

Young People's Mobilities, Farming Aspirations and Engagements in Northern Ghana



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Abstract

Development policies targeting young people and African agriculture tend to focus on their abandonment of the sector and the need to attract new generations to agricultural activities through its commercialization. This paper points to potential gaps in such interventions by investigating the diverse mobilities, aspirations, and engagements of young people in farming, through a qualitative case study in rural northern Ghana. Our study also challenges the prevalent assumption of African farmers' movements from rural to rural areas, from rural to urban areas, and out of farming altogether, as we found evidence of young people migrating from urban to rural areas. We also show that the intersection of generation, place and gender unevenly shaped young people's movements to and away from rural areas, along with the broad patterns of their involvement with farming.

Keywords

agriculture, migration, food security, poverty reduction, rural-urban divides

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Cover Photo

Two Ghanaian youth plow their field in a rural area in northern Ghana. © FAO/Luis Tato



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Introduction

The journeys young people make from rural areas to urban centres have received a lot of attention from policymakers over the past decade due to their negative outcomes for agricultural and food production systems. This is especially the case in sub-Saharan Africa, where young people's rural outmigration is reportedly the highest in the world (ILO 2020). It is estimated that between 60 and 80 percent of young people's total employment is in food systems, mainly in food production (Wittman et al. 2021). Sumberg (2021) has summarized the key consequences of the growing migration of African young people out of rural areas. The loss of young people's labour compromises the growth of the agricultural sector, rural development and national food security. Urban services are unable to meet the increased inflows of young people and young people can be easily pushed into precarious and risky economic activities. Young people are believed to be abandoning agriculture in large numbers because they perceive farming as a primarily subsistence-oriented, low-status and physically intensive endeavour. In a recent report, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO 2014: 106) explained this phenomenon.

[Young people] do not perceive agriculture as a remunerative or prestigious profession, and until they find meaningful economic opportunities and attractive environments in rural areas, they will continue to migrate to cities... Investing in young people living in rural areas is therefore key to enhancing agricultural productivity, boosting rural economies, and ensuring food security.

For decades, policy solutions for poverty reduction and food security have underscored the expansion of business and entrepreneurship in African agriculture (Tacoli 2003). This approach has recently been recast as "agripreneurship", increasingly targeting young people to improve the status of farming and attract new generations to this type of economic activity (Gough and Langevang 2016, Mueller and Thurlow 2019). This approach is based in part on the belief that overurbanization must be controlled to limit deagrarianization in sub-Saharan Africa (Bryceson and Jamal 2019; Tacoli 1998). The general indicators of deagrarianization include reduced role of agriculture in local and national economies, shrinking agricultural employment and commensurate decline in family farms, smallholder farming and number of farms (Ricciardi et al. 2018). Many questions arise as to whether the commercialization of agriculture and this push for agri-entrepreneurship will reduce poverty, food insecurity and incentivize people, particularly young people, to remain in rural areas. Whether rural outmigration in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly by young people, is even a real problem has also been more recently called into question (Potts 2017).

Emerging scholarship on young African mobilities complicates these dominant policy narratives by demonstrating that these movements do not simply occur permanently in one direction, out of rural areas (and agriculture) to urban centres (Glover and Sumberg 2020, Potts 2013, Sumberg

2021). Rather, they often operate more fluidly as circular, short-term, and short distance mobilities. Recent studies suggest that African young people are not necessarily uninterested in agriculture and aspire to combine farm and non-farm livelihoods (Gough and Langevang 2016, LaRue 2021, White 2021). Prescriptive solutions such as agripreneurship overlook the diversity of young people's aspirations, circumstances and needs (te Lintelo et al. 2012). A more nuanced understanding of young people's movements tied to their aspirations and engagements with farming in sub-Saharan Africa and their restrictions to participation is urgently needed (Ripoll et al. 2017). Assessments are especially needed that go beyond youth involvement in business and entrepreneurship to contribute to ongoing debates about the full, partial or non-involvement of young people in agriculture, including their varied movements in and out of rural areas (La Rue et al. 2021, Potts 2009, 2012). Although there is a tendency in the limited literature to describe young people as a distinctive and unified group, young people and the rural areas in which they reside are also highly heterogeneous in terms of their opportunities and constraints tied to gender, wealth, ethnicity, religion, education, location (for example, remoteness and ecological conditions), alongside other socioeconomic and spatial factors (Sumberg and Okali 2013). We build on the key arguments of this emerging literature and offer a qualitative case study from rural northern Ghana to analyze the mobilities, perceptions, aspirations and constraints of diverse young people to farming. We also examine young people's associations with agricultural development policies and practices that support and promote business and entrepreneurship.

