

Food System Transformation Needs to Work for All: Why Youth in the Semi-Arid Drylands are Underserved in Agriculture

Opportunities and challenges facing African youth especially in the semi-arid drylands have recently become major public policy and research discourses due to the attention stakeholders including researchers, governments, and development partners have given to youth involvement or the lack thereof in agriculture. Although agriculture presents a great potential for employment opportunities for youth in Africa, the same opportunities have not been harnessed due to poor understanding of youth and ineffective policies and strategies for harnessing their potentials. Youth in the dryland function in a complex resource deficit environment; often stereotyped, misunderstood, and with less or no voice in the decisions about their future and livelihood.

Although youths are known in the developed countries as the drivers of development, narratives and the construct of the African youth, links youth to irregular migration, the phenomenon of child and foot soldiers (Alfy, 2016), criminal activities, and the consumption of narcotics and their insertion into hazardous gold panning activities. For all these reasons, young people are portrayed most of the time in many urban settings like in Mali as ‘thé-preneurs’ or ‘thé-chômeurs’- literally, tea-drinking unemployed (White, 2012, p.10). Beyond this dark, stereotypical, and alarmist picture of African youth, rural, young people are enterprising, innovative, market-oriented, and well organized in the provision of services, based on available market opportunities in their immediate environments or the regional centers of their country.

Even though youth are the main drivers of agriculture in Africa’s semi-arid drylands, they are faced with constraints that limit their interest in and make agriculture unattractive to the youth. These constraints include shortage of production resources (land and finance), negative attitude about agriculture, limited agricultural knowledge and skills as well as leadership and managerial skills, insufficient technical expertise, low involvement in decision making, the attraction of quick gains especially from collar jobs, market accessibility. Based on these constraints, agriculture is seen less as a trade or career, but rather as a domestic obligation or symbolic duty for many young people because traditional agriculture is not still seen as a real opportunity structure that can assure a secure livelihood (World Bank, 2007).

Sustainable development and economic growth in the semi-arid dryland can only be assured when its youth are actively engaged and their aspirations well aligned to policies and strategic development pathways in context-specific ways. No agricultural policies will succeed if youth are excluded. The youth make up the majority of the dryland workforce. Dryland agriculture needs the youth and the youth need agriculture. This symbiotic relationship should be supported by policies, strategies, and support structures to mainstream youth in agriculture. Facilitating and enabling youth engagement in agriculture, wherein young men and women’s specific pathways into farming—with the gendered challenges and opportunities should be well explored and strategized. In this respect, the norms that hinder young men from gaining autonomy as farmers, and that hinder women from becoming agri-food actors in their own right—are presented in the GLDC youth strategy (Njuguna-Mungai et al., 2021).

Strategic Interventions for youth in the semi-arid drylands of East and southern Africa	
<u>Strategic focus 1:</u> Youth recognition and evidence: Conducting strategic youth and agriculture research	Understand youth as a homogenous group. Establish sustained collaborations between research institutions, government, private sector, NGOs, and CBOs.
<u>Strategic focus 2:</u> Building human capacity	Raise awareness among female and male youth about the potentials of agriculture to help them achieve their dreams and aspirations.
<u>Strategic focus 3:</u> Youth-friendly financial services	Ensure availability of locally adaptable rural finance, e.g. interest-free credit and affordable collateral. Eliminate complex bureaucratic procedures to access youth funds. Support the crop value chain enterprises that are most attractive to male and female youth.
<u>Strategic focus 4:</u> Psychological, life skills and behavior change training	Youth projects should include counselling and guidance for the youth that have to deal with personal, family, community, and regional crises and traumas.
<u>Strategic focus 5:</u> Access to affordable technology & climate adaptation	Youth projects should include interventions and technologies that rebrand agriculture as an attractive sector for the youth. Promote innovative farming practices that optimize land use and climate resilience.
<u>Strategic focus 6:</u> Stimulate youth entrepreneurship and employment	Focus on the post-production, especially value addition and processing that the youth already consider to be lucrative. Nurture youth agri-businesses and market-driven enterprises. Link youth to supporting services and infrastructure for value addition; establish pilot demonstration units. Invest in rural agriculture infrastructures such as solar-powered irrigation systems, rural electrification, feeder road networks, and ICTs to accelerate innovation in agribusinesses. Support the involvement of the youth and capacitate them as value chain actors such as brokers and service providers.
<u>Strategic focus 7:</u> Address social-cultural barriers	Sensitize communities on negative aspects of discriminatory social norms, and practices that inhibit female and male youth from engaging and benefiting from development programs. Enforce implementation of existing laws that guarantee inclusive development, keeping young people in school and against early and forced marriages.

<u>Strategic focus 8:</u> Building youth-friendly social capital and strengthening local institutions	Make an inventory of local support groups male and female youth use to mobilize resources. The inventory should identify the different types of mutual support groups and the types of services (resources) they provide to the different types of male and female youth. Strengthen and work with these support groups.
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Source: Njuguna-Mungai et al., (2021). Gendered Youth Realities, Aspirations, Opportunity Structures and Transitions to Adulthood in the Semi-Arid Tropics: Strategy for Targeting and Engagement.

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