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Young people, agriculture, and employment in rural Africa

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Abstract: This paper examines the current interest in addressing the problem of young people's unemployment in Africa through agriculture. Using notions of transitions and mobilities we set out a transformative work and opportunity space framework that privileges difference and diversity among work opportunities, rural areas and young people. We argue that policy and programmes that seek to engage young people with agriculture must be more realistic, rooted in more context-specific economic and social analysis, and appreciative of the variety of ways that rural men and women use agriculture to serve their needs and interests.

Keywords: young people, transformation, agriculture, entrepreneurialism

JEL classification: J13, N57, O13, Q18

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1 Introduction

Despite long-term processes of migration and urbanization, it is estimated that more than 60 per cent of Africans continue to live in rural areas (World Bank 2011a), and many are engaged to some degree with agriculture. At the same time, poverty in Africa continues to be concentrated in rural areas (Baulch 2011). There are well-established arguments about the ability of agriculture to act as an engine of economic growth, and evidence of strong poverty reduction effects associated with growth in the smallholder sector (Christiaensen et al. 2011; Dercon 2009; Dorward et al. 2004). And, after decades of neglect, there is now significant policy, development agency and private sector investment interest in and around agriculture in Africa, which can be linked to rising food prices, the rush to biofuels and fears of climate change effects on food production and availability, as well as the influence of new actors including some private foundations.

Despite a decade in which some African economies have experienced relatively high rates of economic growth, and the fact that the 2008 global economic crisis had only muted effects on most African economies, in many parts of the sub-continent unemployment and under-employment among young people are increasingly seen as the hard core of the development challenge (World Bank 2006, 2009). While often hidden by official statistics, many young people find themselves stuck in informal sector jobs with few prospects. This is the (youthful) human face of the phenomenon of ‘jobless growth’, and undermines any possibility of realizing the much heralded ‘demographic dividend’ (Eastwood and Lipton 2011; USAID 2012). Unemployment and under-employment among young people sits in tension with the increased investment in education through the Millennium Development Goals and the heightened expectations among young people associated with access to education.

The persistence of rural poverty, the renewed interest in agriculture and a sense of urgency in relation to employment for young people have coalesced in the minds of policy makers and development professionals, to the point where the agricultural sector has become one (if not *the*) obvious place to look for solutions to the crisis in youth employment (e.g. Bernard and Taffesse 2012). Policy and programmes typically seek to realize this apparent potential through group farming schemes, training in entrepreneurship, and improved access to markets, micro-credit and other productive assets. These interventions are informed by two contrasting views. The first is that bright, educated and ambitious young people do not find small-scale farming an attractive employment or career option, and therefore the challenge is to make them aware of the opportunities available and provide them with entrepreneurial attitudes, skills and the resources needed to move into ‘farming as a business’. The second is that rather than a lack of interest, the problem is with agrarian institutions and dynamics – e.g. around land – that stop young people from getting a start in agriculture (e.g. Amanor 2010).

The question that underpins this paper is: what role can policy and associated programmes and projects play in re-aligning rural young people’s engagement with agriculture and thus drive social and economic mobility? Our contribution is to provide a conceptual framework with which to address this question, and we use this framework to guide a preliminary exploration of a selection of programmes from three countries. We argue that these programmes are never likely to provide the promotive and transformative employment opportunities that will attract large numbers of young people to farming. We further argue that this goal is itself flawed. On the other hand, through a longer-term process of structural change there is scope to make the broader agrifood sector a source of employment that can help deliver increased social and economic mobility to rural young people. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows.

The next section sets out the background, theory and concepts, with a focus on transitions (youth and poverty) and mobility (aspirational, economic, social and spatial). Following this we propose a conceptual framework that focuses on difference and diversity among work opportunities, rural areas and young people. The notion of opportunity space is at the heart of this framework. We then use this framework to briefly explore programmes from Ethiopia, Malawi and Ghana. The final section concludes.

2 Background and concepts

2.1 The African rural youth employment challenge

In response to global recognition of the problem of youth unemployment and underemployment,¹ and talk of a 'lost generation', academic inquiry into its causes, consequences and potential policy solutions has increased greatly since the mid-2000s. Contributions from across the social sciences have added new insights to a field traditionally dominated by labour market studies. Within this broad literature, the causes of unemployment and underemployment are usually seen from one of two perspectives. The first focuses on those mechanisms through which young people become prepared for employment with a focus on the effectiveness of the education system and the rates of attainment of secondary and tertiary education (Bennell 1996; Glick and Sahn 1997; Kingdon and Knight 2004). The second perspective highlights characteristics of the labour markets that young people are attempting to enter. Here the spotlight is on the availability and accessibility of opportunities and the factors that result in an employment supply shortfall including reductions in public sector jobs (Calves and Schoumaker 2004; Floro and Schaefer 1998) and limited private investment (Anyanwu 2013; Oviasuyi et al. 2012). Inequality of opportunity associated with institutional bias or ineffective (or non-existent) legal protections is also increasingly recognized (Deranty and MacMillan 2012; OECD 2012), particularly but not exclusively associated with gender.

