Agro-Crime and Agricultural Activities in Guma Local Government of Benue State, Nigeria

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Rural areas by definition are remote areas by-passed by the currents of modern life such as amenities and governmental institutions. Reliable information on social dynamics associated with rural life is therefore lacking. One of such dynamics is the question of agriculture-related crime. The aim of this study was to examine agriculture-related crimes in order to gain insights into how such occurrences affect the activities of farmers in the rural areas. A two-stage sampling procedure was adopted to select a sample of 188 respondents from Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. It was revealed that destruction of crops (24%) and theft of farm produce (22.9%) were the dominant agro-criminal activities. These activities led to reduced output for 69.3% of farmers, and discouraged some (20%) of farmers from growing crops. On the structures on ground to control crime, the dominant was the local vigilante (29.6%), community elders (24.3%) and traditional leaders (19.5%). It was concluded that agro-crime is another factor that negatively affects agricultural production. Hence, serious attention should be accorded the issue by extension services and the other stakeholders in agriculture and rural development.

Keywords: Agricultural crime, rural crime, Rural Policing, Agricultural production, Opportunity theory

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are easy to describe, no matter which part of the world is in focus. The characteristics of rural areas have remained relatively constant even within the context of the rapid changes that have taken place in modern societies. These characteristics include low population density, prevalence of agrarianism or at least the dominance of agriculture as an occupation, the dire infrastructural situation and the prevalence of face-to-face interactions. One chief characteristic of rural areas is their isolation from the urban and modern sectors of the economy. Most rural areas in the developing world are cut off from other parts of the country for most of the rainy season, and experience low presence of government institutions. This isolation also affects the reportage of crime from rural areas. They are poorly policed and official crime statistics and reportage focus mostly on urban crime (Barclay, 2001).

For a country like Nigeria, where a majority of the population lives and works in the rural areas, failure to report rural crime would imply that most of the crime in the country is unreported, even after considering that crime rates in the rural areas are typically lower than urban areas (Weisheit and Donnermeyer, 2000). Agriculture is the main enterprise in the rural areas and crime relating to agriculture is quite significant as it touches on a major facet of rural life and deserves serious research attention. Another serious justification for the study of agricultural crime is the implication for agricultural production and poverty. Barclay and Donnemeyer (2002) reported that agricultural crime negatively affects outputs and also aggravates poverty.

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As important as it is, agricultural crime has received very little attention by scholars. The few literatures available on agricultural crime are from developed countries and they indicate that theft is the most common crime on the farm. Items stolen include tools and equipment, fuel, agricultural machinery, agricultural chemicals and pesticides, fencing material, livestock, seed or grain (Barclay, 2001; Swanson et al., 2002). Generalizations from the studies on crime include the fact that crime rates are lower in the rural areas than in the urban areas (Mears, Scott, and Bhati et al., 2009). Crime has far-reaching impact on the lives of rural people. Apart from the psychological distress of losing something of economic value, sometimes the offender and the victim of agricultural crime are known to each other, and that undermines social cohesiveness as family feuds could ensue.

But then what is agricultural crime? According to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (2015), agricultural crime has no specific definition but is considered to include any statutory or common law offence which may be committed against people in agricultural communities, their lands, businesses and property. Researchers are careful to make a distinction between agricultural crime and rural crime; the latter being defined as any crime that occurs in the rural areas.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this study however, the distinction between rural crime and agricultural crime is not justifiable. Just as official statistics tend to ignore rural crime, so do researchers pay little attention to application of crime theories to rural crime. A salutary departure from this trend is Mears et al. (2007) application of the opportunity theory to rural crime. The opportunity theory of crime simply states that criminals usually choose their targets rationally, preferring those that are less risky and offer high rewards (Mears et al., 2007). Four elements have been identified in the selection of targets by potential criminals. These include: i) Attractiveness (the material or symbolic desirability of property or persons to the criminal) ii) Proximity (the physical distance between the potential targets and the potential criminal) iii) Exposure (physical visibility/accessibility of the persons or objects to the potential criminal), and iv) Guardianship (effectiveness of measures taken to protect persons and properties from being violated).

Rural areas, by their intrinsic characteristics, provide high opportunity for crime to occur. Since oil prices began to fall and the need to diversify the economy of Nigeria acknowledged by the government, commodities produced by farmers have appreciated in value. Credit facilities have been made available to farmers and there have been more investments in the rural areas. So, objects of attraction to criminals have increased. There is also a proximity between the object and persons that constitute the targets of crime, and the potential offenders. The dispersed mode of settlement typical of the study area also means that households are far removed from one another, and may not be able to respond to distress calls from neighbours. Then of course ‘guardianship’ is weak with very poor police presence in most of the rural areas.

