

African Youth in Agriculture and Rural Development

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January 2014

Background paper for the FAO Regional Conference for Africa (ARC 2014)

28th session – Tunis, Tunisia, 24-28 March 2014

Youth employment is firmly on the international agenda. In 1995, the United Nations (UN) adopted the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond*, and the importance of youth employment was recognized in 2000 when it was included within the first *Millennium Development Goal* (MDG 1) “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”, which comprises the target of achieving “full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people” (target 1.B). As clearly stressed by the *High-level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, unemployment and youth employment remain probably today’s major global issue with sustainable development related to climate change (UN 2013).

In relative terms, the youth employment challenge affects every region—developed as well as developing countries—a feature stressed by the World Development Report 2013 on “Jobs” (World Bank 2012). Due to the characteristics of its demographic trends, Africa is the region of the world where this challenge is—and will increasingly be—a deep concern: 60% of the world’s labour force growth between 2010 and 2050 will be in Africa; 60% of the African population today are under 25; African youth weights 35% of the economically active population; and in the only next 15 years, nearly 400 million youth will enter the labour market of the continent¹.

African institutions and governments are strongly committed to addressing this challenge. The African Union (AU) launched the *African Youth Decade* in 2009 as a roadmap for the implementation of the *African Youth Charter* adopted by the Heads of State in 2006. More recently, in 2011, the AU, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) created the *Joint Initiative on Job Creation for Youth in Africa*. Nevertheless, more than ever, the risk is to consider youth employment only as a specific issue calling for targeted policies, while it is deeply rooted within the characteristics of the structural transformation of the continent and its own challenges. There are policies for youth but they must be part of overall development strategies. The way governments, regional bodies and the international community will deal with this massive growth of the labour force will strongly shape Africa’s future.

In this particular context, the importance of rural population in Africa, in spite of a strong and continuing process of urbanization, translates into a very specific position for agriculture. It is the main source of activity of the population, and the sector *sensu lato*² will have a dramatic role to play in the coming decades because it has the potential to fuel a sustainable inclusive growth process, providing jobs and supporting diversification.

¹ Save where otherwise referenced, demographic data are author’s calculation based on the *World Population Prospects* (2010 revision) and the *World Urbanization Prospects* (2011 revision). Developments are provided in Losch *et al.* (2012) and Losch (2012 and 2013).

² We consider here agriculture (crops, animals, fisheries, forestry) and the related upstream and downstream activities of the agrifood system.

African transformations and the youth employment challenge

The youth employment challenge concerns every country in Africa, regardless the economic growth rate and the strong diversity of its 55 states. This challenge results from a massive increase of young workers, their improving skills and their claims for a better life on the one side and, on the other side, from the slow pace of job creation and ill-adapted education systems with regard to the needs of African economies.

The on-going demographic transition

The continent, which was for long under-populated, is catching up quickly. It will grow by 1.2 billion people by 2050 and reach at this time 2.1 billion inhabitants and 25% of the world population. With a 20-year difference with North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the last region of the world to engage in its demographic transition, i.e. the successive reduction in both mortality and birth rates, with a slower decrease of the latter which explains a strong population growth (reaching in the near past 4% per year for some countries, meaning a doubling of the population in less than 20 years).

With this big demographic push, SSA should be able to reap at last its “demographic dividend”³ which is a powerful engine for growth because the labour force (and the productive capacity) increases while the costs related to the inactive population reduce. This unique window of opportunity (because it occurs only one time) is however very critical: it has to be supported by a conducive economic, institutional and political environment and adequate investments, which are the condition for job creation.

This is the challenge for Africa where the labour force will increase by 800 million workers over the next 40 years (over the same period it will increase by 350 million in India but decrease by 95 million in Europe and 180 million in China).

A very slow economic transformation

The African economic landscape has faced a dramatic change since the 1960s with a very quick process of urbanization. However, even if urban population increased tenfold in SSA, the continent remains predominantly rural (around 60-65% of the population). It will continue to be so until the mid-2030s, with the exception of Northern Africa and South Africa, where urbanization started earlier and reaches 60%. SSA is the only region of the world with a long-term rural population growth (rural areas will increase by 305 million people before 2050).

This situation results from a very slow process of economic transformation. Contrary to other regions of the world, urbanization occurred without industrialization; cities concentrate informal activities; and agriculture remains the single biggest source of employment (50-60% of the labour force in average and up to 75% in some regions). The formal sector of “registered” activities in manufacturing and services (government, trade, banking) does not count more than 5 to 10% of the active population, with very few exceptions. And this low economic performance of African cities explains the slowing down of urban growth since the 1980s.

