

Agriculture and the generation problem: rural youth, employment and the future of farming

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I’m grateful and honoured to be asked to speak on the first morning of this important conference. Many of you may wonder why I am here at all; I work mainly on Indonesia, and am no expert on African farming, or African youth. But I have spent most of the last forty years engaged in research and teaching in agrarian and rural development studies on the one hand, and child and youth studies on the other, and recently have been trying to bring these two fields of interest together, as this conference does, by thinking about the place that young people may or may not have in future agrarian renewal.²

As we know, almost all countries in the world face serious problems of mass youth unemployment and underemployment, with unemployment rates much higher in rural than in urban areas. Small-scale agriculture is now, and if it survives in the future has the potential to remain, the developing world’s single biggest source of employment. But claims about future small-scale alternatives assume that there is a generation of rural youth who want to be small farmers, while mounting evidence suggests that young men and women are increasingly uninterested in farming or in rural futures. If this is the case, then we have no argument against a future agriculture based on large-scale, capital intensive, labour-displacing corporate farming – which is becoming an increasingly likely possibility in the present times of renewed and accelerating corporate acquisition of land. Corporate farming (in almost all branches) will employ only a fraction of the numbers active in agriculture today, let alone creating additional jobs, and nobody has been able to make

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² My first attempt was my Valedictory Address at ISS in October 2011 (White 2011a). During the next two years I hope to write a small book on Agriculture and the Generation Problem.

convincing arguments (although the World Bank has tried to)³ that other sectors will be capable of absorbing the labour displaced from agriculture in any kind of decent work. It is therefore quite important to ask what lies behind rural young men and women's apparent rejection of farming futures, in other words to de-construct this aspect of the world of today's rural youth.

If we want to consider the future relations between young people, farming and food, there are various fields of study which we need to get our heads around and put to work. The emerging field of youth studies can help us understand contemporary youth and their paradoxical turn away from farming in this era of mass youth unemployment and mass underemployment. A youth studies perspective also reminds us of the need and the right of young people to be properly researched – not as objects, but as subjects and where possible as participants in research. We need of course to draw on ideas in agrarian studies to better understand the possible future trajectories of the agrifood sector and in particular the underlying and continuing debate on large- vs. small-scale agricultural futures; and we need to find ways to bring these ideas together if we hope to understand the intergenerational tensions that we see almost everywhere in rural communities, particularly young people's problems in getting access to farmland and other agriculture-related opportunities in societies where gerontocracy, agrarian inequality and corporate penetration of the agrifood sector, in varying degrees, are the order of the day.

First, a few thoughts on *rural youth, unemployment, migration and the turn away from farming*.

One important strength of childhood and youth studies, as they have evolved in recent decades, is their insistence that we study young people in their own right and from their own perspectives, when they have previously been hidden in various applied disciplines such as criminology, social work, health and family studies. Understanding young people's lives requires that we look both at how youth is 'constructed' (imagined and represented as a meaningful social, economic and political category), and, also how it is actually experienced by the young. The sometimes wide gap between construction and experience is one key to the

³ World Bank (2007); see various critiques including Akram-Lodhi (2008), Li (2009)

understanding of young people. This understanding however also requires us to position young people within larger social structures, and this relational dimension has been relatively neglected in the new social studies of childhood and youth. The concept of generation,⁴ and of social reproduction⁵ help to make this link.

One problem with talking about youth in English is that, unlike many or most other languages, we use the same word with two different meanings: 'youth' as people (like children and adults) and 'youth' as the state or condition of being young (like 'childhood' and 'adulthood'). Theories of youth approach the study of young people in many interesting and useful ways: youth as action, youth as (sub)cultural practice, youth as identity, youth as generation (Jones 2009: Ch. 1). Policy discourse on youth tends as we would expect to view youth (in both its meanings) in a future-oriented way: viewing youth (the people) as 'human capital', and youth (the condition) as a period of 'transition'. The World Bank report on *Development and the Next Generation* (2006) for example sees youth in terms of a set of interlinked transitions (from child to adult, from education to employment, from 'risky behaviours' to responsible citizenship, from dependency in families headed by adults to formation of their own families, and so on). But young men and women do not necessarily agree with either of these ways of looking at youth. They certainly do not see themselves as 'human capital' (a term which I have always been suspicious of). i.e. as beings in which we (the adult world) invest in order to derive some benefits from them in future. And as for 'transition', this tends to obscure the fact – quite obvious if we look around us – that young men and women are busy in the here and now, developing youth cultures and identities in their own right, i.e. trying to be successful as youth and in the eyes of their peers, besides (or sometimes instead of) preparing themselves to be successful adults. ⁶

