

# The role of youth in agricultural intensification in Zambia

## SAIRLA Research Briefing

June 2019

### At a glance

The majority of the Zambian population depend on agriculture for all or part of their livelihoods. Smallholder farmers dominate the agriculture sector and maize is the main staple crop. Zambia has a young population and 82.1 per cent of the total population is under the age of 35. This briefing explores how and if youth are involved in processes of agricultural intensification and what challenges youth headed households face with respect to agriculture.

Surveys of youth who headed their own households were not marginalised in processes of intensification when compared with other age groups, with use of inorganic fertiliser and improved seeds generally increasing as a result of subsidies. Interview with young people within the households of older generations suggest that the primary challenge is being able to access land for farming independently.

The findings presented here are based on research carried out as part of the Afrint IV project 'Policy for Equity in African Agriculture' – a project designed to analyse patterns of smallholder intensification in Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia. The research outlines issues addressed in the Zambian youth policy, policies on agriculture and development, and explores longitudinal results on maize yields among youth headed smallholder farmers and challenges faced by dependent youth.

Longitudinal quantitative data was collected from five farming communities in Mkushi District, in Zambia's central province. Mkushi District is a predominantly rural district, with maize dominating cultivation as well as diets. Households have been followed since 2002, and revisited in 2008, 2013 and 2017. Households that left the study due to death or migration have been replaced continuously. In this way we have been able to follow the livelihoods and intensification trends in these communities over fifteen years. In 2017, quantitative data was collected from the heads of 268 households. Most youth do not head their own households, however, but live in households headed by their parents or other older relatives. Qualitative interviews have therefore been carried out with 27 youth living in such households. Our focus in this brief is on intensification in maize production, the preferred staple at the centre of many agricultural policies.

### Youth employment in Zambia

Inadequate schooling and lack of sustainable income opportunities means that young people in Zambia are no longer able to follow the expected pathway in their transition to adulthood and family formation. While urban youth face more difficulties in finding income opportunities rural youth engage in family farming while waiting for other opportunities (Locke and Lintelo, 2012).

### Youth employment in Zambia (cont)

Challenges of absorbing youth into satisfactory and sustainable employment are concerns that are placed high on the political agenda, and agriculture is perceived to play a key role in this respect. Within the agriculture sector, there is potential for employment opportunities to meet the demand of a growing and more urbanised population and changing dietary patterns.

## Findings

To address challenges related to the large youth cohort, the Zambia Government launched the National Youth Policy in 2015. This policy plays a limited role in the day-to-day life of rural youth, with agricultural policy and subsidised inputs especially being more important. Using longitudinal data from five communities in Mkushi, AFRINT IV research found that mean maize yields among youth headed smallholders has increased substantially between 2000 and 2017, but that these increases are found also in other age cohorts.

### Zambian youth policy

**Finding 1: Despite rural youth being one of the prioritised subgroups in the National Youth Policy, the themes and strategies related to rural youths are rather limited. Agricultural policies therefore have a more important day-to-day impact on youth in rural areas.** The policy recognises the large youth share of the population, the need to invest in youths and the importance of youth in national development. If given equal opportunities, youth have the potential to develop as individuals, and contribute to sustainable development. However, the large youth cohort also leads to challenges and the National Youth Policy has a strong focus on inclusion, recognising heterogeneity through targeting particular groups of youth. In total 16 target groups are identified and these include, among others, rural youth, female youth, unemployed youth, youth heading households and youth migrants.

### Zambian policies on agriculture and development

**Finding 2: Youth are targeted recipients of subsidised inputs channelled through the Farmers Input Support Program (FISP), but subsidies are accessed through youth associations, requiring formalisation and membership fees that are beyond many poor households.** Historically, two major features of the Zambian economy have shaped agricultural policy: the dual structure of agriculture, where large-scale estates co-exist with a smallholder sector and the dominant role of the mining sector and the need to provide the latter with affordable food. State involvement in both input and output markets is strong. In terms of budgetary allocations, agricultural policy has for many years been focused on providing smallholder farmers with input subsidies and more recently providing above market output prices for maize (Andersson Djurfeldt and Hillbom 2016).

