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ASSESSMENT OF TRACTOR HIRING SERVICES IN LAGOS STATE

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ABSTRACT

Various agricultural mechanization techniques have been introduced to aid crop production. One of such is intensive use of tractors. Expensive capital and maintenance costs have limited the private ownership of tractors by Nigerian farmers. To promote the use and availability of tractors for farmers, tractor-hiring units were established. Tractor hiring units rent out tractors and other farm implements to farmers at affordable prices.

Contrary to expectation, the aim of the program had been defeated due to technical laxity, poor management and the current economic situation of the country. Recognizing the necessity of tractor hiring units, efforts are made on ways of improving performances. Good organization and proper management are needed for effective operation.

Keywords: *Agriculture, Mechanization, Tractors, Hiring and Economy.*

Introduction

In boosting food production and removing drudgery from farm operations, several agricultural techniques have been introduced. These include improved cultural practices such as crop rotation,

hybrid crop varieties, and effective utilization of fertilizers and pesticides, efficient processing methods, improved storage facilities and intensive use of tractors. Tractors are applicable in all stages of crop production. They are useful in land clearing, ploughing, harrowing, planting, fertilizer application, chemical spraying, harvesting and transportation of harvested crops. Utilization of tractors for farming operations enhances faster operational activities and increases output per farm worker.

High cost of purchasing and maintenance of tractors make it difficult for an average Nigerian farmer to privately own tractors. To promote utilization of tractors, for crop production, the Lagos State government once sold tractors to farmers' cooperative societies at subsidized rate (2). Furthermore, tractor-hiring services were introduced with the aim of renting out tractors to farmers at low and affordable rates, create employment opportunity and to generate revenue. In addition to government tractor hiring services, private tractor hiring units are established to supplement government efforts in provision of tractors to farmers. This unit operates with limited number of tractors.

In Lagos State, the State Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives provides the major hiring services in the five major farming areas of the state – Epe, Eti-Osa, Badagry, Ikorodu and Agege. It has fifteen functioning tractors, several farm implements, rollers and excavators, and graders for road construction (2). This is complemented by the Local Government's Units with an average of about three tractors per Local Government.

A typical tractor-hiring unit is made up of administrative section, store, automobile workshop and mechanical workshop. The staff of tractor hiring unit comprises of Engineers, technicians, drivers, and administrative staff. In hiring tractors, interested users book for their usage in advance. In comparison, government-hiring units operate at a relatively lower rate than the privately owned.

The establishment of tractor hiring unit has sensitized farmers on the advantages of utilization in farm operations. Availability of tractors has removed the drudgery usually encountered in activities such as land clearing, ploughing and ridging. Usage of tractors has turned farming into an elite business and has increased the per capita income of the farmers' (1).

This study is carried out in order to establish factors limiting the efficiency of tractor hiring units in Lagos State and to proffer workable solutions by recommending ways of enhancing the viability of the industry.

Methodology

Lagos State is classified into the industrial and agricultural zones. Agricultural activities are concentrated in Badagry, Epe, and Ikorodu areas of the State. Tractor hiring operations in these areas are used for the purpose of this paper. Data are obtained with the aid of questionnaires. Arable crop farmers and

operators of tractor hiring services were contacted. Emphases are on operational cost, prospects, demand and availability of tractor to users. The collated data and evidence from literature were used to draw the conclusion.

Problems of Tractor Hiring Units

Contrary to the aims of its establishment, tractor-hiring units are performing far below expectation and finding it difficult to generate enough revenue for maintenance and profit for investors. With the present situation, only 40% of farmers' request for tractors are met in Lagos State (2). The complaints include non-availability of tractors, flat tyres, no drivers and tractor under repair. The problems hindering the effective operation and smooth running of the units may be grouped into three:

- a. Economic factors
- b. Technical factors
- c. Management factors.

Economic Factors

The poor economic situation is badly affecting the operational activities of the tractor hiring units. It is reflecting in the cost and availability of tractor spare parts and other maintenance materials. The resultant effect is high cost of operation.

Cost of Operation: It is established that the cost of maintaining tractors are high and most tractor hiring units are not economically viable to afford the cost. Operational costs include cost of servicing tractors such as buying engine oil, fuel and oil filters, repair and replacement of damaged parts, replacement of tyres and implements. Buying new tractors for replacement of unserviceable ones is difficult. Tractor price is as high as ₦3,000,000.00 (Three million Naira only) (3). The number of functioning tractors is reducing daily.

