



## Tertiary Agricultural Science Students' Perception of Small and Micro Agro-Enterprise Development as a Poverty Reduction Strategy in Imo State Nigeria.

By

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### Abstract

*The study of agriculture offers plenty opportunities for self-reliance, food security and even poverty reduction. Students of agriculture at the tertiary level have not told us their perception of the above assertion. Therefore, we carried out this research to ascertain students' perception of small and micro agro-enterprises for poverty reduction. A total of 310 tertiary agricultural students were chosen from five (5) tertiary institutions in Imo state. Questionnaire was used to elicit response from the students and percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to analyse data obtained from the students. Results showed that numerous agro-enterprise ventures exist such as supply of agro-chemical (83.3%), seeds/seedlings supply (98%), crop production/reusing (99.3%), livestock production (96.78%), cassava processing (82.9%), sales of yam (98.7%), among others. Agro-enterprise create/generate employment (M=3.41), aid skill acquisition (M=3.14), increase house hold income (M=3.13), self-empowerment (M=3.33), mobilize savings (M=3.01) and the likes. These are poverty reduction potentials of small and micro agro-enterprise ventures. The challenges faced include lack of access to land (M=4.0), shortage of Fund (M=3.85), high interest rate for borrowing (M=4.0), power supply (M=3.91), among other challenges. It is recommended that access to land be improved by reviewing the provision of the land use act so that would-be entrepreneurs could have land to farm; infrastructural facilities should be provided to promote better business environment.*

**Keywords:** Agriculture, agro-enterprise, poverty reduction, entrepreneur, small and medium

### INTRODUCTION

About 70% of Nigeria's population lives in rural areas and works in agriculture at the peasant level. The growing need for increased agricultural production in Nigeria does, however, present options for farmers to mitigate the negative effects of conventional farming methods and underutilization of inputs in the new farming order of mechanization dubbed "precision agriculture" (Aldrich,2004). The integration of small and medium-sized businesses is one method for reversing this detrimental effect (SME). Small and medium-sized businesses are viewed as essential to the country's integrated growth, reduction of poverty, and elimination of unemployment (Bello and Saidu,2015).

It is essential to provide an enabling environment for agricultural SMEs in Africa since small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) are the foundation of growth in production, employment, and innovation. tiny and Medium-sized businesses (SMEs) are widely seen as a source of pride. every state or nation. Due to the important significance that SMEs

play SME participation in the expansion and development of diverse economies accurately described as "the catalysts for growth" and "the motor of growth" for every country's socioeconomic change. SMEs offers an effective means of achieving national economic goals for reducing unemployment and poverty reduction with little effort and the creation of capabilities for starting businesses and local technology (Khan,2014).

In many developing economies, agriculture has served as the backbone, employing a larger share of the labor force and greatly boosting GDP. In Nigeria, agriculture accounts for around 40% of the country's GDP and employs about 55% of the working population. In addition, even though cocoa accounted for the majority, agricultural output growth has been the highest. However, food crop and export crop farmers and rural self-employed people engaged in off-farm activities like trading are said to have the greatest rates of poverty (Adebisi et al.,2015). The "hoe and cutlass" technique of agriculture is being used in Nigeria today, along with very



little processing. The majority of farmers work on farms that are barely subsistence-level.

Therefore, the growth of agricultural businesses, especially those engaged in agroprocessing, will greatly increase the value of products and raise rural incomes. By boosting and diversifying income, expanding market accessibility, enhancing product quality, enhancing product value through intermediate processing, and supplying service industries, it would help to reduce poverty.

Nigeria is blessed with enormous tracts of productive arable land that can be used to grow SME agriculture projects. It makes sense that the economy must experience significant transformation and prosperity if the nation is to demonstrate serious commitment to the development of SMEs in the agricultural sector. For the country's overall economic development, a vibrant SMEs subsector in the agricultural industry is essential and important (Okpachu, 2018). Aside from offering employment possibilities that contribute to poverty reduction, SMEs also support the use of regional raw materials and effective methods for reducing rural-to-urban migration. An enhancement in the agrobusiness sector's operations in a nation will increase demand in other economic sectors as well as create jobs within the industry.

