

# **“Last resort and often not an option at all”: Youth, education and farming as livelihood in Ethiopia <sup>1</sup>**

Getnet Tadele and Asrat Ayalew

Contact: [getnett2001@yahoo.com](mailto:getnett2001@yahoo.com)

## **Introduction**

The current government of Ethiopia considers the agricultural sector as the key factor that will ultimately determine the success or failure of its national development plan based on the ADLI philosophy. Growth in the agricultural sector, in addition to meeting important targets such as achieving food security, is expected to provide the vital push the rest of the nation's economy needs in order to jump start. This belief is also apparent in the latest manifestation of the government's five year plan, dubbed 'the Growth and Transformation Plan', where 'ensuring the agricultural sector is emphasized (as the second of eight pillars) to provide the massive push necessary for economic growth and industrialization' (FDRE Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2010). The government also considers improving agricultural skills, knowledge and productivity as another vital component of the agricultural development strategy and argues that not much can be achieved by trying to teach the older generation of farmers who are illiterate and unable and/or unwilling to acquire and adopt new, improved and scientific methods of farming. Various policies of the government emphasize a need to cultivate a new generation of literate farmers (who have preferably some post elementary school agricultural training or, at the very least, completed elementary school). Clearly, according to the policy, literate farmers are needed for improved agricultural innovation and output which in turn will allow young people to secure more productive and attractive employment in agriculture. Stemming from this government policy, this paper attempts to capture attitudes and aspirations of rural in and out of school youth towards agriculture.

Leavy and Smith (2010) argue that there is a blurry boundary between aspirations and expectations and they suggest that aspirations need to be understood in line with determinants of aspirations. The authors further note that youth aspirations in sub-Saharan Africa are influenced and ultimately formed by existing broader social and economic circumstances.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for the conference **Young People, Farming and Food**, 19-21 March 2012, Accra Ghana. Comments Welcome.

Proctor and Luccheci (2012:35) also note that “Young people’s aspirations and expectations in relation to economic outcomes are strongly related to socio-cultural influences and the degree of social embeddedness. Social influences on aspirations tend to be stronger in rural areas resulting in social pressures that encourage uniformity and limit student achievement regardless of aspiration and motivation to succeed. There is a tendency for rural young people’s educational expectations to be lower than those of their urban counterparts. Higher poverty rates and lower socio-economic status in rural communities negatively impact on the aspiration levels of young people. Aspirations are not just about economic opportunity – status is important: agriculture is unappealing to young people because it does not bring status regardless of economic outcomes”. Thus, occupational aspirations not only depend on tangible outcomes such as income or level of living standard that accrues from occupation but also intangible benefits such as prestige and status in the society. Lack of prestige is one of the reasons why agriculture is not attractive to young people regardless of the economic outcome. Particularly, engaging in agriculture in one’s own community (in the presence of significant others) and after going through schooling is perceived by young people as degrading. “Thus, it is important to note that aspirations are not just about economic opportunities. Perceived degrading work, such as manual labour performed in other locations, does not affect status in the same way as when it is performed in a person’s home location, and such absentee work can enable acquisition of life skills and funds for self-employment and social and kinship contributions that confer higher status (Proctor and Luccheci 2012:35 see Leavy and Smith 2010).

There is often a disconnect between young people’s aspirations and the reality on the ground. For instance, “African secondary school students’ vocational aspirations and expectations do not reflect the employment opportunities or the realities of the labour market, or the socio-economic conditions and development levels of their countries” (Proctor and Luccheci 2012:35) .

Given that agriculture in general and small-scale farming in particular is the key to the country’s economy both currently and in the foreseeable future, understanding aspirations of future generation of farmers (rural youth) and whether they are attracted to take up agriculture as a livelihood is critical for any future interventions on agriculture in Ethiopia.

The objective of this paper is to explore what characteristics of “agricultural life” make it desirable / undesirable to young men and young women across educational levels and regions

and the major forces shaping young men and young women's perceptions of "agricultural life" and life aspirations more generally.

Fieldwork was conducted in two different regions: Amhara Region, East Gojjam Zone – Gozamin Wereda (Chertekel Kebelle); and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), Alaba Tembaro Zone, Qedida Gamella Wereda (Geshgolla Kebelle). These two sites were selected taking different agro-ecological zones and farming traditions, cultures and orientations into account. Site two (Geshgolla Kebelle) is more oriented to cash crop production than site one (Chertekel Kebelle) and school penetration also seemed higher in the second site than site one. There is also a much more severe land shortage in the second site than site one (most households don't have land holdings larger than 1 or 2 timads<sup>2</sup> as the wereda is the second most populated area in the country next to the Welayta zone.<sup>3</sup> This area was also becoming increasingly prone to food insecurity due to successive years of irregularity in the seasonal rains and during the time of the field work, a number of the farmers interviewed were more or less dependent on what they received from the Productive Safety Nets programme run by the government. Both sites were selected in consultation with the wereda agriculture office

Study participants across two sites were identified from five target groups: FGD with Older Farmers (men and women), FGD with Young Farmers (men and women), FGD with In school youth (boys and girls), FGD with Out of School youth (boys/men and girls/women in some cases college students), key informants from wereda agricultural offices, development agents and kebele officials. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Oral consent was obtained from all study participants.

A total of seven key informant interviews and 14 FGDs were conducted and a total of 99 participants were recruited across two sites (41 from first site and 58 from the second site).

All FGD and interview guides used in the study were developed in English and the interviews were taped. Review of the data showed remarkable consistency in viewpoints across two sites

---

<sup>2</sup> Gemed or Timad is a local unit for land measurement that is often translated as corresponding to ¼ hectare. There is, however some diversity in its use and a timad or gemed can often range from 0.16 to 0.25 hectares depending on the locality and the type of soil. It is important to note here that in its literal meaning, a timad of land is equal to the amount of land that can be ploughed by a single farmer using an ox drawn plough in a single day. Both terms were used interchangeably by our informants

<sup>3</sup> Most participants in this site had between 8 – 12 children.

and these results are summarized across two sites. Wherever noteworthy differences by gender, age, educational status, target group and site were observed and indicated.

