



Youth and the Rural Economy in Africa

May 2021

How do young people across Africa engage with the rural economy? And what are the implications for how they build livelihoods and futures for themselves, and for rural areas and policy?

These questions are closely linked to the broader debate about Africa's employment crisis, and specifically youth employment, which has received ever-increasing policy and public attention over the past two decades. Indeed, employment and the idea of 'decent work for all' is central to the Sustainable Development Goals to which national governments and development partners across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have publicly subscribed.

Front cover image: A young African woman in a village in Malawi.

PHOTO: © GOLERO/ISTOCK

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The interest in Africa's employment or 'missing jobs' crisis goes well beyond the spheres of economic and employment policy. In relation to young people, the discussion of the employment crisis encompasses many key areas of social policy, including education, citizenship, social protection and security.

It is fair to say that to date, policy and investment to address Africa's youth employment crisis, particularly in rural areas, have been informed more by strong and persistent narratives than by robust evidence.

Among the most important of these narratives are those which assert that:

- Africa's 'youth bulge' is a defining challenge of our time;
- Young people are leaving rural areas *en masse*;
- Young people do not want to farm, or they do want to farm but cannot access land;
- Rural areas in SSA are brimming with opportunities that young people simply do not see;
- Young people hold the key to rural transformation; and
- Young people are stuck in 'waithood', unable to attain the social markers of adulthood.

Narratives such as these are important because they set out the problem, explain why it has arisen and propose how it should be addressed. In so doing, they cut through complexity and heterogeneity, and avoid all nuance. This is why they can have such a powerful, and at times deleterious, influence on policy processes.

It is in this context that between 2017 and 2020, a consortium led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with funding from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), undertook research on young people's engagement with the rural economy in SSA. The research addressed a number of questions relating to (1) employment dynamics of young people; (2) young people's imagined futures; and (3) policy objectives and levers. The research included analysis of nationally representative household surveys from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. In addition, qualitative fieldwork was conducted in Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Uganda. Across a total of 16 study sites, the qualitative work included 64 group discussions, 416 individual interviews with young people (aged 15–33) and 92 interviews with adults. In addition to researchers from IDS, the team included personnel from the University of Sussex, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), the University of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Makerere University (Uganda), Gulu University (Uganda), the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), the National Root Crops Research Institute (Nigeria) and the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Côte d'Ivoire).

Key findings

Youth livelihood building: hard work and hazard

The broad story of contemporary rural youth in SSA that emerges from the research is one of livelihood building under severe and persistent constraints. Having been buffeted as children by forces beyond their control – including widespread poverty, parental illness or death, family break-up or civil conflict – young women and men are then let down by formal education. Educational quality is low, and many are forced to leave school early because it is simply not affordable. This is despite having worked, often from an early age, to help pay their school fees and support their households. Although many young people see it as normal to combine school and work, others recognise that this jeopardises their educational progress.

The deeply gendered rural opportunity landscapes they encounter offer few prospects for remunerative, secure or decent work, to say nothing of salaried employment. But through their own hard work and with the support of their families and social networks, they attempt to build livelihoods in contexts where infrastructure is poor and services lacking, and gendered social norms and strong social hierarchies restrict room for manoeuvre, particularly for women.

These livelihoods reflect shifting patterns of engagement with the rural economy, combining unpaid caring and domestic work with farming, non-farm wage employment and/or non-farm self-employment. The informal and seasonal nature of much of this economic activity gives rise to endemic precarity, where work is characterised by risk, limited financial reward, instability and lack of protection.

