

PROBLEM ON AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

One of the greatest challenges facing governments and policymakers in Africa today is how to provide opportunities for more than 200 million youth so that they can have decent lives and contribute to the economic development of their countries. Africa's 2011 population was estimated at 1.05 billion and is expected to double by 2050. Africa is the youngest continent in the world: About 70 percent of its population is 30 years of age or younger. In 2011, youth, who are defined here as those between 15 and 24 years of age, constituted 21 percent of the more than 1 billion people in Africa, whereas another 42 percent was less than 15 years old. Slightly more than half of the African youth population is female, and there are more rural dwellers than urban dwellers. With such a large proportion under 15 years of age, Africa's youth population is expected to grow in the years to come while the youth population in other parts of the world shrinks.



Undoubtedly, the challenges for youth that are central to Africa's economic development are numerous and varied. They include employment, health and political participation. These issues differ among groups within countries (by gender, education level, ethnicity and health status), and across countries and regions. Conversely, the size, energy, enthusiasm, innovation and dynamism of youth are assets that can be harnessed for Africa's development with appropriate policies that deal adequately with the issues facing them.

The potentially important role of youth in Africa's development cannot be overemphasized. Youth could be a source of labor inputs as well as human capital in production, which would improve total factor productivity in a region of the world where capital formation is limited. When employed, youth could be a reliable source of demand for the economy through their

consumption activities. In addition, the youth of Africa could be critical for the development of a new class of entrepreneurs that African countries need to prosper. Furthermore, Africa has an opportunity to harness a “demographic dividend” with the projection that most countries in Africa will have more working age adults per child in the future. Thus, enabling large workforce supporting fewer children and the elderly.

Rural youth face many hurdles in trying to earn a livelihood. Pressure on arable land is high in many parts of the Africa, making it difficult to start a farm. Youth often also lack access to credit, and many other productive resources necessary for agriculture. But even if such hurdles can be overcome, isn't urban life much cooler? Perhaps, but not if you cannot make a living there. Particularly in developing countries, rural youth find themselves in such a bind.

While most of the world's food is produced by (ageing) smallholder farmers in developing countries, older farmers are less likely to adopt the new technologies needed to sustainably increase agricultural productivity, and ultimately feed the growing world population while protecting the environment. Hence, we need to re-engage youth in agriculture. Educational programs can provide rural youth with the skills and insights needed to engage in farming and adopt environmentally friendly production methods. With some additional effort, through farmer organizations and improved infrastructure, young farmers can connect to markets to sell their often higher value food. Facilitating youth's access to credit helps them become entrepreneurs, improving their self-esteem and the feeling that they can make a living in rural areas.

However, the situation is particularly dire in many developing countries, where access to appropriate education and training often remains quite limited in rural areas. In developing countries, young rural women tend to have particularly poor access to both general education and education that integrates agriculture sector knowledge. To meet this challenge, various strategies should be implemented. These includes: introduction of a quota system, for example; gender quotas for training programs, direct targeting of women as participants, for example; training targeted specifically at women in Africa and provision of take-home food rations and introduction of flexible school calendars as incentives for families to let young women participate in training programs. Access to tertiary education related to agriculture can be enhanced through scholarships, complemented by strengthening the capacities of universities in Africa. In order to ensure that the competencies of agricultural graduates meet the needs of an evolving agricultural sector, mechanisms can be introduced to facilitate close collaboration between educational institutions and local farming communities.

About the author:

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