## Findings

### Understandings/Perceptions of farming and agriculture as a way of life: Perspectives of young and old farmers

*“Meretu hamsa kind berew yetewiso;*

*Indet libela new indih hono tarso”<sup>4</sup>*

~ Verses from a popular folk song

The farmer was described as “someone who labours to feed others”. The farmer was tied to his land, and lacked, as far as the participants perceived it, no other option than simply being a farmer. While an educated man was seen as being able to move about freely, work where ever he wanted and lived where he wanted to live, the farmer was simply tied down to the same place and to the same trade – toiling in his land. *“What else can a farmer do? What else can he be? He is already all he can be, he has nothing but his land and his labour. He can’t say I am done being a farmer and move on – he simply can’t. He has no options”* one of the older farmers interviewed from site one stressed. The farmer was described as someone who, through his labour and sweat, feeds not only himself but also others. The farmer was also described as the base upon which all life is built on, the source of all food and hence the source of life. This aspect of the farmer as someone who produces and feeds the rest of the population was repeatedly raised and stressed by all farmers interviewed.

Life as a farmer was ultimately tied to life in a village which most of the respondents found hard and demanding. Stressing this inseparability of a life of farming with a demanding rural life, one of the key informants from site one remarked *“People still don’t realize that one can live in a village and yet still live a good life. Even when you find the odd young person who has gone in to agriculture as a result of failing to pass the national exams (at grade 10), and they succeed and lead a good life, people still refuse to see their success; they don’t say “so and so’s son has become a good farmer”, no! They would rather say “So and so’s son*

---

<sup>4</sup> These verses, taken from a popular traditional song which narrates the difficulty of being a farmer loosely translate to a farmer rhetorically asking himself “I have only 50 hands of land (the measure of the hand from the elbow to the finger tips) and even my ox is borrowed, how am I to feed myself and my family?”

*became a farmer after so many years of education*”. According to the informant, agriculture is still seen as a degrading occupation, and being a farmer was unfortunately equated with being the least that one can be – especially when one is educated to some level. *“Even the agricultural extension workers (DAs) are often ashamed of their own occupation. You will find them reading accounting books under their desk trying to get a job in some office as soon as they possibly can”* he remarked.

While life as a farmer was described in more or less the same terms in both sites, farmers in the second site did not see themselves as farmers per se. Although farming was by and large their primary means of livelihood, the mere fact that they didn’t have much land to speak of made them question to what extent they could claim to be proper farmers. As one of the older farmers put it, they were only “farmers by name” in the sense that they had little or no land to actually farm on. “In the olden days”, the participant went on to remark, *“there were not as many people, land was plenty, and we had plenty of cattle. But this is no more. There is no land, there are no cattle, whatever people had, they lost them due to draught. We simply continue calling ourselves farmers, without any land and without any cattle”*. This lack of farm land was repeatedly stressed over and over again by the participants. Only one of the participants had 4 timads of land and was considered quite an exception to the general status in the kebele, where having two timads was considered above the average. *“Say you had something like 2 hectares of land, a pair of oxen, and that you were able to grow 5 or more different crops”* one of the participants remarked. *“You can live of that well, you can feed your children and send them to school and you can certainly call yourself a farmer. But no one here has that kind of land anymore”* he concluded.

### **Desirability/Undesirability Factors**

Agricultural life, or life as a farmer, was considered generally desirable but only under ideal circumstances. The fact that the farmer is not dependent on anyone, lives of his own means, and even provides for others were frequently mentioned by informants as the most appealing sides of agricultural life. The farmer is independent, self reliant and free – he can live of what he produces, he does not depend on others for his life, does not pay for most of what he needs, not only food but also other amenities of life such as wood, water etc. The farmer is his own boss, does not have any one to tell him to do this now or do that later. He does things as he sees fit, works and rests as he sees fit.

The farmer was also seen as a hard worker, well behaved and descent – unlike town folk who are perceived “immoral and wicked”. The farmer spends his day with his oxen and with the soil, and hence stays away from things that corrupt his mind and body (such as drinking and promiscuity). The farmer was also described as, at times, simple minded and perhaps ignorant of much else other than what goes on in his own life. Although this was considered a shortcoming in some ways, some participants were keen to stress that the farmer lives a simple life as a result.

But as things stand at the moment, life as a farmer was far from ideal and becoming increasingly difficult. Increasing inflation in the face of decreasing crop prices and a sharp increase in the prices of fertilizers have made the life of the farmer not only demanding but increasingly frustrating. *“I have been a farmer all my life from my child hood to now. What have I gained out of it?”* one of the older farmers from site two asked rhetorically. *“I struggled with the land and shoved soil all my life, and I can’t even put on decent clothes. And with fertilizer prices as they are, I fear it will get even worse”*. The price of fertilizers was perhaps the single most important factor that caused worry across both sites and across all groups of respondents. In one particular instance, a farmer from site one remarked that he was forced to plant *chaqma/gullo* (castor oil -- *Ricinus communis*) and *ingido* or oat (*Avena santiva*) (both seen as plants that one would cultivate rather than simply leaving the land empty) on land that he would have otherwise used for wheat simply because he could not afford fertilizers. *“I have been wearing these same clothes for the last 4 years. And I fear it is going to get much much worse”* he concluded.

Farmers young and old and key informants in both sites stated that land was not only becoming scarce but also losing its fertility and becoming extremely dependent on fertilizers to produce anything. But at the same time, fertilizer prices have gone up so high that they were almost becoming unaffordable for most farmers. The increase was especially more dramatic in the last year, according to the participants – there has been an increase of 400 Birr from last season’s prices – an increase they felt was not only too steep but also irresponsible. *“We can understand an increase of 100 Birr, or even 200 perhaps. But 400 Birr? That is almost like the government is trying to kills us”* one of the farmers from site two complained. The increase in the price of fertilizers was also seen to be unfair as it has come in a year where crop prices have actually declined. *“We sold a quintal of teff between 500 to 600 Birr last year even at its worst. But this year a top grade teff will only bring you just about 400. A plate (sehan) of wheat has come down to 5 or 6 birr from 11. How can we make a living as*

*farmers with these prices?”* one of the participants in the FGD with older farmers in site one asked.

