

## **Towards Sustainable Youth Engagement with African Agriculture: Challenges and Strategies**

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### **1.0 Introduction**

African agriculture is beset by a host of challenges. Experts identify lack of market access, low productivity, non-adoption of modern farming systems, climate change, low fertilizer usage, inadequate storage and processing facilities as being the most crucial. However, daunting as these challenges may seem, they pale into insignificance when juxtaposed against these two intertwined issues:

- Non-engagement of African youths in agriculture.
- The ageing population of African farmers

As Dr. Namanga Ngongi, President, Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa succinctly stated: "With nearly 60 percent of Africa's population residing in rural areas and the large majority made up of youth, half of them being young women and girls, the poor participation of young people in farming and the agricultural economy must be seen as a matter of grave concern to all; indeed it directly threatens the future of agriculture and rural economic transformation on the continent." (Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa Update 2012 p. 2)

African farmers are ageing and the implications are negatively staggering; not only for food security but also for transfer of necessary knowledge, skills, expertise and techniques and for employment and economic development. The average age of a farmer is 52 in Brazil, 57 in the USA and 60 in Africa. ([http: www. ypard.net](http://www.ypard.net)) The case for Africa is worsened by the non-attractiveness of agriculture to the youths who should replace the old farmers. There is no conscious succession planning, thus the old farmers may literally work themselves into their graves.

This trend is not limited to small-holder farmers. Many agricultural research institutions have a disproportionately large number of staff close to retirement age. This short-sightedness is presently impacting the agricultural sector, with increasingly fewer qualified mentors to pass on knowledge and skills to the new generation.

People as the central players amongst the factors of production occupy a critical position. They possess the entrepreneurship to combine and utilise the other factors-land, labour, machineries, inputs- in an efficient and effective manner to achieve sustainable food production. Their levels of agricultural knowledge, skills, innovation, technological and technical know-how therefore determine how well they do this. Youths by their very education, talent, innovation, energy, openness to new agricultural techniques and technology are better poised to be more effective and efficient agricultural producers. They are thus able to combat the scourge of food insecurity ravaging Africa.

While the non-engagement of youth in agriculture is well documented, plausible and workable strategies, schemes and programs for addressing the issue are not. Youth engagement, while recognized as important tends to become a 'side issue', with experts preferring to look at mainstreaming options instead of tackling the issue directly. Yet we must perceive it with due gravity: a critical threat to future food security that must be addressed now. And in addressing it, we must ensure that youth, the key stakeholders in this process, are fully involved.

### **Africa's Exceptional Population Profile**

Africa has an exceptional population profile: 200 million people living in Africa are between the ages 15 to 24, constituting over 20% of the African population; 70% of African youth resides in rural areas and account for 65% of labour in agriculture. Young people make up 36% of the working population, and account for 60% of the total unemployed (ILO 2012). The large youth population in Africa should be seen as an asset for the continent's development if appropriate human capital investment measures are taken. Youth inclusivity in agriculture is thus an imperative with its many direct and indirect benefits. It will provide under- and un-employed young people with employment and income, this in turn will provide the food we need via increased production, and ensures farming is passed from one generation to the next. Indirectly, it will drastically reduce the criminal and illegal activities youths may indulge in due to lack of gainful employment.

### **Who are the youths?**

Youth is often understood to be the period of adolescence during which young people make the transition from childhood to adulthood, become sexually mature and experience increasing social and economic autonomy. It can also be seen as a social category that is historically and culturally constructed (Thorsen 2007). As such there may be social or cultural 'events' that are understood to define the transition from childhood to 'youth-hood' to adulthood. In policy, youth is usually defined with reference to age brackets, although as Table 1 shows is there is little agreement as to either the upper and lower limits.

Youths are individuals between the ages of 15 to 24 ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)); while the African Youth Charter recognizes youths to be every person between 15 to 35 years. National differences also exist in the understanding and definition of who qualifies to be called a youth. Table 1 illustrates this using some African countries as examples.

