

Context of Youth Aspirations and Opportunities, and Development Interventions for Youth Livelihood Transformation in Miesso District, West Hararghe, Ethiopia



Orientation meeting with rural youth in West Hararghe. Photo by Chanyalew S.

Youth from agro-pastoral and pastoral areas make up an important part of the labor force in agriculture and food production in Ethiopia. The key challenge for agriculture and rural development policy and research is how to effectively empower, engage, and capacitate rural youth as agents of change for rural transformation, and make the rural area an appealing place in which young people can live and work. Literature on rural youth—especially youth from fragile ecosystems—and their role in rural transformation, is very limited. Also, the policy narrative widely portrays young people as a problem that needs to be addressed using policy tools.

Understanding the socioeconomic, ecological, and policy environment in which youth find themselves, and the existing policy strategies and development interventions, will provide useful insights into designing a youth-inclusive agricultural and rural development agenda. This study was carried out as a systematic review of published and unpublished literature to assess the context of agroecology and development interventions for youth livelihood transformation in Miesso District, West Hararghe Zone of Ethiopia’s Oromia Regional State.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Youth play an important part in food and agricultural production in pastoral areas.
- Youth face environmental, structural, and policy challenges that trigger migration and thereby hinder their successful livelihood transformation.
- Major challenges include those around local customs and norms that discriminate against young girls; financial and economic barriers; limited educational and technical capacity; lack of infrastructure and markets; an inhospitable administration and policy environment; and environmental concerns.
- Pathways to engage youth should focus on addressing the underlying causes of youth vulnerability, ensuring their livelihood choices are based on a proper analysis of constraints and aspirations.
- Strategies to target and engage youth should be based on a contextual understanding, recognizing their heterogeneous characteristics.

Key Findings

- Youth comprise an important part of the labor force for food and agricultural production in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas.
- Limited attention is paid to youth and their occupational aspirations, and they continue to face major socioeconomic, agroecological, institutional, and policy-related challenges that constrain their successful transition to adulthood.
- The major challenges that hinder successful youth transition to adulthood in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas include: (1) negative local customs and norms; (2) financial barriers; (3) limited education and technical capacity; (4) lack of infrastructure and market-related challenges; (5) economic barriers; (6) an inhospitable administration and policy environment; and (7) environmental concerns.
- Some of these challenges have different implications for young men and young women and may affect them differently, suggesting the need for gender-specific interventions and programs.
- Youth have varying aspirations and dreams. The most common aspirations include: (1) owning draught animals, land, bicycles, or motorbikes for transporting their farm produce to stores or markets; (2) getting an education; and (3) seeking a career in urban areas.
- These aspirations are shaped by their own personal experiences, gender, local context, access to media, and role models. However, most of these aspirations remain unmet.
- Gender—mediated by the local contextual structure consisting of values, attitudes, norms, and forms of behavior—plays a very important role in the way key productive resources, such as land and credit, are acquired by young men and women, and how aspirations develop. Such processes often discriminate against young mothers and girls in accessing and utilizing such resources.
- Contrary to the popular narrative that portrays young people as averse to agriculture, most youth in this study locality see the potential of the area to transform their livelihoods.
- Environmental degradation, limited access to land, and growing rural–urban development inequalities are some reasons why rural youth don’t pursue agriculture-based careers.
- Several development interventions have been implemented in pastoral areas, but very few target young people as their direct beneficiaries.
- Not everything about young people and rural areas is gloomy. Pastoral and agro-pastoral areas have diverse natural, environmental, ecological, cultural and economic resources. There are also opportunities to support youth’s agroecological transition in the study areas. Opportunities that can be mobilized and tapped to promote successful agroecological transition and ensure food security in the study locations include: (1) cooperation and social support networks, (2) natural resources, (3) the potential of agroecology for livestock production, and (4) strategic market locations for livestock.

