

Young People and Agri-food: Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges

The African population is estimated at more than a billion people: over 60 percent are young men and women under the age of 35. The majority of African young people continue to face unemployment, underemployment, lack of skills, education and capital, and unmet needs for information and services around HIV/AIDS. This situation is even more accentuated among young people in rural areas, the greater proportion of whom do not have the opportunity to fully develop their potential (AU 2011).

African governments, international agencies and NGOs are calling for policies which pay more attention to young people and agriculture.

Continuing rural poverty and underemployment, migration of young people to urban areas, ageing farm populations and low agricultural productivity are observed across the continent. The problem of young people and agriculture is framed as either 'youth in peril' or 'agriculture in peril', depending on one's point of view. Modernised, business-like agriculture – with its assumed potential for growth and employment – is hailed as the 'saviour of young people'. At

the same time, young people are hailed as the 'saviour of agriculture'.

Yet young people increasingly aspire to work outside the agriculture sector. Even if they are interested in farming, in many settings opportunities to make a living in agriculture are limited.

Understanding these aspirations, opportunities and constraints is critical to formulating effective policies to support young people to achieve their full social and economic potential. This policy brief draws on research findings by Future Agricultures¹ and asks:

- What are the expectations and aspirations of young rural men and women?
- What are the constraints and opportunities facing young people who wish to engage in productive agriculture?
- How can policies better support young people to engage successfully in the agri-food sector?

The 'problem' of young people and agricultureⁱⁱ

The 'young people and agriculture' problem is complex. Portrayals of young people are contradictory, representing them on one hand as 'the nation's future', whilst also linking them to problems of unemployment, underemployment, vulnerability and negative behaviours such as risk-taking, crime and violence. Understanding the nature of the problem and how it has been constructed is a first step to addressing it. Unfortunately, empirical evidence is currently thinⁱⁱⁱ, with policy makers and planners relying on 'common knowledge', anecdote and narrative.

Some explanations of the young people and agriculture problem are essentially 'push-pull'^{iv}. Education opportunities, other services and the allure of better paying, higher status jobs in urban areas 'pull' young people away from rural areas. At the same time, increasing population density and pressure on land – aggravated by increasing commodification of agriculture, inheritance structures and foreign investment in land^v – together with low profitability of agriculture (due to poor natural resources, lack of markets or investment) – are blocking young people's access to land, labour and capital resources. A case study of expectations and challenges facing young rural people in Ethiopia is shown in Box 1.

Box 1: A last resort and often not an option at all: Farming and Young People in Ethiopia^{vi}

Development policies in Ethiopia emphasise agriculture as the pathway to industrialisation, and the need for a new generation of young, trained farmers to transform the agricultural sector. The success of this strategy depends largely on the willingness of the new generation of literate youth to take up agriculture as a potentially rewarding livelihood.

The desire of young people to go into farming and the feasibility of agriculture as a future livelihood were studied in two rural kebeles^{vii} of Ethiopia.

Despite recent improvements in productivity, the prevailing attitude among many young people is that agriculture is backward, demanding and even demeaning – especially for those who have gone through years of education with higher hopes and expectations. Negative attitudes of family and society reinforce young people's preference for informal work in urban areas, even if it is low-paying and as back-breaking as agriculture. Going back to farming after failing national school-leaving exams is seen as defeat.

This negative attitude towards a future life in farming was even more pronounced amongst girls in school: '*Kegibrina hiwot melaqeq*' – getting far away from a life in agriculture – was frequently heard.

'I come home from school and don't get any time to study. It's: do this, do that. I wish my parents understood I needed time for my education. If it is this hard already, it can only be worse if I become a farmer like them.' (Schoolgirl, Chertekel Kebele).

Some young people are interested in agriculture but feel it is an impossible option, since they cannot get a plot of land to farm, whether in high or even less densely populated areas:

'If you are a good farmer, use improved seed and know what to cultivate, you can be better off than a salaried government employee. Farming is very profitable. Even townspeople have come to realise this and are coming into agriculture as investors. And many young people would rather go into farming than try something else. But like my friends here have said, they have no land.' (Young man, Chertekel Kebele).

For those young people considering farming, unaffordable inputs, erratic and unpredictable seasonal rains, loss of soil fertility, and lack of agricultural services and credit - aside from land - are making agriculture an increasingly difficult option.