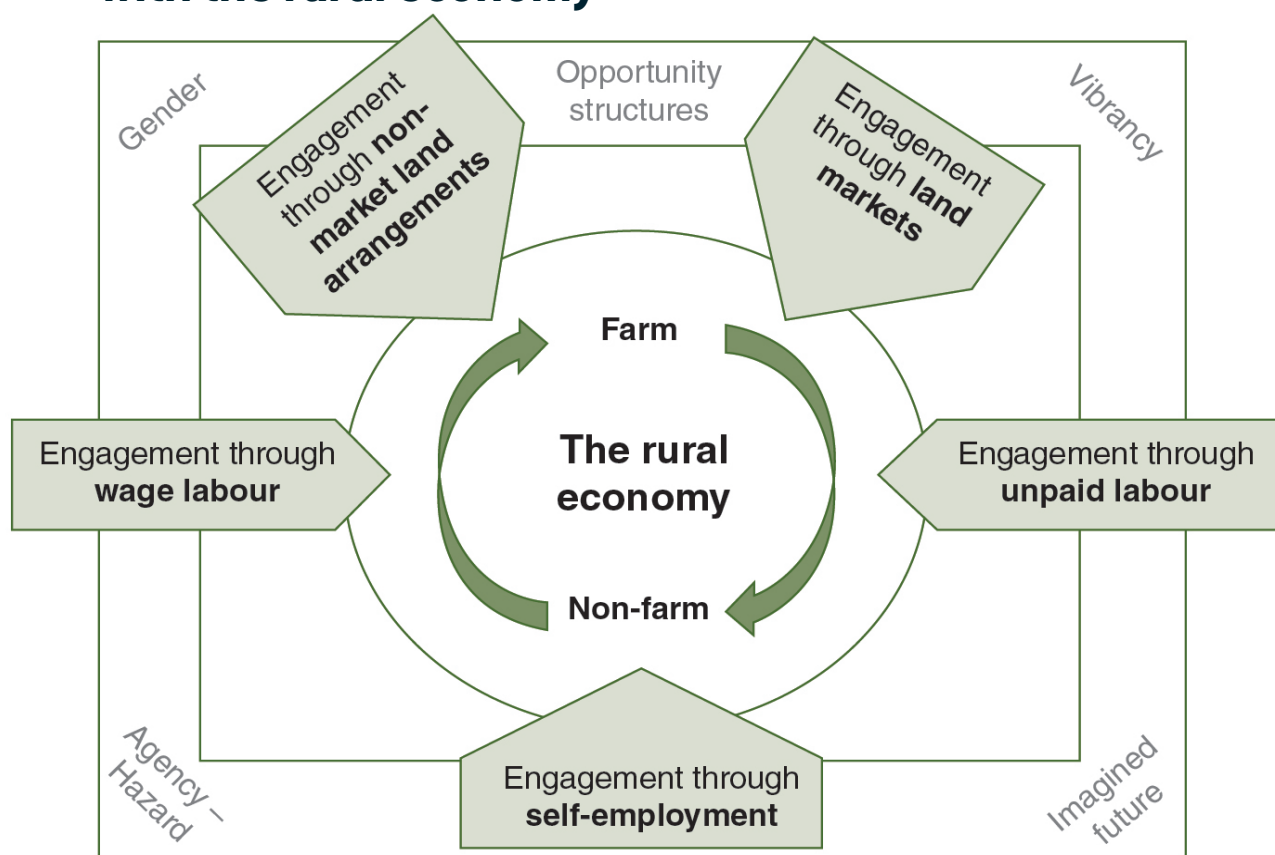
Critically, young people's livelihood building extends well beyond the labour market as they must also navigate the challenges of securing accommodation and land, furthering their own education, caring for parents and siblings, and negotiating relationships, marriage, children and citizenship.

For the vast majority of young people in the study sites, their engagement with the rural economy in the early stages of livelihood building is best characterised as hard work in the face of hazard – personal, financial and environmental.



Rural youth in sub-Saharan Africa have few prospects for remunerative, secure or decent work.

Figure 1. Five main ways that young people engage with the rural economy



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Spatial diversity and opportunity structures

However, the broad outlines of this story are not universal. There are spatial differences in opportunities, as well as socially constructed and mediated differences. The opportunities available to rural young people emerge from multiple 'opportunity structures' that act to create distinct routes into the labour force or adulthood or both. These opportunity structures reflect a web of determinants including place, family origins, gender, ethnicity, education and labour market processes.

A fundamental insight emerging from opportunity structure theory is that neither poor young people nor poor adults typically choose their jobs in any meaningful sense. This raises important questions about the preoccupation with young people's aspirations in the development literature, and with young people's individual choices and decisions in relation to work and livelihoods.

The point is certainly not that everything is predetermined, but rather that most young people in rural SSA have relatively little room for manoeuvre. Thus, while some profess a deep attachment to farming, for many others it is the obvious – and perhaps only – 'choice' that provides food security, and the opportunity to earn an income and forge a potential path to adulthood.

Depleted opportunity landscapes

Of course, diversity and opportunity structures must not be ignored, and there are many obvious variables to consider. For example, better-off young people generally have more options; women and men have different options; migrants generally have fewer options (although this depends on their networks); and areas with greater agricultural potential offer more options than those with lower potential. However, the research suggested that, apart from these obvious points, there was little indication that opportunity structures work to finely differentiate how young people engage with the rural economy.



Young people combine some farming with low-skill, low-investment, low-technology and low-return economic activities.

