help them build the capacity to participate in agro-tourism. This may be difficult to realize, if extension officers cannot disseminate agro-tourism information because they do not possess such knowledge (Sobalaje et al., 2019).

Abakaliki area in Ebonyi State, southeast Nigeria is the quintessence of an agrarian society with huge agro-tourism potentials, because it is endowed with vast arable land for both crop production and animal husbandry. With concerted efforts, farmers in the area can benefit significantly from agro-tourism, and one of the key factors in achieving this is the involvement of extension officers. Extension officers can only make meaningful contributions where they have adequate knowledge about agro-tourism, hence the need to evaluate what they know about agro-tourism, so to uncover their training needs in that respect. A main consequence of ignoring the appraisal of what extension officers know about agro-tourism is the possible denial of farmers, especially local farmers the gains accruable from agrotourism since local farmers often rely on extension officers for information. Besides, the opportunity of agro-tourism to strengthen local food systems, improve the conservation of cultural heritage, encourage community-based tourism, and enhance the sustainability of urban-rural linkage will be deflated. In all, the contribution of agro-tourism towards the multi-functionality of agriculture may not materialize.

Deriving from the aforesaid, this research sought to: (i) analyze the demographic characteristics of agricultural extension officers in the study area; (ii) evaluate the level of agro-tourism knowledge of extension officers; (iii) identify extension officers' sources of agro-tourism knowledge, (iv) ascertain length of knowledge and engagement in agro-tourism practices as extension officers. The study is particularly important with the evolving roles of extension workers, and the need to bolster extension workers' aptitude to recognize farmers' needs, constraints and opportunities. The work is also important as it serves as a source material for policymakers, teachers and students in the disciplines of rural development, tourism, agriculture, and education.

Literature review

Agro-tourism is an approach to farm diversification aimed at achieving sustainability and community-based tourism, thus, it signifies a novel hospitality tactic grounded in sustainable development principles (Barbieri et al., 2019; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020). Brune et al. (2021) note that beyond recreational purposes (e.g., escapism, experiencing the farm lifestyle, staying outdoors), agrotourism enhances visitors' intentions to purchase local foods, thereby, boosting local food systems. According to Rohana (2014), agro-tourism enterprises may include outdoor recreation (fishing, hunting, wildlife study, horseback or ponyback riding), educational experiences (cannery tours, cooking classes, wine tasting), entertainment (harvesting festivals, camping), hospitality services (farm stays, guided tours, catering) and on-farm direct sales (u-pick operations or roadside stands).

Most agrarian communities are in rural areas, thus, agrotourism is always viewed as a vital approach to rural development. It has the capacity to boost the economy of rural people, especially small-scale farmers by way of additional income through farm visits. In the Philippines, for instance, Magdato and Bacongus (2021) note that agro-tourism is a new economic development strategy, which helps uplift the living and working conditions of farmers by generating additional farm-related income that enhances farm profitability at the same time that it provides agricultural education to various stakeholders. However, much of

the benefits of agrotourism to farmers depends to a large extent on the support of extension officers, who have the responsibility to raise farmers' awareness about agro-tourism and build their capacity to participate in it.

Extension is defined by FAO (2010) as systems that facilitate the access of farmers, their organizations and other market actors to knowledge, information and technologies; facilitate their interaction with partners in research, education, agribusiness, and other relevant institutions; and assist them to develop their own technical, organizational and management skills and practices. According to Giginyu and Bala (2020), agricultural extension primarily deals with Human Resource Development (HRD), and the transfer of technology and knowledge from agricultural research centers to farmers. As noted by Prajanti and Utami (2019), the institution of agricultural extension is regarded as an agent that is responsible for transferring knowledge to farmers in building their capacity. These definitions show that extension service has transcended mere information dissemination to the realm of assisting farmers in building the capacity to take greater control of their life. It is in-line with this that Sobalaje et al. (2019) remarked that extension service is no more only by training and visit, but has been moved towards broader concepts, which include community development, poverty eradication, education and development of technical skills in every aspect of farming activity. The implication is that extension officers are now challenged to upgrade their overall knowledge to effectively assist farmers in farming, agribusinesses (including agro-tourism) and other endeavours that may have direct or indirect link with agriculture.

