Regardless of the level of development achieved by respective economies, women play a significant role in agriculture and rural development. Evidently, there are serious constraints which militates against the promotion of an effective role for women in our societies which are bound by age-old traditions and belief. The study investigated how cooperative societies can empower women to get out of the gender inequality in accessing productive resources. The study area is Abia State. Abia State is made up of 17 Local Government Areas. The list of cooperators was obtained from the Abia State Ministry of Cooperatives and State Planning Commission at Umuahia. Twenty cooperative societies were randomly selected using this sampling technique, a total of 8 respondents from the selected cooperatives each were randomly selected, bringing the total to 160 respondents. Data were generated through primary sources through the use of questionnaire, interview schedule, and Focus Group Discussion. Data generated were analyzed with simple descriptive statistics, and major results indicated that women joined cooperative societies to gain access to credit 17%, to improve savings 14%, and more importantly to access inputs for farming activities. The study further showed an increase in income after joining cooperative with a mean difference of 2.28 and the productivity of the women also increased in terms of yield. The study therefore recommends women empowerment through formation of women cooperatives since those in cooperatives have hope for better tomorrow and happy because their well-being is now assured.

Keywords: Rural Women, Cooperatives, Well-being, Poverty Reduction and Hope
INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the level of development achieved by respective economics, women play a significant role in agriculture and rural development in Nigeria. Evidently, there are serious constraints which militate against the promotion of an effective role for women. Promoting women’s empowerment is essential because in most cases women are responsible for their children and for their family, thus empowering women is empowering the society at large (World Bank, 2001). The global statistics shows that women are in-charge of 60 – 80 percent of the food. Despite the fact their contribution is significant, they have limited economic advantage and access to productive resources (Majoux, 2005). History has shown a number of approaches to development, have been employed to solve the socio-economic ills of the developing countries like Nigeria. However, these approaches failed to achieve their goals partly because they completely ignored their contribution to the efforts of development (Easter, 1999). Throughout the history of Nigeria so far, inequalities of women and men were part and parcel of an accepted male-dominated culture. One of the basic factors causing unequal share of women in development relates to the gender division of labour between the sexes (Prakash, 2002).

Cooperatives can be used as breeding grounds to empower women by enhancing their specific knowledge and capacities. The government of Nigeria recognizes and support multi-purpose cooperatives to actively participate in the development process towards employment and women empowerment. About 7% of African population is involved in cooperative business. Despite the advantages of the model, women participation in the economy and leadership position is low. Women membership accounts less than 30% and their participation declines for upper positions (Majurin, 2012). It is not an exception to Nigeria, where women represent only 18% of cooperative membership. There are many factors which limit women’s participation in
cooperatives among them, limited access and control over productive assets are highly pronounced (Habtamu et al., 2004). Thus gender inequality brings a burden on women and women are adversely affected by poverty. Although, the problem of gender inequality is a universal phenomenon, Abia state in particular is highly patriarchal in nature where it is characterized by male domination in all spheres. To this fact, government and non-governmental organizations are actively working to promote women empowerment. However, the male hegemony has not changed. This study, thus deals with the role of cooperatives in promoting socio-economic empowerment of women in order to attain food security and happiness in Abia State, Nigeria, with the following specific objectives, to identify women’s economic participation in cooperatives and also to assess the role of cooperatives in social empowerment of women.

**Review of Literature, Concepts and Meaning of Cooperatives**

The philosophy of cooperative is evolved around 18th century in Europe with the notion of protecting economically poor people from the exploitation of economically powerful (Subburaj, 2003). Cooperatives are democratically owned and governed enterprises guided by the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. They part people at the heart of their activities and allow numbers to participate in the decision making.

**Concepts of Women Empowerment**

Most women in Nigeria especially Abia State, do not have access to education, productive resources and other services. Such discrimination hampers them not to earn income and do not actively participate in socio-economic and political conditions. In order to solve the problem,
women empowerment becomes a global agenda. The term ‘women empowerment’ has become popular in the development field since 1980s. It is widely recognized that women empowerment is essential for sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries. Women empowerment is defined by Mosedale (2005) as a mechanism where women become strong through increasing their confidence to make appropriate choice and control over resource. Naryaan (2002) on the other hand, defined women empowerment as increasing control and ownership of assets to influence and bargain over any decision that affects their lives.