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**African Renaissance and Australia**

| <b>Country</b> | <b>Definitions of “youth”</b>  |
|----------------|--|
| Ethiopia       | 15 – 29 years (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture 2004)<br>15 – 24 years (FDRE Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 1996)   |
| Ghana          | 15 – 35 years, with the upper limit of 35 years seen as the age where people assume “full adult responsibility” (National Youth Council of Ghana (NYCG), National Youth Policy 2010).  |
| Kenya          | 15 – 30 years (Government of Kenya , National Youth Policy 2002)<br>18 – 35 years (The Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) 2011)  |
| Malawi         | 14 – 25 years (Government of Malawi (GoM), draft National Youth Policy 2010); however, this is in practice kept “flexible to accommodate young people under 14 years and over 25 years depending on their social and economic circumstances” (National Youth Policy 1996:2).<br>18 – 35 years (The Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) 2010 and Malawi Rural Development Fund MARDEF) 2010) |
| Senegal        | 15 – 35 years (The Youth Development Sector Policy Letter (LPDSJ) 2004)<br>15 – 19 years (teens); 20 – 24 years (young people); 25 – 35 years (young people of advanced age) (The National Agency of Statistics and Demography 2004)   |

Source: Anyidoho et al, 2012

The difference in national age brackets for African youths has implication for continent-wide and regional youth development programs such as the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) and also for the magnitude of the youth population and by extension its demographics. For the purpose of this paper, the age bracket of 15-35 years will be used. Thus, we can safely assume that we are dealing with a youth population conservatively estimated of 500 million!

Given this huge population of young people, their predominantly rural location and the fact that most are unemployed or under-employed, the imperative for sustainably engaging them in Agriculture becomes easy to comprehend. However, one must emphasize that the vision is not that young people return to the farming methods of their parents and grandparents; rather the new emphasis is on value chains, entrepreneurship and ‘farming as a business’. This new emphasis has multi-dimensions which cover the whole plethora of agri-business from farm inputs to production and finally consumption.

This has given rise to a new term “**agropreneurship**” which is a hybrid word coined from agriculture and entrepreneurship with full recognition of the innovation, creativity, resilience and market-orientation implicit in the concept of entrepreneurship.

## **2.0 Challenges to Youth Engagement with Agriculture**

The theory of change behind “agropreneurship” is enticingly simple – with training in entrepreneurship, access to financial services and land millions of young people throughout rural Africa will be able to create their own jobs in agriculture. However, the factors

militating against this are multi-faceted and can be grouped into two major sub-headings namely:

- Exogenous
- Endogenous

Endogenous factors are factors that emanate from the youths themselves as being reasons for their non-engagement with Agriculture. Strong messages emerging from primary research with young people in rural areas under the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility project – a four-year study across ten developing countries - and from the Future Agricultures Consortium youth theme, focusing on young people and agricultural policy processes in sub-Saharan Africa, shed light on young people's attitudes towards agriculture and the likelihood of being able to address food security concerns via engagement of young people with the sector. These factors include:

**Disinterest:** Agriculture is not considered to be delivering the types of lifestyles and status that young people desire and expect. These are important dimensions of the attractiveness, or otherwise, of agriculture (invariably farming) as an occupation. Agriculture is not considered able to deliver via incomes and working conditions the kinds of lifestyles young people need, expect and desire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, lifestyles that are ever more visible thanks to revolutionary advances in communications technology that is accessible to (almost) all, even people living in the most remote rural areas. In this respect, agriculture is regarded as a poor person's activity, going beyond living standards to people's sense of pride and self-respect. These are important dimensions of wellbeing and take us beyond narrow, one-dimensional conceptions of what it means to be poor, marginalised and disadvantaged. (ILO 2012b) If agriculture is not able to deliver either the desired living standards or the prospects for upward mobility, then the likelihood of attracting young people into or retaining them in the sector is low.

