CHAPTER 3

Youth
Including Africa’s Young People in Food Systems

VALERIE MUELLER, GRACIE ROSENBACH, AND JAMES THURLOW

Valerie Mueller is an assistant professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, USA, and a nonresident fellow in the Development Strategy and Governance Division, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, DC, USA. Gracie Rosenbach is a research analyst and James Thurlow is a senior research fellow in the Development Strategy and Governance Division, IFPRI.

KEY FINDINGS

■ Africa’s working-age population is growing by 20 million a year, and by 2050 will be growing by 30 million a year, raising questions about whether the region can create enough jobs for young people.

■ Concerns should not be overblown—the share of young people in the working-age population peaked in Africa at roughly 38 percent in 2001, not much larger than the peak share in other developing regions during their own “youth bulges.”

■ Africa’s rural areas and food systems will have to play a bigger role in absorbing young job seekers than they did in other regions, given the continued growth of rural populations.

■ Opportunities in food systems for youth may be overestimated: Young farmers who are familiar with information technologies are not necessarily more likely than their elders to adopt improved inputs or increase productivity. Nor are they more likely to operate or work for a nonfarm enterprise or to migrate to large urban centers.

■ Broad-based development policies that create opportunities for all rural people may do more to support the growing youth population than polices designed specifically for youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Focus on broad-based growth, not just on youth, to create an economic environment in which food system businesses can thrive and generate jobs for both young and old.

■ Invest not only in education but also more broadly in sectors such as transportation and energy infrastructure to create inclusive food system opportunities.

■ Create more vibrant rural economies and support policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing youth’s long-term economic prospects, which in turn will cultivate trust in government among young people.
Almost 20 million people join the working-age population every year in Africa south of the Sahara (henceforth Africa). By 2050, that number will rise to 30 million a year and Africa will become the only region in the world contributing to growth in the global workforce (Figure 1). The absolute scale of Africa’s “youth bulge” raises questions about whether, in today’s more globalized and competitive world, the region can create enough job opportunities for young people, or whether much of Africa’s youth will be “excluded” from the benefits of economic development.

It is not surprising then that many view Africa’s rapid population growth with some anxiety: African governments are concerned by the prospect of widespread youth unemployment, which could spark mass protests and threaten stability. Governments elsewhere in the world are concerned by an even greater exodus of African youth from the continent in search of work and a better life abroad. Yet these concerns may be overblown. The challenge of creating jobs for young people is not as daunting from the view of African countries themselves as it is from the perspective of developed countries with smaller populations. In fact, when the share of young people in the working-age population peaked in Africa at roughly 38 percent in 2001, it was not much larger than the peak share had been in other developing regions during their own youth bulges in the 1970s and 1980s. The need to emphasize employment for Africa’s youth does not imply that Africa has a “youth problem.” Moreover, while Africa as a region is experiencing a youth bulge, its timing varies widely across countries (Figure 2). In South Africa, for example, the share of youth in the workforce peaked in 1976, whereas it will only peak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2027. The pressure to create more jobs for young men and women is therefore unevenly felt within Africa.

What is clear from population and poverty projections, however, is that Africa’s rural areas and food systems will need to play a bigger role in providing work for the region’s youth than they did elsewhere. A distinguishing feature of Africa is that it continues to experience high rural population growth despite rapid urbanization. Urbanization does create new work opportunities, but the capacity of Africa’s cities and towns to absorb enough young job seekers is limited. Thus many (and in some places most) African youth will need to find jobs in agriculture or the rural nonfarm economy.
**FIGURE 1** Changes in the global workforce (1950–2100)


**Note:** Uses population data and projections from the United Nations and includes 203 countries/dependencies recognized by the United Nations and the World Bank’s country groupings. Working-age population is all people aged 15–64.

**FIGURE 2** Peak year and size of African countries’ youth bulges (1960–2030)


**Note:** Uses population data and projections from the United Nations and includes 203 countries/dependencies recognized by the United Nations and the World Bank’s country groupings.
It is here where concerns about exclusion, or the quality of inclusion, emerge. Increasing land scarcity in many African countries poses a major challenge for would-be young farmers. And young entrepreneurs, like many people in Africa, often lack the financial capital and other resources to start nonfarm enterprises. These problems are well-known and will need to be overcome if rural youth are to take advantage of the opportunities created by growing food demand in African cities.

While Africa’s youth bulge stirs anxiety in many observers, others view the continent’s growing youth population as cause for optimism. Despite facing significant challenges, these young men and women could play an instrumental role, both on and beyond the farm, in transforming Africa’s food systems. Global experience shows that as countries develop, off-farm components of food systems become more important, creating new job opportunities in sectors like food processing and trading (Figure 3). Evidence from East Africa confirms that many of these downstream job opportunities are in rural areas, where up to two-fifths of nonfarm enterprises are in manufacturing, including food processing.

