

# Youth and rural livelihoods

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In rural areas, young people have a major stake in how the natural, economic and social resources of their communities are developed. However, to feel a part of this process they must be given the opportunity to build their livelihoods on their own terms. A major barrier to developing such an approach is the fact that rural development professionals often do not have a clear understanding of how young people in rural areas use local resources in their livelihood strategies. Also, there is a tendency to regard youth as a “problem” rather than a resource and a source of needed solutions. The urgency of the problems facing many small-scale farming communities makes it critical to find ways of using the positive and dynamic capacities of young people. Studying their livelihood strategies is a starting point for developing policies and programmes that take into account the ambitions and initiatives of the young.

## Challenging old perspectives

In many countries little is done to collect information on rural youth. As a result, knowledge about rural youth livelihoods remains fragmented among service providers. Often key rural policy documents make no mention of youth at all, and even when they are mentioned it does not reflect informed policy. Policies relating to youth and rural development tend to fall into two categories. Either youth is seen as a marginal and dependent category, or they are considered a danger to themselves and a problem for society. Both these approaches undermine the capacity of development workers to see young people as a source of solutions to the challenges of rural development.

Negative “stories” about young people are commonplace and difficult to challenge. One well-known story that has strongly influenced development policy and practice concerns the

migration of young people from rural to urban areas. These youth, according to the story, are either unwilling or unable to work at making a living from farming, so they leave the village for the town in search of luxury and ease. When they get there they cannot find jobs, so they turn to crime and other anti-social behaviour, threatening the tranquillity of urban life.

What steps can be taken to build a more balanced and accurate image and understanding of rural youth and develop more constructive policies? We have suggested that one approach is to look more closely at what young people are actually doing to build their livelihoods in the rural areas. Like Chambers and Conway we define a livelihood as the “capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels in the long and short term”.

How youth livelihoods develop depends on the way young people interact with their environment, the opportunities available to them and the decisions and actions they take. If we look at the livelihoods of young people in this way, we are able to get a better picture of how livelihoods are established and the processes of diversification and innovation involved.

## Key dimensions

Do the livelihood strategies of young people differ from those of adults? To answer this question with confidence we need much more detailed information. Data collected in a recent study on rural youth livelihoods in East Africa, however, suggest that the answer is yes. Informants from all generations agreed that youth are more likely to:



A young man in front of bricks he has produced. Money from this enterprise has been used to invest in maize and sugar cane production. The making of bricks is commonly regarded as environmentally damaging, but for this young person, it provides an entry point into the farming sector.

Photo: Author

- undertake enterprises that need heavy and sustained physical effort: “strength” is seen a key asset of young men, in particular – for example irrigation, tobacco production, stone-breaking, or making mud-bricks;
- engage in high-risk enterprises that offer high and/or quick returns: issues of “long-term security” are less important to youth than to older people – for example horticulture;
- develop opportunistic short-term and niche enterprises, especially where they lack clear rights of control over land or other key assets – for example petty trade, hiring of backpack sprayers, battery charging, or performing plays for schools.

These conclusions also indicate that rural development practitioners should look beyond the main focus of household production if they want to get a better picture of how young people actually set about establishing livelihoods for themselves. Although the investigation of youth livelihood strategies may reveal complex conflicts over the access and control of resources, they can throw new light on ways to develop effective rural development policies that make full use of the potential, ambitions and initiatives of each generation.

The Youth Livelihoods Study, funded by DFID’s *Natural Resources System Programme*, shows that many young people establish successful livelihoods by using natural and non-natural resources in such a way that the profit from one is later used to invest in another. It also shows that – in the case of young men in particular – young people work across the urban-rural divide. Finally, it makes clear that although adults often regard enterprises undertaken by young people as short-term and insignificant, they nevertheless earn their initiators status and respect within their own peer group.

