

Series of Virtual Dialogues

**Parliamentarians action for gender equality
and resilient food systems in response to COVID-19**



**Webinar 4: Engaging young women and men in rural and agriculture
development and resilience building in the face of COVID-19 and beyond**

11.00-13.30 (Rome time - CEST) on 12 November 2020

CONCEPT NOTE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

With 218 million people aged between 15 and 24, Africa has the youngest population in the world. Youth represents almost 20 percent of the population, in a region where 60 percent of the population is below 24. Projections suggest that the African youth cohort will continue to grow and represent almost 30 percent of the world's youth by 2050.

This high proportion of youth in Africa presents a great opportunity for harnessing a potential demographic dividend compared to other regions, but also economic and social challenges, which can lead to political instability or conflict. The capacity of the labour market to offer productive employment opportunities to this burgeoning youth population remains very low. While youth unemployment rates are more dramatic in Northern Africa (30%) than sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (9%), the latter is characterized by very high rates of youth working, poverty, informality and poor working conditions. In 2019, young workers in SSA were the most likely to be living in extreme poverty, which was affecting almost 40 million young workers (ILO, Global employment trends for youth 2020).

Global estimates (World Bank, IFAD) indicate that more than 10 million youth will enter Africa's labour market every year for the next decade, which will inevitably create additional pressure on the labour market. Poor employment opportunities accompanied by the lack of social security, education and inclusive governance can lead youth to informal or even criminal activities, the creation of mega slums in large urban centres and push them to migrate in search of better opportunities, often through irregular mechanisms.

In many developing countries young women and men in rural areas face enormous challenges in accessing decent livelihoods. They often have limited access to knowledge, information, education, decent jobs, land, markets and finance. People under 18 face additional barriers in accessing resources and services and joining local organizations, due to their status as minors. Girls face additional

constraints than boys in accessing resources, services, local institutions and employment opportunities, and are also more exposed to the risks of gender-based violence (GBV), often linked to their task of fetching fuelwood and water.

For many youths, especially the younger ones, engagement in hazardous work is also an issue. Worldwide, the majority of child labour is found in the agriculture sector (71%). Today, 108 million boys and girls are engaged in child labour in crop production, livestock, forestry, fisheries or aquaculture, often working long hours and facing occupational hazards. This includes younger youth or children aged 14-17, who are often not acknowledged in policies and interventions targeting the heterogeneous group of youth even if they may be above the minimum age for employment.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN

Globally, increasing recognition is given to the important role of rural young women and men, as agents for reducing poverty, supporting inclusive rural transformations and building resilient livelihoods. If effectively assisted since childhood, through adolescence and then in their transitions from school to work, young women and men have the potential to change the world – both as empowered citizens of today and as tomorrow’s farmers, workers, mothers and fathers, traders, entrepreneurs, mentors, household heads and political leaders. In Africa youth represent the biggest asset and the drivers of sustainable economic growth (AfDB 2017, Jobs for youth in Africa strategy).

As part of the work undertaken by the global development community towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030, it has proven crucial investing to increase the power of young women and men. It upholds their rights today and promises a more equitable and prosperous future, one in which half of humanity is an equal partner in solving the problems of poverty, food insecurity, climate change, political conflict, economic growth, disease prevention and global sustainability.

Specific policies and strategies are urgently required to empower children and youth living in rural areas, enhance their skills and ensure equal and decent work for all. With such a large number of young people, it is crucial for African governments to design inclusive and sound policies and measures for youth empowerment and gender equality, by investing in education, vocational training, entrepreneurship skills development, decent jobs and business creation, agriculture development and food security, health, and build sustainable peace and security. This approach will transform both the lives of youth and of their households, communities, nations and the whole continent, and also help breaking intergenerational poverty, addressing gender inequalities and creating a stable, peaceful and prosperous Africa. It will require the engagement of a wide range of national and international partners and stakeholders from different sectors, starting from inclusive consultations and dialogues with the youth themselves, to identify and address youth priorities and foster robust implementation of development and resilience building initiatives.

