

Africa is in the midst of a youth employment crisis. By 2035, some 350 million new jobs will be needed, and agriculture, the continent's biggest industry, could provide the bulk of them. But at the moment, young Africans are shunning life on the farm for work in the city. If Africa's employment gap is to be closed, agribusinesses must find ways to recruit younger hands.

This challenge was the focus of my research as part of the Youth Think Tank, a youth-led research initiative in partnership with Restless Development Uganda and the Mastercard Foundation. In a recent report, we examined the experiences of young African agriculturalists in seven countries. And what we discovered is that the best way to entice young people back to the farm is by improving access to and engagement with emerging technologies.

Many of the young people with whom we spoke said that their biggest obstacle to a career in farming is learning the digital and technical skills necessary to succeed in today's agricultural market. With technologies like cloud computing, soil sensors, and weather drones changing how food is produced, packaged, and distributed, digital literacy is as important as arable land and high-quality seeds. It stands to reason, then, that if more young people could master digital skills, more would find work in the field.

To understand how important technology is to the young African farmer, consider competition for land. Most farmland is acquired through hereditary or communal distribution systems, and when new plots are allocated, they are typically smaller than those provided to previous generations. To remain profitable, younger growers must produce larger crops from smaller spaces, which requires innovation.

Our study found that in many cases, the best solutions for young farmers are already being designed by young people. For example, in Kenya, one vegetable grower turned her kitchen garden into a vertical farm to increase its output. Today, she runs her own business designing, fabricating, and installing similar structures for a variety of customers. Another interviewee created a mobile app to help farmers connect with local seed and fertilizer suppliers.

Unfortunately, these types of youth-driven innovations rarely receive the necessary political or financial backing to make them viable and scalable. Despite having great ideas, most young agricultural innovators do not feel supported in their efforts. Young people can help solve Africa's unemployment challenges, but those closest to the problem have yet to be made part of the solution.

Our research suggests several strategies to achieve this outcome. For starters, young people need places to engage with like-minded innovators. Recognizing this, policymakers and the private sector should work together to create incubation centers and ideation hubs to help young people build, discuss, and access farm-related technologies.

Moreover, those who promote new farm technologies should travel to the places where young people gather, to provide hands-on, audience-specific training. If the newest farm gadgets and tools are marketed only on social media, as is often the case, uptake in rural areas will remain weak.

Next, young people need access to financial products and services to help them turn their ideas into marketable businesses. And, finally, countries must find ways to involve their youth in early stages of the technology-development pipeline. As the experience of the Kenyan gardener illustrates, young people are often the best judges of what will deliver long-term, practical results.

Last year, I had the privilege of presenting these findings at the Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit in Washington, DC. I spoke about the role young people play in Africa's economy, and the importance of soliciting their views on the future of African agriculture. It was an important first step in bringing young peoples' ideas to the table.

But much work remains to be done. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the average age of an African farmer today is about 60, while 60% of the population is under the age of 24. To breathe new life into Africa's farms, the entire industry must innovate. And, as our research shows, the best way to do that is by working much more closely with those who have the most to gain from progress.

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