Young people and farming in sub-Saharan Africa

Funded by the Mastercard Foundation, the Strengthening African Rural Smallholders “STARS” project aims to break the cycle of poverty and food insecurity among 210,000 farmers in rural Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Senegal, by facilitating access to financial markets and agricultural services.

A key aim of the project is to broaden the evidence base in rural agricultural finance, value chain development and share lessons learned. Building on research conducted by the project, this report provides an overview of specific challenges and opportunities for working with youth in sub-Saharan Africa.

The findings and recommendations described in this learning brief are drawn from comparative analysis of focus group and interview data collected from 402 farmers in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Senegal.
Youth as entrepreneurs

Despite the rapid economic growth experienced across sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, employment generation remains weak for the growing population of young people.1 Young people are facing rapidly changing social and economic conditions, with shifting labour markets and employment opportunities resulting in high levels of unemployment across the region. Young people are increasingly being encouraged to create their own jobs and opportunities through entrepreneurship2, which is widely regarded as a catalyst for innovation, job creation and economic well-being.3 In the short-term, entrepreneurship may be viewed as a means to address immediate poverty, while in the long-term if offers a potential solution for reducing unemployment.

Young people are broadly categorized in Africa as those aged under 35, and for the purposes of this report this threshold is utilized, although it is acknowledged that definitions are contextually variable in other regions. Across Africa, many populations demonstrate a ‘youth bulge’ which contributes to an urgent need for job creation among young people, and entrepreneurship can also have positive impacts on poverty, education and supporting innovation. Young people engage in a wide range of income-generating activities, from marketing agricultural produce or manufactured goods to offering services such as tailoring or mobile phone charging; and are considered to be adept at identifying economic niches, managing scarce resources and identifying profitable opportunities in economically constrained environments.5

Recognising the challenges facing young people in these contexts, young people are increasingly searching for opportunities to create new job opportunities and become entrepreneurs, and are often moving away from traditional activities such as agriculture in the process.6

The challenge is to capture and capitalize on the many strengths and skills of these youth within the sector. Targeting smallholder farmers across four countries, the STARS program seeks to encourage and support groups including women and young people to engage both individually and through Producer Organisations as agricultural producers, processers, and traders, and recognizes the added value young people can offer in terms of education, innovation, and dynamism.

The business case for youth

- In 2017, it was estimated that 70.9 million young people are unemployed globally, and this number has been growing for the past 20 years;7
- Young people’s unemployment rates are two to three times higher than among other segments of the population;7
- Young people are becoming increasingly economically marginalized, and the resultant idleness and frustration may result in increasing involvement in criminal and anti-social activities;7
- According to a 2015 GEM report, youth in the sub-Saharan African region are most likely to have received business training at school (although quality is variable), and they also have the highest levels of perceived entrepreneurial competence, but lack confidence and opportunities to utilize their skills;8
- Young women are disadvantaged by both their age and gender, although there is no significant difference in exposure to business training at school8.
- The proportion of youth “neither in employment nor in education or training” globally is 21.8%; 76.9% of which are female.9
- The bulk of international migrant flows consists of young people – around 70% are younger than 30.9
- Between now and 2030, 25.6 million young workers aged 15–29 will enter the labour force and will need jobs. This increase in the youth labour force will occur almost entirely in Africa.9
Challenges for youth in farming

The STARS program has identified a number of key challenges reported to face young people across Rwanda, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Senegal.

Access to land

Across all four country contexts, participating youth report that they face challenges of limited access to land. Some young people are able to inherit land and produce effectively, but for many the distribution of land within the household leaves them struggling to grow financially viable yields on the small plots of land they are allocated, and ownership of the resultant produce is sometimes appropriated by the head of household.

Access to finance

Young people reported that they are unable to access finance, largely as a consequence of their lack of assets for security on loans and also as a result of not having a credit history. This can make them more reluctant to engage in farming, as they are unable to implement new or innovative ideas which require start-up capital.

Alternative occupations

Youth are reported to prefer business opportunities offering a quicker return on investment than farming, particularly in cities, overseas and in the mining sector. Participants in Solenzo, Burkina Faso described young people as preferring to find more “sanitary” tasks, such as office work, or adventure, such as searching for gold in artisanal mines.

