

Promoting Agricultural Entrepreneurship Among Rural Youth

Written by the International Youth Foundation



Young women participate in a program focused on both in-school and out-of-school youth in rural regions of Senegal.

Photo courtesy of Jean-Pierre Isbendjian

Many of the world's most disadvantaged youth live in rural communities whose weak economies offer them few possibilities to obtain decent employment—and their numbers are growing. Of the more than 300 million young people poised to enter the labor force over the next 30 years, 195 million live in rural areas.¹

The need to create viable economic opportunities to engage rural youth is urgent. At the same time, the current youth bulge offers an unprecedented opportunity for practitioners and governments to harness the energy, motivation, and innovation of these young people to bolster economic development and social change, while addressing pressing food security needs.

For rural youth in particular, new business creation in the agriculture sector can present an important and viable opportunity to earn a decent living. The International Youth Foundation's (IYF's) YouthMap² program, a multi-country initiative aimed at better

understanding and addressing the challenges facing Africa's young people, found evidence that agriculture's position as a growth sector in many African nations could be a worthwhile option to provide young people opportunities within the value chain.

That said, although most rural youth are already engaged in informal agriculture in some way, they may not see it as an attractive or viable career option given such obstacles as geographic isolation, unfriendly land use policies, poor infrastructure, high transport costs, and/or unavailable agricultural inputs. Nonetheless, increasing meaningful employment opportunities along the agricultural value chain can give rural youth the chance to engage in productive work and overcome these challenges. An often overlooked area of opportunity is the 'green economy' (e.g., solar energy, organic agriculture), which has the potential to become a growth sector for rural youth.

Synapse Center was created in 2003 to promote creative leadership and innovative entrepreneurship as well as personal, organizational, and community development. Since 2007, Synapse, in partnership with IYF, has been implementing a number of youth empowerment programs in Senegal aimed at improving the employment prospects of young people across the country.

This *Best Practice Note* offers learnings for how youth-serving organizations can effectively create holistic programming around rural youth entrepreneurship based on IYF's experiences in carrying out a youth agribusiness project in Senegal.

JEUNES AGRICULTEURS: ONE SUCCESSFUL APPROACH

In response to the growing demand for increased training and employment opportunities for young people, IYF conducted a [study](#)³ through the World Bank's Global Partnership for Youth Employment (GPYE) on rural employment opportunities in Senegal that informed the design of the *Jeunes Agriculteurs* (JA)⁴ project. The goal of the project, which was implemented by the Synapse Center, was to improve rural livelihoods, increase incomes, and provide decent employment opportunities for youth. To make agriculture more attractive to young people, JA saw the need to invest in education at all levels, support agricultural innovation, build market infrastructure, and improve the business environment in ways that would raise incomes and expand the agriculture value chain.

Over 18 months, JA trained 320 young people, ages 16 to 29, from the Senegalese cities of Dakar, Saint-Louis, and Thiès in the areas of entrepreneurship, agriculture, ICT, and life skills. Activities were designed to take youth through the process of developing a business idea and creating a business plan that included key elements (e.g., marketing strategies, sources of financing, and a timeline and action steps for implementation). Youth participants benefitted from a blended learning approach that paired classroom training with experiential activities such as expeditions and exchanges, innovation labs, individual mentoring and coaching, networking opportunities, and the chance to learn about other resources available to them such as financial services. Select business ideas were awarded small seed funding at the end of the course to support youth in starting

up their businesses, based on the quality of the business plan, marketing and financing strategies, and the overall likelihood of success in realizing the business.

To support the project, regional committees, consisting of representatives from technical training institutes, government, civil society, and the private sector, were established in each location and charged with the daily operation of the program. Such committees played an important role in ensuring there was broad community support for the young people and their budding businesses.

