

Ignorant snub or reasonable excuse? Young people's perspectives towards farming in Zuarungu in the Upper East Region of Ghana

Joseph Octavius Akolgo

PhD Student, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Ghana.

Abstract

This paper is a segment of a larger study on landlessness, livelihoods, and youth. It begins on the note that youth unemployment is a global crisis and that land holds hope as a pathway to employment creation through agriculture. Notwithstanding the sector's potential, a common orthodoxy associates young people with apathy 'in this field of work', due to their perception of farming as antiquated, unprofitable and 'not seen as a business'. While this paper seeks to explain what accounts for young people's half-hearted attitude towards farming in the *Zuarungu* area, it argues that the commodification of land leads to competition among the rich upper class, which, combined with unceasing increases in population, results in land fragmentation at family and individual levels. Consequently, some compounds and individuals are stripped of land holdings, particularly arable lands, thus rendering them landless. This may be a critical factor in determining youth interest in land, generally, and farming, in particular. This paper contributes to existing research on the subject of the youth snubbing agriculture and contends that blanket explanations for youth disinterest in agriculture cannot suffice for all areas, even in a given country.

Keywords: young people, interest in agriculture, unemployment, farming, landlessness



1. Introduction

This paper is a segment of a larger study on landlessness, livelihoods, and the youth of agrarian societies, which seeks to contribute to an existing body of research and debates on the subject of the youth snubbing or downgrading agriculture, that is, the youth's disdain or lackadaisical attitude towards the sector. It specifically seeks to investigate reasons for young people's apathy toward farming (agriculture).

In contemporary times, the youth 'as a development category' (Sumberg *et al.* 2012:90) have become very central in the development agenda and continue to attract attention from local authorities, national governments, policy makers, academicians, international donor institutions and stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations. Among the factors for this attraction are the persistent and disproportionate unemployment manifestations and distributions across regions and their feared implications for socio-political disorder (Sumberg *et al.* 2014). This situation makes youth unemployment a serious 'crisis' which deserves the 'highest global priority' (International Labour Organization 2012) by national governments and other stakeholders.

However, there is still hope of fixing the unemployment problem through agriculture, which is considered the 'most immediate means of catalysing economic growth and employment for young people' (Filma *et al.* 2014:113). It remains a fundamental instrument for sustainable development and poverty reduction in our times (World Bank 2007) Relying on the prospects of the sector, the World Bank exhorts economically disadvantaged and poverty stricken societies to place their hope for survival in the destiny of the 'new agriculture' with smallholder farming as a conduit for employment creation (World Bank 2007). While the varying meanings of employment or unemployment, particularly in studies on rural populations in Africa, have been problematic, resulting from inclinations to Eurocentric definitions that are often unsuitable and inapplicable to the African situation (Baah-Boateng 2016), this study conceptualises youth employment as engagement or occupation that yields context appropriate (decent) earnings or material rewards for young persons to make them self-reliant.

Statistics show that agriculture is the principal source of generating employment opportunities and earnings for over 90% of rural men and women in Africa (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2009, Filmer and Fox *et al.* 2014). A thriving agriculture sector boosts the rural economy, soars up wages, and progressively 'eliminates the worst dimensions of absolute poverty' (Timmer 2005:5). The role of agriculture in a nation's development cannot be overemphasised, and historically, no country has been able to sustain a rapid transition out of poverty without raising productivity in its agricultural sector.

However, in spite of the sector's glowing attributes and statistically proven potential to resolve the unemployment challenge, a common orthodoxy associates young people with apathy 'in this field of work', due to perceptions of farming being antiquated, unprofitable and 'not seen as a business'. A

common refrain tag educated and ambitious young people with a stark lack of interest in farming, a notion originating from an existing perceived unattractiveness of agriculture. Global 'mounting evidence' strongly suggests 'young people are increasingly uninterested in farming', partly due to 'the downgrading of farming and rural life' (White 2012). This situation results in young people snubbing the sector and, either not giving it a serious consideration altogether or demonstrating half-committed will to its 'futures' (White 2012, Sumberg *et al.* 2014).

It is similarly argued that youth attitude to agriculture leading to the snub may also explained by sheer 'ignorance' as 'many young people *know little of the opportunities and dynamism possible in farming today*'¹ (Filmer and Fox 2014:117). Other hypotheses are political, which tie youth lukewarmness towards the sector to 'chronic government neglect of small-scale agriculture and countryside infrastructure' and other compelling financial factors such as lack of credit (White 2012).

While these theories are tenable, other factors for the phenomenon are not exhaustively explored, particularly the scarcity of land. The importance of land for livelihoods in rural and urban Africa and other postcolonial societies is widely acknowledged (Lund 2011). The question of access is most often a problem for youth. Thus, some literature aptly attributes the youth's poor interest in agriculture 'for lack of access to, or control over, productive assets, especially land' (Swarts and Aliber 2013, Moyo 2003, Amanor 2006b, 2010, White 2012, Filmer and Fox *et al.* 2014, Bezu and Holden 2014, Kidido *et al.* 2017).

The subject of access to land and land rights is a contested area, but must be examined in the context of youth interest in farming/agriculture. 'Access' is 'the ability to benefit from things' (Ribot and Peluso 2003:151). Access, then, is only possible if natural resources exist as '*things*', namely 'material objects' and objects of value. The elements of '*who* does (and who does not) get to use *what*, in *what ways*, and *when*', as explained by the Theory of Access (Ribot and Peluso 2003), are other dynamics in the access process which come into play only because '*things*' exist. Similarly, '*use*' explained as 'the enjoyment of some kind of benefit or benefit stream' (Hunt 1998) is also possible with the existence of '*things*'. In the Theory of Access (Ribot and Peluso 2003:151), 'bundles of powers', located and constituted within 'webs of powers' where 'people and institutions are positioned differently' in relation to resources at various moments and geographical scales', are preconditioned on the possible assumption that there exist '*things*' that can be used.