**Doubt:** youths do not have strong conviction that agriculture can be a lifelong career choice able to provide their needs and wants. Thus, they stay aloof and un-involved even when they are well-poised by education or experience to make a living out of it. Most young people have no interest in agriculture, not within their own visions for their future. This is often echoed by their parents. By agriculture, people invariably think of farming: back-breaking work, low input, 365 days a year for little or low return. Those who do see a future for themselves in farming believe it needs to be 'smarter', more productive and more reliable

**Negative Perception:** youths perceive agriculture negatively. As something you do if you fail in school, as migrants in town or abroad, or by the side with other non-farm businesses. Or may not even be an option at all – pressure on resources, especially land scarcity, pose serious barriers to entry for young people. An apparent sense of insecurity around farming, related to unpredictable climate variability, volatile food prices, rising costs, further acts as a deterrent.

Exogenous factors refer to factors that are outside the control of the youths which affect their ability and capacity to engage with Agriculture. They include the following:

- ❖ Dearth of infrastructure

## African Renaissance and Australia

- ❖ Very thin body of relevant research
- ❖ Generalizing the youth demographic
- ❖ Land Tenure System
- ❖ Finance/Capital
- ❖ Lack of information on agribusiness opportunities
- ❖ Poor marketing and media relations
- ❖ Ineffective career guidance
- ❖ Exclusion of youth from policy-making processes
- ❖ Disconnect between agricultural education and practice
- ❖ **Absence of workable schemes/programmes**

***Death of infrastructure:*** Rural areas are notably more deficient in physical and social infrastructure than urban areas leading to rural-urban migration with the attendant removal of youths from the rural areas where agriculture is mostly practised. Young people are aware of lifestyles in other regions within their countries and globally. As long as urban areas offer a more attractive destination for young people desired lifestyles, more youths will continue to leave the rural areas. Availability of good roads, constant electricity, recreational facilities, internet, potable water, affordable housing and qualitative health-care in rural areas will go a long way in retaining youths in rural areas and improve their engagement with agriculture.

***Lack of research base:*** The first hurdle to be faced is the marked lack of evidence base on which to build policies and programmes. There is frighteningly thin research about situations in which particular groups of young people engage or do not engage in agriculture. What are the effects of gender, educational levels, household characteristics, proximity to markets, quality of natural resources, land availability, tenure regimes, and access to finance and so on?

***Generalizing the youth demographic:*** One of the key obstacles to sustainable youths' engagement with agriculture is the generalization of the "youth" demographic by policy-makers. Attitudes of young people towards agriculture vary extensively and some of the distinguishing factors are largely geographic location and land ownership. Even with campaigns to stimulate interest or raise awareness to the positive prospects of agriculture, there is a crucial need to segment the "youth" so the right message can be communicated to the right audience. The reality of the matter is youth who have been exposed to agriculture e.g. those from rural settings where subsistence farming is largely dominant will probably understand the value of agriculture and its role as a key component of food security but might feel that it is not very progressive as most people in their communities might still be subsistence farmers who are struggling to not only carry their financial needs but also progress from subsistence farming to commercial farming. On the other hand youth in urban settings might have little or no exposure to agriculture which requires a different marketing approach.

***Land Tenure and access:*** The land tenure system in most African countries makes access to land for agricultural purposes a herculean task. Agricultural is a land-based activity and

youths are excluded from easy access to adequate and suitable land. This effectively dissuades them from engaging with the sector.

***Lack of information on agribusiness opportunities:*** A lot of young people struggle to access information on agriculture and agribusiness. They are not even aware of the enormous range of opportunities obtainable in the sector. Most perceive agriculture from the production part only. Massive emphasis need to be invested in making information easily accessible in schools, libraries and local municipalities. There is also equal demand for the information to be in languages and grammar the youth understands and to span the full range of areas where youths can engage with agribusiness

***Exclusion of youth from policy-making processes:*** The youth need to be part of dialogues focusing on agricultural policies. If we acknowledge their vast population dynamics surely we need to include them in the formulation and implementation of policies affecting their future. In addition whilst there is also a need to look into new policies that best reflect the current economic, social and political climate equal focus needs to be invested in the implement of these policies as in some instances a lot of policies have not seen the light of the day

