



Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative (SPHI)
Sweetpotato Seed System and crop management Community of Practice (SSS-CoP)
Summary of online Discussion

TOPIC 16: Empowering the youth through Agriculture: What role for sweetpotato (seed systems)?

Lead discussant: Aime Ndayisenga, International Potato Center (CIP) - Rwanda

Introduction

On April 10 – May 10, 2018 the Sweetpotato Seed Systems and Crop Management Community of Practice (SSS-CoP) held an online discussion titled “Empowering the youth through Agriculture: What role for sweetpotato (seed systems)?”. The discussion sought ideas on what can be done to attract young people into agribusiness and explored opportunities available within the sweetpotato value-chain. The discussion led by Aime Ndayisenga, Communications Specialist, International Potato Center (CIP) – Rwanda, was pegged on the strong consensus across Africa and the world that involvement of the youth in agriculture will play a crucial role towards meeting global food security needs and reducing unemployment. According to the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy young people between 15-24 years of age constitute between 35 and 40 percent of the workforce in most sub-Saharan African countries. An additional one-fourth of the workforce is between 25 and 34 years old. Approximately 11 million young Africans enter the labor force annually but only about a quarter find paying jobs. If well tapped, agriculture can provide a solution to the rising unemployment in Africa. The discussion culminated in a meeting that brought together seed system practitioners from across Africa to discuss opportunities for youth engagement in sweetpotato production. The meeting held in Kigali, Rwanda on May 15 – 17, 2018 included a talk show on youth engagement in sweetpotato seed and root enterprises and a panel discussion on experiences with capitalizing on opportunities for youth engagement in agribusiness. The panel discussion questions were based on three key points that arose during the online discussion:

- Understanding differences between different youth categories to get a clear distinction on interests and choices.
- Making agriculture attractive to young people.
- Developing robust sweetpotato value-chains to create business opportunities for the youth.

In this article I summarize the key points from the online discussion.

Youth and agriculture: The challenge

Most countries in Africa are grappling with a big challenge of youth unemployment with more young people graduating annually than can be absorbed in employment. This is exacerbated by the high number of school dropouts especially in the rural areas. Agriculture, if harnessed properly,

can provide a solution to this. According to a World Bank [report](#) Africa's farmers and agribusinesses could create a trillion-dollar food market by 2030 with increased access to capital, electricity, better technology and irrigated land to grow high-value nutritious foods. Agri-food value-chains present enormous opportunities for young people. Unfortunately, the agricultural sector is still undeveloped to economically attract the youth as a profitable sector. Majority of the youth are born in rural areas where most farm households are struggling economically due to subsistence farming. Most of these households are characterized by poverty, periodic famine, unattractive price incentives for produce and poor amenities. Because of this, a large percentage of young people view agriculture as arduous and non-profitable therefore opting for white-collar jobs in urban areas. However, conventional employment opportunities are often limited leading to many unemployed youth in urban areas. This poses a security risk since these young people can be frustrated to the extent of joining criminal gangs.

Policy makers have not been keen in developing and implementing policies that can attract the youth into agriculture. Despite being the leading sector in most African countries, there is little investment from governments. Agriculture is also not receiving the attention it deserves within the education sector. For instance, it was among the subjects scrapped from primary school curriculum in Kenya.

In addition to lack of interest, youth participation in agriculture is constrained by limited knowledge on agribusiness skills, lack of start-up capital, lack of information on agribusiness opportunities, limited access to land and limited agribusiness spirit.

Who are the 'youth'?

While talking about youth involvement in agriculture it is important to be aware of the different categories of young people and the varying interests. Age is the most used categorizing factor i.e. 18 - 35 years. In some countries with high school dropout rate a youth can be 12 - 35 years. Be it 18 - 35 or 12 - 35; many other age sub-categories should not escape unmentioned i.e. do the youth live at home as a 'kid' in the household or do they live in the compound with their small start-up family or are they seeking their own independence in an inherited land/ own purchased? And can we draw a clear age line within these sub-categories? It is not the same thing supporting a youth who just drunk porridge from her mother's kitchen and will be waiting for dinner in a few hours from the same kitchen and another youth who is 17 years old with a 2-year-old child and the wife is pregnant with the second.