Hence, youth interest in or indifference to farming can largely be influenced by access to land based on the existence of some sufficient land space before the interplay of the other elements of access put forward by the Theory of Access (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Nonetheless, to examine the issue needs briefly recapitulating or historicising social change that has, in its wake, transformed the world

¹ Emphasis added.

significantly, including upsurge of global land markets in the countryside through neoliberalism, an agenda that has encouraged spiraling ‘development of indiscipline in land markets...’ (Tzikata and Yaro 2013), causing access to land to be determined by ‘market logic and individualistic norms’ (Abudulai 2002, Yaro 2010) in certain parts of Africa and particularly, Ghana.

While liberalised land markets have fuelled competition over land, demand for land is also compounded by increasing population, fast-growing urban settlements, and encroachment of agricultural land (Moyo 2003, Cotula and Neves 2007). The overall effects of these developments have ‘resulted in landlessness...’ (Kasanga and Kotey 2001:iv), which cannot be considered as non-threatening and isolated from factors that may influence young people’s turn away from or attraction to agriculture/farming.

This study primarily seeks to explore how landlessness plays a significant role in youth interest and attitude towards farming (agriculture) in the *Zuarungu* area of the Upper East Region. Other factors contributing to the snub were also explored. It also attempts to address blanket explanations for youth disinterest in agriculture mostly based on ‘common knowledge’ (Aliber 2013), which cannot suffice for all areas, even in a given country.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section discusses the study context and methodologies adopted. The second part discusses the findings about why youth in the research area turn away from agriculture, while the third comments on the inappropriateness of blanket explanations for young people’s apathy towards farming/agriculture and provides concluding observations and remarks.

2. Research area and method

The study area is located in the savannah ecological zone of northern Ghana. The enclave is a microcosm of a bigger reflection of northern Ghana, which graduated from colonial neglect and discriminatory development policies to the post-colonial quagmire of cyclical poverty. The colonialists adjudged the area to be destitute in mineral wealth, valuable timber, rubber, kola nuts, ‘nor indeed any product of trade value’ (Bening 1990:178, Whitehead 2006, Yaro 2013, Grischew 2006, Government of Ghana 2005). Post-colonial political managers have embarked on half-hearted policy implementation tinged with unbridled corruption and incompetence, which have characterised the area’s transformational trajectory.

Specifically, the research was carried out in the *Zuarungu* area of the Upper East Region, an active agrarian cluster of communities, a few kilometres to east of the regional capital, *Bolgatanga*. The study area is wider than the name suggests, and, in reality, transcends the town, traditionally known as *Zuarungu*, and entirely covers one of Ghana’s new districts, created in March 2018 –The *Bolgatanga* East District. It has ten electoral zones that serve as conduits for mobilisation of socio-political participation and development.

The area has historically been a densely populated area (Quansah 1972). As a newly created district, its statistics are still integrated into the data of its mother municipal area, which the Ghana Statistical Service (2014) pronounces to have a youthful population of 37.0% below 15 years. In this municipality, 60% of households depend on agriculture.

Youth interest in or lukewarmness towards agriculture, which largely hinges on access to land, can be better understood if properly situated in the context of traditional land administration in northern Ghana. Prior to colonialism, land tenure was anchored on communitarian ideals, where membership from a common ancestry utilised land resources and completely depended on it for their livelihoods (Chimhowu and Woodhouse 2006, Yaro 2010). Local norms and age old trusted practices still prevail in this system, largely revolving around moral economy tenets and conventions, with very flexible negotiable opportunities to specific communities (Agbosu *et al.* 2007, Zackaria and Yaro 2013). The system had in-built usufructuary rights and tenorial obligations, which made the arrangement 'a source of social security and continuity' of the group (Kasanga 1996:89). For this reason, if not for leasing, selling land was forbidden according to customs and traditions (Cardinal 1921:62).

However, in the era of neoliberalism, this principle of communal ownership of administering land by the chiefs, family and lineage heads and the earth priests, who hold land in trust for their people, has come under intense onslaught by the forces of modernisation, which are rapidly 'transforming traditional society to a capitalist one and linked to global markets' (Yaro 2010:201). Consequently, unrestrained commercialisation of land transactions has become prevalent even in most rural areas (Zackaria and Yaro 2013), thus promoting effective land markets. The normalization of this trend has resulted in a number of outcomes with implications for the youth and women.

First 'neoliberal policies working side by side with commercialisation of land and population explosion aggravate the prevailing asymmetries of social relations, which motivates traditional leadership to reinterpret tradition in their own favour, placing the powerless majority at a disadvantage. The second, which is directly related to this paper, is the dispossessing of household/family land holdings.² Land grabbing, i.e. dispossession of a households' farmlands through transfers to middle/upper class individuals, coupled with escalating family sizes in the area and land area being fixed overtime, has led to extreme land fragmentation, and, in some situations, to complete loss of land. Consequently, young people in the area who need land for agriculture and other land related activities are rendered either completely landless or at best near-landless, as powerful and rich influential middle and upper class individuals grab land at cheaper deals, mainly for housing purposes. The subject of youth interest in farming/agriculture in the research area must be understood in this context.

² Not in the sense of ownership concentration, particularly, in the form of foreign direct investment in agriculture.

