

Youth Engagement and Employment in the African Agricultural Sector

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Abstract

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing development challenges in Africa, occurring alongside the continued centrality of agriculture as a major source of livelihoods and economic activity. Despite the sector's potential to absorb a growing youth labor force, youth engagement in agriculture remains limited, unstable, and often characterized by precarious working conditions. This study presents a literature review that synthesizes existing scholarly and policy-oriented research on youth engagement and employment in the African agricultural sector. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles, books, and institutional reports, the review examines how youth participation in agriculture has been conceptualized, the quality of employment opportunities available, and the key factors shaping youth engagement across diverse African contexts. The findings indicate that while agriculture continues to function as a significant employer of youth, it is predominantly marked by informality, low productivity, income insecurity, and limited social protection. Negative perceptions of agriculture, aspirational mismatches, and persistent structural barriers particularly limited access to land, finance, education, and markets emerge as central constraints on sustained youth participation. The review also highlights significant gaps between education and labor market needs, which undermine youth employability and the sector's capacity for innovation. Overall, the literature reveals a fundamental contradiction between agriculture's employment potential and the poor quality of jobs it currently offers to young people. By synthesizing key themes and identifying persistent gaps, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with youth employment in African agriculture and provides a foundation for more coherent research and policy approaches.

Keywords: Youth Employment, Agriculture, Africa, Agribusiness

Introduction

Africa is currently experiencing one of the most significant demographic transitions in the world, characterized by a rapidly growing youth population alongside persistent structural unemployment (Lebakeng, J., & Matebese-Notshulwana, 2024; Baah-Boateng, 2016; Adegboye & Ighodaro, 2020; Sumberg et al., 2021). Estimates suggest that more than 60 percent of Africa's population is under the age of 25, making youth employment one of the most pressing development challenges facing the continent (Sumberg et al., 2021). At the same time, agriculture remains the largest employer in many African countries, contributing substantially to livelihoods, food security, and national economies.

This coexistence of a youthful labor force and a labor-intensive agricultural sector presents both an opportunity and a paradox: while agriculture has the potential to absorb millions of young workers, youth engagement in the sector remains low, unstable, and often involuntary. Across much of the continent, young people increasingly view agriculture as an unattractive livelihood option, associating it with low productivity, limited income, physical hardship, and social marginalization (Heerde, et al., 2023). This perception is reinforced by the dominance of small-scale, rain-fed farming systems, weak market integration, and limited access to land, finance, and modern technologies.

Consequently, many African youths aspire to urban, formal-sector employment, even as such opportunities remain scarce and highly competitive. The result is a growing mismatch between labor supply and labor demand, contributing to underemployment, informal work, and socioeconomic vulnerability among young people. The challenge of youth employment in agriculture cannot be understood solely as a labor market issue (Sumberg et al., 2021). Rather, it is deeply embedded within broader processes of rural transformation, structural change, and governance. While classical development narratives often frame declining youth participation in agriculture as a natural outcome of economic transformation, contemporary evidence suggests that Africa's structural transformation has been incomplete and uneven.

In many contexts, youth exit agriculture not because of expanding opportunities elsewhere, but due to the sector's inability to provide dignified and sustainable livelihoods. This distinction is critical, as it shifts the policy focus from managing youth exit to improving the quality and attractiveness of agricultural employment. In response to these challenges, governments, development agencies, and international organizations have increasingly positioned youth engagement in agriculture as a strategic policy priority (Rachmad, 2025; Kote et al., 2024; Geza et al., 2021). Numerous initiatives have been launched to promote youth agripreneurship, modernize agricultural value chains, and integrate young people into agribusiness, processing, and agri-technology sectors (Sundari, 2025).

These efforts reflect a broader reimagining of agriculture not merely as farming, but as a dynamic sector encompassing production, services, innovation, and entrepreneurship. However, despite growing policy enthusiasm, the empirical outcomes of such interventions remain mixed, and their long-term impact on youth employment trajectories is still contested. Academic scholarship on youth engagement and employment in African agriculture has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Studies span multiple disciplines, including agricultural economics, development studies, sociology, and public policy, addressing issues such as land access, skills development, migration, gender inequality, and institutional support (Chaudhry et al., 2025).

