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**Kenyan Urban Youth Getting Involved in Agriculture**

*Abstract*

Urban agriculture presents a self-employment opportunity for Kenyan youth to escape poverty and gain employment. Seeing agriculture as a low status rural activity is at odds with market realities in African urban areas, where food is in high demand by all income groups. Mazingira Institute hosts the Nairobi and Environs Food Security, Agriculture and Livestock Forum (NEFSALF), that has provided elementary training over the last decade. The majority of trainees in 2013 and 2014 were youth, about half of them women. They fell into two categories, half living in houses with backyard space, and the other half in high density slums. The differences between them are significant, especially with regard to land availability for farming. The two cases illustrate the opportunities urban agriculture brings to youth and the constraints they operate under. Many have transformed their lives from this new source of income and food.

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Young people in Kenya suffer from severe unemployment and resultant alienation as described in other chapters of this book. Agriculture presents a self-employment opportunity that urban youth are increasingly turning to. Many young Kenyans remember that agriculture was seen as something to be avoided in their childhood, a low-status activity left behind in the undeveloped rural hinterland. It was even a punishment at school, meaning it was not an attractive career choice. These misperceptions are actually at odds with market realities in modern African urban centres, where food is in high demand by all income groups and populations are rapidly expanding. Market research from 2010 in Kampala, Uganda showed that the demand for all urban farmers’ products was high and unmet, whether by kiosks, traders small shops or supermarkets34. Urban farmers in Kampala, Dar-es-Salaam,

34 Nyapendi, R./Best, R./Ferris, S./Jagwe, J. (2010): ‘Identifying market opportunities for urban and peri-urban farmers in Kampala’; in: Prain, G./Karanja, N. K./Lee-Smith, D. (eds): African Urban Harvest: Agriculture in the Cities of Cameroon, Kenya and Uganda, Springer, New York and IDRC, Ottawa.36 Youth Unemployment in Kenya – *A Ticking Time Bomb*

Yaoundé, and Addis Ababa have all been found to have higher than average incomes35.

However, for the mass of urban youth such opportunities are rare. For one thing, they do not have access to any land from which to produce food. As juniors they do not have rights over any land the family might have access to, be it a backyard or scrap of space next to a slum dwelling. This is especially true for girls and young women, whose traditional land rights have been non-existent. So farming has not seemed like a viable option. And urban farming has long been perceived as the province of the old and desperate – people scratching a living for survival – contrary to what the research quoted above has shown. For some Nairobi youth perceptions began to shift when they were driven close to starvation during the post-election violence of early 2008. A youth group in Kibera that started farming then was able to supply itself with vegetables and generate some income, although the farming was on a rubbish tip and this brought health hazards. Nevertheless they had broad support, most notably from the community elders36.

The Mazingira Institute in Nairobi has worked on urban agriculture (UA) for several decades, having carried out and published one of the original studies which brought the widespread nature of urban farming and its economic importance to light in the 1980s. The Institute was established and registered as a non-profit in 1978 and has an international reputation. Currently, it hosts the *Nairobi and Environs Food Security, Agriculture and Livestock Forum* (NEFSALF), which has brought together a mix of actors from public, private and community sectors to promote cooperation around food security, agriculture and livestock-keeping in and around the city. The forum was established in September 2003, with the vision of “a better way toward human security of the many, rather than the few, and food security and sustainability in the city and environs.”

35 van Veenhuizen, R./Danso, G. (2007): ‘Profitability and Sustainability of Urban Agriculture’. FAO Agricultural management, marketing and finance occasional paper no 19, FAO, Rome; also see Prain, G./Lee-Smith, D. (2010): ‘Urban Agriculture in Africa: What has been learnt?’ in Prain et al. (eds), (see previous footnote).

