

**Rural youth aspiring to occupations beyond agriculture:  
Evidence from Young Lives Study in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>**  
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Young Lives Ethiopia

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## **Abstract**

The data presented in this paper is drawn from Young Lives longitudinal study in Ethiopia. It used three rounds of surveys and qualitative sub-studies conducted among the same children born in 1994 drawn from 12 rural communities.

The results show that both parents and children preferred non-farming to farming occupations for the latter. That both have similar occupational aspirations suggest that parents have significant influence since early age of the children. Parents who experience the challenging farming life wanted their children to have non-agricultural occupations, usually with higher returns.

Children keep changing their occupational aspiration over time mainly based on their educational achievements. Farming has rarely been object of aspiration for children but emerged as outcome for those who could not achieve educational aspirations. We argue, therefore, food security in Africa should be guaranteed not just by engaging those with 'failed' aspirations but those who aspire and learn to be 'farmers.' This needs lifting the status of farming so that rural youth could aspire for, invest on and live by it.

**Key words:** children, educational aspirations, farming aspirations, occupational aspirations, rural youth, Ethiopia

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia is largely an agrarian society with about 83 percent of its population living in rural areas earning their living from agriculture. Food insecurity is so serious that about 8 million people depend on government-run productive safety productive to cover their food gaps (MoARD 2006).

In attempt to transform the agrarian society, the government has been promoting education in the country with the emergence of a number of public and privately owned schools and enrolments. This coupled with associated life exposure into the wider world; young people are increasingly looking for better opportunities including life beyond farming. High educational aspirations seem to raise their ambition for better jobs of high return, normally out of their parents' occupation, farming.

The objective of this paper is to investigate children's educational and farming aspirations. It attempts to provide evidence on why and how parents and children aspire for non-farming careers and its implication for Ethiopia, even to Africa, where there is an urgent need for farming young people to ensure food security for the growing population.

The data presented in this paper is drawn from Young Lives<sup>4</sup>longitudinal study in Ethiopia. It used three rounds of surveys and qualitative sub-studies conducted among the same children born in 1994 drawn from 12 rural<sup>5</sup>communities. The surveys were conducted in 2002, 2006 and 2009 and included about 600 children while the qualitative sub-study was carried out in 2007, 2008 and 2011 with 15 children from three sites. In both methods of data collection, children were asked about their educational and career aspirations in each round. In the qualitative studies, children were asked if they changed their aspirations between field visit rounds and why they did so. In each round, caregivers' perceptions were also assessed, except in the 2002 survey.

## 2. The Literature

Aspirations are defined as 'an individual's desire to obtain a status objective or goals such as particular occupation or level of education (MacBrayne 1987;Hansen and McIntire 1989). Aspirations are 'future oriented' and 'motivators' (Sherwood 1989). As future oriented, aspirations can be realized sometimes in the future or remain as mere dreams with less likelihood of being attained. On the hand, aspiration motivates for more effort and investment (time, effort, and money) on life so that it can be achieved better. For example, children work

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<sup>4</sup>*Young Lives* is a long-term international research study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty by tracking the lives of 12,000 children over 15 years from Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru and Vietnam (<http://www.younglives.org.uk/>)

<sup>5</sup>We focused on rural children because urban children who aspired to be 'farmers' at 8 was 1.3%, but 0% at age 12 and 15.

hard in school to achieve better career opportunities as adults. So aspirations are not mere dreams but can be achieved if invested on them.

Aspirations are usually established at childhood with parents having apparent influences. Moreover, 'the vocational choices of classmates, occupational earnings, questionable advice from friends, and many other factors enter into the choices of youth' (Kelsey 2009). Based on their backgrounds, living context and other characteristic, parents try to establish their wishes for their children's future. Using the Parent Socialization Model, Jacobs et al (2006) stated that parents' 'beliefs... influence parenting behaviours and expectations, which in return, will affect child outcomes such as educational and career choices'. Parents transmit their beliefs on their own children as part of their socializations.