Young people are generally better educated than their elders and are often more comfortable with new technology. African youth may therefore be well-suited, so the thinking goes, to participate in the expanding and more remunerative parts of food systems. By adopting modern farm technologies, starting nonfarm businesses, or migrating to cities and towns for work, young people could help rural households raise and diversify incomes. This more positive outlook on population growth sees young men and women becoming the “agents of change” that Africa’s food systems sorely need.

**FIGURE 3** Off-farm segments of food systems grow in importance as countries develop (circa 2015)


*Note:* Uses national accounts and employment data from 96 countries. The downstream agrifood system includes all agriculture-related processing, input production, and trade and transport, as well as accommodation and food services. GDP is gross domestic product and per capita income is based on gross national income, both measured in constant 2011 US dollars.
MYTH VS. REALITY

The new IFPRI book *Youth and Jobs in Rural Africa: Beyond Stylized Facts* cautions against both unbridled optimism about the potential role of rural youth in the food system and undue alarm over the possibility of widespread youth unemployment and consequent political and social instability. The good news is that Africa’s agriculture sector is transforming and that fast growth in the downstream components of food systems can be as effective at reducing poverty as growth in agriculture itself (Box 1). This means that investing in food systems should not only create jobs for young people but also help to combat the growing concentration of global poverty in rural Africa.

**BOX 1 GROWTH IN DOWNSTREAM FOOD SYSTEMS REDUCES POVERTY**

Many studies find that agricultural growth is more effective than nonagricultural growth at reducing poverty. While this is often used to justify public investment in agriculture, it also implies that food systems’ historically strong relationship with poverty reduction may weaken as its off-farm components become more important. Simply put, expanding food systems may not create the kinds of jobs that employ the working poor or benefit poor households.

Dorosh and Thurlow (2018), however, find that this apparent trajectory stems largely from the literature’s tendency to overlook the diversity of nonagriculture sectors. Using economywide models for five African countries, the authors estimate poverty-growth elasticities (PGEs) for detailed subsectors. The PGEs in Figure B1 show the percentage decline in the national poverty rate for every one percent increase in national GDP driven by different sectors. Agriculture’s PGEs are higher than nonagriculture’s overall, but only when nonagricultural subsectors are lumped together. A decomposition reveals that growth in food-system-related nonagricultural subsectors, such as agro-processing and trade and transport, can be as effective as agricultural growth, if not more so, at reducing poverty. These subsectors also grew much faster than agriculture in East Africa during 2000–2015, implying that growth in the region’s downstream food system may have contributed more to poverty reduction than did growth in agriculture. This bodes well for Africa’s rural youth seeking work beyond the farm.

**FIGURE B1 Poverty reduction from growth in agrifood subsectors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malawi</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Nonagriculture overall</th>
<th>Agro-processing subsector</th>
<th>Trade and transport subsector</th>
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<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>Nonagriculture overall</td>
<td>Agro-processing subsector</td>
<td>Trade and transport subsector</td>
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However, the book’s five country case studies reveal the diversity of African youth and the dangers of relying on “stylized facts” about how easily young people can participate in food systems. A careful look at the evidence suggests that, contrary to expectations, young people are not always in the vanguard of transformation and are often excluded or are benefiting less than adults are from economic growth. It is therefore critical that we move beyond generalizations and ensure that our understanding of rural youth and their policy needs is grounded in country-level evidence.

It is a common assumption that having more educated young farmers who are familiar with information technologies could lead to higher agricultural productivity, as they would encourage adoption of modern farm inputs and management practices. But evidence that young farmers are more likely to adopt improved inputs is mixed, and even when they do, the effect on productivity may be small. In Ethiopia, for example, youth-headed households are less likely to receive and use advice from extension officers and, more importantly, less likely to use improved technologies such as fertilizers and seeds.\textsuperscript{11} Young farmers in Malawi also tend to use fewer modern inputs than older farmers, although this changes once the young farmers become heads of their own households.\textsuperscript{12} In Ghana, it is the better-educated farmers, not young farmers per se, who use improved technologies.\textsuperscript{13} So it does not automatically follow that having a younger rural population raises farm productivity.