Any nation's efforts to reduce poverty can have a significant positive impact on the quality of life for its citizens and its economic development (Tefera, 2013). This calls for industrialization, where micro and small businesses are emphasized as one of the programs and tools to hasten economic growth, socioeconomic advancement, and ultimately the decrease of poverty across the country. They significantly boost employment in numerous developing nations where there is a problem with excessive unemployment and poverty (Diriba, 2013). Small-scale industries are well known for their significant contributions to the reduction of poverty, the process of development, and as drivers of economic growth. They are also a crucial component of the manufacturing subsector, an effective strategy for combating unemployment, diversifying output, and achieving trade and balance of payments (Umogbai et al., 2016).

In both developed and developing nations, micro and smallscale businesses are regarded as the most significant alternative sector for promoting socioeconomic advancements and eradicating poverty. It is the primary sector to accomplish the aim through raising living standards, increasing wealth and saving, and providing employment. MSEs are crucial because the rates of poverty and unemployment in these nations are significantly greater than in developed countries (Siyum, 2015). Additionally, MSEs can contribute to the socioeconomic advancement of the poor by enabling them to obtain socioeconomic benefits like education, better health, decent housing, and nutrition through the generation of their income (Ephrem, 2010).

According to a study by FDRE (2013), micro and small businesses, which account for more than 50% of GDP and 60% of employment in developed economies but less than

30% of employment and 17% of GDP in developing nations, are substantial contributors to both employment and economic growth. MSEs are Ethiopia's second largest source of employment after agriculture (Habtam et al., 2013). MSEs have long been acknowledged as crucial tools for a nation's economy to grow faster and diversify its sources of income (Munira, 2012). They can also assist in achieving a more equitable distribution of the advantages of economic growth, thereby assisting in reducing some of the issues related to unequal income distribution, the creation of jobs, industrial development, rural development, and poverty alleviation, job creation, to identify and exploit market opportunities, and export growth to provide the basis for medium and large scale enterprises (Zemenu and Mohamed, 2014).

According to the Addis Ababa 2016 report, a growing number of job seekers are resorting to micro and small businesses due to the public sector's limited ability for employment creation and the agriculture sector's deteriorating absorptive capacity (MSEs). The primary reason the Nigerian government is concentrating on micro and small businesses is because of their superior ability to reduce unemployment and poverty compared to other industries. Even he places more emphasis on small and medium sized businesses than on giant and medium-sized businesses. The government has provided MSEs with considerable support through a variety of initiatives, including financial assistance, marketing links, free production and operating space, free exhibition space, and promotion (Amare and Raghurama, 2017).

The Federal Government of Nigeria declared the inclusion of entrepreneurship instruction in higher educational institutions in response to the aforementioned situation as a means of encouraging Nigerian youngsters to pursue selfemployment, particularly in the agricultural sector.

As a result, initiatives like Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWiN), a creative business plan competition aimed at creating jobs by encouraging and assisting aspirant enterprising young people in Nigeria to create and carry out company ideas, have been introduced (YouWiN, 2012). The programme is being funded and implemented in partnership with Nigeria's private sector. It is aimed at empowering the resource poor farmer especially in the rural areas to take responsibility for their businesses and theoretically, have more freedom to farm as they wish (European Commission, 2004). This is because entrepreneurial development in rural areas has been connected with a progressive modernization of agriculture and is connected with multifunctional rural development (Zmija, 2001).

Today, particularly following the implementation of new economic policies, entrepreneurship has taken on a more vital role in Nigeria's economic growth. For instance, the importance of entrepreneurship goes beyond raising per capita output and income under the influence of the continuously shifting business environment. It is increasingly anticipated that entrepreneurship will act as a catalyst for economic growth, and as a result, there have been quick developments

and advancements in a variety of industries all around the world (Mbam and Nwibo, 2013).

The rise of entrepreneurship also entails a shift in the quality of management in the farming process, therefore farmers are becoming more entrepreneurial in order to develop new skills and functional capacities in order to be competitive (Firlej, 2001). However, despite the potential of agriculture in the Nigerian economy, hunger and poverty have continued to pose severe risks to national development across the board (Mbam et al., 2010).

Thus, although being a crucial component of value added agriculture, the role of entrepreneurship and innovation has received little attention in agriculture, with the exception of a few rare instances (Knudson et al., 2004). The way tertiary students view agro enterprise for poverty reduction is still not known.

