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***CHANGING THE NORM, MAKING AGRICULTURE “COOL” FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE***

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... everyone matters

CHANGING THE NORM, MAKING AGRICULTURE “COOL” FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Abstract

The challenge to attract the youth to the agriculture sector has been exacerbated by the image problem agriculture as a profession faces. In this short review, the perception of people on agriculture as a profession is discussed. Findings indicate that majority of the respondents perceive agriculture as a rural activity for the poor which involves a lot of hard work yet with little profit, whilst others also saw agriculture as a very profitable venture in developed countries but not worthwhile and associated with poverty in the developing countries. Amongst the recommendations suggested to give agriculture a positive image to attract young people into the profession are; the use of ICT to solve challenges in the agriculture sector, Strengthen the teaching of agriculture in schools, participation of youth in agriculture policy discussions, making farmer role models visible to the youth and improving access to information, land and credit.

Introduction

Farmers are aging but who will take their place when they retire? Although the aging demographic structure of farmers offers an opportunity for young people who are unemployed, only a few are willing to take up a profession in farming. Youth participation in agriculture has been inhibited by a myriad of reasons, including access to land and financial capital, high interest rate on loans, lack of security in land tenure and the negative perception of pursuing agriculture as career. Attracting the youth to agriculture requires a shift in the perception of agriculture as a subsistence activity to a viable business enterprise and also creating the enabling environment, which employs a modern approach to farming that raises productivity, making agriculture an attractive venture.

The Image of Farming as a Profession: Who is a Farmer?

A survey was conducted with about 50 people via WhatsApp on their perception on farming as an occupation. People from different backgrounds namely; students, lecturers, development practitioners, professionals from medical field, banking, lawyers, drivers, administrators, researchers, architects, land economists, business entrepreneurs and also unemployed young persons participated in the survey which asked them to describe a farmer.

The preamble and question read as follows; “Can you please spare a moment to answer a question? The response that comes in mind immediately should be the answer. It could be just a word or a sentence. Please do not refine the answer.

Question: When someone says his/her occupation is farming or he/she is a farmer, what comes in mind immediately?

The following are some of the responses given as answers to the question posed:

- *A farmer is someone with little income and inadequate knowledge on modern farming practices*
- *Hard labour yet poor*
- *Grows crops mostly for food and sale, sells the bests, eats the worst and lives in rural area*
- *In Ghana the person may be among the deprived poor, needs to sweat in order to*

survive, elsewhere I see a rich person

- *The person lives in a rural area and operates on a small scale*
- *Belongs to the poor class in the society, most likely uneducated and lives in a rural area.*
- *A hardworking but poor person*
- *Job for those who could not make it academically*
- *Low educational level and financially poor*
- *Produces cash or food crops and rear animals for sale and family consumption, poor with no or less formal education*
- *Works directly on farm or engages others to do so in a supervisory role*
- *A villager who grows crops and does not have any educational background*
- *He directly produces food for consumption, a typical Ghanaian farmer uses hoe, cutlass and other obsolete equipment for farming*
- *A person dressed in tattered clothes, wearing wellington boots*
- *Someone who owns a farm and employs people to work on the farm*
- *An illiterate, weeding the ground*
- *In developing countries, a farmer works on subsistence, in advanced counties a farmer is a businessman*

Majority of the responses indicated that farming involved the growing of food crops and rearing of animals for subsistence or commercial purposes which may be done on a small or large scale. Farmers were also described mostly in an unattractive fashion. Descriptors such as poverty, illiteracy, rural area, subsistence, deprived and inadequate knowledge painted a gloomy mental picture of who a farmer is which already makes it an unattractive and unpromising for a young person to consider farming as an occupation. Very few people described farming as a profession or an activity that have various facets including supervisory roles amongst others. Another faction also acknowledged that farming was profitable in the advanced countries and run like businesses whilst a farmer in a developing country is likely a poor, illiterate rural folk who has resorted to farming as the last chance for survival.

It is not surprising that young people are unwilling to pursue a career in farming. Every young person aspires greater heights and ideally would like to pursue something profitable. Why choose a career in farming when all you could ever imagine as the future is an old man/woman in tattered clothes and wellington boots, whose skin has been burnt by the scorching sun and is slightly bent due to the constant weeding with hoes and cutlass yet with an empty pocket, no promotion or career advancement despite years of hard work?

Agriculture has an image problem! It has earned the tag as unattractive. As a result, most youth would not even consider it as their last job option. Simply put in a youthful tone it isn't "cool" at all. The average young person is very unlikely to consider the farmer as his/her role model in the society. Unfortunately, life revolves around eating and the ageing population of farmers has become a challenge globally. The average age of farmers in sub-Saharan Africa is around 60 years. A report by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) suggests that the migration of rural youth means fewer small-scale farmers in the future, potentially changing the profile of farming.

The agriculture sector offers a massive job creation opportunity for the worrying menace of youth unemployment. However, to take advantage of this opportunity, there is a need for a radical change of the image of agriculture amongst the youth, where the youth will see farming and the food production system as a promising and worthwhile career pathway.

