



Photo: Jörg Böhling

Time to act

Almost 88 per cent of the world's 1.2 billion youth aged 15–24 live in developing countries – the majority of them in rural areas. This means a large number of young people with great potential and aspirations. However, they often face many constraints to achieving decent livelihoods. One particularly daunting challenge is the limited and low-quality employment opportunities available for rural youth. If something isn't done here soon, this could have dire consequences. A call for action.

Developing countries are facing the great challenge of creating enough quality employment opportunities for new labour market entrants, particularly in rural areas. Globally, around 46 per cent of young people are rural, and in low-income countries this figure may rise to over 60 per cent. This means that in developing countries, most labour market entrants will come from rural areas in the coming years, where the agricultural sector is going to remain the backbone of the economy. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, the youth population is expected to

double to over 350 million people by 2050, which implies that around 10 to 12 million new jobs will have to be created per year in the region to absorb the new labour market entrants. Yet, only around three million formal jobs are being created annually.

■ Why is action needed?

The lack of employment opportunities for rural youth is contributing to the high levels of rural poverty. Globally, around 24 per cent of young people are considered working poor, while in Africa over 70 per cent of youth subsist on less than two US dollars per day. The lack of productive employment opportunities, services and facilities in rural areas is increasingly driving rural youth to migrate to urban areas and abroad, adding to the emerging international migration

crisis or the proliferation of slums in urban peripheries. The long-term under- and unemployment of youth is also a risk factor that can lead to civil unrest or violent extremism. As millions of young people enter the labour market, this challenging situation will continue to worsen for many countries if left unaddressed.

Population growth, urbanisation and rising incomes are increasing the demand for food, posing great challenges in terms of food security and nutrition. The ageing of farming populations makes it less likely that new technologies are adopted, which are needed to sustainably increase agricultural productivity and meet increased food demand. Therefore, the capacities of the next generation of agricultural producers need to be strengthened by engaging and empowering youth.

Peter Wobst and David Schwebel
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Rome, Italy
David.Schwebel@fao.org
Peter.Wobst@fao.org

■ What is being done?

The global trend of increased youth under- and unemployment has led many governments and international organisations to develop and support youth-targeted strategies, policies and programmes. In its Goal 8, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. Specific targets were incorporated into this goal, including on achieving full employment for young people. The United Nations (UN) has also developed an Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD) to strengthen collaboration and exchange among all relevant UN entities and other development partners to promote youth development. Similarly, under the German G20 Presidency, special emphasis has been put on creating jobs and better prospects for rural youth, including the G20 Initiative on Rural Youth Employment as part of the G20 Africa Partnership (see also pages 12–13).

At regional level, the African Union has included youth employment as a priority in several of its policy frameworks such as its Agenda 2063 and the Malabo Declaration. The region has also engaged in a wide range of initiatives towards rural youth employment, including the African Development Bank (AfDB) programme on Empowering Novel AgriBusiness-Led Employment for Youth (ENABLE Youth) and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) Rural Futures programme, with a strong focus on youth employment in rural areas. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has recently launched a Special Programme to promote youth

employment through enabling decent agriculture and agri-business jobs in Africa, building on its Integrated Country Approach (ICA) to support governments to integrate rural youth employment issues into their agriculture and rural development policies, strategies and programmes.

At national level, many countries have committed to specific youth employment objectives in their agricultural and employment policies and investment plans. Yet, much effort is still needed at the policy level to push support for rural youth employment to a scale commensurate with the magnitude of the challenge. In particular, additional nationally coordinated efforts are needed to foster policy coherence towards more youth-friendly approaches for agriculture and the development of food systems at country level.

■ What actions are needed?

The answer seems straightforward: create more and better jobs for rural youth. The challenge, however, is to achieve this in an inclusive and timely manner, as the growing labour force usually exceeds the capacities of economies to generate enough jobs, especially in rural areas. Currently, most rural youth are engaged in subsistence agriculture or low-quality wage employment. Young farmers need more access to the necessary productive resources and services

to pursue agriculture as a business, while others require adequate skills to become entrepreneurs and/or increase their employability for wage employment. A more productive and dynamic agricultural sector can then attract rural youth, who despite all obstacles often still consider agriculture a potential sector for engagement. A recent survey of 10,000 respondents aged 18–35 years in 21 African countries showed that the agriculture/food sector ranks second in terms of young people’s consideration, right after the public sector (see article on pages 14–16). It is, however, necessary to simultaneously intervene both in the demand and the supply side of rural labour markets in order to better integrate rural youth, as well as to focus on increasing the quality of farm and off-farm jobs for youth.