Behnke et al (2004) through a qualitative case study with 10 households among Latino families showed how parents establish their aspirations for their children. They found that parents aspire careers for their children higher than their own. None of the fathers who were factory workers (8) and farmers (2) wanted their children to do the same jobs. They desired their children to be mechanics, electricians, computer technicians or supervisors. The children also, except one who wanted to be a factory worker like his father, aspired jobs out of their parents' occupations. The apparent shared views suggest that both parents and children aspired for jobs better than what the parents do.

However, 'future' oriented aspirations may not also be achieved. They are not achievable perhaps because aspirations might be in the first place 'parental wishful thinking' (Kelsey 2009) and expansions of schooling have increasingly encouraged unrealistic and inappropriate student aspirations and expectations (Wellings 1982).

There is evidence that rural children have relatively low level of occupational achievements (Haller and Sewell 1957). For example, children raised up by farming families may find it hard to achieve occupations beyond farming. Studies have shown that 'farm-reared people have low levels of occupational achievement than the nonfarm world' (Haller 1958:355). The farm-reared individuals have generally a relatively low degree of success on the job-market. This suggests that societies hoping to change their economies from agriculture to industry may have a serious problem of changing the life orientation of their people which also affects effective industrial labour forces are developed (p.356).

Conversely, in developing African countries like Ethiopia, where there is a serious food insecurity, getting young people with an ambition of becoming farmers is emerging

as a challenge. Young people are being raised up with career aspirations by far beyond agriculture putting the farming enterprise at risk. There is a grown interest in trying to understand why rural youth in Africa are increasingly seeking life out of agriculture while the larger population is suffering from food shortage.

This paper, based on a longitudinal dataset drawn from the same children, tries to 1) establish how both children and parents aspire non-farm occupations 2) examine why some children change their aspirations as they grow older 3) investigate how children with non-farm aspirations end up being farmers 4) raise policy questions that agriculture in Africa needs to address in order to ensure food security of its growing population.

### 3. Results

#### *Constructing occupational aspirations*

Children were asked about their aspired occupations when they leave school. The list of careers was almost similar over the rounds of fieldworks and for the purpose of analysis, we categorized them into: farming, teaching, highs aspirations and other non-farming occupations (see Table 1). We were interested to see farming aspiration in relation to the three categories, singling out 'teaching' as it has become a predominantly preferred occupation. 'High aspirations' included occupations such as pilot, doctor (physician), university lecturer, engineer, lawyer and scientist. 'Other non-agricultural' occupations include being civil servant, nurse, shopkeeper, singer, sportsperson, domestic worker, labourer and driver.

Table 1. Rural child's job aspiration and gender (%)

Child's aspired job	at the age of 8 in 2002			At the age of 12 in 2006			At the age of 15 in 2009 (%)?		
	Girls	Boys	All	Girls	Boys	All	Girls	Boys	All
Farmer	2.9	8.7	5.9	0.4	3.7	2.1	0.4	4.4	2.4
Teacher	59.3	46.8	52.9	39.3	23.8	31.3	23.2	14.4	18.7
High aspirations	21.4	22.7	22.1	38.9	51.2	45.3	55.4	61.2	58.4
Others non-farming	16.4	21.7	19.2	21.4	21.4	21.4	21.1	20.1	20.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
No	280	299	579	280	299	579	280	299	579

*Pearson P-value 0.000*

*Likelihood-ratio P-value 0.000*

The overall aspiration among children to be farmers is very low but with significant gender variations. Girls seem to envisage life out of farming, while few children want to be engaged

in occupations similar to their parents'. At age 8, more than half of the children desired to be 'teachers', with more than 40% looking for 'high' and 'other non-farming' occupations, leaving the number of children who wanted to be farmers very nominal. Perhaps children who experienced schooling for the first time had the inspirations to be like their teachers.

As children grow older and get more information about lives out of their community, they tend to change their aspirations for 'higher' ones. At the age of 12 and 15, only a third and a quarter of the number of children surveyed wanted to be farmers, respectively. Such decline on farming aspiration has led to an increase in aspirations of 'higher' and 'non-farming' occupations. Children wanted to be like 'others' who are in better position than they were aspiring to be farmers. The number of children desired to be farmers declined over years and at the age of 12, almost one child in fifty wanted to be a farmer with a slight increase at the age of 15. Girls' ambition of being farmer has significantly decreased as they grow older. They rather foresee life beyond agriculture.

