

Original Research Article

Agriculture as a career option for senior secondary school students in the southern province of Sierra Leone

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Abstract

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Agriculture is the career that seventy percent of Sierra Leoneans do for a living. Most of them are farmers and are living in the rural areas engaged in subsistence farming. Agricultural Science is a subject that is studied at the secondary school level and it is anticipated that it should become a compulsory subject so that it continues to be highly regarded by the educated young as a career to be followed to provide food for its populace. The objectives of this study were: to find out senior secondary school students' demographic characteristics; their perception of agriculture as a career and to determine the factors that influence decisions to choose or not to choose agriculture as a career. The study population was 120 students, with an equal number of the two sexes, from schools in the urban and rural areas in Bo district, Southern Province of Sierra Leone. These students were at the highest form of secondary education because this is where decisions are made as to career choices leading to either studying at tertiary institutions or employment. The major findings of the study were that students are prepared to study Agricultural Science as a subject because they perceive it as a subject that is easy to pass at WAASCE. However, many do not want to pursue Agriculture as a career. Some of the reasons advanced are: Agriculture is not a lucrative profession; it leads to one being a farmer and also makes one live in the rural settings. It is recommended that affirmative policies be undertaken by the government to move agriculture from subsistence farming to commercial farming. Also, professionals in all branches of Agriculture sensitize students on its importance as well as on the benefits of undertaking Agriculture.

Keywords: Agricultural Science, Career options, Education, Senior Secondary School, Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone is a country with fertile soil and a hot humid climate which is highly suitable for agriculture activities. Seventy percent of the rural population is engaged in agriculture although as noted by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2005), the drift of the rural youths to the cities and urban areas is alarming. Despite this, as Abdul (2000), stated opportunities for agriculture-based businesses and activities are almost unlimited.

Furthermore, the demand for agriculture products is rarely affected by the world economic crisis and downturn and agriculture is still seen as one of the sector which is expected to offer many job opportunities. In many parts of the world, the agriculture sector covers a wide array of industries such as farming, animal, fisheries, food and non-food processing, agro-based industry, the rise of new contract farming activities: such as leech rearing, worms

rearing, herbs and mushroom have indeed attracted huge interests from public.

Despite the potentials of agriculture both for the nation and its individuals, the agriculture sector in Sierra Leone is still considered as secondary as compared to other more popular sectors such as manufacturing, commercial, mining or even the government sector. This is largely due to the conventional opinion that the agricultural sector is a rough, back-breaking job with low salaries and that it does not promise a direct good future for the people. It is considered not the right place especially for those with tertiary education even though the number of unemployment among the university graduates keep on increasing, (Bowen, 2002). It is his opinion that this situation should be taken more seriously as for most countries this problem can result in national crises.

The number of youths constitutes over 60% of Sierra Leone citizens and the current rate of unemployment among youths is more than 20%, (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, 2005). The agriculture industry has huge potential and thriving business and with full and active government backing, it will provide big opportunity to agriculturists. The general perception of people towards agriculture is negative; Dyer and Brefa, (2003) state that studies into enrolment patterns in Agriculture programmes at tertiary institutions reveal decreasing numbers and that the lack of interest in making Agriculture a career will translate into fewer teachers and that this does not bode well for the agriculture sector. They further stated that there still exists the belief among many young students that the agriculture sector does not have the ability to offer a high income and that it does not have high potential for returns both for the users and the service providers in a technological age.

According to Othman and Ishak (2009), Esters and Bowen (2004), students' choice of careers indicts parents and/or guardians who are most influential in the decisions they make as to courses they study both at school and the tertiary institutions. The writers after studying the low interest of students in the United States stressed that it is up to the decision makers and the stakeholders in the industry to use research and sensitization to get secondary school students interested in studying Agriculture at the tertiary level. Gibbs (2005) state that Agricultural Education in tertiary education attracts fewer students than other fields of study and he gives reasons for the apathetic attitude to agriculture as due to some of the following factors: perceptions of Agriculture as a less prestigious and profitable profession and parents and guardians from both urban and rural areas advising their children not to pursue Agriculture as a career because it is deemed as non-profitable as most of the farmers in the rural areas lives in poverty, (Connors, Moore and Elliot, 1989).

A study conducted in Nigeria, Afonja and Olusi, (1995) bring out gender factors as another key reason that

affects the educated youths not taking agriculture as a career. They opine that although, more than 60 percent of the labour forces in traditional agricultural production are women, less than 25 percent of those studying Agriculture in three agricultural tertiary institutions in Nigeria are women. A conclusion from the research revealed that women are afraid to study Agriculture and take it as a career because it is seen as a back breaking profession that requires hard labour and is deemed as unsuitable for women. The study also brought out the fact that less than twenty percent of the staff of the Faculties of Agriculture of tertiary institutions are women and the majority of them are in the Home Economics Departments, which involves careers stereotyped as exclusively women. Thus, women lack role models in the tertiary institutions who could motivate them to take up Agriculture as a career.