Clearly, young people in rural areas and urban areas may have differing interests which may also vary depending on education. For instance, a young university graduate living in a city may be more interested in an office job but might consider agriculture as a side business therefore likely to invest in commercial agriculture. For example, there is a growing number of young people investing in green house farming in urban areas in Kenya. Their motivation is purely profits and are willing to invest in technologies such as drip irrigation, quality seed and green houses. This has been made possible by the fact that these young people have some disposable income they can channel into agriculture. The case might be different for a young person in the rural area who has lived most of his life in the village watching the challenges faced by subsistence farmers. To him escaping from the village to get a job in the city is the best option.

Based on the differences mentioned and putting sweetpotato seed systems in context, it is important to ask ourselves whether we want to create jobs for the well-educated youths coming out of universities - for example running tissue culture (TC) laboratories - or whether we want to create jobs for the mass of less well-educated youth - for example - transporting planting material on the back of motor bikes. Educated youth may be more interested in TC, processing etc. but not in farming activities, which clearly indicates that strong correlation between education and youth involvement in the food value chain. It is worth noting that the main driver for the educated youth to prefer selected nodes including tissue culture, marketing and processing etc. is the close resemblance with white collar opportunities.

Understanding the differences between various youth categories will make it easier in deciding where to allocate limited resources when wishing to better engage youth in agriculture. There is need to expand our thinking beyond the realm of seeing youth as entrepreneurs or underutilized inputs into the production function. The metric of success for youth in agriculture should go beyond the economic: viable youth managed agribusinesses or youth employed in agriculture. Positive outcomes for young people involved in agriculture may not only be measured by market or business indicators. We should also look to measure and understand how to best support skill building, leadership, connectedness, and character development for youth in grants / activities aimed at youth.

How to get the youth more involved in sweetpotato value-chain

It is now clear that most young people do not aspire to go into agriculture. This is difficult to change unless the sector is seen to be profitable. It is even more difficult when using sweetpotato as an entry point. Sweetpotato is a crop that is largely viewed as a subsistence staple with little market value. Most young people who have invested in agriculture prefer high-value fast-moving horticulture crops such as onions, tomatoes and other vegetables. However, it is possible to change this if the following is done:

a) Rebranding agriculture and creating awareness on opportunities provided by sweetpotato

Unless agriculture is economically revolutionized youth participation will remain low. There is need to change the focus of agriculture in Africa from subsistence to commercial. Approaching agriculture as a business will not only solve the youth unemployment issue but also lead to increased production therefore food security. Reducing laboriousness, input cost and increasing output per unit of agricultural production, clear marketing windows and value adding strategies especially for short maturing crops such as sweetpotato will greatly contribute.

Root, tuber and banana crops offer an alternative entry for young people into commercial agriculture away from the conventional cereals and legumes. Many opportunities exist along the sweetpotato value-chain from clean seed production to processing. Young people wishing to go into sweetpotato production can be involved in any of the following:

1. Seed system: tissue culture, vine multiplication, quality assurance as a service and marketing (promotion, aggregation from small multipliers, packaging, transport etc).

2. Marketing of fresh roots: Most sweetpotato producers are resource poor and less educated. This limits their ability to take roots to big markets and use proper post-harvest management techniques. The youth can help in aggregation of produce and coordination of farmer groups.
3. Post-harvest handling and processing: Post-harvest handling and processing requires good initial investment and technical knowledge. Training the youth on different post-harvest processing technologies and providing them with necessary financial support may lead to increased role of sweetpotato in the food system and income generation.

Expanding value-addition and utilization opportunities for sweetpotato can create avenues for youth involvement. Support services for sweetpotato production and processing should be made in such a way as to encourage youth participation. For instance, in Osun state, Nigeria, the Osun Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES) members went into orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) vine and root production because of the inclusion of OFSP in the school feeding program of the state which opened the market for both root and vine production.

b) Building robust markets for sweetpotato roots

Markets play an important role in commercial viability of any commodity. Sweetpotato production is hampered by poor market structure for roots. This is worsened by the short shelf-life of the commodity and poor farm to market linkages. The latter give rise to middlemen who take advantage of farmers. Organizing farmers into groups or cooperatives that enable collective marketing can address this. Through groups, farmers can directly take their produce to desired markets. The short shelf life of sweetpotato roots can be addressed by establishing storage facilities e.g. at district levels, and expanding processing options. “Youth friendly” sweetpotato processed products can enhance the “pull strategy” which would lead to more sales of such products, as well as increasing demand to produce roots and vines subsequently.

