

## Youth is the key to unlock Africa's agriculture potential

*Wandile Sihlobo argues that African governments must come up with concrete policies to attract young people to the agricultural sector.*

With the agricultural sector seen as an epicentre of growth and development across the African continent, many (myself included) have argued that the sector needs to attract young talent in order to maximise its potential. Some agricultural leaders and policy makers have placed the blame on young people, arguing that they show little interest in the sector – preferring sophisticated office jobs. On face value, this is believable.

In the past few months, however, I have met a number of young South Africans who are motivated and interested in joining the agricultural sector. All ask the same questions: Where do we start? Is it possible to access productive land and some mentorship? How do I access potential funding and financing? Some have already started small operations and are now struggling to join the formal market.



An irrigated field in the Limpopo Basin in South Africa

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These questions arise because South African policymakers have not clearly articulated the path for young people who are interested in joining the sector. For agricultural professionals, though, the road is clear – you obtain a university degree, then join an agricultural institution or government agency. In fact, this seems to be the path that most leaders have been emphasising and understandably so, as it is an essential part to achieving success in this sector. That said, there is still no clarity about support measures for those who are interested in joining the production side of the sector, such as being a farmer.

To be a farmer, one needs good productive land. There are young people willing to leave their 'sophisticated' careers in other industries and enter agriculture, but are encountering funding challenges, which in turn means no access to land. So no matter how ambitious they are, without capital their options are limited.



Accompanying these challenges is an abundance of underutilised land in the rural areas from Eastern Cape, Limpopo to Kwa-Zulu Natal provinces. Perhaps it is time that policymakers review the laws governing communal land and devise new strategies that will accommodate agricultural youth activities. One solution would be to give these youth title deeds, or a tradeable long term lease, so they can acquire capital and then link them to organised agriculture for mentorship and access to global export markets.

Most unemployed young people are from rural communities in these provinces. By giving them an opportunity to work the land, it will not only uplift them but will benefit our entire society by decreasing unemployment and increasing skilled labour. More importantly for the continent at large, about 45 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's population is below the age of 15 while farmers in this region are ageing, with the average age of a farmer in South Africa being 62.

A recent study by Michigan State University and Stellenbosch University agricultural economists entitled [Megatrends Transforming Africa's Food Systems](#) have championed the potential role that youth could play in the sector. Interestingly, with the current youth unemployment level in South Africa and the region at large, the study notes that over the next two decades 330 million young Africans will be entering the job market looking for work. In order to prepare for this influx, governments will need to improve the agricultural sector and maximise its potential, and that needs to be done very soon.

Land policy and public investments could, to some extent, improve the situation and raise profitability and attractiveness of the agricultural sector. This is a situation which could be desirable for the youth, governments, and our society at large.

I must emphasise that it is not enough to promote the sector and its major potential to absorb the youth and grow the African economies, without creating a clear path for youth participation. Governments across the continent could outline the ways in which they plan to involve young people. In doing that, they should not just advise students to get agricultural degrees, rather there should also be a drive to assist a pull of new farmers to productively utilise unused land across the continent. The potential of African agriculture is as bright as the strategies which are being crafted to unlock that potential.

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

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