Ghana is a useful national setting to study the linkages between young people's movements and agricultural development. More than half of the population is dependent on agriculture, contributing 54 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and 90 percent of the country's food needs (FAO 2021). Although Ghana has experienced high growth rates, it has not seen comparable growth in job creation, particularly for young people (GLSS 2014). Youth make up the highest proportion of migrants, mainly to urban centres. In response to youth unemployment and rural outmigration, the government has made the commercial activities of young people in agriculture a policy priority (MoFA 2017). The connections between this priority and young people's own aspirations must be examined to better align these two key aspects (Mausch et al. 2021).

In this study, we adopt a socially constructed conception of young people that asks who, or which young people, are farming in a rural area of northern Ghana and why? What are the farming aspirations, current engagements, and constraints for these young participants in achieving their farming goals? How do their farming aspirations and activities compare to other people's farming engagements and connect with agricultural interventions that promote rural development in the study sites? Our findings complicate existing conceptualizations of young people's movements in and out of rural areas by demonstrating the intersecting disparities and divergences in their farming aspirations and engagements based on generation, place (rural and urban),

and gender identities and norms (woman and man) in a specific rural context. We also draw on our qualitative empirical research to expose some contradictions and exclusions of the entrepreneurship-oriented agricultural development programs for young people.

Research Methods

The empirical findings in this paper are drawn from a broader study involving immersive qualitative research conducted from April to June 2016 and January to April 2017 in two rural communities located in an undisclosed district in the Northern Region of Ghana. The specific research sites have not been disclosed to maintain the confidentiality of participants. A total of 60 in-depth interviews with 83 farmers were conducted by the first author through an interpreter, who translated conversations on the spot where English was not spoken. Thirty-six of these interviews were conducted with women smallholders, 19 were with men smallholders, and others were with farming couples (men and women, or women-only who lived within the same household). These interviews were distributed between the two communities, with more taking place in the community closer to the city because of the respective greater population density. The goals of the farmer interviews were to compare socio-economic differences in perceptions, resource access, farming and food practices. Fourteen focus group discussions were conducted with smallholders (seven in each community). Six were split between women-only and men-only groups, and two were youth-only (with both young women and men included). In these focus groups, a community resource mapping exercise was conducted, as well as discussions of social norms, values and divisions of labour related to farming and food, and how these may be changing due to wider environmental and economic transitions. The analysis of this paper draws largely on the 11 interviews and two focus groups purposively conducted with self-identified young people who ended up ranging in ages from 25 to 36 years. A total of 28 young people were purposively selected to participate in our study. In-depth interviews with an additional 31 key informants working throughout the wider district with specialized expertise on the local agrifood system from their position in government agencies (n=10), donors and NGOs (n=9), agri-input companies (n=3), and contracts with farmers (n=9) were also conducted to compare their perceptions with those of smallholders.

Case Study Context

The Northern Region is a semi-arid area with an average annual rainfall of 600mm and is part of the Guinea savanna agroecological zone. Soils are generally poor in organic matter and nutrients (MoFA 2014). Commercial agriculture has grown significantly here as it tends to receive more multilateral and philanthropic donor, NGO and government assistance for production and marketing contracts than other northern areas. Other relevant factors are its proximity to Tamale (the largest city in the north), infrastructure/roads, and the availability of land, including valleys suitable for commercial rice production. In 2017, there were at least

eight agricultural development projects supported by NGOs or official donors operating in this district alongside the government's main farm contract scheme. These projects supported farming contracts for mainly high-yielding varieties of maize, rice and soybean seeds, offering inorganic fertilizer, pesticides and tractors along with extension and storage services in exchange for direct and indirect cash and in-kind payments (MoFA 2014). These areas have also been the site of the Ghanaian government's National Rural Growth Program (NRGP) and other similar interventions targeting the youth cohort.