***Capital, finance and collateral:*** Most young people do not have access to funding for agricultural purposes. They usually are not able to access finance from financial institutions because they do not possess collateral acceptable to banks and other financial institutions

***Poor marketing and media relations:*** Another challenge is the poor promotion of agriculture. There is a need for more coverage in print and electronic media, radio and television, local and national stations. Programming needs to be shown during prime time, if expensive at least when young people are watching. There is a need to make programming that makes agriculture look “COOL”, the lifestyle that is. We also need testimonials of successful young farmers. The internet particularly social media can also be good tools to promote agriculture if used effectively. With the surge of internet access among the youths, institutions promoting agriculture need to acknowledge the youth’s shift from traditional mediums especially newspapers. Nowadays most young people get their information from the internet so the internet would be one of the best platforms to market and promote agriculture to reach the youth demographic

***Ineffective career guidance:*** The absence of effective career guidance in schools is one huge component that derails youth participation in Agriculture. The poor promotion of agriculture in schools as a tertiary study unit is another key component that adds to the poor interest. How can this be addressed? Institutions that promote agriculture need to hold career expos in rural and urban settings to promote agriculture as a study unit, they need to make electronic and print media available to the youth.

***Disconnect between agricultural education and practice:*** Higher education levels overall mean that young people are being educated on the agricultural systems in use locally and globally. With higher levels of education they seek jobs with higher skill levels than those of the smallholder farming activities that are available locally. But higher unemployment levels,

## **African Renaissance and Australia**

especially among the youth, suggest that work and education are failing as key routes by which people move out of poverty, and as crucial mechanisms linking economic growth to poverty reduction. More children than ever go to school, but what they learn appears to be far removed from the skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is true for agriculture sector skills as any other. African agricultural graduates often lack practical skills and competences required for successful agropreneurship.

***Absence of workable and feasible schemes and programmes:*** All the factors identified above can perhaps be mitigated with well-conceived, inclusive and well-implemented schemes. Such schemes will be targeted at a specific segment of the youth population and thus likely to be more effective and efficient. The absence of such schemes is a major challenge. This paper is focused on solving this particular problem and will discuss one of such schemes to illustrate its potential usefulness.

### **3.0 Strategies to improve youth involvement in agriculture**

Agriculture has an image problem and its image must be made over. According to the Young Professionals Platform on Agricultural Research for Development ([www.ypard.net](http://www.ypard.net)), bringing the voice of the youth to the table, disseminating information on opportunities in agricultural development, sharing success stories of young role models in agriculture and advocating for greater youth representation and inclusion in policy development are steps in the right direction. It is also critical to establish media partnerships to provide more interesting and glamorous portrayals of agricultural careers. In addition, youths must be made aware that ICT, social media and agriculture are not mutually exclusive and can seamlessly integrate.

The second strategy is investing in education at all levels from primary to tertiary levels. School curricula should be linked to on-going policy debates and developments in the agriculture field. Reform of the agricultural curriculum must include the youths and other relevant stakeholders. More opportunities for on farm training for the youth and enterprise development training particularly in value added activities such as food processing, packaging and trade should be identified and utilized. Training in soft skills development such as communication, leadership and business skills beyond technical agricultural skills are also necessary.

Thirdly, investments should also be made in improving access to technology and information for Africa's young people. Data bases of organizations that can provide youth with information, skills and opportunities in agriculture should be developed and disseminated widely. Targeted marketing opportunities for primary and value-added agricultural products produced by young entrepreneurs should be identified and encouraged.

Fourthly, there is need to invest in collateral free micro-credit systems that can offer incentives tailored to the financial needs of young farmers. Financial institutions should develop agricultural financing packages and loan products that target the youth who are often seen as high risk clients because they have little or no collateral. Youths must be encouraged and trained in collective action processes to access finance.