Research Design

The objectives of this study were: to determine senior secondary school students' perception of agriculture as a career; to determine their perception of the importance of Agriculture; to find out demographic factors of the respondents; and to determine the factors that influence decisions to choose or not to choose agriculture as a career.

The study population was 120 students, with an equal number of the two sexes, from schools in the urban and rural areas in Bo district, Southern Province of Sierra Leone studying Agriculture in school. These students were at the last level of secondary education because this is where decisions are made as to career choices leading to either studying at tertiary institutions or employment. Data was collected in a survey using a three section questionnaire with mainly descriptive questions. Data from the questionnaires was captured using an SPSS package for Windows, analyzed and presented in tabular form. Analytical data was further used resulting in a Pearson Regression analysis.

FINDINGS

Tables 1a and 1b show the occupations of the respondent's parents: Table 1a –shows that 34.2 percent of their fathers are farmers and Table 1b shows that 28.3 % of their mothers are farmers. The data revealed is not surprising as the district used in the study includes both urban and rural areas.

This table 2 below shows some of the comments made by students on reasons why they are studying Agricultural Science. 49.1 % state that they like the course; 19.8 % state that it is easy to pass at the school

Table 1a. Farming Occupation of Fathers of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	YES	41	34.2
	NO	79	65.8
	Total	120	100.0

Table 1b. Farming Occupation of Fathers of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	YES	34	28.3
	NO	86	71.7
	Total	120	100.0

Table 2. Reasons for studying agriculture

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	I LIKE THE COURSE	57	47.5
	IT IS A SUBJECT EASY TO PASS AT THE SCHOOL LEAVING EXAMINATION	23	19.2
	MY PARENT(S) SELECTED IT FOR ME	11	9.2
	I LIKE PRACTICAL SUBJECTS	13	10.8
	I LIKE PRACTICAL SUBJECTS MY PARENT(S) ARE FARMERS	13	10.8
	MY PARENT(S) ARE FARMERS	12	10.0
	Total	116	96.7
	Total	120	100.0

leaving examination; 11.2 percent are of the opinion that they are studying Agricultural Science in school because it is practically oriented; 10.3 percent because their parents are farmers; 9.5 % state that it was selected by the parents, This table shows that at the secondary level, students are interested in Agriculture as a subject mostly because they like the subject.

According to table 3 below, the majority, 67.5 % of the respondents want to take other professions as careers. This means that other careers are deemed more interesting. The remaining 32.5 % would like to take Agriculture as a career option. Agriculture is not an attractive career for these young to be school leavers.

The table 4 below reveals reasons why Agriculture may not be an attractive career for young students. Most of the reasons shown above reveal misconceptions and purely subjective reasons not based on facts and

research. 20.8 percent state that those pursuing careers in Agriculture are not as well dressed as those in other professions like law, accountancy and banking; 20.0 percent state that Agriculture is not lucrative; 18.33 percent said that young people are not attracted to careers in Agriculture and the same percent are of the opinion that Agriculture leads to one becoming a farmer. 12.5 percent of the respondents are convinced that Agriculture leads to one residing in the rural areas and 10 percent equate agriculture with farming and agree with the statement that states that Agriculture is a dirty profession.

This table 5 below used the Regression Model to find out the most significant determinants that influence the choice of Agriculture as a career to the respondents. The following determinants were used: Types of School, Sex, Location, Current Class of Respondents, Occupation of Father as a farmer, Other family members involved in Agriculture, no of times Agricultural Science appears in

Table 3. Undertaking Agriculture as a Career

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	YES	41	32.5
	NO	79	67.5
TOTAL		120	100.0

Table 4. Reasons why students do not like agriculture

	Frequency	Percent
It is not lucrative	24	20.0
Its professionals are not as well dressed as lawyers, accountants and bankers	25	20.8
Young People are not attracted to Agriculture	22	18.33
It leads to one becoming a farmer	22	18.33
Agriculturalists live in the rural areas	15	12.5
It is a dirty profession	12	10.0
Total	120	100.0

Table 5. Determinants of choice of agriculture as a career

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.995	.477		4.184	.000
TYPES OF SCHOOL	-.085	.231	-.044	-.369	.713
LOCATION	-.043	.176	-.026	-.245	.807
SEX	-.305	.145	-.186	-2.097	*.039
CURRENT CLASS	.064	.096	.064	.667	.506
IS YOUR FATHER A FAMER?	-.210	.165	-.129	-1.273	.206
HOW MANY OF YOUR OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS INVOLVED IN AGRICULTURE?	-.198	.072	-.273	-2.770	*.007
HOW MANY TIMES A WEEK DOES AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE APPEAR IN THE TIME TABLE?	-.142	.095	-.135	-1.499	.137
DO YOU HAVE ASCHHOL GARDEN?	.797	.151	.524	5.294	*.000

P 95% * Significant

the School Time table and Presence of a School Garden. Three of these determinants were found to be positive at the 95 % confidence level. They were: sex of the respondents, other family members involved in Agriculture and presence of a school garden.

