

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Farmers' Aspiration Indices and Possible Strategies to Improve Sweet Potato Production in South East, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated farmers' aspiration indices and possible strategies to improve sweet potato production in South East, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to ascertain farmers' aspiration indices on sweet potato production and identify possible strategies to improve sweet potato production in South East zone, Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was used to select 240 respondents for the study. Data were collected from primary source using questionnaires. Data collected were analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics. Findings indicated that majority (54.2%) of the sweet potato farmers were female while 45.8% were male. The mean age of the farmers was 43.3%. Greater proportions (40.4%) of the farmers were married, while 18.8% of the farmers were divorced. The average household size for sweet potato farmers was eight persons while the average farm size of sweet potato farmers in the study area was 1.7ha. More so, the average mean for the sweet potato farming experience was 16 years. Socio-economic aspiration indices of sweet potato farmers indicated that majorities (90.3%, 86.5%, 81.4%, and 80.3%) of the adopted farmers supported that they would invest their money on sweet potato farming for future income generation, increase the sizes of the sweet potato farm, increase marketing channels of sweet potato production for multiple income generation, and also use the money to mechanize the sweet potato farm, respectively. In terms of strategies to improve sweet potato production activities a majority (90.3%) of the farmers were of the opinion that decentralization of training on sweet potato production practices while and (87.4%) the farmers also believed that provision of basic infrastructures such as good road, electricity, and water among others in the rural areas would be the best strategy to overcome the problems of youths migration to cities for in search of white collar jobs. This paper therefore recommends that establishments of village information center for effective channels of information are needed to boost sweet potato production activities in the region, establishment of special trust fund for sweet potato producing state will solve the problems of funding in sweet potato industry and farmers' aspirations need to be guided by an extension personnel to incorporate them in agricultural programs that may interest their careers in agriculture as well as sweet potato farming.

Key words: Agriculture, aspiration, farmers, production, sweet potato

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is a general problem since farming output is not directly proportional to the increase in

human population. To make food security through increased production, more youth participation in agriculture sector is important and policies must be needed to encourage youths in the agricultural sector (Musa, 2019). However, the way young people respond to opportunities and whether agriculture can meet their aspirations are essential in terms of

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food security and future employment (Musa, 2019). Based on this, the aspirations and the expectations of youths need to be addressed to rekindle their interest in agriculture.^[1-10]

Sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas* L [Lam]) is one of the most important food crop after cassava among the root and tuber crops in the world. It is cultivated throughout the tropic, subtropics, and warmer temperature regions (Santosh *et al.*, 2014). In general, sweet potato is cultivated in 111 countries with an area of 8.106 million. Through production was 106.569 million tones with an average productivity of 13. 147 (FAOSTAT, 2017; Ejechi *et al.*, 2020). Asia is the world's largest sweet potato producing region with 88.51 million tons of annual production. China alone produces about 76% of the world's production and this makes the country the leading supplier of sweet potato in the world (FAOSTAT, 2018; Ejechi *et al.*, 2020).

Sweet potato production in Nigeria may always show upwards or downwards trends due to adoption behavior of the farmers and other constraints associated with crop production. Africa ranked second after China in terms of sweet potato production with 17 million tons produced in 2011. This is because the special nutrition need by people have shifted their focus to the adoption of Orange Flesh Sweet potato for consumption due to its high content of Vitamin A (Adesina, 2019). Food and Agricultural organization (FAO)'s estimate on the average sweet potato yield of 5 to 8t/ha from 1989 to 2001 is similar to the estimate from a survey carried out by State Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) in Nigeria which reported yield of the varieties from 7 tons/ha in the South Eastern zones, 3.5t/ha in the northern zones, and 7t/ha to 8t/ha in Plateau and Bauchi state (FAOSTAT, 2018). Between 1961 and 1970, Nigeria produced 150,100 tons of sweet potato. From 1971 to 1980, it increased from 150,000 tons to 101,006 000tons and this could be as a result of multiplication of area planted. However, between 1981 and 1990 the production rate reduced to 102,900 tons. From 1991 to 2000; the production trend started increasing with an average output of 1168,100 tons. From 2002 to 2010; there was a tremendous increase on sweet potato output at 4,808, 400 ton, of which the crop had the tenth highest production level of any simple food crop in

Nigeria after cassava, yam, oil palm fruit, maize, sorghum, millet, paddy rice, and plantain. From 2011 to 2017, there was a serious decrease in sweet potato output in Nigeria with an average output of 2,633, 533 tons. This decrease in output could be characterized by the total reduction of areas planted by the farmers as well as the constraints to sweet potato production (FAOSTAT, 2018).