In addition, there is a critical need for a body of research that is cross-disciplinary and cross-functional to fill the knowledge gap. Policymakers must encourage broad studies into why and how youths can engage fully and sustainably with agriculture.

Finally, policy makers must develop and encourage the development of feasible schemes and programs which involve multi-partners, take cognizance of and address the peculiar challenges of each country and most importantly seek inputs from the very youths they are meant to assist.

Drawing on my extensive experience, I have provided concept parameters of a feasible program that is certain to initiate and sustain youth engagement with agriculture in Nigeria.

#### **4.0 FARM INTERNS SELF HELP & EMPOWERMENT SCHEME (F.I.S.H.E.S)**

Farm Interns are penultimate year agricultural students. Agriculture in Nigerian Universities is a five-year program and the fourth year is dedicated to practical training on Universities' Teaching and Research Farms. Sadly, not much teaching and research is being carried out therein at present. The huge land resources and facilities of the Teaching and Research Farms are lying fallow and have deteriorated respectively.

F.I.S.H.E.S addresses most of the major obstacles to youth engagement with Agriculture in Nigeria. Through its multi-partner approach, the scheme will coalesce a range of benefits for the targeted youth segment-farm interns while utilizing the principle of collective action to encourage the formation of self-help groups by the interns (Year 4 students)

. Other key attributes of the scheme are:

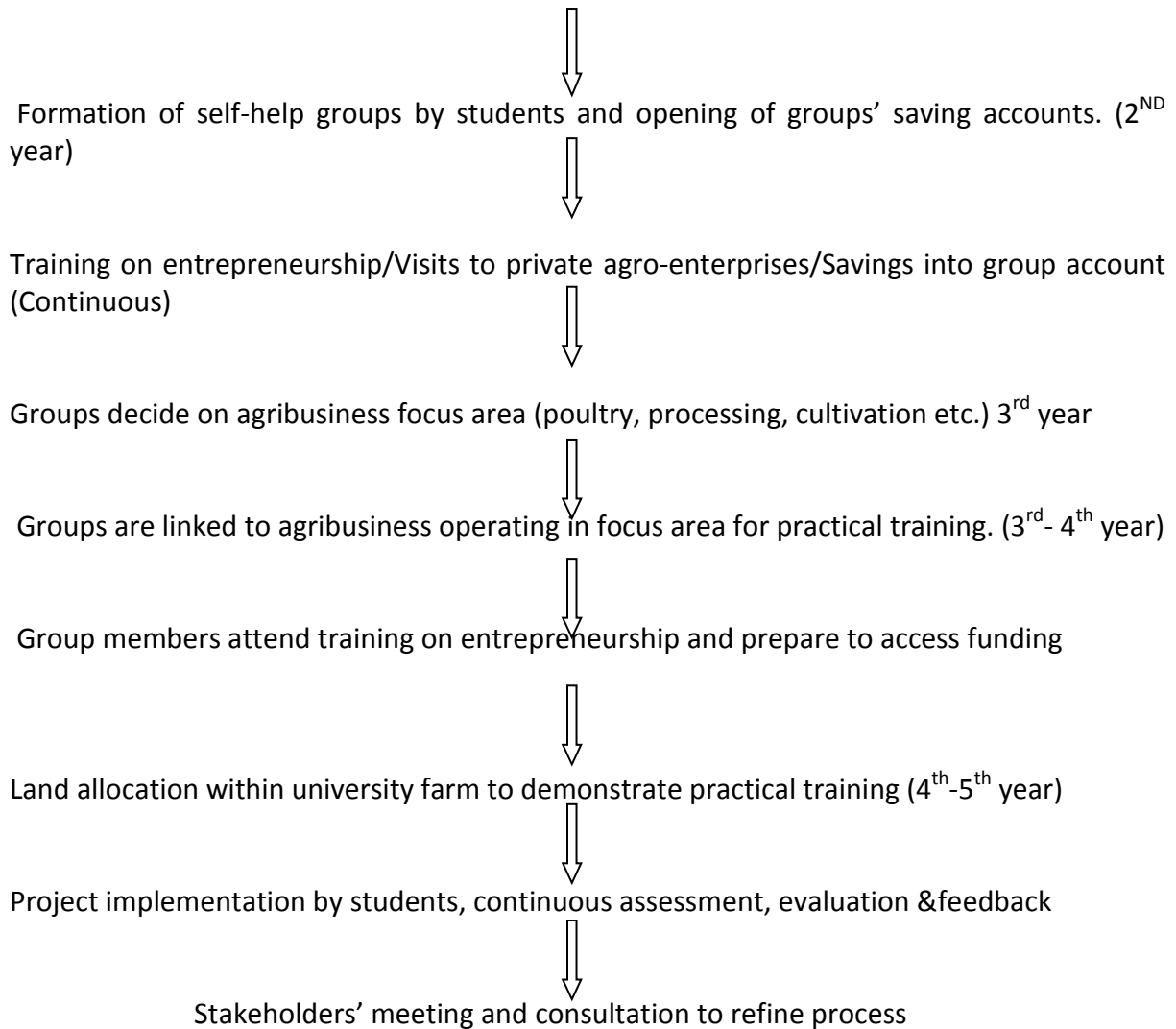
- It is multi-partner. Thus able to utilise expertise from different partner.
- It is symbiotic. All partners have something to gain; this ensures sustainability.
- It is targeted at a specific segment of the youth population which makes it measurable, scalable, easy to monitor and evaluate.
- It resuscitates resources that have lain dormant e.g. land, animal houses etc.
- It engenders greater collaboration amongst hitherto estranged stakeholders in the agri-economy. For example, banks-students; agribusinesses-university etc.
- It recognises and allows for the use of alternative collateral. i.e. students' diploma.
- It solves the problem created by lack of strong identity management system and its impact on youth's access to financial services.
- Although geared towards the Nigerian context, the scheme is highly adaptable to other African countries with due consideration given to the presence and roles of agricultural stakeholders therein.