Within and between sites, and across an array of social variables (including gender, age and education), there are strong similarities in the ways that young people engage with and affect the rural economy. Most young people combine some farming with one or more low-skill, low-investment, low-technology and low-return economic activities. This lack of diversity in patterns of engagement with the rural economy reflects a severely depleted opportunity landscape, resulting from poor infrastructure, limited purchasing power, poor policy and other factors, as opposed to any generalised lack among young people of ambition, skill or capital. In such contexts, it is unsurprising that young people are not the innovative drivers of change in farm or non-farm economies they are often portrayed to be.

Imagined futures

The futures that young people imagine for themselves usually involve expanding their current activities or diversifying into others or both. They often include larger-scale, more modern agriculture. In many of these imagined futures, young people are farming and running their businesses as managers of hired labour. Relatively few see themselves as 'full-time farmers'.

Many also imagine restarting or furthering their education to boost their chances of securing professional wage employment or improving their agricultural productivity. Mobility and migration also feature in many imagined futures. For some, their focus is on nearby rural towns, with the idea of maintaining a firm base in the rural economy. For others, they imagine the classic flight to large urban centres.


Some young people imagine prosperous futures, where they run (sometimes several) successful businesses or farms, or engage in white-collar professional work, and accumulate considerable material wealth and social status. But it remains to be seen how they might transform these imagined futures into reality.

Implications

Framing and discourse

Perhaps the most obvious – but also the most far-reaching – implication of this research is the urgent need to re-frame the ‘problem’ of Africa’s rural youth. We need to move away from the idea that it is ‘all about young people’ and their individual and collective deficits (such as lack of skills, lack of interest in hard work or lack of interest in education). What is required is an alternative framing that puts the economy and its inability to provide decent employment – not just for young people, but for all rural residents – centre stage.

It is also clear that mass outmigration – actual or threatened – by rural young people must no longer be a core element of policy discourse. True, some young people want to, and do, migrate. And in some locations this might have demographic significance. However, millions of young people keep one or both feet in rural areas as they progress through life in pursuit of better livelihood and educational opportunities, and social status.


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Policy Briefing

Youth and Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa: Time to Reset Policy

Agriculture is widely promoted as the only economic sector capable of providing employment to the millions of rural Africans entering the labour market in the coming decades. Two competing visions vie for attention. The first is of innovative, entrepreneurial youth driving rural transformation; the second is of agriculture providing young people with little more than survival opportunities. Between these two visions are the young people themselves, actively building their livelihoods, which most often include some engagement with agriculture. Policy interventions need to better consider how young people engage with the rural economy and how they imagine their futures.

Key messages

- Many if not most of the more than 130 million young people in sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in agriculture to a greater or lesser extent.
- This engagement takes many forms, and is most often other economic and domestic activities.
- While commercialisation of agricultural produce is common, there is little sign of widespread engagement with agriculture as a means of livelihood.
- While many young people see continued and often increased engagement in agriculture in the future, they tend to do so as managers of agricultural labour, with farming being of form and non-farm activities.
- More realistic framing, and spatially and socially differentiated analysis, will be key to more successful policy interventions.

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Policy Briefing

Are Young People in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa Caught in Waitthood?

The idea that large numbers of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are stuck in waitthood – trapped between childhood and adulthood – dominates international development policy discourse. The belief is that because there are no jobs, young people cannot attain social markers of adulthood. Waitthood has proved itself to be a very attractive way to frame debates and promote youth employment interventions. But research challenges two aspects of the waitthood story: that young people are inactive, and that work is the only route into adulthood. Caution and nuance are required to prevent waitthood becoming another catchy term that does little to improve policy.

Key messages

- Waitthood is a concept that has been used to describe a state of being that is neither childhood nor adulthood.
- It is often used to describe a state of being that is neither childhood nor adulthood.
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Policy Briefing


Youth, Land and Rural Livelihoods in Africa

Rural economic transformations in Africa are generating new opportunities to engage with agricultural value chains. However, many young people are said to be locked out of such opportunities because of limited access to farmland, which pushes them out of agriculture and rural areas, and/or hinders their autonomy. This framing of the ‘land problem’ imperfectly reflects rural young people’s livelihoods in much of sub-Saharan Africa, and therefore does not provide a solid basis for policy. Policy-relevant discussions must consider the diversity of rural contexts, broader land dynamics and more nuanced depictions of youth engagement with the rural economy.

