

Young People, Agriculture, and Transformation in Rural Africa: An “Opportunity Space” Approach

Over the last decade, both agriculture and young people have become increasingly prominent on African development agendas. Politicians, policymakers, and development professionals have confronted food price volatility, food insecurity, and the phenomenon of large-scale land grabs on the one hand, and the entrenched under- and unemployment among young people—the (youthful) human face of the phenomenon of jobless growth—on the other. It is perhaps not surprising that many have put two and two together, concluding that engagement in production agriculture (including crops, livestock, and fisheries) is an obvious (if not the obvious) opportunity through which to address the problem of limited economic opportunity for young people in rural areas. Associated with this view is the assumption that rural young people would be better off if they did not migrate to urban areas, thus avoiding exposure to risky and illegal behavior (sex, HIV/AIDS, drugs, crime) and potential entanglement in dangerous political activity.¹

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This essay draws heavily from the unpublished chapter, “Agricultural Policy, Employment Opportunities, and Social Mobility of Africa's Rural Youth: A Critical Analysis,” by J. Sumberg, N. A. Anyidoho, M. Chasukwa, B. Chinsinga, J. Leavy, G. Tadele, S. Whitfield, and J. Yaro (2013), commissioned by the UNU-WIDER Prospects for Africa's Youth project, with additional support from the Future Agriculture Consortium.

Most of the policies and programs that attempt to engage young people in rural Africa with agriculture are essentially variants of “making markets (and globalization) work for the poor.”² Framed with the language of enterprise, entrepreneurship, and value chains, they promote farming as a business and the professionalization of agriculture. Many such programs and projects provide training and access to microcredit, technology, and other resources. They also commonly insist on various forms of group action, for example, to engage in new markets.

We suggest that, in promoting the idea that young people living in rural areas would be better off if they just buckled down to an agricultural life, policymakers and the development community more generally are taking a position for which there is little if any evidence or supporting research. Furthermore, as enticing as the link between agriculture and employment for young people may first appear, it must be recognized that it flies in the face of longstanding evidence, that in at least some situations, both rural young people and their parents hold farming and rural life in very low esteem.³ Indeed, investing in children’s education so they can get out of farming and move on to formal work in the public or private sector is a long-established strategy in rural Africa.

In addition to the dominant discourse around market-based solutions—an important part of the background of the repeated referencing of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial attitudes and behavior, with some initiatives promising to transform job seekers into job creators—is the current focus in the development community on “impact” and “scaling up,” and the imperative to deliver “impact at scale.” From an analytical perspective, this focus foregrounds questions about the nature of the expected development gains (How many jobs over what time period? What kinds of jobs? Jobs for whom?) and the role of or necessity for structural change in delivering these jobs.

A critical factor here is that many, if not most, initiatives are based on an undifferentiated view of young people. The language says it all: “the youth,” as if they all have the same aspirations, talents, opportunities, access to resources, networks, interests, and needs, and will therefore benefit from the same limited array of interventions. This clearly is not the case, any more than it is for other longstanding and equally problematic categories, including the poor, women, or small farmers. While it is obvious that policy and programs cannot be designed to address the unique circumstances of every individual, one of the most important lessons from the last two decades of poverty-focused development is that context and difference matter enormously.

Our argument is that entrepreneurship-based policy and programs that address the job challenges facing young people in rural Africa need to be much more firmly grounded than is generally the case at present. Specifically, in terms of expectations, design, and implementation, they must take explicit account of the highly diverse and changing rural economic and social realities within which young people find themselves (and indeed help to shape), in addition to the diversity of the young people themselves.

In the next section, we first identify four categories that we believe are useful when thinking about work from a development perspective. We then present the notion of “opportunity space” to provide insight into the factors affecting the work opportunities available to young people in particular rural contexts. Following this, we draw on insights from feminist and gender analysis to argue that policy and programs aimed at rural young people must focus more on what roles social relations and social difference play in determining which young people are able to take advantage of which work and entrepreneurial opportunities. The final section identifies a number of policy and program implications.