In order to determine someone's interest in a subject, one need only inquire about it. Youth must be inspired to respond better to agriculture as a discipline in order for agriculture to improve and to get the required results from the kids, as youth are the key to the success of any program. Aldrich (2004) said that graduates in agriculture will be required more and more in the 21st century, along with broad knowledge in farm production and food science. Agriculturists with university training are required for crucial roles like subject matter experts in policy creation and administration at the federal, state, and municipal levels of government. But the unpleasant reality is that most undergraduates have a lax attitude toward the agricultural discipline, and many are prepared to leave the field after graduation in favor of positions that they consider to be more profitable (Gagne, 2004).

All of the subsectors had as their goal educating people, particularly young people, on how to increase agricultural output. Since agriculture and related industries support 75% of our population, and this trend is projected to continue into the future, an agricultural university's key role will be to prepare students for careers in agricultural research, extension, and other related fields. According to the national policy on education (2004), one of the goals of agricultural education is to pique students' interest in agriculture. Unfortunately, it is seen that this interest in practical agriculture is waning because fewer students are enrolling in agriculture as their area of specialization, which is a sensitive issue. FAO (2009) stated that this "lack of concern for actual manpower needs could cripple the production system by not providing the right talent for the right training to the right individuals.

To achieve this, it is imperative to generate graduates who are well educated, highly motivated, and capable of performing both specialised and generalist roles. This presents a challenge to the future of agricultural education and extension as well as agricultural scientists to stay on the right track by clearly identifying the functional issues of youth attitudes toward agriculture so that more efficiency in the discipline may be attained (Yannlebaeu, 2009). Most of our Youth doesn't seem to appreciate the fact that agriculture is crucial in the development of Nigeria as such they are not always ready to

support any sound agricultural policy. A survey on "the learners attitudes towards agricultural policy" by Chimwaze and Pai (2006) showed that Agricultural Science was certainly not a favorite subject of the students also many shows that they will not like to see agricultural science as their future profession.

According to Gagne (2004), many students have a negative attitude toward agriculture, which may be caused by a number of factors. Many people still believe that agricultural science is just a way of life for farmers. Agriculture courses are highly extensive and voluminous, there are no worthwhile careers in it, and agricultural science cannot be useful to any student in the near future. To name a few, the agricultural discipline is unprofitable, it is a very challenging degree, and the jobs it offers are typically low-paying. Many students also have negative perceptions about their professors and the school amenities as a result of these misconceptions. The objectives of the research work therefore are to : a) identify small and micro agro-enterprises in the area; b) examine tertiary students perception of the potentials of agro-enterprise development as poverty reduction strategy and c) ascertain perceived challenges to Small and medium agro-enterprise ventures.

## Methodology

**Imo State** is a state in the South-East zone of Nigeria. It is bordered to the north by Anambra State, Rivers State to the east and south, and Abia State to the west. The state capital is Owerri and its state nickname is the "Eastern Heartland. Imo has an estimated population of 6,347.078 million persons in 2022 projected from the 2006 census figure (Nigeria Informer, 2022). There are several institutions of higher learning including state and federal government run institutions such as: Federal Polytechnic, Nekede (POLYNEK), Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO); Imo State University, Owerri (IMSU); Imo State Polytechnic, Umuagwo (IMOPOLY); Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education (ALVAN). These were selected for the study because they offer agriculture since inception. Random sampling technique was employed to select 310 students doing agriculture. From FUTO, we selected 150 students, IMSU 100 students, POLYNEK 25 students, IMOPOLY 20 students, ALVAN 15 students. Primary and secondary data sources were. The primary data were collected from the field survey, using questionnaire. The secondary data were collected from books, reports, journals, existing literature review, information from library etc. Basically, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. This involves the use of percentages and frequency counts, for objective 1. While objectives 2 and 3 were analyzed using a 4-point likert type scale of strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed to examine students perception of small and micro agro-enterprises as poverty reduction strategy and challenges to small and micro agro-ventures. The responses were assigned weight of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively and added to give 10 divided by 4 to give a mean of 2.50. A mean score of 2.50 and above indicated potentials of small and micro agro-enterprise and challenges to agro-enterprise

development, while a mean score lower than 2.50 indicated no potential benefits and not a challenges.