The land was also concentrated in the hands of a few and land disputes were causing numerous conflicts even among parents and children as well as among siblings in both sites. One of the participants from site one was at the kebele to follow up on a court case he had filed after being beaten nearly to death from a quarrel that arose out of a land dispute. We also met another farmer whose two sons were in the hospital due to injuries they sustained from a similar land related quarrel while waiting for the interview with the wereda agriculture office head at Debre Markos. Although anecdotal, such quarrels and disputes seemed to be very wide spread. The shortage of land was so severe that, the participants from Woreda agricultural office in site two also underlined, most of the conflicts (usually among siblings and relatives) in the area are caused by disputes over land ownership. This suggests that intergenerational transfer of land needs to be given the attention of policy makers. With dwindling land size against increasing population, there is a need to work on intergenerational transfer of land .Otherwise; conflicts related to land may create large scale instability in the rural areas

Problems with the availability, quality and price of the improved seeds being sold to farmers is another challenge. Almost all of the farmers in the first site complained that the improved seeds they have been receiving in the last few years were of very poor quality; especially wheat and maize seeds. One of the participants said that he regretted sowing wheat last year because the harvest was poor and the wheat was stricken with *wagg* (leaf rust or stem rust- a disease affecting wheat plants). In the second site, high yield seeds were said to be becoming unaffordable.

### **Changes in Agriculture and Changes in Desirability/Undesirability**

According to participants in both sites, agriculture has changed significantly in the last decade and more significantly in the last five years. There seems to be a consensus on this fact across all respondent categories. Although the basic techniques of farming (using ox drawn ploughs), and the type of farming that is practiced (mixed farming) has basically remained the same, agriculture has seen a number of changes. The use of better agricultural inputs such as improved seeds, fertilizers and better farming methods (such as slash ploughing, sowing seeds in rows, water pumps, modern bee hives, etc) has lead to a marked

improvement in productivity. *“A farmer was someone who wore tattered and soiled clothes, someone who lives in misery and poverty, always struggling to make ends meet, someone who lives with the soil (affer geffi)”* one of the extension workers from site two remarked. *“A farmer was someone who toiled and laboured all his life and went to his grave with nothing to show for it”* another added. *“You know like that insect [the dung beetle] that is always rolling dirt, a farmer used to be understood as not being so different”* he continued. *“A farmer was someone who, despite all his labour and work, could never live beyond trying to feed himself and his family”* another noted. But this portrayal of the farmer was, key informants were keen to stress, no longer true since the farmer was now someone who lived a life that is better than that of the typical government employee.

A number of positive changes in the lives of farmers were apparent according to the participants. *“In terms of how the farmer dresses, what he eats, what he has in his house and even in his sanitation there have been some changes”* one of the Kebele DAs in site one stated. *“Almost all farmers are now using properly dug pit toilets, it used to be unusual. Farmers have separate houses for themselves and their animals; this is also a change from the past. Almost all farmers have radios and have better access to what is going on in the rest of the world outside their village”*. Another key-informant added that farmers have now learned about management of their resources and assets and a good number of farmers have started savings in the local credit and savings associations. He stated this as being perhaps the most important change that has happened in the life of the farmer in reducing his vulnerability to such shocks as illness and the odd year with a bad harvest. *“If a farmer got ill, his choice was between selling one of his oxen and seeking someone who could give him a loan. It is not like that these days. We have been taught about savings and we do save”* one of the participants in the first site remarked.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction and adoption of better farming methods and inputs including high yield seeds leading to better productivity was a common recognition among participants in both sites. Older and younger farmers gave their own examples of how they have been able to get more out of their land as a result. Participants in the first site narrated how getting 12 quintals of wheat from a hectare of land used to be considered a blessing and added it was now quite normal to get up to 40 quintals of produce from the same land. In addition to crops, improved

---

<sup>5</sup> This narrative suggests that the farmer is always perceived as a man and not woman. The Amharic word- *“gebere”* for farmer often stands for a male

farming methods such as modern bee-keeping hives and methods have also improved gains. One farmer explained that he was earning twice as much from a single bee hive he keeps as a result.

As to whether or not agriculture was becoming more desirable as a result, there were mixed views. On the one hand, participants felt that all the developments that they outlined as having occurred in the last 10 – 15 years were making agriculture more and more profitable and therefore more appealing. But they felt that there was a huge obstacle that set back this appeal – the scarcity of land. The young, they all stressed, have no land of their own nor any means of obtaining one and this was discouraging them from considering agriculture even as an option<sup>6</sup>. One of the participants in FGD with male young farmers remarked that most of the young have the desire to go in to agriculture since farming was the tradition and the most natural thing to do for them, but decide to explore other options such as trade and business when the option of becoming a farmer is off limits due to the fact that they can't get land. He added that farming was not an occupation to be lamented about and despised if it was not for this shortage of land.

Another participant from site one took this further by stating that the government has simply abandoned the youth and left them stranded; the youth have not been given land so they cannot go in to agriculture, but neither is the government trying to give them other opportunities for making a living. Although there are some measures being taken by the government to organize the unemployed youth and help them create jobs for themselves, the participant observed, this was only so in towns. The rural youth were simply left to fend for themselves. He concluded by stressing that the government needs to do something about this situation and do it soon.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Over an informal discussion held later on the topic of the youth having no land, the deputy chair of the kebele administration in site one –himself a farmer, remarked “it is the question they keep on raising in every meeting, they want land. But then again the government says land should not be redistributed again, that it will be too fragmented if redistributed every now and then.”