36 Lee-Smith, D./Gathuru, K. (2012): ‘Urban and peri-urban agriculture and livestock: policy issues and directions’, presentation to the Kenyan UPAL stakeholders forum Kari-Thika 25-26 June.37 Youth Unemployment in Kenya – *A Ticking Time Bomb*

The farmers convened by the forum decided to establish their own NEFSALF farmers’ network, and created structures based on the geography of the city. They elected officers to their own executive, following principles of gender balance. Training was one of the first priorities identified by this structure. As a result of dialogue held at the forum, two government ministries, dealing with agriculture and livestock development, agreed to collaborate with Mazingira Institute on holding regular courses for urban farmers at their premises in Westlands. A pilot training course was conducted in July 2004 for members of the NEFSALF farmers’ network steering committee.

The network determined that each training course would last eight days, with participants coming in each day from across the city and getting bus fare and lunch. This was possible due to the support provided to Mazingira by Rooftops Canada/Abri International with the assistance of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (DFATD). Trainees who successfully complete the requirements of the training course are awarded certificates with approval from Mazingira Institute and the course coordinator from the government extension system. The trainers are mainly government extension service officers.

Trainees are selected from different areas of Nairobi and environs according to the criteria of gender, type of urban farming activity being practised, location and age, to get a balanced distribution. Language proficiency is also a criterion as the courses are conducted principally in English although the trainers often use Kiswahili as well. Course materials and handouts are in English. Prior to the training courses, the extension service providers conduct site visits to trainees’ farms, to assess their level of knowledge, skills and attitude and determine the gaps in practices and the content of the training courses. Post-training site visits are also conducted to evaluate the extent of implementation of knowledge and skills acquired and areas for further intervention.

Numerous courses have now been held and over one thousand farmers have received the elementary training. The training focuses on growing of crops, keeping of animals and recycling waste as compost for subsistence and income, as well as value 38 Youth Unemployment in Kenya – *A Ticking Time Bomb*

addition, marketing and distribution. Participants learn the basics of business and enterprise management, and comprehend all of these within an understanding of Nairobi’s agri-food system and the progress towards getting an urban food policy.

Upon joining of the NEFSALF farmers network, members fill out a form, identifying the issues and problems facing farmers including those keeping animals and recycling waste in the city and suggesting what actions should be taken by themselves, the forum or government to address them. The lack of knowledge and political marginalisation were the first major problems identified.

The democratic structure of the NEFSALF network and its efforts to make forward-looking plans to achieve its goals led to the early identification of youth involvement as both an issue and a goal. Discussions among the network members, Mazingira and the extension personnel explored options for motivating the youth more towards getting involved in agriculture in Nairobi. Another part of the strategy was to seek out and motivate youth through the network’s contacts. For the last several years youth have been given priority in selection for training.

The issue of land availability was thought to prevent youth from having any practical way of farming, plus attitudes and motivations that saw them wanting wage work or quick returns from any effort. A strategy was then developed to encourage parents to make available whatever space they could, as well as encouraging youth groups to identify and lobby to be allocated land they could use for productive enterprises including small livestock-keeping.

However, although the numbers of the youth joining up for the training started to increase slightly, they were still dropping out and lacking in motivation. Peer pressure played a role. Around 2009 things started to shift somewhat when the international networking dimension came in. Through its partner Rooftops Canada, the Mazingira Institute organized exchanges on urban farming between Toronto, Canada and Cape Town, South Africa. Toronto’s civil society-led Food Policy Council also set up a Youth Food Policy Council and its representatives visited their peers in Nairobi.

The NEFSALF youth members were motivated to set up a 39 Youth Unemployment in Kenya – *A Ticking Time Bomb*

youth hub, emulating the women’s hub, where women farmers meet regularly for mutual support and have set up a revolving fund. The new youth hub met to nominate a representative to visit Cape Town and meet youth leaders and farmers there. An enterprising young rabbit farmer was selected by the group and took part in a stakeholders' meeting and visits to farmers in Cape Town in 2011. Two young farmers from Cape Town made the return visit to Nairobi with their counterparts from Toronto in 2012. Meanwhile a further exchange was set up through urban food security partners in USA, and six women and men farmers from NEFSALF, along with colleagues from Western Kenya and Uganda, were selected to spend six weeks with their counterparts at Growing Power in Milwaukee and Chicago and other partners in Denver.

