

# Future Farmers? Exploring Youth Aspirations for African Agriculture

**D**emographic trends point to more young people in the African population than ever before – approximately 70 percent of Africa's 1 billion people is under the age of 30. Across the continent many young people are reportedly choosing not to pursue livelihoods in agriculture, especially as farmers. If this is the case there are clear implications for the future of African agriculture, at a time of renewed government, donor and private sector investment in the sector given its links to economic growth, poverty reduction and food security.

For some, the apparent dwindling popularity of agriculture among the younger generation reflects a general trend towards de-agrarianisation in the continent and is part of bigger agricultural and rural transformations<sup>1</sup>. Others point to customary social systems, which in some countries are so oppressive or restrictive for young people (especially young men) that they would rather engage in violent conflict than conform to kinship obligations and duties to work as agricultural labourers<sup>2</sup>. Another possible explanation is that, in an increasingly globalised world with fast-evolving communication and media technology, young people in remote areas are ever more aware of urban-rural inequalities and aspire to standards of living not

typically associated with agricultural livelihoods.

But with 65 per cent of Africa's population, on average, living and working in rural areas, agriculture and the rural economy play a substantive role in the lives of many millions of young people, and will continue to do so into the future. Even when young people migrate the vast majority retain close ties with their rural 'sending' communities, and in many places agricultural activities remain a strong component of rural social customs, such as bride service. Further, the recent financial crisis has exacerbated the difficulties young people face in finding work outside the agricultural sector, with 15-24 year olds disproportionately represented among the newly unemployed.

These somewhat contrasting pictures of youth engagement in agriculture highlight the importance of understanding more fully the reasons underlying an apparent ageing of Africa's farm population. A central part of this process is to interrogate young people's aspirations and expectations for the future. Aspirations play an important role in influencing how young people make life choices, how they think and feel about themselves and their lives. The aspirations of rural youth and their formation are therefore of interest not only to the young

people themselves, their families and communities, but to all those with an interest in agricultural and rural development policy. Critically, we need to ask how the aspirations of rural youth fit with emerging visions and future models of agriculture in Africa.

## Conceptualising Youth Aspirations

Studies of young people's aspirations tend to be concentrated largely in education research, focusing on occupational and vocational aspirations. An emerging body of work on aspirations has come from studies of migration, with a focus on child and youth migration in Africa and Asia. Ways of conceptualising aspirations are rooted in different schools of thought and influence how research is framed, the kinds of assumptions made and the kinds of questions asked.

Until the 1980s there were two main theoretical approaches used to study occupational aspirations: i) 'developmental' approaches where individuals were understood to seek careers compatible with how they think about themselves; and ii) 'opportunity structure' approaches, which, assuming that few individuals fulfil their aspirations, focused on

occupational opportunities in a given context. More recent approaches combine elements of the two, recognising that aspirations develop within a set of constraints impacting on self-concepts, including gender stereotypes and personal perceptions of academic ability, and are influenced by the context of opportunities and the prestige that individuals associate with different outcomes. So investigating aspirations involves exploring the underlying mechanisms operating within an opportunity space, environment or context that create or affect aspirations and expectations and the way they play out in practice resulting in particular life choices and outcomes. In doing so, we also need to incorporate notions of well-being, quality of life and lifestyle as life goals, which impact on educational aspirations and occupational choice.

## Determinants and correlates of aspirations

Aspirations are personal and dynamic. They are formed and develop in response to different environments and circumstances. Aspirations tend to begin to be formed early in childhood and they are modified in light of new

### Box 1. Defining 'Youth'

There is no agreed definition of 'youth'. It is often understood to be the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, encompassing processes of sexual maturation and growing social and economic autonomy from parents and carers. For operational purposes, it is sometimes defined with reference to age brackets, though these vary widely (e.g. 15 to 24 years old for the United Nations and 16 to 39 year old in Kenya's PRSP). However, anthropologists and sociologists draw attention to the fact that social categories such as 'adolescents' and 'youth' are culturally and historically constructed and can change over time and place. Within one geographical location or even household, views on who is included in the youth category may be a matter for negotiation and are closely related to how young people's identities are shaped and perceived. Studies on child migrants, for example, reveal that mothers, fathers and children may each have different ideas about the kinds of work that are appropriate for the child in question, depending on factors such as their gender and position in the family and kinship networks. Similarly, in the eyes of one community a young man without the resources to marry and establish a household may remain a youth longer than another of equal age, illustrating that age alone is an inadequate descriptor. Classifying young people into different categories is therefore closely related to context-specific norms and customs, such as rites of passage and assignment of social responsibilities, as well as individual drive to acquire independence, prestige and social status.

experiences, choices and information, including an individual's awareness of their own abilities and the opportunities open to them. Several factors have been identified as closely related to aspirations, including:

- Social class, socio-economic status and income;
- Perceptions of academic ability;
- Social norms, customs and expectations, especially within kinship and peer groups;
- Social embeddedness (degree to which behaviour is influenced by and embedded in the relational, institutional and cultural contexts of a society);
- Gender, gender stereotypes and gender relations in a given context;
- Status or prestige associated with different outcomes and occupations.