<sup>7</sup> In a later informal conversation with a young man in his early 20s (which the interviewer met in the compounds of the kebele administration) who said he was from a farming family and had completed school, it was learned that there were some attempts to organize the youth in to enterprises by the woreda. “They [woreda officials] come here and call us for a meeting. They tell us a thousand things about how we need to create jobs for ourselves and promise us they will assist us in organizing ourselves in groups and other things. They ask us what we want to do and write that down. And they leave saying they will be back on this day or that to take it up further. But when we come back on the day they gave us, they don't show up.” When asked if he would have preferred to be a farmer if indeed he was able to secure some land, the young man replied “ If there was the chance to do something better than agriculture, I would prefer that. But all the woreda people do is just talk,

Although the dominant view was that the youth had no lack when it comes to interest in agriculture, some of the participants nevertheless were very keen to stress that this was not the case for all young people and wanted to point out that there were indeed youth who thought little of agriculture as a potential future livelihood and that this fact was simply too evident to be denied. This lack of desire among some of the youth, specifically among the educated, was attributed to various reasons including laziness, lack of proper understanding and the naivety of the young and their tendency to easily be attracted by what they apparently (but mistakenly) see as the better life people live in towns. One of the participants in the FGD with young male farmers in site one described this as follows:

*“If you are a good farmer, if you use improved seeds, if you know what to farm/cultivate, you are better off than the salaried government employee. Farming is very profitable, and you can make a lot of money. Even town people have come to realize this and are coming in to agriculture as ‘investors’. It is just a different name, they are becoming farmers as far as I can tell. And most of the young would rather go in to farming than try something else. But like most of my friends here said, they have no land. They have the desire but the desire alone is not enough, they need land but land isn’t so easy to get. So they start thinking of other things they can do or some go (migrate to) somewhere else thinking there is nothing they can do here. But there are also some young people who, after completing school and failing to go to college, feel that it is degrading to go back to farming. They see their parents and their friends who are farmers, they live a life of hard work, they have no rest, they live with the mud and dirt, even their clothes are full of dirt and mud. And then they see town people with clean clothes and smooth faces and they think it is better. But this is just their ignorance.”*

But these improvements, as welcome as they may be, have not made farming any more appealing than it was, and especially more so for younger people.

### **Desirability / Undesirability across age, education and gender**

The desirability and undesirability of agriculture as a way of life appeared to differ across age and level of education as well as gender. Young boys and girls currently attending school

---

nothing seems to come out of it ever. So I wouldn’t mind being a farmer; I mean what choice do I have, being a farmer is better than having nothing to do at all. All I want is to make a living for myself’.

were especially more inclined to view agriculture as a dead end; an option that they were either unwilling to consider at all or see it only as a last resort. Although there were the few odd responses that portrayed a future in farming as the second best option if in case one's education does not lead anywhere; interviewed in school youth in general had a much stronger and negative view regarding the possibility of going in to agriculture if and when they failed to pass the national school leaving exams. Most of the youth interviewed claimed they cannot see themselves going in to farming as a possibility at all since they neither had the desire, and (perhaps more importantly) nor the means. One of the interviewed boys in the FGD with in school boys from site two, for example, stressed that his family only has four gemedes of land and that even this has been further divided up by two of his three elder siblings who have already completed school and have become farmers. Hence, he stressed, he simply has no way of becoming a farmer even if he wanted to as his family didn't have any land to give him. But even if this was not the case, he added, farming simply was not a way of life he would choose. *"God willing", he remarked, "I will be able to continue with my education to college and make someone out of myself. That I think is my only hope"*. Similar views were expressed by other in school youth, the most often repeated phrase being *"to make some one of myself through education"* which obviously excluded any possibility of becoming a farmer and seemed to practically mean becoming "anything but a farmer".

The fact that they were currently in school and therefore still had hopes and aspirations of pursuing their education further to "make someone out of themselves" appears to be the most important factor in explaining this general negative attitude towards a future in agriculture. As one of the boys (16) in FGD with in school boys 15-18 in site one aptly put it – *"If we were not attending school, we wouldn't have had anything to aspire to besides our parents' livelihood and their simple tools (maresha, misar and wubar). But we have come to know that there is more to life than that and it is all because of our education"*.

For this group of respondents, the life of the farmer was tiring and hard, a life of endless toil from day to day and all year with little gain at the end. The farmer had no goals in life and no plans. The life of the farmer is visionless, the farmer leads out his life one day at a time with no goals other than to survive and toil endlessly. The farmer makes no effort to set long term goals and objectives, he lives off what he gets – starving or feasting as the produce comes. Even when the farmer enjoys the rare good harvest, his gain never goes beyond the year as he feasts on what he gained and does not invest it in anything that may bring more gains. As

such, the life of the farmer was said to show little change from year to year and stagnant. They also described the farmer as traditional and “ignorant”, not in touch with the modern world and stuck in tradition.

This negative attitude towards any future life in agriculture was even more pronounced among the in school girls. As one of the girls in FGD with in school girls aged 16-18 (7-8 grades) in site one put it *“I am attending school so that I don’t end up like my parents”*. The girls described the lives of their parents as traditional and backward and said they wished for a better life which they hoped to attain through their education. One phrase repeatedly used by the girls was *“kegibrina hiwot melageq”* – which loosely translates to “getting as far away from a life in agriculture”. It was the one phrase that came up again and again and seemed to express their strong desire to distance themselves from a life that they felt was rooted in ignorance and tradition. Another of the girls remarked all she needed to convince herself that agriculture has no hope for her is just a look at the life of her own parents. *“They know little, they go about their lives based on what they know from tradition and that is not a life I want to have for myself. I have got to be better than that and that is why I am attending school. Farming is not something I wish for”* (FGD with school girls aged 16-18 in site one). Although the participant added that not all farming should necessarily be traditional and backward, and was keen to point out that there is, in her own words, “modern farming”, the farming practiced by her own family was far from this. The traditional and “ignorant” nature of life as a farmer was further stressed by still another of the girls from the same group who said that she often sees her parents going about doing things in the wrong way and pointed out this often frustrates her. *“But when I try to suggest things to them”* she added, *“all I get is insults. So I don’t do that. Rather I simply hope that I myself don’t have to live my life like that.”*

All of the girls equated life as a farmer with “ignorance” and “backwardness”, a life which they say they have come to detest from what they have seen of the lives of their own parents. This “better life” was not to be found in farming. Life as a farmer was described as hard and tiresome. Describing this, one of the girls said that she doesn’t even have to see the life of her parents as even her life (as a farmer’s daughter) was hard and demanding already. *“I come from school and I don’t get any time to study. It is do this and do that. We all have to do household chores late in to the evening. Perhaps we might get an hour or so late in the night to look at our exercise books but even then our parents may think we are wasting the lamp. And it is back to school the next day without having revised what we have learned the day*

*before. I wish I had more time to study, I wish my parents understood that I needed time for my education. I wish they could allow me to plan my time and put aside some of it for work and some of it for study. But they don't understand this. It is hard. Sometimes it frustrates me too much already {asmerari new}. If it this hard already, it can only be worse if I become a farmer like them"* (FGD with in school girls aged 16-18 in site one).

