



Summary of the online discussion

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Youth and Agriculture in West Africa

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Background

The FSN Forum in West Africa identified youth in agriculture as a priority topic for 2014.

In collaboration with **YPARD**, the Young Professionals for agricultural development, a survey was organized to gather feedback from members on how to make agriculture more attractive for young generations in the region.

The survey was open from 12 December 2013 to 31 January 2014. Participants were invited to fill in an online questionnaire available in English and French; they could also take part by posting on the online Forum, through FAO social media and via SMS. Overall 200 responses were collected (167 to the online questionnaire).

This summary provides statistics on the responses and overview of comments received. Based on interest and reactions, further debates and exchanges on this topic may be launched throughout the year.

Summary of results

Youth, defined by the United Nations as all people between the ages of 15 and 24, represent approximately 60% of African population. As of today, the majority live in rural areas. Clearly, the way in which new generations will get involved in agriculture will influence the features of this sector in the years to come.

Despite Africa's structural transformation, with growth in income and diversification of the economy, it is likely that agriculture will continue to be the dominant sector of employment for most young people over the next few decades.

Promoting participation of young people in agriculture and harnessing their energy and innovation represents an opportunity for increasing agricultural productivity, reducing rural poverty and improving household and national food security. Against this background, the survey set out to explore actions, policies and programmes needed to attract more young people to agriculture.

“There won’t be development without youth. Young people have to be involved and finding how agriculture can be attracting for young people is the priceless solution we should seek after” (Kâ Abdoulaye, Senegal)

The main message that comes out from the survey responses is that agriculture in West Africa needs youth to be able to face the challenge of feeding a growing population and, at the same time, youth can find a range of opportunities for employment in agriculture that can be sustainable and profitable if some support is provided.

However attractiveness of agriculture to young generations is currently on the low side. Difficulties in accessing resources and funding, limited capacity building and training opportunities and marginal role of youth in producer organisations and in agriculture decision-making play a role in youth withdrawal from agriculture and nurture a negative social image of the sector. In other words, for many young people agriculture means low income, hard and old-fashioned work.

Participants to the survey stressed how West Africa has all the potential to build a thriving agriculture sector that would call attention of young workers and entrepreneurs: natural resources, opportunities offered by expanded value chains and agribusiness and the growing food demand in the region are elements that can support agriculture development and modernization.

Efforts to create enabling conditions for more young people to get involved in agriculture according to participants should focus on:

- removing constraints that limit access to credit and to resources, land in primis;
- modernization, including use of ICTs, mechanization, research;
- capacity development, including entrepreneurship and knowledge sharing.

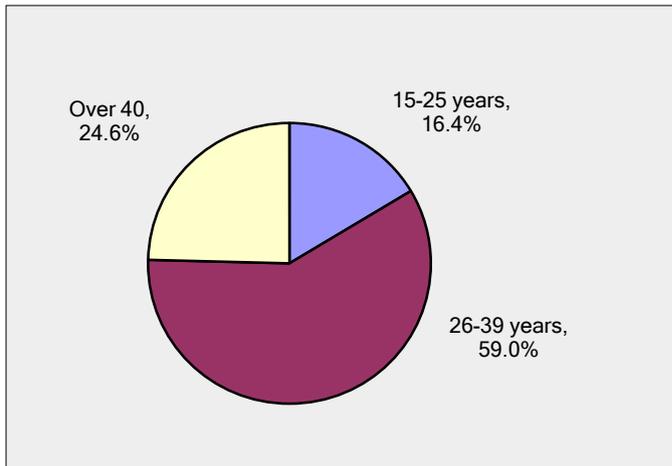
Political will and interest in promoting a renewed image of agriculture are key and initiatives do exist in the region but their scope is often very limited and they certainly need to be supported and scaled up.

Participants profile

Age

The majority of respondents to the survey (59%) were between 26 and 39 years old, followed by over 40 (25%) and between 15 and 25 (16%).

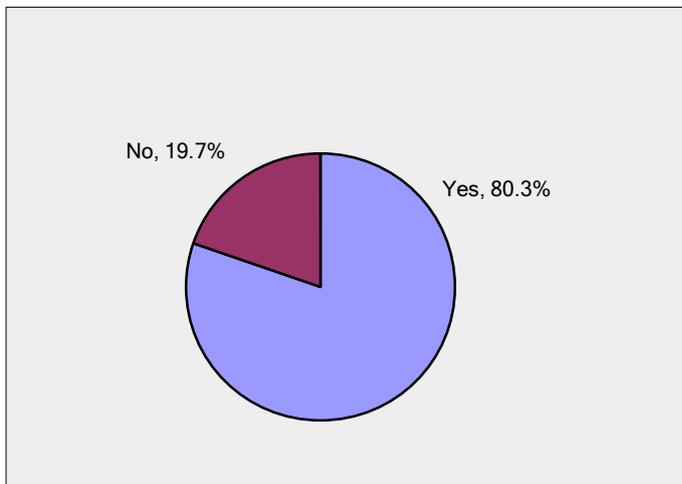
Figure 1 - What is your age?