This is mathematically represented as

$$\frac{4+3+2+1}{4} = \frac{10}{4} = 2.50$$

## Results and Discussion

### Small and Micro Agro-enterprise Ventures in Imo State

Table 1 shows 4 major small and micro agro-ventures in Imo state. They are farm input distribution, farm production, agro-processing and farm distribution/marketing.

#### Farm Input distribution/supply

These means supplies needed for agricultural production and includes building materials, fertilizer, dip, veterinary preparations, seed, animal feeding stuffs, breeding stock, draft animals, planting material, farm implements, land tools, fencing material, petroleum products and other supplies and equipment normally used in agricultural production Several enterprises exist under this group such as farm equipment supply (54.6%), fertilizer supply (67.7%), agro-chemical supply (83.3%), seeds/seedlings supply (98%), livestock feeds supply (67.4%), breeding stocks (62.5%), medicals/drugs supply (59.3%).

#### Farm Production

Farm production means the production of any growing grass or crop attached to the surface of the land, whether or not the grass or crop is to be sold commercially, and the production of any farm animals, including farmed elk, whether or not the animals are to be sold commercially. Farm entrepreneurs can take up agricultural crop production (99.3%), these includes cassava production, yam, cocoyam, maize, and many more. Other areas include livestock production (96.7%), which includes poultry, piggery, rabbitry, snail farming etc; fishing/aquaculture production (93.5%), tobacco production (45.1%), mushroom keeping (63.5%) and raising horticulture/ornamental crops (70%).

#### Agro-Processing

Agro-processing refers to the sub-sector of the manufacturing that beneficiates primary materials and intermediate goods from agricultural, fisheries and forestry based sectors. Agro-processing refers to the activities that transform agricultural commodities into different forms that add value to the product which yields high returns to the farmer. Growth in agro-processing industry plays could play a vital role in the national economic development and has the potential to meet the local needs and export requirements. As increased agricultural production is envisaged, there is need to have proportionate improvement in the agro-processing industry. These include cassava processing (82.9%) into garri, flour, tapioca etc; animal feeds processing (68.7%) using maize, millet, cassava and other compound to formulate feeds of high quality value for animal growth and improvement; palm oil processing (82.2%), this could be done manually or using machine to extract red palm oil for family use and sales to the market; rice processing (67.4%), wood/timber works (56.7%), cloths dyeing (61.6%), charcoal making (74.1%), soap making (58.1%), roselle juice making (69%), otherwise called zobo drink making. This drink is very

high in vitamins and minerals used for treatment of different ailments and balancing the body system.

#### Farm Produce Distribution/marketing

This is the process of carrying agricultural produce in large quantities or amount by vehicles. These vehicles (Lorries) distribute these products to specific companies, market or middle men. Agricultural marketing is an aspect of marketing which involves taking farm produce and other agricultural allied products to consumers for exchange of money. Marketing is an integral part of agriculture. A would-be entrepreneur could distribute and market his numerous farm produce to consumers. These include cassava farm product sales (50.9%), confectionaries (64.8%), palm products (74.5%), livestock feed sales (79.8%), yam sales (98.7%), rice selling (93.8%), sale of fruits and vegetables (98%), roasting of maize (93.2%) and making and sales of cornflakes/popcorns (59.3%). The above agrees with Lwakuba (2011) who reported that farm production paradigms in have various options which includes engagements in different agricultural operations such as food processing, direct marketing or organic production among others as well as engagement in business activities or involvement in the provision of services such as handling agricultural inputs including certified seed, fish fry or breeding improved animals. Again, Vesala and Peura (2003) inferred in a study by European Union that farmers who do not diversify lack entrepreneurial skills growth and expansion of farm business.

