



**Message from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
on the occasion of the 17th International Day of Cooperatives**

“Youth, the future of cooperative enterprise”

Youth are an asset for agriculture

Youth form a large proportion of the global population. They represent a valuable asset and an important potential labour force for countries in which they constitute the majority of the population. According to UNFPA, there are 1.2 billion adolescents in the world, of which, nine out of ten live in developing countries and 55% reside in rural areas. In many regions, young farmers are the future of agriculture and rural development. They are usually endowed with a sense of innovation, creativity and dynamism. Young women and men farmers are the entrepreneurs of tomorrow and can potentially overcome the food security challenge.

And yet, recent riots all over the world demonstrate the dissatisfaction and frustration of younger generations who feel uncertain and desperate about their future. Youth are faced with unacceptable levels of unemployment. In 2009 in North Africa and the Middle East, youth unemployment reached 24.7% and 22.3% respectively. In addition, an estimated 400 million youth worldwide – or about one third of all youth aged 15 to 24 – suffer from a deficit of decent work opportunities. The vast majority of jobs available to youth are low paid, insecure, and with few benefits or prospects for advancement, particularly in rural areas. Around 25 percent of all youth are employed, but live on less than the equivalent of US\$ 2 per day (ILO, 2010).

Compared to urban populations, rural populations suffer from higher levels of poverty, more limited education and training, poorer access to information and technology, as well as more restricted access to labour markets. This situation is particularly acute for young farmers who face a myriad of constraints that are specific to their condition. These mainly include limited access to productive assets and markets as well as high transaction costs, in particular when young farmers take over inherited farms and settle in farming for the first time.

In many developing countries, young farmers are ignored in policies and programmes. This is partly a result of weak farmers' organizations and cooperatives which often fail to represent their interests. As a result, rural youth, including young farmers, tend to have lower aspirations than their urban peers. There is often a disconnect between youth's potential and their actual access to resources.

Cooperatives can empower youth

Young women and men farmers have the drive and capacity to modernize and innovate. For instance they increasingly use ICT's such as mobile phones and social media tools, in order to share information. Evidence shows that in some countries, younger household heads who are engaged in farming tend to derive a higher income from their agricultural activities than older household heads. This is probably because the younger generation is more open to new crops and technologies that can produce higher yields.

Producer organizations and cooperatives often represent an effective means of empowering farmers, especially the marginalized categories such as women and youth. By forming their own cooperatives or taking part in mixed-age ones, young farmers can gain access to a wide array of services ranging from access to and management of natural resources, information, technologies, and participation in policy making. Through their organizations, young

farmers can improve their livelihoods and thus refrain from migrating to overcrowded urban centres. They become empowered and active agents of change, and entrepreneurs and promoters of social transformation in rural areas.

Policies and approaches to strengthen youth participation in cooperatives

Young women and men farmers represent a real asset for the future of the agricultural sector and rural development in many countries. To develop the potential of the younger generation of farmers, specific programmes and policies targeting young women and men farmers need to be put in place at regional, national and local levels. These measures need to be accompanied by appropriate resource allocation plans.

In coordination with relevant stakeholders including young women and men farmers, Governments can help to create enabling environments that strengthen the capacities of existing independent young farmers' organizations and facilitate the creation of new ones where they do not exist.

To ensure that their needs are addressed, mixed-age cooperatives need to raise the awareness of their members and put in place the right governance structures, such as young farmer committees and boards, to encourage the effective participation of young women and men farmers in their activities and decision making processes.

It is only under these conditions that young farmers will become the leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow, capable of harnessing the full contribution that the rural and agricultural sectors have to make to national and global economies.