⁴ Generation: 'the social (or macro-) structure that is seen to distinguish and separate children [and youth] from other social groups, and to constitute them as a social category through ... particular relations of division, difference and inequality between categories' [i.e. between children/youth and adults] (Alanen 2001:13. See also Mannheim 1958).

⁵ Social reproduction: 'The material and discursive practices which enable the reproduction of a social formation (including the relations between social groups) and its members over time' (Wells 2009: 78).

⁶ To claim that youth are mainly preoccupied with the attempt to make a transition to successful adulthood is something like saying that young mothers are mainly busy trying to make a transition to successful grandmotherhood, or that retired academics like myself are mainly busy trying to become successful dead people.

'Youth' as the condition of being young (or more accurately, of being considered and treated as young in society) tends to last longer than it used to. Rural youth gets prolonged as young people remain longer enrolled in education, their average age at first marriage rises, and their entry into the labour force is postponed. Some countries now define 'youth' in their national laws on youth as up to age 35 or 40. Each new generation of rural young men and women now grows up, on the whole, better educated than their parents. But this has not been matched with expansion of employment opportunities for the growing numbers of relatively educated youth. During the past two decades youth unemployment has increased in most world regions. Rural unemployment rates are higher than urban, and youth unemployment rates are typically around twice the adult rate, as can be seen in the data on various African countries compiled by Francesca Dalla Valle of the FAO for her presentation on tomorrow's session (2012); something close to half of all the world's unemployed are youth (World Bank 2006), and many others are underemployed - having insufficient work, and/or in insecure and poor-quality informal sector employment

There has been some interesting research on the lives and cultures of these globalized, un(der)employed, relatively well educated youth. Much of this research has focused on young men, and on urban youth, but many of them are of rural origins, and are hanging on in the cities to avoid returning to their villages, where they will be expected to help in farm work and experience subordination to the older generation.

One study in Mali describes the growing phenomenon of *thé-chômeurs* (literally, the tea-drinking unemployed), young men who gather around portable charcoal stoves with teapots and glasses, drinking sweet tea to pass the time. They have had some formal schooling but now cannot obtain the kind of work (non-manual work) for which their schooling claimed to have prepared them. They have drifted to a precarious existence in urban sites although there is no work for them, because if they return to the countryside they would be expected to engage in agricultural work (reference to be added). In urban Ethiopia where youth unemployment rates are estimated at more than 50 per cent, Daniel Mains describes one of the problems

young male job seekers have to confront – in contrast to their previous busy lives in school or college – as simply ‘the problem of passing excessive amounts of time’ (Mains 2007: 659).

These young people are not necessarily idle. They may take on various kinds of casual, short-term jobs, or help parents in a family enterprise where one exists, but report themselves as ‘unemployed’ because they are waiting, engaging in odd jobs while looking for what they consider appropriate jobs. We may thus need to introduce a new category of the ‘working unemployed’, which is more or less what Guy Standing means by the ‘precarariat’ in his recent book (2011).

In Egypt and other societies of the Middle East region researchers trying to capture this ‘extended transition period during which young people wait for pieces of their lives to fall together’, have coined the term ‘waithood’ (Assaad and Ramadan 2008:1, also Singerman 2007, Herrera 2007). In the middle-sized Indian town studied by Craig Jeffrey young urban graduates, the sons of lower middle class Jat farmers, enroll in one course of study after another rather than going back to the village, and describe their existence as ‘time-pass’, a kind of purposeless waiting (Jeffrey 2010).

This is not only a sad waste of potential in human terms (or of human capital, if you insist in seeing young people in that way). It also says something about the irrationality of the economic and political structures in which we live. There is something profoundly wrong with structures that allow one-fifth of the world’s young people to be unemployed and countless millions more to be underemployed. The ILO has had the issue of youth unemployment on its agenda since 1935, and UN Millennium Development Goal 8 has as one of its targets to ‘develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth’. But neither the ILO, nor other development agencies or national governments, have any idea how to generate ‘decent and productive work for youth’ on the scale which is needed.