From both perspectives, addressing the employment problem is usually understood as a matter for national policy, whether in terms of restructuring public education systems (Pauw et al. 2008); the creation of public sector employment (Thwala 2011); the creation of a more attractive environment for private sector investment (Oviasuyi et al. 2012); or the protection of equal worker's rights (Deranty and MacMillan 2012). Much of the consequent policy and development intervention is grounded in the International Labour Organization's 'Decent Work Agenda', which highlights the responsibility of governments to prioritize job creation and the protection of workers' rights and freedoms with the objective of reducing unemployment and promoting a more productive and sustainable high-employment economy (ILO 2007).

In recognition of the complexity and structural origins of youth unemployment and underemployment, and governments' limited abilities to simply create jobs, both academic and policy attention has turned to the potential for young people to essentially create their own employment. 'Entrepreneurship' has become a critical pathway for creating employment to simultaneously drive productivity and economic growth (e.g. the FAO-ILO-NEPAD Partnership on Decent Employment for Rural Transformation) (Jeffrey and Dyson 2013).

¹ It is important to note that in Africa official unemployment rates for rural young people are generally low. However, they mask high levels of underemployment and engagement in the informal sector jobs that are by-and-large insecure and low paying.

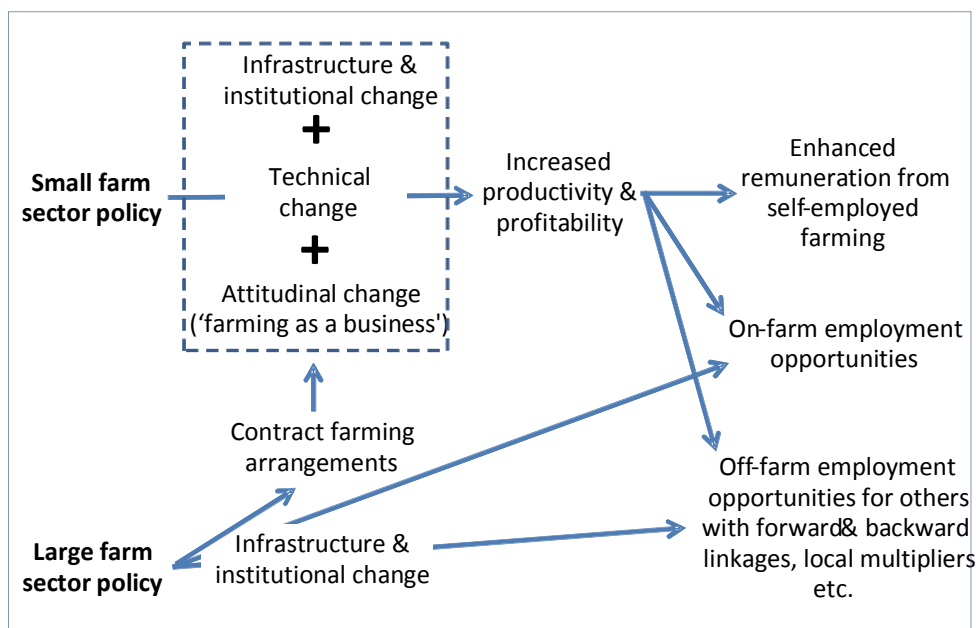
2.2 Rural young people

All too often in African policy discourse young people are lumped into the category ‘youth’. Trapped in the void between children and adults, ‘the youth’ are at once ‘the future of the nation’, and vulnerable, at risk and in need of close supervision. If their agency is acknowledged, it is often associated with anti-social or politically disruptive behaviour. Labelled as ‘the youth’, it should perhaps not be surprising that policy most often frames young people simplistically and instrumentally – as a homogeneous group whose primary role is to build the economy and the nation (Anyidoho et al. 2012a; te Lintelo 2012). However, it should go without saying that rural young people are socially and spatially embedded, and differences in gender, age, religion, ethnicity, education and family position, and the strength and breadth of social networks, social norms – and personality – all bear on their ambitions and aspirations, and their engagement with the world of work. It follows that for research, policy analysis and formulation, the category ‘youth’ is every bit as problematic as ‘the poor’, ‘women’, ‘rural people’ and ‘small-scale farmers’ which deny the nuanced, complex reality within which people make their way.

2.3 Agricultural policy and employment

The basic logic of agriculture sector development policy in Africa as it relates to employment creation is shown in Figure 1. On the right hand side there are three different employment outcomes: the first relating to the self-employed farmer or producer, the second to farm labour and the third to agriculture-related off-farm jobs. The small farm channel in the top half of the figure continues to dominate agricultural policy and programmes in much of Africa, although there has recently been a resurgence of interest in and argument for the large farm channel (e.g. Collier 2008). The problem with this figure is that it gives no recognition to the interplay between larger economic and social processes (and their associated politics) and local factors and processes (and their politics). This interplay mediates the dynamics of change in the agricultural sector and how it is experienced in particular settings and by different groups of people, including young people.

Figure 1. Agricultural policy and employment



Source: authors' compilation.

