

Exploring How Land Inheritance Shapes Youth Migration and Work Choices in Rural Nigeria

Mulubrhan Amare, Kwaw S. Andam, George Mavrotas, and Adebayo Ogunniyi

P olicymakers in Nigeria and other countries in Africa south of the Sahara (SSA) are relying on agriculture to generate employment for the growing youth population. However, there is concern that youth engagement in agricultural production is declining in favor of other economic activities. “Rural-urban-rural” migration occurs mainly during intercrop intervals, as the cyclical nature of crop-related activities prompts African youth to seek more economic stability from nonagricultural employment during the off season (Yeboah and Jayne 2018). While comprehensive data on youth’s departure from Nigeria’s agriculture sector remain elusive, various studies indicate a heightened exit rate, particularly post-discovery of oil resources, and a notable 63 percent reduction in the time Nigerian youth spend in farming activities compared to adults (UNECA 2017). In general, discourse on youth unemployment, with specific pertinence to Africa, underscores the pivotal role of different economic structural transformations that are hindering the formation of “quality” employment opportunities (McMillan, Rodrik, and Verduzco-Gallo 2014).

The majority of youth in SSA reside in rural zones, where agriculture is still the main livelihood (Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson 2013). In regions lacking a robust land market, with limited credit availability and few large farms offering on-farm wage work, land access is the pivotal determinant of whether rural youth embrace an agricultural livelihood or choose migration (Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson 2013). Given the significant share of agriculture and natural resources in gross domestic

KEY FINDINGS

- Among youth, expected land inheritance significantly reduces long-distance and rural-to-urban migration but has only a minor impact on temporary migration. These effects are more pronounced among older and less educated youth.
- Greater expected land inheritance reduces the likelihood of youth engagement in the nonagriculture sector by increasing the probability of staying in agriculture or pursuing both farming and nonfarm activities. This pattern is stronger for less-educated rural-to-urban migrants.
- Older youth and those who are less educated are more likely to respond to different levels of land market development and urbanization.

KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As the interplay between land inheritance and youth’s migration and employment choices is nuanced – contingent on age, gender, and skill levels – targeted strategies could address the diverse needs of youth across various demographic strata by, for example:

- Fostering access to land and enhancing skills useful in multiple sectors to promote employment opportunities for youth and facilitate their gradual movement across sectors.
- Promoting education and skills development to address the specific challenges faced by less educated youth in regions where land inheritance is common.
- Promoting longer land lease durations to address land scarcity.
- Accounting for the quality and suitability of land when addressing youth migration and employment, to reflect the evolving landscape of agriculture and entrepreneurship.
- Developing context-sensitive interventions to empower youth with more informed and effective pathways for advancement.

product, national sustenance, employment, and exports, land plays a central role in social, political, and economic spheres across the continent (Toulmin 2009), including in Nigeria (Edeh, Mavrotas, and Balana 2022).

This brief summarizes a recent study on the influence of expected land inheritance on youth migration and employment in Nigeria (Amare et al. 2023), including data, methods, and three key findings. Based on the study findings, we provide some recommendations that could contribute to the policy goals of the Government of Nigeria. Nigeria's new administration under President Bola Tinubu has outlined an ambitious eight-point development agenda that includes enhancing food security, eradicating poverty, and creating jobs for youth. The agriculture sector, as the largest employer of rural young men and women in Nigeria, offers the best means of achieving these goals. We argue here that to attract youth to agriculture, government policies must also address issues such as land access.

By exploring youth's migration and employment choices, Amare et al. (2023) shed light on economic conditions and offer insights into land tenure and farm size in Nigeria, as well as rural and urban youth employment dynamics. To measure land access, they use expected inheritance size instead of actual access¹ and also adopt an individualized approach, considering factors like age, gender, and education; additionally, they recognize that migration and employment decisions often hinge on sunk costs that vary based on the nature and distance of migration. In Nigeria, where agricultural land is abundant, it is also crucial to assess land access in terms of suitability for modernization and commercialization, accounting for different levels of agricultural market development and urbanization.

