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Migration, Youth and Agricultural Transitions: Emerging Perspectives, Global Linkages

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Throughout the majority world, the role of young people in agriculture has transformed rapidly over the last few decades. Increasingly, the older generation, and to some extent, women, are taking over management of the land, while youth, particularly young males seek employment in the non-farm economy. This is driven by a complex combination of factors including climate stress, a weak terms of trade for agriculture and a cultural shift in aspirations, whereby agriculture is no longer valued as a livelihood option. Given the limited industry and employment opportunities in rural areas, migration is often essential for young people to pursue these aspirations. While refugee movements and large scale displacement generate considerable media interest, and these are of high importance in East Africa, it is important not to overlook the more gradual mass movement which is underway as youth migrate to urban centres on a seasonal or long term basis to seek an alternative future.

On the 18th May 2017, a range of researchers, academics and practitioners gathered in Kampala for a discussion forum *Migration, Youth and Agricultural Transitions: Emerging Perspectives, Global Linkages*. The aim of this seminar was to build upon the large body of research carried out on migration and agriculture in South and East Asia by the International Water Management Institute and the CGIAR program on Water Land and Ecosystems. It sought to draw comparisons between the regions, while developing a research agenda to expand this work to East Africa. The meeting was hosted by Biodiversity International, and was funded by the CGIAR program on Water Land and Ecosystems, under their Gender, Youth and Inclusion theme.

What is driving migration in Uganda and the wider East African region?

One fact that came out across the discussion was that there is no one factor which is driving out-migration of youth from agriculture in the region. As in many countries, access to land is a key challenge. In Uganda, the issue is not so much a shortage of land per se, but whether or not one has the right to farm it. Not only is a large amount of land under-utilised, when faced with rising population, the amount of land the younger generation inherits from their parents is dwindling. While farming one's parents land is an option for extended families, this discourages youth investment in agriculture, and they often have limited control over the income. Furthermore, even if one has access to land, there are few incentives to invest on the land, given the pressures of climate change, weak infrastructure for commercial agriculture. What is clear however, is that migration is by no means a simple response to economic pressures alone, nor can migration be considered as a conscious strategy to build resilience (other investments on the land could also facilitate more resilient agriculture). It is important to recall that there are changing financial aspirations amongst youth. With rising costs of living and consumer culture, and the first priority for many young people will be to earn cash quickly in towns and cities, rather than the more complex and risky process of investing in the land. Examples may include for example, investing in a *boda boda* (motorbike taxi) or carrying out day labour and casual jobs. The challenge for young farmers today is to balance short term needs with long term development of one's livelihoods. Social media has

also played an important role in driving migration, whereby young people can openly observe the perceived 'success' of their peers living outside.

Although the processes, which drive young people to make the decision to migrate are not singular, it is worth remembering that they all arise in the context of an inherently unequal global economy, whereby neither agriculture nor urban wages alone are sufficient to support many families.

Patterns of migration and challenges

From Uganda and the larger East Africa region, labour migration includes movement to small towns and larger cities, and recently, movement to the Gulf countries. It is common for men to take up jobs as security guards, and an increasing number of women are now employed as domestic helpers. This relatively recent wave of migration to the middle east carries considerable risks, with some underpaid or cheated. Some overseas migrants are more successful, but even then, remittances were essentially for survival, including daily subsistence needs, with little actual productive investment to build a stronger livelihood. What little is saved is often for a plot of land, so they have something to do when they get back. There are transformations in gender and also age roles in the context of migration, and this puts new stresses on farming communities – with the elderly increasingly being left in charge of the land.

Opportunities

It was raised by a number of participants, that the migration of youth can also be an opportunity in some contexts. Not only is migration transforming gender roles, the movement of people from the land can reduce resource competition in the village, and it can also provide an alternative for households living in disaster prone regions. Another important group are those who choose to return to rural areas – the successful returnees in particular, are more likely to invest productively, if not in agriculture, in associated sectors such as agro-processing example. While the same can not be said of poorer returnees, there is the potential for employment generation if the investment capacity and skills of the former can be capitalized upon, via the private sector. For example, there are a number of educated Ugandans returning from overseas who could be linked up with the burgeoning population of educated unemployed youth.

Should governments restrict migration?

A key question which arose during the discussion, was the role of governments in restricting or controlling out-migration. It was noted how governments tend to allow out-migration to develop organically – and tend to neither actively promote or try to 'prevent' migration. Nevertheless, this raises the question as to whether there are opportunities for governments to enforce a 'light touch' approach, to regulate the movement of people yet also investing in youth to expand the employment base at home. One option which was raised was the potential for governments to support some level of migration in the short term while the infrastructure for employment is created. This could also involve training up potential migrants so they can access better paid employment. Then in the medium term, the government could play a more regulatory role as a local employment base develops. Nevertheless, there is also a good case that suggests rather than actively 'restricting' or controlling migration, governments should focus on investing in youth, and creating the conditions for them to remain in local employment, including agriculture. At least then young people have a wider ranges of choices available to them.

A key challenge for governments however, is the lack of reliable information and data on migration levels, the type of migration, the location, and the gender of migrants. This makes it far more difficult to develop strategies and policies to address this demographic change.

Youth strategy

Another key policy question relates to the government policy for engaging with youth. Youth has become a talking point amongst policy makers in Uganda – both as potential security worry for future, as well as being opportunity to capitalize on. Although a new youth strategy was recently launched in Uganda, until now, state supported initiatives for youth small in scale and include for example, provision of small loans and the distribution of poultry. Loans are often not repaid. Many youth are unable to interpret the forms, or are unable to provide to co funding which is necessary. Furthermore, many of these low entry enterprise opportunities are not going to lift people out of poverty.

Providing young people with assets for agriculture such as land would of course have the most far reaching impacts. Successful schemes in Ethiopia include the distribution of newly restored (formerly uncultivable) land to youth groups for cultivation and enterprise. However, unlike Ethiopia, the state does not have the same control over land in Uganda, and thus freeing up land for use by young people is far more challenging.

There are some other initiatives however. For example, there is a movement in Uganda underway to ‘repackage’ agriculture – so it is seen as an opportunity and not just as a last resort, and this is supported through the media. There may also be ways to engage with returnees.

Refugee movement

The issue of refugee resettlement and movement arose at several points during the discussion. Refugee movement can put considerable constraints upon local infrastructure, and there should be dialogue on ways in which local people can better cope with these changes – for example, through receiving rent for land. However, it is also clear that the set of policy issues relating to refugee movement are qualitatively very different from those related to labour migration, and government or practitioner responses should be adapted accordingly.

What are the next steps/research questions

A number of next steps for research were brought up during the discussion

- There is a need for case studies of youth agro entrepreneurs, including returnees, not assuming benefits are only positive, understanding both sides of the picture, including entry constraints.
- There is a need for a review of all the policies that governments have to encourage investments by youth, and return migrants. It is important though to not just look at policies of government, also best practices by NGOs to engage with this group. It is important to evaluate past programmes for youth employment and understanding failures and successes.
- Which agricultural value chains we can tap into to generate youth employment, including cash crop production, ancillary sectors (e.g. agro processing), and livestock. Regular income, source of cash?
- How can we use modern technology to create employment for youth? More advanced technology can be used to encourage youth into agriculture, and increase its profitability. For example, climate change resilience building can itself be an enterprise opportunity, through the expansion of renewable energy for example?
- What will drive the youth to invest – in or outside of agriculture? What are the enabling or constraining factors. Are there certain triggers which can encourage investment, rather than just seeking quick money?
- How do we better include youth viewpoints at a policy level?