If we wish to encourage young people to become more involved in rural development processes, a good starting point would be to recognize the contributions they are already making. To do this we must first learn to put aside our prejudices and look again with fresh eyes. Who do we see before us? That boy with muddied hands and feet, is he a school dropout, or a prospective new entrant into farming? Is that girl simply “playing shop”, or is this a successful businesswoman in the making? And is this young man standing in the market a lazy good-for-nothing seeking an easy life, or someone who has found the courage to leave home to gain experience of the wider world? (see Box 1).

### Sustainability

It is generally accepted that the key to developing a sustainable rural livelihood is the ability to use key resources in such a way that the ability of future generations to meet their own needs remains uncompromised. An important idea here is that sustainability depends on the exchange of information, resources and entitlements between generations. An understanding of how assets and opportunities are passed from generation to generation is of critical importance in developing rural policies and services that are appropriate and effective, especially as far as rural youth are concerned.

However, since rural development professionals tend to focus on the long-term management of natural resources (by adults) as key to establishing sustainable rural livelihoods, there has been a tendency to dismiss the contrasting livelihood activities of young people as unsustainable. For example, livelihood enterprises focused on non-renewable natural resources, such as

### Box 1: Ram’s goldfish: a niche enterprise

Some years ago, during a visit to India, I was just leaving the house of a landless woman farmer when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small handwritten sign stuck to the side of the outside wall. It read: “Goldfish for sale”. The sign was above two containers full of water and goldfish. “Who does this belong to?” I asked. Within a few seconds, Ram, a small boy aged around 13-14, and still in his school uniform, stood before me. He said he had first seen the goldfish in a shop in a nearby town. The fish had been in an aquarium, not for sale, but simply to make the shop more attractive. Ram persuaded the shopkeeper to give him a few fish to keep at home as a hobby. However, he found many of his school friends wanted to own fish as well, so Ram decided to exploit the opportunity. After consulting schoolbooks and neighbours about managing fishponds, Ram began breeding and selling goldfish. By the time I met Ram, he had been running his “business” for about two years. Most of his sales were to other children although some adults also bought his goldfish.

What was the significance of what I seeing before me? Was Ram’s “business” anything more than a young child playing at being “grown up”? Were the pretty fish simply a welcome diversion from the harsh realities of living in a state of poverty? I asked Ram, only half-seriously, how his business was doing. I was surprised by his response. Ram handed me his carefully presented and detailed accounts, kept in a school exercise book, which recorded sales, expenses and profits. The bottom line revealed that the income from this micro-enterprise, though small, was not insignificant given the limited income of the household. Ram’s business, it seems, represented one of a number of small but important strands of opportunity and hope, which formed the complex web of livelihood activity carried out by the members of the family.

brick making, are labelled as environmentally damaging, while the movement of rural youth to the towns is regarded as a drain on rural human resources. Further, the temporary nature of many youth activities and enterprises is seen as reflecting a lack of seriousness and competence.

When we look closely at the way young people try to establish their livelihoods, we see how small-scale enterprises can, over time, grow into more stable livelihood patterns (see Box 2). Young people do not have the same access and control over resources as adults and, in most cases, do not have the opportunity to take part – except as dependents – in the types of long-term enterprises undertaken by their parents. The livelihood opportunities available to young people are often temporary, marginal and labour-intensive and it should come as no surprise that their livelihood strategies reflect these facts.

These early, tentative efforts to establish a livelihood should not be judged against naïve notions of sustainability and “snapshot” judgements of good and bad, but assessed in the broader context of how young people learn and take their first steps towards managing financial and other resources.

### Who are the “youth”?

Every culture or society has its own concept of “youth” and one that is determined by traditions, roles and status rather than physical age. In the development debate there is no agreed definition of youth, which makes it difficult for those who shape and implement policy to share ideas and build a basis for understanding. Youth is usually defined in terms of age. This

## Box 2: Pathway to farming

I met Paul in Uganda in 2000. He was living in a mud-brick house with a tin roof and he owned 3.5 acres of land where he grew coffee, maize and plantain. He felt he had a comfortable life. He had left primary school in 1986 before graduation because of "persistent headaches". He had no family land to work because his father, a tailor, had sold the last plot to buy a new sewing machine in an unsuccessful attempt to revive his faltering business.