The return visits from USA counterparts and systematic reporting back to NEFSALF members on all of the learning from these exchanges transformed the image of urban farming for many more Nairobi youth, who now had more positive peer images and role models to motivate their efforts. The collective atmosphere of the NEFSALF forums highlighting youth participation along with reports from visitors and government officials served to reinforce the positive role of urban agriculture as a possible career. The negative image persists in many young minds however, and several young farmers, whether in Nairobi or Cape Town, have given up their farms when opportunities for steady employment – such as becoming a check-out clerk in a supermarket – show up. On the other hand some are showing the impact of the courses, such as the young rabbit farmer from Nairobi, who has a contract to supply to a major hotel and also smaller food outlets. Others, including some of the first NEFSALF trainees, have become successful business people and also continue as mentors and trainers of others.

As a result of the push towards youth engagement, the large majority of trainees in the NEFSALF courses held in 2013 and 2014 were under the age of 35, about half of them young women. They also fell into two categories with respect to where they lived, half living in houses with backyard space, and the other half living in high density slums. The differences between them are significant, especially with regard to land availability for farming.

For example, one young woman living with her husband 40 Youth Unemployment in Kenya – *A Ticking Time Bomb*

and two children had a backyard where they kept poultry and grew vegetables. Another kept poultry and pigs in her backyard of about 400 m2 and also grew vegetables, In addition, she was growing maize and beans on an open space under a power line. By comparison, a young single mother lived in one room in a high density slum and grew crops in three sacks just outside her room, buying water to irrigate them. Likewise a young single man living in one room kept poultry in a cage just outside his room and belonged to a youth group which grew kale in an open space in the same area. A young couple living with relatives in two rooms used open space on a dump-site and on road reserves (totalling 200m2) to keep rabbits and poultry in cages and grow kale, spinach, *managu* (a local vegetable) and sugar cane.

This contrast between slum dwellers and backyard farmers has been highlighted in the research literature on urban agriculture37, which also shows that there are proportionally fewer low income people doing urban farming than those who are better-off, because of access to land38. Handling these discrepancies among the different categories of youth during training as well as bringing them to the attention of policy-makers are priorities for the future. They are also concerns of the now-stabilizing NEFSALF youth hub39.

The Chair of NEFSALF’s Youth Hub was encouraged to farm from an early age by her mother and now keeps 300 chickens and 85 rabbits as well as growing vegetables in her parents’ backyard. She says it is “the most sustainable business you can do”. Although she complains that school does not provide the youth with the skills and capacity to do something useful, her family and the Mazingira training have done so. She learned farming was not a haphazard activity but requires discipline and patience, things she has learned through experience as well as training so that now she is a more focused person. She has learned to re-use manure for her crops,

37 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2012). Growing Greener Cities in Africa. First status report on urban and per-urban horticulture in Africa. FAO, Rome.

38 Lee-Smith, D. (2013) ‘Which way for UPA in Africa?’ CITY 17, pp. 69-84.

39 You-tube: Mazingira Institute Nairobi Urban Farmers.Youth

apply rabbit urine as a pesticide and keep her animals in vertically stacked hutches so they are healthy.

The young man who is now Chair of the Mutual Self Help Group in Mathare Valley slum, was selling drugs from the age of eight, having lost both his parents, but with help he has turned around not only his life but those of his group of 350 youth as well. During the 2008 Post Election Violence he and the group turned from involvement in political upheaval to urban farming instead. “Producing food is the only way to feed our families and get peace of mind” he said. They plant trees, including bamboo, as well as vegetables, protecting the soil and purifying the water along the Nairobi River. Bamboo is further useful for producing various wood products, including charcoal for cooking fuel and furniture items. They have also built and manage a toilet for hygiene and income generation. He says about 50% of the youth in the area have now switched from selling drugs to food production.

These two cases illustrate both the opportunities of urban agriculture and the constraints that youth operate under. Kenya is now entering a new era of devolved government, with agriculture becoming a central part of local county government and all urban administrations under new laws. Nairobi City County is one of the first to take up this challenge, and it is hoped that the lessons learned through NEFSALF’s collaboration with government extension services will bring good results for the urban youth throughout the country, who desperately need space, training, and most of all encouragement if they are to succeed.