Like the boys, the girls felt that they have come to see how backward and traditional the lives of their parents were mainly as a result of their education. One girl remarked *"We don't think like them, we want a life that is better than theirs. So we don't quite get along"* (FGD with in school girls aged 16-18 in site one). Education, the girls believed, has shaped their view – to look beyond and above the traditional to what they considered was the modern way of life. It, therefore, appears that schooling or education is making young people more cognizant of urban-rural disparities and desire to achieve a standard of living not typically associated with agricultural livelihoods.

Although school and education appeared to be the major factors that have shaped the strong repulsion the girls felt towards a future life in agriculture, shortage of land was also a strong factor that discouraged them even further. As mentioned earlier, the girls were keen to point out that not all farming needed to be traditional and backward and that one could lead a modern life as a modern farmer. But this was said to be an attainable and unrealistic mainly due to the fact that there simply was not sufficient land. One of the girls from FGD with in school girls in site one described how her older sisters and brothers who have become farmers have to go to extra lengths to get any land they can cultivate. *"They don't have any land of their own – they had to literally hunt for land they can work on – land owned by other people. They work on it and have to share their produce with the owners."*<sup>8</sup> *But even such land is not easy to find. And how can I possibly want to go in to farming when I see my own sisters go through all this trouble to get a plot of land to work on?"* The participant concluded with the observation that *"living off agriculture is just too difficult"*.

The girls also pointed out that life in agriculture was a lot less appealing for them due to tradition and the way different tasks are traditionally given to men and women; although, they were keen to stress, there was nothing a woman can't do that a man can. *"There is this*

---

<sup>8</sup> This arrangement, called *metemed* or share cropping, involves leasing the land and in return for farming the plot, the client gives a certain proportion (usually 1/3<sup>rd</sup> to half depending on the specificities of the arrangement) of the produce to the owners of the land. There are reports that "renting or borrowing land is somewhat higher in Ethiopia and Ghana than in the other countries" [in Africa or SSA) (Proctor and Luccheci, 2012:44).

*tradition that has been brought on from the past. For example, you will never see a man baking injera or cooking; or a woman ploughing land or sowing seeds in the farm. It is just tradition but it still keeps men and women doing different things*” (FGD with in school girls aged 16-18 in site one). This traditional division of labour, which the girls seemed to think was unnecessary, was said to keep the woman dependent on the man. As one of the informants in FGD with in school girls aged 16-18 in site one put it *“Even if a woman had her own land but had no husband, she can’t farm it herself. May be she can lease it to someone who can but she can’t go out with a plough and a pair of oxen to actually farm it herself.”* Apart from this gendered nature of work and the traditional belief that men can’t work in the kitchen and women can’t plough land, the girls said that the life of the farmer was similar for both men and women – that it was difficult for both.

On the other hand, there seems to be a slightly more positive attitude towards agriculture among young people who were already out of school, either because they had dropped out of school or have completed high school and failed to qualify for higher level education.<sup>9</sup> Although this group of respondents were equally keen to point out what was, in their opinion, so wrong about traditional agriculture and the life of the common farmer, at least some of them were not quick to dismiss agriculture as a possible future livelihood while some even saw it as a preferred livelihood option, albeit under more ideal circumstances.

In both sites, the most important factor that was preventing them from even considering a life in agriculture as a possibility for this group of respondents appeared to be more the lack of access to farm land than the lack of desire. For some, particularly for men, farming was, at least for those who were educated and knew how to do it, a potentially lucrative field and some of the participants stated they had no objections at all to becoming a farmer if they had the means (land). When probed further by the interviewer that most farmers he has met thus far tend to complain about their lives bitterly and seemed to think life as a farmer was no life at all, the participants maintained that this was only because the traditional farmer was ignorant, did not know what to produce and when and simply stuck in tradition as opposed to adopting better and modern ways of farming. *“If I had land, I wouldn’t waste it producing*

---

<sup>9</sup> Leavy and Smith (2010:7) maintain that “... aspirations tend to decline as children mature into young adults, in response to a growing awareness of the world, its possibilities and constraints, influenced by previous choices and experience”. However, Nwagwu (1976 in Leavy and Smith 2010:7) argue that, “in spite of awareness of tight labour markets and limited economic opportunities generally, students in countries like Nigeria and Kenya maintained high aspirations and high expectations for their future employment”.

cereals” one stated. *“Even a small plot can earn you a lot of money if you planted gesho<sup>10</sup> on it”,* he added. Farming, provided that one had a good piece of land preferably with access to an irrigation source such as a stream or a river, was seen as a very lucrative business. One of the participants remarked *“I bet I can turn my life around in just two years [if I had such a land]. But there just isn’t any land.”* (FGD with young out of school men aged 20-25). When asked if they have ever considered sub-leasing land or share cropping (*metemed*) from others if they thought farming was so lucrative, the participants said that this was not appealing for them. First, finding any such possibility for sub-leasing was itself said to be difficult as it was already taken by other people who do not have a land of their own. Second, even when the possibility exists, this arrangement was described as “not worth the effort”. As one of the participants put it, *“you work your sweat off and end up giving almost half of what you have produced to the owner of the land. Perhaps you can make a meagre living out of this but it certainly wouldn’t be enough to change your life. What you get out of it will be very little. It is not as appealing as having your own land.”* (FGD with young out of school men aged 20-25).

As such, farming was, for this group of respondents, something that can be a source of a good and lucrative income if done well. As one of the participants stated; *“There are people who have as much as 12 gemedes of land and yet you don’t see them changing their lives. They are stuck where they were. And then you see someone with just 2 timads of land planting gesho and white onions (garlic) and getting double the income from that small plot. Take my cousin (the son of an uncle) for example; he only has one gemed of land that he got during the 1998 (EC) redistribution. But even with that he is making a good living. He planted gesho and qhat on it. And he was telling me the other day that he got 7,000 Birr out of selling gesho seedlings alone. So if you know what you need to do, farming can be as good as or even better than anything else. But there just isn’t any land for us – and what sort of a farmer can you be without any land?”* (FGD with young out of school men aged 20-25).

