How do young people across Africa engage with the rural economy? And what are the implications for how they build livelihoods and futures for themselves, and for rural areas and policy?

These questions are closely linked to the broader debate about Africa’s employment crisis, and specifically youth employment, which has received ever-increasing policy and public attention over the past two decades. Indeed, employment and the idea of ‘decent work for all’ is central to the Sustainable Development Goals to which national governments and development partners across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have publicly subscribed.
The interest in Africa’s employment or ‘missing jobs’ crisis goes well beyond the spheres of economic and employment policy. In relation to young people, the discussion of the employment crisis encompasses many key areas of social policy, including education, citizenship, social protection and security.

It is fair to say that to date, policy and investment to address Africa’s youth employment crisis, particularly in rural areas, have been informed more by strong and persistent narratives than by robust evidence.

Among the most important of these narratives are those which assert that:

- Africa’s ‘youth bulge’ is a defining challenge of our time;
- Young people are leaving rural areas en masse;
- Young people do not want to farm, or they do want to farm but cannot access land;
- Rural areas in SSA are brimming with opportunities that young people simply do not see;
- Young people hold the key to rural transformation; and
- Young people are stuck in ‘waithood’, unable to attain the social markers of adulthood.

Narratives such as these are important because they set out the problem, explain why it has arisen and propose how it should be addressed. In so doing, they cut through complexity and heterogeneity, and avoid all nuance. This is why they can have such a powerful, and at times deleterious, influence on policy processes.

It is in this context that 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 SSA. The research addressed a number of questions relating to (1) employment dynamics of young people; (2) young people's imagined futures; and (3) policy objectives and levers. 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 study sites, the qualitative work included 64 group discussions, 416 individual interviews with young people (aged 15–33) and 92 interviews with adults. In addition to researchers from IDS, the team included personnel from the University of Sussex, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), the University of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Makerere University (Uganda), Gulu University (Uganda), the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), the National Root Crops Research Institute (Nigeria) and the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Côte d'Ivoire).
Key findings

Youth livelihood building: hard work and hazard

The broad story of contemporary rural youth in SSA that emerges from the research is one of livelihood building under severe and persistent constraints. Having been buffeted as children by forces beyond their control – including widespread poverty, parental illness or death, family break-up or civil conflict – young women and men are then let down by formal education. Educational quality is low, and many are forced to leave school early because it is simply not affordable. This is despite having worked, often from an early age, to help pay their school fees and support their households. Although many young people see it as normal to combine school and work, others recognise that this jeopardises their educational progress.

The deeply gendered rural opportunity landscapes they encounter offer few prospects for 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 attempt to build livelihoods in contexts where infrastructure is poor and services lacking, and gendered social norms and strong social hierarchies restrict room for manoeuvre, particularly for women.

These 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.

Critically, young people’s livelihood building extends well beyond the labour market as they must also navigate the challenges of securing accommodation and land, furthering their own education, caring for parents and siblings, and negotiating relationships, marriage, children and citizenship.

For the vast majority of young people in the study sites, their engagement with the rural economy in the early stages of livelihood building is best characterised as hard work in the face of hazard – personal, financial and environmental.
Figure 1. Five main ways that young people engage with the rural economy

Spatial diversity and opportunity structures

However, the broad outlines of this story are not universal. There are spatial differences in opportunities, as well as socially constructed and mediated differences. The opportunities available to rural young people emerge from multiple ‘opportunity structures’ that act to create distinct routes into the labour force or adulthood or both. These opportunity structures reflect a web of determinants including place, family origins, gender, ethnicity, education and labour market processes.

A fundamental insight emerging from opportunity structure theory is that neither poor young people nor poor adults typically choose their jobs in any meaningful sense. This raises important questions about the preoccupation with young people’s aspirations in the development literature, and with young people’s individual choices and decisions in relation to work and livelihoods.

The point is certainly not that everything is predetermined, but rather that most young people in rural SSA have relatively little room for manoeuvre. Thus, while some profess a deep attachment to farming, for many others it is the obvious – and perhaps only – ‘choice’ that provides food security, and the opportunity to earn an income and forge a potential path to adulthood.
Depleted opportunity landscapes

Of course, diversity and opportunity structures must not be ignored, and there are many obvious variables to consider. For example, better-off young people generally have more options; women and men have different options; migrants generally have fewer options (although this depends on their networks); and areas with greater agricultural potential offer more options than those with lower potential. However, the research suggested that, apart from these obvious points, there was little indication that opportunity structures work to finely differentiate how young people engage with the rural economy.

Within and between sites, and across an array of social variables (including gender, age and education), there are strong similarities in the ways that young people engage with and affect the rural economy. Most young people combine some farming with one or more low-skil, low-investment, low-technology and low-return economic activities. This lack of diversity in patterns of engagement with the rural economy reflects a severely depleted opportunity landscape, resulting from poor infrastructure, limited purchasing power, poor policy and other factors, as opposed to any generalised lack among young people of ambition, skill or capital. In such contexts, it is unsurprising that young people are not the innovative drivers of change in farm or non-farm economies they are often portrayed to be.

