

“We simply can’t rely on young people being only producers of food”

Africa’s burgeoning youth population can play a key role in contributing to sustainable development. Our author argues that while young people do face barriers, agriculture holds many potential opportunities for them – including some reaching way beyond merely producing food.

By Dennis Rangi

It’s a startling statistic, but by 2050, Africa’s population is expected to double to around 2.6 billion. This creates greater pressure to feed so many mouths amid the challenges of economic, political and societal instability let alone the impacts of climate change. When one considers that in 2019, almost 60 per cent of Africa’s population was under the age of 25, making Africa the world’s youngest continent, it becomes clear that Africa’s youth holds the key to the continent’s very survival and the burden to sustain wider global development. In 2019, more than a third of the population was aged between 15 and 34. By 2100, Africa’s youth population could be equivalent to twice Europe’s entire population. According to the UN, the median age in Africa was 19.8 in 2020. Throughout the continent, Mauritius is expected to have the highest median age, 37.4, and Niger the lowest, 15.1.

However, in youthful Africa, just 56 per cent of the population is of working age, which translates to about 1.3 people of working age supporting every dependant (mostly youth) – versus a global average of two workers to every dependant. This in essence is the ‘youth bulge’, and addressing it has never been more of an urgent task.

According to the World Bank, in 2020, 14.5 per cent of 15- to 24-year olds in sub-Saharan Africa were unemployed. This is among the lowest rates globally among young people in this age bracket. But the International Labour Organization says most of them work informally, are underemployed or stay in poverty because of low wages. Quite simply, growing youth unemployment and underemployment – especially in developing countries – is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century.

Agriculture is the most important business opportunity for youths

Agriculture has long been the dominant sector in much of Africa in terms of output, employment and export earnings. Indeed, this sector is arguably the most important business opportunity for our young people to embrace. As such, any meaningful change in the continent’s future must involve agriculture.

A ‘revolution’ in agribusiness involving Africa’s youth is therefore required so that they can capitalise on the sector’s contributing around 25 per cent of the continent’s Gross Domestic Product and 70 per cent of its employment. With our support, they need to meet these challenges head on so that they can leave a lasting and sustainable legacy for their own children and their futures.



Africa’s youth are the lifeblood of the continent’s future, with a mission to help feed its growing population while mindful of increasing the productivity of crops and livelihoods sustainably and amid the challenges of political instability and climate change.

Photo: CABI

This is especially true when thinking of young people's roles in agricultural value chains. We need to take a 'two-pronged' approach to enhancing their skills not only in producing safer foods free from crop pests and diseases but also in helping to involve them as village-based advisors – giving crucial information to help increase yields. It may also be that they can combine both roles as part of a dual approach to the ever-increasing food crisis.

The time is ripe for Africa's youth to lead the technological realisation of digital agriculture – recognising this a key driver for economic development within the agricultural sector. This is particularly so in Kenya, where digital innovations have eased trading barriers in certain value chains by providing trade platforms that directly connect farmers to traders enabling them to get competitive returns on their yields. The African Centre for Women, Information and Communications Technology (ACWICT)-led Maudhui Digiiti (Digital Content) project, for example, recently assessed the access and use of digital content. This included evaluating opportunities for women and young people's employment in the digital sphere for farmers, particularly the underserved agricultural communities and organisations in Laikipia County in Central Kenya.

Youth can catalyse the realisation of digital agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa

Youth play a pivotal role in agriculture and rural transformation. One of the findings in a book recently published by the Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences – CABI – entitled *Youth and the Rural Economy in Africa* recommends a targeted technology promotion aimed at young people, most of whom are "digital natives". These youths can catalyse the realisation of digital agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa thanks to their innovativeness and fast adoption of new technologies.

One example where CABI has extensively supported agricultural production, especially amongst smallholder farmers including the youth in Africa and beyond, is the Good Seed Initiative. It ran in East Africa from 2013 to 2016 and sought to promote good production of quality of African Indigenous Vegetable (AIVs) seeds and vegetables so as to improve the income of seed producers. It also aimed to contribute to food and nutritional security of smallholder farmers and other actors in the seed and vegetable value chains of seeds.

The project enabled women and youth in Uganda and Tanzania to engage in market-driven profitable value chains that required minimum capital, capital and other factors of production. This was achieved by empowering women and youth with requisite skills for seed entrepreneurship of indigenous vegetables which continued to be in high demand.

In research conducted by CABI which focused on Zambia and Vietnam, we sought to understand the nature of youth participation and identify barriers and opportunities for youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness in Lusaka, Zambia and Vinh Phuc, Hung Yen, Dak Lak and Tien Giang in Vietnam. We found that while a majority of youth were engaged in agriculture – primarily production – few were involved in input supply, trading, transportation and the provision of advisory services. For instance, the study in Zambia found that almost all the youth (99 %) worked engaged in farm production, producing crops and animals for home consumption and local markets – yet hardly any were involved in valuable extension services.

This is where initiatives such as the CABI-led PlantwisePlus global programme can engage youth in non-formal extension services and help fill in the missing linkages within the agricultural value chain. In partnerships, through the preceding Plantwise programme, CABI has trained millions of professionals in 34 countries over ten years. This includes extension staff, agro-dealers and quarantine officers to provide improved quality services to farmers.

In Uganda, where 70 per cent of those unemployed are youths, CABI partnered with the Zirowe Agaliawamu Agri-business Training Association (ZAABTA) in Luwero district. This was to skill youths to enable them to provide various services in major agricultural and profitable value chains in the country. Implemented under PlantwisePlus, the training sought to increase the supply of safer food through enterprises driven by women and youth to meet the growing demand by consumers in rural, urban and peri-urban markets.

We believe helping to enable youth to provide services as 'village-based advisers' in this way will be an attractive option to them and call for it wholeheartedly – even if they wish to engage in this activity alongside regular farming activities.

We simply can't rely on young people being only producers of food. They may also need to be involved in ensuring the safe production of



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it in the first place and be part of a 'knowledge exchange'.

In terms of open access learning, CABI's 'plant doctor' training modules have been adopted by various academic institutions across the world. Plant doctors work at 'plant clinics' held in communities to help farmers diagnose their plant health problems and suggest remedies so that their crops can grow more successfully. In Uganda, for example, CABI's practical hands-on course on field diagnostics and plant clinic operation is giving good recommendations to farmer to students at various years of study. The course was first introduced in Makerere University, Uganda, in 2013 and is now offered by Uganda Christian University, Bukalasa Agricultural College, Busitema University and Gulu University.

We need to build our capacities and strengths in partnership to help address the 'youth bulge', and also the growing demand on youth and their role in agriculture to feed the rising population.