Tackling child labour through decent youth employment in agri-food systems
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BACKGROUND PAPER
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For the first time in a decade, child labour is on the increase, severely threatening the realization of the SDGs.

Of the estimated 160 million child labourers in the world in 2020, 70 percent are engaged in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, most in family operations, and there will be no elimination of child labour if small-scale farmers and fishers are not mobilized and supported.

Agricultural work is often an entry point into child labour, and children working in agriculture are generally very young. Agriculture accounts for 76.6 percent of all child labour in the age group 5-11 years and for 75.8 percent in the age group 12-14 years.

Young people between 15 and 17 years of age are particularly vulnerable to hazardous work, though they may legally join the work force in non-hazardous work. Stepping up the protection of young workers in agriculture must be an urgent priority if the world is to realize the Sustainable Development target 8.7.

For younger children below the age of 14 to 15 years, ensuring that alternatives to child labour are in place for the children and their families is essential. This includes first and foremost ensuring that all children, including children in remote rural areas and children on the move, have access to free, good quality compulsory education.
Agricultural skills training and creating decent work for youth in agri-food systems is a fundamental, critical investment in sustainable food systems for the future. If this is not prioritized, food security is at stake.

Promoting decent work and sustainable agri-food systems for the future will require investments in rural development today. Political commitment to investments in an enabling environment with basic infrastructure, good quality education and training, health care and social protection in remote and underserviced rural areas is a prerequisite for the elimination of child labour and for creating sustainable food systems.

Empowerment of youth is critically important to prevent child labour in rural areas. Empowerment must take place through many streams: through education and training, through organization and capacity development, as well as through structures and systems that allow young people to have a say in policy and decision-making.

Supporting the introduction of agricultural, entrepreneurial and life skills in schools will not only ease school-to-work transition for young people, including in the 15-17 age cohort, it may also increase young people’s interest in working in agri-food systems. This has to be coupled with improved access to agricultural skills training, for example, through enterprise-based apprenticeships as well as facilitated peer-to-peer support initiatives.

Employers and agri-businesses need to play a key role in investing in their future workforce, both through training and apprenticeship, and protecting young workers.
Child labour is not only an immediate human rights issue for the children involved, but also a direct threat to future food security and livelihoods.
What is at stake?

Poverty reduction and food security are intrinsically linked. Both depend on sustainable food systems and safe and sustainable agricultural practices. Similarly, poverty reduction and sustainable food systems can only be realized if those producing food, for their own consumption and for local and global supply chains, have decent working conditions and stable livelihoods.

Agriculture makes up four percent of total global Gross domestic product (GDP) and up to 25 percent in some developing countries (World Bank, 2020). Some of the world’s fastest growing industries are in the agriculture sector, e.g. aquaculture, where global production grew by a staggering 527 percent between 1990 and 2008 (FAO, 2020a). These sectors form the basis for the livelihoods of millions of people, both in terms of food supply and employment.

Sustainable agricultural production to feed a growing population, not least in the face of climate change, requires skilled, knowledgeable farmers who are able to adapt to new climate conditions and production methods. This takes building the skills of young farmers. In this perspective, child labour is not only an immediate human rights issue for the children involved, but also a direct threat to future food security and livelihoods.
as it deprives children of their health and education, thereby undermining efforts to secure future food production by skilled, productive farmers (and fishers and foresters). Moreover, high child labour rates often go hand in hand with an overall situation of limited opportunities in rural areas, poorly paid jobs and sometimes precarious livelihoods in agriculture. This situation leads young people to preferring other (often urban-based) jobs if they can get them (Elder et al., 2015; OECD, 2018), thus reinforcing a status quo where agriculture remains an informal and labour-intensive sector, offering low skilled work that children, youth below 18, and other vulnerable groups, such as migrants, can perform for free or at a very cheap price. These dynamics can seriously undermine future sustainable food production in the long run. More immediately, they may expose young people to increased risks of exploitation associated with (unregulated) migration, e.g. trafficking for forced labour. In addition, agricultural practices and systems may rely on both migrant and non-migrant children’s labour, for example, during peak season (FAO, 2020b).