OPPORTUNITY SPACE

It is widely appreciated that work opportunities, whether in the formal or informal sector, differ with respect to the skills required, level of remuneration, risks to personal safety, social status, social identity, and so on. While all these are important, from a development perspective that places poverty reduction, social justice, and social transformation at center stage, they provide an inadequate analytical base. Here we borrow from the literature on social protection to suggest that work opportunities can be seen to fall into four categories:⁴ preventative, protective, promotive, and transformative (table 1). In the remainder of this article, we focus primarily on the latter two.

“Promotive” work allows real incomes and capabilities to be enhanced and capital to be accumulated. Much formal-sector work would fall into this category, but there are also examples from Africa’s agricultural sector. We have previously written about young men and women in Brong Ahafo, Ghana, who use intensive, small-scale tomato production to accumulate capital over a relatively short time (“quick money”).⁵ With hard work and some luck, after several seasons of growing two or three tomato crops per year, these young people were able to save enough capital to build a small house, get married, establish a small kiosk, or fund an adventure (e.g., to Libya in search of work). Strikingly, few saw their future as being in agriculture, although 10 years after our original study, many still had some involvement in farming.

“Transformative” work is similar to promotive work, but it also addresses issues of social equity and exclusion. Labor laws that regulate worker rights are the most common means of addressing equity and exclusion in the formal sector,⁶ and there are some examples—including the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India—of organized efforts to make the informal sector more transformative. For women, transformative work might be regarded as that which increases their social status and contributes to the achievement of gender equity.⁷

While each of the four work types is important, we suggest that, for rural young people, and particularly from a developmental perspective, the focus must be on the promotive–transformative end of the continuum. It is important to remember that rural livelihoods most often include several different economic activities, which may be located at different points along this continuum.

Category	Description
Protective	Provides relief from the immediate effects of deprivation. These opportunities are directly dependent on government or other relief programs, and often form part of a broad system of benefits designed to act as a social safety net. Examples: food for work, labor-intensive public works schemes
Preventative	Forestalls (rather than directly relieving) deprivation Examples: low-productivity, small-scale farming; low-paying, insecure, informal-sector work; job-guarantee schemes
Promotive	Allows real incomes and capabilities to be enhanced and capital to be accumulated
Transformative	As for promotive above; also addresses issues of social equity and exclusion

Table 1. Four categories of work based on the transformative social protection framework.

We use the term “opportunity space” to refer to “the spatial and temporal distribution of the universe of more or less viable [work] options that a young person may exploit as she/he attempts to establish an independent life.”⁸ In the light of well-established patterns of both short- and long-term migration, it is useful to distinguish between near and distant opportunity space.

The near opportunity space available to rural young people is to a significant degree shaped by two sets of factors. The first of these includes the characteristics of the particular rural location, and specifically the quality of natural resources and accessibility of markets. The interaction of resource quality and market accessibility goes a long way to determining the kinds of economic activities that are likely to be viable in a particular location.⁹ It is important to note, however, that as far as agricultural production is concerned, the relationship between natural resources, market accessibility, and economic viability is not always straightforward. For example, the urban demand for perishable horticulture products can be so strong that nearby producers invest heavily to overcome natural resource limitations, such as soil quality or the availability of water. The intensive vegetable production plots that can be seen in and around many African cities illustrate this well. Furthermore, there is a dynamic aspect to the relation between the quality of the natural resource base, market accessibility, and economic viability that is driven,

for example, by new technology or production methods or by investment in new transportation infrastructure.

The second set of factors that shapes the near opportunity space is both social and relational. Social difference (including gender, age, class, ethnicity, level of education, and marital status), norms and expectations, and social relations and networks frame accepted ways of being and doing, as well as the kinds of activities and engagements that are considered appropriate and those that are not. In many societies, for example, women are expected to focus on household food security and welfare, which may have implications—at least during the early years of married life or when they have children—for their interest in and/or ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities, especially when these activities involve working away from home. Social difference and social relations are critical in determining how easily and under what conditions key resources (e.g., land, labor, credit, and access to services and information) can be accessed; family relations, be they supportive or constraining, can be particularly important for young people in the early stages of building a livelihood.

