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ENGAGING YOUTH IN THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES



Introduction and Context

Agriculture is vital for global food security, jobs, and economic development. However, youth participation in this sector is declining, even though their involvement is more important than ever. There are over 1.3 billion young people worldwide, and nearly 85% live in developing nations where agriculture is crucial for their livelihoods. Despite this demographic advantage, youth involvement in agriculture faces structural, economic, and social challenges. Meanwhile, global food systems struggle with climate change, population growth, and urbanization. Youth are key players in transforming agrifood systems and ensuring sustainability in the long run. This issue brief supports the Policy Dialogue on “Engaging Youth in the Future of Agriculture: Challenges and Opportunities.” It focuses on how agriculture can be viewed as an appealing and viable option for young people.

Why This Matters Now

It is urgent to involve youth in agriculture due to a combination of global demographic, economic, and environmental changes that are reshaping food systems. Youth make up a large share of the global population, yet their role in agriculture is limited at a time when the sector needs fresh ideas, innovation, and strength. Closing this gap is essential not just for jobs but also for ensuring sustainable food production, economic stability, and inclusive growth. One pressing issue is the rising unemployment among youth. Young people

worldwide are much more likely to be unemployed than adults, with estimates showing that they are nearly three times more likely to be out of work. The International Labour Organization reports that youth unemployment has stayed high, with millions of young people unable to secure stable jobs. In many developing areas where formal job options are scarce, agriculture can offer many opportunities for young workers. However, this potential can only be tapped into if the sector becomes more productive, profitable, and attractive. At the same time, the agricultural workforce is aging, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of food production. In numerous countries, farmers' average age increases while fewer young people enter the field. This shift can threaten agricultural productivity and innovation, as older farmers may struggle to embrace new technology or adjust to changing conditions. Without targeted efforts to attract youth, the sector risks a gradual drop in energy and competitiveness. The Food and Agriculture Organization stresses the need for generational renewal in agriculture to maintain food systems and support rural economies.

Climate change amplifies the need for youth engagement in agriculture. Young people will inherit agricultural systems that are increasingly at risk from climate variability, extreme weather, water shortages, and environmental harm. These challenges call for new strategies, innovative technologies, and adaptable practices that align with the skills and creativity of younger generations.

Building resilient food systems will heavily rely on youth's ability to foster innovation and adopt environmentally friendly farming methods. Involving youth is thus essential not only for job creation but also for strengthening the resilience and sustainability of global food systems.

There is a strong economic argument for encouraging youth participation in agriculture. Creating opportunities for young people across agrifood systems, such as production, processing, logistics, and digital services, could lead to significant economic benefits. Recent estimates suggest that increasing youth participation in agrifood systems could unlock major global economic value, potentially reaching trillions of dollars through improved productivity, entrepreneurship, and value chain growth. This underscores the untapped potential of youth to drive economic change in agriculture. Together, these factors highlight the need for immediate action. Engaging youth in agriculture is not just about addressing current employment issues; it is also about securing the future of food systems, encouraging innovation, and promoting inclusive economic growth.

Key Challenges Facing Youth in Agriculture

Despite agriculture's potential to create jobs and boost economic growth, young people face various structural and systemic barriers that limit their involvement in the field. These challenges are interconnected and often reinforce each other, making it hard for youth to enter, stay, or thrive in agriculture.

Access to land is one of the biggest challenges. In many areas, land ownership is mostly held by older generations, leaving young people with little or no access to productive land. Even when family land is available, the security of tenure is often weak, which makes it hard for youth to invest for the long term. Insecure land tenure prevents young people from accessing credit and fully engaging in agricultural markets. Without reliable access to land, youth are effectively shut out from one of the most essential assets needed for agricultural production and agribusiness development. Closely related to land access is the challenge of **limited access to finance.**

Young people often lack the collateral, credit history, and financial knowledge that formal financial institutions require, which makes it tough for them to get loans, insurance, or investment capital. This financial exclusion severely limits their ability to start or grow agricultural businesses. Improving financial access for young agripreneurs is crucial for unlocking their potential and enabling inclusive growth in agrifood systems. Without adequate financial support, even motivated and skilled youth find it hard to shift from subsistence work to sustainable agribusiness.



