

Young People, Farming & Food: A post-conference synthesis

These notes seek to synthesise understandings merging from the FAC/ISSER international conference **Young People, Farming and Food**, held in Accra, 19-21 March 2012 (see: <http://www.future-agricultures.org/events/young-people-farming-a-food>).

Despite much praise for the ideal of evidence-based policy in African agriculture, too often the profile of certain “problems” and the imperative to address them quickly through policy, become separated from evidence and understanding. When this happens, policy advocates and policy makers rely heavily on “common knowledge”, anecdote and narrative to develop and argue policy alternatives. Unfortunately this is essentially the position today in relation to the “young people and agriculture” problem in Africa. While much concern is expressed from both the agriculture (e.g. aging farm population; loss of farm labour) and social perspectives (e.g. unemployment and underemployment of young people; migration to uncertain and risky urban environments), the search for appropriate responses is hampered because of:

- A lack of analysis that is theoretically and historically informed, conceptually sound and context sensitive;
- A very weak base of empirical research relating to either the nature of the “problem” or the potential impacts of particular policy responses;
- A limited cadre of researchers and policy advocates who are actively working on and informed about these issues.

As a consequence, common policy responses including training in entrepreneurship, targeted distribution of agricultural inputs, micro-credit and mechanised “block farming” can be in tension with young people’s own imperatives, aspirations, strategies and activities.

The Future Agriculture Consortium’s **Young People and Agrifood** theme will seek to address this situation by generating policy-relevant evidence and understanding of:

- How opportunities for engagement with agrifood are structured at different times and in different places;
- The implications of this structuring for consequent patterns of engagement, and thus for livelihood development, poverty, social justice and sustainability;
- Policy options that might affect, further or modify these livelihood, poverty, social justice and sustainability outcomes; and,
- The politics around these policy options and associated processes.

In this light, several framing questions arise:

- How should agrifood “opportunity space” be conceived, and how is it structured?¹
- How is agrifood opportunity space changing for different social groups in different places?
- In what situations and for what social groups is agrifood opportunity space closing down or opening up, and why?
- What factors, processes and politics are associated with different patterns of engagement and/or resistance to these changes in agrifood opportunity space? What roles does agency play in engagement and resistance?

Seen from another perspective, these questions are drawing attention to the processes through which food systems are “transferred” from one generation to another. In the first instance we might think of these processes as including the transfer of:

- Values, aspirations and narratives (e.g. about farming, food and rural life)
- Physical resources (e.g. land)
- Patterns, systems and styles of production, processing, marketing etc
- Technology and technology trajectories
- Institutions
- Skills and knowledge
- Dietary preferences and traditions

There are at least three aspects to the dynamics of this transfer. The first is **continuity**: the transfer takes place on a continuous basis – one meal, crop operation and harvest after another. The second – **incremental innovation and adaptation** – sits within this continuity, and brings transformation and transfer into a single realm. The third is **discontinuity**, as the process of transfer is also punctuated by periods of non-continuous (radical, disruptive) change and innovation – the emergence of new markets, new technology, new institutions etc. There are arguments that we are in such a period of rapid and discontinuous change at the moment.

It is essential that we situate our analysis of changing agrifood opportunity space and its intergenerational dimensions in relation to a number of critical and interacting processes, trends, forces and developments, and their manifestations at global, regional, national and local levels. Some of these include:

- Demographic transition
- Nutritional transition
- Urbanisation processes and associated changes in labour force participation
- Economic growth and rising incomes (for some)
- New technology

¹ Building on Painter et al (1994) we use the term “opportunity space” to describe the geographical and temporal distribution of the universe of more or less viable options that young people may exploit as they attempt to establish their independent lives. Opportunity space may be more or less large (or extended) and/or more or less diverse, and is a function of: global, national and regional economic factors; place; social and/or cultural norms; ability and willingness to travel; and imagination. An individual’s (or group’s) ability to successfully exploit their opportunity space is a function of: information, knowledge and skills; attitudes (e.g. toward risk); access to key resources; and support from social relations and networks. See: Painter, T., J. Sumberg and T. Price. (1994). Your '*terroir*' and my 'action space': implications of differentiation, movement and diversification for the *approche terroir*. *Africa* 64(4): 447-464.

- Rising fuel prices and the biofuels push
- Rising food prices and increased food price volatility
- Increasing demand for farmland
- Development of local factor markets (e.g. for land and labour)
- Investment in infrastructure
- The MDGs with their focus on children's education
- Changing aspirations and expectations of both young people and their parents
- Widening availability of ICTs

In this context we propose to use the notion of individual and household “life course” as a backbone for the Young People and Agrifood theme’s analyses. The central proposition is that types and levels of engagement with agrifood, and the ability to exploit agrifood opportunity space, change over the life course. For example, most young people need to accumulate some capital in order to launch their independent lives. Certain kinds of agriculture can play a critical role in this capital accumulation process, enabling them to build a house, start a trading enterprise or get married. During this period the ability to generate “quick money” may be of much greater importance than getting established in an agricultural “career” or than any consideration of the long-term sustainability of the production system. We might think of these short-term, quick money farming activities as “instrumental agriculture”.

For young people (as for others), the presence or variety within the agrifood opportunity space of farming and food-related activities that potentially give high returns is in part a function of differentiation among rural areas (e.g. access to markets; quality of NR). The ability of particular individuals and groups to take advantage of these opportunities, if indeed that are present, is tied to both:

- Characteristics of the institutions and markets mediating access to key resources such as land and labour;
- Social relations and social differences (gender, education, “social age” and class).

The responsibilities that come with marriage and parenting – often including the production of food crops – may limit engagement in some intensive, risky, but potentially high return farming activities. Thus the relative importance of different crops or trading activities shifts over the life course as adult responsibilities constrain some parts of the agrifood opportunity space (while perhaps opening others). Changing market demand (in near or distant markets) or the opening of new production areas may also modify the agrifood opportunity space in a given locale.

As indicated above a focus on individual and household life courses should not lead us to conceive of young people as isolated, independent agents. Rather, it is in understanding how their life courses and the life courses of others are woven together – through a variety social relations – that insights into engagement and dis-engagement, advantage and disadvantage, success and failure vis-à-vis the agrifood opportunity space will arise.

Finally, through the FAC Young People and Agrifood theme we will continue to critically explore arguments made by some, to the effect that young people should have a special call on (a right to) resources (such as land) and access to policy makers and processes. How should these arguments be assessed in relation to similar calls in the name of other groups (such as women)? What is the experience and evidence around these kinds of initiatives to date?