After four decades of economic and political instability, the continent in the 2000s engaged in a decade of economic growth with a sharp increase of the GDP per capita, and several countries are growing fast and diversifying⁴. However, Africa remains a continent that mainly exports raw products and imports manufactured goods, and this growth process is not inclusive at all. Job creation does

³ As consequence of the evolving age structure of the population due to the transition, the ratio between the inactive people and the 15-64 year working population declines. The SSA’s ratio, which was a burden in the 1980s (compare to other developing regions), will improve progressively until after 2050 when other regions will be pulled in the downward path by an ageing population.

⁴ But the 47 SSA countries only account for 45% of the continental GDP when Northern Africa and South Africa generate respectively 35% and 20%.

not match with the demographic dividend. It heightens the amplitude of youth unemployment, widens income inequalities and fuels social tensions.

Youth specifics

Although the 15-24 year old bracket ranges are commonly used, notably by the UN agencies, there is no agreed definition of youth. There is a discernible difference with childhood and school age on one side but, on the other side and depending of the social and cultural context, it is possible to be old and to remain in the youth category. It is particularly true in rural Africa where access to land and to full economic independence can occur late in life⁵.

The 15-24 age group represents 20% of today's African population and, contrary to other regions, this youth share will remain high (18% in 2050). As a consequence, Africa's share in the world's youth will be multiplied by two and reach 30% in 2050, while it will decrease elsewhere else. In absolute terms, African youth will grow from 205 million in 2010 to nearly 400 million in 2050 – a big push, which will call for adequate education and training systems and job creation.

The measurement of unemployment is very difficult in economies where the informal sector is predominant, as in Africa. Because the definition of employment is broad⁶, unemployment figures for youth are very low and conservative, often under 10% in SSA and around 25% in North Africa, with more prevalence in urban areas (World Bank 2009a). They are, however, two times and three times higher than those of adults respectively in SSA and North Africa (FAO 2012). Categories, such as the NEETS (“not in employment, education or training”) used by several countries and OECD, are not really usable. In fact, due to the widespread poverty and the lack of social safety nets, the youth are always engaged in activities in order to sustain their livelihood: family labour, odd jobs and other “petits boulots” developed in several places – often mixing rural and urban settings through circular short-term migrations – which result in diversified sources of incomes. Low returns and underemployment are a common feature, particularly in rural areas where the seasonality of agricultural production shapes the activity profile.

The share of youth in the labour force in Africa is the highest in the world: around 35% in SSA and 40% in North Africa, versus 30% in India, 25% in China and 20% in Europe. If, in the long run, the situation of employment is to improve with a better active versus inactive people ratio, the next two decades appear to be absolutely critical. The yearly cohort of young people entering the labour market will increase from 20 million every year in 2010 to nearly 30 million in 2025⁷. Over these 15 years, a total of 330 million young people will search for a job or an income-generating activity in SSA (which is the population of the USA today) and nearly 70 million in North Africa.

These figures explain the strong pressure on jobs and the related economic, social and political tensions, as illustrated by the ‘Arab springs’ in North Africa.

⁵ The AU (2006) defines youth as the 15-35 year age group.

⁶ According to ILO, “the employed comprise all persons above a specific age who during a specified brief period, either one week or one day, were in the following categories: paid employment (... or) self-employment (...). Unpaid family workers at work should be considered as in self-employment irrespective of the number of hours worked during the reference period.”

⁷ The yearly cohort corresponds to 1/10 of the 15-24 year age group. It is different from the increase in the total number of workers (15-64 year group) which of course takes into account people leaving the labor force (after 64). Using the cohorts of young workers helps to highlight the pressure on jobs and avoids the uncertainties about stopping work after the age of 64, which is hardly the case in Africa.

The African agriculture paradox: growing youth disinterest for a strategic sector

Governments have to deal with the “African equation” of poorly diversified economic structures and growing labour forces. This sharp reality gives them narrow room for manoeuvre and they cannot free their policy priorities from their demographic and geographic realities, in other words from what the spreading of activities and people across every country is. Now the continent remains broadly rural. Based on rural and urban demographics, and continuing the existing trends of rural depopulation, 60% of the young people entering the labour market in the next 15 years in SSA will live in rural areas (200 million). And rural North Africa will have to receive 45% (30 million) of the new working youth.

Because agriculture remains central to rural livelihoods, its role in solving the African equation will be critical. And its capacity to absorb an increasing labour force is at the same time a big part of the problem and of the solution. In that perspective, the growing disinterest of youth for agriculture appears as a paradox and is probably one of the major issues to deal with.

