



Young people, livelihood building and the transformation of African agriculture: A reality check

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1. Introduction

Over a ten-year period, we, together with colleagues, have used qualitative and quantitative analysis to explore the dominant narratives and ‘conventional wisdom’ about young people and agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Throughout, we have sought to carefully consider the conceptualisations embedded in these narratives, their empirical foundations, and their implications for policy and intervention.

This research involved a number of different projects, methodologies, funders and partners. Field work took place in 22 sites across seven SSA countries (Ghana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, Cote d’Ivoire), with sites being selected in part to reflect differences in economic geography and intensity of agricultural commercialisation. Findings, conclusions and recommendations are set out in the edited volume *Youth and the Rural Economy in Africa: Hard Work and Hazard* (Sumberg, 2021) and a number of other publications (Sumberg et al., 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020; Ripoll et al., 2017; Yeboah et al., 2017, 2020; Sumberg and Hunt, 2019; Abay et al., 2020; Carreras et al., 2020; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Crossouard et al., 2021b; Oosterom et al., 2022).

This perspectives paper draws heavily on the last chapter of *Youth and the Rural Economy* (Sumberg et al., 2021b). It synthesises findings and sets out their implications for policy relating to youth, agriculture and rural development. Overall, our research lends support to some elements of the standard stories around rural youth, while challenging others. However, even where we find broad support for dominant narratives, there is need for more nuance than is generally offered in shorthand treatments of ‘youth’ questions. We argue that this critical revisiting of the storytelling around youth in rural Africa has important implications for policy content and development interventions, particularly in relation to routes to social adulthood, food system transformation and food security.

2. Hard work and hazard

The broad story of contemporary rural youth in SSA that emerges from this body of research is one of livelihood building under severe and persistent constraints. Having been buffeted as children by forces beyond their control - including for example poverty, parental illness or death, family break-up and civil conflict - young women and men are then let down by formal education. Quality is low, and many are forced to leave school early because it is not affordable (Dunne et al., 2023). This is despite having worked, often from an early age, to help pay their school fees and support their households. Although many young people see it as normal to combine school and work, others recognise that this jeopardises their educational progress. The deeply gendered rural opportunity landscapes they encounter offer few prospects for remunerative, secure or decent work, to say nothing of salaried employment. But through their own hard work and with the support of their families and social networks, they set about to build their livelihoods, in contexts where infrastructure is poor and services are lacking, and where gendered social norms and strong social hierarchies can restrict room for manoeuvre, particularly of women. Through their efforts, and with luck, some young people are able to accumulate assets including skills, businesses, land and housing (Yeboah et al., 2020).

The livelihoods they construct reflect shifting patterns of engagement with the rural economy, combining unpaid care and domestic work with farming, nonfarm wage employment and/or nonfarm self-employment. The informal and seasonal nature of much of this economic activity gives rise to endemic precarity, where work is characterised by risk, limited financial reward, instability and lack of protection (Sumberg et al., 2021a). But livelihood building extends well beyond work and the labour market, with young people navigating the challenges of securing accommodation and land, furthering their own education, caring for parents and siblings, relationships, marriage,

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children and citizenship, as they strive for social adulthood (Oosterom, 2021).

The futures they imagine for themselves usually involve expansion of their current activities and/or diversification into others, and often include movement into larger-scale, more modern agriculture (Yeboah et al., 2021). In many of these imagined futures young people are farming and running their businesses as managers of hired labour. Many also imagine restarting or furthering their education to boost their chances of securing a professional wage job and/or improving the productivity of their farming. Mobility and migration also figure in many imagined futures: in some contexts, the focus is on nearby rural towns with the idea of maintaining a firm base in the rural economy, while in others it is imagined as the more classic flight to larger urban centres (Thorsen and Yeboah, 2021).

In other words, for the vast majority of young people in the study sites, in the early stages of livelihood building their engagement with the rural economy is best characterised as hard work in the face of hazard - personal, financial, and environmental. However, as to be expected, while the opportunity landscape is limited in most places, it is not equally limited everywhere and for everyone. There are real spatial differences in farming and other opportunities (Abay et al., 2020), as well as differences that are socially constructed and/or mediated.