This however, does not imply that this group of respondents saw agriculture appealing as it is. As indicated earlier, almost all of the respondents were quite quick and eager to point out the life of the traditional farmer was not a life they wanted to look at let alone desire. For them, the traditional farmer was uneducated, ignorant, and lacking when it comes to using his

---

<sup>10</sup>The Shiny-leaf Buckthorn (*Rhamnus prinioides*) - used in the preparation of local alcoholic beverages in a manner similar to that of hops in beer production.

resources wisely and putting them to the best use possible. The farmer was described as leaving a life of misery, isolated from the modern world and unaware or unable to make use of the benefits of modernity. One of the participants went as far as remarking that:

*“if you are asking me to tell you what I think of life as a farmer from what I have seen around here – I can tell you very simply; it is like living in hell. Go out and have a look at people’s faces, it tells you how much suffering they have endured. Their life is from hand to mouth, there is no such thing as saving and long term investment. They don’t even have something set aside for covering medical costs if they fell down ill. The best they can hope for is finding someone who can loan them some money but loans are not easy to find. I know of many who have died leaving their children behind because they couldn’t afford medical treatment and couldn’t find anyone to give them a loan; these are people who could have been back on their feet in a matter of a week or two if they had gotten medical treatment. But they can’t, so they die in their beds. May be you will find the rare farmer here and there who isn’t like this but this is the life of most farmers.”* (FGD with young out of school men in site one)

What they observe in their locality, the participants noted, was discouraging the youth from even considering a life of farming since they see that life as a farmer is stagnant, miserable and not worthwhile. The respondent had the following to say before concluding that he had no intention of even considering a life in agriculture. *“I know that farming shouldn’t necessarily be like this. I mean I have been thought in school that agriculture can be modern, and that it can be a very profitable business. That it is the back bone of our economy and that through modern agriculture we can change not only our own lives but even the economy of our country. But that is all in school/class. I look around and I see no one who has been able to change their lives to the better through agriculture. And from what I have seen around here, agriculture is worthless”* (FGD with young out of school men in site one).

Other participants were not quite so unequivocal in their resolution in so far as they at least considered themselves able to lead a better life than the “traditional, ignorant, and uneducated” farmer if only they had access to land. But at the same time, they were also able to relate to what they saw as the overwhelmingly negative attitude among the young towards agriculture as a potential livelihood. “You see” one explained, *“we go to school as children and come to know many things by the time we are through with school. Once done with school, there are a lot of young people who think that going back to farming is like accepting*

*a defeat; it is like admitting you can't be anything better than your parents. All those years gone in to education, all the effort you put in to it, it all comes down to nothing and it shames them".* But this, they stressed, need not necessarily be the case, the traditional farmer was a victim of his own ignorance. *"They lack knowledge, they lack the ability to manage what they have"* one of them reasoned. If they themselves went in to agriculture, they reasoned, they would not necessarily share the same fate since they were better educated and better able to make the best out of agriculture/farming (FGD with young out of school men in site one). The same sentiment was expressed by in school girls and in school boys as well.

### **Government Interventions and Responses**

The current government of Ethiopia has been actively pursuing "Agriculture Led Industrialization Policy" (ADLI) for over a decade. The agricultural sector is considered to be the centrepiece of the overall development plan of the country and growth in the agricultural sector is not only sought for its own ends (such as achieving food security) but also because such growth is expected to provide the vital push the rest of the economy needs to "jump start". Among the many issues raised and discussed at quite some length in the agricultural and rural development strategy of the government is the question of the appropriate utilization of the rural labour force, and the need to motivate the rural labour force (especially the young) and ensuring its commitment and strength to strenuous agricultural work. Here, it goes on to argue that the rural (slightly more educated) youth can present a challenge in the sense that it may not consider the agricultural sector as a viable or desirable means of livelihood (FDRE Ministry of Information, 2002).

The policy stipulates that it is vital to retain the rural youth, and especially those with some level of school education, in the agricultural sector for a number of reasons. In addition to the stipulated fact that the urban economy will be unable to accommodate a huge influx of labour from the rural agricultural sector, the policy considers the rural educated youth as instrumental agents in bringing about the desired transformation in agricultural skills, knowledge and productivity which it seeks to achieve. For these reasons, the policy paper stresses the need to tackle the negative attitudes and attributes associated with agriculture aggressively. It bluntly states that no rural development policy can yield any results as long as this mindset that equates agriculture to backwardness is left to prevail. And in order to tackle this, the policy sets out a two pronged approach. On the one hand, it emphasizes the vital role

that schools, which it blames as being partly responsible for the development of that very mind set in the first place, can play in inculcating the inherent value in any work including agriculture in the minds of students especially during primary education. But, this cannot, the policy argues, be very effective in changing the mind set and further requires making sure that the new generation of educated and trained farmers will be able to earn a level of income that is at least comparable to that of those with a similar level of education but engaged in other sectors; a task which it envisages can only be achieved by increasing the per capita productivity of farmers [p. 44].

It is quite problematic to see how this has been translated in to action and what, if any, effects it has had. But responses from participants (including agricultural extension workers, woreda level agricultural experts as well as young and older farmers) do shed some light on the question. As discussed earlier, respondents attest to the fact that there have been substantial gains in productivity in the last decade and especially in the last 5 years as a result of the introduction of high yield seeds and greater fertilizer utilization as well as the introduction and adoption of better farming techniques. Although some of these gains have been lost in the last two years in the second site due to successive years of draught and irregular rains, it is apparent that this has led to some improvements in the lives of farmers especially in the first site.

