Making agriculture attractive to young people

The recent CTA workshop on ‘facilitating next-generation ACP agriculture through youth entrepreneurship, job creation and digitalisation’ identified seven critical success factors for successful rural entrepreneurship and job creation: access by youth to investment and finance, scalable approaches and models that can be taken up, enabling policy environments for youth, agriculture that is attractive to youth, access by youth to markets, business models that work, and access to a pool of appropriate skills, capacities and knowledge and ways to grow these.

This brief by Lawrence Afere, Oluwaseun Adedeji, Varun Baker, Constance Barbour des Courieres, Lilian Mabonga, Michael Ocansey and Paul Neate suggests that agriculture can be made attractive to the next generations of young people in ACP countries. Drawing from current practice, it proposes several ways to do this, including: promoting farming in schools; having young farmers act as demonstrators and role models for other young farmers; encouraging and supporting youth champions and proactively communicating positive perceptions of agriculture as a career; seeking out and promoting attractive and profitable modern farm technologies as well as emerging opportunities along the entire value chain; and using digital technologies as entry points that match the interests of the next generation. Critical in all of this is to encourage the shift from subsistence to business, so young people see and can experience brighter futures in agri-food chains, making agriculture great again.
Introduction

‘Youth in agriculture’ is one of today’s hot topics – it seems like every development agency and initiative has activities that address this issue but most of them seem to focus on off-farm jobs. Many of them use ‘cool’ information communication technologies (ICTs) as the ‘hook’ to attract young people. All well and good; however such efforts ignore the elephant in the room. Generally, farmers are ageing – the average age of farmers in Kenya, for example, is 62 years – and fewer young people are going into farming. Even farmers are discouraging their children from going into farming, portraying it as a life of poverty and hardship. But if we don’t get young people into farming there will be no food and primary products to feed and transform next-generation agribusiness that will drive many ACP country economies.

This brief looks at some things that can be done to improve the image of agriculture, particularly farming, so it will attract young people to consider it as a career option.

In a nutshell

- Incorporate agriculture, food and nutrition in school curricula from early ages
- Engage parents, farmers and the local business community, not just students
- Promote farming as a business
- Support peer-to-peer learning
- Use the power of role models – seeing is believing
- Embrace the opportunities that technology brings to attracting young people’s interest
- Create awareness of emerging agribusiness opportunities, such as microenterprises and value-adding activities like processing and packaging.

Approaches

Catch them young

Catching people young is key to boosting young people’s interest in agriculture and food production. Programmes around the world show that including food and nutrition in school curricula from as early as primary school raises young people’s interest in agriculture and the food sector (FAO, 2018). It also feeds into improvements in both food production and nutrition, especially if parents and the local community are involved in the teaching and preparation of school meals.

School gardens and farms allow children to get their hands dirty – in the best possible way – by raising crops and livestock. A good example is Springboard’s ‘Farm to School’ initiative in Nigeria (www.farmtoschoolafrica.org). “This experience, if woven into the fabric of childhood, impacts how young people relate to school and learning, healthy food, and their community,” said Lawrence Afere, founder of Springboard (springboardnig.com). The programme trains teachers, helps schools set up school farms and gardens, and encourages the development of organic school farm markets. This ‘farm to market’ approach highlights
agriculture as a business, not as a hand-to-mouth subsistence existence, and teaches young people the knowledge and skills they need to make a success of agriculture and food production. To date, the initiative is working in five schools in Nigeria, reaching more than 2,000 students and teachers.

Such efforts can be reinforced by arranging for successful youth farmers and agripreneurs to visit schools to provide positive role models (there is also a role for these farmers in inspiring older farmers, helping change mindsets from subsistence to business-oriented).

From subsistence to business

Many smallholder farmers do not treat agriculture as a business; they keep few if any records of how much they spend on inputs and supplies, or of sales. But without such records, it is impossible to know if the business is profitable, or if an investment is worth making. Transforming the mindset of farmers from hand-to-mouth to a business orientation is challenging, but numerous experiences point to some approaches that work.