Drawing on Roberts (1968, 2009) this broad-brush picture supports the proposition that the job (and broader livelihood) opportunities available to rural young people in SSA emerge from multiple 'opportunity structures' that act to create distinct routes into the labour force. Indeed, these opportunity structures, emerging from a web of determinants including place, family origin, gender, ethnicity and education - and labour market processes - were a central concern of the research. A fundamental insight emerging from opportunity structure theory is that neither poor young people, nor poor adults, typically choose their jobs in any meaningful sense: 'they simply take what is available' (Roberts, 1977).

This raises important questions about the preoccupation with youth aspirations in the development literature, and the relationship between aspirations, choices and decisions regarding farming, other work, and livelihoods more broadly. The point is certainly not that everything is predetermined, but rather that most young people in rural SSA actually have relatively little room to manoeuvre. While some profess a deep attachment to farming, for many others it is the obvious (and perhaps only) 'choice' that allows them to assure some level of food security, some income, and a potential path to social adulthood. Similarly, the 'choice' between selling charcoal or selling dried fish in the market, or between making bricks or doing day labour, is not irrelevant, but it is unlikely to result in significantly altered financial or social outcomes.

We do not seek to reify the notion of opportunity structures, or the constraining role they play. Indeed, apart from what is obvious - better-off young people generally have more options; women and men have different options; migrants generally have fewer options, depending on their networks; and higher potential areas offer more options than lower potential areas - we see relatively little indication that opportunity structures work to finely differentiate how young people engage with farming and the rural economy. Rather, within and between sites, and across an array of social variables (gender, age, education and so on) there are strong similarities in young people's engagement: most combine some farming with one or more other low skill, low investment, low technology and low return economic activities.

This lack of diversity in patterns of engagement with the rural economy reflects a severely depleted opportunity landscape - resulting from poor infrastructure, limited purchasing power, poor policy, and so on - as opposed to any generalised lack of ambition, skill or capital among young people. In such contexts, it is not surprising that young people are not the innovative drivers of change in farming or the food system, even if this is how they are often portrayed (cf. Sumberg and Hunt, 2019; Chamberlin and Sumberg, 2021).

3. Implications

The broad synthesis outlined above suggests that it is now time to re-consider the framings, narratives and evidence that underpin policy, as well as policy content. In this section we explore the implications for policy framing and discourse, policy content, research and development practice.

3.1. Framing and discourse

Perhaps the most obvious, but also the most far reaching, implication of our research is the urgent need to re-frame the 'problem' of Africa's young people's relationship with farming, so that it is no longer 'all about youth' and their individual and collective deficits (lack of skills; lack of interest in hard work; lack of understanding of the opportunities afforded by agriculture; and so on). An alternative framing is now required that puts the economy and its inability to provide decent employment (for young people and all rural residents) at centre stage (Sumberg et al., 2021a). This framing must emphasise the need for significant structural change, and link this directly to an appreciation of the central role of opportunity structures - from oppressive gender norms, failing education policy and patriarchal-gerontocratic local institutions, to poor infrastructure - in shaping young people's livelihood trajectories and outcomes. In making explicit the embeddedness of young people in broader networks of social, economic and political relations, such a framing will foreground long-term interventions meant to promote structural change in the broadest sense, while (hopefully) nudging aside low-impact, youth-specific projects.

A second implication is that (actual or threatened) mass out-migration by rural young people must be dislodged as a core element of policy discourse (Thorsen and Yeboah, 2021). Yes, some young people want to, and do leave; and in some locations, this might have demographic significance. However, millions and millions of young people keep one or both feet in farming and rural areas as they move on in life, in pursuit of food security, better livelihood and educational opportunities, and social adulthood (Flynn and Sumberg, 2021). The fact that for many, neither their current economic activities, nor their imagined futures reflect the archetypal image of a full-time 'family farmer' is (or should be) irrelevant, except in so much as this out-dated image continues to underpin much problem framing, policy and intervention.

Similarly, more care is needed in relation to the notion of waithood, and the way it is being uncritically integrated into policy and public discourse (Oosterom, 2021). Specifically, the claim that the majority of young people are stuck in permanent waithood is far too broad; while the supposed link between labour market participation and social adulthood is far too narrow. There are many routes to social adulthood for young women and men, of which the labour market is but one, and this multiplicity of pathways deserves to be much better reflected in policy, public discourse and research.

Rural youth show great determination in their struggles to complete their education (Crossouard et al., 2021a). They often combine schooling and work (including farming), and in many cases use the resulting income to cover the costs of their education. This has particular implications for young women's educational progression - young men often have relatively more freedom to engage in paid work, whereas young women can be more confined to the vicinity of the home, fulfilling expectations of unpaid domestic and reproductive work. In contexts of poverty and limited educational and economic opportunities, young women's 'choices' often lead them into early marriage and child bearing.

