

Youth in Food: Opportunities for education and employment

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Migration is a shared global challenge, instigated by rapidly growing town and city populations in Africa and southeast Asia coupled with improved mobility and technology. Many countries have a bottom-heavy population pyramid; an extreme example is Sierra Leone, with (2015) 80% of the population under 35 years of age and just over 40% under 15 (page 35). Young and Rodriguez report in this issue an estimated global total of 1.8 billion people 10 to 24 years old, with youth as the majority population in cities in the Global South.

Youth are on the move: from rural spaces to cities, within countries, between neighbouring countries, and globally as they seek out better lives (see article by Dietz on page 3). What they are moving from includes agriculture – a livelihood broadly stigmatised as backwards and unprofitable. Cities and city jobs, on the other hand, are seen as progressive, with opportunities to prosper. However, the reality is often quite different where cities are expensive to live in, where food and housing are of poor quality, where access to safe water and hygiene are not guaranteed, where personal security can be difficult and there are not enough fairly waged opportunities for many, especially youth and women.

This issue of UA Magazine explores challenges and solutions raised by these migration pressures, with a focus on youth employment in city region food systems. Articles cover Brazil, Canada, China, Indonesia, Liberia, Mali, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and the United States, and small to mega-cities, urban, periurban and rural spaces. This collection explores opportunities for and barriers to youth employment along the entire food system. Discussions often focus on developing rural agriculture or rural food value chains to keep youth from moving. This is not only a limited vision of the nature of migration and the potential of rural agriculture; it also leaves out city region food system opportunities in larger cities, and especially in smaller ones.

Urban, periurban and rural agriculture, as part of broader food systems, offer place-based, practice-centred solutions to common problems in the face of globalisation. Food production and food systems work provide livelihood

possibilities with multiple benefits, including improved meaning and self-esteem, personal and food security through job and food access for youth – who often are under- or unemployed, facing substance abuse, experiencing violence, and/or single parenting.

In a study for Food and Business Knowledge Platform (F&BKP) (2017), RUAF showed that increased recognition of the role of food in responding to various urban sustainability concerns provides new market and engagement opportunities for the private sector and other actors. New players, such as ICT providers and housing agents, have also started to support production innovations such as commercial greenhouse production, vertical farming and food waste reduction.

Horticulture and small animal production, as leverage points for closed-loop multifaceted sustainable change, respond to the need for youth training and meaningful employment in the face of migration and pressures including climate change. This issue of the magazine documents people and communities growing food, building self-sufficiency and food security, and generating income opportunities and empowerment. Among these are collective initiatives such as cooperatives and producer organisations that can help to rehabilitate and join up food producers and people along the food web from seed to eating and beyond. Excellent examples of the potential for co-ops as a platform for youth training and employment in Africa are described in the study in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda emphasising the importance of youth involvement in decision making and peer-to-peer training in general, and in agri-cooperatives in particular (page 40). And in Haiti, of a community centre that transformed vacant land in a stressful environment into a productive space, building community and youth opportunities at the same time (page 19). There, as in many cases reported in this magazine, agriculture is seen as a low-threshold opportunity for young people.

Yet many challenges remain. Fortunately, as reported throughout this issue, these can be tackled. In Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, difficult relations between youth and more senior farmers were addressed through mentorship models (page 40) or farmer training centres. More attention is also needed for profitability, which depends in part on how food is valued. If food availability and improved health through better nutrition and traditional food systems (e.g., *erva-mate* in Brazil, page 38 and *muña* in Peru, page 26) are considered, and the definition of “value” is widened to a social economy vision, then working in agriculture and along



Poultry production at Catbalogan City Agro-Industrial School.
Photo by Ronian Jabon

the food chain could be framed differently for youth and recognised as a vital part of society. To confront perceptions and realities about agriculture, including the stigma of food production as “backwards” and unprofitable, youth are enabled to value traditional food and shown how its cultivation positively impacts urban centres (page 38).

We see, then, that food production needs to be viewed as part of a larger food system connecting urban and rural spaces. Reinforcing such city region food systems is a strategic and effective entry point for achieving food security, social inclusion, employment opportunities, natural resource management and ecosystem services (see earlier issues of UA Magazine). Roots to Harvest in northern Ontario, Canada, is a great example of youth empowerment and building confidence and skills through food and farming, with indigenous and immigrant youth, using a whole person approach. The programme enables learning skills and lessons that are valuable throughout life and in finding employment in food and farming or elsewhere (page 24).

Also pervasive and pressing is the need to invest in youth and provide resources to run programmes and make secure land and credit available. Transportation routes are also needed for connecting rural, periurban and urban spaces to enable access to markets. Illustrated by experiences in Liberia and Mali, the article by Van Soelen and Van Hoolwerff (page 8) unpacks how to start a business and be an entrepreneur, and identifies context-specific projects with high success potential. The article explores what it takes, and the kinds of support young entrepreneurs need. In the box on page 7, F&BKP also reports on experiences that emphasise the need for education, training and coaching of young entrepreneurs, beyond providing them access to finance and infrastructure.

Training programmes such as the Community Food Works for Newcomer Settlement in Toronto deploy food as a tool to

enable settlement, integration and employment (page 12). In documenting the interlinkages between unemployment, low income, food insecurity and poor health, the Toronto programme provides an award-winning example of how credentials help immigrants find meaningful employment. It shows that the food sector is part of the solution and equally relevant for young migrants (see also article from Norway, page 15).

Champions play key roles in raising the profile of youth. In the Philippines, a Schools Division Superintendent leads the agri-preneur training initiative with courses focused on practice-based vegetable and crop production and animal production and marketing (page 21). In Uganda, Nakabaale champions the Camp Green agriculture training programme (page 18), also supported through policies and extension services by Kampala City Corporation. In Chicago, Erica Allen leads efforts (page 22) where urban food initiatives provide youth empowerment, motivation and training to create opportunities in difficult urban environments. This achieves real impact: jobs for youth, formerly incarcerated people and new farmers via training, and food access through mobile markets, school nutrition programmes, and public education. These initiatives all produce remarkable results – yet reliance on a champion can make programmes precarious in the long term.

Policy is needed to support various forms of agriculture so land is available and protected for food (page 32). An FAO consultation (see Resources, page 42) pointed to the need for appropriate innovation as well as building awareness that the food system includes not just growing but also processing, distribution, marketing and food waste management. Policy and programmes must also enable appropriate mentoring, training and knowledge sharing so youth can enter the food sector. Work in Quito emphasises that policy makers must understand youth as a heterogeneous group facing different types of challenges with different needs (Young and Rodriguez, page 28).

Together, these opportunities can be transformative. The articles underscore the importance of valuing youth input into multi-stakeholder processes, to make space for youth to be leaders and active participants and to foster informed risk-taking. As one person interviewed for the article on Sierra Leone explained, “Thanks to my new work as a young urban farmer, my dignity is restored and I now have a future.”

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