The study finds that expected land inheritance significantly and negatively affects long-distance and urban migration but has only a minor impact on temporary migration. The effects are more pronounced among older and less educated youth. A substantial expected land inheritance lowers the likelihood of nonagricultural engagement by increasing the probability of a young person staying in agriculture or pursuing a dual-sector approach (engaging in both farming and nonfarm activities). This pattern holds more strongly for less educated rural-to-urban migrants in the dual economy. As the findings clearly show that land inheritance influences youth migration and employment decisions, programs promoting education and skills development could address the

challenges faced by less educated youth in regions where land inheritance is common.

DATA AND METHODS

Amare et al. (2023) use two-wave panel data from the Nigeria LSMS-ISA (Living Standards Measurement Study-Integrated Surveys on Agriculture), a nationally representative survey of around 5,000 agricultural households across regions. The dataset encompasses demographic, economic, and geographic details. A comprehensive land tenure module, exclusive to the 2012/2013 wave, is pivotal in testing hypotheses about the influence of land inheritance on youth's mobility choices. Both survey rounds (2012/2013 and 2015/2016) asked questions about migrant respondents' status and location, facilitating analysis of migration variables. The Amare et al. study (2023) explores how youth's land inheritance expectations in 2012/2013 impacted their 2015/2016 employment and mobility decisions. In alignment with the African Union's youth charter, "youth" refers to individuals aged 15 to 35. Youth's "land inheritance" is based on the land area reported as inheritance from the household head. This definition captures "expected inheritance," mitigating measurement biases and the potential reverse causality inherent in using actual inheritance.

The study estimates two key models to examine the effect of land inheritance on youth's decisions regarding migration and employment. First, the authors estimate this effect using a household fixed effects approach to capture all characteristics of a district and a household that may influence young people's decisions, capturing the potential bias caused by unobserved heterogeneity. Second, to minimize any bias in the estimates that could be caused by the potential reverse causality, they regress youth migration and employment decisions against *expected* land inheritance instead of *actual* land inherited (as the latter is expected to be more sensitive to endogeneity).