There are quite a number of texts on agricultural extension on one hand, and agro-tourism on the other hand, where a number of discursive formatives have been raised. Welteji and Zerihun (2018) assessed the practice, challenges and opportunities of tourism-agriculture nexuses in Bale Mountains, Ethiopia. Using both the positivist and interpretivist ontological and epistemological perspectives, the study found that there is no economically profitable co-existence between agriculture and tourism. It is surprising, however, that among the challenges adduced to the poor tourism-agriculture nexus, (e.g. non-commercial type of agricultural activities; small market size of tourism industry; health and hygiene concern about local produce, procurement, taxation and institutional issues, absence of marketing channels and local intermediaries); there was no mention of extension services, or the level of agro-tourism knowledge possessed by agricultural extension officers as either a factor in the challenges, or in the recommendations on the way forward.

Again, Yeboah et al. (2017) studied the factors influencing adoption of agro-tourism by small-scale farmers in North Carolina using a survey research design. The variables were found to include possession of a college education, public access to the farm for recreation, total size of land owned, farm proximity to cities, willingness to pay for farm management advice, and 'before-tax household income'. No mention was made of extension services among the variables. Similarly, the study by Emeafor and Okpoko (2017), which examined local participation in agro-tourism in Abakaliki area, Nigeria did not include extension officers' non-dissemination of information about agro-tourism among the factors responsible for poor participation in agro-tourism. Findings from the two studies show that 'extension service' was not among the variables examined to explain what influences farmers to adopt agro-tourism or participate in it. This gap is a considerable one, which ought not to be overlooked in any concerted efforts geared towards diversifying the economic base of rural communities, especially those endowed with rich tourism and agricultural heritage.

However, the studies by Schmidta et al. (2022) and Rohana (2014) did recognize the importance of extension officers in agro-tourism development. A key argument in the study by Schmidta et al. (2022) is that agro-tourism ecosystem would benefit immensely from more robust extension programming and network development. Thus, they made a strong case for

increasing the role of extension professionals in agro-tourism through robust training and education. Furthermore, Rohana (2014) studied the challenges of agro-tourism development in Sri Lanka and examined the role of agricultural extension in overcoming the challenges. The study noted (among other things) that for extension officers to play meaningful role, they must be trained to possess the competency not only in agricultural skills and the production process, but also in marketing, promotion, and additional ways of developing farming communities, such as agro-tourism. Both studies, nevertheless, did not see how imperative it is for extension officers' knowledge on agro-tourism to be appraised as an integral part of increasing the role of extension officers in agro-tourism development, or overcoming the challenges farmers may face in the practice of agro-tourism. Thus, the studies failed to recognize that a starting point would be the appraisal of the knowledge, which extension officers hold about agro-tourism, so as to have a good direction on further training of extension officers for agro-tourism development purposes.

Other related studies, such as that of Bhatta et al. (2019), investigated farmers' willingness to start agro-tourism in Nepal. The result shows that willingness to start agro-tourism was statistically determined by the practice of hosting VFR (visiting friends and relatives), returned migrant status, and farmer age groups; there was no consideration of extension services as a factor in the willingness to participate in agro-tourism. A demerit of this study was the use of only quantitative research approach, perhaps, there could have been emergent issues if the qualitative aspect was explored as well. Qualitative approaches have a way of persuading informants to disclose issues that may remain unidentified using only quantitative methods. Furthermore, Sennuga et al. (2020) used eight (8) statements to evaluate farmers' perceptions regarding agricultural extension agents' performance, none of the items referred to extension officers' performance in agro-tourism, let alone their knowledge about agro-tourism and its connection to rural livelihood improvement. This suggests that educating farmers on agro-tourism as an option to farm diversification was not captured in the evaluation of extension officers' performance.