**Table 1: Small and Micro Agro-enterprise ventures in the study area**

SM Agro-enterprises	*Frequency	Percentage
<b>Farm Input Supply</b>		
Farm equipment supply	164	54.6
Fertilizer supply	210	67.7
Agro-chemical	250	83.3
Seeds/seedlings	304	98.0
Livestock feeds	209	67.4
Breeding stocks	194	62.5
Medical/drugs supplies	184	59.3
<b>Farm Production</b>		
Agricultural crops	308	99.3
Livestock production	300	96.7
Fishery/aquaculture production	290	93.5
Tobacco production	140	45.1
Mushroom keeping/production	197	63.5
Raising horticulture/ ornamental crops	217	70.0

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**Agro-Processing**

Cassava processing	257	82.9
Animal food processing	213	68.7
Palm oil processing	255	82.2
Rice processing	209	67.4
Wood/timber work (lumbering)	176	56.7
Cloths dyeing	191	61.6
Charcoal making	230	74.1
Soap/detergent production	174	56.1
Roselle juice making (zobo)	214	69.0

**Farm distribution/marketing**

Cassava products sales	158	50.9
Confectionaries	201	64.8
Palm products	231	74.5
Timber products		
Livestock feeds sales	245	79.3
Yam sales	306	98.7
Rice selling	291	93.8
Sale of fruit/vegetable	304	98.0
Roasting maize	280	93.2
Cornflakes/popcorn making	184	59.3

Cornflakes/popcorn making 184 59.3

\*Multiple responses

**Poverty Reduction Potentials of Small and Micro Agro-enterprises**

The important roles and potentials of agro-enterprises for poverty reduction has long been recognised as a key factor in augmenting family welfare. This is shown in table 2 that micro and small agro-enterprises create and generate employment (M=3.31), mobilize saving/good production (M=3.01), economic transition by service provision (M=3.42), create opportunities for human training (M=3.42), increase household income and welfare (M=3.13), aid skill development (M=3.14), creates access to economic opportunities (M=3.10), self-empowerment of individuals (M=3.33), provide new opportunities for poor people (M=3.21), enhance standard of living (M=3.15), ability to acquire economic assets (M=2.85) and provide basic needs of entrepreneurs (M=3.42)

The above implies investment in agro-enterprise for income generating activity are important and a step in the right direction to uplift the lives of rural communities. Raising the production base of capacity, improve rural income and reduce food price and make food accessible for rural people to make ends meets(OEDC,2004). In Bangladesh, women in rural

areas are involved in agro-enterprise like poultry, rearing, sale of eggs, broilers, chicks, goat and sheep fattening, among other income generating activities like poultry production and selling of other products enable women improve their income. An agro-enterprise, not only enhances national productivity, generates employment but help to develop economic independence, personal and social capabilities among rural women (Shepherd,2003 and

Kuratko,2001). The goal of agro-enterprise is to improve management skills and competence, increase productivity/profitability, competitiveness and enhance household income.

Other poverty reduction roles include development of skilled and unskilled labour (M=3.31), utilization of rural/urban idle labour force (M=2.97), achieve high value level of productivity (M=2.71), increase availability of scarce resources for use (M=2.87), reduce unemployment among role individuals (M=3.14) and better use of neglected local resources (M=3.35). The creation of small and micro agro-enterprise can contribute to rural economy having multiplier effect on the local economy. This means that the purchase of goods and services by the local people will go directly or indirectly as stimuli to local economy. The increased income helps the people to obtain better schooling health facilities and empower them to get rid of vicious circle of poverty. Growth kin small and micro enterprise contributes to human capital through on job training and increase tax revenue of the government (Agyapony, 2010). Promoting agro-enterprise and small business increasingly seen as a tool of generating meaning and sustainable employment opportunity particularly for those at the margins of the economy such as women, the poor and people with disabilities. Micro and small agro-enterprise promotes women’s economic empowerment, while fighting poverty (Best,2003 and Giovannucci, 2005).

**Table 2: Poverty Reduction Potentials of Small and Micro Agro-enterprises**

Poverty reduction potentials	Mean	SD
Create and generate employment	3.31	0.67
Mobilize saving/goods production	3.01	0.54
Economic transition by service provisioning	3.09	0.67
Creates opportunities for human training	3.42	0.74
Increase household income and welfare	3.13	0.64
Aids skills development	3.14	0.73
Creates access to economic opportunities	3.10	0.84
Self-empowerment of individuals	3.33	0.62
Provides new opportunities for poor people	3.21	0.98