Lack of Spare parts: Tractor parts like all other machinery parts need to be replaced with new ones whenever there is a defect. Most of the farm implements and tractors spare parts are scarce. Non availability of these parts for replacement discouraged immediate repair of most equipment, and thus larger number of the facilities are in poor working condition as indicated in (fig1.)

Table:1 Equipment Chart of a Hiring Unit

E	GC	BC	T
Tractor	15	23	38
Harrower	6	8	14
Plough	4	10	14
Mower	3	5	8
Ridger	8	11	19
Rotavator	1	3	4
Sprayer	4	7	11
Harvester	-	1	1
Excavator	-	1	1
Low loader	1	-	1
Grader	1	1	2
Roller	-	1	1

Key:

- E- Equipment
- GC- Good Condition
- BC- Bad Condition
- T- Total

Source: Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives 1999 Annual Reports

Limited Maintenance facilities: Poor economy does not only affect cost of tractor parts but other maintenance materials are also scarce and expensive. Hydraulic jack, crane, drilling machine, lathe machine, batteries, tractor tyres and implements are all affected. Most repairs are done manually to the ability of the worker and not to standard.

Technical Factors

In addition to economic problems, technical and human lapses hinder effective operation of tractor hiring units. Inappropriate usage of tractors (using tractor for wrong jobs), irregular servicing of tractors, sub-standard repair work and poor handling of tractor by the drivers.

Shortage of skilled personnel and maintenance tools in tractor hiring workshops delay maintenance works.

Management Factors

The nature, ability and skill of operators of tractor hiring units determine the effectiveness of the unit. Poor management of any industry adversely affects her performance and financial returns. Despite the constraints of operating tractor-hiring units, some private ones are expanding due to good management and organization while others are gradually winding down.

Poor planning and some administrative policies of managers of tractor hiring units greatly affect the units. Administrative policies such as non autonomous nature of technical department, long administrative bureaucracy for release of funds and non provision of reserve funds for emergency needs, delay operations.

Tractor hiring unit workers unpatriotic attitude to work also contribute negatively to the progress of the industry. Most of the employed staffs are committed to their personal gain rather than the company's progress, example is stealing of company properties.

Improving Performances of Tractor Hiring Units

Recognizing the needs and contribution of tractor hiring units to crop production, urgent and effective solution should be provided by all parties concerned to problems negating its growth. Government, workers and operators of tractor hiring units have roles to play. This is necessary to revive and make the industry viable. As a contribution the following factors should be considered;

- a. Approach government for necessary assistance,
- b. Be season conscious,
- c. Improve working condition of labor

- d. Make provision for emergency needs and
- e. Give technical department autonomy

Government Assistance

Government assistance is much needed in areas of spare parts and other farm inputs. Importation of these materials should be encouraged by giving special concession to importers of tractors and other farm implements. The assistance could be extended to provision of tractors at subsidized rate, similar to federal assisted mass transit for transporters. Locally, Lagos State Government should endeavor to renew her abandoned policy of providing tractors to farmers co-operative union at subsidized rate.

Season Consciousness

As it is known that agriculture is a seasonal industry. The hiring units must try as much as possible to get all implements in working condition before the cropping season. That is making clearing implements available during clearing period, planters during planting period, harvesters during harvesting period, and transport facilities during post harvesting.

Improve Working Condition of Labor

In order to boost working morale of labor and reduce unpatriotic attitude of some workers, a conducive working environment should be created. This can be achieved with provision of standard working tools. To prevent field delay and enhancing convenient transportation of working tools to field, mobile workshops should be introduced. Dedicated and hard working staff should be financially rewarded.

Provision of Emergency Needs

Operators of tractor hiring units should cultivate the idea of having spare parts, servicing materials, tyres, implement blades and other farm inputs in storage.

Special fund should be allocated for emergency needs.

Autonomy for Technical Department

Giving technical departments autonomy of technical-decision prevents unnecessary delay and avoids political undertone in policy making. It encourages direct solution to maintenance problems

Conclusion

The present condition of the tractor hiring units in the state is pathetic and not encouraging. The factors hindering effective operation of the units are not peculiar to Lagos state but to the entire nation. Greater percentage of the problem may be attributed to economic situation of the country while the rest are negligence of duty.

It is obvious that tractor-hiring services are becoming a dying trade. To revive the industry, an urgent attention should be given to problems negating effective operation of tractor hiring units. Proper management of tractor hiring units will keep the business going as it is experienced in transport industry.

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