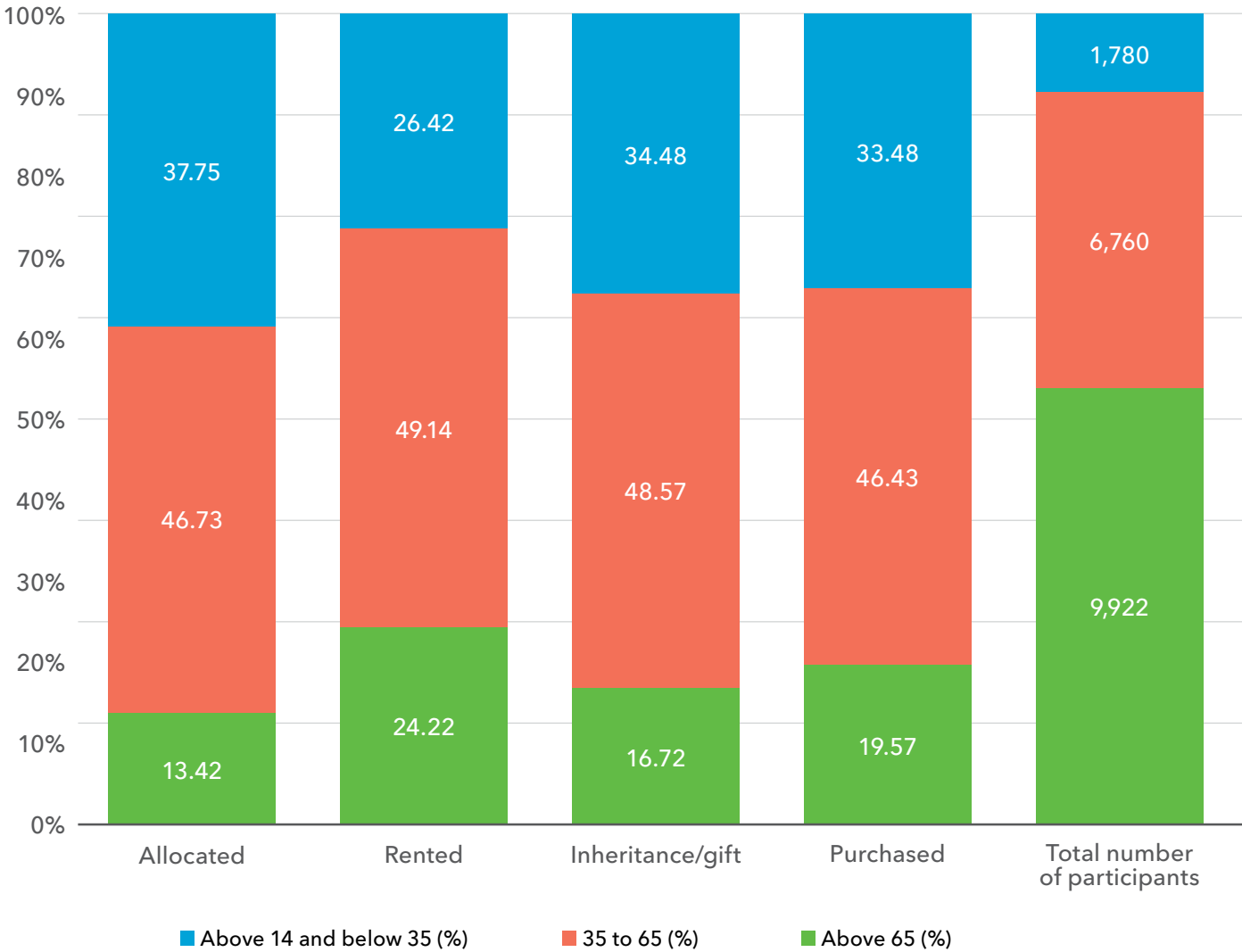
MAIN FINDINGS

Most young Nigerians acquire land by renting

Figure 1 shows the mode of land acquisition in Nigeria disaggregated by age groups of individual landholders. The dominant modes of land acquisition for youth

¹ The study opted to use expected inheritance to avoid issues related to potential reverse causality and household-level indicators.

FIGURE 1 Rentals and purchases dominate land acquisition modes across age cohorts in Nigeria



Source: Amare et al. (2023) using Nigeria LSMS-ISA 2012/2013 data.

in Africa are commonly perceived to be via allocation by formal or traditional authorities and through gifts or inheritance from family; however, Nigerian youth acquire farmland predominantly by renting, as shown in Figure 1. Land market participation has grown in recent years, and one out of four farmers who acquire farm parcels through land rental markets are youth (Ricker-Gilbert and Chamberlin 2018). Overall, youth constitute about one out of five landholders in Nigeria who use market-based forms of land acquisition – either purchase or renting.

Young Nigerians acquire land for various pursuits, including agriculture

Table 1 presents findings on land acquisition modes and occupation choices among Nigerian youth landholders. Among those who buy land, many are engaged in both

farming and nonfarm activities, while renters are mainly pure farmers. This implies the dual sector may help youth accumulate capital to buy land, while renting could be a means to enter farming where land is scarce. Youth in Nigeria have limited access to land except when it is inherited, bought, or leased; land leases, however, are usually of short duration and influenced by land tenure practices (Adesugba and Mavrotas 2016). Most tenants practice only agriculture, possibly having entered farming via land rental, while land purchasers engage in a mix of farm and nonfarm activities. The significance of the role of land inheritance varies due to cultural factors. From a policy standpoint, different pathways clearly exist for youth to access land and engage in a variety of occupations. Promoting longer lease durations and facilitating skills development in farming could address challenges caused by land scarcity.

TABLE 1 Occupations of landholders among Nigerian youth, by mode of land acquisition

Occupation	Total (%)	Purchased (%)	Rented-in (%)	Inherited or gifted (%)	Allocated by community or family (%)
Agriculture sector only	61.35	44.34***	65.66*	61.13	61.57
Nonagriculture sector only	4.24	5.66	3.28	5.86*	3.98
Dual sector	34.41	50.00***	31.06	33.01	34.45
No. observations	3,467	212	396	512	2,540

Source: Amare et al. (2023) calculations using Nigeria LSMS-ISA 2012/2013 data.