Agriculture as a necessary and realistic option for African transformation

The importance of agriculture for the transformation of the continent is indubitable. This positioning faces however a renewed debate among academics, international agencies and governments about the sector offering the best prospects for an inclusive growth process and employment. Points of view are extremely contrasted between proponents of industrialization on the one hand, and advocates of agriculture on the other hand.

For the “industrialists”, agricultural productivity is too low and progress will be too difficult and too slow in order to deal with poverty reduction and employment needs. Manufacturing appears to be the most powerful option to meet the scale of the challenges, knowing that globalization offers new perspectives for “light manufacturing” and that rising costs in Asia will give Africa a competitive advantage. These are opportunities and they must be seized. However, even if things can move quickly, the perspectives for industrialization in the next two decades do not match with the labour force increase. Millions of new jobs could be created, at best, when hundreds of millions are necessary, and the record of manufacturing and free zones over the last fifty years suggests caution.

In comparison, the “agriculturists” present the argument of “basic arithmetic” (Headey *et al.* 2010): agriculture absorbed the majority of the labour force over the last decades; the rural population will remain the majority till the 2030s; agriculture is the backbone of rural livelihoods – around 90% of rural households have a farm, even if off-farm diversification increases; and the prospects for growth of agricultural markets – urban, regional, global – are huge due to rising population and urbanization. Therefore, the challenge is to develop the production and the many upstream and downstream activities (transformation, trade and services) and to boost farm incomes because they have strong intersectoral effects and generate a new rural demand which strengthens and amplifies the dynamics of diversification.

The many reasons for a negative perception of agriculture

If agriculture represents a strategic sector for African development, it holds a negative perception with most young people. It is explained by many reasons which are related to the drowning opportunity space for youth (Leavy & Smith 2010), which results in a confrontation between their aspirations and the reality of the agrarian context and the rural economy and society as whole. New information systems, better transportation infrastructures, and possibility of travel and migration offer a window on other ways of life where big cities and rich countries represent shining Eldorados and potential access to the reality of the images displayed by the media. For rural youth, the realization of their dream of a “good life” lies most of the time clearly away from the countryside. Furthermore, the disconnection of formal schooling from rural realities and rural needs contributes to the downgrading of rural culture.

Consequently, it is not surprising that rural youth rarely mention farming as a “best job” and even a “good job” when one takes into account the very low returns provided by agriculture and the harsh conditions of work with hand tools. As such, agriculture is probably one of the most difficult ways to make a living and, above all, it does not provide a desirable social status.

Recognizing agriculture as an option is even more challenging when economic and social restrictions related to access to productive resources are taken into account. The difficulty of economic and social emancipation from the elders, the weight of obligations to, and control from, the community are sharp constraints – even if these obligations may also provide some security related to family or village solidarity. Access to land is a core issue due to rules of inheritance. This difficulty is exacerbated by new pressures on land arising from land grabs and growing interest of city dwellers, and tensions are increased when population density limits farm sizes and reduces their economic viability. Access to a fair share of returns is another deep concern due to the importance of unpaid labour to the family farm. All these limitations are even worse for young women who, most of the time, have no prospect of land access due to rules of inheritance and who know that they will mainly have to work for their husbands (Tacoli & Mabala 2010).

In that context, the only way to make a living is to engage in diversification strategies, mixing some farm work, many small off-farm activities (occasional wage labour with other farmers, petty trade and handicraft) and temporary jobs in cities through short-term migration. Longer-term migration often means emancipation and a change of status. And when opportunities for migration are limited and local options non-existent, the feeling of exclusion and hopelessness can fuel social unrest. As demonstrated by Chauveau and Richards (2008) for Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire, recent civil wars are rooted in these patterns of rural crises.

Towards pro-youth policies in agriculture and for rural development

Facing the growing challenge of youth employment, African governments have to reengage in sound rural development policies, powered by the engine of agricultural growth. These policies are not exclusive, but they fit with the structural characteristics of the continent. Changing the vision of youth towards agriculture and their perception of the limits of a rural way of life are, however, clear prerequisites, knowing that their commitment to the development of rural areas will be decisive.

In that perspective, many national youth policies have been and are very normative (Sumberg et al. 2012). They focus on youth in general, considering them as a homogeneous group requiring specific support through standardized actions, when their reality is diverse and requires well-reasoned types of actions taking into account their economic, social and institutional environment.

