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# Idle Youth, Idle Fields: How Nigeria Can Turn its Unemployment Crisis into an Agribusiness Revolution

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria faces one of the most acute youth unemployment crises in the world. With a population of approximately 237 million and a median age of just 19.2 years (United Nations, 2024), the country's labour market is under extraordinary pressure. Nigeria ranks 172<sup>nd</sup> out of 183 countries in the 2023 Global Youth Development Index, placing second-to-last for youth employment and opportunity (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024).

Despite a recent methodological revision by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) that lowered the headline youth unemployment rate to 6.5% in 2024 (ILO, 2025), the Afrobarometer (2025) cautions that pre-revision estimates, which recorded youth unemployment as high as 53.4% for 15–24-year-olds in 2020, remain more reflective of labour market realities. Critically, 93% of Nigerian employment is informal (NBS, 2023; Yami et al., 2019), and 13.8% of all young people are neither in employment, education, nor training (NEET), underlining the depth of the crisis beyond headline figures.

As argued by Geza et al. (2021) and Duah et al. (2024), youth participation in agriculture

is crucial for generating employment opportunities and advancing agri-food systems across Africa. The agricultural sector is Nigeria's largest employer, accounting for over 35% of the total workforce (NBS, 2023). Yet the sector faces a grave generational crisis: the average Nigerian farmer is aged 50-60 years, food shortages affect approximately 25 million Nigerians, and Nigeria's agricultural import bill surged 30% to ₦920 billion in Q1 2024 (BusinessDay, 2024; FGN, 2024). As highlighted by Adeyanju et al. (2024) in a systematic review of 57 studies across sub-Saharan Africa, access to finance, land, and skills training remain the primary barriers preventing young people from entering and succeeding in agribusiness.

Against this backdrop, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) launched N-Power in 2016, the largest post-tertiary jobs programme in Africa, with the N-Power Agro component specifically targeting youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness. According to Ogunmodede et al. (2020), whose impact evaluation provides the empirical basis for this brief, the programme operates on a learn–work–entrepreneurship (LWE) model designed to equip young Nigerians with skills, field experience, and entrepreneurial capacity.

This policy brief translates those findings into actionable recommendations for Nigeria’s policymakers, industry leaders, and the broader public.

The study asks, does the N-Power Agro programme effectively generate employment and improve incomes for young Nigerians, and what reforms are needed to maximise its transformative potential?

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

The study was conducted in three southwestern Nigerian states (Oyo, Ogun, and Lagos), selected for their representativeness of national youth engagement patterns in agriculture. Using a two-stage cluster sampling design, a final sample of 645 respondents was drawn, comprising 345 N-Power Agro participants and 300 non-participants matched on sex, age, educational level, and income. Data was collected through structured, face-to-face interviews administered by trained enumerators. Three analytical methods were applied. Descriptive statistics profiled respondents socioeconomically, logistic regression identified predictors of youth agribusiness self-employment, and a Sharp Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) causally estimated the programme’s income impact by exploiting the merit-based selection score cutoff of 80 marks as a natural experiment.

## **3. KEY INSIGHTS**

### **N-Power Agro significantly increases participant income.**

The regression discontinuity analysis shows that participation in N-Power Agro increased average income by ₦30,191.46 compared to non-participants, a statistically significant result ( $p < 0.01$ ). This income gain exceeds the monthly stipend of ₦30,000, demonstrating that the programme generates returns beyond the direct financial transfer. These findings align with those of Bello et al. (2021), whose study on the Youth-in-Agribusiness (YIA) Programme in southwestern Nigeria found that participation in structured agribusiness programmes significantly increases gainful employment among youth. Similarly, as argued in a study by Bello et al. (2022), participation in youth agribusiness programmes produces a statistically significant poverty reduction, with non-participants estimated to have experienced a 28% reduction in poverty exposure had they been enrolled.

### **Younger age and hands-on experience drive agribusiness self-employment.**

Logistic regression results show that age and years of agribusiness experience are the strongest positive predictors of self-employment through agribusiness. A one-unit increase in age raises the probability of self-employment by 29%, while each additional year of agribusiness experience increases that probability by over 100% ( $p < 0.10$ ). These findings align with those of Alabi et al. (2023), whose study on determinants of youth participation in agribusiness in Osun State, Nigeria,

confirmed that practical experience and entrepreneurial exposure are more decisive than formal qualifications in shaping youth agribusiness engagement. Conversely, higher educational attainment beyond a bachelor's degree reduces the likelihood of agribusiness self-employment by 53%, reflecting a persistent preference for formal white-collar employment among highly educated youth. This is a pattern also noted by Geza et al. (2021) across multiple African country contexts.