**Cooperatives in Promoting Social Empowerment of Women**

Although cooperation is viewed as an organization for the promotion of economic interests of its members, it does not confine its self with only to the economic aspects. It also permeates the social aspect of life and aims at establishing a new democratic social order based on freedom and equality, where people live in harmony, caring and sharing like a family, where there is a unity of spirit and common economic bond. Cooperatives have a role to play in alleviating different shocks, and paving the way towards recovery that is socially and economically sound and sustainable. Ultimately, cooperatives can create a safe environment where women increase their self confidence, identify their own challenges, make decisions and manages risks. As a result, women are empowered and become active agents of change, entrepreneurs and promoters of social transformation who can improve their own lives and those of their community.
The Study Area

The study area is Abia State. Abia State comprises of 17 Local Government Areas (LGAs), grouped into three agricultural zones, which include; Aba, Ohafia and Umuahia. The State is approximately within latitudes $4^\circ41'$ and $6^\circ14'N$ and longitudes $7^\circ10'$ and $8^\circ E$. the geographical location makes it a land-locked state. It occupies a land area of about 5243.775sq.km which is approximately 5.8% of the total land area of Nigeria, with less than half of this land area being economically utilized. It shares common boundaries to the North with Ebonyi to the South and South West with Rivers State and to the East and Southeast with Cross River and Akwa Ibom States. Abia State is located within the forest belt of Nigeria and temperature ranges between $20^\circ C$ and $36^\circ C$. It is characterized by the dust laden. North-eastern wind which blow across the country during the dry season (mid-October to March). The rainy period is from April to October, during which period the moisture-laden South-western winds blow, bringing with it the rains. The mean annual rainfall is between 20,000mm and 25,000mm, while relative humidity is about 98% during the rainy season and between 60% to 80% during the dry season (Nwaru, 2007). According to the National Population Census result, Abia State has a population of about 2,845,380. The annual population growth rate is 3.18%. Majority of them live in the rural areas with a population of about 580 per km which is adjusted to be one of the highest among the states of the country (FRN, 2009). Agriculture is the major occupation of the people especially in the rural areas and involving over 70% of the population.
Method of Data Collection

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Primary data were collected through interview, questionnaire, and focus group discussion. Interviews were conducted with the management committee of the selected multi-purpose cooperatives and cooperative promotion office experts. The questionnaire was administered with randomly selected women members of the selected multipurpose cooperative societies and focus group discussion. Secondary data were collected from internal documents of cooperative societies and cooperative promotion offices.

Sampling Selection

The list of the cooperators was obtained from Abia State Ministry of Cooperatives and State Planning Commission at Umuahia. Twenty Cooperative Societies were randomly selected. A list of clients/members was obtained from the operators of the selected cooperative. This formed the sampling frame covering the clients/members (cooperators) from the selected cooperative. Using this sampling technique, a total of eight (8) cooperators each was randomly selected. This gives a total of sample size of 160 cooperators. The data collected were analyzed with simple descriptive statistics like frequency distribution and means.
Results and Discussion

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents based on reasons for joining cooperative societies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to credit</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved savings</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased bargaining power</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce marketing risk</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to land</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to farm input</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multiple response

Source: Field data, 2013

Table 1 reveals that about 27.3% of the respondents join cooperatives to access farm inputs for agricultural production. The result also indicated that respondents join cooperatives in order to enhance their access to land because of the land tenure system and tenure security operative in the state. About 21% of them stated that joining cooperative society enabled the cooperators increase their bargaining power. During the focus group discussion, the members strongly emphasized that cooperatives are alterative means to solve economic and social problems of members. Also 17% of the respondents revealed that they joined the cooperative society to access alternative financial mechanisms to borrow or save money. Sizya (2001) argued that cooperatives have been the leader in development interventions that aim to alleviate the poverty level of the poor in the rural areas and he also stated further that cooperatives are the most significant forms of participation in financial markets available to the rural people and (Larocque et al., 2002) as an avenue for the introduction of formal banking to rural areas in Burkina Faso.
This shows that the rural people first have good knowledge of the benefits of financial services by participating in financial cooperatives. About 12% cooperators admitted cooperative societies reduces marketing risk by setting just prices and bring about a close link between producers and consumers. They therefore constitute a force for rural transformation by rendering those services.

### Table 2: Crop production potential of sampled respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crops (Qtls)</th>
<th>No. Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before membership</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After membership</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>8.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean difference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2.28</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Field data, 2013

The major crops grown in the study area are maize, cassava and yam. The crop production capacity of the respondents before and after cooperative membership is shown in table 2, hence the average production capacity of the respondents is found to be 4.52 and 6.8/hectare. On the average, the respondents have increased their crop production by 2.28 after cooperative membership. The increased production may imply that cooperative societies play a vital role in enhancing the production and productivity of farmers by supplying them with necessary agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, chemicals and improved seeds on time and for fair price.
Table 3: Distribution of respondents based on income after cooperative membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increased income</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Being economic enterprise, cooperatives play a significant role in enhancing the economic well-being of their members. One of the viable economic contribution of cooperatives is improving member’s income. Table 3 shows that 91% of the respondents emphasized that their income increased after membership. According to Otto and Ukpere (2011), savings mobilization and subsequent investment is the key to economic growth and development.

**Conclusion**

The socio-economic dimension of empowerment showed that 90% of respondents joined the cooperatives to access financial sources and improve their bargaining power. Most importantly, the respondents have emphasized that their income increased after joining cooperatives. To sum-up in majority of the matrix used, the respondents have shown improvement in their socio-economic status; so there is hope and happiness in joining cooperative societies. Thus, considerable awareness creation and women empowerment advocacy activities and policies should be derived from appropriate stakeholders.
REFERENCES