It is within an opportunity space shaped by both geography and social factors that an individual young person gravitates toward certain available work opportunities and away from others. This process reflects personal (individual) interests, aptitudes, and attitudes (i.e., toward risk, travel, etc.), as well as chance. It is true that the factors shaping opportunity space as we have outlined them here do not account for the rare innovator or entrepreneur who is able to imagine and act on something within an opportunity space that is simply not visible to others. However, it is critically important that those making policy and designing programs for rural young people do not get so caught up in the rhetoric of empowerment through entrepreneurship that they begin to believe that large numbers of young people are, or will be, able to become entrepreneurs. In other words, when entrepreneurship is defined as “any attempt at new business or new venture creation, such as self-employment,” it obscures the fundamental relationship between entrepreneurship, innovation, and job and wealth creation.

Our basic argument is that characteristics of the rural location on the one hand and social difference, norms, and relations on the other, shape the opportunity space for members of particular social groups in particular contexts. The resulting opportunity space can be analyzed in terms of depth, diversity, and dynamism,¹⁰ characteristics associated with the types and densities of work opportunities available to different social groups. In other words, for different social groups, some opportunity spaces will contain more, and more varied, prospects for agriculture-related promotive or transformative work than others, a fact that must inform policy and program design.

Before leaving the discussion of opportunity space, we note that many people in rural Africa, young people included, are involved in several different economic activities, either in parallel or in sequence.¹¹ This phenomenon of livelihood diversification may manifest itself as a shifting mix of farm and nonfarm activities, both in the short term and over the course of a working life, and it draws attention to

different understandings of the notions of work and career. We also note that many rural young people, both men and women, will at some point exploit part of their distant opportunity space; for example, through temporary or longer-term migration. However, rather than cutting all links with the rural world and agriculture, a decision to explore (and exploit) the distant opportunity space can result in new capital, skills, information, and networks being incorporated into the rural economy. A longer-term view of the dynamics between the near and distant opportunity space, and between rural and urban areas, is therefore essential.

While it is certainly possible to identify examples of promotive work in rural Africa, these must be seen against a background of widespread and persistent rural poverty associated with protective and preventative work.¹² However, to achieve impact at scale will require promotive work to become the norm. This implies real structural change, which is unlikely to be an overnight (or painless) process. In any case, at least as agriculture has modernized in other contexts and regions, the creation of large numbers of promotive jobs has not generally been observed. This picture changes somewhat if the focus shifts from production agriculture to the agriculture and food system more broadly, where urbanization, changing patterns of labor force participation, and rising incomes result in increasing numbers of formal-economy and potentially promotive jobs in areas such as transport, processing and manufacture, food retail, and catering.¹³

Central to the arguments in this essay is the categorization of work presented above and the factors determining the presence (or absence) of opportunities at the promotive–transformative end of the continuum within particular opportunity spaces. In the next section, we extend this analysis by drawing on the considerable feminist scholarship around the concept of social transformation, and the need to challenge norms of behavior that structure advantage and disadvantage if the status and position of disadvantaged groups are to be transformed.

TRANSFORMATION, SOCIAL RELATIONS, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Important and longstanding bodies of scholarship address the particular social, economic, political, and psychological dimensions of youth, as well as the various challenges faced by young people as they begin to make their way in the world. However, young people in rural Africa do not figure prominently in this literature, and when they do appear, the focus is mainly on health, HIV/AIDS, and risky sexual behavior.¹⁴

For this discussion, therefore, we draw primarily from feminist scholarship. This is logical in the first place because of the various ways in which age and gender intersect, and because the understanding of power and power relations that is at the heart of feminist and gender analysis provides insight into these interactions. Second, as we have already indicated, the experience and opportunities of young people are gendered, and feminist literature provides some critical insights into the implications of gendered life experiences that can inform the design and implementation of development programs.

