

Future Farmers: Youth Aspirations, Expectations and Life Choices

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Abstract

Young people constitute a high and increasing proportion of the African population, with around 70 percent of the continent's total population currently under the age of 30. Evidence suggests many young people are choosing not to pursue livelihoods in the agriculture sector, especially as farmers, which may have implications for national and international efforts to drive economic growth through investments in agriculture. An understanding of the aspirations of rural youth and the links between aspirations and career decisions will be critical if agricultural policies achieve their intended outcomes. This paper establishes the foundations for a programme of research by the Future Agricultures Consortium, based on a review of existing research on youth aspirations, expectations and life choices. It describes the dynamic processes through which aspirations are formed, shaped and influenced by economic context, social norms and customs, parental and peer influence, media, previous attainment and gender relations, and relates this to the agrarian context of sub-Saharan Africa. The paper concludes with a series of tentative hypotheses about youth aspirations, how they link to outcomes in the rural African context, and the implications for agricultural policy and practice.

1. Background

Demographic trends point to more young people in the African population than ever before – approximately 70 per cent of Africa's 1 billion people is under the age of 30 (UNECA/AUC, 2010). But across the continent an ageing of the farming population is causing concern. Continuing a long-term trend, many young people are reportedly choosing not to pursue livelihoods in the agriculture sector, especially as farmers. This story of rural youth apparently turning its back on farming forms a compelling narrative that is linked to other narratives around de-agrarianisation in rural Africa and of entrenched, high and rising youth unemployment. These are set against a backdrop of increasing government and donor interest in African agriculture, highlighting its links to economic growth, poverty reduction and food security. At the same time, processes associated with globalisation are having profound impacts on agriculture in some countries and sub-sectors.

The fall-out from the recent financial crisis makes consideration of youth issues all the more pertinent as young people have been hit particularly hard by the crisis, leading to fears of a 'lost generation' (OECD 2010). Already high unemployment rates and vulnerable employment in sub-Saharan Africa have been exacerbated by the crisis, where more than 75 per cent of the labour force is employed in the informal sector (UNECA/AUC, 2010). According to the ILO, 60 per cent of Africa's unemployed people are youth. Even before the crisis, despite average annual growth rates of 6 per cent, African economies had been characterised by 'jobless growth' with few opportunities for young people. While economic activity in Africa is expected to recover in 2010, with GDP projected to grow at an average rate of 4.3 per cent, the expected GDP growth rate is not likely to be accompanied by increased job creation (as predicted by historical trends). This means that unemployment and vulnerable

employment as well as working poverty are likely to increase (UNECA/AUC, 2010: 6). Young people are likely to remain vulnerable and marginalised.

For some, the dwindling popularity of agriculture among the younger generation reflects a general trend towards de-agrarianisation in the continent, linked to environmental degradation and reduced availability of land, economic pressures which have undermined peasant agriculture, and a realignment of rural populations' livelihood activities in response to new economic and political opportunities.² Thus, systematic shifts in the composition of rural livelihoods, as heralded by rural young people's changing aspirations, are part of bigger agricultural and rural transformations. 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.³ 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 achieve a standard of living not typically associated with agricultural livelihoods.

Nonetheless, with 65 per cent of Africa's population, on average, living and working in rural areas, two-thirds of whom work in agriculture mainly as family farmers, agriculture and the rural economy play a substantive role in the lives of many millions of young people. Even when young people migrate the vast majority retain close ties with their rural 'sending' communities. Working away may also be seen as part of the individual and household lifecycles, for example a study of rural non-household wage labour in Zimbabwe showed that 90 per cent of farm labourers on contracts were men under the age of 30 working as wage labourers, prior to the man being allocated his own land (Adams, 1991). Involvement with agricultural livelihoods is in many places a strong component of rural social customs, with young people engaging in agricultural labour through social institutions such as bride service, where a new son-in-law is required to work on his father-in-law's land (see Perry, 2000 on Senegal; IDS research on rural labour markets in Zambia found young Bemba men in remote rural areas perform bride service for the bride's father prior to receiving their own land allocation post-marriage).

Aspirations play an important role in influencing how young people make life choices, how they think and feel about themselves (Schaefer and Meece, 2009) and ultimately their life outcomes. The aspirations of rural youth and the factors contributing to their formation should therefore be of interest not only to the young people themselves, their families and communities, but to all those with an interest in agricultural and rural policy and development. How do the aspirations of rural youth fit with emerging visions and future models of agriculture in Africa?

This paper maps the research terrain relating to young people's aspirations, focusing on defining and conceptualising aspirations and expectations, and themes emerging from empirical studies focusing on the African agrarian setting. Initial, tentative, hypotheses are set out based on 'stylised facts' suggested by the literature and

situating young people's aspirations and expectations within their 'opportunity space' in the rural African agrarian context.⁴ This will form the basis for new research under the Future Farmers theme of the Future Agricultures Consortium.