When children were 12 and 15, parents were asked what they want their children to do after leaving school at the age of 20. The results (see Table 2), indicate that farming parents desired their children to be engaged in 'non-farm' careers.

Table 2: Caregivers job aspiration for their children after age 20 (%)

Caregivers Aspired job for a child	when child was 12 years old	when child was 15 years old
Farmer	0.86	0.52
Teacher	19.14	15.34
High aspirations	45.34	51.38
Others non-farming	34.66	32.76
Total	100	100
N	580	580

*Pearson chi2(3) 44.6504 P-value 0.000*

*Likelihood-ratio chi2(3) 48.0607 P-value 0.000*

Less than 1% of parents want their children to inherit the occupation of farming. Unlike the children, parents have strong desire for their children to have 'higher' aspirations as opposed to being 'teachers'. This suggests that parents have lost confidence in their farming lives and wanted their children to have life out of it. They look for better return from non-farming occupations for their children and even economic support they would get from their children. Illustrative examples drawn from the qualitative study suggest how strongly parents argue for 'higher' aspirations and shared by children themselves (see table 3).

Table 3: Extracts of children's (age 17) and caregivers' non-farm occupational aspirations

<b>Child's views</b>	<b>Caregivers views</b>
I want to be a professor. I want to visit different places and write books (Kassaye, boy, grade 7)	I want my child to complete his education and get hired in government office. This is my wish and it is his wish too (mother)
I want to be a trader after completing grade 10 (Habtamu, boy, grade 7).	I want my son to be an agricultural expert or a teacher (father)
I want to get a university degree and become a doctor (Mulu, girl, grade 9).	I want her to reach higher position education and work in civil service (mother)
I want to be a doctor to get good salary (Sefinesh, girl, grade 8)	I wish her to do office work or to be a teacher. But to be a teacher is last option because it requires a lot of hard work (grandmother)
Since childhood I wanted to be a doctor. But if this fails I will be a farmer (Defar, boy, grade 4 dropout)	I wanted him to be employed by the government in any field. If he does not succeed in his education, I would be happy if he becomes a farmer and lives by my side (father)
I wanted to finish school and get good job but now I am back to farming after marrying to a farmer (Haymanot, married girl, grad 5 dropout)	I want her now to be good wife with happy family (mother).
I desired to be a doctor or teacher, but now will be farmer after marriage (Ayu, married girl, grade 2 dropout)	I wanted her to finish her education but now married and dropped out. I do not know what she will be thinking about her education (mother)
I wish to finish university degree and become a doctor (Fanus, girl, grade 9)	I wish my daughter to be a doctor and have a peaceful marriage. (mother)
I wanted to be a doctor when I complete my education (Haftey, girl, grade 9)	That depends on God's will. How can I tell her to be a doctor or a teacher? (grandmother)
I want to be medical doctor (Mihretu, Boy, grade 7).	I hope my son will have any job except being a policeman or a health professional (mother)
I want to become a doctor after completing my education (Gemechu, boy, grade 2 dropout).	I wish him to get strong in his education and to become a doctor or an engineer (father)
I have also an interest for becoming a doctor. But I wish to be a teacher because a teacher has more interaction with students, and is also decisive in building a nation (Biritu, girl grade 8)	That only God knows, but I want her to learn until the end! (mother)
I have interest of becoming a teacher or a doctor. I prefer being a teacher (Beletech, girl, grade 5)	The future is something that I don't know. But I wish that she does whatever pleases her. I also wanted her to marry someone who is educated (aunt)
I want to become a merchant (Destachew, boy, grade 6).	When he was a child I thought it was enough for him to reach grade 7. But now, I wish that he completes his education and becomes a health professional or a doctor (Mother).

Source: Young Lives Qualitative fieldwork, 2011

The interview extracts show that both children and parents have shared views. Even at the age of 17, they wish children to have non-farming occupations like being doctors, teachers, and civil servants. Their perceptions are based on their real experiences of challenging life in agriculture and believe that education would help them transfer to better job opportunities.