While this growing body of literature has generated valuable insights, it is also characterized by fragmentation and conceptual inconsistency. Many studies focus on isolated determinants or country-specific experiences, often without situating findings within broader continental or structural contexts. As a result, cumulative knowledge remains underutilized, limiting its contribution to coherent policy design. Moreover, existing research frequently privileges policy

narratives and macro-level employment statistics, while underrepresenting the diversity of youth experiences across gender, education levels, and rural–urban contexts (Stauffer, 2023).

Young women, in particular, face intersecting barriers related to land tenure systems, unpaid labor burdens, and social norms, yet their experiences are often treated as secondary within broader youth employment discussions. This uneven representation raises important questions about whose realities are reflected in dominant academic and policy discourses on youth and agriculture.

The growing emphasis on innovation, digitalization, and green growth has further reshaped debates on youth employment in agriculture. Recent literature highlights the potential of digital platforms, climate-smart agriculture, and agribusiness incubation to transform the sector into a more attractive space for young people. While these developments are promising, they also risk reproducing existing inequalities if access to technology, capital, and skills remains uneven. Consequently, understanding youth engagement in agriculture requires careful attention to both opportunities and exclusionary dynamics embedded within contemporary development strategies.

Against this backdrop, a comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarship is essential to clarify what is currently known, what remains contested, and where significant gaps persist. A literature review approach is particularly valuable for consolidating diverse findings, identifying dominant themes, and critically assessing how youth engagement and employment in African agriculture have been framed across time and disciplines. By systematically examining existing studies, such a review can move beyond fragmented evidence to provide a structured understanding of barriers, enabling conditions, policy responses, and emerging trends.

This study contributes to the field by offering an in-depth literature-based examination of youth engagement and employment in the African agricultural sector. Rather than introducing new empirical data, it focuses on synthesizing and critically engaging with existing research to strengthen conceptual clarity and inform future scholarship and policy debates. In doing so, the study seeks to support more inclusive, evidence-based strategies that recognize agriculture not as a residual employment option for youth, but as a sector with the potential to deliver meaningful, dignified, and sustainable livelihoods.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative literature review design to systematically synthesize existing scholarly knowledge on youth engagement and employment in the African agricultural sector. A literature review approach is particularly appropriate given the study's objective to consolidate, interpret, and critically assess findings from diverse empirical and conceptual studies rather than generate new primary data. By integrating evidence across disciplines and geographic contexts, this design allows for a comprehensive understanding of dominant themes, recurring debates, and unresolved issues within the field. The review is analytical in nature, moving beyond descriptive summaries to evaluate how youth employment in agriculture has been conceptualized, examined, and addressed in existing research.

Data Sources and Literature Identification

The literature reviewed in this study was drawn from a range of reputable academic and institutional sources to ensure both scholarly rigor and policy relevance. Peer-reviewed journal articles were primarily sourced from international academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. In addition, books, edited volumes, and reports published by recognized international organizations including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Bank, and the African Development Bank were included to capture policy-oriented perspectives and large-scale empirical assessments. The combination of academic and institutional sources enabled the study to reflect both theoretical debates and applied policy discussions surrounding youth employment in agriculture.