The absence of workable ideas on youth employment in the policy world is not surprising. The problems generating mass youth unemployment are structural ones, as every takeover of smaller by larger enterprises, and every investment in new technologies tends to destroy jobs and expel people rather than creating jobs and absorbing them (Bernstein 2004; Li 2009, 2010); this is happening in agriculture and

all other sectors, including those where the white-collar jobs used to be located. Structural problems require structural solutions, but in a neoliberal world governments are not supposed to spend money on these things. The young are then forced to improvise their own survival strategies, and this is reflected in current policy shifts away from genuine 'employment generation' to an increasing emphasis on promotion of 'entrepreneurial' skills in World Bank and ILO policy discourse, and national youth policies, thus a new kind of 'do-it-yourself' employment strategy for the young. There is little evidence that these policies increase employment prospects or earnings. Young people generally do not have sufficient technical expertise to start a business and would do better to acquire several years of paid work experience, getting to know the ins and outs of their chosen branch of activity before identifying a niche for a new enterprise, and young people themselves are anyway generally more interested in a paid job in the formal sector.

Where are the needed jobs going to be created? Agriculture is the developing world's single biggest employer and the agrifood sector will certainly grow in the foreseeable future - it has to grow, to fulfill the world's growing demand for food, feed, fuel and fibres (and some other crops which fit in none of these categories, like tobacco, various legal and illegal drugs, and inputs for the perfumes industry, but unfortunately don't begin with a 'f' - maybe we can call them 'fragrances and pharmaceuticals') - and if given appropriate support it has the potential to provide decent livelihoods for many more. But agriculture in its present state appears to be so unattractive to young people that they are turning away from agricultural or rural futures. (for Africa, see FAC 2010: 'young Africans are increasingly reluctant to pursue agriculture-based livelihoods'). I think that many of you who have done research with rural youth will agree that young people's turn away from agriculture is certainly 'fact', but we should not take it for granted, until we understand better the reasons behind it. We need to take account of a number of problems, which we will explore in the rest of this talk. They include:

- the de-skilling of rural youth, and the downgrading of farming and rural life;
- the chronic government neglect of small-scale agriculture and rural infrastructure;

- and the problems that young rural people increasingly have, even if they want to become farmers, in getting access to land while still young.

First, a few words about *de-skilling and the assault on rural culture*.

Various studies have noted how education as currently practiced (particularly secondary education) contributes to a process of 'de-skilling' of rural youth in which farming skills are neglected and farming itself downgraded as an occupation. Cindi Katz has described this de-skilling process in Sudan's Blue Nile region, based on her field work there over a fifteen-year period 1980-1995: 'those who were in school ... were likely to find themselves both ill-prepared for the kinds of work available locally, and inadequately educated for other vocations' (Katz 2004: *page reference to be added*). In wealthy countries we are just beginning to understand what we have lost when manual work becomes devalued and disappears as a component of educational curricula (Crawford 2011).

On the subject of 'de-skilling' it is interesting to note how the idea of young people's 'right to earn a livelihood' has disappeared from international policy discourse. Both The League of Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) explicitly state that children have the right to receive education or training which will enable them to earn a livelihood. But this theme has disappeared in later human rights and child rights conventions including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in which preparation for earning a livelihood is not mentioned as a goal of education (White 2005: 324).

The alienation of young people from agricultural knowledge and rural life skills is made worse by the misguided political correctness of many anti-'child labour' campaigners, who insist on the right of children to complete their entire childhoods without any experience of the world of work – thus excluding them from what Karl Marx considered the 'progressive, sound and legitimate tendency ... in [any] rational state of society' for 'children and juvenile persons of both sexes [to] co-operate in the great work of social production', for limited hours and while also going to school, in his vision, from the age of 9 to the age of 17 (Marx 1866). Many recent studies have

found that indeed, young people who combine school and part-time work have much better chances in labour markets after leaving school.⁷