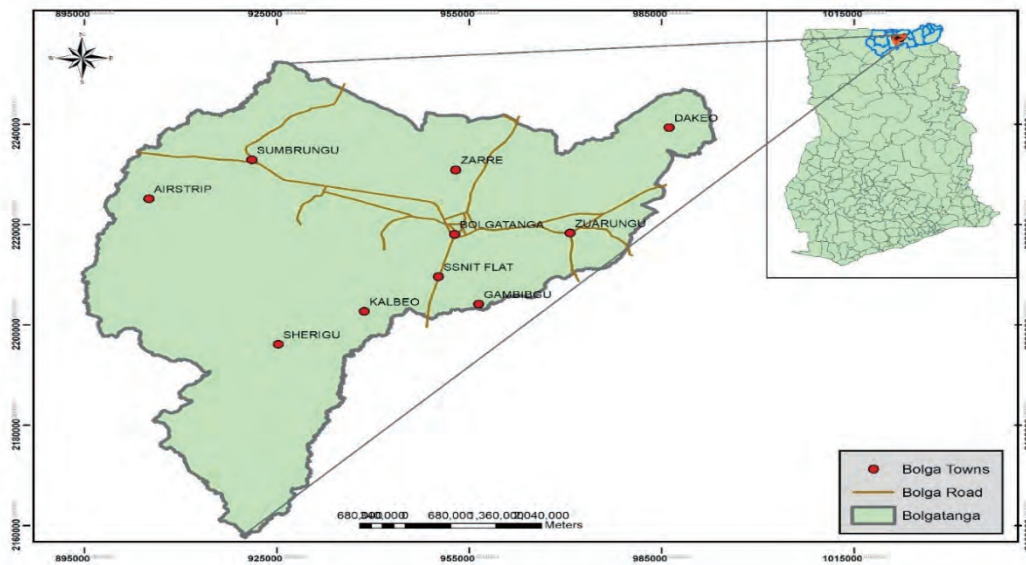


Figure 1. Map of the Study Area (still as *Bolgatanga* Municipal Area)

In terms of methodology, the study was characteristic of autoethnography.

The main sample was the youth, whose ‘age are not self-evident data but are socially constructed’ (Bourdieu 1993:95). Hence, societal expectations defining young people’s age status’ (Tyyskä and Côté 2015:582) were considered. A total of 200 young people aged 18 to 35 years were purposively sampled to investigate their perspectives on why youth are unenthusiastic about farming. Qualification was based on respondents’ engagement and experience in farming/agriculture, their residence in the area, and ability to speak about the issues of the youth not attaching critical importance to farming.

The data were collected, as part of a major study by the researcher, from May to December 2018 from all ten electoral areas of the study setting. The electoral areas were categorised under ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ using proximity to *Bolgatanga*, the regional capital, as the basis. Participants responded to a survey questionnaire in their localities, using *Gurune*, the language of area, if they could not read or write.

The data collection used mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) to amply understand youth perspectives on, and attitude to farming (agriculture), rather than using each method exclusively (Creswell 2012). Quantitative data determined the factors influencing youth interest or indifference towards agriculture, while the qualitative data teased-out in-depth explanations for the attitude. The former were analysed by means of ranking, a ‘question response format’ employed when a researcher’s interest is to establish ‘some type of priority among a set of objects’, which could be attributes, policies, individuals, or property of interest (Oldendick 2008:689). Individual and group in-depth interviews were used to find the clarifications. Some of the in-depth interviewees also participated in the quantitative data. Significant statements from respondents are captured in the text, reflecting as

precisely as possible what was said in *Gurune*.

Farming (agriculture), in the context of the study, refers to crop and livestock production in terms of subsistence and large-scale (business) activities. Respondents were mindful of both concepts in answering the question. The study on why the youth turn away from agriculture began with a 'simple' question 'are you interested in agriculture?'

3. Findings and analysis

A summary of the findings is summarised in the table below with the analysis of each factor for youth turning away from agriculture.

Table 1. Youth interest in farming (agriculture)

Are You Interested in Agriculture?

Interested in Agriculture?	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	189	94.5	94.5	94.5
No	11	5.5	5.5	5.5
Total	200	100.0	100.0	100.0

The above responses may be attributable to the significance of agriculture (farming) in the research area – an integral aspect of the lives of the people, which cannot be divorced from their existence. Agriculture is the sector that provides basic subsistence in the area. Food needs, household provisions, health care provisioning, educational needs, shelter, and cultural goods are all acquired on the strength of agricultural produce. Other sources of income are subsidiary for the vast majority of people, barring a few in formal employment. Agriculture was and is still part of the socialisation of the youth and is the first occupation a male child is introduced to as soon as he is conscious of his existence and can exercise his psychomotor skills. This is illustrated by Fortes and Fortes (1936):

Even an adolescent boy may be given a small plot (*sinsi'ar*) on his father's compound farm to cultivate, the produce of which is his own. This is one of the ways in which a boy acquires a few chickens and lays the foundations for economic independence, which he gradually reaches in the course of years (p. 244).

The account by Fortes is ever-present and integral in the Frafra society as a socialisation process for male children. The exception today may only be among households that no longer have any land holdings. Mbah is a young man of twenty-eight from the Dubila community, married with a son. He completed senior high school but could not progress to the tertiary level. Of land and their 'eternal reliance' on agriculture, the following is a translation of what he said:

Farming is what we were born into, our fathers and their fathers before – they were all born farmers. Ku’a dela tapi lapi, nta-biya (meaning: ‘farming is a bond that is forever and ever’). We do not have work other than farming. It is true that there is government work, but not everyone can get the government work, everyone (here) can get farming to do, even if you do not attend school. You do not need a paper (certificate) before your father can give you land to farm. Even if you have a large certificate, you can still farm, farming does not reject people; it accepts all. Where else can we work, if not on the farm? The only problem now is that lands are becoming very scarce for us to be able to have ample land to farm.