Parents who lived in rural areas have the feel of farming life. Farmers remain food insecure and have limited access for basic services. As indicated in Table 4, about 42.9% of

the households in our study sites ensure their food shortages through Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP)<sup>6</sup>. It is too difficult for the households who have on the average 6.8 (~7) family members to meet their food needs from an average holding of 1.4 hectare of land. Very limited (27.8%) agricultural extension services available could not help them enough to enhance productivity of their small plot of land.

Table 4: Households access to services and holdings

	Rural	Urban	Total
Access to electricity (%)	27.1	93.3	53.7
Access to safe drinking water (%)	41.0	74.6	54.5
Access to sanitation facilities (%)	69.0	47.4	60.3
Agr. Extension support (%)	27.8	1.5	17.2
Participation in PSNP (food insecure households) (%)	42.9	7.4	28.7
Participation in public work (%)	40.3	6.9	26.9
People who received food aid (%)	14.0	4.4	10.1
family size	6.8	6.1	6.5
number of dependents in the households	1.5	0.9	1.2
Land size owned in hectare	1.39	0.18	0.90

Though there is a growing access of farmers' to basic services, in 2009 only 27.1% and 41% of the households had access to electricity and safe drinking water respectively. Moreover, there seems a statistically significant positive association between landownership of parents and children's aspiration. This imply that landownership does not seem a reason for failed aspiration to be a farmer though the general land size owned by parents is not that big compared to the family size they have.

In such circumstances, seeking non-farming occupations seem so evident. For instance, one of the children who experienced the hardship of agricultural life persistently maintained his ambition for job opportunities other than farming. He said:

Aged 13: 'My family depends on agriculture. The harvest sometimes gets better, other time less..... I will be better than my farming family because I will be government employee with monthly salary..... That is why I want to finish my education.'

Aged 17: 'I will have a better life than my father has. He works day and night because he is a farmer. My father loses much energy in work and this would lead him to have a short life. ..But I will be an educated man who sits in an office in town with salary. I will waste less energy so that I will live longer than my father' (Kasseye, boy).

<sup>6</sup>A government-run program which transfers grains and cash for food insecure households. Most households have to do certain public work, but a few of them can be direct support beneficiaries (for example, disabled and the elderly). The program began in 2005 covering more than 8 million people.



### *Schooling and changing aspirations*

The main route for children to non-farming occupations is education. While poverty forces children and their parent to seek other options, educations seem to provide them with windows opportunities. The data indicate a strong association between education and non-farming occupational aspirations. As presented in Table 1, children have changed their aspirations over time. In our study sites, the overall enrolment rate was high (85%) but subsequent data indicate that a considerable number of children were not able to achieve the expected level of education. All school children were expected to finish primary school (Grade 1-8) at the age of 15, but the completion rate was as low as 10%.

Table 5: primary education completion and occupational aspiration at the age of 15 (%)

Aspiration type	Primary education		Total	N
	Not complete	Complete		
Farmer	2.7	0.0	2.4	14
Teacher	20.2	5.2	18.7	108
High aspiration	56.6	74.1	58.4	338
Others non-farming	20.5	20.7	20.6	119
Total	100	100	100	579
N	521	58	579	

Pearson  $\chi^2(3) = 10.5817$  Pr = 0.014; likelihood-ratio  $\chi^2(3) = 14.0597$  Pr = 0.003

As indicated in Table 5, there is a statistically significant positive association between primary education completion and level of aspiration. The result confirms that those who aspired to become farmers while they were aged 15 have not completed primary education, but none of those who completed maintained to be a 'farmer'. However, all children who completed primary school continued to aspire non-agricultural activities such as teacher, pilot, scientist and so on.

Children who were able to weigh up their educational progression alter their future occupations. Educational success helps students to maintain high career aspirations. Some can even raise their aspirations depending on their educational achievements. 'When I started school, I wished to finish just grade 10. But as I grow up I wanted to be a professor and write books. Now I performing well in my class; last year ranked 5<sup>th</sup> out of 65 students in our class. I will study hard and progress well in my education and become a professor (Kassaye, boy, grade 7, 2011).