DISCUSSION

The study continues to corroborate studies cited in this work, Dryer and Brefa (2003) and Bowen (2002) that Agriculture is not a career that young people wants to

pursue. It is interesting that many of the respondents used in the study like the subject; unfortunately, most of these students do not want to pursue Agriculture as a career even if they pass the subject at the School Leaving Examination. A majority of these students live in rural areas where poverty and deprivation are most severe. Since almost all rural households depend directly or indirectly on agriculture, and given the large contribution of this sector to the overall economy, it should be obvious to the students in the study that agriculture is an important component of the nation. Instead as in other African countries, a strategy to

enhance the lives of farmers has not yet been implemented. Most African countries have not yet met the requirements for a successful agricultural revolution, and factor productivity in African agriculture seriously lags behind the rest of the world. The findings of this study corroborate the findings of Connors, Moore and Elliot (1989) that the poverty in rural areas and among farmers have led to growing skepticism in the community, especially among the educated class about agriculture's relevance to growth and poverty reduction.

Agriculture when pursued at the tertiary level demands that it be treated as a Science subject. All over the world, academic programmes in the Sciences in the tertiary institutions attract fewer students every year. Although, Agriculture is generating new opportunities, especially in the agro-business world, students refuse to take it up as a career because for them Agriculture is synonymous with farming as the study revealed and as stated by Gibbs (2005) most of the farmers they know, including their parents and community members are poor. It is unfortunate that the educated youths full of energy and aspirations are repelled by the career that majority of the communities they live in are involved with.

According to Dyer and Brefa (2005) as stated earlier in the study, decline in pursuing agriculture as a career can be attributed to many people having little agricultural knowledge due to large populations moving from rural farm areas to more urbanized areas, which supports the need for agricultural education in today's schools. Early exposure to opportunities in Agriculture should be implemented to broaden students' perceptions of agriculture. The research refutes a study by Gibbs (2005) that it is parents who discourages students' interest in Agriculture. Only a small percentage, less than 10 percent, of the sample used in the study stated that it was parents that influenced their decisions to study Agriculture. Sensitization on the benefits of taking up Agriculture as a career must be specific for the students themselves and not the parents who have little influence on students' choice of careers.

Students may be choosing careers in other fields unrelated to agriculture as a result of seeing their friends experience limited employment opportunities within the fields of agriculture. The study showed that Agriculture as a career is still synonymous with farming in the eyes of young students and that continues to be a major reason why it is not popular. Therefore, students need to be aware of career fields within the agricultural industry, such as Biotechnology, Veterinary Science, Agribusiness and Food Science.

Educated youths are the future of a country with their limitless energy and aspiration and hence there is a need to ensure a successful agricultural sector in this country. Currently there is job scarcity in other more established fields such as government as well as the private sectors. The ability of agriculture sector to create an environment so that youths are willing to embark in this sector is

urgently required. Educated youths' awareness and commitment to the agriculture sector need to be revived. Above all, there is pressing need to change the perception of youths towards looking the agriculture sector as one of the opportunity for them to be self-employed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important that Policy makers help schools and Agricultural societies to sensitize students on educational and career opportunities in Agriculture. Also, efforts must be made to provide sufficient finances, books, facilities and infrastructure for schools and tertiary institutions offering Agricultural Science. Infrastructure, equipment and other facilities will help shape interest in Agriculture as career options. By SSS level, students seem to already have a solid view of their image about agriculture. Because of this, early inclusion of an agricultural course, possibly at the primary school level, should be implemented to broaden students' perceptions of agriculture and its related fields.

Because students were aware of the many occupations in agriculture but less confident about settling for an agricultural career, agricultural instructors, along with other teachers in the school, should collaborate and implement some form of instruction that could be used as a tool to inform students on what requirements they would need in order to pursue a particular field in agriculture or a related field. Majority of the students were more likely to enroll in an agricultural education class for "exam" reasons, counselors should discourage students from enrolling in agricultural education classes for reasons only to pass the subject but to pursue it as career options.

Agricultural Science should be made compulsory in schools from primary level to senior secondary school level, considering its socio-economic importance to the country in providing jobs and food for the populace. Efforts must be made to encourage more females taking up agriculture and minimizing it as a male profession. Scholarships and affirmative admission processes skewed to increasing enrolment must be instituted at the tertiary levels. . Studies similar to this one should be conducted in different demographical and educational settings. For instance, this study should be replicated at schools that are located in large urban areas, possibly at the tertiary level.

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