The Dagombas are the largest ethnic group in this area, organized as patrilineal societies in which male members inherit family land and property (Apusigah 2009). The district under study has some of the lowest education rates in the country, and most households have members who migrate to urban areas for at least four months of the year (GLSS 2014). Many households are involved in rainfed agriculture and rely on food crop production, tree cultivation, animal husbandry and some irrigated horticulture for their subsistence and for sale.

Young People's Farming Aspirations and Engagements

This paper investigates how and why young people engaged in agriculture or aspired to engage with it. This core objective led to conversations with young participants that focused in part on their movements within and outside of farming and rural areas. A key point raised by participants about young people's farming was that they are more physically capable of working on the farm than older generations. As a young man from the urban area living in the rural community said, "I don't have anything that can prevent me from doing work that...involves using our energy. That is why we are thought to be youth." Despite their greater physical abilities, the role of rural young people in farming was evaluated by their socially defined roles within intergenerational socially reciprocal relationships. Their status was determined largely as dependants responsible for working on the family farm who depended on the food produced from these farm plots. The older male head of household managed the family farm, supervised its activities and made all important decisions.

This role and identity of rural young people as workers and dependants on their families' farms was also tied to their personal characterization of a "farmer" as a male household head who was largely responsible for taking care of them. As one young woman from the rural area but living within the urban area explained,

Because it really is our culture that old men or old people should farm. Youth will help them because ... it is not your responsibility to take care of a whole family. But if you are an old man, it is your responsibility to take care of them and...you the youth...all you can do is help them on their farms, but not...have your own land to farm.

This construction of farming as a masculine and adult endeavour greatly shaped the farming aspirations of young people in the area. This was especially the case for rural young men who were striving to transition from dependent labourers to assuming the roles of the household heads themselves. This transformation would offer them more agency and authority to navigate the reciprocal social relationships within their households and larger communities.

Many rural young people described their own aspirations to transition to adulthood in relation to the wishes and desires of their families. These family aspirations involved out-migration and social freedoms to pursue higher status and income-earning opportunities by abandoning farming. These actions, as their older family members believed, would enable these youth to receive more monetary and other rewards, such as social mobility, than had been offered to these older members through farming. A young woman from the rural community, but living within the urban area, explained the frustrating transition from completing school to wanting to find work and gaining more independence from the family farm:

You finish Senior High, [but there's no work], so you are in the village farming while your colleagues are in town [Tamale] looking for work. They [your family] will insult you... Your mother sponsors you and you go to school, you complete, and at the end of the day, you are sitting in the house with your mother.

During interviews and focus groups, most of the rural young participants underscored the constant social pressure to move to urban areas. A male participant from an urban location who lived within the rural community explained that his family wanted him to “get white-collar jobs, rather than staying in the village and farming, or go through hardships”. His older family members believed that “life is better and there are so many job opportunities [in the urban area]”. “Farming is for poor people,” they contended. Our participants indicated that young people left rural areas and agriculture not to seek independence from the family farm and the larger household. Instead, this action was greatly shaped by the sacrifices of their family for their educational training and the aspirations of their family that their children achieve a higher socioeconomic status. These young participants believed that the (potentially) higher remunerative, non-farm income-earning employment could further be used reciprocally to help take care of their family and improve the quality of their lives.

Starting from this understanding of rural young people's identities as valued dependants on their family farms and the low status of their farming even among their family members, we next identify and analyze key themes raised by young people themselves about the opportunities available to them to participate in meaningful farming endeavours. These themes were assessed with reference to the intergenerational and reciprocal social relationships within families and households in the study area.