Occupation

80% of respondents are involved in the agriculture sector.

Figure 2 - Are you involved in the agricultural sector?

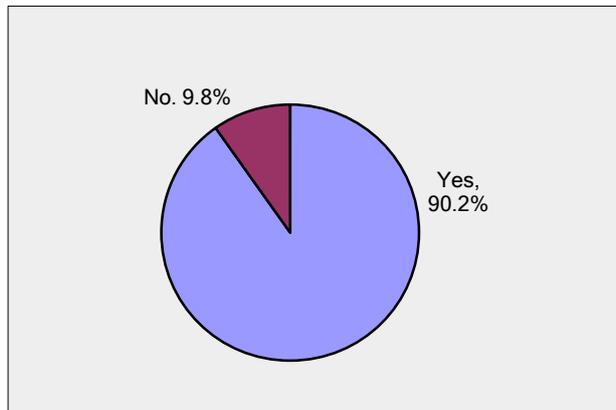


Most participants are directly or indirectly involved in agriculture. In particular, 45% are involved in farming activities, and 30% in other agriculture-related activities such as training, research, communication and awareness raising, policy and extension services.

Opportunities for youth in West Africa

According to 90% of respondents, agriculture offers opportunities for youth employment in West Africa.

Figure 3 - Are there opportunities for youth in agriculture in West Africa?



Young participants (in the age range of 15-24) were on average even more optimistic, with 95% seeing opportunities for youth in agriculture and 5% not seeing such opportunities.

Why opportunities exist

Agriculture development in West Africa offers a “double-dividend” as it supports employment opportunities and food security. Participants also highlighted that agriculture contributes to sustainable development and growth in West Africa and it’s the only way to end poverty.

“An example is my country Nigeria, with a population of over 160 million, these people have to eat every day hence if our youth can be involved in it, we won’t just create opportunities for ourselves but we would be solving a need” (Uchenna Iheukwumere, Nigeria).

According to survey participants, opportunities for youth in agriculture are based, in order of mention, on the following features of the West African socio-economic and environmental context:

- Richness in natural resources, (land and water primarily), and favorable weather conditions.
- Evolution of agriculture value chains and increase of agro-industry activities which offer diversified employment opportunities, in addition to on-farm work.
- Food needs and demand of growing population.

“There are tremendous opportunities because the land is available, the weather is favorable and the environment is good enough for agriculture” (Oladipo Owoyomi, Nigeria).

How to harness opportunities

Almost 50% of respondents provided comments on how to create the conditions for such opportunities to fully display. Many thought that there is space for youth agricultural employment to grow if agriculture is made attractive to youth thanks to a strong political vision at national and

regional level, coupled with training and support to young generations in entrepreneurship, accessing assets and financial services.

“In Africa there are plenty of opportunities in the agriculture and livestock sectors but support and assistance are needed to make sure unemployment is defeated forever. But I want to say it aloud that the only way to end poverty is to go back to land and to livestock” (Abah Codjo, Benin, original contribution in French)

“With a good vision, youth can better succeed in going towards the agricultural sector rather than to stay in payroll employment” (Isidore Kohomlan Houessinon, Benin)

A divergent opinion

A minority of participants (10% of respondents) didn't see possibilities for young generations in West Africa to find decent and interesting employment opportunities, stressing that some factors are inherent to the West African economic and political context. Indeed, limited political support, access to assets, land and markets, climate-related risk and lack of financial support place young entrepreneurs in a very difficult starting point.