Search Strategy and Keywords

A structured search strategy was employed to identify relevant literature systematically. Key search terms included combinations of “youth employment,” “youth engagement,” “agriculture,” “agribusiness,” “rural employment,” and “Africa.” These keywords were used both independently and in combination to capture a wide range of studies addressing different dimensions of youth participation in the agricultural sector. The search was limited to publications written in English, reflecting the dominant language of international academic publishing and ensuring consistency in analysis. To maintain relevance, priority was given to literature published from the early 2000s onward, while seminal earlier works were included where they provided foundational insights.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the reviewed literature. Studies were included if they explicitly focused on youth populations commonly defined as individuals aged between 15 and 35 years and examined issues related to employment, livelihoods, or engagement within agricultural or agribusiness contexts in African countries. Both empirical and conceptual studies were considered, provided they contributed substantive insights into youth agriculture dynamics. Studies that focused exclusively on non-agricultural sectors, did not specify youth as a target group, or addressed agriculture outside the African context were excluded. This selective process ensured analytical coherence and thematic alignment with the study’s objectives.

Screening and Selection Process

The literature selection process followed a multi-stage screening procedure. Initially, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess their relevance to youth employment and agriculture in Africa. Publications that met the inclusion criteria at this stage were then subjected to full-text review to confirm their substantive contribution to the topic. During this phase, attention was given to the clarity of research focus, methodological transparency, and relevance of findings. Redundant studies and those with limited analytical value were excluded to avoid repetition and maintain analytical depth. The final body of literature represents a curated set of sources that collectively reflect the breadth and diversity of scholarship in the field.

Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. This involved iterative reading and coding of texts to identify recurring patterns, key concepts, and dominant narratives related to youth engagement and employment in agriculture. Themes such as employment quality, access to productive resources, policy interventions, gender dynamics, and innovation emerged inductively through the analysis. Rather than treating studies as isolated units, the synthesis emphasized comparison and contrast across contexts and findings, enabling the identification of convergences, divergences, and contradictions within the literature. This analytical process facilitated a critical understanding of how youth engagement in agriculture has been framed and addressed across time and disciplines.

Analytical Rigor and Quality Assurance

To enhance analytical rigor, the review prioritized studies published in reputable journals and by recognized institutions, ensuring a high standard of academic credibility. The use of multiple data sources and cross-referencing of findings helped reduce source bias and strengthen the validity of the synthesis. Furthermore, the analytical focus on themes rather than individual study outcomes allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of complex and context-dependent findings. Throughout the process, careful attention was paid to maintaining transparency in literature selection and consistency in thematic interpretation.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the key findings derived from a systematic synthesis of the existing literature on youth engagement and employment in the African agricultural sector. Rather than reporting empirical results, the findings reflect recurring patterns, dominant themes, and critical insights identified across diverse studies, policy reports, and scholarly analyses. The results are organized thematically to highlight how structural conditions, social perceptions, education and skills systems, and institutional arrangements collectively shape youth participation in agriculture. By synthesizing convergent and divergent perspectives within the literature, this section provides an analytical foundation for understanding the complex factors influencing youth employment outcomes in the sector.

Agriculture as a Persistent but Precarious Source of Youth Employment

The literature consistently demonstrates that agriculture continues to serve as a major source of employment for youth across African countries, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas where alternative livelihood opportunities are limited (Geza et al., 2022; Yeboah & Flynn, 2021). Numerous studies indicate that a significant proportion of young people remain engaged in farming and related activities, not necessarily due to preference, but because agriculture represents one of the few accessible entry points into the labor market. In many contexts, youth participation in agriculture reflects structural realities such as limited industrialization, slow growth of the formal sector, and persistent rural poverty. As a result, agriculture absorbs a large share of young workers by default, functioning as a labor buffer in economies unable to generate sufficient non-farm employment.

Despite its role as a major employer, the quality of youth employment in agriculture is widely documented as precarious. The literature highlights that most youth agricultural work is informal, characterized by low and unpredictable incomes, seasonal employment, and exposure to economic and climatic shocks. Young people engaged in small-scale farming or casual agricultural labor often lack access to social protection mechanisms, including health insurance, pensions, or labor rights. This precariousness not only undermines income security but also limits the capacity of youth to invest in productivity-enhancing inputs, reinforcing cycles of low productivity and vulnerability within the sector.