Those who failed to reach the expected grade levels were likely to lower their occupational aspirations with possibility of resorting to their parents' occupations, farming. For example, a child who has never been to school maintained his farming aspiration throughout, saying 'I want to be a farmer and help my parents' (Hadush, boy).

One of the reasons behind low grade completion is repetitions or dropping out of school for different reasons. We found a statistically significant relationship between occupational aspirations and school dropout (see Table 6).

Table 6: Child's aspiration and dropout from school between 12 and 15 years old (%)

Aspired job	not dropout	Dropout	Total
Farmer	2.0	6.0	2.4
Teacher	18.8	17.9	18.7
High aspiration end	62.1	29.9	58.4
Others non agriculture	17.2	46.3	20.6
Total (%)	100	100	100
N	512	67	579

- Pearson  $\chi^2(3) = 38.9169$   $P\text{-value} = 0.000$
- Likelihood-ratio  $\chi^2(3) = 34.4178$   $P\text{-value} = 0.000$

We investigated change of career aspiration of children who left school between the age of 12 and 15. Dropouts were three times more than those in school 'wanting' to go back to farming. On the hand, those in school wanted to have 'high' aspirations were twice more than the dropouts.

During the qualitative interviews, children expressed their experiences of changing their aspirations. Defar, from a very poor family, dropped out from grade 4 and fully engaged in farming said, 'since childhood I wanted to be a doctor. But if this fails I will be a farmer.' His father, who saw his child's educational level discouraging, stated that 'I would be happy if he would succeed in his education and becomes government employee. If he fails, I will also be happy that he becomes a farmer and lives by my side.'

Among those who gave up schooling are girls who were married early. Though survey results show more girls than boys to have aspired for non-farming employments, they face different impediments including early marriage. Two girls who married at the age of 16 in 2010 abandoned their childhood aspirations and ended up being wives of farmers. Ayu, who was only grade 2 when dropping out to marry through abduction hoped to be a teacher or doctor said: 'my husband insists we go to his parents' place and engage in farming. I do not want to go far from my family and I do not like to live in rural area. But it is likely we will go there to farm. ... When I was in school I was aspiring to finish university and become a doctor or... a teacher.' After marriage Ayu was living in town with her husband (who also dropped out in grade 9) who earns some income through casual work and fishing, but it is likely she will end up living in rural area.

Another married girl, Haymanot, had high aspiration but could not achieve because of poverty. She was forced to be engaged in paid work after dropping out in grade 5 to support her poor family. Until her marriage she had hoped to finish university and have a good job. She said: 'when I was a child I wanted to finish school and become a teacher or a

doctor. Now I got married. I still want to pursue my education and achieve my aspiration but my husband wants me to have a child soon. It is likely that next time you come you will find me with my baby.’ She has married to a farmer in her parents’ neighbourhood and her educational and occupational aspirations seem to have all gone. Her mother who also was happy to see her married and admits, ‘I wanted her to finish school and have better life. .... But now, she has married and stopped schooling. She will live with what the farmland gives her... I wish her good marriage and may God help her!’ For girls, early marriage is one hurdle that some have already experienced and more others facing it. It stands against progressing in schooling and achieving alternative life to what their parents have been going through. Their aspirations seem no more in their own hands, but in the realm of their husbands.

Some children had also developed alternative to failing to achieve educational success. In sites where there are irrigations, children work in family fields or paid works and indicated that they could be ‘rich farmers’ by working hard. For example, from one of the communities with extensive irrigation fields, children combined both work and schooling. A boy whose childhood ambition was to be a doctor said: ‘In the next three years I will be working hard on the irrigation and save money.... In the future, I will be rich vegetable trader and live in town (Gemechu, boy, grade 2, dropout). Another girl, Beletech, who runs her own shop in one of her family’s rooms, plans to rent a plot of land and grow vegetables. She stated that ‘after saving some money, I want to buy a house for both shop and living in town. I can attend evening school while running my business during the days.’ She saw little hope of accomplishing her childhood aspiration of being a doctor while she reached only grade 5 at age 17.