Again, Msuya et al. (2017) used eighteen (18) items to measure the perceived level of achievement of extension roles in Africa's development, none of the 18 items made reference to the role of extension officers in agro-tourism development. Again, Ali et al. (2020) carried out a study in Gezira State, Sudan. The objective of this research was to assess the role of extension officers in transferring agricultural services and innovations to the farmers. The study failed to include agribusiness, such as agro-tourism among agricultural services (or agricultural-related services) and innovation which are deemed transferrable to the farmers. Finally, Umeh et al. (2018) used 17 items to measure farmers' knowledge of the role of extension services in Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. No item covered extension's role in the development of agro-tourism in the area, thus, suggesting that agro-tourism was not construed as part of the functions of extension services.

It has to be noted that the role of extension services has proliferated in the 21st century, transcending its original role of training farmers in basic production processes to broader concepts, such as enhancing the linkage between agriculture and tourism through agro-tourism development, for instance. As pointed out by Schmidta et al. (2022), agro-tourism straddles the sectors of agriculture and tourism, therefore, extension professionals must straddle several areas of expertise, often outside of their scope and capacity. These, according to the authors, include hospitality and direct product sales, business development and marketing (including social media), place-making and rural economic development, extension activities and research, and building agro-tourism support networks. It is easy to see that extension officers may not play a significant role in building agro-tourism support networks where their

knowledge of agro-tourism is not sufficient, hence, the need to appraise what they know about agrotourism is of paramount importance for viable agro-tourism development.

In all, some of the papers reviewed failed to consider agro-tourism in the evaluation of the evolving role of extension services, others did not consider extension services among the factors which influence the willingness/motivation of farmers to participate in agrotourism, as well as the factors that determine agriculture-tourism nexus. For the few papers that identified the importance of extension services in agro-tourism development, there was no recognition of the level of agro-tourism knowledge possessed by extension officers as a consideration in sustainable agro-tourism development. What this suggests is that there is a dearth of studies on the appraisal of what extension officers know about agrotourism as a main factor in agro-tourism development, hence, necessitating this study.

Study area

Abakaliki is situated at elevation of 65 metres above sea level and located on 6.32 Latitude and 8.11 Longitude. Abakaliki belongs to the Izzi clan which occupies the northeastern part of Ebonyi State. As noted by Steensel (2009), the Izzi are a sub-group of the Igbo whose language and customs are considerably different from other Igbo people outside the Abakaliki area. The differences in language and customs are probably attributed to their isolated position and contact with other non-Igbo groups right from ancient times.

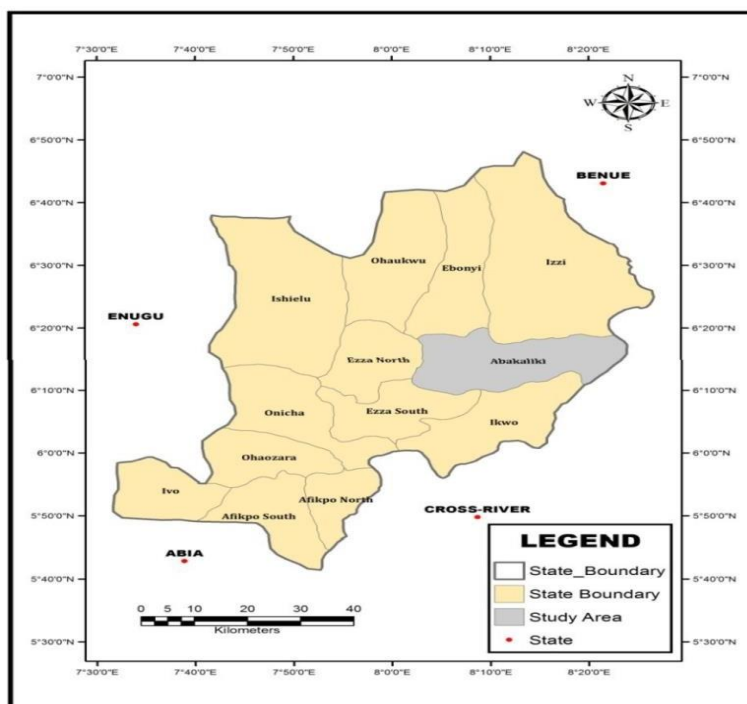


Figure 1: Map of Ebonyi State showing the study area.