Peer-to-peer learning

One of the beneficial approaches that works is peer-to-peer learning. AgroCenta (agrocenta.com) is using this approach to promote a positive view of farming among young people in Ghana. “In the communities where we work in Ghana, the youth are mostly influenced by evidence-based learning,” said Michael Ocansey, chief technology officer of AgroCenta. “Getting them interested in agriculture meant we had to show them evidence of a successful young farmer.” AgroCenta identified a young lead farmer in the Nasia community in northern Ghana – not a new farmer, but one who was already known to his peers. The team then worked with this farmer to change his outlook. “Farmers mostly wear tattered old T-shirts and trousers with slippers or sandals,” Michael noted. “We gave him nicely branded AgroCenta overalls with wellington boots and a cap.” This new look was immediately noticed by other youth in the community. But looks alone are not sufficient – the farmer also had to be demonstrably successful as a farmer. AgroCenta helped the farmer acquire certified seeds and other inputs at subsidised prices, and a project agronomist visited him regularly and ensured he followed best farming practices. Together, this boosted his yields by 30–40% – more than enough to convince other farmers to take notice. By the end of that farming season, four other young people had adopted the practices of the demonstration farmer. Four converts is a small number but it is hoped that the number will rapidly snowball as the programme expands to other areas.

The Youth Agripreneurs team at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) is using a similar peer-to-peer learning approach to fisheries, crops and livestock production and processing along the value chain. Graduates of the IITA programme have gone on to set up and run numerous agro-enterprises in

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Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Seeing is believing**

Another approach that works uses the power of the media to challenge the mindsets of young people towards agriculture.

“Seeing is believing” is the tagline for Agribusiness TV (agribusinesstv.info), an Internet TV station that promotes innovation and success stories among young agribusiness entrepreneurs in Africa. Founded in 2016 by husband and wife team, Inoussa Maiga and Nawsheen Hosenally, Agribusiness TV aims to make the agricultural sector more attractive to young people by showcasing success stories and innovations through the medium of video. The site has channels covering production, value-addition, green jobs, technology and services, and nutrition, with nearly 120 videos from 12 African countries so far, and more in the pipeline. The videos are designed to be viewed on mobile phones, the main tool used by young people in Africa to access the Internet. The station also uses Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram to promote and share its videos. Agribusiness TV’s videos have been viewed millions of times, inspiring a new generation of agribusiness entrepreneurs. Those who have featured in the videos have found new opportunities, including invitations to participate in policy debates and approaches from other businesses interested in their products.

USTADI (www.ustadi.org), a capacity development facility in Kenya, has also succeeded in promoting awareness of agriculture as an attractive career sector by building the technical skills and business knowledge of young people and raising the profiles of successful farmers and enterprises as role models. For example, a project supported by USTADI in Busia county, western Kenya, tripled the productivity of local chicken farmers through training in both practical agricultural skills and business skills. A demonstration farm created a focal point for interest in the project as well as providing peer-to-peer learning opportunities and generating a profit. This transformed young people’s perception of chicken farming from a subsistence-type backyard activity to a professional, profitable business.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been using ‘youth champions’ to raise the profile of agriculture and inspire other young people to engage with the agricultural sector. In Uganda, for example, the programme identified 25 young people who were already innovating in the agricultural sector and provided them with training and mentoring to help them further develop their enterprises. These champions took part in radio shows and other events, including the National Agricultural Show, acting as role models for prospective young farmers and agripreneurs.

Other approaches that help promote awareness of agriculture as a business and career opportunity include engaging with

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Show how ICTs can bring profits home to farmers

Today’s youngsters are increasingly tech-savvy, with a ready interest in how ICTs can help raise incomes. They offer opportunities to connect farmers more directly to markets, giving them information on prices and demand that was once the preserve of the much-maligned ‘middleman’. Technologies such as blockchain, for example, allow produce to be traced all the way from the farm to the consumer. This allows companies like The Little Coffee and Bean Company, which provides great coffee direct from farmers, to make sure that profits are shared more equitably along the value chain and consumers to make ethical choices about what they buy and from whom.