Imagined futures

The futures that young people imagine for themselves usually involve expanding their current activities or diversifying into others or both. They often include larger-scale, more modern agriculture. In many of these imagined futures, young people are farming and running their businesses as managers of hired labour. Relatively few see themselves as ‘full-time farmers’.

Many also imagine restarting or furthering their education to boost their chances of securing professional wage employment or improving their agricultural productivity. Mobility and migration also feature in many imagined futures. For some, their focus is on nearby rural towns, with the idea of maintaining a firm base in the rural economy. For others, they imagine the classic flight to large urban centres.

Some young people imagine prosperous futures, where they run (sometimes several) successful businesses or farms, or engage in white-collar professional work, and accumulate considerable material wealth and social status. But it remains to be seen how they might transform these imagined futures into reality.
Implications

Framing and discourse

Perhaps the most obvious – but also the most far-reaching – implication of this research is the urgent need to re-frame the ‘problem’ of Africa’s rural youth. We need to move away from the idea that it is ‘all about young people’ and their individual and collective deficits (such as lack of skills, lack of interest in hard work or lack of interest in education). What is required is an alternative framing that puts the economy and its inability to provide decent employment – not just for young people, but for all rural residents – centre stage.

It is also clear that mass outmigration – actual or threatened – by rural young people must no longer be a core element of policy discourse. True, some young people want to, and do, migrate. And in some locations this might have demographic significance. However, millions of young people keep one or both feet in rural areas as they progress through life in pursuit of better livelihood and educational opportunities, and social status.
Policy

There is much room to improve education policy in rural SSA. For example, making primary and secondary education accessible to all remains an unfinished project, despite the great leap forward in primary enrolment resulting from concerted action to address the Millennium Development Goals.

There is clear demand for vocational and technical training. However, given the desire and need of many rural young people to combine further training with the demands of ongoing economic and caring activities, this must be provided in both flexible and part-time modes. More research may clarify the kinds of complementary interventions that would best enable rural young people to take advantage of existing or augmented educational resources.

The research supports calls for a root-and-branch interrogation of school curricula, with a focus on how they and the whole ecosystem around schooling valorise (or denigrate) particular kinds of work and reproduce particular gender regimes. This interrogation should also address ‘vocational’ fields and locally relevant knowledge(s). Attention to differences in education systems that reflect different histories would also be valuable in understanding how the skills, vocational and employability agendas might be better integrated into mainstream schooling.

This book unites qualitative and quantitative research to illuminate how young men and women engage with the rural economy and imagine their futures.

Source: © CAB International
The research offers solid support for the idea that in one way or another, large numbers of rural youth engage in crop or livestock production or both, and many combine this work with other economic activities. Further, both farming and livestock production have important places in the futures that many young people imagine for themselves, even in rural areas that may be seen as less economically dynamic. However, in these futures young people do not see themselves principally as farmers or as having wholly agrarian livelihoods. Rather, theirs is often an arm’s-length, managerial or executive vision of engagement, with manual work being done by hired labour and farming being one of multiple economic activities. This has important implications for key areas of agricultural policy, including training and skills, employment, agricultural extension services, and technology development and promotion.

**Research**

There is a need – and an opportunity – to bring a broader set of perspectives to the discussion of rural young people’s livelihoods in SSA. For example, too little research, policy and public discourse, and youth-oriented development practice, engages with the large, diverse and challenging, yet highly relevant, literature from the field of youth studies.

While nationally representative household surveys provide valuable insights into the economic activities of rural young people, it is also recognised that these same household based survey instruments may not fully capture youth activities. For example, farming activities of young people may not show up reliably on household plot rosters. There are also concerns about how well path dependencies and transitions (e.g. household formation, starting to farm, school-to-work transitions and migration) are captured. Similarly, more work is needed on how data on temporally and spatially variable livelihood engagement can realistically be collected, including data on income and how labour is allocated among different activities.

A related area that deserves more attention is how insights arising from qualitative research instruments can be more creatively integrated with quantitative analyses to more effectively inform policy.
Practice

In terms of development practice, the research points to two simple guidelines. First, practitioners need to be extremely cautious about youth-specific arguments and the youth-targeted interventions that these are used to justify. While it is obviously true that ‘young people are the future’, their future is unlikely to improve through piecemeal interventions that support a small number for a short period of time, without shifting opportunity structures. Focusing on opportunity structures and structural conditions requires programme continuity and coordinated, national and subnational approaches.

Second, it is critical to work with, not against, the grain of family and social relations, as in most cases they allow young people to access key resources. This will also serve as a reminder that while interventions are often narrowly framed around economic activity and employment, young women and men build livelihoods and move towards social adulthood through hard work on many fronts – including caring, relationships, education, children and civic action.
Key readings


IDS (2020) How do Young People Engage with the Rural Economy in Sub-Saharan Africa?, video, 30 January [in English]

IDS (2020) Comment les jeunes s’engagent-ils dans l’économie rurale en Afrique Subsaharienne, vidéo, 20 août [in French]
Delivering world-class research, learning and teaching that transforms the knowledge, action and leadership needed for more equitable and sustainable development globally.