Policy makers, development partners, civil society and the private sector need to engage with young people and take their perspectives, aspirations and needs seriously. This means addressing the very real constraints to young people taking up agriculture. First is access to land. Addressing intergenerational transfer of land and reopening the debate over land distribution (to limit patronage and enable young people to benefit) is urgent to prevent on-going conflicts escalating into widespread instability in rural areas. Second, young people who wish to take up 'modern' farming need to be assisted through access to input programmes and credit. Otherwise, the Government's vision of creating a new generation of elite young farmers will remain a mirage.

Young people and opportunity spaces

But young people are not entirely forced to act against their will by external forces and have - to a greater or lesser extent - a role in their own destiny. Young people's expectations, aspirations and perceptions of rural life are also factors in their occupational choices. And these, in turn, are shaped by their experiences and (increasing) access to education, media and communications technology.

Youth have different backgrounds and experiences which influence their expectations of farming and their futures. Understanding this diversity is important in framing policies for young people's involvement in agricultural development. An example of experiences from Ghana's cocoa sector is shown in Box 2.

A young person faces a set of more or less viable options - or 'opportunity space' - as they attempt to establish an independent life. This opportunity space is determined by global, national and regional policies, institutions and markets, and social and cultural factors. A young person's ability to successfully exploit opportunity space depends on: their access to resources, social networks, information, knowledge and skills; their attitudes (e.g. towards risk and travel), imagination and alertness; and their ability to exploit opportunities.

Understanding opportunity space for young people means moving beyond the current policy focus on farming to include the whole spectrum of activities in the agri-food sector, including processing, marketing, retailing and export.



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Cash cropping helps young people accumulate capital to start a business outside farming.

Box 2: Perceptions and aspirations: Young people in Ghana's cocoa sector^{viii}

Cocoa production is an important economic activity in Ghana. However, it is thought that there is the potential for average yields to be significantly improved.

A study of young people's perceptions and aspirations towards cocoa farming found that most young people had first-hand experience of cocoa farming, some as full-time farmers; others working part-time, often on their parents' farms. Most had also had exposure to life outside their immediate surroundings: some had migrated independently or with parents to different parts of Ghana; others had travelled to towns or other districts for work or school. Young people's experience and engagement with farming and their current and expected educational attainment were the most significant factors in framing occupational aspirations.

Occupational aspirations of young people fell into 3 categories (in order of preference):

- Formal work as primary occupation with no direct engagement in farming;
- Farming as a means of accumulating capital towards non-farming primary occupation;
- Farming on own farm as primary occupation.

Formal non-farm work as primary occupation. All young people indicated that the best form of occupation was formal, salaried white-collar work, but only a minority considered this a realistic option. These were mainly students in school who hoped to continue their education to secondary or tertiary level. This illustrates the influence of educational attainment and goals on young people's aspirations. Formal education can offer young people knowledge and skills for a range of occupations, the final choice depending on personal factors and context (opportunity space). Most of this group gave no space to direct involvement in farming; at best they would find caretakers for their parents' farms. A few would consider going into large-scale commercial farming, if land, loans and supportive government services and policies were available.

Whilst most young people's first preference is for a job outside farming, the other two sets of aspirations directly involved farming.

Farming on own farm. Some young people hoped to progress from caretaking to share-cropping (sharing the proceeds with the owner), to ultimately owning a farm on leased or purchased land. Their goal was to gain increased control over farming activities, reduce drudgery and earn better income at each stage. For some young people, this might involve migration, not to cities but to rural areas where prospects look brighter.

Farming to accumulate capital for non-farm work. More than half of young people aspired to learn a trade (e.g. mechanics, carpentry, electrical work, tailoring) typically in a larger town. Most had some formal education, in contrast to those who aspired to be farmers, who had little or none. This group saw engagement with cocoa farming as a stop-gap measure: a means to earn funds to allow them to enter a trade in future. Some said they would prefer to leave farming behind completely. Others expected to continue engaging in cocoa production as an additional source of income, ideally as an owner, with the farm as a long-term investment.

Policy makers need to recognise these different categories. Agricultural training programmes need to be tailored for young people who have dropped out of school -- in addition to those in high school and tertiary education -- who may be more motivated to stay in agriculture, given the right opportunities and incentives. Some young people are clearly interested in farming as a commercial venture (with a preference for farm ownership). With rising urbanisation, trade and the emergence of larger scale enterprises, employment opportunities are increasing across the agri-food sector. An effective education and training policy that addresses the needs of both employers and employees is critical.