2.4 Two transitions and three mobilities

In this section we begin to build the foundation for a conceptual framework by introducing two overarching concepts: transition and mobility. Both of these concepts are integral to contemporary understandings of young people, livelihoods and poverty. Critically, both concepts suggest movement, action and dynamics. Specifically we will focus on two transitions: youth transitions and poverty transitions, and three mobilities: aspirational, economic, social and spatial mobility. The suggestion is that both youth and poverty transitions are to a significant degree underpinned by – and are part and parcel of – these mobilities and their interactions. Notions of structure, agency and networks are central to this understanding.

Two transitions

Poverty transitions refer to the dynamic poverty status of a household or individual: ‘movements into poverty, escapes from poverty and the inability to escape from poverty’ (Lawson et al. 2006: 1226). Research on chronic poverty highlights multiple and intersecting determinants, from the personal to the social, political and structural. Literature on poverty transitions and their drivers and dynamics is closely linked to the broader understanding of social mobility (Baulch 2011; Bird 2007; Dercon and Shapiro 2007; Harper et al. 2003; Narayan and Petesch 2007; Smith and Moore 2006). Economic and livelihoods approaches to poverty transitions focus at both individual and household levels and highlight factors such as access and returns to various assets, and how these are mediated by markets, social norms, gender relations, macroeconomic policies and shocks.

‘Youth transitions’ theories conceptualize the processes, drivers and determinants of the changes experienced by young people as their dependence relationships evolve (Locke and te Lintelo 2012; MacDonald 2011; Worth 2009). Whilst changing dependency relationships are perhaps most commonly associated with a transition to economic independence marked by the life changing event of moving from education to employment (Ansell 2004), it has been recognized that adulthood can be identified by a whole set of social and cultural markers (Lloyd 2006; MacDonald et al. 2001); that trajectories of transition are plural, diverse, and often partial, constituting a range of possible life events (Locke and te Lintelo 2012); and that these trajectories and their end points might be determined by a combination of individual choices, initial and changing social capital, and structural barriers (Worth 2009). In rural and developing country contexts, the negotiation of structural constraints – including location, social expectations, quality of education, economic resources, employment opportunities – is a critical part of any transition (Crivello 2011; Locke and te Lintelo 2012). In many cases, internal and international migration is important both as a strategy and a marker of transition, and changing geographies of opportunity represent an important driver of the transitions of rural young people (Crivello 2011). Bynner (2005) suggests it is not helpful to try to standardize an experience that is so diverse (also see Crivello 2011; Hall et al. 2009; te Riele 2004); nevertheless more linear and deterministic models of transition out of economic dependence (or poverty) based on a progression from educational achievement to employment, still informs the policy of some international agencies (USAID 2012; World Bank 2009).

Three mobilities

In this section we draw attention to three interacting mobilities – aspirational, economic, social and spatial – as they relate to young people, livelihoods and poverty dynamics. Aspirations – what someone hopes will happen in the future – are thought to play an important role in influencing life choices and life outcomes (Schaefer and Meece 2009); they are therefore an

important component of poverty dynamics. Aspirations tend to be formed in early childhood and are shaped and modified over time into expectations (what someone believes is likely to happen) and ultimately outcomes (see review by Leavy and Smith 2010). The interplay of different forces in the contemporary context, spanning globalization, urbanization and migration, engagement in diverse labour markets and the connectivity offered by new media and communications technology, means young people increasingly construct their aspirations and identities by drawing inspiration from outside their local, historical and socio-political contexts (Langevang and Gough 2012). A strong policy focus on education, embodied in the second Millennium Development Goal on universal primary education, as well as efforts to encourage and support young people to complete secondary schooling, has seen increasing average education levels in developing countries (UNESCO 2012; World Bank 2011b), fostering rising aspirations and expectations of what these higher education levels might bring. Factors that have an ‘inflationary’ effect on aspirations, however, may also serve to widen the gap between aspirations and attainment, and can result in vulnerability to impacts of negative external events such as an economic downturn. However, poor quality schooling and other features inherent in rural areas (e.g. isolated communities with limited social networks, a narrower range of experiences and limited role models, and fewer clear and effective transmission mechanisms for poor rural populations to benefit from economic growth) act as a constraint on aspirational mobility (see Lieten et al. 2007; Mulkeen 2005). Social norms and social pressures in rural areas – including gender prescribed roles and responsibilities – reinforce ‘traditional’ ways of living and doing, further constraining (or channelling) aspirations.

In the research literature there is a longstanding interest in the link between education and aspirations, with some work highlighting ‘aspiration gaps’ in relation to education (e.g. Del Franco 2010 on adolescent girls in Bangladesh), employment (Kritzinger 2002), and social norms, well-being and poverty (Camfield et al. 2012; Copestake and Camfield 2010). However, based on work from the UK, St Clair and Benjamin (2011) warn against a deficit approach to aspirations that ‘can lead to people being blamed for being poor and at the bottom of the social hierarchy on the grounds that this simply reflects their own aspirational deficits’ (St Clair and Benjamin (2011: 503). Suggesting that there is an important ‘performative’ element to aspirations, they argue that ‘there are no ‘true’ aspirations, simply responses that young people find effective to utter in particular situations’ (St Clair and Benjamin (2011: 504). It follows that an isolated focus on young people’s aspirations is unlikely to be of much value, but shifting aspirations must certainly be considered in analysing young people’s engagement with the world of work.

