INTRODUCTION: The rapidly expanding labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is driven by the growing youth population. While this may present opportunities for social and economic development as there is potential for the youth in SSA to contribute to economic growth, the continent is still faced with the challenge of high unemployment levels. Youth employment and entrepreneurial opportunities particularly those in rural areas of the developing countries remain limited, poorly remunerated and of poor quality and as such, countries in SSA face the challenge of absorbing a large cohort of youths entering the labor markets (FAO 2014; AGRA 2015; Yeboah and Jayne 2017).

Youth Employment in Zambia: What Opportunities Does Agriculture Offer?

By

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Key Points

1. The agricultural sector has strong potential to employ the labor surplus that youth in Zambia provide. There are immense opportunities in the primary production, secondary and tertiary segments of the agriculture value chain. However, the sector is still faced with a myriad of problems affecting its performance and policies that increase the participation of youth in agriculture will enhance the job creation performance of the sector.

2. For long, there has been a negative perception among the youths towards a career in agriculture. The education curriculum shapes the student to be an employee rather than an employer. This is coupled with limited agricultural skills and trainings, limited access to finances, limited access to land, lack of information of existing opportunities hinder youth participation in the agriculture sector.

3. Investment in agricultural development through infrastructure and skills enhancement is necessary to attract the youths in the sector.

4. The private sector plays a key role in youth employment in the agro-industries however, the prevailing unstable and unpredictable commodity policies prevent employers from planning and investing sustainably in order to grow their businesses and, consequently, expand their employment base.

5. Policy makers need to find means of making agriculture profitable by reducing the cost of borrowing for young people to access capital. The initiatives that promote group savings are important as they help smallholder farmers and agribusiness accumulate capital.

6. There is a need for a change in attitude in order to view agriculture broadly as a value chain that offers employment for youth in various segments. Academic curricular needs to change in that direction and along with young people’s mindsets so as to promote their involvement in the value chains.

7. There is need to integrate ICTs into agricultural programs and interventions. These are necessary to improve the capacity of the youths to engage in the modern agriculture system.

8. To have well-rounded youths, entrepreneurship and financial literacy must be provided to the youths in agriculture to improve their agribusiness skills and their productivity. This can be done with the involvement of both the public and private sector.
Like in most Sub-Saharan African countries, Zambia is faced with a similar challenge of youth unemployment. While the country’s youth proportion of the population was estimated at 35.5% in 2011, the proportion is projected to slightly increase to 36.5% by 2035 (CSO 2013, Figure 6, p. 16) and, thus, continue to supply more youth into the labor market. However, job creation growth has lagged behind population growth for a long time resulting in high unemployment rates for young people. The country’s job market has not been growing at a rate commensurate with the rate of the labor demands especially from the young people, partly due to low agriculture growth rate and growing mechanization in the industrial sector.

To address the pressing need of promoting economic growth and absorbing the youth population in the labor force market, agriculture still remains the key driver in most countries in the African region accounting for 50% of employment. However, the narrative around agriculture in most African countries invokes a story of back-breaking labor and subsistence with agriculture seen as a last resort option for the poor. As such, despite offering employment opportunities, the sector is not so attractive to young people as they prefer to have formal jobs in urban areas, citing backwardness, drudgery, and low profitability. But the limited absorption capacity of the formal sector leaves many unemployed. Further, the 2014 Living Conditions Monitoring Survey show that, among the young people that are engaged in agriculture, the majority are concentrated in primary production (CSO 2015) while the participation rates are low in secondary (industry and manufacturing) and tertiary (services) levels.

Though the agriculture sector in Zambia provides income-generating opportunities for the young people, rural youth participation is agriculture rarely goes beyond primary production. And based on our knowledge, there is little information on challenges related to youth participation in agriculture in Zambia. National policy efforts to address the unemployment challenges need to be guided by evidence-based research findings hence this study bridges the information gap by identifying the opportunities for youth employment in the agriculture sector using a Value Chain Approach (VCA).

DATA AND METHODS: The study involved a desk review of the literature on youth employment and interviews with 47 key informants. The key informants included large and small-scale agri-business employers along the agriculture value chain, policymakers, agro-dealers, grain traders, agro-processors, livestock traders, agriculture colleges and a university, development organizations, and primary/secondary school teachers to determine their perception of youth and agriculture. Among the policy makers interviewed were high-level government officials (Directors) and District Agricultural Coordinators (DACOs) to get their vision and policy directions on youth employment. Other key informants came from educational institutions that prepare youth for employment in the agriculture value chains.