Given the vulnerability of the rural people to criminal activity, and the dire implications for agricultural productivity, food security and the national economy, it becomes imperative that accurate data be obtained on rural crime in Nigeria. The study was designed as a little step in this direction. The major objective of the study was to investigate the impact of crime on agricultural activities in Guma Local Government area of Benue State. The specific objectives include the following:

i) identify the types of criminal activities going on in farming communities in the study area;
ii) examine the impact of criminal activity on agricultural productivity;
iii) examine any measures put in place to respond to agricultural crime; and
iv) assess the effectiveness of crime management institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Guma Local Government of Benue State, Nigeria. Situated in the North-eastern part of Benue State, Guma has a total landmass of 240,000 sq. km. and is bounded to the East by Tarka and Logo local government areas and Makurdi local government area in the South. The local government area is very remote with very poor road network, and poor infrastructure. The major occupation in Guma is subsistence agriculture with beans, cassava, groundnuts, maize, millet, rice, sorghum, soybeans and yams as the major crops. Livestock are also kept on a small scale.

A cross-sectional research design was adopted to capture the impact of agricultural crime in a typical agrarian community. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used. At the first stage, Guma Local Government was purposively selected because it represented typically isolated rural environment which is the subject of this study. At the second stage, five wards out of ten were randomly selected. Finally, 75 respondents were randomly selected from each of the five wards, making a total of 375. A structured interview schedule was used to elicit information on respondent’s experience and perceptions of agricultural crime. Simple descriptive statistics were employed in the analysis of all the objectives.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prevalent Criminal Activities

The result in Figure 1 shows that theft is the prevalent form of crime in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. Theft of farm produce constituted almost one quarter (22.9%) of crimes in the study area. Cattle rustling (21.3%) and theft of small ruminants (15.5%) were also found. The destruction of farm produce and arson take up 24.0 % and 7.2%, respectively. The findings are in congruence with happenings elsewhere. In Australia for instance, Barclay (2001) reported that livestock theft was the most significant crime on the farm. In the same vein, Walsh and Walsh (2017) reported that in Ireland, theft constituted 43% of agricultural crimes, and vandalism/criminal damages/trespass was 47%. This may suggest a high vulnerability to crime in rural areas which may be attributed to poor policing or low ‘guardianship.’ Effective policing serves to deter crime. If an area lacks the presence of law enforcement officers, criminals may find their activities rewarding as the probability of apprehension and prosecution is low.

Impact of crime on agricultural activities

The respondents were also asked to state the impact of crimes on their agricultural activities. Figure 2 summarizes their responses. Most of the respondents (69.3 %) reported that agricultural crimes led to a decrease in their productivity. Barclay et al. (2002) confirmed this to be the case in other countries. This is to be expected because a farmer’s output could be negatively affected whether his produce was stolen on the farm or after harvest. The effect would be the same in the case of destruction of crops on the farm as is often experienced when Fulani herdsmen invade the Local Government.

Another effect of theft on the farm is that some farmers stopped cultivating certain crops (20.0%) while others stopped keeping livestock (6.7%). This could be attributed to inability to recover from the loss occasioned by the theft as most of the farmers are very poor and averse to insurance. These dispossessed farmers are potential offenders who may compound the crime situation in the countryside.

Structures for Agricultural Crime Management

Another issue investigated relates to the state of ‘guardianship’ or crime management in the study area. The results in Figure 3 confirm that rural areas are poorly serviced by the police. From the figure, only 12.5 % of the respondents experienced police presence, while 14.1% had access to the court. Majority of the people make use of informal institutions like the vigilante (29.6%), traditional rulers (19.5%) and community elders (24.3%) to deal with issues of criminality. Rural areas are under policed globally, and the resort to informal arrangements is to be expected (Alemika and Chukwuma, 1989; Yarwood and Edwards, 1995)

Effectiveness of Crime Management Structures

To determine the effectiveness of crime management structures in Guma, respondents were requested to state their opinion on how effective crime control structures in their locality were. The result in Table 1 shows that a significant proportion of the respondents believed the structures were working. Over 23 percent (23.2%) of the respondents felt that the structures for crime management were very effective, and the same proportion (23.7 %) felt that they were effective. A significant proportion of
respondents were not impressed by the crime management structures on ground. Over one quarter of the respondents (26.4%) said they were ineffective while 16.3 percent felt they were very ineffective. This differential in opinion may indicate that effectiveness of informal structures in crime management is determined by the type of crime involved, a position well-articulated by O’Block, Wurschmidt and Donnermeyer, (2007).

Table 1: Effectiveness of Crime Control Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness of Crime Control Structures</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Effective</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Effective</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Ineffective</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was concluded that agricultural crime affects agricultural activities in Guma Local Government in very profound ways. Theft of produce and livestock has depleted the output of many farmers and has caused some to give up production altogether. This has negative implications for the food security and national economic growth, and may even aggravate the crime situation. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were proffered.

i. More researchers should become interested in studying agricultural crime so that accurate data could be generated to form the basis of more realistic intervention in the rural areas;

ii. Stakeholders in rural development should embark on advocacy to strengthen law enforcement in the rural areas; and

iii. As a follow-up to this study, a participatory inquiry should be initiated to discover how rural dwellers can be assisted to organize better to secure lives and property.

REFERENCES


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