2. Conceptualising Aspirations and Expectations

Social science studies of young people's aspirations tend to be concentrated largely in education research, focusing on career (occupational and vocational) aspirations. Substantial research on the aspirations of rural youth was carried out in United States during the 1960s and 1970s (see MacBrayne's 1987 review), with a resurgence of interest in this theme more recently (Bajema et al., 2002; Schaefer and Meece, 2009⁵). Similarly, there are a number of studies on the aspirations of school children in the UK, including analysis of the effects of gender, disability, and social and economic deprivation (Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Tinklin et al., 2005; Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008). There is also a somewhat dated literature on youth aspirations and educational achievement in Africa (see Nwagwu, 1976; Osuji, 1976; Owuamanam, 1982; Idowu and Dere, 1983). More recently, a strong, emerging body of work on aspirations has come from studies of migration, with a focus on child and youth migration in Africa and Asia (Del Franco 2007; Thorsen, 2007; Whitehead et al, 2007; Anarfi et al, 2005).

Ways of conceptualising aspirations are rooted in different schools of thought and influence how research is framed, the assumptions made and the questions asked. From the literature two strands are evident: concepts of aspirations that embody some component of reality - that is, what people expect to achieve; and those distinguishing hopes and dreams from expectations.⁶

In her review of the literature on rural youth in the US, MacBrayne (1987:1) defines aspiration as: "an individual's desire to obtain a status object or goal such as a particular occupation or level of education", while expectations are: "the individual's estimation of the likelihood of attaining those goals, plans, ambitions or dreams". Attainment is then described as "the behavioural realisation of the goal" (MacBrayne, 1987:1). By contrast, in a review of literature focusing on determinants of aspirations, Morrison Guterman and Akerman (2008) follow Quaglia and Cob (1996) and use a definition of aspirations that reflects the ability to set future goals while being "inspired in the present to work towards these goals" (2008: 3). This may be combined with insights from studies based on social comparison theory in sociology, which find that "people tend to compare themselves to groups with similar beliefs and abilities - thus acting to limit levels of aspiration, especially when the group is cut off from other groups" (Collier 1994:8, cited in Bajema et al, 2002: 62; see also Quaglia and Cobb, 1996).

This relates to other work highlighting a 'pragmatic' dimension to the formation of aspiration, with students' educational aspirations defined as "a set of expected, realistic educational plans... rather than a youth's idealistic goal pursuit" (Schaefer and Meece 2009:6, in a study of the role played by personal and environmental influences in educational aspirations and achievement of rural

youth in the US). This definition of aspirations originates in psychological approaches (following a social cognitive framework of development, see Bandura, 1986), based on theories of achievement motivation which recognise that people have a conscious desire to perform well and reach high standards of excellence, and so can be influenced by teachers, parents, role models and so forth (McLelland, 1961; Atkinson, 1957; Collier, 1994).

Pragmatism or rationality is also embodied in a definition of aspirations as a future goal in which an individual is willing to invest time, money and effort, based on the belief that individuals assess opportunities, constraints and risks, making efficient choices to "maximise satisfactions and minimise dissatisfactions" (Sherwood, 1989). Thus implicitly equating aspirations with expectations and taking into account the 'opportunity space'.

Furlong and Biggart (1999) note that until the 1980s, there were two main theoretical approaches to occupational aspirations: i) 'developmental' approaches where individuals are understood to seek careers compatible with their self concepts⁷; and ii) 'opportunity structure' approaches which, where it is assumed that few individuals fulfil their aspirations, so the focus shifts to the occupational opportunities in a given context. The opportunity structure itself refers to the framework of rules people are encouraged to follow in order to achieve what their culture considers to be success. Thus, opportunity is believed to be shaped by the way society or an institution is organised.⁸

More recent approaches combine elements of the 'developmental' and 'opportunity structure' approaches, suggesting a dynamic process in aspiration formation, recognising that aspirations develop within a set of constraints impacting on self concepts, including gender stereotypes and personal perceptions of academic ability, as well as being influenced by the context of opportunities and the prestige individuals associate with different outcomes. Drawing on the work of Gottfredson (1981; 1996), Armstrong and Crombie describe the main processes by which occupational aspirations form through 'circumscription' and 'compromise': "Circumscription is the process by which individuals limit their occupational aspirations to a zone of acceptable alternatives. Compromise is the process by which individuals exchange their aspirations for more realistic occupational choices from within the zone of acceptable alternatives" (2000:83).

Compromises can be either 'anticipatory' (i.e. based on their perception of being able to access an occupation) or 'experiential' (i.e. based on their experiences). Their study of adolescents lends support to Gottfredson's theory that aspects of an individual's occupational self concept incorporated earlier in their life are more central, and less likely to be compromised, than aspects that are incorporated later in the developmental cycle. For example, "individuals will compromise prestige level to maintain a desired level of gender traditionality because gender traditionality is circumscribed in an earlier developmental stage" (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000:83). This has important implications for policies and interventions which aim to address inequalities and under-achievement in particular social groups.