The project faced a number of challenges not uncommon in rural youth entrepreneurship initiatives, such as scarcity of business financing, limited availability of land to launch new business ideas, and lack of access to key agricultural inputs. With the support of the regional committees, JA organized monthly financing platforms to expose young entrepreneurs to bankers, investors, philanthropists, and micro-credit union leaders. These platforms not only helped the young entrepreneurs to showcase their projects and demonstrate their credibility, but also emphasized the need to reduce the barriers for young entrepreneurs to access finance.

To combat the land access issue, 'innovation labs' were created through partnerships with technical training institutes and colleges to provide small plots of land for young people to test their ideas. The innovation labs enabled youth to receive training in new agricultural technologies. Each lab was concluded with an event showcasing the young entrepreneurs' business models to a group of specialists in order to demonstrate the viability of their approaches, gain suggestions, and encourage networking.

To facilitate access to the agricultural inputs (e.g., seeds, pesticides, fertilizer) needed to increase yields, JA connected youth with government extension programs or local providers who could help them gain the information, products,

and services they needed to start and build successful businesses.

Ultimately, the project helped young people start 172 businesses, which in turn, created over 200 jobs in their communities. These youth-run businesses included organic restaurants, vegetables sales, juice enterprises, and the marketing of natural jams and nutritious baby foods. Business sizes ranged from one employee to production enterprises employing 15-plus people.

BEST PRACTICES FOR RURAL AGRICULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMS

Below are key learnings and recommendations derived from the JA experience and other similar IYF programs.

Provide a Holistic Approach to Training

In Africa, 89 percent of rural youth are employed on family farms or are self-employed, with only 30 percent having completed primary school.⁵ As a result, young entrants into the agricultural sector often require a mix of both technical and soft skills. The unique needs of rural youth can be addressed through a holistic approach that places high-quality small business and life skills training alongside relevant technical training (e.g., in agronomy, animal husbandry, handicraft production, dairy science, horticulture). Life skills development plays a particularly important role to help youth hone competencies such as self-confidence, creative thinking, risk taking, and decision making, along with skills, such as project and money management, that let them re-think entrepreneurship and agriculture as viable, personally-meaningful, income-generating options.

Many would-be rural entrepreneurs come from agricultural families, but lack the advanced technical knowledge needed to get ahead—either by cultivating new products; adding value to traditional raw products (e.g., through drying, milling,

packaging); or by branching into related fields like small animal husbandry. In designing rural entrepreneurship programs, it helps to tap both local and international expertise to tailor effective technical trainings for young people. In this way, youth gain the knowledge and perspective to build businesses whose innovative products or services fill an unmet need in a local market. Where appropriate, programs can coordinate their efforts with those agricultural vocational schools that play a role in training young people across the value chain for agricultural-related jobs (e.g., related to machinery, transportation, processing, marketing).

Take a Value Chain Approach

In designing rural entrepreneurship programs, it is vital to have a holistic view of the agricultural value chain in order to better understand the opportunities available to young people. Youth may find that their skills, interests, or talents are best aligned with aspects of the agriculture value chain other than actual farming. Examples include the distribution of agricultural inputs and farm financing, the production and manufacturing of more processed goods based on farm crops, and the marketing and sale of farm outputs. Showing young people that there are a variety of jobs in and around the agricultural sector and exposing them to these careers helps them imagine more options for themselves. A program that establishes linkages with relevant sectors of the agricultural value chain will be more effective at preparing young people for and connecting them to those opportunities. Identifying synergies between agriculture and other sectors helps enable youth to engage and participate in the value chain more proactively, which can have the ripple effect of creating more jobs. By incorporating a value chain approach—and not just focusing on farming—a program can create space for innovation, entrepreneurship, employment, access to markets, and increased productivity and efficiency.⁶

Youth at a Glance: Sen Gnam

When Adja, Fatou, and Oumy—three cousins—discovered that their uncle's lemon crop was destined to rot when sales fell flat, they came up with the idea for a processed fruit and vegetable business. Their enterprise, Sen Gnam, produces, packages, and sells a variety of juice drinks made from local produce. While Adja, Fatou, and Oumy had all graduated from university, they lacked knowledge of how to start and grow a business, which is where Jeunes Agriculteurs came in. "The program allowed us to develop better controls, to anticipate risks, and structure the project," says Oumy. [Click here](#) to hear more about their story.