### Trends in maize yields – youth heading their own households

**Finding 3: The longitudinal data from 2000-2017 indicate a 75.7% increase in mean maize yields among youth headed households (up to and including 35 years), with three seasonal average yields rising from 1175 kg/ha for 2000-2002 to 2064 kg/ha for 2015-2017.** A positive development of mean maize yields is also found among other age groups (households aged 65 and above, as well as among the age group in between these two groups). Average maize yields have therefore risen overall although they are still far below the highest yields attained in the villages, which at above 5000 kg/ha are more than double the average attained. The gap between the highest yielders and the average suggests that there is considerable room for further intensification.

**Finding 4: Data on use of chemical fertiliser and improved varieties of maize show an increase in technology use.** The share of youth headed households who used chemical fertiliser on maize increased by 13 percentage points while the share who grew improved varieties of maize increased by 33 percentage points between 2000 and 2017. Such trends are part of a general pattern of increased technology use across all age groups. Meanwhile, changes in land use and the introduction of conservation farming techniques as well as oxenization have also contributed to raising yields. Youth-headed households have benefited from intensification in maize to the same extent as other cohorts.

### Challenges for dependent youth

**Finding 5: Land is the linchpin of transitioning into adulthood and also for participating in sustainable agricultural intensification.** Having established an independent household has a strong influence on the possibility for participating in processes of agricultural intensification. Nonetheless there are variations among dependent youth related to their positionality within the household. Most youth farm with their parents and do not have an independent foothold in agriculture. A handful of unmarried men live with their widowed mothers and take on the role of the household head – their position in agriculture is equivalent to that of youth heading their own households. Others live in married couples within extended households or have been given land by their parents to farm independently.

**Finding 6: Growing pressure on land, resulting from natural population increase, immigration as well as the selling of land by parents to large-scale commercial farmers is preventing this transition.** Control over land is exercised by parents when the household lacks land, or they fear that land will be underutilised or as a way of indirectly controlling their children. Despite these obstacles, both youth who head their own households as well as youth within households demonstrate professionalism and express a strong desire to stay in agriculture.

**Finding 7: The concerns of young people in rural areas extend beyond agriculture.** In group and key informant interviews, young people expressed their anxieties largely in relation to challenges outside the agricultural sector, specifically the lack of employment opportunities for those that are educated both outside and within the villages.

## Conclusion

Unlike older adults, young people within households are not generally able to independently participate in the agricultural sector because their parents or other elder relatives control the land available to them. Our data shows that youth who head their own households have the same opportunities to participate in processes of sustainable agricultural intensification compared with other demographic groups. Youth who head their own households can be targeted as farmers, as is already occurring through subsidised inputs for instance.

Policies relating to young people living in rural areas need to look beyond the agricultural sector, by for instance, promoting skills that can be used within as well as outside the village setting. Accessing land is the key to transitioning into adulthood and setting up an independent agricultural household yet this option may not be available to youth over time as pressure on land increases. As a result, they need to find employment outside agriculture to diversify income sources.



## Further Reading

Andersson Djurfeldt and Hillbom, 2016. Pro-poor agricultural growth – Inclusion or differentiation? Village level perspectives from Zambia, *Geoforum*, Vol. 75, pp. 220-233.

Central Statistical Office, 2012. 2010 Census of Population and Housing, National Analytical Report, Central Statistical Office, Lusaka.

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Ministry of Youth and Sport, 2015. 2015 National Youth Policy – Towards a Skilled, Enlightened, Economically Empowered and Patriotic Youth Impacting Positively on National Development, Ministry of Youth and Sport, Lusaka.

## Acknowledgements

The opinions expressed in this briefing are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of SAIRLA or DFID. Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material with full acknowledgment.

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## About Afrint IV

Afrint IV – Equity and Institutions in Sustainable African Intensification – is implemented by the Department of Human Geography at Lund University in cooperation with the University of Malawi, Sokoine University of Agriculture, the University of Zambia and LUCSUS. It is supported by the Sustainable Agricultural Intensification Research and Learning in Africa programme (SAIRLA). For more information about Afrint IV see <https://sairla-africa.org/what-we-do/research/policy-for-equity-in-african-agriculture-afrint-iv>

## About SAIRLA

SAIRLA is a UK Department for International Development funded initiative that seeks to address one of the most intractable problems facing small-holder farmers in Africa – how to engage in the market economy and to deliver sustainable intensification of agriculture which avoids negative impacts on the environment. The programme is managed by WYG International Ltd and the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich. For more information visit [www.sairla-africa.org](http://www.sairla-africa.org)

