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YOUNG AND PROUDLY AGRICULTURALIST, GHANA EXPERIENCE

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BY

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Summary

It is an undeniable fact, that agriculture is the backbone of growing economies in developing countries. It will continue to contribute to the major part of the Domestic Gross Products (GDP) for many years to come. It is therefore imperative for developing countries to pay particular attention to promoting sound agricultural policies that would enhance food security, provide a solid business platform and mitigate poverty. It is also a very important fact that the youth commands a major portion of the population in developing countries. Investing in people particularly the youth to explore entrepreneurial initiatives in agriculture would provide a panacea for increasing unemployment among the youth, and overall growth in developing countries economies. This paper attempts to discuss critical issues that pose a challenge to the engagement of youth in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa (using Ghana as a case) whilst exploring the opportunities necessary to inspire and encourage the youth's participation in agriculture. The paper recounts the success story a youth who has embraced agriculture as a viable profession and vowed to inspire the youth in his community to explore the prospects of agriculture. Finally, the paper outlines the communiqué that was ratified by all the youth participants at the workshop.

Introducing the Youth

Various definitions have been given by diverse and reputable organizations who particularly hold interest in the affairs of the youth. The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. This definition was made during preparations for the International Youth Year (1985), and endorsed by the General Assembly. Many countries also draw a line on youth at the age at which a person is given equal treatment under the law – often referred to as the "age of majority". This age is often 18 in many countries, and once a person passes this age, they are considered to be an adult. However, the operational definition and nuances of the term 'youth' often vary from country to country, depending on the specific socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors (*United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development, 2010*). The Commonwealth Youth Programmer defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 29 years.

In Africa, some countries have adopted the United Nations (UN) definition of youth (15 to 24 years) while others use the Commonwealth definition (15 to 29 years). For policy purposes, the age range can be even wider. In some African countries, such as Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania, the definition of youth used for policy purposes ranges from 15 years to 35 years. In Nigeria, it ranges from 12 to 30 years. South Africa's National Youth Policy defines youth as any person between the ages of 14 and 35 years (Mkandawire 2000)

Youth as a target of Agricultural Programmes

Approximately one billion youth (15-24 years) representing 18 % of the total population live in the world today according to the United Nation. In Africa, about 145 million youth represent close to 16% of the total population (*World Population Prospects, 2006*). In sub-Saharan African, young people under 30 years are the major population segment, especially where about 80% of the youth live in rural areas where agriculture is the principal occupation.

According to Ghana Living Standard Survey 4 (2000), Ghana's population is generally quite young; about 5 out of every 10 persons are less than 20 years of age. About 69 percent of the population is under 30 years of age with about 74% of the population is under 35 years (0-34 years).

There is compelling evidence of an ageing farmer population in sub-Saharan Africa including Ghana which must be addressed to facilitate sustainability in agricultural production and by extension food availability from internal production. Studies have shown that average age of farmers in the farming communities in Ghana is between 50 and 60 years, or majority of farmers are over 50 years (La-Anyane, 1985; Dankwa, 2002; Bosompem, Kwarteng, and Ntifo-Siaw, 2010) with life expectancy in Ghana at 56 years according to World Bank Development indicators. The countries risk a drastic decline in food production and related agro-businesses if young farmers are not motivated and attracted to replace the ageing farmer's population. Increased productivity in the agricultural sector depends on youths who comprise 30% of the population in the Ghana (GLSS4, 2000). The energy that youths possess and the fact that their number are significant in regard to the population provides tremendous opportunities for increasing agricultural productivity (Lalji, 2009).

The unemployment situation in Ghana can be said to be a youthful phenomenon. The age group of 15-24 years, recorded unemployment rate close to about 30% (GLSS4, 2000) which is more than twice that of the 25-44 age group and more than three times that of the older age group, 45-64 years. Given the many opportunities available in Agriculture and related businesses, it can play a significant role in reducing youth unemployment in the Ghana. The provision of productive alternatives to engage the youth may contribute to the reduction of social vices in the society. The availability of real income generating options in agriculture can offer opportunities preventing and indeed rehabilitating young persons whose alternative options are not socially acceptable nor responsible (Lalji, 2009).