Social mobility is the movement over time from one social class or socio-economic status to another. Sociology tends to consider social mobility in terms of movement across occupational groups, while economics focuses more on income (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002; Heath 1981). The social mobility literature makes the distinction between *intra-generational* (over the course of a life-time: specifically a change in class and/or income over a single life-time) and *inter-generational* (change in socio-economic status between parents and their children) social mobility. Key drivers of social mobility include: income; education; human capital; social capital and social networks; physical capital; and choice of occupation and other markers of status or prestige (so-called ‘symbolic’ capital). Two commonly used measures of social mobility are: the index of educational opportunity (defined as the effect of family background on student performance (see Crawford et al. 2011); and intergenerational income elasticity (i.e. the extent to which parents’ income predicts their children’s income (Solon 1992; Zimmerman 1992). The latter has a strong correlation with income inequality, and in some

studies social mobility has been measured as increased consumption expenditure (e.g. Bezu et al. 2012 on rural non-farm incomes in Ethiopia).

While social mobility is well established in northern scholarship and political discourse, it is less prominent in relation to international development in general and Africa in particular (although in the 1960s and 1970s there was some considerable research interest in social mobility in Africa, particularly in relation to education, migration and urban populations (Hurd and Johnson 1967; Kelley and Perlman 1971). More recent studies focus on occupational mobility, especially in South Africa, e.g. Woolard and Klasen (2005) on household income mobility dynamics in Kwa-zulu; Ziervogel and Crankshaw (2009) on inter-generational occupational mobility amongst blacks in Cape Town; and Finn et al. (2012) on income mobility. Education and skills training has been central to thinking about both social and economic mobility (see Buchmann and Hannum 2001 for a review), although Bowles and Gintis (2002) question the significance of this link. Of course, education-social mobility linkages are mediated by labour market mechanisms, and where the rate of expansion of employment opportunities fails to keep pace with expansion in education there can be 'education devaluation' with higher levels of education needed to achieve the same positions over time (Hurd and Johnson 1967).

Our third mobility, spatial mobility, includes daily movements within a local space, occasional travel, and long-term migrations and resettlements (Kaufmann 2002); it may be within rural or urban locations or between them (De Bruijn et al. 2001); and involve crossing local spaces or international boundaries. The motivations for movement are varied: to access resources; in pursuit of opportunities; for building human and social capital (Ansell et al. 2012; Langevang and Gough 2009; Porter et al. 2011); or forceful displacement in response to natural disasters, conflict or land acquisition. A growing body of literature considers spatial mobility in relation to employment and economic independence (Ansell et al. 2012; Porter et al. 2011; van Ham et al. 2001): The ability to access employment and market opportunities that are outside a person's local geography is an important determinant of economic success and career status, and this understanding underpins the concept of 'mobility as capital' (Kaufmann et al. 2004). However, the relationship between spatial mobility and social and economic mobility is not simple (Gough 2008; Savage 1988). Scholars interested in the 'geographies of children and youth' recognized spatial mobility as a component of independence, and central to the shaping of identity: mobility helps define both growing up and adulthood (Holdsworth 2009; Holt and Costello 2011; Valentine et al. 2009). Movement involves direct and indirect costs, including transport costs and foregone earnings whilst travelling, but also personal and social sacrifices (Ansell et al. 2012; Gough 2008). An individual's 'mobility capital' – in essence their ability to meet these costs – might depend on economic resources, status, social networks (Ansell et al. 2012; Gough 2008; White and Green 2011), and access to transport (Bryceson et al. 2002), amongst a host of other factors (Gough 2008; Porter et al. 2012).

With some notable exceptions there has been relatively little research on spatial mobility of African young people, and particularly those living in rural areas. Ansell et al. (2012) identified four particular spatial strategies adopted by young people in rural South Africa in the pursuit of productive livelihoods: (1) travel for access to better education; (2) migration for work; (3) using dispersed social networks (e.g. to join an extended family business); and (4) travel to distant markets for selling produce. The mobility of African populations, particularly in rural areas, has been recognized (Adepoju 1995), despite constraints such as underdeveloped infrastructure (Porter 2010) on-farm and at-home income generating responsibilities (Ansell et al. 2012; Porter et al. 2010) and social and cultural expectations (Ansell et al. 2012).

3 The ‘transformative work’ and ‘opportunity space’ framework

With these two transitions and three mobilities firmly in mind, in this section we introduce a conceptual framework, which we argue can provide a useful lens for the analysis of policies, programmes and projects touching on young people and agriculture in Africa. First, we explore the diversity of rural areas. Then we introduce the transformative work element of the framework before linking these together through the concept of opportunity space.