Source: Google earth map as modified by cartographic unit, Archaeology & Tourism Dept. University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Materials and methods

The respondents were the 51 agricultural extension officers under the Agricultural Extension Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture, Abakaliki Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, in the Southeast region of Nigeria. All the extension officers were involved in the study, since the population was not large enough to necessitate sampling. Their names and contact details (mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses) were collected from the unit head and used to facilitate sensitization of the extension officers about the survey and scheduling of convenient

time(s) for questionnaire distribution. The questionnaire distribution was done in batches, depending on the scheduled time with the officers, but care was taken to minimize expenses. This approach was very useful because most of the time, the extension officers are in the farming communities without network coverage, which could have made it very difficult to locate them.

Required information on the distinct objectives of the study were obtained by the use of structured questionnaire distributed to the selected respondents, i.e., extension officers. The questionnaire comprised four sections. The first section contained items that sought information on the socio- demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second section contained questions on the knowledge level of the extension officers on agro-tourism. The third section was used to obtain information on the sources of agro-tourism knowledge, while the fourth section dwelt on length of knowledge and engagement in agro-tourism activities. The item on sources of knowledge of agro-tourism were presented as multiple response items whereby each respondent was free to select as many options as deemed relevant. The distribution of the questionnaire was achieved through the help of a staff of the Ministry of Agriculture in the area, who is acquainted with the extension officers, the farming communities/settlements, the dialect and cultural/traditional disposition of the local people. The collection of data lasted a period of 29 days, from November 10 to December 8, 2022. Data collected from the respondents were screened for errors, collated and analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, percentages, tables and charts; regression analysis and multiple response analysis. The analysis of the data was aided by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

Results

Analysis of demographic characteristics

The distribution of the respondents' demographic characteristics was presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of demographic characteristics

Demographic Factors		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	25	49.0	49.0
	Female	26	51.0	100.0
Age	18 – 30 years	1	2.0	2.0
	31 – 40 years	16	31.4	33.4
	41 – 50 years	34	66.6	100.0
Marital status	Single	7	14.3	14.3
	Married	40	81.6	95.9
	Widowed	2	4.1	100.0
Education	Tertiary	51	100.0	100.0
Length of service	6 – 10 years	2	3.9	3.9
	11 – 15 years	14	27.5	31.4
	16 – 20 years	23	45.1	76.5
	Above 20 years	12	23.5	100.0
Religion	Christianity	50	98.0	98.0
	Traditional religion	1	2.0	100.0

The gender distribution shows that male and female agricultural extension workers are almost equal with the females having a 2.0% advantage in numbers. This indicates that no gender is seriously disadvantaged on the course of data collection, and balance of opinions on the subject matter. The age distribution shows that 98.0% of the extension officers are above 30 years of age, while only 2.0 % are at most 30 years. As many as 81.6% of the respondents are married, while the remaining 18.4% are either single (14.3%) or widowed (4.1%). Two of the respondents who did not indicate their marital status, were identified as non-responses for the

item and excluded from the distribution of marital status. Also, all the respondents (100.0%) have tertiary education, which makes them knowledgeable enough to provide the needed information on the research objectives. From the results in Table 1, 96.1% have spent more than ten years in service as extension workers, and this is very vital to the study, with the years of experience in the system providing the needed knowledge and insight on agro-tourism in the area. The respondents are predominantly Christians (98.0%), one extension worker (2.0%) identified with traditional religion.

Evaluation of knowledge of agro-tourism

The extension officers' level of knowledge of agro-tourism was ascertained using mean and standard deviation. The mean values were compared with the benchmark mean score of 3.0 obtained as the average of the response scores (Very High Extent = 5, High Extent = 4, Moderate Extent = 3, Low Extent = 2 and Very Low Extent = 1). Any mean value lower than the benchmark mean implies low level of knowledge, while a mean value equal to or higher than the benchmark mean score implies a high level of knowledge of agro-tourism. The results were presented in Table 2. With an overall mean knowledge of 3.83, there is high level of knowledge of agro-tourism among the extension officers in the Abakaliki agricultural zone. This is reflected in their identification of features of agro-tourism, such as agro-tourism relying on the relationship between agriculture and tourism, visiting of farms, ranches, etc. for research, education, entertainment and leisure, etc. One respondent did not respond to items 8 and 9 and was treated as non-response (missing value).