The discussion thus far points to the potential difficulties of separating aspirations from expectations and also of conceptualising aspirations in isolation from their determinants. Put another way, it is necessary to explore 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 to result in particular life choices and outcomes. In doing so, we also need to incorporate notions of happiness, quality of life, lifestyle and satisfaction as ultimate life goals, which impact on educational aspirations and occupational choice. This fits with a wellbeing approach which considers wellbeing as arising from i) what a person has; ii) what they are able to do with what they have and iii) how they think about what they have and are able to do (McGregor, 2007).

In Section 3 we look at the evidence on determinants and correlates of aspirations, and then further explore the relationships between aspirations, expectations and outcomes. This not only helps us to develop research hypotheses for the Future Farmers work, it will also inform the conceptual framework that we will use for the empirical studies. However, we first want to briefly set out how we intend to define 'youth', as this has important implications for our research.

2.1. Conceptualising and 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 (Bennell, 2007). For operational purposes, it is sometimes defined with reference to age brackets: the United Nations applies an age range of 15 to 24 years old for its work on youth (with under 15s being classed as 'children'), while the 2007 World Development Report 'Development: the Next Generation' expanded the range to include all people between 12 and 24 years; the Kenyan PRSP (2005) used the even more extensive range of 16 to 39 year olds to define youth.

However, anthropologists and sociologists draw attention to the fact that social categories such as 'adolescents' and 'youth' are culturally and historically constructed (Thorsen, 2007), and can change over time and from one social context to next. For example, in rural Senegal the period of adolescence is contracting – the age at which daughters are married is falling for various reasons (e.g. in order for them to gain status as the 'first wife' and to avoid the scandal of pregnancy outside marriage) and, in a context of decreasing returns to agriculture, household heads are encouraging young men to marry early and take over responsibility for the household (Perry, 2009).

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 (Thorsen, 2007). 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 (Anarfi et al. 2005; Whitehead et al.,

2007). 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 similar age, illustrating that age alone is an inadequate descriptor (Waldie, 2004). Classification of 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. It is this contextualised understanding of 'youth' that we will adopt in the Future Farmers empirical work.

Important too are discourses around young people and what it means to be a 'youth' that go beyond categorising people based on age and life stage alone. Research on young people and rural livelihoods in Uganda and Kenya highlights the preponderance of narratives placing young people as 'victims or villains': associating young people with: crime and juvenile delinquency; rebelliousness and conflict; apathy; antisocial behaviour and unemployment (Waldie, 2006). Such 'crisis narratives' are thus posited as justification of adult stewardship, as young people "are portrayed as both threatening to 'respectable citizens' and the morality of society and yet also as 'victims of society,' at risk' and in need of protection and guidance" (Waldie, 2006: 8, citing: Johnson 1993; Cunneen & White 1995; Wyn & White 1997). Research in Sierra Leone on young people and identity illustrates very well how young people are variously perceived as "a diversely represented and diversely representative group":

"When I asked, 'Who do you consider a youth?' only 10% of the respondents (mostly formally educated) gave a definition within the current government's definition (18 to 35 years). 2.7% describe youth, not in terms of numbers, but in descriptive terms as those who are in the ghettos and idle. For instance, a civil servant in Bo says, 'a youth is any man or woman active and vulnerable to temptation when idle'. A secretary said, 'anyone who considers himself or herself strong enough'. A middle-aged man in Makeni in northern Sierra Leone said 'anybody at the helm of some community activity'" (King, 2007:13)

Such narratives relate also to the tendency to view youth as a group in transition, without agency or under the agency of adults. However, young people do have agency and are also current members of society, not just citizens of the future, and are in a state of being and not just becoming.

While we are interested youth we recognise that we are dealing with a development cycle, that youth grow out of children, and that the aspirations and expectations of youth are born and take root in children. So, the factors and processes affecting aspiration formation during childhood must also be within our research interest. We cannot focus on youth – however defined – independent of children.

3. Emerging Themes

This section sets out key themes emerging from the literature on aspirations. These are not only interesting

as findings in themselves, but also in the way they open up questions for further research as well as feeding back into the conceptual framework. First, we consider determinants and correlates of aspirations - how aspirations are formed and how they develop in response and in relation to different environments, contexts and circumstances. Second, we describe relationships between aspirations and expectations, and links to outcomes, bearing in mind that aspiration formation and fulfilment can have mutually reinforcing relationships. The section concludes with important findings in relation to aspirations, expectations and outcomes of rural youth – in particular stories around the desirability of agriculture as an occupation or way of life, set within the context of aspirations research.

3.1. The formation of aspiration – determinants and correlates of aspirations

From the literature it is clear that aspirations are personal and dynamic: aspirations may mean different things to different people and they are formed and develop in response to different environments and circumstances. The formation of aspirations tends to begin early in childhood and aspirations are adapted and changed in light of new experiences, choices and information, including an individual's awareness of their own abilities and the opportunities open to them.