Finally, while a deficit model of African rural youth is at the core of dominant framings, there is also a counter tendency to reify the innovative and transformational capacity of young people (see Sumberg and Hunt, 2019). The one is as mis-placed as the other. Policy narratives that suggest young people are poised (or can be positioned) to transform agriculture, the food system and food security are unrealistic and

counter-productive (Glover and Sumberg, 2020). While superficially these narratives might appear as a great vote of confidence in young people, they can also be seen as a discursive offloading of responsibility onto their young shoulders - to create their own jobs, to save the agricultural sector, and to achieve national food security. Some rural youth will certainly have a part to play, but the excessive focus on the young people as the most important agents of change is simply misplaced.

3.2. Policy

This body of research has a number of implications for the focus, content, and targeting of policy. Here we elaborate the key insights for education and some other key policy areas supporting the livelihoods of rural young people.

Clearly there is much room to improve education policy as it relates to rural SSA. For example, making primary and secondary education accessible to all remains an unfinished project, despite the great leap forward in primary enrolment resulting from concerted action to address the erstwhile Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) extend the ambition that education should be 'affordable' to all across the whole life course - including access to vocational and tertiary education. Gender equality is also a key element of these goals, and this too is far from being realised. The fact that an inability to meet the costs of attending school continues to stop many rural young people from continuing their formal education is nothing less than a catastrophic policy failure. Indeed, unless it is addressed, the more recent focus on quality in education, and how it should be measured and improved, will do little for rural children or the next generations of young people. The findings also point to a demand for vocational and technical training (Yeboah et al., 2021). However, given the desire and need of many rural young people to combine further training with demands of on-going economic and caring activities, this must be provided in flexible and/or part-time modes. More research may clarify the kinds of complementary interventions that could enable rural young people to take better advantage of existing or augmented educational resources.

The call for attention to quality education is fully justified and the broad aims of the SDGs are to be applauded. However, the metrics of quality proposed in the SDGs remain too narrowly focused on attainment. Student assessment data is notoriously problematic and importantly, such measures do not speak to the broader ambitions of the SDGs. These ambitions can only be addressed with a much clearer recognition of the historical, ideological and patriarchal underpinnings of education policy and practice, that result in the promotion of ideals of life, transition and work that are alien to most rural settings (CROSSOUARD et al., 2021a). The assumption of a linear trajectory from schooling into work, and the devaluing of unpaid and domestic work are prime examples. These underpinnings are also reflected in the discriminatory and disempowering dynamics that arise from the gendered landscape of education (Dunne et al., 2005; CROSSOUARD et al., 2021a). Again, the focus on internationally comparable metrics of quality is misplaced as long as these underpinnings are left unexamined.

The research supports calls for a root-and-branch interrogation of school curricula with a focus on how they, and the whole ecosystem around schooling, value (or denigrate) particular kinds of work and reproduce particular gender regimes. This interrogation should also address 'vocational' fields and locally relevant knowledges. Attention to differences in education systems that reflect different histories would also be valuable for understanding how the skills, vocational and employability agendas might be better integrated into mainstream schooling (Tikly, 2019; McGrath et al., 2020; Dunne and Humphreys, 2022). The content and skill-specificity of education are implicitly questioned by the increasing investments in vocational skills training aimed at young people (e.g. training of 'agriprenuers').

In relation to agriculture, the findings offer solid support for the idea that in one way or another, large numbers of rural youth engage in crop

and/or livestock production, and many combine their farming with other economic activities (Yeboah et al., 2020; Flynn and Sumberg, 2021). Self-provisioning through small-scale farming is central to their food security. Further, farming has an important place in the futures that many young people imagine for themselves - even in rural areas which may be seen as relatively undynamic. However, in these futures they are not seeing or identifying themselves principally as farmers, or as having wholly agrarian livelihoods (Yeboah et al., 2021). Rather, theirs is an arm's length, managerial or executive vision of engagement, with the work being done by hired labour, and farming being only one component of a portfolio of economic activities. In effect, Africa's young people are developing their own unique take on the 'farming as a business' ideal that has been so heavily promoted over the last two decades. Specifically, they seem to be rejecting a model that assumes the key process underpinning any move to business-oriented farming will be the progressive specialisation and professionalisation of a hands-on 'farmer'.