Farmers constitute a high and increasing proportion of the African population. Research views that many young people are of the interest not to pursue livelihoods in the agricultural sector, especially as farmers, and this may have implications for national and international efforts to drive economic growth through investments in agriculture (Leavy and Smith, 2010). An understanding of the aspirations of rural youth and the links between aspirations and career decisions will be essential if agricultural policies were to achieve their expected outcomes (Leavy and Smith, 2010).

The word aspiration refers to a desire or ambition to realize something. Aspirations are an individual's goals or an expectation for the future. It is a hope or an ambition of achieving something. Aspiration simply means the desire, hope, longing, yearning, hankering, urge, wish, aim, ambition, expectation, inclination, objective, goal, and target an individual wants to accomplish in life. Individual could aspire in various ways; it could be income, wealth, education, and social status (Kosec *et al.*, 2016). Researchers conceptualize farmers' aspirations in agriculture and its potential impact on four ideas: Aspiration window, aspirations gap, capacity to aspire, and aspirations failure. Nandi *et al.* (2022) defines an aspiration window as "an individual's cognitive world, seeing himself or herself in the zone of "similar," "attainable" individuals." An individual draws his/her aspirations from the lives, ideals, and achievements of those around, who serve as role models. Aspirations gaps then are the difference between what an individual aspires to and what he/she already has, or is able to achieve. Such gaps affect future-oriented behavior and in fact, can lead to what called a "weak capacity to aspire" or "aspiration failures," a situation when individuals fail to set ambitious goals or targets, do not proactively invest in them, hence also fail to achieve them Nandi *et al.*, 2022).

Aspirations play an important role in influencing how young people make life choices, how they

think and feel about themselves and ultimately their life outcomes. Aspirations of rural youth and the factors contributing to their formation should therefore be of interest not only to the young people themselves, their families and communities, but to all those with an interest in agricultural and rural policy and development (Leavy and Smith, 2010). The aspirations of the rural poor are increasingly being recognized as an essential dimension of their well-being and it is imperative to understand and nurture these aspirations if governments want to improve the well-being of the poor (Kosec and Mo, 2017). Populations with high aspirations subsequently visualize and engage in forward-looking behavior (Dalton *et al.*, 2015; Kosec and Mo, 2017), whereas low aspirations among the rural poor lead to reduced efforts and fewer investments for bringing about a prosperous future. When the poor fail to see a better tomorrow in which their well-being would be much higher than it is today, they do not take action to improve their future, and consequently become even more stuck in a poverty trap (Nandi and Nedumaran, 2021).^[11-18]

Aspirations are not merely expectations of what the future will be like; individuals could aspire to outcomes that might be possible only if barriers were removed or if they altered their behavior. Recent research in Pakistan revealed that income, assets (wealth), status in society, education for children, and security are typical aspiration themes for rural communities that are involved in agricultural activities (Kosec and Mo 2017).

Aspirations of farmers may influence the agricultural inputs and investments they select, which could, in turn, lead to increased productivity. Mausch *et al.* (2018), acknowledged that aspirations play a role in influencing short and medium-term decisions and have a potentially great influence on technology adoption. Sequel to the above, aspiration Index (AI) measures the content of people's life goals.

The capacity for developing a stream of research on youth aspirations is the observation that young Africans are reluctant to pursue an agriculture-based livelihood and this may have implications for continent-wide initiatives to revitalize the agriculture sector. Presently, sweet potato farming is gaining more attentions of the farmers unlike the previous years where sweet potato farming was regarded as a neglected and gender based crop that should

be treated with less attention. However, the reason could be the health benefits and other potentials associated with the crop, especially orange fleshed sweet potato (OFSP). In the light of this, the broad objective of the study was farmers' aspirational indices and potential strategies to improve sweet potato production in south east, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to ascertain farmers' aspiration indices on sweet potato and possible strategies to improve sweet potato production in South East zone, Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study area is South-East agricultural zone of Nigeria. The south East of Nigeria comprises Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. It has a land area of approximately 28,972 km² and the vegetation of the area is a mixture of savannah and tropical rainforest with average annual rain fall of 2500 mm. South-Eastern Nigeria has fertile and well-drained soil and the good population are essentially farmers (Okeke and Oluka, 2017).

