



Engaging Young Women and Men in Rural and Agriculture Development and Resilience Building in the Face of COVID-19 and Beyond

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Globally, approximately 1.21 billion people are between 15 and 24 years old, a number that will increase to 1.29 billion by 2030. In Africa alone, more than 10 million youth are expected to enter the labour market every year for the next decade. This growing youth population, especially in developing countries, represents a great opportunity for harnessing a demographic dividend, but there are also economic and social challenges that could lead to political instability or conflict. With the COVID-19 crisis exacerbating inequality and the existing vulnerabilities of rural young women and men, it is crucial to design inclusive and sound gender-responsive policies and legislation that support investments in employment creation and formalize the adoption of labour standards in rural areas, providing equal opportunities for them. It is also important to ensure that youth has 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.

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 focused on how to engage young women and men in rural and agricultural 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 Investments in Agriculture and Food Security, supported by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and Oxfam, the webinar [*Engaging Young Women and Men in Rural and Agriculture Development and Resilience Building in the Face of COVID-19 and Beyond*](#) gathered parliamentarians and strategic partners from Africa and Asia-Pacific, along with other key stakeholders representing rural youth organizations and networks.

The important role of youth is acknowledged at the international level by the strong commitments made in both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union Agenda 2063. As highlighted by Mr. Robert Guei, FAO Sub-Regional Coordinator for West Africa, the "inclusive transformation of rural economies and food systems will not be possible without young women and men." In order to harness the

possibilities offered by the demographic dividend, deliberate efforts are needed to empower young women and men through equal access to productive resources and services, as well as by providing them with decent employment and income-generating opportunities.

The webinar provided an opportunity to share some relevant initiatives and progress made to date toward these crucial goals. At a policy level, empowering young men and women is a key area of action to assist countries in creating more sustainable and inclusive agricultural systems while also including them in the design and development of measures post-pandemic. In this respect, the FAO has released several policy briefs to highlight the various challenges incurred by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Rural Youth and the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), [Impact Of COVID-19 on Informal Workers](#) and [Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 and Equitable Policy Responses in Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition](#)) while also featuring innovations coming from the youth themselves ([Africa's Youth in Agrifood Systems: Innovation in the Context of COVID-19](#)).

Examples of programs designed to empower youth were offered from across the world, including the FAO's [Integrated Country Approach \(ICA\) for boosting decent jobs for youth in the agri-food system](#), the [Green Jobs for Rural Youth Programme](#), the FAO and UNIDO's [Opportunities for Youth in Africa \(OYA\)](#), and [Magna Carta for Young Farmers in the Philippines](#). The importance of designing age-targeted and gender-responsive interventions emerged strongly in the discussions, with a particular focus on developing a holistic approach to understanding the specific problems faced by young men and women. Participants recognized that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work. For example, women have experienced a disproportionate increase in their domestic burden and risk of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vital that interventions are targeted to ensure that the complex and different needs of the most vulnerable and at-risk populations are met.

There has also been an increasingly strong commitment to include both young men and women in policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and assessment. As Mr. Guei emphasized, "working with and strengthening youth organisations as well as informal groups of young farmer champions, or agripreneurs, is the key strategy to enable more inclusive consultation and decision-making in the agri-food sector." This requires ensuring that young men and women can participate in decisions that affect them and that they are given an equal voice to offer possible solutions. Further reforms are required within democratic institutions and decision-making bodies to give more voice to the youth. In this regard, Mr. Khadim Diop, President of the National Youth Council, Senegal, introduced a draft bill developed in Senegal that asks for youth representation in 30% of elected posts in decision-making bodies.

On the other hand, empowering young women and men entails supporting youth-led and youth-serving organizations in their capacity to represent and engage young people while strengthening their social capital. This will ease their access to vital information, services and opportunities for personal and professional development. As Ms. Elizabeth Nsimadala, President of East Africa Farmer Federation (EAFF) and Pan-African Farmer Organization (PAFO), emphasized, young people need to create "stronger business

groups, associations, cooperatives and champions in the networks. This will strengthen young men and women to speak volumes in advocating for their needs, demands and investment priorities to markets." Clear messages and inclusive multistakeholder mechanisms are needed to ensure the voice of youth is heard and attracts the attention of all key actors across the agricultural value chain. Mr. Khamutima Tumwebaze, Chair of the Young Farmers Champions Network (YOFCHAN) in Uganda, stressed the crucial role of agricultural youth champions to work as role models in rural communities to inspire other young people to go into agri-business by showing the benefits of productively engaging in the agriculture sector.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations for Parliamentarians

Systemic and holistic approach:

- Foster a holistic approach, with policies and interventions enhancing the development of youth skills and experience to work in agriculture as a productive business while providing credit, financial support, and equal access to inputs and markets for young men and women.

Financial support:

- Develop inclusive financial stimulus packages tailored to youth. Financial support and subsidies must be provided to youth associations, cooperatives, and businesses to minimize the crippling effects of over-taxation.
- Introduce incentives in the form of subsidies and tax breaks for young people to encourage employment and a career in agriculture.

Market access:

- Introduce simplified trade regimes and removal of red tape to encourage small-scale cross-border trade and increase the ability of entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises to take advantage of trading opportunities.
- Address high-level systemic issues, such as the deprivation of markets. Young women and men must be considered in the negotiation of trade agreements, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and in the reassessment of current agreements to enable marginalized groups to access markets.

Equal opportunities:

- Reform decision-making bodies and processes to ensure inclusion, equal representation, and opportunities for young men and women.
- Promote digital inclusion policies and skills development programs targeting youth, and young women in particular, creating opportunities for equal access to mobile and Internet services, as well as education and business skills development.

Evidence-based policies:

- Generate gender- and age-disaggregated data to produce the evidence base to be used in the design and implementation of gender-responsive policies and projects in the agriculture sector. Policy initiatives need to be accompanied by a

strong research agenda to ensure decisions are backed by adequate evidence and provide statistics on what to target, who to target, and what their needs are.

Multistakeholder partnerships:

- Strengthen strategic partnerships between parliamentarians and non-parliamentary actors, including international organizations and think tanks, youth organizations, farmer groups, civil society organizations, and the private sector.