Hence, it is essential that young people above the minimum age for employment are protected, offered relevant technical and vocational training, and able to work in safe, non-exploitative agricultural work. Working towards a successful school-to-work transition for the 15–17 years age cohort goes hand in hand with the wider goal of turning agricultural work into productive, decent and therefore desirable employment. Ensuring that well-educated young people are ready to work in agriculture is a key element of food security and sustainable agri-food systems in the future.

This paper explores the complex links between child labour, access to education and training, and youth employment in the context of sustainable agri-food systems, poverty reduction and food security, with a particular focus on 15- to 17-year-old youth in rural areas.

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3 This paper uses 14 to 15 years as the general minimum age for full time employment, which is generally the minimum working age(s) adopted in countries, provided the young worker has completed compulsory basic education and the work is non-hazardous, in line with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 138 (Convention 138 sets the general minimum age at 15 years but allows for 14 years of age for an interim period. Member states can adopt a higher minimum age as well, and some countries have set the minimum age at 16 years). The paper also recognizes that children can perform nonhazardous, light work for a limited number of hours, alongside attending education, from the age of 12 to 13 years. Children above minimum age, who have not completed compulsory education, should only perform work that does not interfere with their education.

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1 The term agriculture covers crop and livestock farming as well as fishing, aquaculture, forestry and post-harvest handling of produce.

2 For more on child labour in seasonal migration, see the conference background paper exploring this subject in more detail.
The 2021 global estimates on child labour (ILO and UNICEF, 2021) indicate that of the 160 million child labourers globally, 70 percent work in agriculture and are more likely to live in rural areas. Overall, 9.6 percent of the world’s children are child labourers, and almost half of them perform hazardous work.

The prevalence of hazardous work is particularly high in the 15 to 17 years age group (35 million children, in other words, 9.5 percent of children of this age cohort worldwide).

Hazardous work is significantly more common in agriculture than in other sectors, with 60.8 percent of child labour in agriculture being classified as hazardous, against 16.3 percent in industry and 23 percent in services (including domestic labour). Hazards include exposure to pesticides and other toxic substances, handling large animals, sharp tools and heavy machinery, exposure to extreme weather conditions and in some instances, mental health risks, such as isolation (ILO and UNICEF, 2021; FAO, 2020b; FAO and ILO 2013).

Most child labourers are boys, including child labourers in agriculture. It should be noted though, that girls tend to engage more in invisible forms of child labour, and if domestic chores for more than 21 hours per week are included in the estimates, the difference between boys and girls significantly reduces (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). It is important to understand the gender dynamics in the allocation of work roles among boys and girls. Girls are typically engaged in tasks near to the family home, such as postharvest handling of crops and tending to smaller livestock as well as in local marketing of agricultural products. Boys are expected to carry out heavier work in the fields and handle larger livestock. Both boys and girls typically get pulled in for peak season labour, e.g. harvesting, and for labour-intensive tasks, such as weeding. The seasonality and labour intensity both contribute to child labour interfering with children’s education (FAO, 2020b). In addition, the organization of agricultural production may facilitate the use of child labour, for example, through contract farming systems that may represent a pressure for farmers to use all available labour resources, including children, in the household to fulfil quotas (FAO, 2020b).

Often, child labour in agriculture is underpinned by social norms and narratives that normalize child labour as a way of life. Engaging children in agricultural...
work, even if it is hazardous or interferes with education, may be seen as the only way to transfer skills to the children. This is especially so if formal education is not perceived as relevant and/or is not freely and easily accessible. Where schools are far away, under-resourced or using outdated curricula and learning methods, parents and children may decide that going to school is not worth it and that children are better off learning agricultural skills in a family setting (FAO, 2020b).

For the 15- to 17-year-old group of young workers, who may work legally, the hazardous nature of work is a primary concern along with the precarious nature of their employment. Young workers below 18 years of age typically work as unpaid family helpers in agricultural production (ILO and UNICEF, 2021), and they have limited options in terms of alternative employment and training opportunities (Elder et al., 2015). This matches poorly with their aspirations. Young people in rural areas, like their peers in urban areas, generally aspire to academically based education and white-collar jobs (OECD, 2018), but they are significantly less likely to achieve this than their urban peers. Young people, growing up in rural areas, are most likely to follow in the footsteps of their parents and become small scale farmers, agricultural labourers or work in other parts of local supply chains or in subsistence agriculture (Elder et al., 2015; OECD, 2018).