‘Partnerships’ between tech-savvy younger members of farm families and their ageing parents – today’s farmers – are an entry point to engage youth in farming. The younger generation can help their parents adopt and benefit from new information technologies, placing farms on a more-business-oriented footing, while at the same time gaining a knowledge and appreciation of farming as a potentially profitable and satisfying way of life.

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mainstream media to share success stories, radio and TV ‘soaps’ about agriculture such as Shamba Shape Up in Kenya, school visits by successful farmers and agripreneurs, and targeted promotion of investor success stories in the financial media to encourage farmers and investors.
Emerging technologies are another entry point to engage young people in the running of farms. Field sensors are now available that monitor everything from soil moisture and crop cover to levels of soil nutrients, while drones can spot pest and disease outbreaks before the human eye can pick them up. It will not be long before there are robotic weeders and small, automated farm machines that will take away much of the drudgery of small-scale farming. Now is the time to alert young people to these possibilities and get them involved in developing the farms of the future.

**Embrace opportunities that technology brings**

Beyond ICTs, other new developments in agricultural technology, such as hydroponics, aquaponics and vertical farming, are creating opportunities to engage young people in producing food in ways that are more attractive.

Urban farming with high-value, short-season crops like lettuce, tomatoes and herbs and spices is well matched with the aspirations of young people to see a quick result from their efforts. The close proximity to markets helps get these perishable products to the consumer quickly and reduces the number of intermediaries in the value chain so farmers retain a greater share of the selling price of their products.

In Nigeria, for example, PS Nutrac ([https://www.psnutrac.org/](https://www.psnutrac.org/)) has tested aeroponics – growing plants with their roots in the air, not in soil – on more than 200 crops. The system needs little land, produces crops quickly and cleanly year round, and reduces water use by up to 95%.

These are exciting, clean and quick-return opportunities that offer attractive opportunities to our young people.

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Not just fields

Too often, the image of farming is the end-to-end production of staple crops and livestock, often as hand-to-mouth subsistence farming. But agriculture is not a uniform, monolithic enterprise.

There are many micro-enterprises within agriculture, especially as farming becomes more commercial. For example, as poultry farming becomes more popular, there are opportunities for producing feed, running hatcheries to provide farmers with day-old chicks, for processing bird carcasses and the like. Small-scale nurseries can produce vegetable and tree seedlings for sale to farmers, and specialist growers can produce the seeds of crops that small-scale farmers need for planting.

At the other end of primary production, there is a world of opportunities in processing and adding value to harvests, from flour milling and brewing to juice making from fruits, transforming cocoa into chocolate, tomatoes into puree and so on. Agribusiness also offers a number of opportunities for youth to provide services ranging from logistics, innovative financing, aggregation, communication, packaging and branding to providing market information and linkages and lots more.

A recent report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) highlighted the benefits of engaging young people in market studies in the agricultural sector so that they can identify activities that they could see themselves doing and that they see as possible business opportunities.

In conclusion

Challenging the mindset of youth that agriculture is a life of toil, hardship and poverty is not easy, but it can be done – and must be done to secure our future food security. By catching children young and showing them the potential of agriculture as a challenging but rewarding business, we can bring a new generation to the farms. But we also have to engage with current farmers to change their mindset from one of subsistence and hand-to-mouth existence and build a sense of professionalism around agriculture. We have the tools to do this, especially media and social media. Now, we have to tell the stories that make agriculture great again.
References


This brief was created through a CTA-led process to document and share actionable knowledge on ‘what works’ for ACP agriculture. It capitalises on the insights, lessons and experiences of practitioners to inform and guide the implementation of agriculture for development projects.

A series of video recordings with participants gives personal perspectives on the issues raised during the workshop. See: https://bit.ly/2FROq7r

The products of the workshop can be found and downloaded at: https://bit.ly/2sRaSVH

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