How to Make Agriculture Attractive to Young People

In this section the following are proposed measures to attract the younger generation to agriculture;

- **Social Media for Agriculture Promotion**

The use of mobile phone is growing rapidly, connecting people to information. The rise of social media particularly amongst the youth creates an opportunity to use the medium to promote and engage young people in discussion about the agriculture sector. The youth can be sensitised that agriculture is a worthwhile activity which can earn them a decent livelihood. In the same vein, social media can be used to improve access to market information, technologies and financial opportunities to support youth in agriculture.

- **Making Farmer Role Models Visible**

Farming has been portrayed as old peoples' business, an activity reserved for pensioners as a hobby or means of survival. Young people tend to thus see the activity as outdated. Awareness has to be created on the benefits of being a farmer. Opportunities have to be created for market engagement, which will sell out farming as a business. Mentoring opportunities should be created to allow for information and experience sharing amongst old and young farmers and young people. The national farmer's day celebration is an occasion where the media can broadcast the activities of young role model farmers to a broad audience to encourage other young people to go into farming.

- **Strengthen how Agriculture is taught in Schools**

Reforms should be made in the curricula on agriculture based courses at all levels. In Ghana, agriculture is no longer taught as a subject in basic schools but rather as a part of integrated science curricula. Agriculture must be re-introduced as a subject with field practicals – school farms/school garden in basic schools. In addition, agricultural education should be made attractive and more relevant to the current opportunities that young people seek. The content taught and the materials employed by teachers need to be linked to modern technology, facilitate innovation and relevant to the evolving agriculture sector where emphasis is on agribusiness and entrepreneurship rather than subsistence. Aside the technical training, the capacity of students should also be built for management, communication and decision making which is all essential to grooming future farmers.

- **Use of ICT in Agriculture**

Attracting young people into the agriculture sector also means employing technological solutions to challenges in the agriculture sector through the use of ICT. The use of technology goes a long way to increase profitability thereby reducing cost of business transactions. Currently, entrepreneurs have developed mobile platforms and applications which is being used by smallholder farmers in Ghana. As mobile coverage advances, this initiative is envisaged to bring about transformation which will change the face of

agriculture. It is interesting to note that these mobile application developers are mostly young people. Some of these initiatives are ***Trotro Tractor***; a GPS enabled mobile platform that connects farmers to mechanized farming equipment within their vicinity whenever they need them, enabling them to request, schedule, and pre-pay tractor services and ***Cowtribe*** which provides on-demand access to veterinary doctors on farmer's phone. There must be a collaboration between these developers and government services such as the agriculture extension services, marketing boards and telecommunication companies to scale up the use of agriculture mobile applications especially in remote areas.

- **Improving Access to Information**

Aside providing young farmers with land, finances, inputs and technical assistance, access to information is vital for improving productivity. The information needs of farmers is dynamic according to the seasons, local and global developments. Understanding the information needs of farmers and providing such knowledge and information through mobile technology and other means accessible to farmers will improve general agricultural information services and subsequently reflect in farm practices and productivity.

- **Participation of Youth in Agriculture Policy Discussions**

The involvement of the youth in agriculture policy formulation has been discussed severally on different platforms. National policy on agriculture need to address the barriers to youth engagement in agriculture. Identification of factors that make agriculture unattractive to young people should come out of direct engagement with the youth in policy dialogue and formulation. The collective views of the youth on making agriculture attractive should inform the policies that government puts in place to promote youth in agriculture. Young farmers should be represented on policy formulation platforms, advisory groups, boards and committees to articulate their views. Engaging young people in policy dialogues and the creation of a platform to discuss opportunities in agriculture development, share experience and advocate for the emergence of young farmers will change the negative perceptions of young peoples' involvement in the agriculture and food production sector.

- **Facilitate Access to Land and Credit**

Young people are unable to afford the purchase of land or long term lease. Access to financial resource to purchase a land is also challenging since getting credit without collateral to buy land is impossible. Access to land can be eased through governments' acquisition of parcels of land for youth farm incubator programs. This will offer new farmers leases on land, access to land and technical assistance on production, farm business management and conservation practices. In addition, access to credit can be enhanced through the provision of soft loans for young people with ingenious agriculture proposals.

In as much as these proposed solutions aimed at making agriculture more appealing to the youth might sound "cool", it comes with its cross-cutting hurdles such as access to land, technology, education and rural development in general. But as long as there are plenty hungry mouths to be fed due to rapid population growth, a vast fertile soil, an energetic and vibrant youth force and modern technology and knowledge, such opportunities

should be harnessed for transformation and positive outcomes rather than allow them waste away while the youth wallow in poverty.

Today's farming industry should not be about manual work, but also managing communication and innovation. Careers in agriculture in the 21st Century should involve state of the art equipment, smart communication with buyers, retailers, banks, farmers and what have you, technology to measure and mitigate risks associated with farming and operationalizing sustainable farming business models. Agriculture must be seen with a class and not the mental picture of hard labour. The image of poverty should be replaced with the smile of a fulfilled young man/woman with a large acreage of farms where crops are monitored by drones and high resolution satellite imagery. The next generation of farmers should be inspired young people, technological savvy and empowered with a modern approach to feeding the world.

WHAT ARE YOUR CANDID THOUGHTS AND IMMEDIATE MENTAL PICTURE AT THE MENTION OF A FARMER AND HOW SUCH THOUGHTS CAN BE IMPROVED ON IN CASE IT IS UNATTRACTIVE?

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