To increase the labour demand, larger-scale investments in agricultural and rural development should be promoted, particularly in infrastructure, energy, water, education and health. Furthermore, a favourable business environment for agribusinesses should be created through conducive policies and regulations. Rural youth face particular difficulties in accessing financial services, land and markets to start their own agribusiness. It is therefore crucial to accelerate the intergenerational transfer of land, including through loans that assist youth in acquiring land and youth-tailored land leasing arrangements. Promoting other financial products targeting youth (such as savings, credit and insurance), and start-up funding opportunities can help youth to engage in agriculture and agribusiness and access markets. In addition, the development of inclusive agri-food systems can enhance the attractiveness of farming for the younger generations and create additional jobs for youth in input supply, service provision, aggregation, processing, distribution, and marketing along agricultural value chains.



The farming population is ageing. This makes it less likely for new technologies to be adopted.

Photo: FAO/Florita Botts

To enhance the labour supply, the rural youth need access to education and training in order to develop job-relevant skills for agriculture and non-farm occupations, increasing their productivity and employability. Better educated youth are more likely to make good use of resources and adopt innovative agricultural technologies. These skills can be developed through public Technical and Vocational Education and Trainings (TVET) systems, skills development programmes such as Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools, as well as agricultural extension services. Particular attention needs to be paid to rural youth aged 15–17 who face specific challenges in accessing decent jobs by supporting their school-to-work transition through employment-oriented education (agriculture as part of the school curricula), and specialised vocational training (including for school drop-outs and low-educated under-age youth). Employment services

should also be extended to rural areas and adequately target young people, in order to provide them with job search assistance as well as agricultural and labour market information.

It is equally important to ensure that jobs for rural youth are decent. This means first that International Labour Standards are observed in rural areas, particularly the prevention of child labour in agriculture and the application of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) regulations (see article on pages 9–11). Second, that social protection coverage is extended to rural areas and includes rural youth, for example through targeted cash-for-work programmes. Third, that the engagement of rural youth in social and policy dialogue is facilitated, for example through more inclusive producers' organisations and co-operatives. And finally, that social constraints and discriminations related to gender, ethnicity, religion, disability,

etc. are removed to achieve equitable access to productive employment for all young women and men. Generally, young rural women face particular constraints in accessing productive resources and employment opportunities due to gender-biased social norms, laws and practices (see Box).

■ What is the way forward?

Many governments and development organisations are currently implementing youth employment and entrepreneurship projects, but these efforts have so far failed to reach scale, thus limiting their impact. The way forward to promoting decent rural youth employment lies in adopting integrated and co-ordinated approaches that scale up successful solutions to create sufficient jobs for youth at national level. The Nigerian Government, for example, launched a comprehensive Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme (YEAP) to create decent jobs for youth in the agriculture sector of Nigeria. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, FAO and the International Labour Organization (ILO) collaborated to design the YEAP, which provides a framework for supporting targeted State-level investments to complement and leverage on-going programmes for youth employment in agriculture.

More co-ordinated action is needed across governments, development agencies, the private sector, and NGOs in large-scale programmes. Additional efforts are needed to foster policy coherence towards more youth-friendly approaches for agriculture and the development of food systems. Large-scale public and private investments in agricultural and rural development should target rural youth and employment promotion measures. In sum, more inclusive policies complemented with targeted investments and programmes will create the enabling environment for rural youth to reach their full potential.

For references and further reading, see online version of this article at:

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Challenges for young rural women engagement in agriculture



Photo: Jörg Böthling

Agriculture remains the most important source of employment for young women in developing countries. In Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, over 60 per cent of all working women continue to work in agriculture, mainly in labour-intensive activities in small-scale farming. However, young rural women are more likely to be in poor-quality jobs and vulnerable employment than young men, largely due to the higher share of female workers in unpaid family farming.

For young rural women it is an even greater challenge to access land as they often do unpaid household work or subsist on low wages. Women own less than 5 per cent of agricultural landholdings in North Africa and Western Asia, and an average of 15 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, young rural women generally have even fewer opportunities to acquire livelihood and business skills through training. Targeted agricultural extension services that enhance access to agricultural inputs, services and markets for young rural women can increase their productivity, incomes and employment opportunities.