But the aggressive agricultural extension programme that is being pursued is not without its problems as participants (especially farmers) are keen to point out. Cases where supposedly high yield seeds have failed to produce any yield at all due to their being disease prone or outright inappropriate for the ecological zone they were distributed were raised by participants. Farmers also felt high yield seeds were not being given to them at a fair price, and with the escalating prices of fertilizers; they feared that they may have to switch back to the old way of agriculture. In addition to the introduction of high yield seeds, fertilizers, and improved farming methods; the government also seems to have taken some limited steps to encourage specialization although the extent to which this was done in the two sites differed greatly. In site two where there was greater stress on land and greater cash crop orientation than cereal farming, woreda level agricultural experts stated that efforts were being undertaken to identify specific kebelles suited to the production of coffee, maize and wheat and encourage farmers to go along those lines. In site one key informants stated that not much has been done towards specialization despite their belief that specialization was not only possible but beneficial as well. For example, lowland (qolla) areas were perfectly suited

for farming *selit* (sesame seeds or *Sesamum indicum*) seeds and other cash crops such as coffee and sugar cane but the agriculture practiced there is heavily geared towards livestock. Highland (Dega) areas were more appropriate for rearing sheep than producing teff (since the soil has become too infertile due to years of erosion and intensive farming) but the agriculture practiced there still remains mixed at best. And this they claimed was because nothing has been done to identify specialization opportunities and encourage such specialization.

As such, the agricultural extension programme in conjunction with rural development programmes such as rural electrification, the expansion of education and health care in to rural areas has gone some way in terms of making the life of the farmer a lot more better than how it used to be a decade or two ago. Participants remarked that agriculture has changed in many ways in the last 10 years through the government's extension programme; the farmer gets all the support and technical advice he needs without having to go anywhere looking for it from the DAs based in each kebele. And through this farming has become not just a way of life as was the case in the past but a potentially very profitable and respectable (at least economically speaking) source of livelihood. Yet, the participant went on to add, the young are either unaware or unwilling to see these changes.

In the eyes of government experts at woreda and kebele levels, while the older generation of farmers is making the best use of current opportunities to maximize productivity; the younger generation most of whom have finished school, continue to regard agriculture as a degrading profession – as if it was beneath them (beneath their level of education). The participant however also stressed that not enough has been done to challenge this, in their views, “misguided” attitude of the young towards agriculture. “Someone needs to talk some sense to these young people” one of the woreda level key-informant from site one remarked without specifying who. *“They have no problems wasting their young lives and energy working as daily labourers and earning money that is just enough to cover their meals”* he elaborated. *“Why they think agriculture is beneath them is beyond comprehension! They could make a better life for themselves, they could even go beyond themselves and assist their families, contribute to the country's development. But they don't see that”*. The solution then, according to the informant, is to talk to these young people, to make them realize that agriculture is not the evil they think it is and to help them get a better life as “educated and modern” farmers and this, he felt, was not being done. Unlike the uneducated youth who stay in their villages and are making use of support opportunities, those who have gone to urban

centres and towns for high school stay there once they fail to proceed to higher education and were being forgotten by the government.

Key informants recognized that the issue of land was another obstacle that prevented young people from pursuing agriculture as a livelihood. Although lack of access to farm land was a problem across both sites, it was more severe in the second site where house hold land holdings were meager and there weren't any communal fields that have not yet been farmed. Here the only way of giving the young any land at all came via voluntary resettlement. And according to key-informants, young people were not being prioritized in the resettlement program as the program was mainly focused at relocating families who were currently dependent on the productive safety nets program for their livelihood. Although house hold land holdings were not as meager and communal grazing fields were still predominantly visible in the first site; young people nevertheless had little to no access to farm land due to the policies being followed by the regional government. The government has ruled out any possibility of further land redistribution as it would lead to further fragmentation. That leaves the young with only one of two possibilities. Either getting land from their own families (which was considered unlikely for the majority young people below the age of 25 since any land that could possibly be given to children has already been taken by their older siblings) or securing a plot from the communal grazing fields which required the consent of at least 80% of the households who reside nearby; which was, according to key informants, often impossible. Hence, young people have little means of becoming farmers even if they wanted to be. On the other hand, many respondents felt that a lot of land has been swapped around through inheritances (often gained through divorce and remarriage) and was now concentrated in the hands of few households. Some of the respondents felt that the current situation was more similar to the old imperial days when land was the property of a few land lords. Lack Access to land by young people across sites is also exacerbated by the practice of patronage based land distributions to members of political elite or parties.

This perception has obviously created a sense of injustice and deprivation among the young; especially those who were already in agriculture and were struggling to find plots to lease or those who were willing to go into agriculture but were unable to do so as they have no access to farm land. As such, it appears that the government has not yet meaningfully addressed either the attitude of young people towards agriculture or the practical obstacles that prevent young people's entry in to agriculture.

## Is agriculture a future for young people at all?

As discussed in the preceding sections, young people tend to look down upon agriculture as a potential future livelihood. Despite gains in the last decade, the prevailing attitude is that agriculture is backward and demanding and in some ways even demeaning especially for those who have gone through years of education with higher hopes and expectations. Going back to agriculture after failing the national school leaving exams is seen as the ultimate defeat akin to accepting the fact that one cannot be anything better. Even when young people are willing to face up to this humbling if not shaming task of going back to a life of agriculture after so many years of schooling, they find it nearly impossible to get hold of a plot of land they can farm. The young people interviewed in this study, both male and female, in and out of school, said that the only possible livelihood they saw open to them was either some form of employment through their education, manual labour in towns, going in to the service industry (waitressing) or petty trade.

But the negative attitude towards agriculture was not just unique to the young. Although older farmers and key informants were quick to lament that the young were too lazy and unwilling to come down from their self built pedestal and face the fact that agriculture can be a very good means of livelihood; they themselves were equally prone to looking down upon agriculture. None of the older or younger farmers (both men and women) interviewed in the study wanted their children to follow in their footsteps even when they claimed their lives had become better and that agriculture was now as good a means of livelihood as any other, if not better. As one middle aged male farmer in site one put it *“Our hope is that they [the children] will be able to make someone of themselves through their education; that they can become someone we would be proud calling a son/daughter; that they live better lives and perhaps even support us live better. Why else would we send them to school? So they end up exactly like us? No! Certainly not! How can they be farmers any way[even if they wanted to]? The land is already scarce as it is”*.