But we need to focus first on the link between development and transformation, particularly as we start with the conception of development that has poverty alleviation and social justice at its core. Feminist scholars and activists use the term “transformation” to refer to a change in the status and position of women (described as subordinate) relative to men. Transformation comes about through individual but especially through collective action that challenges entrenched institutions and power relations. Women’s agency is placed at center stage, but it is recognized that their ability to act may be limited. In relation to work, the focus is on the relative terms and conditions of employment for men and women, but more broadly on the relative value attributed to work done by men and women in all sectors and domains, including unpaid domestic work. In this context, transformative work is as much about being in a position to exercise choice as about the work per se, and the struggle is against women’s “constrained inclusion” and “adverse incorporation” into labor markets.¹⁵

This understanding of transformation contrasts with the narrower notion of women’s economic empowerment that is common currency in much development practice. Here the emphasis is on individual women having control of their assets and income; as such, economic empowerment is presented as individual self-fulfillment, with clear ownership rights incentivizing individual as opposed to collective action. The anticipated economic and social impact of this model of empowerment—including expectations that women will forgo their own needs and interests in favor of their children and household—are then used to justify state and development agency investment that promotes women’s economic activities. A focus on women’s empowerment thus becomes “smart economics.”¹⁶

The major limitation in this conception of economic empowerment is the fact that men and women exist and act within a network of social relations, and, moreover, that to some extent these social relations (with spouses, siblings, parents, friends, kin group members, etc.) both enable and constrain action. Decisions are seldom taken or implemented by men or women in isolation, with no reference to joint interests and projects or to the interests and projects of others. Thus, a simplistic conception of individual decisionmaking and individual action can be dangerously misleading.

We find these contrasting views of transformation and social relations useful because young people, whether male or female, also depend on support from others—on their social relations and networks—as they start to explore the local opportunity space, enter the world of work, and begin to build their livelihoods. Assistance comes in many forms, and parents and/or the domestic unit is rarely its only source. For example, our work with young, male, cash-oriented tomato growers in Ghana demonstrated clearly that the success of their activities depended on sisters, mothers, or aunts preparing their daily food; on family or others providing (through rental arrangements or otherwise) access to scarce riverside land; and on working together with friends on one another’s plots at peak times. These young men were anything but atomized, isolated, or individualized economic actors. On the other hand, the fact that in many cases they were not encumbered by other

social relations and obligations—arising, for example, through marriage or childbirth—gave them additional room to maneuver. There is a sense that young people, and perhaps particularly young men, occupy a social space where the rules are relaxed, thus giving them additional latitude to experiment and explore.

Although we are arguing that social relations must be taken seriously when both analyzing opportunity space and promoting individual entrepreneurial activity, we are at the same time forced to recognize the importance of social difference in determining which individuals can make use of particular opportunities. This is especially important in relation to young men and young women, largely because of entrenched views of what is appropriate behavior for one or the other at different points in the transition to adulthood, and the way in which these influence policy design, implementation, and outcomes.

Ideally, we should be seeking to understand the work and income-earning decisions (of young people, adults, households, and families) in the context of their economic and social lives as a whole. This would then shift the focus toward a greater understanding of the interdependency and linked lives of men and women, both within households and families and across generations. While network approaches and life-course analyses are well established in the social sciences, to date they have gained little traction in development practice. This kind of approach would specifically help to highlight the changing ways men and women engage in agriculture, rather than working on the assumption that one size (e.g., professionalized farmer) fits all, and at all times. It would also force us to agree that neither transformation nor empowerment look the same for everyone, nor are they fixed or permanent states.

This brings us to the links between transformation and economic empowerment on the one hand and entrepreneurship on the other. What is the theory of change supporting entrepreneurship as a key development intervention for rural young people? We suggest that in practice the entrepreneurship agenda is less about transformation in the feminist sense of changing structures and power relations (although there are initiatives to engage young people in political processes¹⁷) and more about the inclusion of rural youth in the current structures and power relations. While this might be construed as a staged approach that initially emphasizes promotive over transformative work, there is no indication that this is actually the case, or that transformation in the broader sense is even on the agenda.