I think it is no exaggeration to say that in most countries, formal schooling as currently practiced teaches young people not to want to be farmers. (We could ask Lydia Biriwasha, who has been looking at school curricula in Zimbabwe and will be presenting her results in Panel 2 this afternoon). This is part of a more general downgrading of rural life, an 'assault on rural culture' which goes far beyond education and works through global consumerism and media. We should also remember the absence of even basic infrastructure in many rural areas, due to decades of neglect in government spending. Basic infrastructure for today's young people includes communications infrastructure. We need to know a lot more about this; even if farming could be made more attractive and profitable and if land could be made available, would rural life still be unattractive to today's globalized young men and women simply because their Smart Phones don't work there, and they can't be in touch with their Facebook friends, or because of the absence of other facilities and environments which they consider essential components of successful youth? This is actually the easiest part of the problem to take care of, and it will be solved in the not-too-distant future.

Problems of rural infrastructure can be relatively easily overcome. So also, though less easily, can problems of the irrelevance and anti-rural bias of education, and the alienation of young rural men and women from agricultural work and agricultural knowledge, if educationalists are willing to follow the proposals of IFAD's 2010 *Rural Poverty Report*:

A new and broader approach to, and a new emphasis on, agricultural education and training are required [...] to provide the next generation with the skills, understanding and innovative capacity that they require (IFAD 2010: 171)

But suppose that a new generation of rural school leavers and college graduates do wish to make their futures in 'the great work of social production' in the agrifood

⁷ For general arguments on the importance of work (alongside education) as a part of growing up, see Bourdillon et al. (2010)

sector, and suppose rural schools encourage and support them in this, what would be their chances of acquiring a farm when they are ready for it? Today's rural young men and women, even if interested in farming, are confronted by the narrowing and sometimes complete closure of access to land. This may be due to corporate or absentee acquisition of community land; the micro land grabs and 'intimate exclusions'⁸ resulting from local processes of everyday accumulation, land concentration and social divisions that are inherent in agro-commodity production; or simply local gerontocratic structures which give the older generation control of land resources, and make them reluctant to transfer this control to the next generation.

I'd like to take a brief look at these problems, in the last part of my talk.

First, *the global squeeze on farm land*.

I will not spend too much time on this, although it's a matter of great concern to many of us. It is established beyond doubt that large-scale, government-supported corporate acquisition of contested lands and common lands, and the accompanying dispossession of local farmers, pastoralists and forest users is occurring on an unprecedented scale, in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union but most particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹

There is of course a rich history of land grabbing and enclosure in both the global South and the global North. In the post-colonial decades however, many governments and agrarian social movements attempted to correct these historical distortions by land reforms or other means of breaking up large private or corporate holdings and re-distributing them to smallholders. But 'once having nearly disappeared, ...[corporate farming] is now re-emerging everywhere under the aegis of the agro-export model' (van der Ploeg 2009: 2), as governments and international agencies support the acquisition of great expanses of land by large corporations, both foreign and domestic.

⁸ The phrase is from Hall et al. (2011: Chapter 5)

⁹ Among the standard sources on contemporary 'land grabbing' are various reports available at www.grain.org, Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick (2009), Cotula et al. (2009), De Schutter (2011a), World Bank (2010), Committee on Food Security (2011), HLPE (2011b), Oxfam (2011) and most recently Anseeuw et al. (2012).

While some local elders and local or national elites may become rich by facilitating land dispossession and exclusion, and some adult cultivators may be seduced by immediate cash payments for relinquishing their land, we also need to consider what kind of future these land deals imply for the next generation in rural areas. These deals are usually accompanied by government and corporate promises to develop modern, industrial forms of agricultural production for export, and to provide good jobs and incomes for local people. But research has long ago shown that these industrial (capital- and energy-intensive) forms of agriculture are unsustainable. They also don't provide employment on any significant scale, tending to create enclaves of capital intensive, monocrop farming with minimal linkages to the local economy.¹⁰

The World Bank's own report on the global land rush *Rising global interest in farmland – can it yield sustainable and equitable benefits?* includes eighteen commissioned case studies in countries which were expected to provide at least some success stories (including five African cases the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia). But these studies only confirmed that corporate land investments are not fulfilling their promise of employment creation for local people, they are environmentally destructive, they disadvantage women, they ignore the proper legal procedures for land acquisition and forcibly displace large numbers of people. But the same report proposes that all these problems of governance, illegality, environmental destruction and so on can be prevented by getting agribusiness corporations to sign up to a voluntary “code of conduct”, in the form of seven “Principles for Responsible Agro-Investment”, to ensure that they will behave more responsibly in future (World Bank 2010; see also Borras and Franco 2010).