What is puzzling was that even successful farmers who highly rated farming as livelihood did not want their children to be farmers. Some of the young farmers from site two went on to remark that they thank God for making them farmers instead of a civil servant and stated that *“even the educated and the civil servants now envy farming”* In an apparent contradiction to this however, none of the participants said they want their children to be farmers when asked if they wanted that. When asked why, participants gave a few reasons. The most obvious of

this was that there was no land for their children to farm even if they wanted to be farmers. Other reasons included the fact that the life of the farmer was extremely dependent on nature. Others still remarked that they were farmers only because they have no other option on account of being uneducated (or not being educated enough) and stated they wanted their children to be educated and live of their knowledge and skills rather than farming. This sentiment was shared by all participants but one participant concluded “*our children have two choices – either they go on with their education and become employees or if they fail somewhere along the line – they can borrow money from somewhere and go in to trading and business, farming is not even a realistic option – and even if it was – it is not something we wish for them*”.

In addition to negative attitudes and the shortage of land, there were also other factors that made a future in agriculture appear less than promising. The steep increase in the price of fertilizers, the increasingly erratic and unpredictable nature of the seasonal rains (perhaps due to global warming), loss of soil fertility due to the erosion of the top soil and its increasing acidity were all mentioned as other factors that not only made agriculture less appealing to the young but also increasingly worried current farmers. Although the increase in the price of fertilizers was dismissed as unimportant by local level agricultural experts working for the government since there has also been a corresponding increase in the price of agricultural products as well as an increase in productivity itself, soil erosion and degradation were equally worrisome for the local level agricultural extension workers who felt not enough was being done to prevent this. Although they felt that they were doing the best they can to teach farmers about soil and water conservation, the extension workers argued that the absence of any punitive measures on those who fail to heed to their advice and fail to take proper care of their land was not exactly helping the situation. “*I fear the next generation is going to inherit bare rocks for land*” one of the extension workers from site one remarked.

## **Conclusion**

From the forgoing discussion, prevailing assumptions and policy prescriptions aimed at cultivating a new generation of literate farmers need to be challenged as literate youth and even their parents are unequivocally against the idea of engaging in agriculture. We need to engage in a new debate and ask whether aspirations and demands of rural youth are in line with policy discourses and the reality on the ground. Because of the negative attitude of the

family and the society at large about agriculture, informal work in urban areas is preferred by those who are exposed to school even if it is low paying and as backbreaking as agriculture.

This requires engaging rural youth in the policy process and addressing what needs be done in order to make farming more attractive as livelihood. Mass media and educational institutions should play a proactive role to change such mind set and instill in young people that agriculture could be one of decent livelihood activity. Parallel practical steps should be taken to make agriculture appealing future career as well. Access to land is the top concern voiced by young people in both sites and the government should consider facilitating access to land for those who are interested in agriculture. In the Ethiopian context (like many other developing countries), the rural areas have remained underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure and other facilities and thus not attractive to retain rural youth. Although improvements have been seen in the past decade, the young feel that agriculture and rural life is still backward. Addressing infrastructural needs of rural people and social and economic transformation of rural areas may attract young people to engage in agriculture.

Although agricultural technology and farming traditions have stayed the same, there has been a marked improvement in productivity due to the use of improved high yield seeds and fertilizers. But the gains from the past decade are slowly eroding due to recent difficulties caused by erratic rain falls and the drastic increase in fertilizer and high yield seed prices both of which seem to strongly discourage youth expectations regarding a future life in agriculture. The private sector engaged in supplying agricultural inputs and technologies should not only consider profit but also corporate social responsibility and engage in encouraging young farmers through subsidies and supplying on credit.

While there is some attention to engage in urban youth and create employment opportunities through micro and small enterprises, there seems little or no attention paid to the rural youth. There are a number of reasons for the near total neglect of rural youth. First, rural unemployment or under employment is disguised or concealed because of the nature of rural economic sector. Second, urban unemployed youth are considered as a political threat that requires attention. Whatever action it being taken for rural youth is to prevent rural-urban migration and reduce such political threat. Thus there seems to be only knee jerk reaction to address the needs of rural youth both at the policy and action directed to create decent employment opportunities in the agriculture and other rural sectors.

This is not to deny progress made in encouraging young people to go into agriculture through the policy of rewarding model farmers and other measures. While there is such progress, negative voices captured in this study do not inspire confidence to say that enough has been done to attract young people into agriculture as a livelihood. It is not only rural youth who don't want to take up farming as livelihood but also their parents. Parents in our study strongly noted education and schooling as a route to a better future of their children. They did not consider farming as a mark of their identity which should be inherited by their children. Given this, it is not surprising to know that young people detest agriculture as “the aspirations of young people will thus be framed within the implicit and explicit expectations placed upon them by family and kinship networks, which in turn are influenced by gender-based societal customs and norms. Both the environment close to the individual and the broader societal context therefore influence aspiration formation” (Leavy and Smith 2010:6).

A lot, therefore, needs to be done to make young people and their parents unlearn their negative perception of agriculture and relearn new thinking and vision about this sector. There is a need to reshape mind set of young people to consider agriculture not as a last resort but a sector that could provide viable livelihood, valued by society and essential for national food security. Any such intervention should take heterogeneity of youth into account in terms of age, gender, educational level or status.

Overall, there is a need to engage policymakers, development partners, academics, civil society organizations and the private sector on ways of meeting the aspirations of rural youth and arouse their interest in agriculture. Such engagement and policy dialogue should take the perspectives and aspirations of young people into account and engage them squarely. Otherwise, the government's policy of cultivating new generation of elite farmers will remain a mirage.

Finally, to our knowledge, there seems to be paucity of information regarding aspirations of rural youth and their attitude towards agriculture as livelihood and employment opportunity and we need further studies that capture aspirations of rural youth and the reasons behind their disinterest in agriculture.

## References

FDRE Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. (2010). *Five Year Growth and Transformation Plan of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2010 - 2015)* [Amharic]. Addis Ababa.

FDRE Ministry of Information. (2002). *The Rural Development Policies and Strategies of the Government of Ethiopia* [Amharic]. Addis Ababa.

Leavy Jennifer and Smith, Sally (2010) Future Farmers: Youth Aspirations, Expectations and Life Choices, IDS discussion paper 013, Sussex: IDS

Proctor, Felicity and Lucchesi, Valerio (2012) Small-scale farming and youth in an era of change. IIED.