



# The future belongs to the youth

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A few years ago, I was at a forum – organized by the Africa Leadership Forum in Nigeria – when the convener, during his welcome speech, asserted that the problems of Africa started with the pioneer African leaders who were not prepared for leadership but had it thrust upon them by circumstances and fate. He said, they were so desperate for political freedom and self-determination and concentrated their strength so much on the fight that they did not know what exactly to do with the freedom when they got it.

Recently, as a member of different youth groups – especially in the areas of agriculture and environment – that advocate for the voice of the youth to be heard and for youth to be given “real” seats at the tables where decisions affecting their lives and future are taken, I have had cause to revisit and ruminate over the similarities of this assertion about the pioneer African leaders vis-à-vis the modern youth and their quest to be heard and be taken seriously.

Incidentally, I have been teetering on the fringes of the fine line between acceptance and rejection of this view – that the current generation of youth is spending much of its time on striving to have a voice and participate in decision-making but not preparing much for what to say with that voice or do when eventually the decision-making space is ceded to them.

For some time, my rational/realistic side has been seeing reasons to agree but my youthful/idealistic side keeps disagreeing with this espoused view vehemently, with the belief that my generation will be different.

But, not long ago, at the Africa Agriculture Science Week in Accra, that decision was nearly made for me when I stumbled on the Foresight programme of the Global Forum for Agricultural Research ([GFAR](#)), one of the 51 side events of the conference and to my dismay found that the



youth were grossly underrepresented despite being well represented at so many other side events with little or no bearing on the youth agenda.

The Foresight programme, “a forward-looking” initiative, is a programme which seeks to anticipate problems or issues in the areas of agricultural research for development and, according to the Foresight roadmap, strives to “integrate a range of perspectives and diverse views of all stakeholders” – including farmers, women and the youth – in solving these problems. Also, it examines the identified issues through various lenses and present a coherent and sustainable solution based on this all-inclusive approach.

The main goal of the Global Foresight Hub is to shape how agricultural innovation and knowledge can best help to address the impending global challenges in agricultural productivity; meet increased food demand resulting from a burgeoning global population, and improve the global food and nutritional security. These future challenges are inevitably diverse and knotty, combining food security problems with socio-economic, environmental and sustainability concerns – in a complex tangle.

Therefore, the Foresight Hub adopts a participatory approach that blends the expertise/experience of the older agricultural and development experts – as guardians of the present – with the energy, drive and innovative abilities of the youth in agriculture – as custodians of the future. Naturally, it is a hub in which one would expect and encourage many young people to participate as eager learners and active stakeholders who will sooner or later have to shoulder much of the responsibilities and perform the tasks needed to feed the world.

Besides, the Global Foresight Hub employs a process that involves three approaches, which – in combination with the participative approach earlier discussed – include the prospective and planning approaches. This not only enables it to be forward-looking but also builds into it the ability to set priorities and engage diverse stakeholders and knowledge sources.

In all, for me, it is a hub whose programme focuses on the topmost agenda of the youth – the future – and one of those to focus attention on if young people truly want to influence the future of agriculture and by extension their own future.



## Fostering youth participation in the Foresight Hub

Although, young people many times possess the energy, creativity and ideas to solve or contribute to solving many problems, oftentimes they are inhibited in taking action by a host of factors like lack of adequate information, lack of resources and – probably the most important – lack of unified and coherent platforms to air their views among others.

Opinions/analyses from many areas have shown that, to a large extent, youth – especially those in the developing world, where there are no structures or where structures available are ineffective – generally lack access to capacity building and participatory platforms, and are often a disadvantaged segment of the society.

As a result of this, youth communities or networks have sprung up the world over to canalize the thoughts of young people in different spheres/fields and to lobby for the youth's position and put forward their perspective in dialogues/discourses geared towards solving critical development issues. It is to this end that a network like the Young Professionals' Platform in Agricultural Research for Development (YPARD) was formed, and has continued to serve the youth in agriculture.