Furthermore, existing studies emphasize that youth engagement in agriculture is frequently driven by necessity rather than choice. Agriculture is often positioned as a residual sector for young people who are unable to access higher education, vocational training, or formal employment in urban areas. This dynamic reinforces negative perceptions of agriculture as a last-resort livelihood rather than a viable career pathway. The literature suggests that such perceptions are shaped by lived experiences of hardship within the sector, as well as by broader social narratives that associate success with urban, non-agricultural employment. Consequently, even when young people remain in agriculture, their engagement is often characterized by low motivation and limited long-term commitment.

Taken together, these findings reveal a fundamental structural contradiction within African agricultural systems. While agriculture possesses significant potential to absorb labor and contribute to youth employment, its current organization fails to provide sufficient economic security, social recognition, or upward mobility for young workers. The literature underscores that without substantive improvements in job quality, productivity, and institutional support, agriculture will continue to function as a precarious safety net rather than a transformative employment sector for youth. This contradiction lies at the core of ongoing debates about the role of agriculture in addressing Africa's youth employment challenge and highlights the urgency of rethinking how agricultural work is structured, supported, and valued.

Negative Perceptions and Aspirational Mismatches among Youth

The literature consistently identifies negative perceptions of agriculture as a central factor shaping youth disengagement from the sector (Boye et al., 2024). Many studies report that young people view agricultural work as physically demanding, economically unrewarding, and socially undesirable. These perceptions are often formed early in life through direct observation of older generations engaged in low-productivity farming under challenging conditions. Consequently, agriculture is frequently associated with poverty, vulnerability, and limited life chances, making it an unattractive option for youth seeking stability and social advancement.

Beyond individual experiences, broader societal narratives play a critical role in shaping youth attitudes toward agriculture. Educational systems, media representations, and social discourses across many African contexts tend to valorize formal education and urban-based employment as markers of success and modernity. In contrast, agricultural livelihoods are commonly portrayed as backward or transitional. The literature suggests that this symbolic devaluation of agriculture reinforces youth aspirations toward white-collar occupations, even

in contexts where such employment opportunities are structurally limited. As a result, young people often aspire to careers that are misaligned with prevailing labor market realities.

The mismatch between youth aspirations and the actual conditions of agricultural livelihoods emerges as a recurring theme across studies. While many young people express interest in innovation, entrepreneurship, and financial independence, existing agricultural systems often fail to offer clear pathways for skill development, income growth, or career progression. This gap generates frustration and disengagement, particularly among educated youth who perceive agriculture as incompatible with their qualifications and expectations. Even when youth participate in agricultural activities, their involvement is frequently temporary or strategic, serving as a fallback option rather than a long-term commitment.

Collectively, these findings indicate that negative perceptions and aspirational mismatches significantly undermine efforts to promote youth engagement in agriculture. The literature emphasizes that policy initiatives aimed at attracting youth to the sector often overlook the symbolic and social dimensions of work, focusing instead on technical or financial incentives. Without addressing the underlying perceptions that frame agriculture as undesirable, such interventions risk limited effectiveness. This underscores the importance of understanding youth engagement not only in economic terms but also as a socially constructed process shaped by identity, status, and future-oriented aspirations.

Structural Barriers Limiting Youth Engagement in Agriculture

The literature consistently identifies structural barriers as fundamental constraints shaping youth engagement in agriculture across African contexts (Kote et al., 2024; Nthoesane & Teele, 2024). Among these, access to land emerges as the most persistent and widely documented challenge. In many countries, land tenure systems are governed by customary norms that prioritize inheritance and seniority, effectively marginalizing young people and first-time farmers. As a result, youth often lack secure land rights, limiting their ability to make long-term investments in productivity-enhancing practices. The absence of land security not only discourages sustained engagement in agriculture but also reinforces youth dependence on informal or temporary farming arrangements.