The mismatch between young people’s aspirations and their realities is tied very closely to their limited access to education and training, as well as to the limited numbers of actual productive opportunities in rural areas. Young people in rural areas simply do not have the skills to match the jobs they aspire to and, even if they did, productive and remunerative

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4 Young worker is defined differently in different countries. Often, the group of young workers encompasses those between 15 and 25 or 35 years of age. In the context of child labour, young workers mean 14/15- to 17-year-old workers, who have completed compulsory basic education and who may therefore work full time legally, provided they are protected against the Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL), including hazardous work in line with ILO conventions 138 and 182. Hence, this age group is the focus of this paper, though it is recognized that many of the issues discussed are relevant to 18+ year-old youth as well.
opportunities often simply do not exist in rural areas. These limitations, on both the push and the pull sides, confine many rural youth to the poorest quality jobs with the lowest pay. The **skills mismatch** is evident also in the agriculture sector where limited vocational training opportunities mean that young farmers are less likely to match the needs of the wider sector determined, for example, by changing agricultural practices. This, again, confines young farmers to subsistence agriculture or to the poorest quality agricultural labour and food processing jobs. Again, it is important to note that gender roles play a role in determining which jobs young men and women aspire to and actually do (Elder *et al.*, 2015; OECD, 2018).
The mismatch between aspirations, skills and opportunities, so characteristic of the situation for young people in rural areas, especially in low-income countries, is tied closely with wider youth empowerment issues. Young people, and especially girls and young women, generally have poorer access to land, finance and services that may support them in establishing their own agricultural operations. They often also have fewer options for participating in local decision making and getting their voices heard, and their relative position in local supply chains is often weak compared to older, more established farmers and food processors (Trivelli and Morel, 2019; OECD, 2018). Young women and young people from ethnic minority groups may be particularly vulnerable to discriminatory practices in employment, in accessing services and in voicing their grievances and opinions (ILO, 2017). The relatively weak position of young workers in the 15- to 17-year-old age group may be due simply to their young age and limited life experiences, but it is often also exacerbated by early school dropout resulting in low literacy levels.

The precarious jobs, limited career prospects and the weak voice and position that young people in rural areas face is often combined with poor rural infrastructure and service provision overall. Limited road networks, poor
The challenges

internet and telecommunication access, low levels of health care and education opportunities and so forth combine with the limited career prospects to drive young people’s out-migration from rural areas. Leaving underserviced rural areas becomes a goal in and of itself for many young people (Arslan et al., 2021; Fiedler, 2020).

It is important to stress that many of these challenges, while particularly acute for young people, are not unique to particular age groups. Small scale farmers, especially women, of all ages may face challenges to their tenure rights, limited access to business and social services among others. Moreover, agricultural workers in general often have limited protection, for example, being excluded from parts of the labour laws and work in precarious informal conditions. Decent work deficits in agricultural work and in rural areas is a wider issue (ILO, 2019a).

Summing up, young people’s prospects in rural areas need to improve for young people (not least those in the 15– to 17–year-old age group) to be interested to work in agri–food systems in the future. This entails first and foremost improving young people’s access to education and training and ensuring that they are protected from hazardous work. Moreover, their career opportunities, the general levels of physical, business and social services in rural areas and, last but not least, their status and voice in local communities and farmers’ organizations must improve. This paper now turns to exploring ways to addressing the drivers of child labour in agriculture while at the same time empowering young agricultural workers and entrepreneurs.
Tackling child labour through decent youth employment in agri-food systems
Opportunities

Effective school-to-work transition is critical to ensuring that families prioritize the long-term gains of education over short-term additional income derived through child labour. It is equally essential to ensuring that young people are interested in engaging in agricultural value chains. It is important to bear in mind that school to work transition is not a linear process. Young people may transition in stages and move between education attendance, employment and unemployment interchangeably over a period of time. The more direct and easier the process of transitioning from full-time education to decent work, the more likely young people are to be protected from hazardous work. The process must begin early enough and not at the end of compulsory education, by introducing students to key skills that are important in the labour market. This includes, in addition to literacy and numeracy, life skills, communication skills, critical thinking and so on (UNICEF, 2019).