Rural-Urban Connections and Divides

There were striking differences in the participation of young people in agriculture depending on whether they had been raised in rural communities or in the city of Tamale. These two groups have been designated as “rural young people” and “urban young people” in the analysis. Although our sample size was small, we found that rural young people were more likely to be farming independently on a significantly smaller scale than their urban young counterparts. Since much of the sample of young interview participants coming from the urban area were based in the community closer to the city, this also signalled the need to investigate further the unevenness of rural-urban socially reciprocal relationships. Rural areas closer to the city serve urban areas with land, labour and food, and urban areas serve these rural areas with commercial farming on their land. Some members of the rural community benefited from those urban investments in commercial farming on land in their communities through wage labour, payments made in-kind, or for use of the land itself. Although we cannot make claims about the absolute or relative importance of these place-based divides, most of the young participants and many other respondents in the wider study underscored significant differences in farming related to these locations.

Young people from urban areas or “urban young people” acquired land to farm in rural communities in different ways than their rural counterparts. Some urban young people had chosen to farm in the rural community because that is where they were residing. They had arrived in the community to work as teachers and had drawn on their localized social and work-based networks, such as their neighbours and school-based connections, to acquire farmland. Other urban young participants had arrived in the community for farming, after accessing land through friends and family or through historical ties and social networks, particularly those connected to development projects. Rural participants worked on their family farms and acquired their own farmland, typically through their family and wider kinship networks. Sometimes the demarcation between family farms and rural young people's farms blurred, especially when young people performed labour on their family farms with varying degrees of control over the harvests produced from these plots.

Greater potential to generate start-up capital from nonfarm activities, such as working as teachers or as extension employees for private or family production companies, was a major factor contributing to the farming opportunities available for young people coming from or living within the city. As one urban young man living in the rural community explained, “there are no companies like that, or shops like that, for them [the rural youth] to engage themselves, so definitely they [the rural youth] have to move to the urban places where they can get those things [like start-up capital].” Our young farmers and key informant participants identified tractor rentals and inorganic fertilizers as the major farm expenses. Many young rural participants were unable to finance these required investments beyond a few acres. Conversely, the few young people who arrived from the urban area to the

rural area to farm managed to successfully acquire start-up capital from the government, NGO and/or donor-supported agribusiness competitions and farm contracts. None of the rural young people reported receiving these subsidies.

In addition to start-up capital, the greater exposure of urban young participants to large-scale production, mentorship, information and agribusiness promotion by government, NGOs and donors encouraged them to farm in rural areas. As one young man from the rural community explained, “the urban youth, they know now there is money in farming and some of them are exposed to a lot of information on farming...But those in the rural area, they don't have that information, so that is why they don't want to [do farming].” Rural young people have been largely familiar with, and have worked mainly on, vulnerable smallholder farms. This experience and background probably influence their perception of farming as an unprofitable livelihood activity, consistent with the general sentiments about farming in the region. While there may be commercial farming activities in their area, rural young people did not reveal significant exposure or connection to this form of land use. This finding also highlights the socio-economic and spatial divides within these communities.

Since most rural young people grew up working on their families' farms, they were more likely to be exposed to the common constraints of pursuing farming than young people in urban areas. The vast majority of our participants described farming in the region as a risky endeavour due to its dependence on increasingly irregular rainfall patterns, shortening growing seasons, heat stress, and aridity, all associated with rapid climate change. Dozens of farmers operating within communities also expressed how farming had become less profitable over the past 20 years due to the high costs of overcoming soil infertility coupled with decreasing market values for farm products. One young man from the rural community echoed these common sentiments:

*Because the rain pattern [is very erratic]. As of now, people have planted there *points to area* and there is no rain, and they have to go and plough again and start all over again. So, [rural youth] see it as a waste of time... So, they would like to go south [to Accra] as they think there is money there.*

Rural young people are more acutely aware of environmental and market risks (and associated costs) than their urban young cohorts. This is due to their intimate exposure to these elements and its harsh consequences. Rural young people observe and feel the effects of an acutely changing climate on their own family's land and food supplies, as well as those of their neighbours and communities. Therefore, some may be unwilling to pursue farming or plan to rely on it for the future growth of their own households. As a result of these personal experiences of the increasing effects of climate change on agriculture and food production, migrating to southern areas is perceived by some as a less risky endeavour than farming.

