

Policy Briefing

Youth and Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa: Time to Reset Policy

Agriculture is widely promoted as the only economic sector capable of providing employment to the millions of rural Africans entering the labour market in the coming decades. Two competing visions vie for attention. The first is of innovative, entrepreneurial youth driving rural transformation; the second is of agriculture providing young people with little more than survival opportunities. Between these two visions are the young people themselves, actively building their livelihoods, which most often include some engagement with agriculture. Policy interventions need to better consider how young people engage with the rural economy and how they imagine their futures.

Key messages

- Many if not most of the more than 130 million young people in rural sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in agriculture to a greater or lesser degree.
- This engagement takes many forms, and is most often combined with other economic and domestic activities.
- While commercialisation of agricultural produce is common among young people, there is little sign of widespread engagement with value chains – characterised by higher-value products, value addition, safety requirements and quality differentiation – or a blossoming of youth-led entrepreneurship.
- While many young people see continued and often expanded engagement in agriculture in the future, they tend to imagine themselves as managers of agricultural labour, with farming being part of a portfolio of farm and non-farm activities.
- More realistic framing, and spatially and socially differentiated analysis, will be key to more successful policy.

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A vision of youth-led agricultural transformation

Sustainable Development Goal 8 represents a commitment to promote 'full and productive employment and decent work for all'. In sub-Saharan Africa, progress towards this goal means addressing the sub-continent's 'missing jobs crisis'. It is widely assumed in policy circles that, for the foreseeable future in rural areas, where the majority of young people live, only the agriculture sector will be able to provide job opportunities for the projected 20 million new labour market entrants per year.

Policy and intervention strategies addressing youth and agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa are channelled by a number of powerful and persistent narratives that are used to justify and promote particular policy approaches. These narratives include:

- Africa's 'youth bulge' is unprecedented, but if harnessed could deliver an important demographic dividend;
- Young people do not want to farm and are leaving rural areas *en masse*;
- Rural areas are brimming with opportunity that young people just do not see;
- Young people want to farm but cannot access land;
- Young people hold the key to rural transformation; and
- Young people are stuck in 'waithood', unable to attain the social markers of adulthood.

Combining key elements of some of these narratives, one particularly important vision informing youth-targeted rural policy is of innovative and entrepreneurial youth driving forward the linked processes of agricultural and rural transformation. In this vision, young people bring their energy and innovativeness to bear on the opportunities afforded by growing markets, integration of digital technology into agriculture, new crop technology and mechanisation, to engage with more demanding agricultural value chains. In mastering innovative production and processing activities, and linking with

value chains characterised by higher-value products, value addition, safety requirements and quality differentiation, young people will lead the way to 'farming as a business'.

But how far along is this process of youth-led transformation? And how does this vision align with the rural livelihoods that the current generation of young people are in the process of building and the futures they imagine for themselves?

Between 2017 and 2020, a consortium led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with funding from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), undertook research on young people's engagement with the rural economy in sub-Saharan Africa. The research included analysis of nationally representative household surveys from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. In addition, qualitative fieldwork was conducted in Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Uganda. Across a total of 16 sites, the qualitative work included 64 group discussions, 416 individual interviews with young people (aged 15–33) and 92 interviews with adults.

Realities of how young people are building livelihoods

Broadly, the story of contemporary rural youth in sub-Saharan Africa that emerges from the research is one of building livelihoods under severe and persistent constraints. The deeply gendered rural opportunity landscapes they encounter offer few prospects of remunerative, secure or decent work, to say nothing of salaried employment. But through their own hard work and with the support of their families and social networks, they set about building their livelihoods. In some cases they are able to accumulate assets, in contexts where infrastructure is often poor and services lacking, and gendered social norms and strong social hierarchies restrict room for manoeuvre, particularly for women.

Young people's livelihoods reflect shifting patterns of engagement with the rural economy, combining unpaid caring and domestic work with farming, non-farm wage employment and/or non-farm

self-employment. The informal and seasonal nature of much of this economic activity gives rise to endemic precarity, where work is characterised by risk, limited financial reward, instability and lack of protection. Of course, livelihood building extends well beyond the labour market, with young people navigating the challenges of securing accommodation and land, furthering their own education, caring for parents and siblings, and negotiating relationships, marriage, children and citizenship, as they strive towards adulthood.

