

Young People, Farming & Food Conference

19th - 21st March 2012
Accra, Ghana



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Speaking the unspoken: youth and policy

A dynamic keynote speech from **Dolf de Lintelo** kicked off the final morning, stimulating some interesting discussion around the participation of young people in developing youth policies. Whilst there are a number of African national youth policies, these are frequently 'schizophrenic'. These policies frame youth as the 'only real hope for a great future', yet underlying them are fears that young people lack responsibility or are immature. The result is a set of paternalistic and directed interventions, without any recognition of the different needs and aspirations of young people.

There is also a lack of focus on poverty, be it urban or rural. Although there are examples of youth councils (mostly led by educated young men), there is little evidence that these have effectively shaped policy. Any meaningful participation of young people in policy processes tends to be rather tokenistic, with most policymakers unconvinced of the value young people can bring to the policy process. In the Q&A, one participant remarked that involving youth was not the same as making youth-relevant policy. A warning was issued to perceiving all youth as "energetic, creative and liberal-minded", as many may wish to express more conservative views but don't feel they're allowed to do so. As in previous sessions, a call to better understand the diversity of young people's lives should be accompanied by capacity building for young people, as well as older adults, to foster trust and partnerships that will mean young people can be involved in influencing better youth policy.

Risk and market opportunity

In the partners panel session, **Darran Belgrave**, social advisor for the UK Department for International Development (DFID), emphasised DFID's commitment to focus on the poorest of the poor, including women and youth. Although DFID has no specific youth policy, Darran detailed several key areas of action: the private sector, supporting African scientists (particularly

women) to capture indigenous talent, and use of multi-media and ICTs, for providing entry points for working with young people. New business models must speak to the demands of smallholder farmers and meet the needs of women and young people.

Peter Trenchard from USAID, newly arrived in Ghana, shared much of his previous experience in Senegal in highlighting USAID's approach in creating competitiveness and supporting commodity value chains. Like DFID, USAID has no specific youth policy but increasing competitiveness, particularly for niche markets, has the potential to involve and impact on women, youth, as well as the elderly. Agriculture, he emphasised, is much more than working with a hoe: it's about the value chain, new technologies, innovation, credit and market opportunities. He agreed that ICTs are particularly attractive to the youth, and concluded: "What we're looking for and hope to attain is that agriculture is a sector not where people are running away but where people are seeing real opportunities."

"How can we be more thoughtful about role models for the young?" - Christine Okali

Steps towards a research agenda

Given some big constraints, including a limited body of research on youth and agrifood, and incoherent policy, where do we go from here? In the final session of the conference, **Jim Sumberg** challenged the conference to think about a conceptual framework and pose research questions.

The context of global economic forces, changes and trends, and their implications on nations, regions and localities are crucial. We need to break down the classification of young people, perhaps into classes of "social age", gender, class and education. Rural areas could be classed by access to markets, and quality of natural resource.

Mike Mortimore proposed that the issue was about the transfer of the agrifood sector to the next generation. Nana Akua Anyidoho added the idea of "transformation" to this, as young people innovate and treat the sector in a more holistic way.

Education is important when talking about transformation - not just the formal education system, but the passing-on of knowledge and skills - a point raised by Grace Mwaura. Education needs to be both more fun, and have a more critical approach, argued Ben White.

Ben also asked what land tenure arrangements could offer secure rights to those wanting to farm, though it was important to ensure that older people were not thrown off the land.

Another research question was to explore the constraints to

young men & women engaging in large scale-farming in ways that provide them with good prospects, dignity & being part of active communities.

The issue of a limited research base could be addressed by turning to evidence on unemployment, which is a huge problem for young people.

Other key suggestions for research questions included:

- the human agency of young people, and how they define themselves in the socio-economic arena
- lessons from the successes of Ghanaian youth in gaining property and political engagement
- embracing diversity and complexity as a feature of this area of research
- research on coastal communities and fishing
- the implications of operating in areas where there is conflict and violence
- risk, incentives / disincentives and the politics which open up opportunities or closing them down
- the effect of communities around young people and the expectations put upon them by families.

Some methodological questions also came to the fore. We need to refine our methods and explore how to measure aspiration. And young people can also participate in research themselves, building their capacity and providing unique insights.



Conference on the web

The Future Agricultures blog will have more comment, opinion and analysis from many of the sessions, written by and for conference participants. Join in now and comment at www.future-agricultures.org/blog

The conference website also includes:

- all the conference newsletters
- links to media coverage from our competition winners and elsewhere
- conference photos
- the programme and conference papers
- text and audio interviews with young people
- participant videos
- background reading, and more.