The young people's alternative vision, with their future-selves as an (often) town-based manager at its centre, has more in common with the caricature of distant 'telephone farmers' directing farm operations through their digital devices (e.g. Leenstra, 2014). This vision poses important challenges in key areas of agricultural policy including training and skills, employment, agricultural extension and technology development, to say nothing of food security. Here young people may indeed be setting the agenda, and if so, it will be important that policy makers and programme designers remain flexible and in close touch with those on the forefront of change. This implies greater attention to who is able to access advisory services both through traditional systems and emerging digital variants. If many young farmers are not household heads, then making extension more accessible to household dependents will be important. This has implications for extension services that are tightly tied, for example, to cooperatives or other farmers' organisations, which may prioritise household heads or landlords because they are members.

The promotion of entrepreneurship is one of the preferred responses to the rural youth employment problem. However, across the study sites there is relatively little evidence of young people engaging with value chains or the ethos of 'farming as a business' (Flynn and Sumberg, 2021). Nor is there much evidence that they are engaging in nonfarm activities that require more than minimal levels of skill, investment or technology. This is not because they lack the capacity to do so, but because of the absence of rural consumers who need and can afford a more diverse and remunerative range of products and services.

Further, basic material factors such as the lack of roads and transport options hamper trade and mobility; and whereas mobile money goes some way to facilitate trade and financial transactions, it is not available to all. The critical assumption is that the structural conditions and opportunities are in place such that entrepreneurship - which we understand to be more than simply low-level self-employment - makes sense. It appears that this assumption cannot be sustained when it comes to the majority of rural areas. Entrepreneurship may be lucrative for a few young people in some places, but programmes that promote 'entrepreneurship for all' must be accompanied by a very large dose of realism.

More broadly, it is time to reflect critically on the increasingly common interventions that combine training with 'financial inclusion'. This coupling is most often embedded in a three-part belief system - that agricultural value chains offer opportunity; that youth are innovative; and that digital technology is a rural game changer. Individually, these beliefs are either meaningless (youth are innovative) or they are appropriate only in some contexts and for some young people. As a general belief system or programming framework it has little value, yet the long-term commitment to training and skill enhancement make it difficult to shift. In any case, more evidence on the impacts of tying training to financial interventions is needed (Fox and Kaul, 2018). The new framing discussed in the section above, with its focus on structural constraints to decent work, should help to guide such research, and in so doing open-up space for a fundamental re-think of the training and skills

agenda (Sumberg et al., 2021a).

A final policy area highlighted by the research is that of social protection (for a recent review of social protection and rural transformation in SSA see Correa et al. (2023)). While rural residents generally are poorly covered by social protection programmes, young people may be particularly vulnerable. It is clear that young people face hazards as they go about building their livelihoods. These are not associated with high-risk, high-return entrepreneurial endeavour, but rather everyday events like sickness (affecting themselves and family members), accidents, theft, business collapse because of customer non-payment, drought and so on (Yeboah et al., 2020). To recover from such events, families often need to liquidate assets or use savings that cannot then be reinvested in farming or starting and expanding new ventures. The research shows that the experience of hazards can also have major knock-on effects such as a child being withdrawn from school. There is an important opportunity to explore social protection interventions - beyond for example crop insurance - that could help protect young people, and all rural residents, against these downside risks. Such interventions could also, of course, have potentially strong synergistic effects with extension, education, training, and other investments targeting youth in the variable and risk-prone rural environments and economic contexts that are pervasive.

3.3. Research

Oosterom et al. (2021) and the research reported in the other chapters of *Youth and the Rural Economy* amply illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the frameworks, methods, data and analytical approaches that underpin current understandings of young people's engagement with the rural economy. Here we highlight some specific steps with the potential to significantly increase the quality and relevance of the evidence base, and thus contribute positively to understanding, policy and practice.

First and foremost, there is a need, and an opportunity, to bring a broader set of perspectives to the discussion of rural youth livelihoods in SSA. For example, too much research, policy and public discourse, and youth-oriented development practice, does not draw on or engage with the large, diverse, and challenging, yet highly relevant literature from the field of youth studies. In his recent book *Agriculture and the Generation Problem*, Ben White (2020) demonstrates the benefits of integrating insights from youth studies, and from both historical and political economy approaches.

