

Agricultural Cooperatives

One third of African youth are underemployed or unemployed, or have marginal incomes or limited career prospects (AfdB, 2016, AGRA, 2015). As well, there is a burning need to efficiently commercialise the agricultural sector to enhance food security and create employment for youth. Engaging youth in agribusiness could provide a win-win solution, and agricultural cooperatives could play an important role. Youths would benefit from cooperative membership by accessing opportunities not available to them as individuals.

Cooperatives would benefit as well: young women and men sustain and revitalise (ageing members of) agricultural cooperatives and introduce new ideas and technologies. However, little knowledge is yet available on how to strengthen synergies between cooperatives and youths. An exploratory study, carried out by the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), and the global network of Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD) and Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCDI) and supported by the Food & Business Knowledge Platform, aimed to contribute to current knowledge on youth in agricultural cooperatives by providing insights directly from youth in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

Back to the land

In general, young people perceive farming as a poor man's job, requiring a lot of hard work with little return; parents also prefer to see their children in a white-collar job. A negative perception of agriculture leads more and more young people to move to urban areas for education or employment opportunities. However, formal unemployment is skyrocketing in most African countries (even after graduation). Because they need to make a living, young people return to their rural livelihoods. Some move back by their own will, seeing agriculture as a true income opportunity and feeling passionate about it¹. When turning to agriculture to earn a living, whether due to necessity or opportunity, the youth do face serious challenges such as a lack of agricultural knowledge, or no access to land and financial services. Agricultural cooperatives could play a role in helping young farmers overcome these challenges and, at the same time, sustaining the cooperatives' own relevance.

Key motivation for youth to become members

During discussions with participants from six agricultural cooperatives in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, access to knowledge and training was mentioned as a key reason for youths to join a cooperative. Youth face challenges in accessing training opportunities: often, they are neither organised into groups nor members of agricultural

cooperatives (Guiliani et al., 2016). Also, young farmers in cooperatives gain access to the generational exchange of knowledge as well as peer-to-peer learning, which can be very effective and influential. Young farmers can be role models for each other (inside and outside of the cooperative) in sharing their knowledge.

Another key motivation for joining a cooperative was access to land and financial services for engaging in agricultural activities and economic opportunities. However, none of the cooperatives studied had successful examples of supporting youths in access to land or financial services – despite the fact that involving young people by providing access to land would increase membership, volume of produce, and the sustainability of the cooperative. Providing these services may not be the cooperatives' core business; as long as young people do not engage in productive activities or value addition, they are not, as members, very relevant to co-ops and will not have access to co-op services (e.g., land or financial services). However, if young farmers are to participate in the agricultural sector they need land, finance, and knowledge/skills. So it is a vicious circle: young farmers' expectations towards cooperatives are directly related to fulfilling their need to access productive assets. Though limited, some cooperatives have found innovative solutions to support youth in gaining access to land. For example, cooperatives in Burkina Faso have lobbied village chiefs to convince them to give land to young women in their communities (FAO et al., 2014).

Youth: benefits for agricultural cooperatives?

By becoming members, and by increasing their capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship, youth could be the key to the longevity and sustainability of cooperatives (FAO et al., 2014; MIJARC et al., 2012; Plechowski, 2014). Young people are often more inclined to work with new technologies, and generally have higher levels of education than older farmers. Moreover, the engagement of youth in cooperatives can counteract the alarming pace at which the farming population



Group discussion with young women who are members of dairy cooperative MVIVAMBO. Photo by Ingrid Flink

¹ See some inspiring videos of young agripreneurs in Africa: <http://agribusinesstv.info/en/>



A milk bulking centre of dairy cooperative BIACE in Uganda.
Photo by Chloe Vaast

is ageing. However, it is still common for agricultural cooperatives to be dominated, managed and led by older men. Also, young people, and young women in particular, are scarcely involved in key decision-making processes.

The cooperatives that were part of the explorative study have not recognised, or have only recently started to recognise, the importance and potential of youth engagement for the functioning and sustainability of the cooperative. Senior cooperative members are not always convinced of the benefits of attracting and including young farmers, though youth in Tanzania have been given record-keeping positions because their education level is higher than that of older generations. To top it off, youth are often insufficiently aware of the benefits of being a member of an agricultural cooperative. All of these factors combined lead to limited youth membership.

Recommendations

A summary of recommendations to tackle these challenges include the following.

For policy makers:

- Identify solutions to improve access to land (e.g., land registration and land rental).
- Support collaboration between cooperatives and financial institutions by providing guarantees for loans to youth members.

For (development) organisations and agricultural cooperatives working to promote youth engagement in agricultural cooperatives:

- Offer youth-specific training on good agricultural practices and new technologies, and soft skills such as leadership, negotiation and marketing.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer or mentor systems where (groups of) older farmers and young farmers learn from each other. In the interviews conducted, young female farmers stressed the need to meet other (female) farmers, to have a sense of belonging and to have a chance to share their experiences.
- Establish savings groups linked to the cooperative, with each member regularly depositing a sum of money which can then be borrowed. This practice is quite widespread in Uganda and strengthens social relations and trust among youths.

- Facilitate meetings with microfinance institutions, local government, banks and young members to discuss the possibility of developing tailored financial services.
- Facilitate the establishment of youth councils to strengthen the voice of young farmers, particularly in collaboration with local and regional authorities.

For the private sector:

- Identify and/or create specific jobs within market systems suitable for young people (ICT jobs or off-farm services).
- Improve farm-firm relations by training youth cooperative members and assigning a mentor from the company to guide youth in service provision (e.g., milk transportation, input traders).

For research and knowledge institutes:

- Build an evidence base around the following questions:
 - Does the input of youth lead to more ICT use and new technologies in cooperatives?
 - How can different organisational structures (e.g., cooperatives, networks, associations, groups) contribute to youth inclusion in the agricultural sector?
 - What are good practices/case studies of agricultural cooperatives in supporting youth to gain access to land and financial services?

The full report can be downloaded here: <http://knowledge4food.net/youth-in-agricultural-cooperatives-a-two-way-street/>

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