Another stylized fact is that young people, given their higher levels of education, are better-positioned to start and run successful rural businesses, including food processing and food service enterprises. Surveys suggest that this is true in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tanzania, where youth are far more likely than their elders to operate or work for nonfarm enterprises.\textsuperscript{14} Yet even if young people are driving growth in rural nonfarm employment, the nonfarm sector itself is not always a major driver of rural transformation. In Ethiopia, for example, the nonfarm sector remains very small; in Senegal, family-run businesses often result in youth working for free; and in Ghana and Tanzania, young people are more likely to engage in low-productivity occupations, like informal trading, than to work in the formal sector.\textsuperscript{15} Even when youth are actively participating in their countries’ transformation processes, it may still be their elders who benefit more. In short, young people’s education is a crucial asset, but on its own can neither guarantee individual success nor singlehandedly ensure rural transformation. Of course, investing in education, especially for girls, tends to reduce fertility rates, and this would eventually slow down population growth and reduce the number of young job seekers.\textsuperscript{16}

Finally, it is widely believed that rural youth are more likely than their older counterparts to migrate. Evidence from Malawi and Tanzania supports this. Moreover, when young people migrate to cities and towns, their higher-paying urban jobs help to diversify rural households’ incomes through remittances.\textsuperscript{17} Yet few Malawians or Tanzanians actually move to urban centers. Rather, they are far more likely to migrate from one rural area to another, and doing so imposes a cost on those left behind (Box 2). Even when youth in Malawi and Tanzania do migrate to cities and towns, many continue to devote at least some of their time to working in agriculture. In fact, evidence from Ghana suggests that jobs associated with the food system are more prevalent in peri-urban areas surrounding small towns than in big cities. So, while youth are more likely than their elders to migrate, the importance of urban migration, especially to big cities, for young people in finding jobs beyond the farm should not be overstated.

In summary, young men and women are already participating in Africa’s food systems, and in some countries, they are helping to raise farm productivity, start nonfarm businesses, and take advantage of urban job opportunities. However, their continued inclusion is not assured without supportive policies and public investment programs.

**BETTER POLICIES, NOT YOUTH POLICIES**

Creating rural employment in the food system will be key to ensuring that African economies can avoid the prospect of widespread youth unemployment. However, Africa does not have a “youth problem,” but rather faces the broader challenge of promoting inclusive economic transformation. Africa must provide better jobs for younger and older workers alike, all of whom aspire to higher living standards and better working conditions.
Older workers in Africa will also need to move out of agriculture and into the broader food system and economy as the process of structural change unfolds in their countries. That said, even a broad-based development strategy that targets all workers must pay special attention to its effects on youth employment.

Creating jobs for young men and women is already a major policy goal in most African countries, but the means of achieving this goal are not always well-represented in current policies. Experts in the development community are largely divided between those who promote youth-specific policies and those who advocate broad-based development policies. The former tend to be strongest on labor supply issues, such as promoting self-employment and improving youth education, but they are weaker on labor demand issues, such as stimulating private sector job creation.

This uneven focus implies that it is an underinvestment in young people’s capabilities that is preventing them from finding decent work. However, as discussed above, education alone is not a panacea. Broader-based policies and investments are needed to create an economic environment in which businesses that employ and are run by young and older people alike can thrive. Young people need policies that produce better economic opportunities—not policies that narrowly focus on youth capabilities. This means investing not only in education but also in areas such as transportation and energy infrastructure.

While the scale of policy reforms and actions needed to create more and better jobs for Africa’s growing workforce is daunting, there is now a clear alignment of interests and incentives. African governments have made youth employment a policy priority, and African youth are demanding policies that improve their job prospects. While evidence suggests that young people in Africa are only slightly more likely than adults to protest, youth protests are more often motivated by concerns about unemployment.

To avoid the possibility of dissatisfied young people taking to the streets en masse, governments need to cultivate greater trust among the youth, not only by creating more vibrant rural economies, but also by improving dialogue with young people to enhance their role in decision-making processes.

Young women and men need assurances that government policies and initiatives are aimed at enhancing the youth’s long-term economic prospects rather than simply at mobilizing short-term political support. African governments can prevent widespread youth unemployment just as other developing regions have, but doing so will depend on policies that help whole economies flourish and create better jobs for everyone.

**Box 2: Youth Migration Has a Cost for Those Left Behind on the Farm**

Although rural-to-urban migration among youth (ages 15–24) in Africa is quite low, young people are increasingly moving within rural areas for work. Given the high prevalence of youth migration, Mueller et al. (2018) shed light on the net benefits that youth migration yields for rural households in Ethiopia and Malawi. While the migration of the sons and daughters of household heads can increase the incomes of typical agrarian households, it may also leave them with a shortage of labor to prepare, cultivate, and harvest the land.

Using panel data from the Living Standards Measurement Study–Integrated Surveys on Agriculture in both countries, the authors find that the migration of young men, in particular, increases the burden of farming activities on family members left behind. In Ethiopia, adult female family members experience increasing time burdens on the farm as a result, while in Malawi it is younger male family members who must pick up the slack. In spite of the induced labor constraint on households, the migration of young men results in an overall net income gain to households in Ethiopia. In contrast, migrant households in Malawi face net losses. These losses coincide with an increase in household expenditure on hired labor, presumably to substitute for the absent migrant on the farm. The findings highlight the increasing importance of diffusing labor-saving technologies in these areas in order to enable households to diversify their income outside of the agriculture sector without compromising their main livelihoods or the welfare of other family members.

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