Economic geographers have long recognized that in order to take advantage of labour and economies of scale, economic activity from the secondary and tertiary sectors locates in and around urban centres (Fujita and Krugman 1995; Krugman 1993). Whilst diversification of some economic activity in rural areas is observed (Barrett et al. 2001; Bryceson 2002; Ellis 2011), it is inevitably limited compared to more urban areas (Wiggins and Proctor 2001). It is only in regards to ‘immobile natural resources’ (Wiggins and Proctor 2001), such as farm land, forests, water bodies, landscapes, and minerals that rural areas have a competitive advantage. Wiggins and Proctor (2001) have argued that there are two key dimensions of rural areas that determine economic opportunities: proximity to urban centres (markets) and quality of natural resources. As illustrated in Table 1, a matrix of three stylized zones (peri-urban, ‘middle’ countryside and remote rural) and a stylized assessment of the quality of natural resources (good or poor) helps to characterize potential development and employment opportunities. The value of this simple disaggregation is that it highlights the diversity of rural areas, and consequent impacts on the labour market. It is of course important to remember that for any particular area such analysis is contingent: urban centres expand and new ones materialize; the market value of natural resources change, as population grows (or shrinks); and, as new infrastructure and communications technology reduce the ‘distance’ between spaces (Wiggins and Proctor 2001).

Table 1: Rural diversity – a characterization, with most likely activities [

Location characteristics			
Quality of natural resources	Peri-urban zones	'Middle' countryside	Remote rural areas
	<i>Market gardening & dairying</i>	<i>Arable farming & livestock production, specialized, with capital investment, producing surpluses for the market</i>	<i>Subsistence farming, with only the production of surpluses of high value items that can bear transport costs</i>
Good	Daily commuting to the city		Crafts & services for local markets
	Weekend recreation activities	[Same for forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying]	Tourism & recreation
	Manufacturing industry may 'deconcentrate' from city proper into this space	Tourism & recreation	Migration
		Some crafts	
		By-employment in rural industry?	
Poor		Migration	
	<i>As above: i.e. Market gardening & dairying</i>	Extensive farming, probably livestock.	Subsistence farming, low productivity. <i>Surpluses very small or nil</i>
	NB: Quality of natural resources not so important since capital can be used to augment poor land – e.g. by irrigation, fertiliser – when needed for intensive farming	Probably lightly settled	Crafts & services for local markets
		<i>Few jobs</i>	Tourism & recreation
		Tourism & recreation	Migration
	Some crafts		
	Migration		

Source: adapted from (Wiggins and Proctor, 2001) emphasis added.

If there is a diversity of rural areas, the same is true of work opportunities. It is widely appreciated that work opportunities, whether in the formal or informal sector, vary in respect to the skills required, the level of remuneration, risks to personal safety, social status, social identity, and so on. While these differences are obviously important, from a development perspective that places poverty reduction, social justice and social transformation at centre stage, they are not sufficient. Here we borrow from the literature on social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007) to suggest that work opportunities can usefully be placed into four categories:

- **Protective** work, such as food-for-work and labour-intensive public works schemes, provides relief from the immediate effects of deprivation. These opportunities are directly dependent on government or other relief programmes, and often form part of a broad system of benefits designed to act as a social safety net.
- **Preventative** work is also defined relative to deprivation, but in this case, it is a matter of forestalling rather than directly relieving deprivation. Examples in rural areas include low productivity, small-scale farming, and low-paying, insecure, informal sector work.
- **Promotive** work allows real incomes and capabilities to be enhanced, and for capital to be accumulated. Some types of farming (e.g. the rapid accumulation of capital – ‘quick money’ – by young tomato producers in Brong Ahafo, Ghana described by Okali and Sumberg (2012)) and trading could be considered promotive, as could some formal sector work.
- **Transformative** work allows real incomes and capabilities to be enhanced, *and* addresses social equity and exclusion issues. In the case of women, transformative work might be regarded as that which increases their social status and contributes to the achievement of gender equity (Kantor et al. 2006). Labour laws that regulate worker rights are the most common means of addressing equity and exclusion in the workplace, and it is therefore logical that transformative work opportunities will be associated essentially with the formal sector (e.g. Barrientos et al. 2003).

This spectrum of work is not specific to young people, and at the same time it maps to Dorward’s (2009) three rural livelihood strategies: ‘hanging in’ (‘concerned to maintain and protect current levels of wealth and welfare in the face of threats of stresses and shocks’ (Dorward 2009: 136) which maps to protective and/or preventative work opportunities); ‘stepping up’ (‘investments in assets to expand the scale or productivity of existing assets and activities’ (Dorward 2009: 136) which maps to promotive work opportunities); and ‘stepping out’ (‘accumulation of assets to allow investments or switches into new activities and assets’ (Dorward 2009: 136) which maps in part to the notion of transformative work).

We argue that policy and programmes addressing unemployment among rural young people must focus on the promotive-transformative end of the continuum. This brings us back to agriculture. While in rural Africa it is certainly possible to identify some examples of promotive work, much of today’s smallholder farming, and particularly in remote areas, or where plots are small, natural resources poor and/or productivity low, would have to be considered preventative at best, (i.e. while employment in farming under these conditions averts deprivation it provides little opportunity for the processes of capital or asset accumulation that might drive social or economic mobility and/or satisfy aspirational mobility). This is not to say that protective and preventative employment opportunities within agriculture are not valuable. Indeed they are likely to be particularly so for the most disadvantaged. In a way these kinds of employment opportunities might even act as drivers of social and economic mobility and for the most

disadvantaged groups. However, we hypothesize that protective and preventative employment opportunities are unlikely to be (1) sufficient to attract increasingly educated young people with rising aspirations to agriculture or (2) an adequate basis on which to envisage the transition to a more modern agricultural sector.