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Enhance standard of living	3.15	0.78
Ability to acquire economic assets	2.89	0.65
Ability to acquire/obtain loans to grow business	2.91	0.89
Ability to provide basic needs of entrepreneur	3.42	0.91
Development of skilled/unskilled labour	3.31	1.05
Utilization of rural/urban idle labour force	2.97	1.01
Achieve high level of productivity	2.71	0.69
Increase availability of scarce resources for use	2.87	0.55
Reduce unemployment among idle individuals	3.14	0.65
Better use of neglected local resources	3.35	0.71

Accepted mean=2.50

#### Perceived challenges to Small and Micro Agro-enterprise Development

Table 3 showed that the major challenges facing agro-entrepreneur was that of lack of access to land with a mean (m) response of (M=4.00). Land is major asset in the production sector. Availability of land and access to it means great wealth and prestige. He who owns land, owe everything and can use it to obtain loan and other favours as a collateral. Shortage of finance (M=3.85), lack of initial capital (M=3.40), high cost of raw materials (M=2.91), lack of government support (M=2.89), lack of credit facilities (M=3.01) are challenges of small and micro agro-enterprise development.

Other challenges included, high interest rate for borrowing (M=3.41), high tax regimes (M=2.80), lack of awareness of credit opportunities (M=2.76), poor road network (M=3.04), poor market information (M=3.17), inadequate power supply (M=3.91), poor telecommunication facilities (M=2.68), poor managerial skills (M=2.57), lack of experience (M=2.61), lack of professional assistance (M=2.83) which need of it could arise, and poor infrastructure (M=3.33). Justifying inadequate credit facilities as a constraint to agro-enterprise development, Duniya (2010) inferred that low productivity in agriculture has led to limited market surplus which prevents the prospective entrepreneurs in agriculture from having enough cash to procure farm inputs and services. Again, the formal financial intermediaries are not helping issues as most do refuse farmers from sourcing loan from their institutions due to lack of acceptable collateral, hence branding the farmers as non-credit worthy. Again, Diriba (2013) reported that there are many constraints facing micro and small enterprise in operating business. These are unfavourable legal and regulatory environment, discriminatory regulatory practices, lack of access to markets, business information, low access to appropriate technology, poor access to quality business infrastructure, lack of inputs and the like.

**Table 3: Perceived Challenges to SM Agro-enterprise Development**

Challenges	Mean	SD
Lack of access to land	4.00	0.98
Shortage of finance	3.85	1.09
Lack of initial capital	3.40	0.73
High cost of raw material	2.91	0.81
Lack of government support	2.89	0.56
Lack of credit facilities	3.01	0.64
High interest rates for borrowing	3.41	0.91
High tax regimes	2.86	0.89
Lack of awareness of credit opportunities	2.76	0.78
Poor road network	3.04	0.96
Poor market information	3.17	1.05
Inadequate power supply	3.91	1.05
Poor telecommunication facilities	2.68	0.62
Poor managerial skills	2.57	0.63
Lack of experience	2.61	0.89
Lack of professional assistance	2.83	0.62
Poor infrastructure	3.33	0.57

Accepted Mean = 2.50

#### Conclusion

There are four broad areas of agro firms, namely; farm input supply, farm production, agro-processing, and farm distribution/marketing. In developing nations like Nigeria, micro and small size agrofirms are typically seen as the driving force behind economic growth, poverty alleviation, and fair income distribution. After agriculture, it is the sector that creates the most jobs in Nigeria It has been instrumental in helping the country meet its development objectives, such as to equitable income distribution, better use of local resources, the expansion of large industries, attainment of economic independence, increased productivity, and the production of goods and services that meet the basic needs of the underprivileged.

It is crucial for them to use local resources more effectively, raise government tax revenues, adopt appropriate technology, increase revenues, boost individual income or savings, promote gender equality, boost socioeconomic growth, raise standards of living, maintain macroeconomic stability, respond quickly to market changes, innovate, and cut costs. Even while MSEs make significant contributions to reducing poverty, there are issues that prevent the growth of micro and small businesses. These include: inability to obtain start-up financing;

lack of working capital; inability to obtain input on schedule or raw materials; lack of experience; insufficient government support; inability to access training; among many others. To reduce the challenges above, government and other stakeholders should provide the enabling environment by provision of infrastructural facilities for agro business to thrive.

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