The target population for this study was all the sweet potato farmers in the selected States. Multistage sampling procedure was used for the study. In the first stage, three States out of the five states that make up South Eastern zones were purposively selected because of their perceived active engagement in sweet potato production. Anambra, Abia, and Ebonyi were selected for the research.

In the second stage, three local governments were purposively selected from each selected state. Ogbaru, Anambra East and Anambra West local government in Anambra State, in Abia State the selected local governments were Umuahia South, Ikwuano and Isialangwa North while Ezza, Ikwo and Ohaukwu local governments in Ebonyi State were also selected. This gave a total of 12 local governments used for the research.

In the third stage, three communities each from the selected local governments were randomly selected in the areas. The communities were as follows; Atani, Akili Ogidi and Ossamala in Ogbaru LG, Igbariam, Nando and Aguleri Otu in Anambra East L.G; Nzam, Nmiata Anam and Umuoba Anam in Anambra West L.G.; Umudike, Ibeku and Umuariaga in Ikwuano L.G.; Ubalaka, Amakama

and Nserimo in Umuahia South L.G.; Amaputigha, Ngwa Ukwu and Okpuala-Ngwa in Isialangwa North of Abia State; Ngbo, Izzia Ngbo and Effium in Ohaukwu L.G; Indigazu, Ezzia and Umuezoka in Ezzia North L.G.; Amagu, Noyo and Alike-Ndufu Ikwo in Ikwo L.G of Ebonyi State. This gave a total of 24 communities that used for the study.

In the fourth stage, eight sweet potato farmers were selected from the list of information in each community using simple random sampling techniques and this gave a total sample size of 240 farmers. Data for the study were collected from primary source through the use of validated interview schedule. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data in Table 1 show that greater proportion (38.1%) of the farmers were between 31 and 40 years of age, while 27.1% were within the age range of 21–30 years. The mean age of the farmers was 43.3%. This implies that young people of active age were involved in sweet potato production. This could also influence farm decision making process as a result the active young people involved in the production. This could be also an indication of the fact that the levels of youth movement in agriculture have been increased due to lack of white collar job among youths in the study area. This finding confirmed the result of Garba (2016) which reported that most farmers in their study were still in their productive years. Majority (54.2%) of the sweet potato farmers were female while 45.8% were male. This shows that the sex distribution of the sweet potato farmers skewed toward female farmers and this could be that female farmers are more efficient than male farmers when it comes to minor root crops like sweet potato production in the study area. The implication of this is that sweet potato production activities will be more or less masculine activities that will be dominated by younger females than the male counterparts. Greater proportions (40.4%) of the farmers were married, while 18.8% of the farmers were divorced. This finding is in line with farmer's culture as many rural farmers do marry as early as possible to avoid unnecessary embarrassment from their age grade, parents, relatives, and more

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of the farmers

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
Age			
21–30	65	27.1	
31–40	92	38.3	43.3
41–50	56	23.3	
51 and above	27	11.3	
Sex			
Male	110	45.8	
Female	130	54.2	
Marital status			
Single			
Married	97	40.4	
Divorced	45	18.8	
Separated	33	13.8	
Widowed	30	12.5	
Household size			
1–5	99	41.3	
6–10	70	33.3	8.0
11 and above	61	25.4	
Farm size			
<0.5–1 ha	89	37.1	
1.1–2 ha	78	32.5	
2.1–3 ha	43	17.9	1.7 ha
3.1 and above	30	12.5	
Farming experience			
1–9	75	31.3	
10–19	85	35.4	16.1 years
20–29	50	20.8	
30–39	30	12.5	
Occupation			
Full time farmers	120	50.0	
Trading	28	11.7	
Pension	22	9.2	
Civil servant	55	22.9	
Artisan	15	6.3	
Types of improved sweet potato varieties grown			
Ex-Igbariam	60	25	
Buttermilk	90	37.5	
Ex-Oyunga	35	14.6	
OFSP	55	22.9	
Other crops grown			
Yam	32	13.3	
Maize	45	18.8	
Cassava	55	22.9	
Rice	94	39.2	
Okra	14	5.8	