Note: Includes all parcels in which household members have been reported to have ownership, management, or control over land. Statistical significance is the differences in the means within the subsets. *, **, and *** indicate statistical significance at the $p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.01$ levels, respectively.

Land inheritance's effects on Nigerian youth's migration and employment decisions

Individuals (or households collectively) make decisions about migrating, participating in agricultural versus non-agricultural activities, or continuing education based on the anticipated benefits of each option. Given the potential methodological challenges and endogeneity problems associated with actual rented or purchased land, Amare et al. (2023) investigate how expected land inheritance influences young people's decisions regarding migration and employment in rural Nigeria. They find that the effect of expected land inheritance on migration decisions varies depending on the type of migration considered. When migration is broadly defined as "any migration," the size of expected land inheritance does not seem to significantly influence migration decisions, but disaggregating migration by type provides more granularity. For example, temporary migration, likely due to its lower associated costs, does not appear significantly affected by expected land inheritance, but youth who anticipate inheriting more land are less inclined to engage in permanent migration, especially to more distant locations or to urban settings.

The results also show that larger youth-controlled farm sizes correlate with increased farm employment; and conversely, larger expected land inheritance reduces the likelihood of primarily nonagricultural employment. Significantly, land inheritance enhances the probability of youth engagement not only in agriculture but also in the dual sector. From a policy perspective, fostering access to land and enhancing skills useful in multiple sectors could

promote youth employment opportunities and facilitate their gradual movement across sectors.

Other possible channels through which land inheritance may shape rural youth's migration and work choices include (not necessarily in order of importance):

- **Fragmentation of landholdings.** As successive generations divide land among heirs, individual landholdings can become fragmented and smaller. This can make farming less economically viable, prompting youth to seek alternative sources of income (Jayne, Chamberlin, and Headey 2014).
- **Delayed land transfers.** In some cases, older generations may delay transferring land rights to younger generations. This can lead to youth's uncertainty about their future in agriculture, pushing them toward migration and nonagricultural work (Bezu and Holden 2014).
- **Land as security.** Inheritance may provide some youth with a sense of security, knowing they have a fallback option. They might migrate or try nonfarm work, knowing they can return to their inherited land if necessary.
- **Modernization and cultural shifts.** Modernization may change youth's aspirations. Those inheriting land might see agriculture as a less attractive occupation due to perceptions of it being backward or less lucrative, prompting them to migrate to urban areas.
- **Land as capital.** Inherited land can be used as capital. Youth might lease out their land and use the income to finance education, start a business, or migrate in search of better opportunities.
- **Land rights and agricultural investment.** Individuals who hold powerful positions in a local political hierarchy may have more secure tenure rights and

consequently invest more in land fertility and have substantially higher output, as has been shown in Ghana (Goldstein and Udry 2008).

- **Land and marriage.** In many African societies, land ownership is linked to marriage. Inheriting land might mean added responsibilities, influencing youth to make certain choices regarding marriage and family.

Individual attributes influence the effects of land inheritance on youth's migration and employment decisions

The preceding findings underscore the effects of land inheritance on youth migration and employment choices, but these could differ based on distinct individual attributes. Thus Amare et al. (2023) also consider age, gender, and education, finding, for instance, that the sway of land access in curbing migration tendencies is more potent for older youth than their younger counterparts. Younger youth (15 to 24 years) may have a relatively greater capacity for migration, as they are still dependents of their parents. Furthermore, their comparative lack of agricultural skills may lessen the discouraging effect of anticipated land inheritance on their migration decisions.

Similar analyses show that land inheritance seems to favor younger youth's involvement in the dual sector. Land inheritance seems to predict rural-to-urban migration for both older and younger youth, with distinctions arising mainly in agricultural and nonagricultural domains. Young men are more likely to migrate long distances and take up dual sector employment. These further estimates seem to reinforce the study's earlier observations. For instance, rural-to-urban migration and the likelihood of dual sector employment are more pronounced among less educated youth than their more educated counterparts, particularly in response to the prospect of inheriting relatively more land. In other words, less educated youth are more inclined to delay migration based on the size of their expected land inheritance, an effect that is less apparent among better educated youth.