The needs to improve rural livelihoods in Africa and to facilitate the inclusion of youth in the rural economy are immense, and the specific requirements for agriculture are not the least. However, the risk here is to become mired in the long list of the many things to do in a context of limited resources. Policy recommendations often provide a well-known shopping list of measures which include a right provision of public goods, the reduction of transaction costs, incentives for the development of missing markets, mitigation mechanisms, and so on, to which more specific requirements for youth in terms of access to productive assets can be added. Another risk is to be over focused on sectoral issues: rural development is often reduced to agriculture first, with the core objective of increasing a lagging productivity (this is, for instance, the priority in the recipe for agrarian economies proposed in the WDR 2013). Even if productivity growth is central, it is not enough and it has to be rearticulated with other issues.

As a consequence, pro-youth policies cannot stand alone. They are necessary part of an overall development strategy, which includes territorial and sectoral dimensions, with their own options, and which can then be detailed further, addressing youth specifics.

Strategy and shared vision

A development strategy is more than the articulation of sectoral policies. It is first the result of a process among stakeholders and constituents – which needs to include youth – that leads to a shared vision of challenges, constraints, opportunities and possible futures. As described and pointed out by Stiglitz (1998), a development strategy is a public good and deserves strong public support in its design. Investing in knowledge creation is a necessary step for a better understanding of changing rural economies and for engaging in consultation among stakeholders. That stage is critical and has to be carefully planned because its quality will determine ownership which is a decisive factor of commitment.

Youth, who are generally marginalized in these processes when they exist, request specific attention and support in terms of information and capacity building in order to fully participate in the debates and make their voice heard. Their political participation in local institutions which have developed in the aftermath of decentralization is a major opportunity, notably in rural areas. This is where they can raise their own problems, express their views, negotiate specific support or policy instruments and, above all, get the recognition of a status.

In the end, the specific role of agriculture and rural development in development strategies and in answering the challenge of youth employment will require trust among stakeholders. And the necessary step here is to re-establish a positive status for agriculture and for rural life in politics, in the media, in school and in the society as a whole. Such an approach refers more to ideology than to specific means and requires a strong commitment from politicians and governments.

Decomartmentalising territories and policies

Rural youth are part of a quickly evolving environment, which is often no longer the one governments or donors think they know. And youth are well positioned to enlighten this “new rurality” if they are asked. With the exception of limited remote areas, new territories are emerging as a result of densification – population settlement, road networks, development of rural centres and small towns – new information networks, and of the practices of local people who implement new strategies that straddle the boundaries between urban and rural (Losch et al. 2013).

Public policies are generally blind to these developments, because of the statistical segmentation of rural and urban areas (and their shifting definition), the lack of accurate information, and also because of the fragmentation of policies themselves. Public action is often far away from a territorial perspective and this results in a juxtaposition of sectoral approaches which misses many possible synergies.

Engaging in territorial/regional approaches is a necessary step to break the rural-urban divide, to foster local development strategies, and to join rural and small town dwellers and youth in common objectives by using the opportunities of the decentralization processes. This is a promising way to reconnect agriculture and rural development within a broader perspective where investing in rural towns and small cities (providing infrastructures and services) is a way to facilitate the transformation of agricultural products, develop new employment opportunities in agro-businesses and retailing, and provide rural youth with new perspectives. Nepal’s new Rural Futures programme is supporting and developing this new vision.

Which development model for agriculture?

There is today somewhat of a raging debate between supporters of small- versus large-scale agriculture, which has been reinitiated by the food price crisis of 2008 and the arrival of new investors (e.g. Collier & Dercon 2013). This debate tends to obscure the central issue which is the need to increase production while creating employment in agriculture, as well as in upstream and downstream activities, by both strengthening value chains and improving the incomes of farmers, which constitute the trigger of rural demand and economic diversification.

In that perspective and to secure the maximum impact, the primary objective of public policy should be to support the broad masses of farmers and their family farms, which offer the greater potential for inclusive agricultural growth and of integration for youth. Family farms are labour-intensive, flexible and can be efficient and competitive in terms of production costs when compared to other regions of the world (World Bank 2009b). They represent the majority of world agriculture – both in developed and developing countries – and have demonstrated in the past their true capacity for productivity improvement when they receive the necessary support and benefit a conducive environment.

Family farms are rarely fully engaged in subsistence agriculture, with the exception of a few remote areas. They are most often broadly participating in markets and when self-consumption remains it is firstly the consequence of a risky environment. The answer here is to improve their performance with information, technical advice and credit, but addressing risks is a major issue. It can be done by securing land rights and land access and by reducing market instability (using public intervention for price stabilisation – Galtier 2009). Supporting collective action by strengthening farmers' organisation is also a necessary step which offers economies of scale in marketing and supply, helps investment in storage or transformation facilities, and increases bargaining power in contract negotiations.