Meanwhile the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Philippe De Schutter, has become a lone voice within the UN family arguing for a broader vision: ‘not to regulate land grabbing as if this were inevitable, but to put forward an alternative programme for agricultural investment’, based on reorientation of agricultural systems towards modes of production that are both productive, sustainable and

¹⁰ See for example Beckford (1972)

contribute to the progressive realization of the human right to adequate food. De Schutter therefore argues

Land investments implying an important shift in land rights should represent *the last and least desirable option*, acceptable only if no other investment model can achieve a similar contribution to local development (De Schutter 2010a: 20, emphasis added).

A youth and generational perspective adds another powerful reason to De Schutter's arguments. Large-scale land deals (whether purchase or long lease) should be seen as the 'last and least desirable option' because they close off the smallholder option, not only for today's farmers but also for the next generation, who are completely excluded from decisions made at national or local level which result in their permanent exclusion from land on which they, or their children, might want to farm at some future time.

What about the alternative models? We can think of these in two ways. First, those that involve different and better relations with agribusiness but that do not require, or allow, agribusiness corporations to own or lease land on a large scale. Lorenzo Cotula and colleagues have studied and compared several 'collaborative business models' which do not involve corporate investment in land.¹¹ Looking at the relationship between agribusiness and smallholders in terms of the sharing of ownership, voice, risk and rewards they conclude that the impact on smallholders (good or bad) depends not so much on the form of the relationship but on how it functions in specific contexts. One key ingredient is the willingness of companies to employ the more inclusive business models as a genuine component of their operations rather than just as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes; another, very important in contract farming relations, is the negotiating power of smallholders (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010: 7).

Small farmer organizations and movements tend to go further than this. The Via Campesina for example claims that smallholders can feed the world, and keep the planet cool, without any need for agribusiness, with slogans like '*Land-grabbing*

¹¹ For example in *Alternatives to Land Acquisition: Agricultural Investment and Collaborative Business Models* (Cotula and Leonard eds 2010), and *Making the Most of Agricultural Investment: A Survey of Business Models that Provide Opportunities for Smallholders* (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010).

causes hunger! Let small-scale farmers feed the world!, and “*Small scale sustainable farmers are cooling down the earth*”, and therefore demands: ‘1/ *The complete dismantling of agribusiness companies, [and] 2/ The replacement of industrialized agriculture and animal production by small-scale sustainable agriculture supported by genuine agrarian reform programmes.*’¹²

You may think this is romantic nonsense, and indeed the claims of small-farmerists also need to be critically interrogated. Small farmerism of course is not without its own problems. Agrarian structures based on small-scale (‘peasant’) farming are inherently unstable under conditions of commodity economy, due to the in-built mechanisms of land concentration and agrarian differentiation, which many authors from Lenin onwards have described.¹³ But these problems are not impossible to overcome, once we get away from fixations on private ownership titling to other forms of secure individual tenure, subject to maximum holdings and periodic redistribution.

On the technical side, quite authoritative support for smallholder futures comes from the important but almost unnoticed international study of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (*Agriculture at a Crossroads*, IAASTD 2009). This report, which drew on the expertise of about 400 specialists from all over the world, concludes that industrial, large-scale monoculture agriculture is unsustainable and must be reconsidered in favour of agro-ecosystems that combine mixed crop production with conserving water supplies, preserving biodiversity, and improving the livelihoods of the poor in small-scale mixed farming.¹⁴

Reflecting on the possibility or impossibility of smallholder futures means looking at the next generation of rural people. So we return in the final part of this talk to the

¹² See various La Via Campesina position papers on <http://viacampesina.org>

¹³ Bernstein (2010); for an overview of these processes in sub-Saharan Africa, Peters (2004).

¹⁴ IAASTD (2009). This report is not mentioned in the World Bank Report on ‘*Rising global interest in farm land*’, although the Bank was one of IAASTD’s sponsors. See also the UN Special Rapporteur’s report on agroecology as scientific framework to ‘facilitate the transition towards a low-carbon, resource-preserving type of agriculture that benefits the poorest farmers’ (UN General Assembly 2010b:3).

problems of rural youth, and specifically *the generational problem in agriculture*.