We now build on the notion of opportunity space to being together the differences in rural areas and work opportunities highlighted above. Sumberg et al. (2012: 5) defined opportunity space as ‘the spatial and temporal distribution of the universe of more or less viable [work] options that a young person may exploit as she/he attempts to establish an independent life’. In terms of the spatial dimension, and in the light of well-established patterns of both short- and long-term migration among young people, it is useful to distinguish between ‘near’ and ‘distant’ opportunity space.

The near opportunity space available to rural young people is to a significant degree structured by two sets of factors. We have already referred to the characteristics of the particular rural location, and specifically the quality of natural resources and proximity to or accessibility of markets, which go a long way in determining the kinds of economic activities that are likely to be viable in a particular location. The second set of factors is both social and relational. Social difference (including gender, age, class, ethnicity, level of education and marital status), norms and expectations, and social relations and networks frame accepted ways of being and doing, and the kinds of activities and engagements that are considered appropriate and those that are not. In many societies, for example, women are expected to focus on household food security and welfare, which may have implications – at least during the early years of married life or when they have children – for their interest and/or ability to engage in entrepreneurial activity, especially when these activities involve working away from home. Social difference and social relations are critical in determining how easily and under what conditions key resources (like land, labour, credit and information) can be accessed; family relations, be they supportive or constraining, can be particularly important for young people in the early stages of livelihood-building. Our basic argument is that characteristics of the rural location on the one hand, and social difference, norms and relations on the other, structure the opportunity space for members of particular social groups in particular contexts. The resulting opportunity space can be analysed in terms of its: depth (referring to number/extent of particular types of opportunities); diversity (of opportunities both within the agricultural sector and across other sectors) and dynamism (referring to the rapidity and extent of change).

These characteristics of the near opportunity space will be associated with the distribution of work opportunities across the categories from preventative to transformative. Some opportunity spaces might for example offer little potential for promotive or transformative work, while others might be far richer in such opportunities. It is within such a structured opportunity space that an individual young person gravitates toward some available work opportunities and away from others. In addition to everything else, this process that reflects personal (individual) aspirations, interests, aptitudes and attitudes (i.e. toward risk, travel etc.), as well as an element of chance.

There is also a distant opportunity space, the characteristics of which are independent of local spatial and natural resource conditions. The distant opportunity space might include other rural areas and/or urban areas, and not uncommonly has an international dimension. The exploitation of the distant opportunity space requires spatial mobility, through for example, short- or long-term migration. A willingness and ability to travel and live away from home are necessary in order to exploit the distant opportunity space. Many rural young people – both men and women – will at some point exploit part of their distant opportunity space; however, rather than a once and for all cutting of links with the rural world and with agriculture, a decision to explore the

distant opportunity space can result in new capital, skills, information and networks being incorporated into the rural economy. A longer-term view of the dynamics between the near and distant opportunity space, and between rural and urban areas, is therefore essential.

We believe that the transformative work and opportunity space framework as laid out above can be useful in the analysis of policies, programmes or projects that seek to link young people, agriculture and employment in rural areas of Africa. As illustrated in the next section, many of these seek to provide or facilitate access to skills (e.g. through technical, entrepreneurial and/or management training, often framed as ‘farming as a business’ or the ‘professionalization of agriculture’), productive resources (e.g. land and capital), markets and/or increase scale, efficiency and/or market power through group-based strategies. The contribution of this framework is to insist that in relation to these kinds of initiatives, analysis of ‘what works, where and for whom?’ must take account of the diversity of employment types (from protective to transformative), the diversity of rural areas and the diversity of young people.

4 Case material

Five types of interventions that are relevant to the discussion of rural young people, employment and agriculture can be identified:

1. Government agriculture sector programmes that while not specifically targeting young people may benefit some of them.
2. Government initiatives that specifically target young people in order to provide them with additional or enhanced employment opportunities in agriculture.
3. Government initiatives focused on young people’s employment, and which have an agriculture component.
4. NGO projects that specifically target young people in order to provide them with additional or enhanced employment opportunities in agriculture.
5. Private sector agribusiness initiatives that while not specifically targeting young people may provide some of them with additional or enhanced employment opportunities.

In this section we use the framework developed above to begin an initial exploration of four examples of government initiatives that seek to provide employment opportunities to young people (the section draws on Anyidoho and Yaro 2013; Chinsinga and Chasukwa 2013; Tadele 2013). The examples are from Ghana, Malawi and Ethiopia, countries within which the Young People and Agrifood research theme of the Future Agriculture Consortium is active (see e.g. Anyidoho et al. 2012a; Anyidoho et al. 2012b; Chinsinga and Chasukwa 2012; Okali and Sumberg 2012; Tadele and Gella 2012). Only one of the cases is focused solely on agriculture, while the other three include agriculture. We believe these are representative of the range of government programmes in this area.