Box 3: Young farmers and Nigeria's development dilemma^{ix}

Farming is undergoing a transformation in Nigeria. Rural population growth means there is more labour, skills and consumers. Urbanisation means less rural labour, but the rapidly growing urban population provides an unprecedented opportunity for commercialisation of the agriculture sector, with rising commodity prices encouraging investment in new technologies. Policy-makers face the dilemma of finding strategies to facilitate the modernisation of small-scale farming, including the shift from an ageing farm population to a new generation of producers.

The new policy strategy (especially in Kwara State), is to make access to land and credit easier for individuals and companies operating larger-scale commercial farms. This means, in effect, transferring support for agriculture from the informal to the formal sector – rather than emphasising commercially-oriented smallholder agriculture.^x

The state has a pivotal role to play in the growth and sustainability of commercial agriculture. This is particularly the case where tenure systems limit access to land, infrastructure is rudimentary and commercial banks are jittery about lending to agriculture. Activities in Kwara State provide an example of this.

Kwara State is well endowed with cultivable land and has a good climate. The state government sees commercial agriculture as the pathway to socioeconomic development and is promoting this through three different models. The first, and newest, is the high-profile subsidised, large-scale commercial farm model in Shonga. Under the Shonga experiment, 13 farmers from Zimbabwe have been provided with land, infrastructure and credit to test large-scale farming under Nigerian conditions and provide training to young farmers. This model is being replicated around the state. Whether it can be replicated without state subsidies remains to be seen.

The second model evolved from a 'back-to-the-land' programme targeted at young people with little experience in farming, and no interest in pursuing 'hoe-and-cutlass' technology. So a new programme of youth empowerment through agriculture was launched to train young people in commercial farming. After the training, Kwara State promises to assist the young farmers to get access to bank credit and land (including setting aside some land from the Shonga farms) in their local government areas (LGA). But unless they have advocates in administration, young farmers have great difficulty in accessing the loans. Access to land may also be a problem in some LGAs without the state government's intervention.

The third model is to provide limited incentives, such as subsidised inputs, to small-scale farmers and leave them to their own devices to move agriculture forward. Official views seem to be that this strategy is unlikely to produce rapid productivity growth and support for it is limited.

The three models are competing for state resources, and strong economic and political interests are involved. Young people are consistently seen as underperforming in rural development. Many young Nigerians have a disdainful attitude towards agriculture. Yet enthusiasm for entrepreneurial activity is evident in markets and value chains across the country and beyond. Agricultural education focuses on science and technology, but business development and management also need to be stressed. Development policy needs to prioritise value chains, institutions and supporting infrastructure. Young people may find such an approach more relevant to their needs and aspirations.

Policy responses to the youth and agriculture problem

Policy makers have typically responded to pressure to address the young people and agriculture problem in one of a (limited) number of ways: training in agricultural skills (sometimes including entrepreneurship); targeted distribution of agricultural inputs and micro-credit; group farming schemes; and farm mechanisation. These are illustrated by the attempts of Kwara State, Nigeria, to get young people into commercial farming (Box 3).

The future of rural young people in agriculture^{xi}

To secure meaningful futures for rural young people, wider fundamental questions must be addressed: Who will own the countryside? Will young men and women have the option – and the necessary support – to engage in environmentally sound farming, providing food for themselves, their society and beyond? How can rural areas be turned 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?^{xii} These questions need to be debated by both policymakers and rural young people.

Involving youth in policy processes^{xiii}

Participation of young people in policy processes is increasingly seen both as a political right and of practical benefit. It brings young people's knowledge, experience and commitment to policy issues.

To foster this, National Youth Councils (NYC) have been set up in over 100 UN member states; Nigeria has a Youth Parliament; Tanzania is reserving seats for youth members in parliament; and there are youth associations across Africa.

Yet questions remain about appropriate and meaningful participation of young people. In some countries NYCs are key stakeholders in decision-making on youth issues; in others they are purely symbolic or dysfunctional. Most NYCs are dependent on state funding which raises questions of interference.

Who participates? Clustering young people with diverse needs, desires and problems ignores differences such as gender, class, educational attainment, and rural/urban location. Consultation exercises frequently have an urban bias, and may be conducted in official administrative languages. Youth leaders are often urban, educated males, but even they may

feel unable to challenge their elders on issues of policy and allocation of resources.