The youth can have an impact on the development of rural communities as leaders, activists, organizers and citizens while they are developing skills. Youth are keys to development in rural areas both in agriculture and community development.

Challenges of Youth in Agricultural Development

A boost in agricultural production in Ghana through commitment and increased participation by youth would provide the needed catalyst to revitalized Ghana's economy to become food self-sufficient and aid towards achieving the first millennium development goal. However there are certain obstacles that threaten the active youth participation in agriculture:

Ghana's annual food import bill is estimated at \$500 million. This is expected to soar up given the increase demand for exotic products. Whilst Ghana occasionally experiences seasonal glut of food products at the farm gates, lack of storage facilities or appropriate drying technologies renders surplus food useless as they are left to rot. Farmers tend to be risk-averse following post-harvest losses which may lead to the decline of national agricultural production and output levels. If these trends should continue, the availability of food in the country over the next 20 years will be dependent on imports which may put heavy burden on our foreign exchanges earnings, and make the country vulnerable to catastrophic events and other exogenous shocks that may have negative impacts on food production. The significant increases in the price of food due to regional and global economic crisis and upward movement in oil price are issues of relevance.

Agriculture particularly farming has long been labeled as an occupation for aged, illiterate, and rural folks. This misconception persists and poses a great challenge to food production in spite of effort to erase that mindset of youth especially the educated ones. The poor image of persons involved in agriculture does not offer the youth the needed incentives to venture into agricultural production. Highly educated youth harbor the perception that agriculture is a job for illiterate and school drop-out, the poor and rural people (Okorley et al, 2006).

The lack of appropriate transitional mechanisms to replace the ageing farmers population with young ones may pose severe risk to the production of food within the country in the next 10-20 years.

Opportunities for Youth Involvement in Agriculture

Sufficient evidence exist to suggest that, there are better opportunities and great prospects within the agricultural sector. There is a high potential for accelerated growth in Ghana economy if sound agricultural policies are implemented to make agriculture an attractive profession, to empower and invest in the youth development for agricultural production.

Ghana's agricultural sector has experienced an average growth of about 5 percent per year during the past 25 years, making it one of the world's top performers in agricultural growth, according to the Overseas Development Institute. There is a vibrant and growing market for agricultural commodities for export and domestic market. This current status of progressive growth provides a suitable environment for the youth to thrive in agriculture as a viable economic and business option.

In recent years, incentives and policies that target youth involvement in agriculture are put in place to encourage young persons. For instance, in a recent development, the Minister of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) disclosed that a total of 47,000 youths have so far been employed under the Youth in Agriculture Block Farming Programme (YIABFP) initiated by government in 2009. The government intends to expand such programs to absorb the youth across the country. Other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Funding Agencies have instituted programs encourage the youth to enter into entrepreneurial ventures in Agriculture.

There is a higher recognition of youth as forming an integral part of the development process of the country. To this effect, the National Youth Policy was enacted to empower and prioritized the agenda of the youth. The policy makes provisions an active participation of the youth in modern agriculture through some instituted programs which offers tremendous opportunities for the youth to become self-reliant and to earn good income from agricultural activities.

Encouraging rhetoric on agriculture continues after the hike in the prices of agricultural commodities, the increasing food import bill, climate change issues and the financial crises which has created a high level of interest in the region in agriculture.



Paul (middle) with his siblings showing some vegetable products from his farm

Success story of youth in agriculture

Paul Kamanga's story

Paul Kamanga is a 21 year old native of Zanlerigu in the Talensi Nabdam district in the Upper East region of Ghana. As early as 10 years, Paul harbored a dream of migrating down south to seek greener pastures. His dream was fired up by the occasional return of his fellow natives from the South with fancy electronic gadgets and bicycles that signified wealth acquisition in his society.