**Monthly stipends are valued over skills development, constraining long-term impact.**

Nearly half of N-Power Agro participants (48.1%) identified monthly stipends as their primary perceived benefit, compared to only 13.84% who prioritised training and skills development. Approximately 80% reported an inability to save enough from their ₦30,000 monthly stipend to invest in an agribusiness venture. As argued by Adeyanju et al. (2024), youth-facing agribusiness programmes that prioritise financial transfers over business literacy, market linkages, and risk management fail to build the durable entrepreneurial foundations required for long-term self-employment. This stipend-over-skills dynamic directly undermines N-Power Agro's stated goal of entrepreneurship and economic self-sufficiency.

**Female youth remain systematically excluded.**

Male respondents constituted 76.79% of N-Power Agro participants, reflecting

entrenched gender disparities in agricultural programme uptake. The physical demands of primary agriculture, combined with ICT-based selection processes that may inadvertently disadvantage women, create structural barriers to female participation. ILO (2025) confirms this nationally, recording women's unemployment rate at 7.8% compared to 5.4% for men. As highlighted by Adeyanju et al. (2024), gender-inclusive agribusiness policies must focus on segments of the value chain, including processing, packaging, and trade, where women can participate on more equitable terms. Without deliberate corrective measures, these disparities will persist, limiting the programme's reach and equity outcomes.

#### **4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Upscale the programme with targeted gender inclusion measures.**

The federal and state governments should expand N-Power Agro while introducing deliberate interventions to close the gender gap. Adeyanju et al. (2024) make the case that youth agribusiness policies should prioritise value chain segments such as input supply, agro-processing, and food marketing, which are less physically demanding and more accessible to women. Recruitment criteria should be redesigned to reduce gender bias embedded in ICT-based screening, and dedicated female-targeted cohorts, mentorship networks, and gender-sensitive training modules should be embedded into programme delivery.

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### **Replace stipend dependence with capital and asset empowerment.**

Rather than relying on monthly stipends as the primary incentive, the government should reorient N-Power Agro towards capital endowments, land access, input credit, and enterprise matching grants. Bello et al. (2022) show that programme designs which combine training with productive asset transfers produce significantly stronger poverty-reduction and employment outcomes than income transfers alone. Linking programme graduates to the government's Home-Grown School Feeding Programme as agricultural suppliers offers one immediate mechanism for channelling participants into productive enterprise without fostering long-term stipend dependency.

### **Establish age-targeted agribusiness programmes for the 20–35 age cohort.**

Programme design should explicitly prioritise youth within the 20–35 age bracket. Ogunmodede et al. (2020) show that this cohort has the highest probability of creating sustained agribusiness employment, driven by innovation, risk appetite, and physical capacity. Targeted mentorship, peer learning networks, and business incubation support should be embedded into programme delivery. Intervention pathways should also bridge the gap between the N-Power stipend period and full entrepreneurial independence.

### **Strengthen agricultural value chain diversification policies.**

Nigeria's agricultural value chain is underdeveloped, with critical weaknesses in processing, storage, and market infrastructure. Effective policy interventions must prioritise financial literacy training, market linkage facilitation, and risk management support to make agribusiness viable beyond primary production. With Nigeria's agricultural import bill surging 30% in Q1 2024, policymakers must incentivise private sector investment in agro-processing and support cooperatives that can aggregate youth-produced outputs at competitive scale. N-Power Agro graduates should be systematically connected to value chain actors rather than left to navigate fragmented markets independently.

### **Make youth co-designers of agricultural policy.**

Governments must formalise youth consultation mechanisms within national agricultural planning processes so that young people's priorities, lived experiences, and entrepreneurial perspectives directly shape how programmes are designed, delivered, and evaluated. Geza et al. (2021) and Duah et al. (2024) show that the meaningful participation of youth in the design and governance of agricultural programmes is an important success factor that remains largely absent from African policy frameworks. Youth should be treated as partners and leaders, not only as beneficiaries.

### **Expand and adapt the model across Africa.**

The income and employment effects documented in southwestern Nigeria make

a strong case for wider adoption of youth agribusiness frameworks across the continent. The African Development Bank (AfDB), through its Feed Africa Strategy, and the ECOWAS Commission, through its Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP), should lead efforts to adapt and scale evidence-based youth agribusiness models in partnership with national governments, rural communities, and private sector actors. The African Union Commission’s Agenda 2063 flagship programmes on agricultural transformation offer an additional vehicle for embedding Nigeria’s lessons into a continental policy architecture. The AfDB projects a need for 68 million new African jobs by 2030, a quarter of which Nigeria must fill. The evidence is in place, but what is needed now is the political will to act on it.

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