Both the environment close to the individual and wider society therefore influence the formation of aspirations. Studies in the US and Australia highlight potential constraints on aspirations inherent to rural areas, including isolated, more close-knit communities with limited exposure to a broad range of experiences and role models, and fewer clear and effective transmission mechanisms for the benefits of economic growth to reach poor rural populations, such as suitable employment opportunities. These may be further reinforced by higher levels of social-embeddedness in rural areas and social pressures to maintain 'traditional' ways of living, including gender prescribed roles and responsibilities. Set against this are the 'modernising' forces of globalisation, urbanisation and migration, which bring rural youth closer to the outside world, especially via engagement in diverse labour markets and the connectivity offered by new media and technology. The interplay between these two broad sets of influences on youth aspirations and expectations is yet to be fully explored, especially in relation to the rapidly changing contexts of rural Africa.

## Youth Aspirations in relation to African Agriculture

The starting point for this policy brief is the observation that young Africans are increasingly reluctant to pursue agriculture-based livelihoods, which could have major implications for continent-wide initiatives to revitalise the agriculture sector. To date there has been little empirical research in Africa on youth aspirations, but the studies that do exist lend support to the notion that young people turn away from agriculture not simply as a result of poor economic returns or lack of access to factors of production (such as land). In Tanzania, for example, young people reportedly regard farming as a 'dirty activity' without proper facilities, while in South Africa teenage girls point to the low status ascribed to farm children compared to children living in towns and villages, as well as alcohol abuse, gossip and jealousy among farm workers and lack of privacy, boredom and social isolation on (larger scale) farms. The role of status and social norms, as well as opportunities, in the formation of youth aspirations is explored in a case study from Senegal (see Box 2). This illustrates well the need to deconstruct youth aspirations related to agriculture in order to understand the types and forms of agricultural activity they associate with both economic benefits and enhanced status and prestige. A different, though not inconsistent, picture has arisen from research in Sierra Leone and Liberia (see footnote 2), where young rural men have opted to become guerrilla fighters rather than conform to customary land and marriage laws which require them to perform agricultural work for local leaders under exploitative conditions.

## Where now for research on Africa's Future Farmers?

We need more detailed and systematic empirical research to explore the aspirations of young Africans in different social, cultural, economic and political contexts, and the implications in

## Box 2. Multiple determinants of youth aspirations and outcomes in Senegal

In the Wolof region of Senegal, different types of farming have different status and this has important implications for preferences in relation to livelihood composition. For instance, farming grain is less profitable than farming groundnuts and is generally scorned by young men, but to fulfil filial responsibilities they may resign themselves to grain farming on own-account fields rather than migrating out in search of work. When they do migrate it is usually for only one season, working as farm labourers, and this is a strategy to bring resources back to the household (including payments in kind, such as groundnut seed, which can be used for next year's crop). Importantly, this is a context in which youth options for upward mobility are limited: few have enough education for a career outside agriculture, urban economies are in decline and offer few employment opportunities, and they do not have sufficient money for migration overseas.

Source: Perry, D. (2009). Fathers, sons and the State: Discipline and punishment in a Wolof hinterland. *Cultural Anthropology*, 24 (1: 33-67).

terms of agricultural policy and rural development. This includes investigating the effect of exposure to different farming systems and access to productive resources, as well as policies of universal education and advances in communication technology. As we have seen, aspirations are situated against a time line from childhood to adulthood and are influenced by a multitude of factors; they are likely to vary markedly from one generation to the next. This has important implications in terms of the need for up-to-date empirical data and for the methodological approaches that should be used (e.g. longitudinal studies may be required). By filling the evidence gaps on youth aspirations, and their links to outcomes, we can assess the likely contribution of today's young people to future

agricultural development in Africa and identify possible and effective entry points for policy, both in terms of agriculture but also rural poverty, welfare, and rural growth more broadly.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive account of these arguments is given in Bryceson, D. and Jamal, V (1997). *Farewell to Farms: De-agrarianisation and employment in Africa*. Ashgate: Hampshire.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Richards, P (2005) *To fight or to farm? Agrarian dimensions of the Mano River conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)*. *African Affairs*, 104/417, 517-590.

### Sources

Leavy, J. and Smith, S. (2010) *Youth Aspirations, Expectations and Life Choices*. FAC Discussion Paper...

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