Ghana: National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) (2006-present) and Youth in Agriculture Programme (YIAP) (2009-present): The NYEP aims to bridge the gap between education and formal employment and, in doing so, to ‘empower the youth to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic and sustainable development of the nation’ (MMYE 2006). It operates through an internship model: selected applicants are placed within various government and quasi-government agencies. Participating young people are given a small

allowance throughout the internship. In rural areas the specific objectives of the NYEP is 'to create employment opportunities for the youth through self-employment' (MMYE 2006). NYEP was established in 2006 and is implemented by the Ministry of Youth and Sport. The main indicator of success is the number of young people placed in jobs. In addition, the programme identifies other broad changes that it seeks to support including the creation of employment opportunities for the youth, for example, through self-employment; ensuring that the drift of youth from rural to urban communities is checked; the empowerment of young people to contribute to national development; and the reduction of deviance (MMYE 2006).

The internship model at the heart of NYEP limits the number of participants and does not provide a basis for a serious attack on the problem unemployment among young people. The programme does not address the extensive education and training required to make many young people employable. Further, it downplays the myriad challenges that young people face when trying to establish a business.

Does the programme address the dimensions of diversity highlighted in the conceptual framework? Young people are recruited and placed into modules based on the need and assets of their district of residence: the 'agri-business module' is meant to be particularly appropriate to rural areas. While it purports to cater to all young people, the programme appears to be geared towards those with more formal education. Recently an attempt has been made to be more inclusive of persons with disabilities.

YIAP seeks to increase youth employment and employability within agriculture and to bolster national economic development and slow down rural-urban migration. To do this it provides young people with access to land and equipment, or assistance to acquire these, and also training and some supervision. The focus is on 'block farms' (state land or land acquired from chiefs or private individuals is ploughed and shared in blocks among young farmer under supervision of Ministry of Food and Agriculture staff), livestock and poultry, fisheries and aquaculture, and agri-business. YIAP was initiated in 2010 as part of a reorganization and revamping of the NYEP. The main indicators of success are the number of jobs created, the number of hectares cultivated and that young people 'accept and appreciate farming/food production as a commercial venture, thereby taking up farming as a life time vocation'.²

A review of the block farm programme by Benin et al. (2013) concluded that on average only 25 percent of participants could be considered 'youth', and suggested that one reason for their apparent lack of interest was that the potential income was not sufficiently high. There was also some indication that extension agents may have introduced an element of negative selection against young people because their results are often less impressive than that of older participants (this reflecting badly on the agent).

While the crop production and other activities undertaken under YIAP are in principle matched to the district context, there is little indication that diversity among potential or actual participants is taken into account, or that the activities themselves have much promotive or transformative potential.

Malawi: Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) (2010-present): The objective of YEDF is to help young people earn independent livelihoods and create employment for other youth particularly in rural areas. Specifically it provides loans to young entrepreneurs for capital equipment and working capital. Loan recipients must be organized in groups with at least ten

² YIAP webpage on the Ministry of Food and Agriculture website from www.mofa.gov.gh (accessed 9 March 2013).

members (although in some rare cases loans have gone to individuals after appraisal by the YEDF district committee and the Malawi Rural Development Fund (MARDEF) secretariat). When it was introduced in 2010, YEDF targeted young people between 18 and 30 years of age but eligibility was then extended to 35. According to its guidelines, the fund caters for out-of-school youth, both skilled and unskilled who are expected to engage in various trades such as agricultural production, construction, carpentry and joinery, panel beating, welding, metal fabrication and woodwork. The fund is implemented by MARDEF, the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) and district YEDF committees and is characterized as ‘a key development agenda for young people in Malawi in as far as the current government policy portfolio is concerned’ (Interview with the Regional Manager for MARDEF, Ntcheu, 2 February 2013).

YEDF is open to criticism on three fronts. First, in terms of the link between the credit and the training that is supposed to help build recipients’ entrepreneurial attitudes and skills. According to one informant the training in business management and entrepreneurship is rarely offered and even then is not adequate ‘to transform youth into competitive entrepreneurs’ (Interview with the Principal Youth Officer, MYS, Lilongwe, 28 January 2013). Second, YEDF can do little to help young people gain access to key markets that are jealously guarded by elites with close links to government. Finally, there is a perception that YEDF is more or less of a hand-out to young people who are well-connected politically as there is reported to be pressure from politicians to disburse loans to groups with which they are associated. As one informant puts it, this is ‘a way of saying thank you to the youth who supported them in their campaign for office in the May 2009 elections [...] and to mortgage their support for the forthcoming May 2014 elections’ (Interview with the Programme Officer at the National Youth Council, Lilongwe, 26 January 2013).

Does YEDF address the dimensions of diversity highlighted in the conceptual framework? Neither the official documentation nor the interviews gave any indication that diversity among either rural areas or work opportunities were taken into account. However, the fund makes a point of saying that it caters for both skilled and unskilled and youths from various social backgrounds.

Ethiopia: The UNICEF-assisted Youth Development Program (2007-11): This programme provided credit to young people to start small businesses or expand existing ones, but more broadly focused on life skills, behaviour change, peer education, youth dialogue, participation in policy advocacy, local level development planning and implementation and livelihood development. The programme was designed and implemented under the auspices of the former MYS to address the problems of unemployment, poverty and vulnerability among young people. Financial and technical assistance were provided by UNICEF.

