

YOUTH AND AGRICULTURE

Understanding the challenges first: the rural youth and rainfed smallholder farming

The youth have a crucial role to play in South African agriculture and ensuring that the nation has enough food. But while the country needs more food producers, its farmers are ageing.

The average age of South African farmers is 62, despite the fact that young people (those between the ages of 18 and 34) make up a third of the population. Prof Edilegnaw Wale Zegeye of the University of the Free State's Agricultural Economics Department reflects on a current Water Research Commission (WRC)-funded project aimed at attracting more young people to specifically rainfed smallholder farming in South Africa.



Recent statistics from Statistics South Africa (2020) show that youth constitute over one third of the South African population. Unemployment among youth (15-34 years) is as high as 40 – 50%. Among the sampled rural households, 51.5% are not employed but actively seeking employment. Only about 10% are self-employed.

Experience requirement excludes most of the youth who have never been employed. Poverty levels are also higher for the rural youth. They are still the biggest beneficiaries (directly or indirectly) of social grants and remittances.

Agriculture is better placed to create job opportunities, especially in rural areas, for various reasons:

- Much of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) farming systems are rain-fed and form an important part of the agriculture in the region;
- When both the direct and indirect effects of agricultural growth are taken into account, such growth is more poverty reducing than growth in other sectors; and
- With rising incomes and growing population, food demand is expected to increase in townships and semi-urban areas, which, in turn increases the incentive for rural youth to farm.

To achieve national youth objectives on food security, employment creation and poverty reduction, it has become critically important to examine and understand the challenges and opportunities of linking the youth to profitable rain-fed farming and identifying appropriate entrepreneurial development paths. To this end, the Water Research Commission (WRC), through the former Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is funding a five-year research and development project entitled 'Entrepreneurial development for establishing small farming businesses and employment by youth in rain-fed crop farming'.

In the absence of such a study in the past, the project recognises the need for more research in South Africa on the challenges and opportunities for pursuing entrepreneurial development pathways in rain-fed farming, linking the youth to profitable value chains, exploring avenues for establishing small farming business while empowering rural youth, and enhancing youth employment creation in rural areas. The project has been underway since 2018 under the leadership of Prof EW Zegeye. It is expected to contribute to food security, small-scale farm profitability, and rural youth employment.

The first step to achieve these rural development objectives is to examine the prevailing challenges. Drawing from the empirical findings thus far, this article summarises these challenges.

The study confirms that youth participation in agriculture is limited. The data gathered suggests that only 24% of the youth are engaged in rain-fed farming. Only 23% and 21% have farm income and own business as a livelihood strategy, respectively. Married youth and those with more dependents in their households have a higher propensity of participating in rain-fed



Many of the youth who participated in the WRC-funded study had a negative perception about agriculture as "laborious, old fashioned and non-profitable".

smallholder farming, owing to their relative immobility and family responsibility. This suggests that some of the rural youths are farming not out of interest, but because circumstances have forced them to do so.

The project has identified several constraints, one of the main ones being the youth's general mindset and perception about smallholder agriculture, which is generally negative. Many young people see agriculture as laborious, old fashioned and non-profitable, and there is a tendency to associate smallholder agriculture with poverty.

These perceptions under young people are often created by the poor performance of their fathers and mothers in smallholder farming, which negatively influence their perceptions towards farming. The focus group discussions with agricultural extension officers also confirm that youth attitude is negative.

Agricultural value chain activities that entail vertical and horizontal coordination seem to be more attractive to the rural youth, because they are relatively not deemed 'dirty work'. However, the rural youth endowed with better entrepreneurial capacity have a lower propensity to participate in agricultural value-adding economic activities; they perceive other business opportunities in other sectors as more profitable.

The negative perception of the rural youth about farming must change. A mind-set shift – viewing agriculture as a source of livelihood is needed from the youth themselves. This mindset shift will not only attract youth to agriculture, but also reduce rural-urban migration and ensure a succession plan within the sector. Tailor-made training (on livestock production, rain-fed farming, managerial and entrepreneurial skills, and agricultural value-adding economic activities) must be provided to emerging smallholder young farmers to raise interest, change their mindset, and increase knowledge and skills in farming.

In addition, it is critically important to publicise success stories in agriculture – even though these stories are currently hard to find. Sharing farmers' success stories through platforms such as social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), mainstream media and policy briefs, making the way it is packaged appealing to the youth.

Furthermore, there is a need to develop programmes meant to support a few model smallholder farmers in rural communities so that the success of these model farmers will make young people see the potential in farming. Mentorship programmes targeting the rural youth must link them with successful and experienced farmers and mentors. Agriculture should be marketed and promoted the same way other sectors market and promote their businesses, including the creation of more television and radio programmes. Moreover, workshops and seminars that allow the interaction of rural youth with successful farmers will convince the youth to change their perceptions and take up primary agriculture and agricultural value-adding economic activities.