Beyond information, networks and capital, access to land was another major challenge identified by most farmer participants in the wider study. For some young people, it acted as an important disincentive to farming. As one young man from the rural area explained:

Some of our parents they don't also have the land, [and] normally they beg from the Elders or from the Chief. So, because of this, when we also want to farm, they will say they 'don't have the land'. But [even] the land they use to farm, what will you grow from it? You will not get it [good yields].

Since agricultural land is in limited supply, many small landholders pointed out that inherited family land parcels had become significantly smaller over generations. This parcelling out of land and shrinking landholdings made it much harder for them to meet their subsistence needs and expand the scale of their operations. This shortage of farmland was exacerbated by soil degradation, leading many of the farmers to seek more and better-quality land to produce sufficient harvests for subsistence. Furthermore, many of these farmers indicated that they were concerned about the growing presence of “newcomers”. This applied particularly to recent entrants from urban areas who had arrived to benefit from the new farming contracts in these rural communities. Urban young people were farming profitably on a larger scale, while those of the rural community struggled to grow sufficient food to feed their families. These disparities have sharpened the rural-urban divides and motivated some rural young people to out-migrate to the urban areas.

Gender-Based Norms and Discrimination

The interactions between gender norms and expectations and young people's farming activities and aspirations constitute another major theme emerging from our study. Our research found that young women faced even greater barriers to farming when assessed against young men. The fact that only a few young women participated in this study signalled their lack of interest and exclusion from agriculture. Access to land and its other qualities is highly gendered in this area. Dozens of women farmers interviewed during fieldwork reportedly used smaller and more dispersed parcels of land. The distribution of landholding by size varied considerably according to gender, with women holding two acres on average to farm compared to seven acres for men. Thus, landholdings of male farmers were more than three times the size of those held by female farmers. The patrilineal land inheritance system is one of the main reasons for these gender-based disparities in land held and used for agricultural purposes. However, a female participant argued that resolving biased land inheritance norms in favour of women was an insufficient condition for equitable land redistribution. She believed that so long as farming was treated as a masculine endeavour and male preserve primarily for feeding the family, men would continue to feel entitled to use the land even at the expense of their female relatives:

Where women inherit, they [relatives] will still come to you... and say, 'you let me use the land to farm' and then there's nothing you can do, you have to let him use it. Why is that? Because ... We are from a male dominated [society and sector]. So, even we [the women], we have been oriented like that.

Not surprisingly, most of our respondents of over 100 farmers and key informants also characterized farming as an economic activity carried out by male household heads to feed and support their families. These masculine images of “farmers” and “farming” can discourage young women from farming and actively limit their involvement in agricultural pursuits.

Many participants underscored that women face time constraints for farming because of their care responsibilities of housework and taking care of children, among others. Some of the participants also believed that women who engaged in large-scale farming were encroaching on the male domain where they would not necessarily be welcomed as equal participants. As one young man from the rural community explained,

[Women] are still struggling with the housework, kitchen, taking care of children and all that, they can't, like they [relatives] won't even give them the chance [to farm]. It is always believed that the man is the overall boss of the house. He farms to feed the entire family, no one has a right to do that...And their pride is so much so that when women are seen to be farming and also making headway [money] in farming, the men perceive her to be dominating over him.

Successful women farmers would be perceived negatively as “dominating” over male farmers and men in general, and breach gender-based social codes about women’s position and rank within households.