With the natural attachment to farming/agriculture through socialisation, what then accounts for the youth of the area turning their backs on agriculture? The table below is a summary of the rankings of youth perspectives on why agriculture is now spurned.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Factors Determining Youth Interest in Agriculture in the Research Area

Factors considered/ Frequency in %	Extremely Considered Factor	Highly Considered Factor	Moderately Considered Factor	Low Considered Factor	Factor not Considered at All	Total
No Land	79 (39.5%)	41(20.5%)	43 (21.5%)	30 (15.5%)	6 (3.0%)	100%
No Money for Investing in Farming	47 (23.5%)	42 (21%)	56 (28%)	36 (18%)	19 (9.5%)	100%
Unreliable Weather Conditions	45 (22.5%)	38 (19%)	76 (38%)	33 (16.5%)	8 (4%)	100%
Investment Disproportionat e to Returns	12 (6%)	26 (13%)	72 (36%)	78 (39%)	12 (6%)	100%
Labour Intensive, Little Reward	12 (6%)	20 (10%)	59 (29.5%)	86 (43%)	23 (11.5%)	100%
Agriculture Takes too Long to Yield Returns	6 (3%)	24 (12%)	80 (40%)	80 (40%)	10 (5%)	100%
Farming is for Illiterates	1(0.5%)	17 (8.5%)	6 (3%)	54 (27%)	122 (61%)	100%

3.1. No land factors

From the rankings of factors accounting for the youth’s poor interest in farming, the most common factor that accounted for the phenomenon was ‘no land’. Of the respondents, 39% considered no land as an ‘extremely considered factor’, which was the overall influencing interest in agriculture. The ‘no

land factor' was also ranked overall second with 20% and was the lowest among the less considered factors with 15%. Only 3% felt that it was a 'factor not considered at all'.

The 'no land factor' was also examined in terms of the urban-rural divide to determine the differences the factor may play out in urban and rural areas and the result are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Urban-Rural Divide Analysis of No Land Factor

		Residence		Total	
		Urban	Rural		
No land factor	Extremely considered factor				
	% within Residence	44.8%	34.6%	(79)	39.5%
	Highly considered factor				
	% within Residence	21.9%	19.2%	(41)	20.5%
	Moderately considered factor				
% within Residence	19.8%	23.1%	(43)	21.5%	
Low considered factor					
% within Residence	9.4%	21.2%	(31)	15.5%	
Factor not considered at all					
% within Residence	4.2%	1.9%	(6)	3.0%	
Total	% within Residence	100.0%	100.0%	(200)	100.0%

The data showed that youth in urban areas were those whose interest in agriculture was more affected by 'no land factors'. Of the respondents from urban areas, 44% said it was an 'extremely considered factor'; 21.9% ranked it as 'highly considered factor' while 19.8% said it was a 'moderately considered factor'. 9.4% and 4.2% ranked it as 'low considered factor' and a 'factor not considered at all', respectively. Among those residing in the rural communities, 34% ranked it as an 'extremely considered factor'; 19.2% ranked it as a 'highly considered factor', while 23.1% felt that it was a 'moderately considered factor'. In these communities, 21.2% respondents ranked it as a 'low considered factor', while 1.9% thought that it was a 'factor not considered at all'. The statistics are 'normal' and confirm the fact that land scarcity for agriculture and even for putting up residential accommodation is often more acute in urban or peri-urban communities.

The 'no land factor' conforms to lack of access to land as confirmed by previous research (e.g. Bezu and Holden 2014). The explanations are not unanimous. Different factors are often named including the high cost of accessing land, unwillingness of the elders to release land, and increasing scarcity of productive family land' (Kidido *et al.* 2017). Other factors include 'limited potential' to obtain agricultural land; insignificant inherited land space for farming, local gerontocratic and 'intimate exclusions' (White 2012). Issues such as discrimination against certain groups such as women and sister's child³ are critical in terms of access to land in the research area.

³ Sister's child, a male child born out of wedlock, is not customarily entitled to his biological father's family land

Specifically, the increasing scarcity of productive land and sales of family lands primarily accounts for ‘no land’ in this area to enable the youth to access reasonable agricultural activities. In urban communities, such as Kombosigo, and some sections of Dulugu, Yarigabisi, and Puulgo, lands had been sold; family lands dwindled drastically, thus depriving the youth access.

Land sales through neoliberal land policies confirms Amanor’s (2009) argument that such policies which are often ‘heralded as successful examples of equitable development’ have a ‘dark and disturbing side’. First, land sales lead to a rising inadequacy of productive family lands (Amanor 2010). Second, it excludes participation of small-holder farmers in agriculture with such groups ‘falling into an underclass with an extremely uncertain future’ (Amanor 2009:12). Youth and women are shorn of the opportunity to realise any agricultural dreams. Finally, the practice culminates in a considerable shrinking of physical land space, which affects the construction of housing infrastructure. In fact, the net effect of land sales climaxes into landlessness; land sales become common and lead to the ill-fate of some communities in the research area.