Another challenge identified by the project team is the general poor understanding of what smallholder farming entails; only 21% of youth who participated in the study had received



agriculture skills training – mostly skewed towards those already in farming and most training on crop production. Only 20% of the participants are part of a learnership programme. No training was provided on livestock, water management, agricultural value chains and financial management, all issues identified by the participants. The basic education system has limited entrepreneurial content which, among other factors, has resulted in low entrepreneurial culture. This will require revisiting the curriculum.

Young people in rural areas lack access to land, financial capital, information and markets. Even though 64.2% of the participants have access to land, they do not own land. Access to agricultural land (the lack of land tenure security) affects the interest of the rural youth to participate in agricultural activities, particularly primary agriculture.

Most rural youth access land through inheritance from their parents and traditional leaders. They cannot invest in the land without permission from the owner. There is a need to improve land access for rural youth regardless of their age, gender, and marital status. Land markets will enable them to borrow, lease, and where possible, purchase agricultural land. Rural youth access to land and its security should be integrated to the land reform programme.

Participants confirmed that they did not have access to formal credit sources. Informal credit sources (e.g., stokvels) in rural areas of South Africa are not in line with entrepreneurial behaviour in that they are mostly consumptive and expensive. Production

credit tailored for the rural youth is almost non-existent. It is critical to address this to engage them in both primary agriculture and agricultural value-adding economic activities. However, the youth should be mentored to ensure that the funds are used for the purposes stipulated or the credit service must be linked to services and resources such as agricultural input and output markets.

Access to relevant, tailor-made and adequate information is the key to unlocking rural youth entrepreneurship in farming. For most of the participants (78%), access to relevant and adequate information (crop varieties, inputs, new technologies, markets, prices, climate and so on) is a key constraint. Lack of information further limits youth participation; restricts performance of their enterprises; and reduces their incentive to engage in farming. There is a need to stimulate demand for agricultural information among rural youth through awareness creation and training. Owing to their unique features, there is a need to design specific information packages that can be used by the youth with interest in farming and value-adding economic activities. To this end, it will be imperative to reduce the cost of locating and accessing information.

For the youth who are currently engaged in smallholder farming, lack of access to markets affects the profitability of their farming, which, in turn influences the perception of the non-farming youth about agriculture.

Poor infrastructure in remote areas and high cost of data result in poor connectivity and limit the youth from fully utilising

information computer technology (ICT), negatively impacting learning and skills development. Despite the prevailing constraints, their engagement with social media platforms is very high. The youth, as a techno-savvy generation, spend most of their time on their phones and social media platforms.

In terms of content, information is available on agriculture, however, the youth access content associated with luxurious lifestyles of famous/rich people, politicians, musicians, artists, models and sport personalities. This does not stimulate them to be interested in agriculture, but drives them away from agriculture and rural areas. Social media platforms and blogs must be tailor-made to cater to information needs of the South Africa rural youth where they can discuss and share information (on agricultural input and output markets, government programmes, and agricultural job and business opportunities). There is a need to invest in ICTs infrastructure to improve connectivity in rural areas so that these technologies can be accessible and affordable to the rural youth.

About 62% of the participants have never had contact with agricultural extension agents. Traditionally, agricultural extension services are designed for adults; the youth are a unique group of people that respond, react and think differently. There is a need to train agricultural extension agents so that they understand their information and services need to be tailor-made for the rural youth.

Regarding youth access and participation in agricultural and rural development initiatives targeting youth is poor and mostly not tailor-made. Most programmes are not evaluated in terms of impact; monitoring and evaluation is done with a focus only on the number of beneficiaries. There is mandate

overlap and lack of coordination. Only about 14% of the participants were beneficiaries of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and rural agricultural programmes of non-governmental organisations on livestock, conservation agriculture, and home gardening. Most of the participants reported that the support had only short-term impacts on their lives.

Any project, programme or policy for the rural youth must start with a full understanding of their circumstances, challenges, endowments and mindsets. Strategies and policies that seek to attract youth to engage in agriculture must consider these important factors. South Africa urgently needs a national youth agricultural engagement policy to implement tailor-made strategies for the rural youth. Such strategies can lay the foundation for entrepreneurial development pathways in rain-fed smallholder agriculture.

Farm service agency, transportation, retailing, facilitation of training on farm business management, and agro-processing (virtually non-existent) are the most important rain-fed farming opportunities along the agricultural value chain that the participants mentioned. Less-complicated activities that can serve as a steppingstone for rural youth to engage in agriculture include retailing of farm inputs and outputs; serving as a farm agent; buying and reselling livestock and other agricultural products; buying and reselling of farm inputs; transportation of both inputs and outputs to different locations; and small scale agro-processing.

It is hoped that the results and recommendations of the project will lead to more active participation of youth in South Africa's agricultural sector.



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