In addition, the study conducted two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a total of 83 youth (farmers and students), in each of the sampled districts, to ascertain their aspirations, motivations, and constraints for engaging in agriculture value chains. However, in a selected few cases, people beyond 35 years of age were still allowed to be part of the group discussions. For more details on the data description and methods see Machina, Namonje-Kapembwa, and Kasoma (2018).

FINDINGS: Five key findings emerged from this study. Firstly, the negative perception among the youths towards a career in agriculture affects their uptake of employment opportunities in the sector.

The education curriculum has shaped the student to be an employee rather than an employer.

Secondly, there are numerous employment opportunities for the youths in primary, secondary and tertiary segments of the agriculture value chain. In the primary production, opportunities available include, crop production, horticulture, livestock, and aquaculture production. Under the secondary segment of the value chain, employment opportunities include primary processing as well as agro-processing industries. According to the Zambia Development Agency (ZDA) profile, both the primary and agro-processing industries account for more than 60 percent of Zambia’s total labor force (ZDA 2016). The government should, therefore, look into boosting wage
employment in the secondary segment of the value chain. Other employment opportunities in this segment of the value chain include trading and retailing. The tertiary segment of the agricultural value chain also offers employment opportunities for the youths such as service provision in training in the education sector, veterinary and spraying, offering extension services and marketing agro produce or as employment contractors.

Thirdly, many young people have insufficient information and knowledge about the diversity of the agriculture industry, hence they perceive agriculture to be unprofitable. Coupled with inadequate education, skills, limited access to finances, land and poor road infrastructures have hindered youth involvement in the agriculture sector.

Fourth, the private sector plays a key role in youth employment especially in commercial farms and agro-processing industries. However, the prevailing unstable and unpredictable commodity policies such as export bans (Chapoto and Chisanga, 2017) prevent employers from planning and investing sustainably in order to grow their businesses and consequently expand their employment base. The high cost of business was cited as the major disincentive for private investors as it limits their ability to invest and compete with international markets. These factors inhibit employment creation as the cost of doing business is high.

Fifth, there is a low adoption of modern technologies in the agricultural sector. Technology promotion is key in attracting youth into the agriculture sector as it does not only boost their productivity but also motivates them. Since they view agriculture as ‘laborious’ and ‘dirty’ and less profitable, promoting technology such as mechanization (ripping with tractors, planters, tricycles, irrigation equipment and combine harvesters) would ease their work and change their perception.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Youth unemployment is a critical challenge that Zambia faces. This study highlighted existing and potential employment opportunities in the agriculture sector that if implemented can contribute towards addressing the problem. The study found immense opportunities in primary production, secondary and tertiary. However young people face challenges in taking advantage of these opportunities mainly due to, inadequate education, skills, information and knowledge, inaccessibility of finance, lack of access to land and tenure insecurity, the high cost of undertaking selected businesses, poor road infrastructure and their own negative perception of agriculture.

The Study Recommends the Following: Paradigm shift: Most participants interviewed have a myopic view of agriculture mainly as ‘farming’. As such, there is a need for a paradigm shift to view agriculture broadly as a value chain that offers employment for youth in various segments. There is need to move from subsistence farming to farming as a business. Academic curricular needs to change in that direction and along with young people’s mindsets so as promote their involvement in the value chains. This includes reorienting youths to develop interests and self-confidence to engage in the various segments of the agricultural value chain.

Addressing skills gap; there is need to focus on closing the agriculture skills gap among the youths. Improving skills acquisition process for youths in Zambia is instrumental in increasing the employment chances of youth entrants in the sector. This can be done through vocational training centers.

Access to finance is also critical for young people as most do not have collateral. Youth targeted financial programmes especially grants to well-selected groups/cooperatives (with benefits accruing to individuals) needs to be considered. Equally, value chain players need to further promote savings groups for youth, especially
females, to affordably accumulate capital. Moreover, well-orientated groups/cooperatives have the ability to access vital agribusiness information and strengthen bargaining power and take advantage of markets.

Infrastructure and promotion of modern technologies is important for youth agribusinesses to thrive. Most rural youths rely on feeder roads to acquire agro-inputs and transport produce to markets. There is a need for government to work on feeder roads to facilitate smooth movement of goods and services to and from the markets. Since young people are adventurous and innovative, promoting Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as phones, radio platforms, and computers would encourage them to engage in the sector. ICTs can help youth access relevant information and knowledge about the type of agriculture production to engage in, the market trends, and available services that can be accessed.

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