

Africa's youth want to cultivate careers, not just crops

By [Sylvia Ng'eno](#)

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By 2050, sub-Saharan Africa will be home to a third of the world's young people, who will play a key part in feeding future generations. No region is this phenomenon of having more young people in the future more apparent than Sub-Saharan Africa.



A farmer watering plants Copyright: Image by [Qui Nguyen Khac](#) from [Pxabay](#)

However, the fact that young people in Sub-Saharan Africa often view agriculture as inefficient, socially immobile and technically uninteresting has led to a situation where the average age of Africa's farmers is 60 despite the median age being 19.

Threat and solutions

The combination of an ageing generation of farmers, high rates of youth unemployment and a rapidly growing population poses a significant threat to Africa's agricultural sector and future food security. As farmers grow older and young people move away in search of job opportunities, who will be left to feed the continent?

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Involving more young people in farming is clearly crucial but major shifts in power dynamics and perceptions are needed to ensure that Africa's next generation embrace agriculture. To attract Africa's next generation of farmers, we must highlight how agriculture can be a profitable and rewarding enterprise.

And with limited access to financing, markets and land, young people must also be empowered with continuing support and investment in order to overcome these obstacles.

Directly involving them in the agricultural supply chain and enabling them to develop skills and knowledge is essential, and central to the approach of our non-profit enterprise called Producers Direct.

Working with more than a million smallholders across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, we have learnt that to engage young farmers, we must also provide opportunities to access funds, training and markets.

With young smallholders comprising more than a fifth of our farmer-led network, giving them important roles throughout the agricultural supply chain and providing them with continuous training and support has enabled them to develop leadership skills and vital knowledge.

For example, we currently have ten youth coordinators, 29 youth agents and 118 youth leaders providing essential services to smallholders – from digital tool support and market linkages to on-farm diversification assistance so farmers can branch out into producing and selling new crops.

Youth farmers bundle these products and sell them at markets, earning commission for their work and enabling smallholder producers to earn a profit.

Youth-focused initiative

Since January 2019, more than 3,000 farmers and young smallholders have received training through this pioneering model. Five Youth Forums have taken place so far across East Africa, bringing youth members together for mentorship and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing.

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The development and deployment of digital support services is also central to this youth engagement initiative, for instance with FarmDirect. The service application provides farmers with real-time information through easy-to-understand charts, enabling them to gain market access, make better business decisions and improve crop yield and quality.

Youth coordinators and agents have been actively involved in the continuous testing and use of the application from the start — gathering data from farmers in paper form and digitalising this into the central database. Selected youth members have also participated in the co-design process, helping ensure that local farmer needs are met as the application is scaled out to new user groups.

Benefits of the initiative

By appealing to the technical strengths and economic ambitions of younger people, this modernisation allows them to build local agricultural knowledge, learn from older farmers and ultimately carry their legacy into the next generation. Also, by spreading the use of these digital tools, it mutually benefits older smallholders too, providing opportunities to access new forms of financing and reliable markets for their products.

Thus, while the notion that the youth are the future of food security is nothing new, for young people to be driving the

agricultural sector forward, we need to continue investing in them. Technology alone is not enough to engage future farmers but the potential it affords young people to finance, build and grow agri-businesses should not be underestimated.

The way forward

We must continue opening up lucrative opportunities that empower young people to embrace innovative tools, reshape perspectives, and give them leadership roles to carve out new enterprising routes that drive the agriculture sector forward.

Only then will Africa's fast-growing youth population be able to cultivate a more fruitful farming future for themselves.

[This piece](#) was produced by [SciDev.Net's sub-Saharan Africa](#) English desk.

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