In particular, agricultural and rural development policies must specifically integrate decent work concerns and address the needs of youth and children. This will also require setting up partnerships between governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations, farmers’ and rural producers’ organizations and communities, women’s organizations and associations, and especially youth networks and organizations to develop these policies and to raise awareness on youth and gender equality concerns. In this context, it is important to use a gender lens to identify and address the specific needs

and priorities of young women and men, girls and boys, in order to eliminate existing inequalities and discriminations, transform gender roles and build gender-equitable relationships, as well as reduce the exposure to hazards and risks such as GBV.

Both the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the African Union Agenda 2063 made strong commitments to empowering young women and men, by increasing their access to productive resources, services and local institutions, and providing them with decent employment and income-generating opportunities. **ECOWAS adopted in June 2019 a regional support strategy for youth employability in the agro-sylvo-pastoral and fisheries sectors**, aimed at facilitating the maintenance and socio-professional insertion of young men and women in the agricultural and agribusiness value chains in order to: (i) reduce underemployment and unemployment of active people, and (ii) minimize rural exodus and uncontrolled migration. The strategy offers national decision makers with the ways and means to tackle the two dimensions of the problem: youth unemployment and human resource needs for the agro-sylvo-pastoral and fisheries sector and emerging value chains.

However, although it offers real opportunities for the integration of young people in the labor market, the agro-sylvo-pastoral sector is increasingly facing exposure to climate risks that affects its development. With a warming of 1.5 to 2°C, drought and aridity will make between 40 and 80% of agricultural land unsuitable for growing maize, millet and sorghum by 2030-2040 (A. Madjidi Moutari 2016, Note de décryptage sur l'adaptation). It is critical for governments in Africa to strengthen young women and men skills to respond to climate challenges, access greener jobs, green value chains and entrepreneurship opportunities, and equally participate in the local and national economy and benefit from interventions.

Moreover, there is increasing evidence that the current COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating existing inequalities and threatening the progress made so far, with devastating health and socioeconomic effects across Africa. Rural youths' lives are being disrupted as they find themselves dealing with considerable economic, physical and mental stress. A survey conducted with 167 rural youth from 24 African countries found that only one in every 10 respondents had received COVID-19 relief (e.g. food supplies, personal protective equipment, subsidized utility bills) from local governments or other development actors.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, young entrepreneurs in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa were already facing a number of challenges to access natural resources, finance, technology, knowledge and information, and insufficient participation in policy dialogues and other decision-making processes. The pandemic and its disruptions to agricultural value chains are presenting additional hurdles for these agripreneurs. For example, several formal and informal micro, small and medium-sized agribusinesses that are led by or employ many young people, have been forced to close or downscale significantly as a result of lockdowns and movement restrictions at national and local levels (FAO 2020, Africa's youth in agrifood systems: Innovation in the context of COVID-19).

Nevertheless, youth have quickly found innovative strategies to adapt their businesses in the face of the crisis and to rewrite the narrative that they are disengaged and apathetic. Young champions, leaders and volunteers across the continent are already playing a key role in their communities, using their knowledge of technology and global networks to organize and deliver vital information and services,

and to promote community cohesion and social solidarity, especially for the most vulnerable people in their communities.

FAO Policy brief on Rural youth and the COVID-19 pandemic (available at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9531en/CA9531EN.pdf>) highlights key policy recommendations to address the needs of rural young women and men and ensure both during and after the pandemic. Better and more age and gender-responsive policy and legislation are crucial, together with investments in employment creation and adoption of labour standards in rural areas, to ensure equal access to quality jobs with decent working conditions - including a living wage, health and safety at work, on-the-job training and access to social protection.