Policy-makers need to move away from seeing young people as an undifferentiated and problematic mass to be reformed and directed. Agricultural policies can then be addressed to the varied needs and ways in which young people engage in agriculture. One-size-fits-all solutions are not appropriate.

Legal and policy frameworks that work for the benefit of youth are needed. They must support young people's skills and capabilities to develop their own lives, and to participate as partners in development^{xiv}.

Young people should be seen as part of the solution to the difficulties they face. Failure to do so risks policy failure, given the marked differences in life worlds and experiences of adult decision makers and youth, in migration, mobility, lifestyles and so on.

Lessons for policy makers

- Policy makers' expectations of the role of youth in agriculture are frequently at odds with young people's own views: many aspire to work outside farming. Young people have diverse expectations and aspirations, dependent on their background, education and life experiences. It is important to look at how young people are portrayed in policy processes and the assumptions made about their willingness and ability to engage in agriculture.
- Even where young people are willing to work in agriculture, many face critical challenges in accessing land, labour, inputs, technical know-how – including entrepreneurial skills - and credit. Land dispossession needs to be addressed by policymakers if young people are to have a future in farming.
- Existing policy responses, such as higher education training in agricultural skills, distribution of agricultural inputs and microcredit, group farming schemes and farm mechanisation, are not meeting the diverse needs of young people and the expanding agri-food sector. Young people need the right skills to participate in the whole value chain and policies to support this.
- Young people need to participate meaningfully in debates about their future in the agri-food sector. Policies need to work for the benefit of youth, with youth as partners, and shaped by youth as leaders in development.

End Notes

- ⁱ Future Agricultures Consortium and the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research, University of Ghana, brought together researchers, policy makers, private sector and young people at the 'Young People, Farming and Food Conference' in Accra, Ghana, March 2012 to examine how young people engage with the agri-food sector in Africa – as producers, employees, consumers and citizens – and how these findings are integrated into policy processes. See: <http://www.future-agricultures.org/ypff-conference-resources>
- ⁱⁱ Sumberg, J., Anyidoho, N A., Leavy, J., te Lintelo, D and Wellard, K (2012) 'Introduction: The young people and agriculture problem in Africa' IDS Bulletin 43:6 1-8
- ⁱⁱⁱ A search of ISI Web of Science published papers on young people and Africa produced 1,908 hits since 1960, with only 74 on young people and agriculture
- ^{iv} Following 'push-pull' models of migration
- ^v See: Chinsinga, B and Chasukwa, M (2012) 'Youth, agriculture and land grabs in Malawi', IDS Bulletin 43.6: 67-77
- ^{vi} Tadele, G and Ayalew Gella, A (2012) 'A last resort and often not an option at all': Farming and young people in Ethiopia' IDS Bulletin 43:6 33-43
- ^{vii} Chertekel Kebele, Gozamin Woreda, East Gojjam Zone, Amhara Region and Geshgolle Kebele, Qedida Gamella Woreda, Alaba Tembaro Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region.
- ^{viii} Anyidoho, N A., Leavy, J and Aseno-Okyere, K (2012) 'Perceptions and aspirations: A case study of young people in Ghana's cocoa sector' IDS Bulletin 43:6 20-32
- ^{ix} Ayiro, J A and Mortimore, M (2012) 'Youth farming and Nigeria's development dilemma: The Shonga experiment' IDS Bulletin 43.6: 68-66
- ^x e.g. World Bank (2007) World Bank Development Report 2008: Agriculture for development, Washington DC: World Bank
- ^{xi} White, B (2012) 'Agriculture and the generation problem: Rural youth, employment and the future of farming' IDS Bulletin 43:6 9-19
- ^{xii} IFAD (2010) Rural Poverty Report 2011, Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development
- ^{xiii} Te Lintelo, D (2012) 'Young people in African (agricultural) policy processes? What National Youth Policies can tell us' IDS Bulletin 43: 6 90-103
- ^{xiv} SPW/DFID-CSO (2010) Youth participation in Development: A guide for development agencies and policymakers, London SPW/DFID-CSO Youth Working Group <http://www.ygproject.org/guide> downloaded 23.02.2013



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Young people are seeking employment outside traditional agriculture.

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