Table 2: Extension officers' level of agro-tourism knowledge

Agro-Tourism Knowledge	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Knowledge Level
Agro-tourism relies on the relationship between agriculture and tourism.	51	4.94	0.24	High
Agro-tourism involves visiting a farm, ranch or any agricultural-related venture for education, entertainment, leisure, research, and so on.	51	5.00	0.00	High
Agro-tourism is a form of commercial enterprise.	51	3.53	0.92	High
Agro-tourism could be alternative means of income for farmers.	51	4.00	0.60	High
Agro-tourism could lead to the diversification and development of local economy.	51	3.94	0.47	High
Agro-tourism takes humanity closer to nature.	51	4.49	0.51	High
Agro-tourism can help protect the natural environment.	51	3.86	0.35	High
Agro-tourism could be another form of rural tourism.	50	4.00	0.29	High
Bed and breakfast accommodation is a feature of agro-tourism.	50	2.00	0.78	Low
Guided farm tour is a feature of agro-tourism.	51	5.00	0.00	High
Wine tasting is a feature of agro-tourism.	51	1.35	0.48	Low
Overall	51	3.83	0.42	High

The extension officers have low knowledge of wine tasting as a feature of agro-tourism because such feature is not obtainable in the Nigerian agro-tourism zone as there are no wine farms in the country. Overseas, wine tasting is a feature of agro-tourism because there are wine farms and wines are processed in most of these farms (Back et al., 2020; Dimitrovski & Joukes, 2017; Karagiannis & Metaxas, 2020; Mnatsakanyan, 2019).

Regression analysis was used to evaluate the influence of some socio-demographic factors (age, marital status, religion, gender and length of service as extension officer) on the knowledge level of the extension workers on agro-tourism. The independent factors included in the model are gender, age, marital status, religion and length of service. The regression analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a p-value of 0.00 clearly indicated that the regression model adequately described the relationship between the knowledge level of the respondents on agro-tourism and the factors influencing the knowledge level. The R-square value

(coefficient of determination) for the regression model is 0.749, which implies that about 75 % of the observed variations in the knowledge level of the extension officers on agro-tourism were explained by the changes in the independent variables.

The stepwise regression procedure of model building was used in estimating the relevant model coefficients and their level of influence on the knowledge of agro-tourism. The stepwise regression procedure builds the independent variables one after the other into the regression model and measures the R-square and the regression ANOVA at each stage. The significant variable (at 0.05 level of significance) with the highest R-square (indicating the highest influence on the dependent variable) is first included in the model and this continues until the significant variable with the smallest R- square is included. The influence of each significant variable was measured by the value of the R- square (R^2) when the variable was included in the model (Faraway, 2002; Rencher & Schaalje, 2008). The percentage contribution of each significant variable is the percentage difference between the R-square of the immediately preceding variable and the R-square of that particular independent variable. Any independent variable whose coefficient is not significant was excluded from the model. Model coefficient with p-value less than 0.05 (the level of significance) is significant and a coefficient whose p-value is greater than 0.05 is not significant. The results are presented in Table 2 and only the significant variables were included.