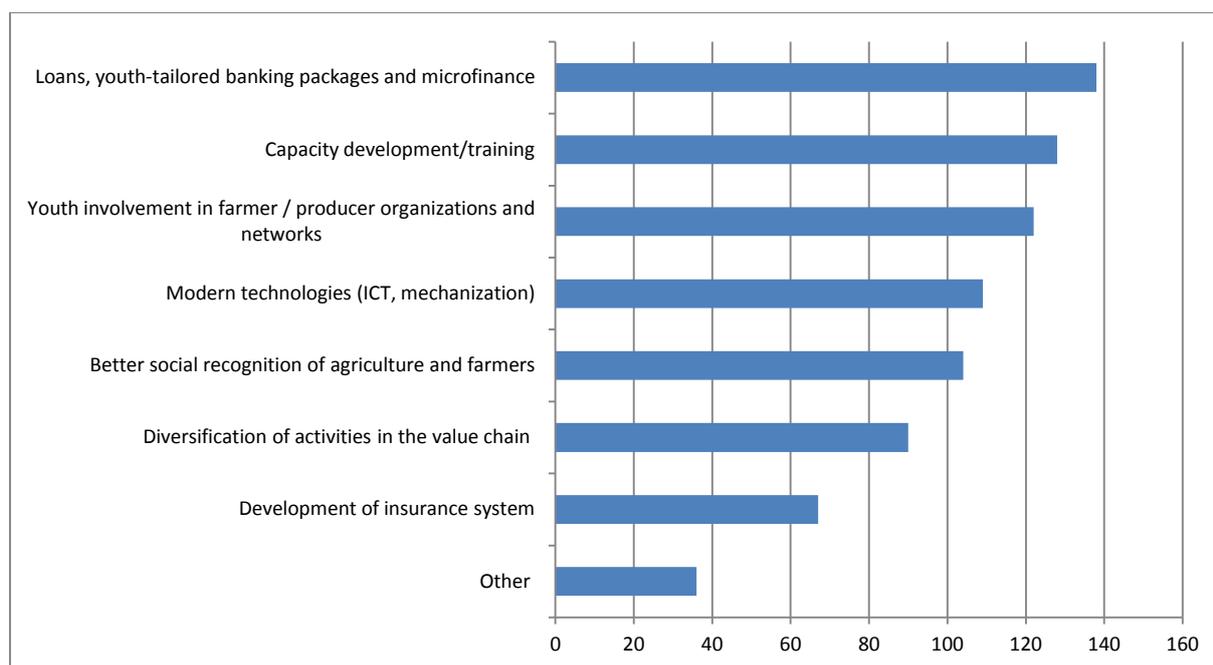
“Agriculture is the worse venture for the youth in West Africa in that there is very minimal support from both the Government and the financial institutions in the sub region for people who want to do large scale farming. The Financial institutions are only interested in buying and selling activities and wouldn't want to give any meaningful support the agriculture sector. Beside this, there is the problem of weather and market for farm output for people who want to venture into agriculture in the sub-region” (Kingsley Saforo Twumasi, Ghana)

Some disenchantment on the possibility for initiatives in support of youth involvement in agriculture and on the capacity of governments to put forward effective activities also emerged.

How can agriculture become more attractive?

Participants were invited to rank the most important conditions for agriculture to become more attractive for young generations. Loans, youth-tailored banking packages and microfinance came first, followed by capacity development and training and by use of modern technologies and ICTs.

They also stressed the need to raise awareness on the opportunities that a diversified value chain offers, the advantage for the youth of getting involved in farmers organizations, and the importance of a better social recognition of farming activities. Better access to land and insurance were also mentioned as critical for making the sector more viable.

Figure 4 - How could agriculture become more attractive for young people?

Participants further specified their perspectives on how to move forward on such conditions and added additional elements to include for achieving a youth-attractive agriculture sector.

Loans, youth-tailored banking packages and microfinance

Access to financial services received the highest number of preferences by respondents among the conditions for attracting youth employment in agriculture. Indeed, the problem of access to capital and credit affects the whole sector but is even magnified for young people.

Proposals also included combining access to financial services with technical support for young entrepreneurs. Other participants mentioned the importance of supporting innovative agriculture projects with grants, competitions and awards.

Capacity development and training – with an agro-business and value chain orientation

To equip young people in West Africa for agriculture development, schools and higher education must offer suitable training and development of skill sets that reflect the sector needs and can respond to business and employment opportunities in the agriculture value chain. Participants proposed stronger curricula from primary school to university and stressed the need for establishing linkages between training/educational institutions and private sector. Focus should be put on the agro-business and entrepreneurial spin that capacity development for agriculture needs to include; a range of activities aimed at building capacities and motivations, such as study tours, exchanges between young entrepreneurs and knowledge sharing can help in this regard. Educational institutions should stimulate potential entrepreneurs through networking opportunities and business incubators.

In general, there was a sense that training opportunities available and skills of young people are not in line with the needs of an evolving agriculture sector.

“Undertaking an agribusiness policy for youth and strengthening youth entrepreneurship as this can allow to attract youth” (Mamadou Lamine, Guinea)

“Capacity building and training is huge. Rote learning does not instil the sense of confidence youth need to go out and be entrepreneurial actors in the agricultural system” (Stacie Irwin, Ghana)

Modern technologies and ICT

Limited integration of modern technologies in agriculture in West Africa is a main reason for the sector being mostly at the level of subsistence and therefore not attracting youth.

The rapid spread of ICTs have a great potential to improve the farming sector in general, by enhancing access to market information, production techniques, new technologies and financing opportunities; further, ICT-for-Agriculture interventions are very likely to extend opportunities, motivations and capabilities of young farmers to engage in farming.