Paul's first enterprise was brewing local beer using plantains he had bought from money he earned as a farm labourer. In 1989, using his savings from brewing, he hired two acres of land on which he grew maize and beans. After the first year, following a successful maize harvest, he stopped brewing and bought a second hand bicycle and used it to carry firewood to the nearest town. In 1992, he joined a rotating savings and credit scheme with some friends. The group only stayed together for eight months, but it lasted long enough for Paul to receive a payout. With his money he went to Kampala, the capital, and assisted by a brother who lived there, he bought a bundle of second hand clothes that he brought back to the village and sold on the local market. He used profits of this business to enter into coffee trading, agreeing a price with farmers when the beans were still growing. After harvest, he would dry and hull the beans, before selling to a trader. Profit from the coffee trading was high and after seven months he left this business. In 1995, using money gained from his coffee trade, he purchased one and a half acres of land from a neighbour, ordered enough bricks to build a house and 15 pieces of iron sheet for the roof. Over the next few years Paul continued to expand the farming base of his livelihood at times renting in more land to expand production, and occasionally making charcoal when new land was cleared. When I met him, he was trying, for the third season, to grow some cabbages and tomatoes.

seems a neat and tidy way of doing things until one realizes that, for some organizations, a youth can be anyone between the ages of 9 and 35 years!

It is common simply to regard youth as "not yet adult". Consequently, many rural development workers frame policies relating to youth in terms of what the young need to become adult, instead of being based on the potential of "youth-hood". However, young people do not simply want to become adults. They want to enjoy their lives as young people. At the same time, young people seek both opportunities to earn money to buy the things they want, and opportunities to assert their independence. To do this, they need resources and accessing them will clearly be easier for some than for others. In the eyes of the community, for example, a poor youth may remain a youth longer than his rich friend because he does not have the resources to marry, establish a household and claim full adult status. Therefore, the challenge facing development workers is to recognize the qualities and meet the needs of "youth-hood", while supporting youth in its move toward adulthood.

### Youth as an agency of change

In meeting this challenge, it is important to reflect on the present methods and tools we use to understand rural lives. How often do we fail to consider the views and aspirations of the young men and women looking on silently at the edge of the meeting while we discuss important matters with the respected elders of

the village? Young people often have few opportunities to make their interests and needs known in societies that are governed by principles of age and where control of key resources is expected to remain in the hands of older people. Is this something we should challenge? In many communities young people have no "voice". Current development policy tends to focus on the household and in doing so, centres on the lives of adults. Thanks to the "gender agenda", we now recognize the need to see the household in terms of the particular needs of its male and female members. But how often do we go further, to consider the needs of their children?

We have to look beyond the institutions, organizations and relationships that adults have constructed to guide the young, such as schools and youth-clubs, to recognize the way young people can be active agents of change. Unlike the health sector, where recognition of the skills and experiences of young people have often brought them to the fore in peer-to-peer extension programmes – particularly with regard to HIV/AIDS prevention – rural development agencies have been comparatively slow to recognize the potential of building partnerships with young people. The building of partnerships entails far more than the formal registration of youth groups. It requires rural service providers to put aside their fixed views of what constitutes good sustainable development practices, in order to adopt a more open and inclusive dialogue with young people about their livelihood strategies. It means recognizing that young people already make a considerable contribution to rural life through their innovative approaches that criss-cross accepted boundaries: using books from school to build fish-ponds, selling bricks to buy back-pack sprayers, trading second-hand clothes to hire land. On a more personal level, it means that we must find ways to facilitate the "intergenerational exchange" that lies at the heart of sustainability. Meeting such challenges will not be easy. However, by facilitating collective efforts across the generations, we can look towards a future that will provide sustained benefits for us all, both young and old alike.

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- **Rural Youth Livelihoods Research Project** funded by DFID through its Natural Resources System Programme. [www.youthlivelihoods.info](http://www.youthlivelihoods.info)