Intriguingly, a gradual shift from agriculture to nonagricultural activities is more evident among less educated Nigerian youth, bolstering the idea that improving their land inheritance, perhaps through mechanisms like youth land banks, could significantly impact their migration choices, while having limited effect on the decisions of more educated youth. Another positive implication is that while education has typically been seen as a pathway out of agriculture, some more educated youth seem likely to stay in agriculture, possibly applying their education to enhance agricultural productivity. In essence, these

findings demonstrate the nuanced interplay between land inheritance and youth's migration and employment choices, contingent on age, gender, and skill levels. This underscores the imperative of adopting targeted strategies to address the diverse needs of youth across various demographic strata.

Amare et al. (2023) also compare outcomes based on the level of land market development and urbanization, postulating that youth may base their migration and employment choices not only on the prospect of land inheritance, but also on the quality and suitability of land for agribusiness or "agripreneurship." In alignment with a similar study in Ethiopia (Kosec et al. 2018), these findings illustrate that youth in regions with less dynamic land rental markets exhibit greater responsiveness to the magnitude of anticipated land inheritance when making their migration and occupational choices. In locations with less vibrant land rental markets, a rise in anticipated land inheritance considerably diminishes the inclination toward urban migration while elevating the probability of working in the agriculture sector, in contrast with regions characterized by more robust rental markets. In other words, youth in less-developed market settings who do not inherit land tend to migrate and transition out of agriculture to a greater extent than their counterparts in areas with relatively advanced market frameworks.

Finally, Amare et al. (2023) show that in more urbanized rural settings, youth may exploit the magnitude of expected land inheritance as a means to diversify their employment options. Notably, these youth may also defer or circumvent decisions regarding long-distance migration or urban relocation. This implies that youth in more urbanized rural zones, anticipating substantial land inheritance, might view urban migration as a final recourse, preferring a gradual vocational shift out of agriculture. Overall, land inheritance is intertwined with market dynamics and urbanization levels, shaping youth's mobility and employment decisions in nuanced ways (Amare et al. 2020). Incorporating insights from comparable research in Ethiopia and deciphering these patterns yields some policy implications. Context-sensitive interventions are needed that acknowledge the interplay of inheritance, market accessibility, and urbanization to empower youth with more informed and effective pathways for advancement.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This policy brief focuses on the possible influence of expected land inheritance on youth migration and work choices by building on the findings from Amare et al. (2023). Their study explores the role land inheritance plays in shaping youth's migration and vocational decisions while considering broader social and economic factors. By conducting analyses that encompass levels of land market development and urbanization, they provide a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms involved. The authors demonstrate that the size of anticipated land inheritance significantly and negatively impacts long-distance migration and migration to urban areas but has less influence on temporary migration.

The observed effects are more pronounced for older youth and those with less education. Notably, less educated youth exhibit greater responsiveness to the anticipated size of land inheritance, particularly in terms of rural-to-urban migration and dual sector involvement. Thus, improving land inheritance could steer less educated youth toward more favorable geographic and occupational choices while having minimal influence on their more educated counterparts. Tailored policy interventions that recognize the diverse dynamics at play

within the youth demographic are essential. Furthermore, policies should account for the quality and suitability of land when addressing youth migration and employment, reflecting the evolving landscape of agriculture and entrepreneurship.

The fact that land inheritance more heavily influences less educated and older youth is a bad omen for the agriculture sector and rural Nigeria. It perpetuates the narrative that farming is a low-productivity activity that cannot attract high-productivity labor. Enhancing land inheritance for youth, particularly those with limited education, as a means to guide more informed and rewarding mobility decisions can yield benefits. Additionally, giving young people access to land – for instance, by establishing youth land banks – could steer less educated youth away from unrewarding geographic and occupational mobility decisions. In contrast, those with more education might be less influenced by land inheritance considerations. In sum, the research underscores the intricate interplay between land inheritance, education, and mobility choices among youth in Nigeria and the need for well-informed, targeted policies.