Another big barrier is the **mismatch between the skills** young people have and what modern agriculture needs. Many education and training programs focus on traditional farming methods, while the sector increasingly relies on technology, market integration, and entrepreneurship. As a result, young people often lack the technical, business, and digital skills necessary for success. Improving youth skills in agribusiness, innovation, and value chain development is vital for boosting job prospects in rural areas. To close this gap, we need to reform education systems and also provide more practical training, mentorship, and extension services.

Perceptions of agriculture also play a key role in how young people engage with the field. Many see agriculture as hard work with low pay and high risks, especially compared to urban or formal sector jobs. These views are reinforced by challenges like low productivity, limited market access, and unstable income. As a result, many young people hesitate to pursue careers in agriculture, even when opportunities are

available. Changing these perceptions requires improving the realities of agricultural work while also promoting success stories and innovations within the sector.

In addition to these **structural and social barriers**, agriculture is inherently exposed to various risks that hit new entrants especially hard. Climate variability, pests, diseases, and changing market prices add uncertainty and cut into profits. For young people who often lack savings or safety nets, these risks can be particularly demoralizing. Climate change is already impacting agricultural productivity and raising vulnerability, especially in developing regions. Without tools like insurance, climate-smart practices, and risk-sharing systems, youth participation will continue to be limited.

Finally, **weak market access and underdeveloped value chains** further limit youth engagement. In many rural areas, poor infrastructure, bad transportation systems, and limited access to reliable market information lessen the profitability of agricultural activities. Opportunities for adding value, processing, and connecting with higher-value markets are often scarce or inaccessible to young people. This not only lowers income potential but also strengthens the view of agriculture as a low-return field. Improving value chains and boosting market connections are essential for making agriculture more appealing and economically viable for youth. Together, these challenges show the need for a focused and coordinated approach to tackle both structural barriers and perception issues. Without specific interventions, the gap between youth and agriculture is likely to grow, which will have major effects on food systems, rural development, and economic growth.

Migration and Rural Transformation

Youth Migration is closely tied to decreasing interest in agriculture, especially in rural areas where economic chances are scarce. Many young people leave these communities due to low agricultural earnings, poor infrastructure, and limited access to essential services like education, healthcare, and markets. Consequently, rural-to-urban



migration has become a major trend, as young people look for better job opportunities and improved living conditions in cities. The lack of decent rural jobs drives youth to migrate. The lack of stable wages for youth working on family farms is another primary driver of youth out-migration and is considered a form of "hidden" youth unemployment or underemployment.

Besides limited opportunities, poor working conditions and low pay in agriculture push young people away from rural areas. Many view agriculture as physically demanding and economically uncertain, making urban jobs, even in the informal sector, seem more appealing. The International Labour Organization notes that job quality in rural areas often fails to meet decent work standards, further encouraging youth migration.

However, migration shouldn't be seen only as a negative development. It also shows young people's desire for better livelihoods, improved working conditions, and access to diverse economic opportunities. Migration can lead to knowledge sharing, remittances, and new skills, which can benefit rural economies if properly managed. Migration decisions often stem from a mix of economic necessity and the search for opportunity.

These factors highlight the need to change rural economies and agricultural systems into competitive and attractive sectors that can keep young people in rural areas. This involves improving infrastructure, increasing service access, creating decent jobs, and including agriculture in broader rural development plans. Making agriculture more rewarding and appealing to youth is vital for reversing negative migration trends and promoting balanced development.

Opportunities for Youth in Agriculture

Despite the challenges mentioned, agriculture offers various opportunities for youth, especially as the sector evolves with technology, markets, and global value chains. Unlocking these opportunities requires changing the view of agriculture from a subsistence activity to a dynamic and profitable industry.