Since many young people are well versed with the use of technology especially ICT and social media, these can be utilized to increase awareness on the innovations and the benefits of farming as business and especially on sweetpotato. In Rwanda, a lot has been achieved towards developing business models along the crop value chain through several projects. Marketing strategies for vines and roots are put in place including use of radio spots, road signposts, road side markets, social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

c) Capacity building on agribusiness skills

Mentorship and training programs to impart agronomic, processing and business skills can also lead to an increase in the number of young people involved in sweetpotato production. Equipping the youth with such skills will put them in a good position to take up sweetpotato production as a business. Agronomic skills can range from the basics such as pest and disease management, planting and scheduling of production to the advanced skills of producing roots of desired sizes. Puree technology and incorporation in baking is an important skill that can foster value-addition. Young people also need to learn how to calculate cost-benefit analysis, identify markets and negotiate prices.

d) Linkages to credit service providers

Inadequate access to financial services is one of the key constraints for youth wishing to go into agriculture. Training of young people in agribusiness should be linked with programs to ensure access to capital like unsecured loans and competitive grants among others.

e) Using successful case studies to attract more young people into agriculture

Peer mentorship programs can also play a great role in getting young people into agriculture by fostering knowledge and experience sharing. Development programs can also start with those who are ready to engage in agribusiness. Success stories of young farmers engaged within the sweetpotato value-chain can be shared through the media and other channels to show what is possible.

f) Policy interventions

Young people should be involved in agricultural policy dialogues to ensure their needs are catered for. In addition, policy interventions aimed at increasing sweetpotato production and utilization can open new opportunities for the youth along the value-chain. For instance, policies aimed at including OFSP in the school feeding programs and inclusion of OFSP flour in bread, biscuits and other confectionaries can open the market therefore making OFSP production from vine to root lucrative. In addition, policies committing governments to provide financial support for youth initiatives along agricultural value chains should be pursued.

Conclusion

In 2015, a report by the African Development Bank projected that Africa's agricultural output would increase from US\$ 280 billion per year to as much as US\$ 880 billion by the year 2030 if constraints in the system are removed. Young people have a lot to contribute to this if they take advantage of the many opportunities in the sector. Developing agricultural value chains and encouraging crop diversification will open many entry points for youth involvement. There are many opportunities to be exploited in the sweetpotato value-chain despite the crop being traditionally considered as subsistence crop. There has been a lot of investments in terms of finance, advocacy, capacity building, processing, promotion and marketing. With a well-developed value chain, it will be possible to get more youth involvement. However, if the value chain is immature, it will be very difficult to attract the youth because of non-profitability. Favourable policies, capacity building in technical and business skills and linkages to financial and support services will also contribute to increased youth involvement in agriculture. However, in the end it will all depend on interest and change of mindsets among young people. The youth need to stop viewing agriculture as a non-profitable sector only reserved for old age.

Summary on the respondents:

Duration	No. of contributions	No. of unique respondents	No. and type of institutions	Number of countries
10/4/2018 – 10/5/2018	27	21 (17 males and 4 female)	NARIs: 4 CIP: 11 Regulatory bodies: 1 NGOs: 2 Independent: 2 Private sector: 1	10 (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda Tanzania, Uganda, UK and USA)

Contributors

1. Donata Kiiza
2. Jean Claude Nshimiyimana
3. Moses Sila
4. Nessie Luambano
5. Emmanuel Anedo
6. Kwame Ogero
7. Mihiretu Cherinet
8. Sam Namanda
9. Joseph Okalebo
10. Geoffrey Arinaitwe
11. Jean Ndirigwe
12. Florence Munguti
13. Richard Gibson
14. Kiriimi Sindi
15. Chifundo Kapalamula-Mussa
16. Srinivasulu Rajendran
17. Ted Carey
18. Simpson Biryabaho
19. Steve Walsh
20. Kennedy Masamba
21. Simon Heck

Compiled by: Kwame Ogero