The process also requires that jobs are in fact available, and therefore employment policies, employment services and employers’ willingness to employ young workers and so on also impact school-to-work transition. This is discussed further below.

Introducing agricultural subjects as part of regular learning can be an important part of introducing labour market-oriented skills in education and vocational education. The junior farmer field and life schools (JFFLS) of the Food and agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) methodology introduces agricultural subjects, relevant to the local contexts, along with life skills. The JFFLS has been implemented in a variety of environments, in schools, in vocational training centres and in producers’ organizations, via extension departments of the Ministry of Agriculture and other extension and advisory services in rural areas. When implemented in schools, the JFFLS is executed as a collaborative effort between schools, teachers and local agricultural offices. In this type of environment (schools), experiences show that the JFFLS programmes are effective in improving the relevance of education in rural areas, in introducing students to new and innovative agricultural techniques, and in vetting their appetite for the sector (FAO, 2020b).

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5 In line with UNICEF 2019, this paper defines school to work transition as the process that prepares young people to transition from education to work and the actual transitioning process from education to full-time, decent work. This is not a linear process.

6 ILO Convention 138 on minimum age explicitly allows for children below minimum age to work as part of their education and vocational training programmes in article 6 of the convention.
Combining approaches such as the JFFLS with career guidance and counselling in basic schools may improve school-to-work transitioning as well as young people’s interest in agriculture and food processing. For example, experiences from Palestine show that JFFLS can be an effective tool for linking student and young, budding farmers with local producer organizations to promote employment (FAO, 2010). However, this will only really pay off when young people in rural areas have access to appropriate vocational education and training. If compulsory basic school education does not feed into agricultural career paths, the main mode of agricultural training will still be working on the family farm, possibly at the expense of formal education.

Hence, expanding the range of vocational training options in rural areas is essential to counter child labour and promote youth employment. Formal, state-run vocational training schools are often located in urban centres, or they might require formal education qualifications (e.g. secondary education) and are therefore inaccessible to many rural youths. They may also be relatively inflexible in terms of curriculum, hours and so on. Hence, many rural youths end up attending training programmes offered by, for example, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or in traditional, informal apprenticeships. While these forms of vocational training are more accessible and sometimes more flexible, they are also often of lower quality and are informal (i.e. do not lead to a certificate and with no supervision).

There is a need to improve the vocational training systems and establish accessible, flexible enterprise-based training programmes with strong supervision and support to ensure quality.

This training needs to focus on both the agricultural production and on other parts of agricultural supply chains, e.g. food processing and marketing, production and supply of tools and implements for farming and so on to fill the gap between market and labour market demands and the skills and aspirations of young people (OECD, 2018).

Once through training, young people need support to find decent jobs or establish their own businesses. Mentorship programmes, incubator programmes, peer-to-peer support and start-up financing have all shown potential to help young people transition from training to employment or self-employment, and expanding access to business and employment services in rural areas will help young people gain a foothold (Fiedler, 2020). Supporting young agripreneurs can be a powerful tool to foster the engagement of youth and create additional employment for other young people. For support to young agripreneurs to be effective, their specific age-related needs and preferences need to be accounted
Moreover, business service providers may potentially support efforts by labour inspectors and others to raise awareness among business owners of how safe employment of 14/15- to 17- year-old workers can be accomplished within national regulations and be an important investment in the future labour force, especially if combined with vocational training. This may help overcome employers’ reluctance to employ workers below 18 years of age due to concerns that they may break regulations and that employment of young people is perceived as cumbersome. This needs to be combined with efforts by employment service providers to ensure that young workers are aware of the existence of decent job opportunities with businesses that employ young workers and that young workers know their rights.

