

Youth-inclusiveness in agricultural transformation

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I would like to start by focusing on the title of the event today: **youth-inclusiveness in agricultural transformation**. At its centre we have the notion of agricultural transformation, which most observers and policy makers believe is a necessary step for Africa, and one that should be very positive for people living in rural areas. So far so good. The next element is the idea of inclusiveness, or more simply inclusion, and again, who can possibly argue with this? Inclusion is, after all, at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals, with the mantra to “leave no one behind”. Finally, we have the youth, who for a variety of reasons – including demographic change in the form of the youth bulge, un- and under- employment, and political risk -- are now firmly in the development policy and intervention spotlights.

So, it would seem at first glance that our discussion of youth-inclusiveness in agricultural transformation ought to be pretty straight forward. It’s all good – transformation is good; inclusiveness is good; and the focus on youth is good.

But is it really so simple?

What I propose to do is to reflect on some parts of this story. In doing this I am certainly **not** trying to convince you that the involvement of young people in African agriculture is not worth exploring. Rather, I want to argue that this whole area urgently needs more critical engagement on the part of those interested in policy, as well as practice. For without a more critical approach, we really do run the risk of wasting time and resources, but most importantly, wasting an opportunity to positively affect the lives of future generations of rural young people.

Let’s start by returning briefly to the notion of agricultural transformation. I believe the discourse around youth and agriculture in Africa includes two quite different visions of transformation. On the one hand there are those who take a producer’s perspective, and focus on what we might think of as **farm-level transformation** – the introduction of new technology to enhance productivity and profitability; engagement with value chains; a more “business-like” or entrepreneurial approach to farming, and so on. From this perspective, youth inclusiveness might be about skill enhancement and better access to information, access to key resources including land, technology, labour and credit, and of course access to markets.

On the other hand, there are those who focus on the transformation of the agricultural sector in the more classical sense of **structural transformation**. Here transformation would likely include consolidation of farms into larger units; significant reductions in the use of labour at farm-level; and consequently a movement of labour into off-farm and non-farm activities. From this perspective on transformation the meaning of youth inclusiveness is perhaps less clear. The barriers to entry facing new producers will be high, and there will be far fewer on-farm employment opportunities. Yes, there are likely to be new jobs in food processing, logistics, retail and catering, but where will these jobs be located? How long will they withstand the march of progress in automation and robotics? What kinds of skills will they require? And how attractive will they be to an increasingly educated population of young people?

Of course, these two visions of transformation are clearly linked, with farm-level transformation contributing to or underpinning the structural transformation of the agricultural sector. The point I want to make is that we need to be clear which of these two types of

transformation we are talking about, and specifically, whether our focus is on short-term or longer term opportunities for young people. The choice between these has critically important implications for our discussion of youth inclusiveness.

Now let's turn to some of the other aspects of this story that deserve attention.

First, what might inclusion look like? Here it might be helpful to distinguish between three different kinds of opportunities potentially associated with agricultural transformation, and that could be open to young people. Some young people might, for example, become **agricultural producers** – farmers or livestock keepers – in their own right. Others might find **productive employment** on farms, or in other formal or informal businesses associated with agriculture. Finally, still others might set themselves up as **operators** of formal or informal businesses associated with agriculture. This all sounds positive enough, but the opportunities actually available will depend very much on the characteristics of the rural area that particular young people find themselves in. Is there good access to markets? Will the local natural resources, the agro-ecology, support intensification? And just as important, is there the land, and are the other necessary resources available? This is where the ideal of inclusion confronts the more complex reality of the different positions that young people find themselves in – in terms for example of gender, age, knowledge, family background, and so on – that may enable or constrain them as they seek to exploit particular opportunities.

One assumption that underpins much current policy and intervention relating to youth and agriculture in Africa, is that it is possible to identify what are essentially “youth-specific” problems or constraints. We might consider that some problems affect multiple social groups **to some degree** – for example, men and women, young and old, locals and strangers, and so forth; other problems may also affect multiple social groups to some degree, **but may have a stronger effect on young people**. A third category would be those problems that affect young people **only** – these might be considered to be truly youth-specific. Unfortunately, this distinction is not commonly made. So, in areas where, for example, agricultural credit is not readily available to anyone, no matter what social group they are in, some programmes set out to provide credit to young people, as if the lack of credit was a youth-specific problem. I suggest that it makes no sense to try to address a structural problem – like a general lack of credit – with a youth-specific intervention. This looks like a classic example of treating a symptom instead of the root cause of the problem. Almost by definition, interventions like this will face significant sustainability challenges.

