



## Youth, agriculture, and education: Unlocking the potential for rural development



Did you know that the world is experiencing a significant increase in the youth population, particularly in rural areas? In 2017, approximately 42 percent of the global population was under the age of 25. However, a concerning trend is emerging in Southeast and South Asia, where farmers and agricultural researchers are aging. While the youth demographic offers promise for rural development, young people face formidable challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, and a lack of skills and competencies. Thus, it is crucial to address how agriculture can benefit the youth and vice versa, making it a high-priority social development concern.

One of the most effective ways to generate young peoples interest in agriculture and educate them about it is through schools. State-funded schools are obligated to provide free education to all citizens, ensuring accessibility for youth from diverse economic backgrounds. Additionally, schools serve as the primary environment for the cognitive and noncognitive development of young minds, preparing them to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Unfortunately, the current state of agricultural education fails to attract enough students. Enrolments in agricultural courses have been declining worldwide, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. For instance, in Bangladesh, out of 191,409 enrollees across 15 public institutions offering tertiary-level education in agriculture, approximately only one percent (1,891 students) are enrolled in agricultural universities each year (BANBEIS 2022). Furthermore, only five out of 821 institutions offer agricultural courses privately, while 24 public and 239 private institutions offer diplomas in various agricultural fields (BTEB 2022). This decline can be attributed to low government investment in agricultural education, rapid urbanization, and the perception of agricultural jobs as uncompetitive.

Speaking of perceptions, young people generally hold a negative view of agriculture. They perceive it as an outdated and unglamorous career with low social status and financial rewards, and limited job opportunities. To better understand youth perceptions of agriculture, a survey



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was conducted in March 2023 among 208 high school students from 18 secondary schools in the Khulna district of southwest Bangladesh, with 58 percent of the participants being female. The survey aimed to assess the students' perception of agriculture as a livelihood and their future study plans. The results revealed that only 11 percent of the students considered agriculture a potential subject for their future studies. Interestingly, girls showed a slightly higher inclination (14%) toward agriculture compared with boys (7%). However, when asked about their opinion on agriculture as a viable career option regardless of their own plans, 72 percent responded positively. The reasons cited for the positive perception included agriculture being the main livelihood option in their community, the primary source for fulfilling basic needs and ensuring food and nutrition security, its role in poverty elimination and national development, and the love and respect for their parents' profession. Moreover, the students believed that studying agriculture would enable them to serve their community better and fulfill their personal and parental aspirations. Among the 28 percent of students who held a negative perception of agriculture as a viable career option, they viewed it as an unfavorable and dirty work environment involving laborious tasks that could potentially lead to health issues from working under the sun and rain.

So, how can schools play a crucial role in promoting youth participation in agriculture? Firstly, by integrating agriculture into the curriculum, students can learn about the significance of farming and its relevance to their lives. From primary to higher education, agriculture can be taught using science-based, vocational, and entrepreneurial approaches, making it engaging and exciting for students.

Secondly, organizing extracurricular activities related to agriculture can provide practical experiences and ignite students' interests. Activities, such as agriculture clubs, field trips to farms, agricultural competitions, and community service projects, contribute to hands-on learning and foster civic responsibility. Thirdly, vocational training in agriculture is crucial for bridging the skills gap and improving employability. Such training equips students with the necessary skills for a career in farming, ensuring inclusive growth and benefiting rural communities.

Additionally, encouraging entrepreneurship in agriculture can open new possibilities for young people. By exploring agricultural entrepreneurship, they can view farming as a business opportunity and contribute to economic prosperity. Lastly, building partnerships with agricultural organizations can provide more resources and expose students to innovative farming practices. Collaborations could involve school gardens, guest lectures, and farm visits, all enhancing students' understanding and interest in agriculture.

In this digital age where information is readily available, schools remain a stronghold for educating and engaging youth in agriculture. Through agricultural education, hands-on experiences, and partnerships, schools can empower the next generation of farmers and agricultural leaders. Therefore, it is imperative that we invest in agricultural education to ensure a brighter future for both our youth and the farming industry.

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