Social class, socio-economic status and income have been identified as correlates of aspirations, with higher levels related to higher aspirations, although these can be over-ridden by the effects of attitudes and beliefs (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008). In UK studies, social class has been found to have both direct and indirect effects on aspirations, the latter through academic attainment. For young people with a high level of confidence in their academic ability, aspirations remain high irrespective of social class (Furlong and Biggart, 1999). Similarly, young people with a high level of self belief in their ability to achieve and who attribute success to hard work rather than luck tend to have higher aspirations than their peers. Attainment and aspiration are thus mutually reinforcing and it can be difficult to state with certainty the direction of causality (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

Gender is another key determinant of aspirations, both in the form they take and how they evolve over time. Numerous studies in the UK and US have found strong gender differences in the content of occupational aspirations for girls and boys, reflecting stereotypical occupations for women and men (e.g. nurses and teachers versus skilled trades) (see for example Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Riley, 1981; Blackhurst and Auger, 2008; Kenkel and Gage, 1983). However, some studies have found girls tend to be less circumscribed by gender stereotypes than boys (Blackhurst and Auger, 2008); girls are also consistently found to have higher educational and career aspirations than boys, in spite of the reality that men continue to achieve higher occupational status, career enhancement and financial rewards (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Clearly these patterns are context specific, with outcomes in other socio-cultural settings likely to be different depending on the context of gender norms and gender relations. Central to this is the role of

gendered identity formation, as well as the influence of 'others' on the aspirations of boys and girls, and how these change through the life cycle, as discussed below.

UK studies have found that parents, mentors and peer groups also play a key role in aspiration formation, and in particular there appears to be a strong relationship between the aspiration of parents for their children and those of the children themselves (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Del Franco's work in rural Bangladesh explores this dynamic, looking at how the emphasis placed by young people on commitments to family and also their own personal complex networks of social relationships influence aspirations. Important here is the extent of conceptualisation of persons as "autonomous and individuated" (both adults and young people), setting a more 'Western' individualised conception of the self against more socially-embedded socio-cultural and economic contexts, and what this means for individuals' degree of agency. The interplay between socialisation and processes of socioeconomic change, and how they affect identity and notions of self-hood and directly feed into processes of aspiration formation and realisation, are also highlighted in this work (Del Franco, 2007).

In a similar vein, drawing on empirical work by the DFID-funded Migration Development Research Centre to analyse inter-generational relations and independent child migration, Whitehead et al. use a specific interpretation of the concept of 'inter-generational contract' which stresses that intra-household relations "may be simultaneously relations of dependence, interdependence and autonomy on different terrains" (Whitehead et al., 2007:18). Interactions between family members involve day to day bargaining and negotiations around the "long term balance of support and reciprocity" (ibid:15). The aspirations of young people will thus be framed within the implicit and explicit expectations placed upon them by family and kinship networks, which in turn are influenced by gender-based societal customs and norms. Similarly, research in the US has found 'self-efficacy beliefs', educational plans and achievement of rural young people are influenced by a strong sense of community, social support and social influences in general, intensified by relative isolation limiting access and exposure to other influences (Schaefer and Meece, 2009).

Both the environment close to the individual and the broader societal context therefore influence aspiration formation. This includes socio-cultural influences and degree of social-embeddedness⁹. Aspirations are formed against a broader, changing social context and wider changes in society. Phenomena such as financial crisis and recession, religious fundamentalism, the changing role of women, and rise of new media can therefore affect the determinants of aspirations, their relative importance, aspirations themselves and perceived barriers to achieving (occupational and social) aspirations over time (MacBrayne, 1987; Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

3.2. Fulfilment of aspirations and the role of expectations

The previous section highlighted the tendency for aspirations to be formed early in childhood but shaped and modified over time by environment and experience. In

this section we revisit the relationship between aspirations and expectations.

Early work, based on longitudinal studies in the US, found that expectations generally decline with age while aspirations remain high, begging the question: “why do young people dream dreams they never expect to fulfil?” (Boyd et al., 1984, cited in MacBrayne, 1987:135). Other studies have found youth aspirations are generally higher than their expectations, but it is aspirations that tend to decline as children mature into young adults, in response to a growing awareness of the world, its possibilities and constraints, influenced by previous choices and experience: “This decline is particularly marked for those facing multiple barriers” (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008:i). Meanwhile, the longitudinal study of 13-16 year olds occupational aspirations by Furlong and Biggart (1999) found a tendency for both aspirations and expectations to fall over time – especially for males – and for expectations to be towards much lower status jobs than those aspired to.