There are many successful initiatives to support young people in Africa. For example, FAO's Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) show positive impacts by giving rural girls and young women access to quality training in vocational, business and life skills and were included in learning or working groups (depending on their ages) with also young men. At the JFFLS established in a refugee camp in northern Kenya, girls and young women aged 10-18 learn agricultural, life and entrepreneurship skills in an experiential and participatory learning approach that is especially well-suited to vulnerable youth. As they attend to their plots of maturing tomatoes, cowpeas, okra, watermelons and kales, they learn about crop spacing, pest management and other farming practices. Furthermore, given their vulnerability, specific protection modules are included in this typology of settings. The JFFLS is designed to empower vulnerable and disadvantaged youth, and provide them with the livelihood options and employment opportunities (when at the legal working age) while adopting gender-sensitive skills needed for long-term food security and for reducing their vulnerability to destitution and risk coping strategies.

In view of the above, the fourth virtual dialogue of the Parliamentarians Actions for Gender Equality and Resilient Food Systems in Response to Covid-19 series will focus on ***How to engage young women and men in rural and agriculture development and resilience building in the face of COVID-19 and beyond.*** In the framework of the ECOWAS Network of Parliamentarians on Gender and Agriculture Investment Investments in Agriculture and Food Security, supported by FAO, IISD and Oxfam, the webinar will gather parliamentarians and strategic partners, including stakeholders from the civil society and producers' organizations.

Through their legislative, budgetary and oversight roles, parliamentarians are crucial agents of change to promote gender equality and empowerment of youth in rural areas, including in the Covid-19 response, by supporting gender responsive recovery and mitigation measures. Parliamentary Networks, such as the ECOWAS Network of Parliamentarians on Gender Equality and Investments in Agriculture and Food Security launched in Abuja in December 2018, can play an essential role in fostering gender-sensitive legal frameworks, policies and strategies to support rural young women and men and enhance they role in agriculture, food security and nutrition.

OBJECTIVES OF THE WEBINAR

The overall objective of the webinar is to provide a space for parliamentarians, youth and other main stakeholders to discuss the importance of engaging young women and men in efforts undertaken to eradicate rural poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, and support youth empowerment and gender equality, and exchange information and lessons learned to support the adoption of measures that can foster youth empowerment and gender equality during the covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

The **specific objectives** include:

- **Raise awareness on the specific constraints and challenges faced by rural young women and men** and the interlinkages with rural poverty and food insecurity, and potential opportunities to strengthen youth rights.
- **Share existing public policies and strategies in the ECOWAS region regarding youth employment in the agribusiness sector and enhance parliamentarians' commitment towards the achievement of SDG 8** on Decent work and economic growth in its interlinkages (particularly indicators 8.5, 8.6, 8.7 and 8.b) with SDG 2 on Zero hunger and **SDG 5** (particularly indicator 5.a.2) on Gender equality, through the promotion and adoption of gender sensitive policy and legal frameworks specifically targeted to youth, including the rural youth, and the objectives of the ECOWAS regional support strategy to youth employability in the agro-sylvo-pastoral and fisheries sector.
- **Promote an exchange of knowledge, experiences and good practices among parliamentarians, regional economic communities, youth organizations and other relevant stakeholders** on specific measures and approaches to empower rural young women and men and promote gender equality during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

EXPECTATIONS FROM THE WEBINAR

1. **Awareness raised of parliamentarians and other strategic partners** on the importance of empowering young women and men to build resilient and sustainable rural livelihoods.
2. **Increased knowledge on critical issues faced by young women and men in rural areas**, including the challenges during the Covid-19, and potential opportunities to empower rural children and youth and promote gender equality.
3. **Parliamentarians, government representatives and youth organizations are engaged in a dialogue, share experiences, lessons learned and challenges, and increase their engagement** towards inclusive policies and programmes for your empowerment and gender equality and legislation for sustainable and inclusive food systems, starting from the existing public policies and strategies in the ECOWAS region regarding youth employment in the agribusiness sector.

METHODOLOGY

The webinar will last 2.5 hours and will be composed of four sessions: an opening session, followed by a session to set the scene on key issues of youth employment in Africa and relevant policy work to empower young women and men in rural areas of Africa (with presentations by FAO and ECOWAS and panel discussions), then a moderated panel discussion for experience sharing by representatives of parliamentarians and youth organizations (from The Philippines, Uganda and Senegal), followed by a Q&A and closing remarks.