

Youth Engagement in Agriculture: How Extension Education Can Inspire the Next Generation of Farmers

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ABSTRACT

The global agricultural sector faces a critical challenge: an ageing farmer population and a declining interest among youth in pursuing agricultural careers. This trend threatens food security, rural development, and the sustainability of agricultural systems. However, the 21st century offers unprecedented opportunities to engage young people in agriculture through innovative extension education programs. This article explores strategies to attract youth to agriculture, emphasizing the role of extension education in inspiring the next generation of farmers. It examines the barriers to youth engagement, such as negative perceptions of agriculture, limited access to resources, and a lack of tailored educational programs. The article also highlights successful case studies and innovative approaches, including digital extension services, agripreneurship training, and experiential learning. By leveraging technology, fostering entrepreneurship, and creating inclusive programs, extension education can transform agriculture into an attractive and viable career path for young people, ensuring the future of sustainable food systems.

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the backbone of many economies, particularly in developing countries, providing livelihoods for millions of people. However, the sector is grappling with a significant demographic challenge: the average age of farmers is rising, and fewer young people are entering the profession. This trend is driven by several factors, including the perception of agriculture as a low-status, labor-intensive occupation, limited access to land and financing, and a lack of educational opportunities tailored to the needs of youth.

Engaging young people in agriculture is essential for addressing global challenges such as food security, climate change, and rural poverty. Young people bring energy, innovation, and a willingness to adopt new technologies, making them key drivers of agricultural transformation. (Rogers, 2003). Extension education, which bridges the gap between research and practice, has a critical role to play in inspiring and equipping the next generation of farmers. This article explores strategies to attract youth to agriculture through innovative extension programs, highlighting the potential of technology, entrepreneurship, and experiential learning to reshape the future of the sector. (Pretty 1995).

Barriers to Youth Engagement in Agriculture

Negative Perceptions of Agriculture: Many young people view agriculture as an unattractive career option, associating it with poverty, hard labor, and low social status. This perception is often reinforced by media portrayals and societal attitudes.

Limited Access to Resources: Youth face significant barriers to entering agriculture, including limited access to land, credit, and inputs. In many regions, land ownership is

concentrated among older generations, leaving young people with few opportunities to start their own farms.

Lack of Tailored Educational Programs: Traditional agricultural education systems often fail to address the needs and aspirations of young people. Curricula may be outdated, theoretical, and disconnected from the realities of modern agriculture.

Urban Migration: The allure of urban life and non-agricultural jobs draws many young people away from rural areas. This migration exacerbates labour shortages in agriculture and contributes to the ageing farmer population.

Strategies to Attract Youth to Agriculture

According to FAO 2014, here are the five strategies to attract youth towards agriculture.

1. Digital Extension Services

- Digital technologies offer innovative ways to engage youth in agriculture by making information and resources more accessible and appealing.
- Mobile Apps and Online Platforms: Apps like FarmChat and iCow provide real-time advice, market information, and training modules tailored to young farmers.
- Social media: Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube enable youth to connect with peers, share knowledge, and access educational content.
- Gamification: Interactive games and simulations can make learning about agriculture fun and engaging for young people.

2. Agripreneurship Training

- Entrepreneurship is a powerful motivator for youth, offering the promise of financial independence and creative fulfilment.
- Business Skills Development: Training programs can teach young people how to develop business plans, access financing, and market their products.
- Value-Added Agriculture: Encouraging youth to explore value-added activities, such as processing and packaging, can increase profitability and attract interest in agriculture.
- Incubators and Accelerators: Agripreneurship incubators provide young entrepreneurs mentorship, funding, and networking opportunities.

3. Experiential Learning

- Hands-on learning experiences can help youth develop practical skills and a deeper appreciation for agriculture.
- School Gardens: Integrating agriculture into school curricula through garden projects can spark interest in farming from an early age.
- Internships and Apprenticeships: Partnering with farms and agribusinesses to offer internships and apprenticeships provides youth with real-world experience.
- Youth Farmer Field Schools: These schools combine practical training with peer learning, empowering young people to become leaders in their communities.

4. Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Programs

- Engaging young women and marginalized groups is essential for creating a diverse and inclusive agricultural sector.

- Gender-Sensitive Training: Programs should address the specific challenges faced by young women, such as limited access to resources and cultural barriers.
- Youth Cooperatives: Cooperative models can provide young people with collective bargaining power and shared resources.
- Mentorship Programs: Pairing young people with experienced farmers and agribusiness professionals can provide guidance and inspiration.

5. Policy Support and Advocacy

- Governments and organizations must create an enabling environment for youth engagement in agriculture.
- Land Reform: Policies that facilitate youth access to land can remove a major barrier to entry.
- Financial Incentives: Grants, loans, and subsidies can help young people start and sustain agricultural enterprises.
- Awareness Campaigns: Public campaigns can challenge negative perceptions of agriculture and highlight its potential as a rewarding career.

Case Studies: Successful Youth Engagement Initiatives

1. **Young Agripreneurs Program (Nigeria):** The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) launched the Young Agripreneurs Program to train youth in agribusiness and value-added agriculture. Participants receive hands-on training, mentorship, and access to funding, enabling them to start their enterprises. (IITA, 2020)
2. **4-H Clubs (United States):** 4-H is a youth development organization that engages young people in agriculture through hands-on projects, competitions, and

leadership training. The program has inspired millions of youths to pursue careers in agriculture and related fields. (National 4-H Council, 2021)

3. Green Innovation Centers (Africa):

According to German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) the Green Innovation Centers initiative, supported by the German government, promotes youth engagement in agriculture through training, access to technology, and entrepreneurship support. The program has empowered thousands of young people to become agripreneurs. (Davis and Franzel, 2014)

The Role of Extension Education in Youth Engagement

According to Word Bank 2017, the role of extension education in youth engagement are as follows: -

- Extension education is uniquely positioned to inspire and equip the next generation of farmers. By adopting innovative approaches and leveraging technology, extension services can make agriculture more accessible, attractive, and rewarding for young people. Key strategies include:
- Developing Youth-Friendly Curricula: Extension programs should be tailored to the interests and needs of young people, incorporating modern technologies and entrepreneurial skills.
- Building Partnerships: Collaborating with schools, universities, and private sector actors can enhance the reach and impact of extension services.
- Promoting Role Models: Showcasing successful young farmers and agripreneurs can inspire others to follow in their footsteps.

CONCLUSION

Youth engagement in agriculture is critical for the future of food security, rural development, and sustainable agriculture. Extension education has a vital role to play in inspiring and equipping the next generation of farmers. By leveraging digital technologies, fostering entrepreneurship, and creating inclusive programs, extension services can transform agriculture into an attractive and viable career path for young people. The success of initiatives like the Young Agripreneurs Program and 4-H Clubs demonstrates the potential of innovative approaches to engage youth in agriculture. With the right strategies and support, the next generation of farmers can drive agricultural transformation and ensure a sustainable future for all.

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