REFERENCES

- Abramitzky, R., L. Boustan, and K. Eriksson. 2013. "Have the Poor Always Been Less Likely to Migrate? Evidence from Inheritance Practices during the Age of Mass Migration." *Journal of Development Economics* 102: 2-14.
- Adesugba, M., and G. Mavrotas. 2016. "Youth Employment, Agricultural Transformation, and Rural Labor Dynamics in Nigeria." *IFPRI Discussion Paper 01579*. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC.
- Amare, M., C. Arndt, Z. Guo, and G. Seymour. 2020. "Variation in Women's Attitudes toward Intimate Partner Violence across the Rural-Urban Continuum in Ethiopia." *ESSP Working Paper* 155. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC.
- Amare, M., H. Ghebru, G. Mavrotas, and A. Ogunniyi. 2023. "The Role of Land Inheritance in Youth Migration and Employment Choices: Evidence from Rural Nigeria." *European Journal of Development Research*, published online, July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-023-00596-8>
- Bezu, S., and S. Holden. 2014. "Are Rural Youth in Ethiopia Abandoning Agriculture?" *World Development* 64: 259-272.
- Edeh, H.O., G. Mavrotas, and B. Balana. 2022. "Land Tenure Security and Preferences to Dispute Resolution Pathways among Landholders in Nigeria." *Land Use Policy* 119 (3-4): 106179.
- Goldstein, M., and C. Udry. 2008. "The Profits of Power: Land Rights and Agricultural Investment in Ghana." *Journal of Political Economy* 116 (6): 981-1022.
- Jayne, T.S., J. Chamberlin, and D. Headey. 2014. "Land Pressures, the Evolution of Farming Systems, and Development Strategies in Africa: A Synthesis." *Food Policy* 48: 1-17.
- Kosec, K., H. Ghebru, B. Holtemeyer, V. Mueller, and E. Schmidt. 2018. "The Effect of Land Access on Youth Employment and Migration Decisions: Evidence from Rural Ethiopia." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 100 (3): 931-954.
- McMillan, M.S., D. Rodrik, and I. Verduzco-Gallo. 2014. "Globalization, Structural Change, and Productivity Growth, with an Update on Africa." *World Development* 63: 11-32.
- Ricker-Gilbert, J., and J. Chamberlin. 2018. "Transaction Costs, Land Rental Markets and Their Impact on Youth Access to Agriculture in Tanzania." *Land Economics* 94 (4): 541-555.
- Toulmin, C. 2009. "Securing Land and Property Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Local Institutions." *Land Use Policy* 26 (1): 10-19.
- UNECA (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa). 2017. "African Migration: Drivers of Migration in Africa." Draft report prepared for the Africa Regional Consultative Meeting on the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, Addis Ababa.
- Yeboah, F.K., and T.S. Jayne. 2018. "Africa's Evolving Employment Trends." *Journal of Development Studies* 54 (5): 803-832.



Acknowledgments

The findings presented in this brief are based on research undertaken as part of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI's) Nigeria Strategy Support Program, and was supported of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Feed the Future Nigeria Agriculture Policy Activity (NAPA), and the CGIAR Research Initiatives on [National Policies and Strategies](#) (NPS) and on [Fragility, Conflict, and Migration](#) (FCM). We would like to thank all funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund: <https://www.cgiar.org/funders/>

Mulubrhan Amare is a research fellow, Development Strategies and Governance Unit, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, DC. **Kwaw S. Andam** is a senior research fellow and country program leader, Development Strategies and Governance Unit, IFPRI, Abuja, Nigeria. **George Mavrotas** is a full professor, Institute of Development Policy, University of Antwerp, Belgium. **Adebayo Ogunniyi** is a country program analyst, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Nigeria.

This is a peer-reviewed publication.

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A world free of hunger and malnutrition

IFPRI is a CGIAR Research Center

1201 Eye St, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA | T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | Email: ifpri@cgiar.org | www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896294608>



© 2023 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). This publication is licensed for use under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](#).