In 2005, Paul's dream became a reality when he finally arrived in Kumasi. However, his excitement and zeal was to be short-lived when Paul discovered the kind of menial jobs his fellow natives do. He was even more disappointed to know that most of friends do not have decent shelters but rather sleep in the open in front of stored or obscured places. Paul was never told about hardship and the difficult conditions that exist in the South. In his moment of sadness and deep thought, Paul began to contemplate on his return home. But the decision to return was not entirely in his hand. Paul's transportation fare was paid by a fellow native who help him to come to Kumasi and therefore he had to work and pay back the money. Again, he also needed money for transportation back home.

Paul recounted the ordeal he endured in his quest to make ends meet, sometimes sleeping on an empty stomach. After a year and half of hardship, Paul decided to return home with the little money he has accumulated. Coming back empty handed was not a pleasant story. Paul risk being labeled as a lazy person due to his failure to return with some "goodies" such as the electronics and bicycles that his fellow natives bring along. But Paul was not perturbed. He would rather endure this ridicule than to face the harsh life in Kumasi.

Back to his village, Paul decided to return to farming. This time, thanks to the provision of a small dam he began cultivating vegetables during the dry season on a small piece of land. During the first season of harvest, Paul was amazed at the amount of money he was able to generate from the harvest: 4 times the amount he made in a year and half of hard labor in the South. Inspired by the first harvest Paul expanded his farm during the next season. Over the years, Paul acknowledges the positive impact of this profession on his life and his family. Paul stands tall and proud in his family as he is well position to even pay his younger brother school fees. Paul sees himself as a youth ambassador to inspire the youth in his village to engage in farming which has proven to yield more returns than yearning to make that trip to the hassling life of the South.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having recognized potential role of the youth in contributing to agricultural revolution in Ghana, it becomes imperative to develop long term comprehensive programs that would attract and inspire the youth to actively participate in agriculture as a career. Such programs may include mentoring the youth, agricultural ambassador and entrepreneurial components that would bring out the talents of innovation and initiatives in the youth. Mentoring programs would identify successful young agriculturist to share their experiences with the aim to inspire the youth, and guide them. Ambassadors may be selected to spread the ‘message of hope’ on the youth in agriculture in order to motivate the younger generation.

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[Frequently Asked Questions Youth at the UN website](#).

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Communiqué

A Call for Stronger Support for Youth Involvement in Agriculture

At the end of the workshop, nearly 30 of us young agricultural development workers, emerging researchers and university students, representing 18 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries unanimously issued a communiqué on issues debated upon concerning agricultural policies and their impact on youth participation in the sector:

Policy Support Needed

We strongly believe that our novel and strategic technological use, ingenious nature, enthusiasm and demonstrable successes must be substantially matched by equally thoughtful, dynamic multilevel and relevant agricultural policies across the ACP group of countries. We recognize that the situation varies across the ACP group, but the reality is similar in key respects. In many ACP countries agriculture accounts for upwards of 50% of gross national product and youth, irrespective of how it's defined, constitutes a large portion of the citizenry. In Africa, more than 60% of the population is engaged in agriculture. Yet, youth involvement in the sector remains astonishingly low, while unemployment among our peers remains consistently high across the ACP block.

Policy Recommendations

Recalling the renewed international recognition of the importance of agriculture for our countries, we urge ACP governments and institutions to aid us in addressing this key developmental problem, notably by engaging us in a meaningful dialogue around the following policy recommendations:

Agricultural Studies

Recommendation 1: A thorough revision of the curricula used across the ACP group of countries. This MUST reflect the dynamism of the agricultural sector by including courses and modules that equip students with the skills to write and implement business plans, appreciate, utilize and develop ICT tools.

The absence of agriculture from the curriculum, particularly at the compulsory levels of education in some ACP countries is untenable. The current mode of education in most developing countries is geared towards educating white collar workers, which doesn't reflect the economic and social context for which we are being trained. This is not to suggest that ACP countries shouldn't plan for economic expansion, however those plans should not negate the existing needs of the economy.