“Youths do not want to practice agriculture the way of their fathers but in a modern way, with an appropriate image that speaks to their aspiration as natives of the digital age – where the media have a great influence on perceptions and aspirations. Much can be achieved in that direction” (Raymond Enoch, Nigeria)

Diversification of activities in the value chain

Value chains offer a broader range of agriculture employment than in the past and a growing and diversified agriculture sector is likely to create new non-farm employment opportunities. Opportunities in agronomy, maintenance of farming equipment, marketing, packaging, transportation should be made better known to the youth.

“To stimulate youth’s interest in agriculture, it is necessary to make it a driving sector for development. Many think that investing in agriculture does not go beyond production. We need a real post production policy: support to market development and agriculture transformation. Market development should not be limited to realization of infrastructures such as roads to connect regions, but should be linked to agriculture industrial transformation that allows to create an effective supply chain. Encouraging agricultural processing industry requires incentive policies such as support for the promotion of local products by governments, flexible tax regimes, access to credit with low interest rates. Support to agricultural markets can also be done through institutional purchasing of food supplies for hospitals, prisons, universities, etc..” (Anonymous participant, original contribution in French)

More opportunities for youth to get involved in farmer / producer organizations and networks

Participation in farmers consortia and organization can help youth in facing constraints and strengthen their position on the market.

“Organisations such as Faso Jigi in Mali can strengthen negotiation skills of young people” (Ariel Djomakon, Benin, original contribution in French)

“There are several policies and activities: but I think young people should come together in groups at all levels especially at the grassroots, if we can get it right in our immediate environment then it is achievable on larger platform. Policies that will drive youth access to farmland, loan and tools/ machinery cannot be over emphasized” (Tosin Apiriola, Nigeria)

Better social recognition of agriculture

Several comments expanded on how to promote better social recognition of agriculture and on how to renew the image of agriculture. This of course goes hand in hand with the efforts to provide resources and assets for youth to engage in agriculture.

“I think that the young African flees the agricultural sector because of the obsolescence of methods used. He sees agriculture as something for the villagers. Therefore, we should have an awareness raising policy in place to change the mentality of youth and modernize the sector” (Kaditi Radji, Benin, original contribution in French)

Ideas shared on how to improve social recognition and image included use of celebrities, campaigns, communication on the various opportunities and jobs that exist in agriculture at large, display of examples and successful cases/stories etc.

“Communication on the richness and the diversity of agriculture employment that involves agronomic, livestock, mechanical expertise and exciting developments, as agriculture is not limited to sowing and harvesting grains or milk cows. It is necessary for young people to be aware of this” (Lesoeurs Tillier Claire, original contribution in French)

“Fashion, Entertainment, Art and Technology have gained traction in West Africa with everyone trying their hands out to make a hit off #Music. Art. Technology and co. Adding Farming/Agriculture to the mix won't be bad” (Oni Olusola, Nigeria)

Policies and investments to enable youth involvement in agriculture

The need for political will to invest in agriculture emerges as an overarching theme across the survey responses. Ultimately, it would also help minimize youth involvement into criminal activities by giving more viable opportunities.

Many additional comments can be clustered around the need for an enabling environment made of policy, investments and budget allocations and legal frameworks in support of young agriculture entrepreneurs.

“This loss of attraction for agriculture can be explained by African governments disinvestments since the 80s” (Al Hassan Cissé, Senegal, original contribution in French)

Examples of programmes and policies for youth inclusion in agriculture

A number of initiatives and programmes in support of youth involvement in agriculture already exist at national and local level in West Africa. Certainly these efforts need to be scaled-up, updated to the specific context and evolving needs and linked to other programmes to capture synergies and opportunities.

At the same time progress needs to be made on policy and regulatory frameworks.

Below are some of the programmes mentioned by participants:

- The REVA (Return to Agriculture) Plan, Senegal
- Fonds National de Promotion de l'Entreprise et de l'Emploi des Jeunes (FNPEEJ), Benin

- Ardys (Agriculture, Rural Development and Youth in the Information Society)
<http://ardyis.cta.int/>
- ACED (Action pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable), Benin
<http://www.aced-benin.org/fr/node/42>
- National Youth commission, Sierra Leone
- Songhai Project <http://b.songhai.org/index.php?lang=en>
- Grand Agricultural Offensive for Food Security (GOANA), Senegal
- Initiative 3N « les nigériens nourrissent les nigériens »

Some participants also drew attention to **YPARD**, the Young Professionals' for agricultural development, as a valuable initiative for networking and sharing knowledge among professionals in the region and beyond. AgroDev in Benin, managed by YPARD-Benin with support from ACED, was also quoted as a mean for promoting agriculture entrepreneurship
<http://agrodevbenin.wordpress.com>

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