for, such as their preferred training and coaching modalities, the gender role that they are expected to live up to (and may want to break free from), their position in the communities and their possibilities to acquire land and other production inputs. In other words, the business development support and communication that is appropriate for older farmers may not be appropriate for young people (Fiedler, 2020). While youth agripreneurship support may be more relevant and effective for older youth, who already have some work experience, it is particularly beneficial to include entrepreneurial education and training subjects from a young age, to create positive attitudes about entrepreneurship and develop critical problem-solving skills (Lackéus, 2015; Hassi, 2016; ILO, 2017b).
Local supply chains hold significant potential for young farmers, food processors and other agripreneurs. The barriers to entering local supply chains are usually lower than the barriers to enter global supply chains. As incomes grow and preferences change in low-income countries, local supply chains will increasingly expand to include new products. Young agripreneurs establishing their businesses may be more agile and able to take advantage of changing market demands. Again, it is critically important to understand gender dynamics in getting products to local markets and to ensure that young women have access to opportunities and earnings just as well as young men (OECD, 2018). This may, in turn, take thinking through young women’s multiple gender-based responsibilities. Childcare, care for the elderly and other unpaid family and community work can form substantial workloads that leave young women with limited time and fewer options for business development and that may cause child labour, as young women leave some of their family responsibilities to younger girls (FAO, 2020b; FAO, IFAD and ILO, 2021). Hence, ensuring that young women can establish businesses or seek full time formal employment under decent conditions, alternative care systems may be required. In Rwanda, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) supports the establishment of preschool centres in tea plantations. The preschools allow young mothers to work full time in the plantations and earn an income while their children are in a safe environment nearby. In addition, the preschools allow the children to grow and stimulate their development (UNICEF, 2018). They also prepare children for entering compulsory education, and experience shows that children who enrol in pre-school are significantly more likely to also enrol in primary school (UNICEF, 2019).
Hence, this initiative may both promote decent work for young women and prevent child labour in the next generation.

Expanding the potential of local supply chains may also take addressing underlying, structural drivers of gender-based inequality, such as access to land, financial services and decisionmaking, to ensure that women can engage fully and equally in the expansion of local supply chains. This will enable both young women and men to develop new products that match the (changing) tastes of the market and the growing mechanization of agriculture and other developments in agricultural practices (OECD, 2018; FAO, CTA and IFAD 2014; FAO, IFAD and ILO, 2010).

Organization of young farmers, food processors and agricultural workers is a critical step in the empowerment of young people in agri-food systems.

Encouraging young farm workers to establish or to join rural workers’ organizations is critical to strengthening the voice and bargaining position of young workers in the sector.
It is also important for these organizations to strengthen the voices of their young members through specific policies and positions, including, for instance, establishing dedicated youth committees. Collective representation may also be a necessary condition for accessing finances and other services through savings and credit societies and for marketing and selling product in local markets and/or into local, national and global supply chains. Efforts to develop rural workers’ organizations to negotiate prices based on shared information, for example, will strengthen the relative position of power for young farmers and young workers for whom rural workers’ organizations can seek support for wage negotiations, workplace risk assessments and protection measures.
Freedom of association is a fundamental element of decent work, and understanding the concept and its application is important to smooth school-to-work transition processes: freedom of association is key to empower young workers as explained in the example below (box 1). In the Philippines, the concept of freedom of association and related support to make it reality is introduced and offered by an International Labour Organization (ILO) project to working students in the 15- to 17-year age bracket (ILO, 2019b). Hence, introduction to organization may be important, even if young people may only join organizations at the age of 18 years old.

The organization of young farmers and agricultural workers is intrinsically linked to wider youth empowerment issues. Steps must be taken to overcome the relatively weak position of young people, and particularly of young women and young people from marginalized communities.