It is clear that nationally representative household surveys provide some valuable insights into the economic activities of rural young people. Indeed, without these data, our understanding would be much poorer. However, it is also clear that there are issues with these surveys, and there is therefore a need for methodological work on how well youth activities are captured in household-based survey instruments. For example, do the farming activities of young people show up reliably in household plot rosters? As discussed in Chamberlin and Sumberg (2021), the low level of plot management assigned to household 'dependents' (other than the spouse) suggests that there may be systematic omissions. Two other questions deserve attention. First, how well are transitions (i.e. household formation, starting in farming, school-to-work, migration) and path dependencies captured, and how might they be better addressed in empirical work? Second, how can data be realistically collected on temporally and spatially variable livelihood engagement, including labour allocation to different activities, and income? A final concern is how well collective agency (to which youth contribute) is conceptualised and measured in these surveys.

A second area that deserves attention relates to qualitative research instruments, and how insights arising from them can both be more creatively integrated with quantitative analyses, and more effectively inform policy. As highlighted in Oosterom et al. (2021) much of the qualitative research on youth in SSA relies on an extremely limited range of methods (two recent exceptions include Daum, 2019; Mausch et al.,

2021). Digging deeper into the qualitative tool box, methodological innovation, and new approaches to analysis and synthesis will likely be key to greater policy impact.

But there is also scope for creative mixing of quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to better observe incipient change and innovation, and their social and technological dynamics. Along similar lines, new methodological approaches are needed to identify and over-sample sites of economic and social dynamism, i.e. areas undergoing rapid transformation, which may be atypical in a statistical sense, but very informative about how young people navigate and negotiate change (Vigh, 2009).

Now we turn to three areas arising from the research that we consider deserve priority attention.

First, how do rural people - young and old, women and men - understand notions of work and decent work; and how do these understandings affect engagement with school and training, present activities and imagined futures? This question should be addressed in ways that are explicitly gendered, and allow exploration of the extent to which young women bear a more significant burden of unpaid work, both domestic and reproductive.

Second, more work is needed around the nexus of home, schooling and work within rural SSA contexts (also see Dunne et al., 2023). This should attend in more depth to the processes of schooling, including attention to differences in curriculum and the gender and class-based imaginaries of work that these reproduce. A related question is around the meaning of quality education to young women and men, and adults, and the gender dimensions of quality education.

Third, while there are real differences between rural places, how do these differences matter for youth livelihoods and imagined futures? In fact, this was a central concern of our research, but our framework was apparently not strong enough to provide clear insights. The descriptive patterns of youth economic engagement and imagined futures were largely indistinguishable across sites. On the other hand, in some sites there were signs that social stratification was significant, and a stronger focus on how such stratification plays out in youth livelihood building would be valuable. Another tack is to think more carefully about how to define economic remoteness and dynamism. It is possible that criteria like population density and distance from markets map onto very different realities in different countries, or that a notion like economic vibrancy is too complex to be captured by simple characterisations. More empirical work would help to clarify this.

Finally, the claim is commonly made that even when they want to farm, many young people are not able to access land, and this is used to justify calls for interventions to improve their access. Our research suggests that this story is far too simplistic: while the means of access are changing (e.g. rental markets are increasingly important), few young women or men reported that land was not available. Many rural areas are undergoing rapid transformation with respect to land-related questions, and this will certainly affect young people (Chamberlin et al., 2021). New approaches to data collection and analysis, for example that focus on spaces farmed by youth that may not show up in sample survey frames, are needed if a more nuanced picture of the implications of these on-going changes for young people is to be developed.

3.4. Practice

In terms of development practice, this synthesis points to two simple guidelines. First, as argued previously, practitioners need to be extremely cautious about youth-specific arguments and the youth-targeted interventions they are used to justify. While it is obviously true that 'youth are the future', their futures are unlikely to improve through piecemeal interventions that support a small number of young people for a short period of time, without shifting opportunity structures. Focusing on opportunity structures and structural conditions requires programme continuity and coordinated, national and sub-national approaches.

Second, it is critical to work with, not against, the grain of family and social relations, as in most cases they allow young people to access key resources. This will also serve as a reminder that while interventions are often framed narrowly around economic activity, employment and food security, young women and men build their livelihoods and move toward social adulthood through hard work on many fronts – including caring, relationships, education, children and civic action.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

James Sumberg: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Carolina Holland-Szyp:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Thomas Yeboah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Marjoke Oosterom:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Barbara Crossouard:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Jordan Chamberlin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

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