Another reason may be the population increase that impacts land availability for farming and housing. For these reasons, most youth in the area face enormous difficulties in accessing land. It may also account for land being an ‘extremely considered factor’ in determining youth interest in agriculture. Mbabila summarises the frustration of the youth when he asked rhetorically: ‘*Ho sam pum bota kua, hu yeti hu ko la zinzaka bii?*’ This translated as: ‘*Even if you have affection for farming, will you farm in your courtyard?*’

3.2. No money to invest in agriculture

Another factor that most youth considered in determining their interest in agriculture was the availability of or access to investment capital. The sector has two categories: subsistence and large-scale commercial agriculture. While the former requires some ‘basic’ resource for investments, the latter requires significant financial outlay and logistical base. One of the critical factors identified as a hindrance to youth engagement in agriculture is ‘limited access to affordable credit’ (Filmer and Fox 2014). Access to affordable credit is a very common problem among African youth as established by a number of studies (e.g. Bezu and Holden 2014, Kidido *et al.* 2017). This was similarly confirmed among the youth in the study area.

Money plays a crucial role in both subsistence and large-scale agriculture. In the case of the former, ploughing the field by bullocks is a common practice in the research area. A young person who obtains a parcel of land for his private farm, if he is lucky to have such a space, faces difficulties in raising

nor his maternal grandfather’s land, except in rare cases. In the case of the latter, it could be the family’s decision to have the woman give birth out of wedlock in order to produce a male child for the family. The child’s grandfather has to provide him land.

money for bullock services. *Mbabila* in the *Dubila* community explains:

Dubila, however, is scarce. If you really want to farm, then you have to go to the bush; the bush is not nearby; our plots are very small because you have to share it with your brother or brothers. If there was money, I could have gone to *Tilli*, *Nangodi*,⁴ or any place I could get enough land to farm, but standing here penniless ‘with my ten fingers, ten toes’, where will I get money to do farming that will make me the person I want to be?

Another young person, Fred *Atua*, 33, a senior high school graduate, from the neighbouring *Dakio* community said something similar:

We, young people, our generation is unfortunate. Many things are not there, if you want to farm, the lands are not there, if you must farm, real farming, you have to go somewhere far to get land. But who will give you the money to go and cultivate such a farm? Who has even the money in the community? If I have to go to the bank, what (collateral) will I use to get the money? Even if I got a loan and did not get good yield from the farm, how would I pay back the loan? Those of us who want to go into farming are keeping our dreams in our bosoms because there is nowhere and no one to turn (to).

The statements captured above explain why most of the respondents ranked no money as one of the key factors considered in determining youth interest in farming. Advocates for youth financial capacity urge financial service providers such as formal banking institutions, and others, to advance credit to the youth to bolster their interest in agriculture. However, ‘providing financial services in rural areas is considered a typically high risk venture due to the unique characteristics of agriculture: i.e. dependence on natural resources and seasonality; long production cycles; and vulnerability to variable weather’ (Filmer and Fox 2014:34), which are some of the factors financial institutions consider before advancing credit to farmers. This situation justifies the youth’s lack of interest in agriculture due to a lack of financial resources to invest in the sector.

3.3. Unreliable weather conditions

The study area lies in the natural vegetation of the savannah woodland, where the climate is characterised by one rainy season, with usual erratic rainfall. Successful agricultural activities depend largely on weather and climatic conditions. However, variable, unpredictable climates and climate

⁴ These two communities are in different districts, which border the research area.

change have emerged as the greatest threats to human populations (Eldridge and Beecham 2018:293). Climate variability arises mainly from global warming and other human activities. The World Bank in its *World Development Report 2008* warned that ‘global warming is one of the areas of greatest uncertainty for agriculture’ (World Bank 2007:64). The variability of weather conditions has serious implications for agricultural activities in the research area and other parts of the country. Therefore, the weather question has been an important variable link factor for the youth to consider before committing their futures to the agriculture sector.

From the data, 22.5% ranked weather as an extremely considered factor for pledging future agriculture. This occupies the third position in the ‘extremely considered factor’ scale, after no land and no money for investment factors. Of the respondents, 19% ranked it as a ‘highly considered factor’, 38% as a ‘low considered factor’, and 4% as a ‘factor not considered at all’.

Seasons have changed over time such that it has become difficult to determine when the wet season actually begins. In the mid-1930s, according to Fortes and Fortes (1936), the first planting rain usually fell in late March, and early millet with some cowpeas were planted. Rain again fell in mid-April, which enabled most people to plant early millet. With all routine husbandry activities carried out within the stipulated time based on the farming season, early millet was harvested in July and August, late millet, ground nuts, and other subsidiary crops were harvested in September. In contemporary times, however, rains could set in as late as June to plant the early millet. It may also stop abruptly before the first sowing is completed. Rainfalls have become very erratic in recent times, often causing losses for farmers.

Unpredictable weather is a grave threat to the youth interest in agriculture. Weather shocks have been responsible for tragic deaths and farmers abdicating agricultural ventures. The media reported management of the Defunct Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) took steps to write off a GH¢21.8 million loan (the equivalence of US\$4,628,450.11) to farmers after the legal option to retrieve the money was shelved. This came after defaulting farmers ‘gave evidence of the destruction of their farms caused by harsh weather conditions and a subsequent poor harvest’.⁵

Another aspect of unpredictable weather conditions surfacing in some parts of the Upper East Region is ‘annual flooding’ during the months of August and September that has occurred each year since 2007. Even though flooding is normally attributed to the Burkinabe authorities spilling excess water from the Bagri Dam in that country, this explanation does not appear comprehensive, as some areas that are not directly in the spillage zone downstream are also often flooded. Communities such as Puulgo, parts of Gambibigo, and the western parts of Kombosigo are in lowland areas, located near the Abeerivose River and are perennially threatened during flooding. Consequently, agricultural activities are often affected.

⁵ Story adopted by Today’s Newspaper (online) from Joy FM, (a popular Ghanaian radio station based in Accra): SADA writes off millions in loans over poor harvest, bad weather 21 June 2018 edition. SADA was instituted to fast-track and propel northern development to close the gap between the poor north and developed south of Ghana.