Many young people farm to a lesser or greater degree

Agreeing with other recent analyses, our results suggest that with some variation across sites and contexts, the majority of economically active young people in rural areas engage in some kind of agriculture. The evidence clearly does not support the idea that rural young people have turned their backs on agriculture *en masse*.

But neither does the research support the idea of a youth-led agricultural transformation. First, few young people are engaged only in farming: the majority of those who farm are also involved in some other form of self-employment or wage labour. Thus, while there is widespread involvement in farming, in most sites it may be quite wrong to conceive of or label these young people simply as 'farmers' (or even 'primarily farmers'). While some young people profess a deep attachment to farming, for many others it is the obvious – and perhaps only – 'choice' that allows them to guarantee food security, earn an income and forge a potential path to adulthood.

Second, in most cases young people's engagement with the rural economy does not align at all well with the image of young, highly entrepreneurial, innovative, business- and value chain-oriented 'agri-preneurs'. A key distinction here is between commercialisation on the one hand, and engagement in value chains on the other: the latter includes the former, but agricultural commercialisation, in which many young people are involved, does not necessarily mean engagement in value chains.



Go back to rural development basics, which are prerequisites for transformation and will benefit people of all ages.

Indeed, much of the farming that young people undertake – on their own or on family plots – is for both their own consumption and sale. Even where there are higher levels of commercialisation (e.g. where commercial vegetable production is prevalent), there is little direct mention of engagement with value chains, agribusiness firms or certification bodies. This, combined with the fact that farming is one of several economic activities, is likely to have important implications for if and how young people seek out and/or invest in new agricultural technology.

Third, while there is little evidence that rural young people are turning their backs on agriculture, few imagine a future spent 'digging'. Rather, the futures they imagine for themselves usually involve expanding their current activities and/or diversifying into others, and often include larger-scale, more modern agriculture. In many of these imagined futures, young people are farming and running their businesses primarily as managers of hired labour. Significantly, many also imagine restarting or furthering their education to boost their chances of securing professional wage employment and/or improving agricultural productivity.

Mobility and migration also figure in many imagined futures: in some contexts, the focus is on nearby rural towns, with the idea of maintaining a firm base in the rural economy. In others, it is imagined as the more classic flight to larger urban centres. Some imagine prosperous futures, where they run – sometimes several – successful businesses and/or farms. They see themselves engaging in white-collar professional work and accumulating considerable material wealth and social status. But it remains to be seen whether they can transform these imagined futures into reality.

Policy recommendations

The focus on youth, employment and agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa will remain strong over the coming years. Given the apparent gap between the vision of young people as innovative entrepreneurs, and how they actually engage in agriculture, policymakers, youth advocates and development practitioners should:

- Acknowledge that rural young people's activities often combine work in agriculture with other non-farm self- and/or wage employment, as well as domestic work. While most engage in agriculture in one way or another, it is neither correct nor helpful to assume they are simply or even primarily farmers.
 - Take more explicit account of how spatial factors, including access to markets, agricultural potential and population density, determine potential agricultural and rural development trajectories, and thus opportunities for young people.
- Stop promoting the idea that young people are particularly innovative and therefore have the potential to transform agriculture. There is no evidence to support this proposition and it only sends policy in unproductive directions.
 - Take a more measured approach to the short-term potential of digital agriculture to revolutionise smallholder farming. Experience suggests that the benefits of digital agriculture may be much more elusive than commonly assumed.
 - Go back to rural development basics, which are prerequisites for rural transformation and will benefit people of all ages. These include better infrastructure, market access, rural services and education.
 - Explore how one or more social protection interventions could be used to mitigate the negative effects of shocks and hazards on young people's efforts to build livelihoods. Effective protection during the early stages of livelihood building could be a game changer for many young people. ■

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Further reading

Mueller, V. and Thurlow, J. (eds) (2019) *Youth and Jobs in Rural Africa: Beyond Stylized Facts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sumberg, J. (ed.) (2021) *Youth and the Rural Economy in Africa: Hard Work and Hazard*, Wallingford: CABI

Sumberg, J. et al. (2020) 'Africa's "Youth Employment" Crisis is Actually a "Missing Jobs" Crisis', *Development Policy Review* (advance online publication)

Yeboah, T. et al. (2020) 'Hard Work and Hazard: Young People and Agricultural Commercialisation in Africa', *Journal of Rural Studies* 76: 142–51

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The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or IFAD.

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