Certainly, as young people mature, practical issues begin increasingly to inform aspirations:

“Young people’s opportunities are often limited by the pathways that they have already taken, such as leaving education and becoming a parent ... Over time, as young people become more aware of the obstacles they face, they may lower their aspirations to meet their expectations, particularly when facing multiple barriers to success. A UK study of disadvantaged young people, for example, noted that while 14 to 17-year-olds were optimistic about getting good, well-paid jobs, their aspirations dissipated as they faced the realities of low-paid, low-skilled jobs in their later teenage years. By the time these disadvantaged young people were 18 to 21 years old, their prospects of reaching their aspirations seemed remote because of lack of qualifications and other perceived barriers” (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008:8, citing The Prince’s Trust, 2004).

Importantly, somewhat different findings emerged from early studies of African student’s aspirations and expectations. Nwagwu (1976) reports that, in spite of awareness of tight labour markets and limited economic opportunities generally, students in countries like Nigeria and Kenya maintained high aspirations and high expectations for their future employment. He relates this to the proposition that Africans tend to be very prestige conscious and keen to occupy positions which will gain them respect in their societies, as well as aspiring to the very high standards of living enjoyed by the privileged elite, corrupt governmental officials and rich businessmen. As such, African secondary students’ vocational aspirations and expectations “neither reflect the employment opportunities and the supply and demand nature of the labour market, nor the socio-economic conditions and development levels of their countries” (ibid.:115).

A more recent study with adolescent girls living on farms in South Africa (Kritzing, 2002) also found they envisaged having professional success and material wealth in the future, as well as a happy marriage and children – aspirations similar to non-rural youth,

irrespective of race and class, and suggesting they were identifying outside their historical and socio-political context. This points to the need to explore cultural variation in the development of aspirations and in the relationship between aspirations and expectations through empirical work in different contexts.

The importance of prestige in the formation and fulfilment of aspirations is illustrated very well with respect to migration where, along with economic security and social mobility, the potential for status enhancement via occupation and income can be considerable. This provides compelling reasons why agriculture, for example, may be unappealing as it may not bring status regardless of the economic outcomes (Rao, 2009). In this regard, it is important to note that aspirations are not just about economic opportunities. Degrading work, such as manual labour, performed in other locations does not affect status in the same way as when it is performed in a person’s home location, and can allow acquisition of life skills and funds for self employment and social and kinship contributions that confer higher status. Gender and inter-generational relationships have a critical influence on the acquisition of status and prestige via different occupational routes. In Bangladesh, for instance, women’s migration increases their autonomy and confidence but this, and the type of work they do in towns and cities, is not valued by older generations and therefore their families try to restrict their migration in order to retain their own status (ibid.). This example underlines the need to disentangle the multiple and sometimes contradictory influences on aspirations, including through interrogating the aspirations of parents and peers.

3.3. Aspirations and Outcomes

We now turn to the relationship between aspirations and outcomes. There are two important questions here: First, to what extent are aspirations related to eventual outcomes? And, following from this, what are the implications of the aspirations – outcomes link for current policies and practices?

Numerous studies from the US, UK and Australia point to strong relationships between young people’s educational aspirations and future educational attainment; and occupational aspirations and eventual career choices (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Capara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Rojewski, 1999 cited in Schaefer and Meece 2009; Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008). The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth, for example, suggests that intentions formed early in a young person’s secondary school career in relation to leaving or completing school significantly related to actual educational participation in later years (Khoo and Ainley, 2005). Similarly, in general parental aspirations predict children’s achievement, even after taking family background into account (Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008). However, there is also evidence to suggest an ‘aspiration-attainment gap’ – high aspirations are not necessarily associated with high outcomes.

As suggested earlier, studies from Africa indicate potential differences in correlations between aspirations and outcomes for young people living in different

socio-cultural and political conditions. For example, Kritzinger's (2002) interviews with 17-19 year olds living on South African farms indicated that the aspirations and expectations of younger girls were likely to be thwarted by their social location and broader macro-economic factors which structure their opportunities. For instance, although their parents also had high (educational) expectations for their children, they often put pressure on them (especially girls) to start working and contributing to the household. Teenage pregnancy was also a common obstacle to continued education. Similarly, Nwagwu (1976) noted the gap between high aspirations of students in Nigeria and Kenya and their actual career opportunities, given the socio-economic contexts in which they were located. Further research is required in order to investigate these relationships and explore the reasons behind divergent trends.

To our knowledge, the only longitudinal study looking at aspirations and outcomes for young people in developing countries is the Young Lives project¹⁰, an international study of childhood poverty tracking 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over a 15 year period beginning in 2000. The Young Lives research has incorporated questions related to ambition and agency within sections on 'wellbeing' and 'feelings and attitudes' in the questionnaires for 8 year olds and 12 year olds. However, the study has not yet reached the stage that the relationships between aspirations and outcomes can be explored. The next section considers findings from the aspirations work in relation to rural young people, highlighting broad themes relevant to rural sub-Saharan Africa.