Source: Field survey 2021. OFSP: Orange fleshed sweetpotato

importantly to get additional helping hands both at home and on the farm. This result also confirmed

the finding of Okeke *et al.* (2019), that the largest proportion of the sweet potato farmers was married in their study. Result in Table 1 also reveals that a greater proportion (41.3%) of the farmers had a household size of 1–5 persons while 33.3% of them had a household size of 6–10 persons. The average household size for sweet potato farmers was 8 persons. This finding is in consistence with the finding of Garba (2016) and Okeke (2018) whose average household size of Irish potato and sweet potato farmers were eight persons and seven persons in their separate studies. This implies that farmers had relatively large-sized household that could sustain their family labor.

Results in Table 1 indicate that 37.1% and 32.5% of the sweet potato farmers cultivated <0.5–1 ha and 1. –2 ha, respectively. The average farm size of sweet potato farmers in the study area was 1.7 ha. This implies that farmers cultivated small hectares of land and this could bring about low investment and returns to scale up agriculture for food security. The result from this research also implies that sweet potato farmers were small-scale farmers. This finding collaborates with Okeke (2018) who found small-scale farmers predominantly in the South East zone. The average mean for the sweet potato farming experience was 16 years. This finding implies that the farmers had fairly long period of sweet potato farming experience which could serve as an alternative for increased participation in sweet potato production, since long farming experience promotes specialization, improved knowledge, skill, and aspiration. On the other hand, long farming experience could as well influence farmer's willingness to learn and adopt technology packages associated with improved sweet potato production. Therefore, the more experience the farmer is, the more his ability to make farm decision. This result is in line with the finding of Okeke *et al.* (2019) which said that the average farming experience in their study was 13.34 years. A greater proportion (37.5%) of the sweet potato farmer grown butter milk sweet potato variety while 25% of them grown OFSP improved variety. Similarly, 22.9% and 14.6% of the remaining farmers grown ex-igbariam and ex-oyunga improved sweet potato variety, respectively. According to Effa *et al.* (2019), varieties with good biomass, leaf area index and vine length were most prolific in tuber production and this could

be the reason this variety is selected among other disseminated varieties to farmers. The finding, therefore, shows that buttermilk sweet potato was incorporated into farmers' farming system may be because of the above reasons. Greater proportion (50%) of the farmers was full time farmers, while 22.9% of them were civil servants. The implication could be that farmers in the study area saw sweet potato production as an enterprise and also a source of income to support their livelihood. This finding is in line with Ezeano (2015) who saw sweet potato enterprise as a source of income to augment other incomes in the South East Agro-ecological zone.

Table 1 shows that 39.2% of the farmers grow rice as an alternative crop while 22.9% of the sweet potato farmers grown cassava. High percentage values attached to rice and cassava may be due to their frequent consumption, high economic values as cash crops and industrial use associated with them when compared to other crops the study area.

Socio-economic Aspiration Indices of Sweet potato Farmers

Table 2 shows the aspiration indices of sweet potato farmers of both adopters and non-adopters. Farmers were subjected to an aspiration question like "supposed you were by an opportunity acquired an income of N500, 000, what would you spend it on"? The responses of the farmers were presented as follows:

The majority (70.5%) of the non-adopters asserted that they would convert the money to other agricultural related activities such as planting of plantain, yam, rice among others, while 20.3% of the adopters said that they would equally do the same when they have such amount. Furthermore, 80.3%, 68.3%, 65.3%, and 50.4% of the non-adopted farmers were of the opinion that they would use the money for social activities (e.g., birth day celebration, burial ceremony), re-payment of other outstanding debts, petty trading or marketing activities that will generate income and payment of children school fees, respectively.