Traditional agrarian societies are typically sites of patriarchy in both gender and generational relations, reflected in patterns of harsh discipline, and cultural emphasis on respect for the older generation (Stearns 2006:11-13). Within these patriarchal structures young people are not passive victims, but exercise a constrained agency. Studies of “traditional” rural ways of growing up in past times provide many examples in which children (both male and female) who wished to farm were allocated a plot of land to farm themselves by parents or other adult relatives, or engaged in paid work on the farms of others, and controlled to greater or lesser extent the product of their farming work.

Sixty years ago, Elisabeth Colson’s research among the Tonga in Zimbabwe found that many children had their own fields. Unmarried boys or girls might be given a portion of a field belonging to either father or mother before obtaining their own fallowed land, and after harvest might have their own bins in which to store grain from these plots (Colson 1960: 79-89). A generation later Pamela Reynolds described how young children often work, and are sometimes allowed to make their own farms, on the land of a parent or other relative, and ‘actively direct their labour contributions in accord with various strategies that maximize their chances of meeting current needs, and establishing links among kin and neighbours that will enhance future security’ (Reynolds 1991: xxvii).

In how many countries is it still possible for young people to slip themselves into autonomous agricultural production and earning in this way? One reason why young people express a reluctance to farm may reflect their aversion, not to farming as such, but to the long period of waiting that they face before they have a chance to engage in independent farming, even when land is available in the community. In many or most agrarian societies the older generation – parents, or community elders in places where land is controlled not individually but by customary law - retain control of land as long as possible. The tension between the desires of the older generation to retain control of family or community resources, and the desire of young people to receive their share of these resources, form their own independent farms and households, and attain the status of economic and social adulthood, is

such a common feature of agrarian societies that it is surprising how neglected it is in research.

Is it surprising if young men and women today, having experienced some years of education, are reluctant to engage in long years of agrarian 'timepass': who wants to wait around in the village until they are 40 or 50 years old to be a farmer? Julian Quan, reviewing changes in intra-family land relations in sub-Saharan Africa notes:

limitations in young people's access to land, land concentration, and land sales and allocations outside the kin group by older generations can become highly problematic where alternative livelihoods are not available, and can trigger wide social conflicts. (Quan 2007: 57)

Georges Kouamé provides an example of such conflicts from Cote d'Ivoire, where Abure youth, angered at the way the old men preferred to rent the land out to Burkinabe migrants for pineapple cultivation rather than letting their own young people work it, destroyed the pineapple crops in the field (Kouamé 2010). Closer to home, Kojo Amanor has described the night-time harvesting of oil palm kernels, by young people frustrated at the difficulty of obtaining land now that so much of it had been given over to the GOPDC plantation.

The youth ... argue that the land belongs to them anyway and was taken away unfairly so they have a right to harvest the fruits (Amanor 1999: 109)¹⁵

One important strategy in negotiating youth transitions is young people's mobility, which now extends to all social classes and (in most countries) both genders. These migrations are not always permanent; we need to explore further the phenomenon of cyclical, part-lifetime migration. For young people 'village' (and also 'farm') can come to mean the place where you grow up, which you will leave in search of urban employment, but where you may later leave your children in the care of their grandparents (and in many cases, to care for your grandparents), and where you may later return to be a farmer yourself, and maybe a smarter farmer than your parents, when land becomes available and urban work has maybe provided some capital for improvements. (The cases which Richard Ampadu will present in Panel 1

¹⁵ See also Amanor 2010 for analysis of changing intra-family and intra-generational relations following on commodification in South-Eastern Ghana.

after lunch, mostly involve young people who went first for other career options and then, for one reason or another, returned to farming in their later youth).

Paul Richards (in Wageningen University) and his former student Krijn Peters have argued consistently for the need to find ways to make farming a better, a possible and a smarter option for young people in West Africa. Peters, writing on Sierra Leone describes in detail the mismanagement and stagnation of the agricultural sector, the false hope that education gave young people, and their vulnerability to local seniors, through the elders' control over customary courts, land, agricultural labour and the allocation of marriage partners, in this highly gerontocratic society.