A member of the Yarigabisi-Puulogo FGD recounted his experience a few years ⁶ ago. The translation of his flashback is as follows:

I cannot remember the exact year. Anytime the incident comes back to memory I feel like God does not exist, our ancestors forsook us. I cultivated rice. My *susu*⁷ group came to help in weeding and I managed to get fertiliser to apply. After the weeding, the rice was very green, and I felt that the harvest would be good. Then, a rain, a heavy rain, came. I think about two or three days, it rained and stopped for a while, rained and stopped, and rained stopped. After sometime, the place was flooded, houses were all soaked, and some collapsed, people's clothes, money, and property were lost. My rice was washed away. It was so terrible, unbearable, and unforgettable. After that, I swore never to use money to farm. *Ti bo? Hu gerege la wani?* (to wit: Why? How foolhardy are you (to waste your energy and resources on farming?))

Another member also explains his experience after investing his 'little resources' into farming:

Some of us like farming, truly, some of us like it because it is in our blood. But sometimes, you have to reflect deeply (*sey to ho behe ho zuo sunga* ⁸). The weather patterns are a serious factor to consider before farming here. The rains may stop right at the time you needed it most urgently, as if your enemy has switched it off. So, when you are investing in agriculture, it is '*allah, allah*' (God, God). You ask yourself: is it wise to invest (in farming) or keep your little savings for something else?

Unpredictable weather patterns are a critical determining factor for youth interest in agriculture, and the evidence from narratives is overwhelming.

3.4. Investment and labour input not commensurate with returns

Two common thematic variables were put together: investing without compensatory commensurate returns and intensive investment of resources and labour with little reward. Agriculture requires a lot of

⁶ The participant could not mention the specific year but from somewhere around 2007 there have been annual flooding in some parts of the entire Upper East Region normally attributed to the spillage of the Bagri Dam in Burkina Faso to the north of the country. Some parts of Puulogo and Gambibigo lie very close to the Aberivose River.

⁷ *Susu* is a communal arrangement where members take turns to carry out an activity for members of a group, especially in cases of farming in the research area. This term also connotes financial contributions where members contribute to a common fund and access the contributions in turns.

⁸ This directly translates as 'you have to look at your head (very) well, thus you have to consider issues very carefully'.

investment in terms of labour, that is, fulfilling all the husbandry procedures that include clearing the land, planting, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest protocols. At the subsistence level, all these activities are undertaken by household members and the burden lies heavily on young people in the research area, particularly if the parents are incapacitated due to their age. At the subsistence level, the youth could still devote both resources and intensive labour in agriculture because, as stated previously, farming is inextricably linked to community life.

At the level of commercial farming, work could involve either human labour, services delivered by livestock, or machinery. Logistical requirements, including money to pay for labour, insecticides, machinery and equipment, and technical support, among others, are essential. When raising livestock, the producer has to feed and tend the animals regularly, and ensure that they are vaccinated timeously. When products are to be sent to the market, they must be properly and meticulously processed. All of these processes and others constitute the basic investments and labour inputs into farming.

The practicality of obtaining proper agricultural benefits/rewards requires heavy investments in terms of both labour and logistics. However, unpredictability is characteristic of African agriculture. Agricultural potential, especially that of ‘rain-fed agriculture, is highly sensitive to soil quality, temperature, and rainfall’ (World Bank 2007:54). The report expresses further caution:

Agriculture is one of the riskiest sectors of economic activity, and effective risk-reducing instruments are severely lacking in rural areas. Negative shocks can deplete assets ... It can take a very long time for households to recover from such losses. (ibid.89).

Additionally, there are issues of market access and price fluctuations. Two outcomes emerge from the unpredictability mentioned above. First, after intensive labour has been put into production, disasters such as flooding or bush fires could strike and everything would be lost after the drudgery and toil. A media report said a farmer in the Upper East Region sold his cattle and invested in tomato farming the year before was said to have committed suicide after his investment went bad due to lack of market – a situation that made it difficult to take care of his family.⁹ Second, the produce may be delayed or perish while in transit to the market due to many factors including poor road network, glut, or competition from other areas, resulting in all investments being wasted. Justifiably, these factors are critical and play an important role in determining youth interest in agriculture.

The survey results reveal that both variables were correspondingly ranked 6% for ‘extremely considered factor’ for determining youth interest in agriculture. In terms of agriculture being considered a labour-intensive factor, 10% and 29.5% of the respondents ranked it ‘highly considered’ and

⁹ Story adopted by Today’s Newspaper (online) from Joy FM: SADA writes off millions in loans over poor harvest, bad weather 21 June 2018 edition (Accessed on 25 January 2019).

‘moderately considered’ factors, respectively. For its associated variable – investment not being commensurate with returns – in the same scale, 13% and 36% ranked it as ‘highly considered’ and ‘moderately considered’ factors. These rankings may be explained by the theory of motivation.

Psychologists argue that how an individual thinks about or reacts to a choice of (alternative) goal-directed behaviour(s) depends on the rewards or punishments associated with each of the alternative behaviours (Sinding and Waldstrom 2014:188). Experiences or narratives of catastrophes of countless manners and magnitudes inform youth decisions on their interest in agriculture. For instance, in 2015, it was reported that tomato-farmers in the Upper East Region had abandoned tomato cultivation due to a lack of guaranteed markets and one of them committed suicide.¹⁰ This story and other similar experiences could be reason enough for their rankings. Such an experience should guide a rational person committing to a future in a chosen sector of the economy.