However, for many of the children who end up going back to agriculture there is little optimism. They saw agriculture as final resort after all options are no more working and see no better future than what their parents have gone through.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results presented in this paper indicate that both parents and children are involved in designing career aspirations of the later. That both have similar occupational aspirations suggest that parents have significant influence since early age of the children. Though schooling experiences, friends, media could play their own role (Kelsey 1954), rural children aspiring for occupations that are not visible at their communities (e.g. engineer, doctor, etc) as early age of 8 show apparent sway of their parents. Parents’ role is huge in socialization in which they transmit their wishes on their children (Jacobs et al 2006).

Though seemingly mere parental wishful (Kelsey 1954), the failure of farming to ensure food security and rural life failing to provide basic needs, pushed farmers to wish for their children non-farming occupations. It cannot be unrealistic for rural households in Ethiopia with large family size but with very small plot of land, some surviving with safety nets; getting very limited agricultural services, scarce access to basic needs such as electricity and safe water, to aspire non-farming lives for their children. Parents always desire their children to have better life than they do.

The longitudinal data suggest the fluidity of aspirations. Children keep changing their occupational aspiration over time mainly based on their educational achievements. Though our data provide more of the processes, some of the children who dropped out of school and made some life transitions (e.g. girls' early marriage) have gone out of their childhood aspirations. Their occupational outcome is by far lower than they anticipated when they were in school. Children with better grade completion rates tend to maintain non-farm high aspirations but those who achieved less in school reconsidered farming life as a last option. The findings suggest that more young people are likely to experience similar setbacks in their education and would be forced to go back to their farming lives.

At this stage two questions emerge. First, can 'farming' be a 'motivator?' Second, is farming an outcome of failed aspirations for rural youth in Ethiopia? Very few rural children and their parents wanted 'farming' as future occupations for young people. Both looking life out of agriculture means that they are not motivated by the outcomes of their farming activities. They are not therefore investing on education to be 'farmers'. They are more 'motivated' to be 'non-farmers.' If farming could not be part of children's aspiration it could not be a motivator. Parents have all the challenging experiences of being farmers and are not motivated to encourage their children to pursue the same career. Therefore, we argue that 'aspirations are motivators' (Sherwood 1989) does not seem to apply for young people in rural Ethiopia.

The evidence also shows that rural youth are ending up being farmer despite their aspirations. When their childhood aspirations fail mainly because they couldn't achieve their educational goals, they end up being farmers. We can consequently conclude that 'farming' is an outcome of failed aspirations.

The practical implication for farming in Africa is the impasse rural youth are facing. The dilemma is: Africa needing more farmers to ensure food security for its growing population but rural youth looking for occupations out of farming. Aspirations as motivators, children in Africa are pushed to progress in schooling, parents to invest on education and have their children better life than their own. But at the same time they are expected to be also farmers which, as it stands, require less education, pay-off less and force them to live in areas with very limited services. Can African farming be transformed into a level where rural

young people can aspire for it, require high education, pays-off better and situate them in good life in no less than their urban educated counterparts? These are some of the questions that future African agriculture needs to answer to attract young educated farmers that can ensure food security. We argue, instead of blaming African youth as having 'unrealistic aspirations' (Kelsey 1954; Wellings 1983) and subscribe for 'reorienting to readjust their ambitions' (Wellings 1983), it would be useful to lift up farming to a position it could attract children's aspirations. Raising to that level would help children to have motivation, effort, invest on their schooling to that end with final outcome of better agricultural productivity that would address future African food security.

## 5. Conclusion

We presented in this paper that children and their parents have aspired for higher but non-farming occupations for young people when they leave school. Parents, based on difficult farming life, wanted their children to have alternative career when they grow up.

However, depending on the success in education children tend to change their aspirations over the years. Farming has rarely been object of aspiration for children but emerged as outcome for those who could not achieve educational aspirations. So we argued farming is an outcome of failed aspiration.

Instead of claiming that children as having 'unrealistic' non-farming aspirations and trying to address it with 'reorienting' them to adjust to it, we argue that it is important to transform farming into a level it could also be object of aspiration for children since childhood. Appropriate policy interventions, agricultural extension education, access to land and capital, making farming paying-off better, developing rural services would help children aspire for it and invest towards its achievement. Food security in Africa can be guaranteed not just by engaging those with 'failed' aspirations but those who aspire and learn to be 'farmers.'

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