Table 3: Regression estimates of determinants of knowledge of agro-tourism

Factor	Coefficient	t-value	p-value	R2	Percent Effect
Constant	3.565	65.084	0.000		
Gender	0.163	4.854	0.000	0.370	37.0
Religion	-0.191	-4.086	0.000	0.572	20.2
Length in service	3.441	2.178	0.033	0.749	17.7

Regression ANOVA = 23.813, p-value = 0.00

The significant factors that influenced the knowledge level of agro-tourism are gender of extension officers, their religion and length of service as extension officer. These factors are the major determinants of the level of knowledge about agro-tourism. The variables that have no significant influence on the knowledge level of the respondents on agro-tourism are their age distribution and marital status. Table 2 revealed that gender, with 37.0% contribution to the increase in the knowledge level of the extension officers, is the highest determinant of knowledge of agro-tourism. This is followed by religion of the extension officers with 20.2 % impact on the extension officers' decrease in knowledge level on agro-tourism. Since the factor, religion has negative coefficient (-0.191), it indicates that religion has a negative impact (up to 20.2 % decrease) on the knowledge level of the extension officers about agro-tourism. The factor with the lowest significant input on the knowledge level of the extension officers is length of service in agricultural ministry with an impact of 17.7%.

Information on the extension officers' sources of knowledge of agro-tourism was obtained using the questionnaire item "Through which source(s) did you have knowledge of agro-tourism?" The multiple response items allowed the respondents to identify as many sources (in the options) as possible through which they gained knowledge about agro-tourism. The data obtained were analyzed using the multiple response analysis and the results summarized in Table 3. The results in the table show 'on-the-job training', conferences and workshops as the only source of knowledge of agro-tourism among the extension workers with 100.0 % response rate. This implies that the extension officers did not acquire knowledge on agro-tourism from the classroom as students of Agricultural Extension, or through friends/colleagues, nor from articles, online resources and books. This is an indicator for the upgrade of the Agricultural Extension curriculum of the universities in Nigeria.



Table 4: Sources of agro-tourism knowledge

Source	Frequency	Percent
On-the-job training programme(s), conferences and Workshops	51	100.0

The respondents’ length of knowledge and engagement in agro-tourism practices as extension officers are summarized in Table 4. All the extension officers (100.0%) admitted having knowledge of agro-tourism for more than 5 years, which gives credence to the earlier finding that the extension officers have spent more than five years in the service as extension workers. Only 13.7% have engaged farmers in the study area in agro-tourism since their services as extension officers. These results indicate poor contribution of extension officers towards agro-tourism development in the study area. Despite all the extension workers having knowledge of agro-tourism for over 5 years of their service, very few have actually engaged in agro-tourism activities. It is therefore pertinent to identify the challenges faced by the extension officers in promoting agro-tourism in Abakaliki.

Table 5: Length of knowledge and engagement in agro-tourism

Knowledge and Engagement		Frequency	Percent
How long have you had knowledge of agro-tourism?	1 – 5 years	0	0
	More than 5 years	51	100.0
Have you ever engaged farmers in agro-tourism?	Yes	7	13.7
	No	44	86.3

Discussion

The Abakiliki agricultural zone abounds with numerous agricultural resources with agro-tourism potentials. Most of these potentials reside with the local farmers, although the farmers have not been able to benefit significantly due to insufficient involvement in agro-tourism businesses. From data gathered and analyzed, all the extension officers involved in the study have spent at least more than five years on the job, have known about agro-tourism and have participated in several workshops, conferences and job-related trainings. However, it is disturbing to notice that their knowledge of agro-tourism did not come from the classroom, indicating the need to expand the present education curriculum in the country to include agro-tourism because of the socio-cultural, career and economic benefits accruable from agro-tourism development. Though the extension officers have knowledge of agro-tourism, this has not reflected in their relationship with the farmers, as very few have engaged in educating the farmers on the potentials, opportunities and benefits of agro-tourism in the area. A thorough analysis of why extension officers’ good knowledge about agro-tourism has not translated to significant participation in agro-tourism ventures by local farmers would involve a look into other variables which may have contributed to poor participation.

Lack of financial capacity of the farmers (who are mostly peasants) and the failure of the government to provide an enabling environment, such as the necessary facilities to support and promote agro-tourism in the area could be two of such variables. Developing agro-tourism in farming communities characterized by challenges, such as poor road networks, non-existent stable electricity, land and boundary disputes, tribal wars, other social amenities, and presently, herders’ menace of killing farmers and feeding their herds with farmers’ crops (Brottem, 2021) cannot be resolved by the farmers alone. The government, tourism industries and well-meaning individuals must be involved either directly or through public-private partnership.