In situations where agricultural credit is available, some have concluded that a youth-specific problem exists because formal institutions like banks will not provide credit to young people who are still legally minors. This kind of thinking has been used to suggest that young people are being discriminated against, and to justify programmes that create alternative channels through which young people can access credit. It is of course true that most, if not all countries prohibit banks and other businesses from entering into binding contracts with minors – and this is simply to protect young people from exploitation.

Here the point is that we all need to be much more careful to distinguish between those cases where young people are being systematically and institutionally disadvantaged or discriminated against, from those where the simple fact of being young – and perhaps still a minor – means they are likely to have fewer assets, less status, and less access to, or claim on, productive resources.

Another aspect of discourse, policy and practice around young people and agriculture that deserves critical attention is the prominence given to entrepreneurship as the key to employment generation. What is so striking is that the term entrepreneurship is now being used to refer to activities “coincident with owning and managing a business **including any self-employment or trade activity**”. Taking this very – perhaps overly -- inclusive definition

of entrepreneurship, we can expect that most young rural “entrepreneurs” are likely to be in the informal sector, and engaged in low skill, low investment, low technology and yes, low return activities. Let’s be honest -- this does not sound much like a solution to the rural youth employment challenge. Another issue with the focus on entrepreneurship is that it puts most of the responsibility on individual initiative and agency, on the shoulders of the young people themselves, and downplays the important roles that the state, social structures and structural constraints, as well as local agro-ecology, play in circumscribing the opportunity space available to rural young people.

Now I want to turn to the ways that young people are commonly being brought into policy and programmes. Here I argue that they are rapidly becoming the newest target group for agricultural and rural development. Young people are incorporated into savings groups, offered training, provided with privileged access to technology and credit, and all the while they are conceived of as if they are individual, isolated economic agents. But nothing could be further from the truth. Young people are, for the most part, deeply embedded in, even dependent upon, networks of family and social relations. These networks both enable and constrain, but targeting and intervention strategies that ignore them, fly in the face of both the central tenets of sociology and youth studies, and the realities of rural life. The challenge is to work with young people in ways that build on, rather than ignore, these social relations and networks. If taken seriously, this will have important far reaching implications for how policy and interventions are designed, implemented and evaluated. It would be highly ironic if in our attempts to design programmes for youth inclusiveness, we exclude the social relations and networks that ground young people in their own communities. If ever a **social systems** approach was called for in development, it is now, and the work on youth and agriculture would certainly benefit from it.

A second reason to resist the pressure to define youth as the new development target group, is the associated temptation to go down the path of essentialist thinking – or believing that all young people, simply by being young, share certain characteristics. For example, it is frequently stated in policy and programme documents that young people are more innovative than other people, more willing to take risks, and quicker to try new technology than other people. The implication is that all young people share these characteristics; again, simply because they are young. While thinking along these lines may help justify a focus on young people, it is not supported by evidence, and indeed is contrary to everything that we know about the tremendous level of diversity within broadly defined social groups like youth. Essentialist thinking **never** provides a solid basis for development interventions – by the state, development organisations or the private sector.

So, where does all of this leave us?

I have tried to suggest that as we think about, plan for, and invest in youth-inclusive agricultural transformation, we need to be more critically engaged, and not just jump on the youth bandwagon. An important aim of this critical engagement should be much greater clarity as to what are the **youth specific** angles in the story of agricultural transformation.

We also need to be much more aware of how rural young people in Africa – in all their glorious diversity – are imagining and actively making their futures. For, no matter how “inclusive” they are meant to be, if policy and interventions are not aligned with the ways that young people imagine their own futures, they will stand little chance of success.

What does this mean specifically for policy? I use a framework developed by Andy Sumner and his colleagues that identifies five dimensions of policy change: change in how a policy problem is **framed**; change in the **priority** given to a policy problem; change in the **level of financial resources** devoted to a policy; change in the **content of a policy**; and finally, change in how a policy is **implemented**.

Based on what we have talked about today, it seems to me that there are opportunities for policy change, and particularly in terms of framing and content. So rather than framing the problem as “**youth inclusiveness in agricultural transformation**” we might, for example, consider a broader framing of “**inclusive rural transformations**”. This change may help dampen the temptation to deal with young people as if they are separate from the rest of rural society, and it also makes explicit that change in the agricultural sector is part and parcel of change in the broader rural economy, including, for example, rural industry.

Finally, In terms of policy content, I think there is an opportunity to be much more imaginative, in moving beyond the current default vision of a retreating state and a rural economy powered by micro-entrepreneurship and engagement with value chains. In agriculture, and every other sector, we need much, much more imagination and ambition – only then will meet our responsibility to future generations.