

Demand-driven extension and advisory services – catalysing opportunities for youth in agriculture

While education access has improved globally, gains are uneven, and development impacts driven by increases in education continue to be left on the table, especially in rural areas. Demand-driven extension and advisory services (EAS) – as a key institution educating rural people while providing agricultural advice and supplying inputs – have a critical role to play in bridging the education gap. This can help ensure that millions of young people successfully capitalise on opportunities in agriculture markets, as surveys in Rwanda and Uganda demonstrate.

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More people than ever before are accessing education around the world. In the last two decades alone, the number of out-of-school girls dropped by 79 million, and in the past decade, girls have become more likely to be in secondary school than boys. Evidence is clear that, on average, increased education is associated with increased opportunities for employment, lifetime earnings, national growth rates and innovation, and decreased poverty, gender inequality, child marriage, child mortality and child stunting. The global rate of return on one additional year of education is approximately nine per cent per year, with those in private sector employment benefitting even more.

However, major regional and country-level disparities have continued to leave 258 million children, adolescents and youth out of school, particularly at the primary level in sub-Saharan Africa. Although at 8 per cent, the proportion of youth in sub-Saharan Africa who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) appears more promising than the global figure of 20 per cent, informal employment predominates and masks the realities African young people face in finding and sustaining better (higher earning and more youth inclusive) jobs. About 38 per cent of Africa's youth live in extreme working poverty.

Many of the countries with the fastest growing youth populations in the world are in Africa. With a rapidly growing labour force, employment transformation (from household and self-employment to wage employment) is slowed. Most African youth must pursue informal, mixed livelihoods or commercial agriculture in household and other enterprises. Youth are often underemployed, and their level of success in agriculture and supporting markets is highly constrained by – among others – low levels of education (secondary, and management, technical and soft skills), lack of access to capital and technology and gender norms.



A young village agent with farmers in Uganda. The village agents use smartphones for registering farmers, helping them order inputs, sell produce and access information via call centres and videos and access services such as microfinance, insurance and soil testing services.

Photo: m-Omulimisa

Demand-driven EAS has a key role to play

Mass formal education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) have not been able to keep pace and deliver high-quality, relevant education and skills development opportunities at scale to serve the record numbers of African youth expected to enter the workforce each year over the next 30 years. Vocational training investments have largely lagged behind market demands, supplying graduates with skills which are often mismatched to business needs, and which are able to reach only a highly limited number of youth. Although investments in high-quality formal education systems are critical, without

increased government revenue and conducive policies and governance, their inclusivity and sustainability will continue to fall short while pressure for youth employment generation rises.

Particularly in rural areas of developing countries, demand-driven extension and advisory services (EAS) have a major role to play in bridging gaps in know-how and connections that would enable large numbers of young people and businesses to successfully engage with one another in agriculture and supporting markets in the near term. More attention has been paid in recent years to targeting youth both as providers and recipients of EAS. But how is this occurring?

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Feed the Future Developing Local Extension Capacity (DLEC) project conducted a three-country study on youth and EAS in Rwanda, Niger and Guatemala. These case studies provided a landscape analysis to inform actions to strengthen the inclusion of youth in EAS to improve their livelihoods and increase the effectiveness of EAS systems. Following on from the three-country study, DLEC expanded the research to examine youth engagements in EAS in Uganda and Rwanda, and take a special look at demand-driven, private sector-led, youth-inclusive EAS models. The objective of this latter study was to assess how private sector EAS engages youth and what the potential is for greater engagement. It focused on private sector initiatives, public-private partnerships, and government, NGO and project initiatives to engage youth in the private sector. Results of DLEC's work are described below. Multiple methods were used to collect data for this study, including a literature review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted with youths involved with such EAS initiatives across the two countries and with representatives of 37 private companies, NGOs, government, educational institutions and farmer organisations engaging with the young people in the initiatives.

Models for youth engagement in EAS

The following demand-driven models for engaging youth in EAS all involve youth as recipients of extension, while in the first, second and fourth, youth are also providers of extension. All four are pluralistic in terms of involvement by government, private sector and NGOs, but the private sector usually leads in the first two models whereas the public sector usually leads in the last two.

1. Fee-based extension services

Fee-based extension services are not widely considered as offering opportunities for youth employment because of youths' lack of expertise and experience. But youths have started successful fee-based extension companies in Rwanda and Uganda by focusing on niche enterprises for which there was scant expertise in the country. For example, youths returning from agricultural training in Israel started two private companies, HoReco in 2016 and Agriwin in 2017. HoReco trains extension staff, volunteer "farmer promoters" and farmers in irrigation and production techniques, and cooperative staff on cooperative management. Agriwin trains farm managers and their

employees on fruit and nut production. The companies took different paths to growth, with Agriwin relying on contracts with private farmers whereas HoReco's contracts were largely with government and donor agencies. As of early 2020, HoReco employed 104 extension staff (89 per cent youths) and Agriwin 20 (100 per cent youths). In Uganda, the Uganda National Apiculture Development Organization has trained 150 "drones" (the name they give to their extension staff), all youths, who provide fee-based advisory services to beekeepers and start other businesses in the honey value chain.

2. Village agents

Village agents in Uganda link farmers to input suppliers, produce buyers and other service providers. Often paid through sales commissions, they may work directly for these service providers or for NGOs, projects or private companies which link farmers to inputs and services. There is much variation in the amount and types of information that village agents supply to farmers. Village agents of some companies, such as m-Omulimisa Ltd., provide only basic information about the inputs they are selling. Village agents of other companies provide general extension advice, and some, such as those of Akorion Ltd., are able to share videos, weather information and other resources through their smartphones. Some conduct soil tests to customise fertiliser recommendations. Some also, such as m-Omulimisa, "bundle" inputs, providing them on credit and deducting the debt from produce sales at harvest time. The agents manage this process at the village level, and many use apps on their smartphones to do so. Many also facilitate interactions between farmers and other value chain service providers such as banks and insurance companies. Five companies interviewed in Uganda employed 106 agents on average and served about 130,000 farmers. Around three-quarters of the agents were youths.