"In their eagerness and desire to achieve quickly, young people skip steps, they are not responsible"

Older farmer. Kelle, Senegal.

Similar issues were reported in Rwanda:

Mining is more attractive for ... youth as they feel it generates quick money. Most young people here they don't see farming as a good business because ... our land is not fertile, it requires a lot investment to procure organic manure and fertilizer to increase productivity.

Young male participant. Rutsiro, Rwanda

Case Study: Burkina Faso

Souleymane Ouedraogo is a 29-year old married father of one who is a member of Sandouané Cooperative living in Yalle, Central West region. He explains,

“I earn my income through agriculture (corn, sesame, sorghum, and beans), animal husbandry and searching for gold in artisanal mines."

Souleymane was a student in Ouagadougou but could no longer afford to pay for his schooling, so decided to become a farmer to help his family. Agriculture enables Souleymane to meet his household expenses, but he objects to the use of traditional handheld tools (particularly the daba) and comments,

“I don't like to squat down to cultivate, I don't like working with the traditional daba...”

Souleymane often goes in search of gold during the dry season in December, and returns to the fields and his family from May. He has tried bulking and selling together with other group members, but while they were stocking cereals the market prices fell and they struggled to find a buyer. Eventually, however, they were successful.

Souleymane hopes to secure a loan in future, and has asked the President of his cooperative for advice about financial institutions and how to access credit to invest in his farming. The cooperative will help him to secure a loan from a credit union, in order to rent more acreage and increase his yields.
Enablers for youth

Participants in the STARS program identified a range of strengths broadly attributed to youth, which were consistent across all four countries. They frequently described young people’s greater physical strength and energy, innovation and creativity, and superior education.

Physical strength and energy

Young people are widely regarded as strong farmers and important group members because they can do activities which require energy, endurance and physical strength, such as spraying pesticides, digging and travelling long distances to access good markets. In Burkina Faso, participants in Rallo even allocate larger plots in collective fields to young people because of their greater physical strength, although in most contexts young people report struggling to access sufficient farm land to cultivate.

Innovation and creativity

Young people were widely reported to be effective farmers and group members as a result of their innovative ideas and creativity.

“...they have innovative ideas to help others understand quickly emerging innovative ways of farming”

Male farmer, Kamonyi, Rwanda

Young people are regarded as flexible and adaptive to changes, which can be beneficial in the face of challenges such as climate change and outbreaks of pests and diseases.

Education

In Senegal, young people support POs in terms of administrative procedures and interpreting documents, and are reported to have superior education than older people.

"young people are able to learn more easily than older people, they are receptive to knowledge”.

Older participant, Solenzo, Senegal

In other country contexts, young people are not very active in POs, and some face stigma from older farmers who regard them as lacking in wisdom and impatient.

Case study: Senegal

Ismaila Ndiaye is 31 years old and single, and a member of the UGPAR Producer Organization in St Louis. He earns income from fattening livestock and horticulture; growing onion, tomatoes and cabbage. He explains what he likes about farming,

“You can solve all your needs. In 3 or 4 months you could have up to 200-300,000francs and this income allows autonomy. Moreover, we were born in a peasant environment, our parents knew only that.”

The other members of his household are all involved in agriculture and breeding, with the women also engaging in trade. However, the challenges he faces are common among young people in this community, as he explains,

We use our savings to finance our activities. We are limited but we can’t do more. Young people do not know the way to funding. We young people do not have access to information. We only hear sometimes that this or that village is financed. We don’t know how to access it. We finance our activities from our profits from previous crops... I am currently self-financing, but I know that funding will allow me to strengthen my agricultural activities. If we look closely at young people under 40 years of age, we have become more and more aware and we are returning to the land...

Ismaila considers himself a risk-taker, and has invested in inputs and a motor-pump and irrigation equipment for a small borehole. He explains,

Before we used the basins to irrigate our crops, then we had wells drilled and bought a motor pump from our profits. We installed a mini borehole which is financed by our economies too. Currently our challenge is to have a sprinkler and drip system. We rely on our resources but if the financing arrives, we will use it...