The main indicators of success were growth of self-employment and formal/informal employment opportunities and increased participation of young people in the economic, social and political transformation of the country. An evaluation of the programme revealed that the number of young people who benefited from the different components was generally small (Zelege 2012). While many targets were achieved, the programme suffered from poor management, and the lack of a regular budget. Neither the available literature nor interviews provided any insights into how the programme addressed diversity amongst rural areas, work opportunities or young people.

What can we learn from these four government initiatives? First, while they use the language of entrepreneurship, they are essentially about creating opportunities for self-employment. A more encompassing notion of entrepreneurship, including innovation, risk-taking and employment creation is by and large absent. Second, they are built around a simplistic view of what is required

in order to establish and grow a successful enterprise: there is, for example, no reference to the relatively high number of ‘failures’ that experience says should be expected. Third, they tend toward an ‘individual uplift’ rather than a structural change approach (except perhaps the YIAP in Ghana where the normal structures governing access to land are bypassed). The implication of this is that opportunities for creating promotive (to say nothing about transformative) work opportunities are likely to be constrained. Finally, these programmes do not appear to recognize or take into account the implications of different kinds of work opportunities or the diversity of rural areas and young people: rather, they tend toward blueprint or ‘one size fits all’ approaches.

It is also important to note that in some of these programmes, employment is one of several objectives. For example, in Ghana both programmes also seek to slow rural to urban drift while NYEP seeks to reduce ‘deviance’; in Ethiopia the Youth Development Programme also sought to strengthen life skills and political participation. The link between rural young people, employment creation in agriculture and reduced rural to urban movement is striking in that it highlights the tension between greater awareness of the world, rising aspirations and the use of spatial mobility on the one hand, and on the other, the longstanding official view of the risks and dangers – both personal and political – associated with young people in the urban environment.

None of this is to say that these programmes or others like them may not be delivering some useful benefits to some young people. Rather, we are suggesting that their potential to deliver benefits efficiently and effectively – and ‘at scale’ – would appear to be quite limited.

5 Conclusions and implications for policy

The new policy and development interest that has coalesced around young people, agriculture and work in rural Africa is clearly to be welcomed. However, policy advocates and development agencies face this particular policy moment from a relatively weak position. Specifically, the lack of a research and evidence base, ideology (e.g. concerning the potential of market-based empowerment through entrepreneurship) and entrenched (and outdated) framings and narratives concerning the nature of the problem and potential solutions, hamper both policy development and programme implementation and impact.

If agriculture or the agrifood sector³ more broadly is to be an attractive source of employment for rural young people it will be necessary that promotive work becomes the norm. This implies real structural change which is unlikely to be an overnight (or painless) process. In any case there is little evidence to suggest that modernization of the production side of African agriculture is likely to result in large numbers of promotive or transformative employment opportunities for young people in rural areas, so the whole notion of ‘impact at scale’ needs to be critically re-examined. It is important to note that as agriculture has modernized in other contexts and regions, the creation of large numbers of promotive jobs has not generally been observed. This picture changes somewhat if the focus shifts from agriculture to the agrifood system more broadly, where urbanization, changing patterns of labour force participation and rising incomes result in increasing numbers of formal sector and potentially promotive jobs in areas such as transport, processing and manufacture, food retail and catering.⁴

³ We use the term agrifood sector to refer to the broad range of activities related to the production, processing, manufacture, distribution, retail, preparation and serving of food, including the provision of agricultural inputs.

⁴ For example, in the UK the agrifood sector broadly conceived is a major source of work, however, many of these jobs are not located in rural areas, and the sector is characterized by low-skill and low-paid jobs (Lloyd et al. 2008).

If policy and programmes are to be successful in promoting social and economic mobility they will need to be based on context-specific social and economic analysis that acknowledges and takes account of difference and diversity in relation to both rural locations and young people as encompassed in the transformative work and opportunity space framework. There was little evidence of this kind of analysis in the government-led programmes in Ghana, Malawi and Ethiopia that we examined. There is a specific need for life course analysis and an appreciation of the various ways that young rural men and women use agriculture to serve their needs and interests. Critically this analysis must also privilege the social and relational aspects of young people's lives and worlds. More nuanced analysis along these lines should result in policies and programmes that are better grounded in the realities of both young people and place. It is also important to begin to trim what we believe are the unrealistic expectations associated with the rhetoric of market-based empowerment through entrepreneurship. There is at present little evidence about how, in what situations or for whom these programmes deliver promotive or transformative work opportunities. To confuse self-employment and petty enterprise in the informal sector with entrepreneurship is not particularly helpful.

While it is tempting to conclude that agriculture can and should be a central part of the solution to the employment problems faced by the present generation of African rural young people, this may not be realistic simply because, as argued above, both transformation of the agricultural sector, and the changes required to position young people to take advantage of the resulting job opportunities, will only happen over the medium to long term. Thus, we suggest that the real development challenge is in relation to future generations, and the critical questions over the next 5-10 years will be: How many and what kinds of agrifood-related jobs will be created? Where will they be located? What knowledge and skills will be required? What kinds of education and training programmes will be needed? Now is the time to address these questions systematically. While entrepreneurship will certainly have a place, the young people who engage with the agrifood sector will increasingly do so as employees of formal sector businesses.

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