Advocating and raising the voice and status of young people may be a necessary condition for the exercise of freedom of association in agriculture and for young people to have a voice within rural workers’ organizations and their young members and leaders (unions, farmers associations, cooperatives and other representative organizations alike). This, in turn, may take capacity development for youth organization members and leaders, as well as youth members of trade unions and other representative organizations, to engage in advocacy and policy dialogue and development structures that create a space for youth. In Mali, the Conseil Supérieur de l’Agriculture, a broad stakeholder group mandated, amongst other, to monitor the implementation of Mali’s agricultural orientation law. The national federation of rural youth in Mali (FENAJER) has a seat on the Council (Fiedler, 2020). Promoting dialogue and supporting capacity development can take many forms, e.g. summer camps, discussion groups and peer-to-peer support through role models (see the case example from Uganda). Increasingly, websites and social media–based fora are accessible to rural youth and provide expanding opportunities for dialogue, learning and so on.

In addition, research has found that young women may, in some contexts, have easier access to virtual groups and resources than to other means.

(Trivelli and Morel, 2019)
Protection of young workers is an absolutely essential part of eliminating child labour and promoting youth employment in agriculture. Youth empowerment is an essential component in the protection of young workers as discussed above, but it also requires both policy-level initiatives and workplace-level initiatives.

At national level, adopting national lists of hazardous work prohibited below 18 years of age is essential. The list needs to be cognizant of the risks and hazards in different types of agricultural sector activities. A blanket ban on agricultural work until the age of 18 years is unlikely to be productive, but tasks and processes that expose young workers to high risk levels, tasks and processes must be included. This could include, for example, tasks that expose young workers to toxic substances. This would mean, in practical terms, that young people should not apply pesticides, but it would also mean that they should not weed or harvest crops that have just been sprayed, as this would also lead to exposure.

In Pakistan, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) supported local organizations to set up Women’s Open Schools for young women in cotton growing areas. The open schools were established with support from local teachers and offered educational subjects as well as support for income-generating activities and training and orientation on pesticide management. The Women’s Open Schools led to a 66 percent reduction in pesticide poisoning among young cotton farm workers (FAO, CTA and IFAD, 2014).
In addition to tasks that may put young workers’ health at risk, states may ban work that can harm young workers’ mental health or expose young workers to verbal, physical or sexual abuse, such as work in very isolated sites. In the agriculture sector this could include, for example, herding in isolated locations for extended periods of time. It should also be noted that isolated workspaces may also pose physical risks. Being injured in occupational accidents is riskier in remote mountains, out to sea and so on, where appropriate medical attention is harder to reach (FAO, 2020b; ILO, 2018).

Developing national lists of hazardous work that take full account of the various risks and hazards in agriculture is therefore complex or even complicated, and no matter how detailed a national list of hazardous work is, individual workplaces need to assess the specific risks in the workplace and put in place measures to protect young workers accordingly. This is also potentially a complex and time-demanding exercise, and some businesses choose instead to not employ workers below 18 years of age to be “on the safe side”.

As discussed above, engaging young workers is not only an important measure to ensure that poor households have an income. It is also a way to mobilize a sufficient workforce for agriculture, and therefore, blanket bans on hiring young workers below 18 years of age should be discouraged beyond very few, specific high-risk operations (e.g. underground mining). In most agricultural operations, there will be both hazardous tasks that are not suitable for young workers, and less risky tasks that young workers can do if given proper guidance and support (ILO, 2018). The Labour Inspectorate plays a key role in providing this guidance, but other actors can also make significant contributions. For example, agricultural extension officers may play an important role in reaching out to farmers with information on the protection of young workers. Inclusion of agricultural extension (and other agricultural departments) in the fight against child labour can be underpinned through policy development, such as the inclusion of Ministries of Agriculture in the development and implementation of National Action Plans on child labour (FAO, 2017).

Ensuring that young workers are properly protected and trained to do their jobs may also remove some of the negative connotations that young people have about agricultural work. Agricultural work is often seen as dangerous, poorly paid and hard, and as discussed, young people prefer work in other sectors to a great extent (Fiedler, 2020; OECD, 2018). Ensuring that young workers are indeed well protected against hazardous work and that they have training opportunities available may help change the attitudes to agricultural work.