‘Agriculture as labour intensive but with little reward’ was ranked 43% and 11.5%, respectively, for ‘low considered factor’ and ‘factors not considered at all’. This ranking could suggest that most youth did not consider being indebted to anybody while working hard to invest in the required labour. The results reveal no fears of investing in farming. This is in synchrony with youth values in this area, where hard work is the most cherished. The ranking was different for ‘Investment not commensurate with returns’: 39% of respondents judged it as a ‘low considered factor’ while 6% ranked the variable as a factor ‘not a considered at all’. This ranking could also mean that there was apprehension about investment losses rather than labour-intensive losses because the former requires direct borrowing or collateralised action to receive either cash or kind from external agencies, while the former is a self-generated effort.

Agriculture takes too long to yield returns

A key reason for individuals to go into productive ventures or seeking employment is economic survival, including provisioning for individual and family needs. Individuals seek to accumulate wealth for ‘self-serving reasons, particularly for economic population density and reproductive advantage’ (Prentiss *et al.* 2012). The length of time a venture yields returns can be a motivator to engage or abstain from such an undertaking. Agriculture is not an industry that typically yields an immediate turnaround. It has a long gestation period, marked with unpredictability. Even when farming is not rain fed, there may be unforeseen interventions in terms of pests and other vulnerabilities.

The youth currently reside in a world driven by neo-liberal market ideals, which are characterised by quick returns. In the logic of neo-liberal free markets, human relationships are increasingly monetised and depersonalised, and the practical realities of a free market society can be summarised as

¹⁰ See <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/upper-east-farmers-abandon-tomato-cultivation-due-to-lack-of-guaranteed-market.html> (Accessed on 25 January 2019).

‘fend for thyself’ (Adejumobi 2011:2). It therefore means that an individual going into a venture must ponder on what the enterprise may yield instantaneously before seriously considering it.

The data does not present ‘Agriculture takes too long to yield Returns’ as a critical factor influencing the youth’s interest in agriculture, although it plays a role. Cumulatively, 55% of respondents considered it as an ‘extremely considered factor’ to ‘moderately considered factor’ in determining their interest in agriculture. Only 5% of the population ranked it as a ‘factor not considered at all’ while 40% saw it as ‘low considered factor’.

The youth probably compare themselves to others who amass wealth and other resources within a relatively shorter time. In the agriculture sector, they may have to remain on the sidelines for a little longer to harvest benefits from investments. A respondent, Abagene, is a 34-year-old from Nyonkoko, a rural community. He completed primary level education and was married with two children. Speaking in *Gurune*, he said the following about agriculture’s long gestation period and waiting for fruits of his labour:

Nan nan wa teya dela aze’zo
Kua, de la aba’a vo’
Ho san yeti ho kɔ, samana ka bo’e
sey to ho kiye ten zaa’re ta ko
Ho taaba ka kɔ’re, ge tara
Ane an nya wa nyange gura aba’vo diya?

This translates directly as:

These days, the world is grab and vanish¹¹
 Farming (agriculture) is a futuristic activity
 If you want to farm, there are no lands
 Except you travel to distant places with land (abundance)
 Your peers have not farmed, but they possess many priceless things
 Who would like to wait for future food (wealth)?

This reasoning reflects the view of how a young person’s position among his peers arouses ‘a comparison process’, with the experience of disadvantage stemming from an interpersonal contrast between the individual and others who are well off and ahead of him (Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2017).

¹¹ The description seems to convey the theoretical ‘state of nature’, where everyone is fending for himself and none seems to have a moral sense of being concerned about the survival of others.

This feeling could then propel young people to develop an interest in certain employment opportunities while ruling out others. The responses from this study suggest that due to the long gestation period of agriculture, the youth of the area, amidst the factors discussed above, are demotivated to commit to it as a functional livelihood option in contemporary times.

Farming is for illiterates

For some time now, formal education has been seen by both parents and wards 'as framing their fields of social possibilities'. These fields of social possibilities include the license to pursue a career in public service or some other white collar job. Farming (agriculture) was reserved for people with no formal education. These perceptions were widely prevalent after independence in most African countries. The rise of higher education similarly compounds the problem in recent times as the level of education seems to alienate the youth from their culture and economic endeavours derived from their environment.

Agriculture is often treated as an unbecoming sector for persons who have attended school. A website¹² presented fifteen reasons why the youth are disinclined towards farming. Among other reasons that are very important, two stand out in terms of why agriculture is rarely considered as an option for employment. They are related to the objectives of education and the imageries people have about dream areas of employment. While the whole article is worth reading, the following two are illustrative here:

When one talks about agriculture or farming, in the minds of young people, they think of someone far down in a village living in a shack, who wakes up very early every morning to go dig, returning home at sunset. This farmer in their minds, is so far away detached from civilisation, wears barely no clothes, and is the typical person who lives on less than a dollar a week.

The other reason is:

In Africa, parents always encourage their children to study to become doctors, accountants, and other words professionals in white-collar jobs. From the onset, farming or a career in agriculture is frowned upon as a poor man's business.

The images mentioned above give the impression of agriculture being the occupation of 'somebody'

¹² Please see the major reasons why youth do not like farming (<http://www.youthinfarming.org/2011/12/15-major-reasons-youth-in-africa-do-not.html>) (Accessed on 14 February 2019).

who is low class and ‘uncivilised’ or ‘uneducated’. The fact that farmers want their children to belong to other occupations shows how Western education has alienated African youth from their cultural environment. It also demonstrates that farmers themselves have accepted farming as inferior to other professions.