On the other hand, majorities (90.3%, 86.5%, 81.4%, and 80.3%) of the adopted farmers supported that they would invest the money on sweet potato farming for future income generation, increase the sizes of the sweet potato farm, increase marketing channels

Table 2: Percentage distribution according to socioeconomic aspiration indices of adopters and non-adopters of sweet potato farmers and non-adopters

Variables	Adopters %	Non-adopters
Converting the money to other agricultural related activities such as planting of plantain, yam, rice, and banana use for petty trading or other	20.3	70.5
Marketing activities that will generate income such as selling of palm oil and groundnut oil.	15.4	65.3
Social activities such as birthday celebration, burial ceremony, and memorable day.	30.5	80.3
Repayment of other loans	25.3	68.3
Payment of children school fees	15.8	50.4
Investing the money on sweet potato farming for subsequent income generation	90.3	30.3
Increase the sizes of sweet potato farm	86.5	20.1
Improvement of existing sweet potato farm such as employment of more labor for cleaning, purchase of sweet potato vines using the loan to mechanize my sweet potato farm	70.5 80.3	25.3 20.4
Using the money to acquire more training on sweet potato production practices	75.3	15.5
Building sweet potato project like purchasing of processing machines	68.3	21.3
Increasing marketing channels of sweet potato production	81.4	30.2

Source: Field survey, 2021

of sweet potato production for multiple income generation and also use the money to mechanize the sweet potato farm, respectively. Furthermore, 75.3%, 70.5%, and 68.3% of the adopted sweet potato farmers agreed that they would use the money to acquire more training on sweet potato production practices, improve the existing sweet potato farm like employment of more labors and building sweet potato project such as purchasing of sweet potato processing machine to minimize post-harvest lost. With respect to non-adopters, 30.3%, 30.2%, 25.3%, 20.4%, and 21.3% of the farmers asserted that they would equally invest the money into sweet potato farming for future income generation, increase marketing channels of sweet potato production, improve the existing sweet potato farm, and use the money to mechanize the farm and building sweet potato project.

In conclusion, from the farmers' aspiration, farmers who have adopted sweet potato technologies would

aspire to improve their farm quantitatively. Better improvement on the farms would increase the yield to attract more cash that could be used to meet other rising needs. However, the non-adopters of sweet potato technologies wanted to use the money for other agricultural related activities that could bring in money more than sweet potato farming activities. Some also wanted to divert the money for children's school fees and this could be that they were uninformed about the returns investment ratio on sweet potato farming.

Strategies to Improve Sweet potato Production Activities

Data in Table 3 show that a majority (90.3%) of the farmers were of the opinion that decentralization of training on sweet potato production practices while and 87.4% the farmers also believed that provision of basic infrastructures such as good road, electricity, and water among others in the rural areas would be the best strategy to overcome the problems of youths migration to cities for in search of white collar jobs. Presences of basic amenities in the sweet potato producing communities will not only boost the production but will also discourage rural-urban drift and when these amenities are available, it will reduce the influx to mega cities. Furthermore, 85.3% of the farmers were of the view that distribution of more planting materials (vines, fertilizers, etc.) at no cost to farmers will be a proper solution to promote sweet potato farming in the study area.

Data in Table 3 also indicated that 78.3% of the farmers were of the point that strengthening the existing farmers' organization through proper coordination and monitoring by both government and non-governmental agencies could be a lasting panacea for sweet potato production constraints. This can be done by linking them to financial institutions for easy access to credit facility. However, 72.3% and 70.8%, of the sweet potato farmers were of the belief that enhancing the performance of extension staff through regular payment of salary and promotion and establishment of input center at the villages would enable a greater proportion of the farmers to participate in sweet potato production activities, while 63.2% and 60.5% of the sweet potato farmers were of the suggestion that creating special

Table 3: Farmers' Suggested Strategies to Improve Sweet potato in the Zone

Variables	Percentage
Distribution of more planting materials such as sweet potato vines, fertilizers etc.	85.3
Special budget should be allocated to sweet potato farming	63.5
Establishment of input center at village levels for easy access to farm inputs	70.8
Provision of basic infrastructures like good road, water, electricity in the rural areas	87.4
Strengthening of NRCRI that has mandate for sweet potato research	35.3
Strengthening the existing farmer's organization through proper coordination and monitoring and also linking them to financial institution for easy access to credit facilities	78.3
Fixing price control for sweet potato vines and roots	25.3
Decentralization of training on sweet potato production	90.3
Fastening of collaboration between ministry of agriculture and NGOs to complement government funding	50.5
Enhancing the performance of extension staff through regular payment of salaries and promotion	72.3
Establishment of village information center for effective channel of information on crop production	60.5
Ensuring efficient and effective information dissemination to sweet potato farmers at the grass root using various communication channels	50.1