If the agricultural sector is to attract sufficient, well-qualified workers to be able to keep up with future demands for sustainable agricultural products, the narrative must change from food production being hard work to food production as a desirable occupation. This changing narrative has started, and young role models are key to transforming the narratives. International organizations, industry associations and others can play a key role in sharing the stories of role
models through campaigns and so on, but ensuring that role models reach out to younger children with their stories is equally important. This can happen, for example, through school-based activities, such as the JFFLS discussed elsewhere in this paper.

7 See for example this feature story about a young woman agripreneur in Georgia, or refer to the story about young fisher farmers in Northern Zambia in the paper on child labour in fisheries and aquaculture, in the same series.

All of these initiatives need to be underpinned by investments in rural areas, not just in agricultural development. Investing in non-farm employment opportunities and in access to basic health care and education services is essential, as discussed above. Moreover, ensuring that rural populations have access to basic infrastructure, such as roads, internet access, water and electricity and so on is necessary to make rural life attractive to young people in the first place (OECD, 2018; Fiedler, 2020). These investments in rural transformation need not be specifically targeted at young people. In areas where most of the population lack access to basic services, general investments will benefit young people. It is, however, important to ensure that young people’s perspectives are heard in the planning and execution of transformation initiatives (Arslan et al., 2021).

A key element of rural development efforts that is no less critical for young people in ensuring access to social protection and other measures to cushion against economic shocks (e.g. livestock and crop insurance) is essential to make the prospects of working in agriculture desirable to young people. This is particularly important also from the perspective of preventing shock-induced school dropout and child labour.

The background paper on agricultural investment and international finance institutions provides more detail on the challenges and opportunities of investments in rural and agricultural development towards the elimination of child labour.
Box 1: The International Labour Organization (ILO) skills for youth employment and rural development in Western and Southern Africa project

The ILO skills for youth employment and rural development in Western and Southern Africa project ran in Benin, Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe between 2010 and 2014. The project results in Zimbabwe were evaluated in 2015, and the evaluation found that the project had supported 10,292 young people in remote rural areas in Zimbabwe to become gainfully self-employed or find wage employment in both agriculturally based and non-agriculturally based industries: apiculture, aquaculture, cattle fattening, dairy, horticulture, cattle fattening, dairy production, piggery, poultry, and solar marketing/green jobs. Quality Informal Apprenticeships (QIA) include art and crafts, catering, carpentry and joinery, clothing, hair dressing, home décor, motor vehicle mechanics, upholstery, plumbing and welding.

The project provided skills and business training and facilitated access to microcredit and incubation services. Skills training was provided through supervised apprenticeships with master crafts people who were given access to microcredit in return for the training they offered. Trainees generally completed their apprenticeships successfully and obtained government recognized certificates, though some young women withdrew from very male-dominated environments.

For the young persons who started businesses, the project supported assessment of their skills, resources and so on, and where young people had no access to land, the project supported establishing other businesses such as food processing.

The evaluation found that the project had been highly successful (and the project did exceed all its targets) in taking training to where young people live and in providing services that are relevant to the context in remote rural areas. It further demonstrated that improved quality apprenticeships are feasible and can better lead to young people gaining the skills they need for employment and entrepreneurship.

Box 2: FAO’s Integrated Country Approach (ICA) for promoting decent rural employment

FAO’s Integrated Country Approach for promoting decent rural employment supported the Government of Uganda’s National Strategy for Youth employment in Agriculture (NSYEA) through policy dialogue, technical advice, knowledge generation and support for capacity development with stakeholders. The capacity building support included support to strengthen the capacity of youth organizations and piloting models for youth engagement in the agricultural sector through awareness raising, youth peer-to-peer support and networking. Among the knowledge products, a study focusing on rural youth aged 14/15 to 17 showed that young people often drop out of school before completing primary education to end up in low-paying jobs or become unemployed. Ninety-six percent of the young people in the study work as unpaid help on family farms.