Facilitate Access to Financing and Capital

Rural agricultural entrepreneurs have the potential to spark economic growth in their communities, but often have trouble accessing financing to launch or develop their business. Young entrepreneurs who use personal or family savings to start an enterprise may eventually encounter limits on how much their business can grow if it is not supplemented with outside investment.

Some youth have overcome this challenge by accessing grant facilities—such as the Youth Employment Network’s (YEN) Youth to Youth Fund (Y2Y)—that specifically target young entrepreneurs and youth-led start-ups. The Y2Y grant facility helps young entrepreneurs and youth-led organizations in East and West Africa create employment for themselves and their peers, by challenging youth to develop innovative ideas and providing capacity building and implementation support. Additionally, YEN’s Youth Entrepreneurship Facility (YEF) includes components that stimulate youth entrepreneurship by creating partnerships between microfinance institutions and providers who offer youth training in business-related skills.

In other situations, rural entrepreneurs may turn to financing models such as revolving loan funds or village savings and credit associations. These mechanisms can be effective for poor rural households that have neither the assets nor the skills to engage with formal institutions. These groups can be seen as a first step before accessing services from more formalized financial institutions.

Foster Community Buy-In

Long-established generational attitudes toward farming techniques can prove to be a barrier for rural youth. With high rates of illiteracy among rural adults, the older generation—which often controls family land use—can fail to recognize the utility of a formal education in agriculture. For

this reason, youth who gained specialized skills in agricultural techniques or animal husbandry can experience difficulties with farmers who trust their own traditional experience. Even in a family farm setting, the ability of young people to apply new technologies and knowledge is hindered by their parents’ lack of confidence in their capacity and skepticism of innovations. Young women, in particular, may face additional cultural biases.

For this reason, programs should consider activities that build broad awareness and support among key stakeholders, including family members, community leaders, and business representatives. In the JA program, the use of local councils became important in creating community buy-in. The councils, comprising representatives of chambers of commerce, government bureaus, technical institutes, and educational institutions, worked to create sustainable local impact because the community at large saw the program’s value. Such councils can help programs by identifying youth participants, hosting training activities, and facilitating youth’s access to credit or other resources. These partnerships connect youth with business leaders or agricultural cooperatives that have insight into the ups-and-downs of the local business environment. Finally, ongoing contact with government ministries helps ensure their support for rural training programs and linkages to policy.

Another way to encourage youth to engage in agriculture and see opportunities for themselves in the sector is to expose them to successful role models. Young entrepreneurs, ideally from a similar background as the program participants, can be invited to share their stories and inspire new entrants to imagine an entrepreneurial future they may not have considered. Program alumni, too, can serve as mentors to new program entrants to provide encouragement and guidance as a way of giving back.

Country-Specific Resources

Following are reports from assessment studies that provide relevant country-specific data on youth needs and opportunities:

YouthMap DRC

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/youthmap-drc-congolese-youth-assets-opportunities>

YouthMap Mozambique

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/voices-next-generation-assessment-youth-mozambique>

YouthMap Senegal

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/youthmap-senegal-youth-assessment-road-ahead>

Youth Employment Opportunities in Northern Senegal

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/youth-employment-northern-senegal-creating-job-opportunities-young-people>

YouthMap Tanzania

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/youthmap-tanzania-assets-opportunities>

YouthMap Uganda

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/navigating-challenges-charting-hope-cross-sector-situational-analysis-youth-uganda>

YouthMap Zambia

<http://library.yfn.net.org/library/youthmap-zambia-cross-sector-analysis-youth-zambia>