3.4. Rural Youth

The bulk of the literature dedicated to the aspirations of rural youth relates to educational and occupational expectations and aspirations of rural young people in the United States. Work here spans five decades, with a strong body of studies in the 1970s and 1980s and a resurgence of interest more recently. In this more recent work, patterns emerge that provide useful entry points and hypotheses to explore in relation to rural youth, livelihoods and aspirations in sub-Saharan Africa.

First, there appears to be a tendency for rural young people's educational expectations to be lower than those of their urban counterparts (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hansen & McIntire, 1989; Sarigiani, Wilson, Petersen, & Vicary, 1990). A range of reasons are put forward for this, including supply side issues in rural education: school curricula in rural areas tend to be narrower than those in urban areas; there is a shortage of higher-qualified teachers; students have restricted access to careers advice services; resources for programmes to keep young people in school longer are limited; employment opportunities in local communities are constrained; and there are fewer professional role models (Haller & Virkler, 1993; Lapan Tucker, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003).

Higher poverty rates and lower socio-economic status in rural communities also impact on the aspirational levels of young people (Ley, Nelson, & Belyukova, 1996; Irvin, Petersen, Meece & Farmer, 2009). Research also finds young rural people can feel

conflicted between relocating to pursue opportunities (educational, occupational) elsewhere and the desire to remain close to family in their local community, where choice tends to be more restrictive (Cobb et al, 1989; Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Farmer et al., 2006; Hektner, 1995; Howley, 2006; Rojewski, 1999; Schaefer and Meece 2009). Young rural people who do prioritise being near to family tend to have overall lower levels of aspiration vis-a-vis higher education and lower levels of academic achievement more generally (Johnson et al., 2005). Research suggests that social influences on aspirations tend to be stronger in rural areas because of smaller population sizes, relative isolation and community culture (all factors inherent in most rural populations), resulting in social pressures that encourage conformity and limit student achievement regardless of aspiration and motivation to succeed (Haller & Virkler, 1993; Howell, Tung, & Wade-Harper, 1996; Quaglia and Cobb, 1996). The more isolated the community the more pronounced is this effect, linked partly to limited access to educational services, which can result in lower confidence levels in young rural people to try new experiences (Quaglia and Cobb 1996; Elliott, 1987).

Both supply side issues in education and potential constraints on aspirations, expectations and outcomes that are inherent in rural areas (such as isolated, more close-knit communities with limited exposure to a broad range of experiences and role models; fewer clear and effective transmission mechanisms for the benefits of economic growth to reach poor rural populations, such as suitable employment opportunities) are pertinent to the realities faced by rural young people in sub-Saharan Africa (see also: Lieten et al., 2007; Mulkeen, 2005). 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 are bringing 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.

3.5. Aspirations and Agriculture

The impetus for developing a stream of research on youth aspirations is the observation that young Africans are reluctant to pursue an agriculture-based livelihood, which may have implications for continent-wide initiatives to revitalise the agriculture sector. In this section we look at the (limited) literature which speaks to youth aspirations in relation to agriculture.

Using the example of Nigeria, Nwagwu (1976) illustrates students' attitudes towards farming. Despite being an agricultural country with, at the time, a strong 'back to the land' campaign by government, students expressed no desire to farm and the stated preference for any involvement in agriculture was as an agricultural officer. Farming's lack of appeal is often voiced by rural young people today: referring to Tanzania, Juma finds "Many [youth] regard farming as a 'dirty activity' due lack of

proper facilities. This has resulted to the fact that agriculture is regarded as an employer of the last resort to young people.” (Juma, 2007:2).

In South Africa, Kritzinger (2002) found that most teenage girls living on fruit farms had negative views of farm life, relating to: nature of farm work and low wages; low status ascribed to farm children compared to children living in towns and villages; alcohol abuse, gossip and jealousy among farm workers; lack of privacy, boredom and social isolation. Most want to escape farm life and improve their economic position, as well as their status.

Status plays an important part here, as highlighted in the previous section in relation to motivating factors behind realisation of aspirations. Perry (2009) refers to the status assigned to different types of farming in the Wolof region of Senegal and what this means for preferences in relation to migration. For instance, farming grain is less profitable than farming groundnuts and is generally scorned by young men, but they may resign themselves to farming grain on own-account fields rather than migrating out in order to fulfil filial responsibilities. Migration is usually for only one season, working as farm labourers, and is a strategy to bring resources back to the household (including payments in kind, such as groundnut seed, that can be used for next year’s crop) rather than to escape authoritarian rule. 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. This example illustrates well the need to deconstruct youth aspirations related to agriculture to understand the types and forms of agricultural activity they associate with both economic benefits and enhanced status and prestige.

One final point to note here relates to the role of women in agriculture. It has long been argued, and it remains at the core of much development thinking, that women perform the most substantial part of the labour on family farms, particularly for food crops. This places women at the heart of food security discourse. It is also argued that increased levels of livelihood diversification have tended to increase women’s responsibility for agricultural production, particularly in countries with high levels of male migration. Women also make up a large portion of the new labour on larger scale commercial farms growing non traditional crops (Deere, 2005; Dolan and Sorby, 2003). Collectively these developments have been referred to as the feminisation of agriculture (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006). At the same time, women have primary responsibility for domestic activities, and therefore experience an increased burden of work. Associated with this understanding is the view that women are often constrained in their access to productive resources (land, labour, capital) and agricultural inputs and services, which impacts on the scale and productivity of any own-account (i.e. non-household) farming they undertake.