With the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF), ICA initiated the Youthinspiring-Youth in Agriculture initiative (YIYA), piloted in 2017 with 25 young champions nominated and awarded through a national contest. The young champions were all innovative agripreneurs, committed to social and environmental dimensions, who now serve as role models for other young people in rural areas, including younger and more vulnerable youths in their rural communities. The champions were trained by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and national partners on business development, strategic planning, child labour prevention and decent work and were empowered to establish their own organizations and networks. A result of the initiative is the formalization of the Young Farmers Champions Networks (YOFCHAN), which managed to establish itself as one of the two national youth representative organizations in the country (together with the Young Farmers’ Federation of Uganda (UNYFA)) and actively participates in policy dialogues and national coordination mechanisms. Moreover, the youth champions have sparked increased interest in agricultural work and entrepreneurship among other young people in their local communities. A recent evaluation (Ose, 2021a, b; FAO, 2020c) demonstrated the positive impacts of the champions approach in terms of youth employment creation, youth empowerment and positioning within the community, leading to the scaling up of the initiative in 2021, with 270 new champions identified.

Sources: FAO, (2020c); FAO, (2019); FAO, (2018); Ose, (2021a); Ose, (2021b); FAO, (2021).
Recommendations

Protection of young workers from hazardous work is crucial to the elimination of child labour and to promoting decent work for young people, and it is strongly recommended that projects and programmes aimed at the elimination of child labour in agriculture prioritize protection of young workers under 18 years of age, including those who work as unpaid family helpers.

Moreover, it is necessary to ensure that agricultural businesses are prepared to employ young workers and have the capacity to protect them against hazards. This requires the capacity to undertake workplace risk assessments and put in place risk mitigation measures. Some employers find this cumbersome and expensive and prefer to only employ workers aged 18+ years. It is important, however, to raise awareness that employers have an interest in investing in their future work force through protecting young workers and engaging actively in their vocational training, for example through offering good quality apprenticeships.

Skills training opportunities are critically important, not least to address the mismatch between skills and aspirations among young people in rural areas. This takes more than enterprise-based solutions. Political commitment is necessary to expand vocational training opportunities to young people in rural areas, for example, through improved apprenticeships and locating vocational training institutions in rural areas. The expansion of vocational skills training must stand on a firm basis of equal access to compulsory education of good quality for all children, including those who live in remote and under-serviced rural areas. It is further recommended that governments prioritize the integration of agricultural (and other vocational and life) skills into primary education, for example, through school farming projects, to promote smooth school-to-work transition processes and an interest in agriculture. This needs to be coupled with career guidance and counselling and other initiatives that support school-to-work transition. While this is a government responsibility, international partners and civil society organizations (e.g. farmer associations, youth groups and NGOs) can play a key role in supporting access to good-quality education and training.
Expansion of decent work opportunities (both employment and self-employment) is essential to prevent child labour. Good job opportunities combined with quality education will increase the likelihood that families prioritize longer-term gains of education and training over short-term child labour generated income. Leveraging the potential of local supply chains, for example, supporting young people to set up businesses that cater to the demand for new food products in the local markets has significant potential to expand job opportunities in rural areas.

At both local, regional and international levels, businesses need to undertake thorough and systematic due diligence on child labour as part of their wider environmental and social due diligence in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Empowering young people to tap into local supply chains will also require development of business skills and wider youth empowerment measures by governments, civil society organizations, financial institutions and international partners. For example, young people may need support to access land, finance or other resources for their business, negotiate prices or salaries and have their voices heard in decision-making processes nationally and locally. Peertopeer support has also proven to be very effective in this regard and might be facilitated by schools and extension systems. While many of the actions above might be more relevant for older youth, integrating entrepreneurial education at a young age could facilitate youth future engagement as agripreneurs.

All of this requires adoption and implementation of wider rural development policies and programmes, including investment in basic infrastructure, health, education and social protection in rural areas. It also demands empowering youth and their organizations to actively participate in policy dialogue and governance mechanisms that shape food systems development. Hence, comprehensive responses at policy level and at community and workplace levels are needed to ensure that agri-food systems are sustainable in the long run and that healthy, well-educated young people are ready to work in them and adapt to future demands and challenges. This requires multiple partners at all levels (local, national and international) to work together and prioritize elimination of child labour, protection of young workers and creation of decent job opportunities in agri-food systems. It is recommended, in particular, that agricultural extension services integrate child labour outreach and awareness-raising activities in their on-going dialogue with farmers.
References


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