There is a real risk that the rhetoric of transformation and entrepreneurialism (with images of innovation, new opportunities and markets, risk-taking, but above all significant job creation—and implying at least the potential for transformation) is being used to mask initiatives that in reality are much less ambitious. Our sense is that many of these are essentially about creating opportunities for self-employment and petty trade, which may not have much potential to be promotive, to say nothing of transformative. To confuse self-employment and petty trade in the informal sector with entrepreneurship is not helpful.

If this analysis is anywhere near the mark, there are important questions to answer about the potential nature and scale of the anticipated development impact

(i.e., How much new work? Will it be promotive? Where will it be located? Who will be able to take advantage?), about value for money, and so on. It also raises questions about the potential effect on the challenges, processes, and dynamics that worry policymakers and development specialists; for example, under- and unemployment, the migration of young people from rural areas, aging farm populations, and the progressive hollowing-out of rural communities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we are left with the question of whether small-scale agriculture (or agriculture of any scale or type) combined with microenterprise provides a credible basis for economic empowerment or transformation at scale; if it does, where, under what conditions, and for whom is this likely? More broadly, what does this imply for the jobs agenda across both rural and urban areas?

POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

The new policy and development interest that has coalesced around young people, agricultural production, and work in rural Africa is clearly to be welcomed. However, in this essay we have argued that if policy and programs are to be successful they will need to be much more firmly grounded in life-course analysis and an appreciation of the various ways that rural men and women might use agriculture to serve their needs and interests. Such a social and economic analysis must be context-specific and must address difference and diversity in relation to both rural locations and young people. Critically, it also must highlight the social and relational aspects of young people's lives and worlds. We have suggested that the notion of opportunity space provides a framework that can facilitate such an analysis.

More nuanced analysis along the lines we suggest should result in policies and programs that are better grounded in the reality of difference among both young people and rural locations. It is also important to begin to trim the unrealistic expectations generated by the rhetoric of empowerment through entrepreneurship. At present there is little evidence about how, in what situations, or for whom these programs deliver promotive or transformative work opportunities. Furthermore, much more needs to be done to understand the likely effects of the modernization of the production side of African agriculture on the availability of promotive or transformative employment opportunities for young people in rural areas.

While it is tempting to conclude that agriculture can and should be a central part of the solution to the employment problems faced by the present generation of African rural young people, we suggest that the real development challenge is in relation to future generations. If the transformation of African agriculture, and the agrarian economy more broadly, proceed apace, the critical questions over the next five to ten years are these: How many and what kinds of agriculture and food-related jobs will be created? Where will they be located? What knowledge and skills will be required? What kinds of education and training programs will be needed? Now

is the time to address these questions systematically. While entrepreneurship will certainly have a place, the young people who engage with the agriculture and food sector will increasingly do so as employees of formal-sector businesses. Crucially, the sector's ability to attract and keep young talent will depend on the degree to which these positions are at the promotive–transformative end of the work continuum. However, if demand for these types of jobs continues to outstrip supply, with the exception of reputational risk, there may be little motivation for the sector to move in this direction.