While waged labour is argued to increase women’s status and control over income, such work tends to be low paid and insecure and in the case of married women can lead to an increase in intra-household conflict and violence. These factors can limit the potential for women’s

economic activity to contribute to increased economic and social autonomy (Deere, 2005; Dolan and Sutherland, 2002; Dolan and Sorby, 2003; Whitehead, 2008; all cited in Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006).

This narrative around the feminisation of agriculture is both compelling and widely accepted, and continues to hold considerable sway in policy and development circles. However, there is now a substantial body of evidence casting doubt on some of its main elements and highlighting the need for a much more nuanced analysis (e.g. Whitehead, 1994; Spring, 2000; Rao, 2006).

What is beyond doubt, however, is that the diverse social and economic roles of women in rural Africa impact on the aspirations of young people, especially girls and young women, both through their effect on the gendered formation of self concepts and on perceptions of occupational opportunity space and status.

4. Emerging Hypotheses

This review has shown that there are strong links between aspirations and expectations of young people (and their parents) and their outcomes. These are influenced by the environment close to the individual and the broader societal context, including socio-cultural factors such as gender and social-class, as well as geography. Further, occupational status is an important factor for young people in making life choices. Rural young people tend to have lower aspirations and expectations compared to their urban counterparts and this is reflected in lower levels of attainment. The relative isolation of rural communities and the tendency towards higher levels of poverty and lower socio-economic status play a significant role in this. Supply-side issues in rural education and limited rural labour markets are also important barriers both to high aspiration formation and higher levels of achievement. However, young people can often face an ‘aspiration-attainment’ gap, where there is a mismatch between what young people strive towards and what their realities (socio-cultural and economic) can offer them. Early aspirations research in Africa suggests this to be the case with young Africans (Nwagwu, 1976; Osuji, 1976; Owuamanam, 1982), a theme picked up in Kritzinger’s work in South Africa (2002), and may explain in part the apparent unpopularity of farming among the younger generation. Rural youth are certainly being brought closer to the ‘outside world’ through increased globalisation, urbanisation and migration but the interplay between these major forces and the socio-economic and cultural realities of rural life, and the impact this will have on agriculture and the rural economy, are yet to be explored in relation to aspiration formation and outcomes in the rural African setting.

The review suggests the following “stylised facts”:

- Aspirations are formed against a broader, changing social context and wider changes in society. Both the environment close to the individual and the broader societal context therefore influence aspiration formation.
- Young people’s aspirations and expectations in relation to economic outcomes are strongly related to socio-cultural influences and the degree of social-embeddedness, which can exacerbate/ perpetuate entrenched inequalities along the lines of gender,

ethnicity, class, etc depending on extent of pre-determined trajectories.

- Social influences on aspirations tend to be stronger in rural areas because of smaller population sizes, relative isolation and community culture, resulting in social pressures that encourage uniformity and limit student achievement regardless of aspiration and motivation to succeed.
- There is a tendency for rural young people's educational expectations to be lower than those of their urban counterparts.
- Higher poverty rates and lower socio-economic status in rural communities negatively impact on the aspiration levels of young people.
- Aspirations are not just about economic opportunity – status is important: agriculture is unappealing to young people because it does not bring status regardless of economic outcomes.
- African secondary students' vocational aspirations and expectations do not reflect the employment opportunities or the realities of the labour market, nor the socio-economic conditions and development levels of their countries.

These give rise to the following hypotheses:

- The aspirations of rural and urban youth in SSA are converging, and are significantly influenced by global and/or northern media, images, celebrities and so forth.
- There is an increasing gap between these aspirations and rural young people's expectations about the style of life and level of livelihood that local rural environments and economies can support.
- Young people in areas of high agricultural growth are likely to be more interested in making farming a central element of their livelihood than those living in low growth areas.
- Young people's interest in making farming an important element of their livelihood will likely be positively related to their ability to put together or gain access to the resources needed to farm on a "commercial" basis (i.e. land, credit, labour...).
- There is a fundamental tension between MDG 2 (universal primary schooling) and the desire to see young people maintain an engagement in farming. This may be particularly so for girls and young women.
- SAP-related agricultural growth and profitability dividends invested in education will only strengthen the exit of youth from agriculture.