In future, Ismaila plans to install a drip-fed irrigation system and invest in solar panels, but it will be a long time before he can achieve these goals with his current levels of profit.
Overcoming challenges and leveraging enablers

Having identified both challenges and opportunities facing young smallholder farmers across the four countries, the STARS program aims to support the development of credit products which enable young people to maximize their opportunities for success. Youth can be supported through:

- **Access to land**: Recognizing young people’s restricted access to and control over land, work with young people to engage more widely in **agricultural sectors related to processing and trading**, which capitalize on their strengths and do not require access to land. Alternatively, working in groups can give more energetic young people shared access to land which elders struggle to utilize effectively.

- **Access to finance**: Both women and young people may struggle to access finance as they lack sufficient assets to provide security deposits, which can inhibit both agricultural and wider entrepreneurial opportunities. Developing **products and services which address the needs of youth** is essential to empower them to succeed.

- **Collaboration between age groups**: Promoting effective collaboration between youth and elders is reported to enhance the success of both; capitalizing on young people’s energy and innovation supported by the experience, wisdom and assets of elders.

- **Education and Innovation**: In many contexts, youth are better educated and more innovative than elders, they learn new skills more quickly and are able to engage effectively with new techniques and technologies. Young people can add value and efficiency to agricultural production and processing where they are given the opportunity to engage.

- **Role models**: Showcase successful youth to inspire and mentor others.
Darare Bekele is a 33 year old women farmer living in Chilanko Kebele of Jeldu Woreda in West Shoa. She is member of the saving and credit group organized by the NGO HUNDEE, and is planning to be member of Chilanko multipurpose cooperative in Jeldu Woreda.

Darare never went to formal school as she was forced to marry while was 14 years old. She is a divorced single mother of 5 children. She grows malt barley and potato on land she was given by her father and other land she rents, and keeps sheep and hens. Some of her children help her farm. Darare explains that was struggled after her divorce but was saved by access to a revolving credit fund through her saving and credit group. She first got an initial credit of 2000ETB and bought sheep, ingredients and materials to make local alcohol called tella. The by-products of tella serves as feed for the sheep, and she soon began receiving income from the sale of sheep and tella. Her life improved and she was able to send her children to school, and improved both her house (with corrugated iron sheets) and kitchen for preparation of tella.

Darare repaid HUNDE 500ETB every three month, and the final 500ETB was given to her as a reward for her hard work. She is also a member of Chalchise saving and credit group established by HUNDE. It’s now five years since its establishment and the group has 40 women members. The biggest learning from her life is that women can be productive even when they are divorced. Commitment and taking risk matters. She says

“We women are not committed to improving our own circumstances unless difficult situations like this are pushing us...”

She explains that in many cases, women are waiting for their husband rather than trying their own way of doing things, and encourages young women to be brave and take risks in order to succeed and support their households.

Financial credit for youth

Recognizing the distinct challenges facing youth, and the potential opportunities to be unlocked in this underserved market segment, it is essential for finance institutions to consider youth as a valuable market segment within their market analysis and in the design of credit products.

Financial services tailored to youth should:

- Recognise young people’s limited access to collateral for loans and provide alternatives to enable them to access finance;
- Where young people have limited access to agricultural land, facilitate engagement in other agriculture-related activities such as processing and trading;
- Sensitize communities to support young people’s endeavors and encourage them to engage in traditional sectors of the economy, highlighting the benefits of supporting young people’s success;
- Capitalize on the opportunities associated with young people’s higher rates of literacy and numeracy for effective business and entrepreneurship activities;
- Recognize the opportunities associated with young people’s greater mobility and adaptability, including the use of new technologies;
- Promote the inclusion of youth in group lending modalities.
Youth smallholder farmers: a crucial market segment

As producers and consumers, youth are a crucial market segment for service providers.

- **Emigration:** Young people are increasingly moving away from traditional agricultural activities in search of more accessible and lucrative opportunities in other sectors, searching for work in urban areas and sectors such as mining. Supporting young people offers great opportunities for enhancing production, processing and marketing.

- **Physical strength and energy:** Young people can offer valuable labour power in activities which require strength and stamina.

- **Education:** Youth in sub-Saharan Africa benefit from better education than other age groups, with higher rates of literacy and numeracy as well as business skills compared to older farmers.

- **Innovation:** Young people are generally regarded to be more innovative and dynamic, more responsive to new ideas and better able to engage with new technologies and implement new techniques.

**Bibliography**


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