The data shows that 0.5% ranked this variable as an ‘extremely considered factor’ influencing interest in Agriculture, for ‘highly considered factor’ scale, 8.5% ranked it as the influencing reason for their interest in agriculture, 3% as a ‘moderately considered factor’, 27% as a ‘low considered factor’, while a whopping 61% did not consider it as a factor at all. The rankings confirm that all categories of youth in the research area engage in agriculture and do not link it with illiteracy. In earlier sections, a respondents indicated that once one was a citizen of the research area, farming (agriculture) was a lifelong enterprise that one remained committed to until death.

Wholesale diagnoses of the youth and agriculture problem

Some observations highlight the blanket reasons assigned to youth turning away from the agriculture sector. For instance, Moses Abukari¹³, IFAD’s Country Programme Manager and Youth Focal Point for West and Central Africa, argues that:

Young people are usually not interested in this field of work, in large part due to their perception of farming being antiquated and unprofitable. Traditionally, the image of agriculture has been more about subsistence; you produce enough for you to eat. It is not seen as a business.

Narratives such as these have been espoused by policy advocates, policy-makers, and development planners, among others, and are most often reflected in policy documents and public pronouncements (Aliber 2013). However, blanket explanations or diagnoses for the phenomenon are not sufficient for all areas in Africa or even in a given country that seeks to holistically address youth apathy in agriculture. The findings of Sumberg *et al.* (2017) bring to light a classic case in which students’ perspectives on reasons for youth attitude towards farming vary on two key research questions: ‘What explains young people’s attitude toward farming?’ and ‘What should be done about rural young people and farming?’ (Sumberg *et al.* 2017). This could partly be due to the location of the two schools involved in the research: one in southern and one in northern Ghana.

Again, while there are clear differences between the methodology and rationale of Sumberg *et al.*

¹³ Youth Agribusiness, Leadership, and Entrepreneurship Summit on Innovation (YALESI 2016), Held in Dakar, Senegal from 29 to 31 in March. <<https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2016/04/why-are-rural-youth-leaving-farming/> Accessed on 13 October 2018>.

(2017) and youth perspectives towards farming/agriculture in the *Zuarungu* area, the field of this study, there are clear differences in attitude from the former and the latter towards farming/agriculture generally. While respondents in Sumberg *et al.*'s study (2017) have a relatively 'negative' attitude towards farming/agriculture in perceptions of the sector, 95% of respondents in the *Zuarungu* study responded 'yes' to 'are you interested in farming?' but only then explained the factors that stand between their interest and the sector. This means that location and context matter. Therefore, while designing interventions to address youth interest in farming/agriculture, 'segregating and targeting' are needed based on context and location, even if there is a general policy framework. It would also be interesting to explore why different motivations towards farming exist between groups from different cultural backgrounds.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the youth turn away from agriculture/farming, confirming previous research on this subject. Each study context has specific factors explaining the youth's lukewarm attitude towards agriculture. The youth of *Zuarungu*, as the rankings show, explains landlessness, lack funds for investments, and unfavourable climatic conditions among others as influencing factors in their decision to commit full-heartedly to agriculture/farming. As a typical agrarian community, educational attainment does not affect one's decision to commit or not to commit to farming/agriculture among the youth who participated in this study.

In conclusion, a few observations are significant. The World Bank has argued that land markets can play an important role by ensuring access to land by productive but landless persons, and that commoditisation of land also facilitates exchange of land as collateral to market credits (Deininger 2003). With an agenda to liberalise land holdings from 1975, the World Bank facilitated land reform policies in several countries with the aim of 'changing the structure of land holdings, improve land productivity, and broaden the distribution of benefits...' (World Bank 1975:5).

However, it does appear that the World Bank's appraisal of the situation was not comprehensive, considering the profiles of all sections of society. For instance, liberalisation, instead of broadening the distribution of profits, has led to wealthy people in some societies grabbing land at the expense of vulnerable groups such as women and youth, thus creating a wide gap in the social structure. Second, the phenomenon has created landlessness in communities with smaller holdings, which account for youth lukewarmness towards agriculture/farming.

Today, the youth seem to be the only actors in the discourse of the youth and their snubbing of agriculture. They are the ones identified as 'losers' or 'uncommitted' in not taking up the opportunities farming present. However, the youth and agriculture nexus cannot exclusively be the concern of young people or national governments. The critical political angle that has not been deeply explored is the role

of the World Bank. In the 2008 World Development Report, agriculture was identified as the sector that could be relied upon to facilitate poverty reduction, create employment, and ultimately, development. While the strength of agriculture was touted as the best possible solution for the youth unemployment quagmire, “the youth – the appropriate agency to facilitate the delivery of the promise – were not directly targeted to take on this responsibility. Even though the report is emphatic that the sector is the panacea to the youth employment/unemployment crises, no deliberate efforts were made to tease the youth to aggregate interest in agriculture. This delay deepened youth disinterest in the sector, thus making young people’s turn away from agriculture an unquestionable ‘fact’.

The responsibility of the World Bank and other donor institutions to impress upon national governments to raise youth interest in agriculture should not be underemphasised. This is a critical point because the World Bank spearheaded liberalising land holding reforms arguing that ‘changing the structure of land holdings, (could) improve land productivity and broaden the distribution of benefits...’ (World Bank 1975:5). It is now imperative for the World Bank to be enthusiastic about creating youth interest in farming by prompting or pushing national governments to instigate youth interest in agriculture. After all, as a powerful political actor, the World Bank has operated through diverse approaches, ‘in the interface between the political, economic, and intellectual fields on an international scale, in function of its singular condition as lender, policy formulator, and inductor of ideas and prescription about what to do in questions of development’ (Pereira 2016). Youth interest in agriculture has the potential to whittle down the upsurge of youth unemployment, which is a threat to political stability in many countries.

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