One promising area is **agribusiness and value addition**. Young people can participate in all parts of the agricultural value chain, including processing, marketing, logistics, and export-oriented activities. These segments generally provide higher returns and require innovation, making them more attractive to youth. Integrate young people into agrifood value chains to boost productivity and income.



Digital agriculture and technology are also opening new doors for youth. The growth of mobile platforms, precision agriculture, data-driven farming, and e-commerce is changing how agriculture is practiced and marketed. These innovations closely match the skills and interests of young people, making agriculture more accessible and efficient. Digital technologies can greatly enhance productivity, market access, and financial inclusion in agriculture.

Climate-smart agriculture offers another significant opportunity. As climate change impacts agricultural systems, there is growing demand for sustainable and resilient practices. Young people can lead the way in adopting climate-smart solutions, including conservation agriculture, agroecology, and efficient resource use. Youth involvement is crucial for spreading sustainable agricultural practices and ensuring long-term food security.

Entrepreneurship is also becoming a key pathway for youth engagement. Agriculture is increasingly a platform for startups and innovative business models, particularly in areas like agri-tech, input supply, consulting, and logistics. These initiatives not only create jobs for young entrepreneurs but also generate employment for others along the value chain. Supporting youth entrepreneurship through incubation, mentorship, and access to funding is critical.

There is **increasing global recognition** of youth as agents of change in agriculture. Governments, development partners, and international organizations are placing greater emphasis on including youth in agricultural policies and programs. This shift is evident in global initiatives and investment frameworks designed to empower young people and enhance their role in agrifood systems. The Food and Agriculture Organization recognizes youth as key change agents in transforming global agrifood systems, noting that 44 percent of working youth depend on these systems for jobs. As of 2026, the FAO continues to stress that targeted policies and investments are vital for addressing challenges like food insecurity, which rose among youth to 24.4% between 2021 and 2023, and for replacing an aging workforce. These opportunities show that agriculture, when well-supported and modernized, can become a sector of innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable growth for young people.

Making Agriculture Attractive to Youth: What Needs to Change

Making agriculture attractive to young people requires a deliberate shift in how the sector is structured, supported, and perceived. This involves addressing both economic realities and social perceptions, while creating an enabling environment that aligns with youth aspirations. A central priority is improving profitability and income stability within agriculture. Many young people are discouraged by low and unpredictable returns, which are often linked to weak value chains and limited market integration. Strengthening agricultural value chains, improving access to reliable markets, and supporting agribusiness development can significantly

Conclusion

Engaging youth in agriculture is not optional; it is essential for the future of food systems, economic development, and sustainability. As global challenges such as unemployment, climate change, and food insecurity intensify, the role of young people in transforming agriculture becomes increasingly critical. While significant barriers continue to limit youth participation, there are also clear and emerging opportunities to reposition agriculture as a sector that is innovative, profitable, and aligned with modern aspirations.

The challenge, therefore, goes beyond simply bringing more young people into agriculture. It requires a fundamental transformation of the sector itself. Agriculture must evolve into a space that offers meaningful livelihoods, embraces technology and innovation, and responds to the social and economic expectations of youth. By addressing structural constraints, investing in skills and innovation, and fostering supportive policy environments, it is possible to build a future in which agriculture is not seen as a last resort, but as a sector of opportunity and choice for the next generation.

The World Agriculture Forum is global platform connecting diverse stakeholders to drive sustainable agricultural development through policy advocacy, trade facilitation, and technology-driven solutions. WAF unites governments, farmers, agribusinesses, experts, and development institutions to bridge implementation gaps and drive sustainable agriculture and food systems transformation towards a resilient, food-secure future. With a strong focus on collaboration, innovation all along the value chain, and public-private partnerships, WAF is committed to transforming agriculture worldwide.

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