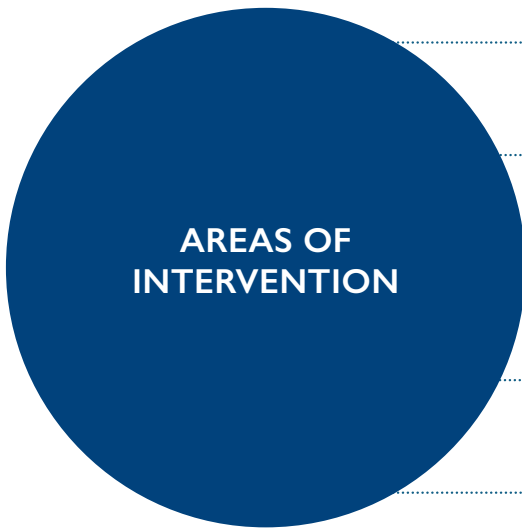
The challenges youth face are complex. Strategies to address youth issues should consider these vast complexities and the context in which agro-pastoral/pastoral youth operate, as well as the internal dynamics between and among the various youth groups.



Key Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The future of agriculture and the food system in pastoral/agro-pastoral areas depends on whether young people want to remain and work in these locations. This means ensuring that pastoral areas

are attractive to youth. The following five key recommendations are proffered to facilitate youth livelihood transformation in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas:



- 1 Understand the vast complexities and the context in which agro-pastoral/pastoral youth operate.
- 2 Recognize local social capital practices and networks for youth livelihood transformation.
- 3 Stimulate and support youth agripreneurship and the development of off-farm businesses.
- 4 Promote an inclusive extension system for youth livelihood transformation.
- 5 Conduct primary studies on rural youth to inform inclusive policies and strategies targeting pastoral youth in fragile and conflict-prone ecosystems.



Recommendation 1: Understand the vast complexities and the context in which agro-pastoral/pastoral youth operate.

Youth problems are complex. Strategies by government and policymakers to address youth issues should consider the vast complexities and the context in which agro-pastoral/pastoral youth operate. It is also important to consider internal dynamics between and among youth groups. The appropriate development pathways and livelihood strategies for youth livelihood transformation should be based on a clear understanding of these dynamics and the type of constraints youth face, along with their aspirations.



Recommendation 2: Recognize local social capital practices and networks for youth livelihood transformation.

Social capital resources and networks offer various services to rural households, such as mutual insurance, labor sharing, savings, and credit, to facilitate youth transformation in agro-pastoral/pastoral areas. To this end, greater effort must be made by government and development partners (such as USAID) to recognize the role of social capital and improve grassroots social capital and community-based mutual support groups for rural youth livelihood transformation.



Recommendation 3: Stimulate and support youth agripreneurship and the development of off-farm businesses.

Promoting youth employment for livelihood transformation requires investment in agripreneurship development. Project interventions and the government should consider supporting youth entrepreneurship development in various ways, including training for appropriate business selection, technical training, financial support, etc.





Recommendation 4: Promote an inclusive extension system for youth livelihood transformation.

Agricultural extension services are often provided at the household level but mainly target the male household head. Thus, the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources should design a tailored extension system that targets both male and female youth and enforce its implementation by district bureaus of agriculture in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas. This is in line with Ethiopia’s strategy for the agricultural extension system, which recognizes the mainstreaming of gender and youth as one of the pillar strategies to support livelihoods transformation.



Recommendation 5: Conduct primary studies on rural youth to inform inclusive policies and strategies targeting pastoral youth in fragile and conflict-prone ecosystems.

Strategies designed to promote youth inclusion and employment in Ethiopia and the study area are almost exclusively based on secondary reviews, most of which are based on the context of urban youth. More studies, based on primary data (using a qualitative design), are required to generate an improved understanding of the situation of youth in agro-pastoral or pastoral areas, their aspirations, and opportunity structures. To this end, national research institutions and universities should provide technical backstopping and conduct local and regional research.

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