Another variable could be the extent of governments knowledge of these agro-tourism opportunities in the area. Enough awareness may not have been created by concerned bodies in particular, the extension officers, of the existence of agro-tourism opportunities and their

potentials in the farming communities. There are equally the challenges of general poor educational level of the farmers, farming on a small scale and poor linkage in the tourism value chain.

Talking about value chain in the context of tourism, it is an approach that entails identifying every stakeholder and linkages in the tourism sector of a society, and not focusing only on the poor in an isolated manner. This method can be used to assess revenue flows to the poor in various parts of the tourism value chain; the approach helps to ascertain how impediments can be surmounted in order to increase participation of the poor in tourism (Pro-poor Annual Register, 2007). Thus, value chain approach can be used in Abakaliki to advance farmers participation in agro tourism.

Again, capacity building is also seen as a main tool that can galvanize local farmers towards meaningful participation in agro-tourism. Capacity building is concerned with efforts at assisting people to have greater control over decisions, activities and actions that affect their lives. One way to ensure capacity building is by way of educating farmers. Indeed, Baipai et al. (2022) identified ‘education of farmers’ as one of such critical success factors to enable sustainable agritourism development. Through this means, farmers can recognize the tourism potentials of their farms, and maximize the use of the potentials. Wahab (2000) has pointed out that farmers who need supplementary income most are often least able to benefit from agro-tourism because they lack the necessary capital, management and marketing skills. In this regard, capacity building is an invaluable mechanism through which farmers can benefit significantly from agro-tourism development. Thus, extension workers are invaluable in providing the training requirements for agricultural tourism. As noted by Adefila and Yusuf (2012), an up-and-coming concept for extension workers in Nigeria is that of organizing training courses for local farmers. Indeed, training farmers for active involvement in entrepreneurial agricultural tourism practice is of paramount importance if agro-tourism can be used as a pro-poor growth strategy. Areas of training may include: environmental management, water management, fruit and vegetable preservation, nursery production, entrepreneurial motivation and guidance, tour guiding, advertising skill acquisition and organization management. Appropriate training would culminate in increased knowledge, skills, attitude and managerial aptitude for generating change which will bring about local economic growth.

Conclusion

This study assessed the level of agro-tourism knowledge held by extension officers in the Abakaliki area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Although extension officers have good knowledge about agro-tourism (which was not gained from the classroom), it is bothersome, that the knowledge has not brought about significant involvement of farmers in agro-tourism activities. The result is poor participation of farmers in agro-tourism activities, which connotes a negative effect on Nigeria’s tourism development. For a country like Nigeria, which is in dire need of economic diversification, agro-tourism, and tourism in general should be given serious consideration as a key alternative to economic diversification even if on local level. As noted by Litheko (2022), development of agro-tourism can contribute to the socio-economic development of rural regions and enhance the well-being of rural population, especially for the sustainable development of small-scale farms.

It is clear that extension officers’ knowledge about agro-tourism alone may not be able to achieve significant participation in agro-tourism, yet, there is still the need for extension officers to prioritize the education of farmers on agro-tourism. Agro-tourism topics should be brought to the fore in agricultural extension curriculum in Nigerian tertiary institutions, such that students of agricultural extension can view agro-tourism as an integral part of their responsibilities when they graduate. Assisting farmers to participate fully in agro tourism is

one sure way of achieving the multi-functionality of agriculture, which indicates that the role of agriculture to society transcends its basic functions of providing food, fiber, and raw materials.

Summarily, it is instructive to note that much is expected from the Nigerian government at federal, state and local levels in terms of providing the enabling environment within which extension officers may be able to carry out the function of galvanizing local farmers to participate significantly in agro-tourism ventures. This requires political will, because as far as the political process of tourism development (including agro-tourism) is concerned, government is the key actor (Bramwell, 2011; Vujko & Gajiic, 2014). This implies that the institutional arrangement for tourism policy is intertwined with politics; consequently, the Nigerian government should summon the political will to view agro-tourism and tourism in general as key players in sustainable development.

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