**4.1**

**SCHEME'S OPERATIONAL FLOW-CHART**

Create awareness of scheme to First Year Students



**Source: Author's creation**

**4.2 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF STAKEHOLDERS**

| <b>Relationship</b>            | <b>Benefit to intern</b>   | <b>Benefit to partner</b>  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Interns-agribusinesses         | Training and exposure to current agri-practices.<br>Possible research topics.  | Training stipend. Gain from interns theoretical knowledge  |
| Interns-financial institutions | Access to funds using alternative collateral.<br>Cheaper and easy to secure.   | Interest on loans. Loans guaranteed by CBN and university/development partners. Funds warehousing from students savings, grants from partners. |
| Interns-government             | Land. Infrastructure development. Political support.   | Unemployment reduction. Reduced rural-urban migration. Food security. Economic development. Innovations.                                       |
| Interns–development agencies   | Support through funding and training in soft and technical skills.   | Achievement of objectives. Research possibilities.   |
| Interns-CBN                    | Loans guarantee. Interest rebate. Training. Ensure non-exploitation by financial institutions  | Achievement of organizational objectives. Real sector development. Youth development.  |
| Interns-universities           | Allow use of teaching and research farms. Validate studentship and eligibility to participate in scheme. Co-ordinate scheme. Provide part-funding. | Increased research sources. Improved national and international ranking. Contribution to local economic development.                           |

*Source: Author's creation*



units of labour to be placed in jobs. Effective empowerment and engagement of young people in agriculture requires the ability of the sector to address youths' aspirations, expectations and desire for social mobility. Agriculture needs to be 'decent work' (FAO 2012) and address broader conceptions of human well-being. The image of agriculture as dirty, laborious work at low skill levels for little returns must be changed. The strategies and the scheme highlighted in this paper can be a starting point towards recasting agriculture as an aspirational career choice for African youths.

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