Key messages

- More young people from rural areas will continue to be involved in agriculture. However, it is harder than for older generations to access land, and to secure access to land.
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Jordan Chamberlin and James Sumberg


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Policy Briefing


Imagined Futures: Gaps in Support for Rural Youth in Côte d’Ivoire

Lack of employment opportunities for young people is a major concern across Africa, and involves many policy areas. In Côte d’Ivoire, the situation is challenging because of political and economic crises that have beset the country in recent decades, impacting negatively on education and accentuating job insecurity, particularly among rural youth. Tackling the problem in rural areas requires a youth-centred approach that builds long-term, well-targeted and coordinated interventions based on young people’s lived experience.

Key messages

- Young people in rural Côte d’Ivoire aspire to financial stability and social standing within their communities. Despite gender inequalities, young men and women often hope to acquire material possessions, such as houses and household items, as well as providing material support to extended families.
- Rural young people tend to be pragmatic about employment opportunities. Their plans reflect an intelligent assessment of the kind of income-generating activities they will need to pursue to support themselves and their families.
- Building on their knowledge, young people can be supported in gender-responsive ways to expand their participation in regional and global value chains by improving vocational training, access to affordable loans and cash transfers.

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Policy Briefing

Avenir imaginé : insuffisances du soutien aux jeunes en milieu rural en Côte d’Ivoire

Le manque de débouchés professionnels pour les jeunes est une préoccupation majeure en Afrique, et a un impact sur de nombreux domaines stratégiques. En Côte d’Ivoire, la situation est difficile en raison des crises politiques et économiques qui ont frappé le pays au cours des dernières décennies et qui ont eu un impact négatif sur l’éducation et l’emploi, en particulier pour la jeunesse rurale. Afin de statuer sur le problème dans les zones rurales, il faut une approche centrée sur les jeunes qui met en place des interventions à long terme, bien ciblées, coordonnées et basées sur les réalités des jeunes.

Messages clés

- Les jeunes en milieu rural de Côte d’Ivoire aspirent à la stabilité financière et à une position sociale au sein de leur communauté. Malgré l’inégalité des sexes, les jeunes, quel que soit leur sexe, souhaitent acquies des biens matériels, comme une maison et des biens domestiques, et pouvoir également apporter un soutien matériel aux membres de leur famille élargie.
- Les jeunes en milieu rural ont une vision pragmatique de leurs possibilités d’emploi. Leurs projets reflètent une évaluation réfléchie du type d’activités rémunératrices dans lesquelles ils devront s’investir pour subvenir à leurs propres besoins et à ceux de leurs familles.
- En s’appuyant sur les connaissances des jeunes, on peut renforcer leur formation professionnelle, de l’école à des petits ateliers bancaires et à des transferts d’espèces permet de les soutenir afin d’élargir leur participation dans les chaînes de valeur régionales et mondiales, tout en tenant compte de l’égalité des sexes.

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Un grand nombre de jeunes en milieu rural ont des responsabilités importantes en tant que conjoints, parents et pourvoyeurs. Ils souhaitent une vie moins précaire.

Policy Briefings present evidence-based recommendations. See Key Readings (p.11).

Policy

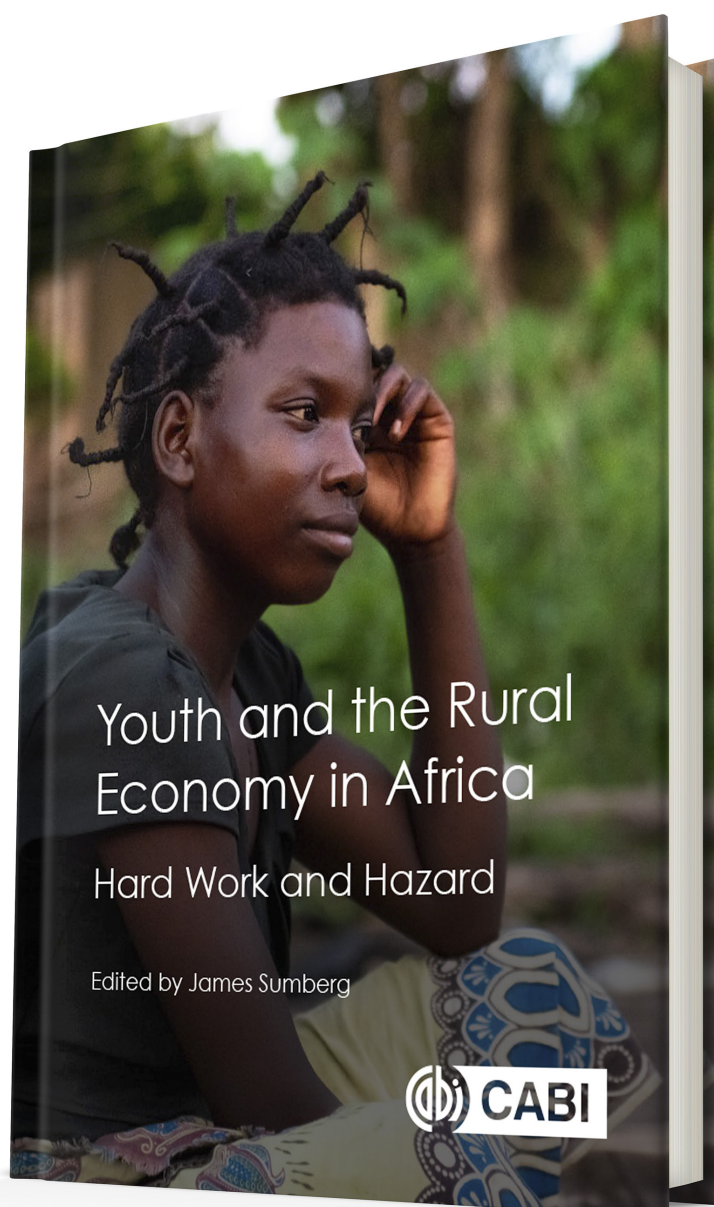
There is much room to improve education policy in rural SSA. For example, making primary and secondary education accessible to all remains an unfinished project, despite the great leap forward in primary enrolment resulting from concerted action to address the Millennium Development Goals.