3. Strengthening youths' skills and capacities

Programmes to strengthen rural youths' skills and capacities with a business focus were common. For example, the Africa Institute for Strategic Services and Development at Makerere University, Uganda, trains rural youth in livestock and business skills on demand. An important weakness of some training programmes was that they were not integrated into a broader strategy of increasing employment and offering support services such as coaching and credit. The USAID "Get Trained and Lets Work" Project in Rwanda

addressed this weakness by using a holistic approach, the Youth Options Pathway Model, which ensures that technical training is integrated with financial services, soft skills such as work readiness, and coaching, leading to self- or wage-employment. Needs assessments are conducted to find out youths' aspirations, assets and constraints. Training topics include foundational training such as goal setting, leadership and financial literacy, as well as technical vocational training. Business incubation hubs such as the one at Bishop Stewart University, Uganda, which helps youths create and grow young businesses, are an important sub-category of this model.

4. Internships

Internships offer an effective way for youth to strengthen skills, gain experience, enhance their marketability, develop professional networks and realise that there are fulfilling careers in agriculture. The Rwanda Development Board (RDB) has an internship programme for university graduates, placing them in public institutions or private companies and paying the interns a stipend for six months. USAID's Private Sector Driven Agricultural Growth Project (PSDAG) worked with RDB and other partners to strengthen the programme by extending 328 internships to agribusinesses and cooperatives to one year, providing orientation training and helping interns find long-term employment. The programme also had an additional dividend – many interns were hired by their hosts when their internships ended.

Implementing EAS models – lessons and recommendations

Even though the individual models are based on very different approaches, some common conclusions can be drawn from the surveys.

Differentiating among youth. More consideration needs to be given to understanding the heterogeneity of youth, and programmes need to be tailored to the contexts of particularly vulnerable youth segments. For example, more attention is needed for helping economically poor rural youth who have not completed high school and understanding their varying aspirations, needs and contexts. Dedicated resources for conducting youth assessments should be required in project planning, and targets should be set and monitored for achieving levels of youth inclusion. Incentives for private companies to hire youth should also be encouraged, such as corporate social responsibility awards or tax credits.



Constraints including domestic responsibilities and negative attitudes towards women's capabilities lead to women still being underrepresented in public and private extension services, despite many improvements.

Photo: Steven Franzel

Helping young women. A corollary of the above is the need to focus on gender at the same time as youth. Otherwise, the benefits accruing to youth may benefit only young males, particularly if the unique constraints that young women face are not addressed. These include domestic responsibilities, which limit women's mobility and time-flexibility, lack of access to land and negative attitudes about women's capabilities. Again, it is imperative that incentives, such as those mentioned above, are created for organisations and companies to set, monitor and meet gender targets. Public and private extension services have learned a great deal in recent years concerning how to increase their proportion of women, such as proactively encouraging women to apply for positions. These lessons need to be more widely shared.

Market-based solutions. Private sector, market-based solutions help ensure sustainability, as in the above-mentioned cases of fee-based extension and village agents. Inclusive markets are achieved when youths benefit from engaging with and within the private sector, and when other actors, including the private sector, benefit from engaging with youth in markets. The right incentives are needed to ensure that private-sector engagement with young people involves extension, where information is exchanged that gets at learning gaps among youth and others. Sometimes, businesses take the initiative, and other times, governments and development actors have facilitation roles to play, including that

of reducing risks of investing in new ways of doing business. One of the underlying private sector interests in youth engagement is workforce development, as exemplified by the internship model. Among other motivations for youth engagement, businesses are also interested in increased sales, market share and profits, public relations, and at times, the achievement of social impacts.

Ensuring that youths also have incentives to engage is critical, and short-term financial gain, though important, is not the only incentive that youths consider. For example, the fact that some village agents have gone on to become input suppliers provides a huge incentive for other youths to become village agents. Non-financial incentives are often also important such as improving one's social status and developing social networks. Village agents who are youth may be best-placed to influence and engage other young people in agricultural markets and encourage more expansive peer-to-peer exchange.

Effectiveness of public-private partnerships. Many successful initiatives feature collaboration among different types of development partners. For example, the internship programme mentioned above involved the Rwandan government administering the programme, private companies hosting the interns and a development project providing training. Private companies, government and development projects also partnered effectively in Uganda's village agent models.

Digital tools. Digital tools have important benefits: enhanced communication and feedback, improved economic efficiency and added prestige to agricultural enterprises. The considerable emphasis being given to digital tools needs to be sustained. Increased research is warranted to assess performance and guide future use of these tools, particularly for ensuring that the economically poor and traditionally underserved have access to them.

Interestingly, the above models are not being implemented uniformly. Rather, there are important variations in each of them as different implementers test different approaches. Do twelve-month internships in extension result in significantly more youth employment than six-month ones? Or would six-month ones give an opportunity for twice as many youth to get involved? Will the cost of making the young village agent an extension agent pay for itself in increased sales, or is a village agent that does not provide EAS more cost-effective? Or is backing up the village agent with a call centre, as two Ugandan companies do, a more effective strategy? Research to rigorously assess the advantages, disadvantages and cost-effectiveness of different models and how best to implement them could go a long way towards improving the viability of the models and the potential for young people, and the companies and markets they engage with to benefit from them.

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