However, policy choices must avoid radical positions, and investments in large-scale farming, including foreign investments, can offer synergies with family farms and opportunities for growth and youth employment. Large farms can help the development of new value chains by facilitating the reach of minimum production thresholds for local transformation. They can offer a channel for the marketing of smallholders' production and facilitate their access to inputs, training and credit, notably through the development of contracts. But conditionalities in terms of local employment and local infrastructures must be a rule.

In the end, policies must be adapted to the local context – land constraints or potential for new farm land – and to the type of production, which can have requirements requesting specific investments (i.e. high value exports). With reference to the scarcity of the existing factors of production, governments should however better orient firm investments towards segments of the value chains where capital is missing (input supply, marketing, transformation) and where they would create new jobs and support the huge potential of family farms for production.

The specifics of pro-youth policies

When dealing with the specific needs of youth, the risk is again the syndrome of the long list. In order to sustain their livelihood in agriculture and other rural activities, and to consider a life in a rural setting as a possible future, young people need everything: land, credit, training, technical assistance, information, good infrastructure, access to services, etc.

Therefore, identifying priorities is a necessary step. But it is essential first to keep in mind that targeted actions for youth cannot be disconnected from the global picture. What has been identified above are prerequisites, or at least affirmative actions that must be embedded in an overall process supporting rural youth: provide them with a status (considering farmers as professionals); restore agriculture and rural life as positive options (improving farm labour with adapted mechanisation and giving rural towns infrastructures and services); give voice to and learn from youth needs, realities, and experiences (taking advantage of local institutions to engage in the design of territorial strategies). In that perspective, promoting a decent rural employment, which is a core joint initiative by FAO and ILO hosting many specific programmes, corresponds to a very positive approach, nevertheless subject to necessary reconnections with the political dimension of youth participation in the overall development process.

General support for youth employment will have to focus on education and training, enhancing modern skills and using all the resources of ITCs. General education must evolve towards more interactivity with information systems and participation in the civil society and policy debates, and it

must give rural youth the keys for a voice in designing their future. Targeted training (vocational schools) must be flexible, adapted to sectoral needs and be close to business realities: the ones of the farm (like the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools), the ones of the enterprises (with apprenticeship in agri-businesses or industrial units), or the ones of the small-scale entrepreneur (with mentorship on running a business).

Specific support for youth employment will be determined by local conditions (Brooks *et al.* 2013). In the majority of rural situations, the issues of access to land and of the intergenerational transfer of holdings are the most critical. Many young people are locked in agrarian systems in which they remain dependent on their fathers and grand-fathers until the elders die – a situation that blocks initiatives and innovations. Managing the transmission of farm assets and the standing down of elders must be addressed by public policy with adequate legislation and social support. On the other hand, when access to new farming areas is possible, tensions are reducing but adequate assistance is requested. It involves first a careful inventory of potential land and existing rights (a priority objective in every country), and then specific assistance and funding in terms of infrastructure and services, which are conditions for success.

Key messages

Youth employment is at the crossroads of the economic and demographic challenges of Africa. Due to the durable share of rural people in the overall population and to the strategic positioning of agriculture, what is at stake with the evolution of rural areas is a major part of African future.

Accordingly, a failure in boosting agriculture and rural development would miss the target of providing jobs to the majority of youth, but it would also worsen the situation of African cities where slum-type urbanisation demonstrates the weakness and fragility of their growth process.

Most of the youth policies have been so far very normative and have addressed youth as a specific population – as if they were located on an island. It is urgent today to end stand-alone approaches and to reconnect youth policies with necessary development strategies.

Several interlinked recommendations emerge from this analysis for facilitating an escape from the syndrome of “doing everything at the same time”:

- Youth must fully participate in the public policy debate and make their voice heard. This is part of the restoration of their status and requests adequate support in terms of information and training.
- Agriculture and rural life must be upgraded and get consideration in politics, media and school. This is a prerequisite for fostering youth agreement on a possible rural future.
- Local and territorial development facilitating rural-urban linkages through the provision of infrastructures and services in small towns is an adequate framework for youth participation, farm modernisation, transformation of products, diversification of rural activities, and development of employment.
- Governments must support family farms which are more labour-inclusive and offer broad prospects for development. The improvement of the institutional and economic environment is a necessary step for an increased participation in markets, which can be facilitated by synergies with agri-businesses. Access to productive resources and intergenerational transmission of farm assets is a core issue to be addressed.
- Education and training are keys for helping youth to design their future. They must focus on targeted training close to business realities but also facilitate a general understanding of global challenges which is a critical step for full citizenship.

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