Multiple responses

budget for sweet potato farming and establishment of village information center for effective channels of information on crop production would enable a majority of the farmers to engage in sweet potato production activities. Regular payment of salary, promotion, and training of extension staff to enhance commitment and dedication to duties will serve as an incentive to them and remain commitment to extension work.

Furthermore, establishment of village information center will also ensure efficient and effective information dissemination to sweet potato farmers at the grass root, using various communication channels (television, radio, farmers' group, etc.) will help in creating more awareness about sweet potato farming respectively. According to the farmers, since sweet potato farming are seen as a gender specific and minor root crop by some farmers, special budget should be created for it as to make the farming attractive to others.

On the other hand, 50.5% and 50.1% of the sweet potato farmers suggested that fastening the collaboration between ministry of agriculture and nongovernmental organizations to support

government funding and efficient and effective information dissemination will bring about people's engagement in sweet potato farming activities. Furthermore, 35.3% of the farmers said that strengthening of NRCRI that has the mandate for sweet potato breeding and improvement will help to reduce the constraints to sweet potato farming in the region. However, a very small proportion (25.3%) of the farmers was of the view that fixing price control for sweet potato vines and roots will bring about positive development in sweet potato production activities in the region thereafter. Before planting sweet potato, prospective growers need to target a market price, understand monthly market trends and identify specific buyers. Production costs for sweet potato varies from a location to another due to environmental and socio-economic factors and prices normally drop at the peak of harvest and also tend to increase when the crops tend to be scarce. Returns from the crop spring to fall when yields are flooded in the market. Therefore, fixing price control for sweet potato vines and roots and strengthening of the existing national root crops research institute could be of benefit to improve sweet potato production in South East, Nigeria. This finding is in line with that of Rajendra *et al.* (2017) that fixing price control for sweet potato seeds and understanding actual and potential customers of the crop were the effective strategies to improve sweet potato seed sector in eastern and southern Africa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Farmers constitute the increasing proportion of the African population. Research indicates that many young people are of the interest not to pursue livelihoods in the agricultural sector, especially as farmers, and this may have implications for national and international efforts to drive economic growth through investments in agriculture. An understanding of the aspirations of rural youth and the links between aspirations and career decisions will be critical if agricultural policies were to achieve their intended outcomes. Aspirations play an important role in influencing how young people make life choices, how they think and feel about themselves and ultimately their life outcomes. Aspirations of rural

youth and the factors contributing to their formation should therefore be of interest not only to the young people themselves, their families and communities, but to all those with an interest in agricultural and rural policy and development.

The capacity for developing a stream of research on youth aspirations is the observation that young Africans are reluctant to pursue an agriculture-based livelihood and this may have implications for continent-wide initiatives to revitalize the agriculture sector. Presently, sweet potato farming is gaining more attentions of the farmers unlike the previous years where sweet potato farming was regarded as a neglected and gender based crop that should be treated with less attention. The word aspiration refers to a desire or ambition to realize something. Aspirations are an individual's goals or an expectation for the future. It is a hope or an ambition of achieving something. In view of the above, this paper therefore recommends that establishment of special trust fund for sweet potato production will solve the problems of the farmers. There should be efficient and effective information dissemination to sweet potato farmers at the grass root using various communication channels. Existing farmers' organization should be strengthened through proper coordination and monitoring by special committee. In this case, farmers' organizations could also be linked to financial institutions for easy access to credit facility to boost sweet potato production. Distributions of planting materials free of charge to farmers and establishments of village information center for effective channels of information are needed to boost sweet potato production activities in the region. Farmers' aspirations need to be guided by an extension personnel to incorporate them in agricultural programs that may interest their careers in agriculture as well as sweet potato farming.

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