Financial exclusion constitutes a second major structural barrier highlighted across the reviewed studies. Young people commonly face significant difficulties in accessing formal credit due to a lack of collateral, limited credit histories, and perceived risk by financial institutions. Insurance products tailored to small-scale or youth-led agricultural enterprises remain scarce, further increasing vulnerability to climate and market shocks. Without adequate access to start-up capital and risk-mitigation mechanisms, many youth are unable to scale their agricultural activities beyond subsistence levels, reinforcing low productivity and income instability.

Beyond land and finance, the literature emphasizes the role of weak institutional support in constraining youth participation in agriculture. Agricultural extension services are often under-resourced and inadequately adapted to the needs of young farmers, particularly those interested in innovation or agribusiness. In many cases, policy frameworks addressing youth

employment and agricultural development operate in silos, resulting in fragmented and poorly coordinated interventions. This institutional fragmentation limits youth awareness of available programs and reduces the overall effectiveness of support mechanisms designed to facilitate youth entry into the sector.

In addition, inadequate rural infrastructure and limited market access significantly undermine the viability of youth-led agricultural enterprises. Poor transportation networks, insufficient storage facilities, and unreliable access to electricity and digital connectivity increase production and transaction costs. These constraints disproportionately affect young farmers, who typically operate with limited capital and narrower margins for risk. The literature suggests that without improvements in rural infrastructure and market integration, efforts to promote youth engagement in agriculture will remain constrained by systemic barriers that extend beyond individual capacity or motivation.

Education, Skills, and Employability Gaps

The literature consistently highlights significant misalignments between existing education systems and the evolving labor market demands of the agricultural sector (Storonyanska et al., 2024). Formal education pathways in many African countries remain weakly connected to agricultural realities, often prioritizing general academic credentials over sector-specific competencies. As a result, young people frequently exit educational institutions without the skills required to engage effectively in agricultural production, agribusiness, or value-chain activities. This disconnect contributes to high levels of graduate unemployment and underemployment, even in contexts where agricultural labor demand persists.

Agricultural education and training programs are widely criticized for being outdated and insufficiently responsive to technological and market changes. Many curricula continue to emphasize traditional farming techniques while neglecting emerging areas such as agribusiness management, value addition, digital agriculture, and climate-smart practices. The literature suggests that training approaches are often overly theoretical, with limited opportunities for hands-on learning, apprenticeships, or field-based experience. Consequently, young people lack practical exposure to modern agricultural systems, reducing their confidence and readiness to pursue agricultural careers.

In addition to technical shortcomings, the literature identifies gaps in entrepreneurial and soft skills as a major constraint on youth employability in agriculture. Skills related to business planning, financial management, marketing, and innovation are frequently absent from formal and informal training programs. This limits young people's ability to operate agriculture as an enterprise rather than a subsistence activity. Even where opportunities exist within agricultural value chains, youth often struggle to meet employer expectations or to develop viable self-employment initiatives due to these skill deficits.

Collectively, these education and skills gaps undermine both individual employment outcomes and broader sectoral transformation. The literature emphasizes that without a workforce equipped with relevant technical and entrepreneurial competencies, agriculture's potential as a driver of innovation and employment growth remains constrained. This reinforces a cycle in

which low skills contribute to low productivity, further diminishing the attractiveness of agriculture to youth. Addressing these gaps is therefore widely recognized as a critical condition for enhancing youth employability and repositioning agriculture as a dynamic and future-oriented sector.

Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that youth engagement and employment in the African agricultural sector are shaped by interconnected structural, social, and institutional factors that extend beyond individual choice or motivation. While agriculture continues to absorb a significant share of the youth labor force, it is largely characterized by precarious working conditions, negative perceptions, structural barriers, and persistent skills mismatches that limit its capacity to provide dignified and sustainable livelihoods. The findings collectively highlight that without meaningful improvements in job quality, access to productive resources, institutional support, and education systems aligned with modern agricultural demands, agriculture will remain a residual employment option rather than a transformative pathway for youth. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic rethinking of how agriculture is structured, valued, and supported within broader development strategies, ensuring that youth are not only included in the sector, but are able to participate in ways that foster long-term employment security, innovation, and socio-economic mobility.

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