One response is to encourage partnerships with the education sector to integrate agriculture into the primary and secondary school curriculum meaningfully. In many instances, agriculture is incorporated as an optional component that is taught with minimal enthusiasm; its broad based and compulsory inclusion with the appropriate resources will help to motivate youth towards having a more favorable view of employment opportunities in the agricultural sector.

Research and Educational Incentives

Recommendation 2: The Provision of a mixture of favorable scholarships, tuition grants and concessionary education and research loans to those under age 35 who are keen to pursue studies in critical areas of agricultural and rural development, such as agronomy, agricultural extension biotechnology, food science and technology, agricultural engineering, agricultural chemistry and water management. The current university structure in most ACP countries favors the Arts and Social Sciences, sectors for which our economies are expanding too slowly to provide enough employment opportunities. This should be complemented with improved learning facilities.

Capacity Building

Recommendation 3: Fund and pilot a robust peer-extension, localized training on good agricultural practices, agro-processing and an ICT officer program to aid young and emerging farmers master their trade and boost capacity in far-flung regions and urban areas alike. This may also be integrated into national youth service programmes. We also advocate greater resources for researchers at universities in ACP countries who are focused on unearthing solutions to agricultural challenges.

Our collective experience shows that a critical mass of young people in ACP countries are interested in pursuing careers in the field of agriculture, but they are hamstrung by limited skills, knowledge and training opportunities. Resolving these intractable problems requires urgent attention. ACP economies are bound to benefit immensely given the need to reduce food imports.

Financial Aid

Recommendation 4: Create a legible, collateral free micro-credit environment that offers incentives tailored to the financial needs of young farmers, and ICT software developers who are focused on rural development and agriculture. In the short term, we also call on ACP governments to allocate funds (loans and grants) specifically for young farmers and ICT software developers.

ICT Proliferation

Recommendation 5: The establishment of regional ICT incubators over the next five years to develop contextual and efficient technological responses to agricultural problems. This should complement the process of decentralization which we urge ACP policy makers to accelerate immediately. Central to this effort is an emphasis on training to boost the capacity of farmers and trainers to ensure the effective application of ICTs in the sector.

There is relatively limited use of ICTs in the agricultural sector across the ACP region. The adoption of ICTs and other new technologies in agriculture is highly dependent on the quality of the trainers, who are usually extension agents. The training of a cadre of highly proficient extension agents is crucial for the successful implementation of the recommendation above. This will require improvements in communications and transport infrastructure.

The Law, Gender and Marginalized Youth

Recommendation 6: The provision of legal structures to facilitate enhanced participation of the youth in ICT, particularly women, physically challenged youth and marginalized youth with the required skills and interest is vital. We forthrightly endorse the prioritization of these groups in land reform programmes. We also urge ACP countries to meaningfully institutionalize youth involvement in agricultural policy making, giving full consideration to the varying needs of men and women and the different demands they face.

Access to resources in developing countries is often skewed towards groups that exclude young people, especially women and youngsters from marginalized communities. This is exacerbated by the limited legal structures to guarantee equal opportunities for young people, particularly women and youngsters from marginalized backgrounds. The development of ACP countries hinges on creating equitable opportunities for all backed by firm and clear laws.

We acknowledge that the recommendations that we have made are not sufficient to redress the full scope of challenges faced by budding farmers in ACP countries. Nonetheless, these six key policy endorsements are essential to any effort that will aid us in altering the unsavory image and diverse challenges in the agricultural sector in the ACP group. We are eager to continue the dialogue with interested parties-policy makers, activists, young farmers, researchers and all those who share our cause.

Let's make ACP countries a tenable place for us to live, learn, work, develop and call home! In accordance with an African Union head's recent statement, we want to say "Let's start feeding the ACP through new technologies: LET US ACT NOW!"