Program Resources

Following are resources that may be helpful as you consider implementing a rural youth entrepreneurship program:

Supporting Young Entrepreneurs:

A Practical Guide to Quality Programming
<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/supporting-young-entrepreneurs-practical-guide-quality-programming>

Strengthening Life Skills for Youth:

A Practical Guide to Quality Programming
<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/strengthening-life-skills-youth-practical-guide-quality-programming>

Build Your Business

<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/build-your-business-byb>

Accelerated Skills Acquisition Program (ASAP):

Training for Young Entrepreneurs
<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/accelerated-skills-acquisition-program-training-young-entrepreneurs>

Youth Employment Network

www.ilo.org/yen

CONCLUSION

What's clear from IYF's experience is that the needs and challenges facing rural youth require comprehensive approaches that combine key components—locally-relevant training, a value chain focus, financing options, and the engagement of the broader community—in providing an integrated 'package' of support that fits the local context.

Equally important is shifting mindsets about what's possible for youth when it comes to pursuing entrepreneurial careers in the agricultural sector. Toward this end, an emerging generation of young social entrepreneurs is using agri-business to address pressing needs—from boosting incomes to improving nutrition. IYF's *YouthActionNet*® program—designed to strengthen and promote the role of young social entrepreneurs across the globe—has captured numerous examples of youth-led agri-enterprise creation, particularly in Africa.

"There's a common narrative that young people don't like agriculture and don't want to be farmers and are fleeing to urban areas," says YouthActionNet Program Manager Jessica Elisberg. "For this reason, it's heartening to see young social entrepreneurs who are changing this narrative." A potent example is Maimouna Ilboudo, age 27, who created Djikadi—a purveyor of local seasonings in Burkino Faso—to fight malnutrition through the promotion of locally-

produced goods. Maimouna sources her raw materials from women farmers, providing a more stable income for members of her community. Similarly, in Nigeria, Mene Blessing Oritseweyinmi, 25, produces a low-cost chicken feed that makes poultry farming more affordable, while also addressing local nutritional needs.

These two youth—and many more young entrepreneurs like them—are paving the way for a more robust agricultural enterprise sector, while serving as role models for their peers. They stand at the forefront of a promising new trend across the continent.

For more information on the Global Partnership for Youth Employment, please visit www.gpye.org or contact Angela Venza at a.venza@iyfn.net.org.

ENDNOTES

1. Brooks, Karen, Sergiy Zorya, and Amy Gautam. *Jobs for Africa's Youth*. Employment in Agriculture. Chapter 5. Pg. 1
2. YouthMap is an IYF program supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). More can be found at <http://www.iyfn.net.org/youthmap>.
3. See: <http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/youthmap-senegal-youth-assessment-road-ahead>.
4. The JA project is part of the *YouthMap Innovation Fund* in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by Synapse Center.
5. Brooks, Karen, Sergiy Zorya, and Amy Gautam. *Jobs for Africa's Youth*. Employment in Agriculture. Chapter 5. Pg 52.
6. http://www.fanrpan.org/documents/d01417/developing_capacities_and_opportunity_20121018.pdf

In 2008, with support from the World Bank Development Grant Facility, the International Youth Foundation, the Youth Employment Network, the Arab Urban Development Institute, and the Understanding Children's Work Project joined together to form the Global Partnership for Youth Employment (GPYE). Its goal: to build and disseminate evidence on youth employment outcomes and effective programs to help address the challenges facing young people in their transition to work. The GPYE leverages the technical and regional experience of the five partner organizations in youth employment research, programming, evaluation, and policy dialogue. The partnership's work focuses on Africa and the Middle East, regions in need of better evidence on effective approaches to promote youth employment.

This Best Practice Note is one in a series of assessments, research studies, technical guides, and learning papers produced by the GPYE to build the evidence base for improving policies, program design, and practices related to youth employability in the region. These resources can be accessed at www.gpye.org.

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THE WORLD BANK