5. Proposed Research under the Future Farmers Theme of the Future Agricultures Consortium

This review has shown that aspirations are situated against a time line from childhood to adulthood encompassing a period of youth-hood. Determinants of aspirations include, inter alia: economic context, social norms and customs, parental and peer influence, socio-economic factors, media, previous attainment, gender relations. This means the aspirations of individuals are likely to vary markedly from one generation to the next, and a longitudinal approach may be required to fully expose the linkages between aspirations and outcomes. This has important implications both for understanding

the contribution of today's young people to future agricultural development and for the methodological approach that we propose to use. To the best of our knowledge, there are no longitudinal studies with the specific intention of focusing on and capturing the links between youth aspirations and expectations and outcomes in rural sub-Saharan Africa (a small element of the Young Lives project being the exception, as discussed above). The Future Farmers theme aims to contribute to filling evidence gaps on how aspirations are formed, how they may relate to expectations, how these translate into life choices and outcomes for young people in rural areas. Following from this, we will address the following questions: what are the implications for agriculture and agriculture policy; what are possible and effective entry points for policy, both in terms of agriculture but also rural poverty, welfare, and rural growth more broadly? Is agriculture policy failing young people? How?

The first area for research is to unwrap narratives around young people in policy discourse in Africa, focusing on the core Future Agricultures Consortium countries: Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Ghana and Burkina Faso. This will involve systematic analyses of policy documents to identify dominant narratives, discourses and intervention models around young people in relation to agriculture and rural development.

Second, following from the narrative analyses, we will revisit and develop further the hypotheses set out above in preparation for primary research. Third, we will examine existing datasets (quantitative and qualitative) from within FAC as well as other aspirations or rural livelihoods research related to young people, to determine the extent to which they are suitable for the analysis of the issues identified above. To the extent that they are not a further area of research activity is to develop and test a range of instruments for uncovering information about young people's aspirations and their links to expectations and outcome in African agrarian settings.

These staging activities will allow us to develop our conceptual framework and methodology for primary field research during 2011 to map out aspirations, expectations and outcomes of young people in rural areas. This will allow more systematic examination of the hypotheses outlined above emerging from the aspirations literature and those developed through the policy narrative analysis, and in doing so enable us to address questions around the future of agriculture and agricultural policy in sub-Saharan Africa.

End Notes

¹ Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton. With thanks to Rachel Phillipson (DFID) and participants of the Future Farmers Scoping Workshop held at IDS on 26th March 2010 for comments and feedback on an earlier draft.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ We consider "opportunity space" as an individual's perception of the geographical and temporal distribution of the ensemble of opportunities available to her/him for earning a living. This builds on the idea of "action space" as set out by Painter et al. (1994).

⁵ This is part of a larger Rural High Schools Aspirations Study at the National Research Center on Rural Education Support at the University of North Carolina <http://www.nrcres.org/HSA.htm>.

⁶ The treatment of expectations in neoclassical economics relates to situations where speculation about the future is a crucial factor in determining current action, mainly through Adaptive Expectations and Rational Expectations hypotheses – based on utility maximisation. In adaptive expectations people are assumed to form their expectations based on what has happened in the past, thus, on the average, people learn by experience, slowly and predictably, with an emphasis on the 'backward' nature of expectation formation. The Rational Expectations hypothesis states that outcomes depend partly on what people expect to happen and in forming expectations people try to forecast what will actually occur using all available information, not just what has happened in the past.

"The concept of rational expectations asserts that outcomes do not differ systematically (i.e., regularly or predictably) from what people expected them to be." Contrast this with neuroscience research suggesting that emotion is not separate/ separable from logic and rational thought. If one considers the brain as a 'simplifier', then in reality humans do not weigh up pros and cons using all available information. Linked to this is emerging neuroscience research asking 'what goes on in a teenager's brain?' This suggests full maturity of the prefrontal cortex – where 'rationality' is believed to reside – does not happen until adulthood, around the age of 25 (Giedd, 2004). Research in psychology, however, repudiates this and suggests young people are indeed rational, weighing up the pros and cons, costs and benefits of decisions, but differ from adults in their estimates of the consequences of decisions (see Reyna & Farley, 2006: http://www.psychologicalscience.org/journals/index.cfm?journal=pspi&content=pi/7_1)

⁷ Self concept refers to the way one thinks about oneself. It is a multi-dimensional construct, influenced by both internal perceptions, and ones beliefs about the evaluations and perceptions of others.

⁸ Building on Merton's concept of anomie - that society sets culturally desirable goals and provides some legitimate means of obtaining them - an assumption underlying the opportunity structure approach is that because not everyone can achieve success through legitimate opportunity structures, people turn to

different (illegitimate) forms of opportunity structure. See <http://www.sociology.org.uk/p2d5n2c1.htm>.

⁹ In economic sociology, social embeddedness refers to the way people are ultimately embedded in a social society, in its relational, institutional and cultural contexts. Economic transactions and relationships are considered to be embedded in social relations and social networks rather than in abstract, idealised 'market' terms where people are atomised individuals acting to maximise their utility (see Granovetter, 1985; and Polanyi, 1944, 1957, for its roots).

¹⁰ <http://www.younglives.org.uk/>

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