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1. N. A. Anyidoho et al., “Young People and Policy Narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa,” FAC working paper 32. Brighton, England: Future Agricultures Consortium, 2012.
 2. See for example “A synthesis of the Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) Approach”, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC: Berne, 2008.
 3. For example, Getnet Tadele and Asrat Ayalew Gella, “A Last Resort and Often Not an Option at All: Farming and Young People in Ethiopia,” *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 6, 2012. On the other, hand some have argued that young people are leaving agriculture not because of a lack of interest but because changes in agrarian relations result in them being denied access to land. K. S. Amanor, “Family Values, Land Sales and Agricultural Commodification in South-Eastern Ghana,” *Africa* 80, no. 1, 2010. Others suggest that where there are business opportunities, young people who are keen to will go into agriculture, and to innovate. F. Proctor and V. Lucchesi, *Small-Scale Farming and Youth in An Era of Rapid Social Change*. London: IIED and The Hague: HIVOS, 2012.
 4. “Social protection describes all initiatives that transfer income or assets to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised; with the overall objectives of extending the benefits of economic growth and reducing the economic or social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised people.” S. Devereux and R. Sabates-Wheeler, “Social Protection for Transformation,” *IDS Bulletin* 38, no. 3, 2007: 25.
 5. C. Okali and J. Sumberg, “Quick Money and Power: Tomatoes and Livelihood Building in Rural Brong Ahafo, Ghana,” *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 6, 2012; J. Sumberg and C. Okali, “Tomatoes, Decentralisation and Environmental Management in Brong Ahafo, Ghana,” *Society and Natural Resources* 19, 2006.
 6. See, for example, S. Barrientos, C. Dolan, and A. Tallontire, “A Gendered Value Chain Approach to Codes of Conduct in African Horticulture,” *World Development* 31, no. 9, 2003.
 7. See P. Kantor, U. Rani, and J. Unni, “Decent Work Deficits in the Informal Economy: Case of Surat,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 21, 2006.
 8. See J. Sumberg et al., “Introduction: The Young People and Agriculture ‘Problem’ in Africa,” *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 6, 2012; T. Painter, J. Sumberg, and T. Price, “Your ‘Terroir’ and My ‘Action Space’: Implications of Differentiation, Movement and Diversification for the ‘Approche Terroir’ in Sahalian West Africa,” *Africa* 64, no. 4, 1994.
 9. S. Wiggins and S. Proctor, “How Special Are Rural Areas? The Economic Implications of Location for Rural Development,” *Development Policy Review* 19, no. 4, 2001.
 10. N. Bosma, S. Wennekers, and J. E. Amorós, *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2011: Extended Report: Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurial Employees Across the Globe*. Babson Park, MA: GEM, 2012, p. 9.
 11. Depth refers to the number/extent of particular types of opportunities; diversity refers to the diversity of opportunities both within the agricultural sector and across other sectors; dynamism refers to the rapidity and extent of change.
 12. F. Ellis, *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000.
 13. B. Baulch, ed. *Why Poverty Persists: Poverty Dynamics in Asia and Africa*. Cheltenham, England: Edward Elgar, 2011.

14. For example, in the UK the agrifood sector broadly conceived is a major source of work; however, many of these jobs are not located in rural areas, and the sector is characterised by low-skill and low-pay jobs. C. Lloyd, G. Mason, and K. Mayhew, eds., *Low-Wage Work in the United Kingdom*, Russell Sage Foundation Case Studies of Job Quality in Advanced Economies. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.
15. Some notable exceptions include P. Richards, "To fight or To Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)," *African Affairs* 104, no. 417 (2005); P. Richards, "A Systematic Approach to Cultural Explanations of War: Tracing Causal Processes in Two West African Insurgencies," *World Development* 39, no. 2, 2011; G. Porter et al., "Mobility, Education and Livelihood Trajectories for Young People in Rural Ghana: A Gender Perspective," *Childrens Geographies* 9, no. 3-4, 2011; T. Langevang and K. V. Gough, "Diverging Pathways: Young Female Employment and Entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Geographical Journal* 178, 2012.
16. P. Kantor, "Women's Exclusion and Unfavorable Inclusion in Informal Employment in Lucknow, India: Barriers to Voice and Livelihood Security," *World Development* 37, no. 1, 2009.
17. M. Buvinic and E. M. King, "Smart Economics," *Finance and Development* 44, no. 2, 2007; S. Chant and C. Sweetman, "Fixing Women or Fixing the World? 'Smart Economics', Efficiency Approaches, and Gender Equality in Development," *Gender and Development* 20, no. 3, 2012.
- 18 Dolf J. H. te Lintelo, "Young People in African (Agricultural) Policy Processes? What National Youth Policies Can Tell Us," *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 6 (2012).