Having recorded a lot of successes in its core objectives, still, the YPARD network needs to do more to bring to the awareness of young professionals the importance of their participation in the Foresight Hub which has a bearing on their most important concern – the future. YPARD, with its strong links and broad appeal can leverage on its visibility, acceptance and membership across all regions to help bring more youth into the Foresight fold and, on the other hand, also help bring more present youth concerns to the fore of the hub's discourses.

The network can achieve this by acting as a bridge i.e. by bringing the many positive narratives of Global Foresight Hub to the youth's attention, while at the same time showcasing the reports of programmes with successful youth inclusion template to stakeholders. By so doing, the youth get the chance to contribute to decisions affecting their future, while the Foresight Hub gets a constant lifeblood supply of young people eager to join its ranks and therefore aid its sustainability – and a mutually benefitting relationship is forged.



## The need for Youth involvement in Foresight activities

By 2030, the world's population is expected to rise to 8 billion people and further to over 9 billion by 2050 ([Toulmin and Godfray, 2012](#)). Many of the activities of the Global Foresight Hub today are geared towards feeding this rapidly increasing population by 2050 ([Bruinsma, 2012](#)) and at the same time promoting a sustainable future out of the many alternative futures especially for today's youth – whose heritage and wellbeing depend, and who are going to be more affected, by the decisions taken today ([Millenium Ecosystem Assessment Vol. 2, 2005](#))

For instance, in Africa alone, more than 300 million young people will be coming into the labour market over the next twenty years ([RuralStruc, 2011](#)), and there is need to plan for this significant injection into the labour force through identifying the alternative futures available and working to achieve the most appropriate one(s). Moreover, by 2050, the resultant age of today's youth between the ages 21 – 30 years will be between 58 – 67 years with majority of today's older youth on the cusp of retirement.

Hence, the argument for the active involvement of youth in the activities of the Foresight Hub is not for the purpose of diversity of opinions or inclusion of all stakeholders alone, but because the success or failure of all activities of the hub – scenarios building, anticipatory research and all – will depend on enabling today's youth to key into its programme and make it their own for the sake of viability and sustainability ([Global Foresight Hub Brief](#)).

Besides, as they age, many among this category of young people are going to be the researchers and development workers generating the necessary outputs needed to keep the Foresight Hub on its course, while others will be the drivers and implementers of the ideas and research outputs being generated. In all, the practicality of the Hub's agenda rests on passionate youth being grafted into its programmes and processes.

Yet, for this to work out well, young people on their part must realize that being young and vocal do not automatically confer the right to be heard on anyone, neither does it give an automatic seat at the table, but that the ability to bring something real and tangible to the



discourse, the capacity to bring fresh ideas and perspectives, and the courage to follow uncharted courses in solving problems are all that matter.

The youth should not only knuckle down to solve existing problems of agriculture and food production systems, especially as relating to climate change and the finding of alternative adaptation or mitigation opportunities for the different agricultural production systems and in the diverse agroecosystems ([Thornton et al., 2013](#)), but also need to develop the ability to anticipate problems/challenges and proffer possible solutions.

Furthermore, where there are existing knowledge gaps, there is need for the youth in the various fields of agricultural research for development (AR4D) to close the gaps by embarking on cutting-edge researches that do not stop at plugging these knowledge gaps but also go ahead to provide useable, durable and economical solutions ([ibid](#); [Requillart, 2012](#)).

All these will not happen without major support and input of the older ones – especially in the areas of research and policymaking – who young people will inevitably depend on to provide resources and guidance. Still, the youth will have to demonstrate the readiness not just to acquire vital authority but to bear the responsibilities that come with it.

We must show the willingness and readiness to lead. This is where programmes like that of the Foresight Hub come in; to offer necessary training in skills needed for handling complex future situations and to provide a platform to interact with and learn from older researchers, experts and policymakers on whose shoulders young people can stand to project into the future.

Because, although the future belongs to us (the youth), – unlike the pioneer African leaders of the post-independence era – we must be prepared for the task we seek to undertake. Likewise, we must rise up now to determine the kind of future we inherit (and subsequently handover to our children) so that we do not just take over the future given to us but create, together (with the elders), the sustainable and enriching future we desire.



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