These gendered images of farmers and farming as a masculine and adult endeavour also produced negative effects on women’s participation in commercial farming. One of the most common complaints made by many women farmer respondents is that these gender-based beliefs prevented them from accessing much-needed resources on their own, such as tractors, agricultural extension and production contract services. District-level records maintained by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture further confirmed the weaker accessibility and participation of female farmers in the various support programs. Male farmers had received twice the number of private, NGO or donor-supported farm contracts as compared to female farmers. This stark disparity occurred even though two of the eight agricultural development projects exclusively targeted women. Only 30 women participated in the first year of the government-led farm contracts. The number of male participants, on the other hand, exceeded 1,700. This low female participation can be attributed to other reasons beyond personal bias. Some of

the farm contracts required a minimum area of land as a qualifying criterion. For government-led contracts, five acres of land were required. Many women smallholders held less land and, as a result, were rejected by such programs.

Age-Related Discrimination and Nepotism

Many participants in this study complained of age-related discrimination and nepotism, which had detrimental effects on their farming activities and participation in government, NGO- and donor-supported farming programs. Both the cohorts of respondents and rural and urban young people felt that their farming commitments and aspirations were not taken seriously by government officials, NGOs and others. In addition, they believed that their role in farming and related intentions were treated facetiously by their families and communities because of their younger ages. This age-based discrimination is exemplified by the experience of an urban young man from a family involved in commercial farming. He revealed that he had to work very hard to persuade his father to endorse his ambition of cultivating rice using the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) technique. Unlike the regular process of rice farming highly dependent on chemical fertilizer and pesticides, SRI farming requires transplanting and adopts more ecologically sustainable practices. Low water cultivation and a preference for organic manure and compost are some features of SRI. This participant explained,

Last year I tried to do a mini project aside of the commercial farm that was an intensification of rice production [technique] ... Oh, I looked like a boy who didn't know what he was doing, like I was just going to mess up the season ... I even had opposition from my dad...[and now] he is shaking his head like 'wow I think we should have done the whole field'.

Another young male respondent from the rural community highlighted the preferential treatment shown to some well-connected members of the older generation in the various agricultural development schemes.

It's politics because you [the government] registers some people [to participate]...but it's only the Big Men who know the top, top people who get the benefit [e.g. credit or subsidy]. Like, if they register some farmers, they put [political] party people there... That is why we say, 'politics pays in agric[culture]'.

The phrase “Big Men” is used here to denote an individual with high status and wealth, and is generally associated with older men of standing. Government schemes such as NRGPs aim to expand the involvement of young people in commercial agriculture. However, many young participants, especially those from rural areas, pointed out that they were unable to participate in or benefit from such programs. This exclusion was made more difficult by the fact that urban young people were able to access such opportunities much more easily.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the aspirations, engagements and movements of young people in and out of agriculture and rural areas using a case study from northern Ghana. Our findings highlight the intersecting effects and significance of place (rural or urban), gender (woman or man), and generation in moulding the opportunities and constraints for young people to engage in agriculture. Decisions to move out of the rural community and abandon farming were not simply based on individual choices, contrary to what has been suggested in policy discussions and the existing literature on rural development. Social norms and expectations about social and economic roles within and outside the household and gendered patterns of land usage and inheritance exerted a profound negative impact on the participation of young people, especially young women. Our paper also discusses the differential experiences of two sets of cohorts, rural young people and urban young people. Rural young participants' non-farm livelihood aspirations and their movement out of rural areas were shaped by their experiences on their families' farms, which have become increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of climate change, competition for suitable land, and rising costs of agricultural inputs and mechanization services. Their farming families often could not see the transformative potential of farming as a pathway out of poverty and precarity for their children. These discouraging beliefs of their families affected the aspirations and engagements of some young rural people. These key findings underscore the importance of situating the livelihood aspirations related to farming of young people within larger family and community expectations and prevalent social norms. Urban young people in this study enjoyed multiple advantages over their rural counterparts, thanks to non-farm income-generating opportunities, better social networks, information and mentorship. Finally, our study shows that the ideas and desires of young people about farming were more differentiated, complicated and ambitious compared to the narrow agribusiness policy advocated by government, NGOs and donors.

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