There is clear demand for vocational and technical training. However, given the desire and need of many rural young people to combine further training with the demands of ongoing economic and caring activities, this must be provided in both flexible and part-time modes. More research may clarify the kinds of complementary interventions that would best enable rural young people to take advantage of existing or augmented educational resources.

The research supports calls for a root-and-branch interrogation of school curricula, with a focus on how they and the whole ecosystem around schooling valorise (or denigrate) particular kinds of work and reproduce particular gender regimes. This interrogation should also address 'vocational' fields and locally relevant knowledge(s). Attention to differences in education systems that reflect different histories would also be valuable in understanding how the skills, vocational and employability agendas might be better integrated into mainstream schooling.

This book unites qualitative and quantitative research to illuminate how young men and women engage with the rural economy and imagine their futures.

Source: © CAB International





Farming and livestock production have important places in the futures that young people imagine for themselves.

The research offers solid support for the idea that in one way or another, large numbers of rural youth engage in crop or livestock production or both, and many combine this work with other economic activities. Further, both farming and livestock production have important places in the futures that many young people imagine for themselves, even in rural areas that may be seen as less economically dynamic. However, in these futures young people do not see themselves principally as farmers or as having wholly agrarian livelihoods. Rather, theirs is often an arm's-length, managerial or executive vision of engagement, with manual work being done by hired labour and farming being one of multiple economic activities. This has important implications for key areas of agricultural policy, including training and skills, employment, agricultural extension services, and technology development and promotion.

Research

There is a need – and an opportunity – to bring a broader set of perspectives to the discussion of rural young people's livelihoods in SSA. For example, too little research, policy and public discourse, and youth-oriented development practice, engages with the large, diverse and challenging, yet highly relevant, literature from the field of youth studies.

While nationally representative household surveys provide valuable insights into the economic activities of rural young people, it is also recognised that these same household based survey instruments may not fully capture youth activities. For example, farming activities of young people may not show up reliably on household plot rosters. There are also concerns about how well path dependencies and transitions (e.g. household formation, starting to farm, school-to-work transitions and migration) are captured. Similarly, more work is needed on how data on temporally and spatially variable livelihood engagement can realistically be collected, including data on income and how labour is allocated among different activities.

A related area that deserves more attention is how insights arising from qualitative research instruments can be more creatively integrated with quantitative analyses to more effectively inform policy.

Practice

In terms of development practice, the research points to two simple guidelines. First, practitioners need to be extremely cautious about youth-specific arguments and the youth-targeted interventions that these are used to justify. While it is obviously true that ‘young people are the future’, **their** future is unlikely to improve through piecemeal interventions that support a small number for a short period of time, without shifting opportunity structures. Focusing on opportunity structures and structural conditions requires programme continuity and coordinated, national and subnational approaches.

Second, it is critical to work with, not against, the grain of family and social relations, as in most cases they allow young people to access key resources. This will also serve as a reminder that while interventions are often narrowly framed around economic activity and employment, young women and men build livelihoods and move towards social adulthood through hard work on many fronts – including caring, relationships, education, children and civic action.

Key readings

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