The point is [he writes] that the African rural setting is ... inhabited ... increasingly by numbers of young people who lack the basic modalities even to be peasants. Marginalized by 'customary' institutional exactions, first begun under colonial rule and maintained by rural elites ever since, [...] They cannot even mobilize their own labour to work the allegedly abundant land, since this would be vulnerable to extraction from them by marriage payments and court fines for infringements of a traditional code of behaviour regulated by elders. (Peters 2011:224f.)

He therefore argues that 'the dislike of rural youth [for agriculture] is not focused on agriculture as such, but on their vulnerability, in village conditions, to exploitation by local elites and gerontocrats' (Peters 2011:203) Richards argues for '...the need to open up land to more intensive use by making it more readily accessible to young people, free from control by a local gerontocratic order' (Richards 2010: 560). How many governments, international agencies or NGOs have young people's access to land on their policy agendas, as more than rhetoric?

Before closing I'd like to try a small experiment.

Would each of you please picture, in your mind's eye, a young rural person in some part of the world that you know about, who has finished secondary school, and is now considering whether to remain in the village and become a farmer, or to move to the city ?

I'd like to know how many of you pictured a young rural woman?

As we know, much of the world's small scale farming is done by women. More than thirty years ago the UN's CEDAW Convention established clearly that women must ...have access to ... equal treatment in land and agrarian reform (article 14) and also that they must have equal rights in intra-family property transfers through inheritance (article 16)

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs recently released a special report on girls in rural economies around the world, noting that girls have the power to transform rural economies, and should be seen as future farmers and major stakeholders in agriculture and natural resource management, which requires among other things 'ensuring equitable inheritance and land rights for adolescent girls and women by supporting efforts to change and enforce relevant national and customary laws' (Chicago Council 2011: 4).

How many of those studies that found rural youth uninterested in farming asked young women whether they would be interested to be independent farmers, on their own smallholding?

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that thinking about youth, farming and food raises fundamental questions both about the future of rural youth, and of agriculture itself. If visions of a future based on sustainable smallholder-based agriculture are to be realized, and if young people are going to have a place in that future, these problems have to be taken seriously and given much more attention than has been the case in recent policy debate, and in recent research. IFAD's *Rural Poverty Report* for 2010, which gave special attention to young people, underlines :

[the need] to turn rural areas from backwaters into places where [young] people have access to quality services and profitable opportunities, and where innovation takes place, whether in agricultural production and marketing, in non-farm enterprises or in energy generation. (IFAD 2010:219f.)

The issue of intergenerational transfer of land rights - or, when that does not happen, intergenerational dispossession, when one generation's land is sold off which ought to have been passed on to the next - deserves our attention.

This brings us back to the question of youth agency, and policies towards youth (which will be the topic of Dolf de Lintelo's keynote presentation in the plenary on Wednesday morning, and Panel 9 on 'Engaging young people' on tomorrow

afternoon). One fundamental question affecting rural youth futures is simply the question: 'who will own the countryside?' when today's young men and women reach adulthood. There is something fundamentally worrying about policy contexts which allow older men, in communities, local or national governments to engage in or endorse land transactions which permanently bar the next generation from farming careers, without giving those to be affected any say-so in this process. The establishment of Youth branches of Farmer Organizations, special National Youth Commissions, Ministries of Youth [or Youth and Sports, Women and Youth, or Women Youth and Sports]) etc. do not always help, they may even marginalize the discussion of issues which affect youth by taking them out of the mainstream. In such conditions young people may have no option but to invent their own ways of doing politics, as did the masses of predominantly young people who went to the streets and brought down the government of Madagascar in protest against the massive land deal it had made with the South Koreans.

There are real and important choices to be made, with important consequences for the coming generations. We might express them in this way: will young men and women still have the option, and the necessary support, to engage in environmentally sound, small scale, mixed farming, providing food and other needs for themselves, their own society and others in distant places? Or will they face only the choice to become poorly-paid wage workers or contract farmers, in an endless landscape of monocrop food or fuel feedstock plantations, on land which used to belong to their parents, or to move to an uncertain existence in the informal sector of already crowded cities?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and that is exactly the reason why they deserve a place on our research agenda in the coming years.

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