**FSN West Africa Network**

**Finding work for young people – agricultural options**

**New year – new opportunities**

***OK, so the Christmas and New Year holiday period has passed and everyone is climbing back into the flow of things for the start of 2014. We have a brand new year to live and explore, and if you don’t take advantage of the time on hand, you’ll find yourself one year older this time on in January 2015 and nothing exceptional will have been achieved. If you’re young, enthusiastic and interested in agriculture now is the time to do something about it. While you’re sitting around thinking about things, others are doing.***

**What kind of agriculture are you talking about?**

Agriculture has always been the world’s most under-rated lifestyles, but then the majority of people don’t want to be part of the traditional peasant communities that continue to dominate much of small-scale agro-production worldwide. If you want to remain small you have to specialize, become technically clever, and market those few high value products with skill and knowledge (of markets). The reality is, however, that few of us become farmers – the majority end up working elsewhere in the value chain – as service providers of one kind or another.

**Starting out**

This is not to under-estimate the challenge if you’re graduating next June and don’t have any idea of what you want to do from July-on (meaning you know what you *don’t* want to do, but not the opposite). There are complex issues here given that many agricultural graduates are not taught how to become farmers, but how to occupy service niches – as salesmen, technicians, managers, service agents, engineers, scientists, economists, administrators and more for either that lucrative white collar job in government service or, more difficult still, as a junior entrant with an agricultural service company – providing farm inputs, technical advice, trading and more but, typically, with a sales platform implicitly involved. How else can the company remain in business?

It’s even more challenging if you’ve left school with little in the way of an education. You’ll really need luck then to find a rewarding niche in the local job economy. The buoyancy of the teenager quickly fades with the lack of opportunities, the short-term jobs, low pay and, more worrying, low esteem and low expectations that creep up on you. *And they do.*

So you have to get educated, and you have to understand how to compete in the marketplace.

**Where to go from here?**

You will already have read the introduction to the current debate – importance of agriculture in West Africa, fastest growing population, (so lots of scope to feed people), key role of agriculture in local economies and dependency by >60% of the population on agriculture. What can you do about it? As the introduction to the debate says *‘How do you make jobs in agriculture more appealing to young people?’* For a start, focus upon finding that job. Jobs don’t grow on trees (as my old Prof used to say – but then he was a dairyman not a forester).

**Sales pitch**

***That first wage earning job is a milestone on the path to independence and maturity for most young people. Everyone remembers the first time. School and university are important, but the period is quickly relegated to those formative years as competition for your space in the world takes priority. But first you have to find that job.***

**Selling into markets**

The market, as defined by the economists and planners, is simply a place where buyers and sellers do business*.* For most people, markets represent a place in the community where goods are traded on a regular basis. *(But it can also mean the ‘space’ where services and skills are bought and sold.)*

**Young people in the marketplace**

Markets are important for young people seeking employment. Wherever there are people there will be need to *sell yourself;* to convince others that you and you alone are the best and most suitable choice. You have to market yourself - much the same way that you would sell any valuable commodity. You and your qualifications will need to be promoted with skill to attain the best possible opportunities when seeking employment. Selling yourself may be tough, and much may depend upon the reality of demand for people with your skills and your kind of experience.

**Gaining a competitive advantage**

Your biggest *competitor* will be other young people around your age with similar skills, experience and qualifications who may also be seeking the same employment opportunity. You can do much to make yourself more attractive to a prospective employer. Key points to consider are (1) Computer knowledge; (2) Languages skills; and (3) Imagination. This, in addition to having some qualifications and/or experience for the work on offer, for example, you have less chance of working as a technician in an agricultural machinery company if you trained as a biologist *(but that should not stop you from trying – if you really want the post).*

Wherever you are, you are most likely never to be far from access to the Internet, which has become easily and cheaply available in recent times. This is where computer skills come in. It is often difficult to get the necessary training, yet the message is a simple one – you *have* to have computer/keyboard skills in a modern world. No good fudging this one.

Languages are equally important. You may already have one of the key international languages such as Arabic, English, French or Spanish in additional to your local language. Competence in a major international language *is* essential, and you may have to work hard to gain more than simply a passing knowledge in it. West Africa is divided into parts on the basis of two international languages – make sure you can work in both of them; quality work too – written and spoken.

Imagination comes from within. The great pioneers of science, technology, history and geography were mainly people with vision. It takes a special kind of person to explore alternatives, to think differently, to be able to apply theory or practice out-of-context. Much will depend on your personality, your upbringing and the way that you have developed as a child and a young person. With effort you can develop your imagination and become more versatile. Developments of this kind – with skill - should continue throughout your life.

Follow the employment opportunities in your local community, watch the companies and/or public sectors for possibilities from the advertisements that are posted. Search the web each week. Target the jobs with high quality CVs and letters of application and, when given the opportunity, present yourself in the best possible manner. Almost everyone older than you in the workforce will have faced the same challenges. Now it’s your turn.

***Go for it and hope for that little bit of luck that we all need to succeed. And, if you are not successful, try again. Remember that success rate is typically 2-3% only.***

**Case study #1: Motor mechanic.** One of the most valuable skills in modern communities is an ability to understand how motor vehicles work. This attracts many young men, but young women make equally good mechanics when provided with an opportunity to become involved. The biggest challenge may be one of breaking with tradition in the community. Hey, you don’t even need to *do* the mechanic’s work – you can manage others who do it; but you will need that understanding of what is going on.

**Case study #2: Tractor operation.** More than 60% of farmers around the globe are women but, paradoxically, bring in machines and the work becomes dominated by the men. Machines make life easier on the farm, their use raises the image of farming and boosts the productivity of people on the land. Machines-on-the-land *are* the future of agriculture *everywhere*.

People are more efficient when in charge of machines *(and when designing, developing, manufacturing and servicing them).* Have you considered training as an engineer? Everything around you in the modern world has been ‘*engineered’*. Nothing can be achieved without engineering skills, technologies and experience. The future of people is ‘*engineering’*.

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**04 January 2014**