

Prospects and Barriers to Youth Engagement in Agriculture and Food Systems in Malawi
Maggie G. Munthali, Bonface Nankwenya, Felix Chiyenda, Williot Lumbe, Levison Chiwaula, Rex Chapota,
William Chadza & Milu Muyanga

Key Messages

- The agriculture and food systems sector in Malawi has the potential to provide employment and income opportunities for disadvantaged and unemployed youths.
- However, this potential is hindered by a multitude of challenges, including; include limited access to land, low profitability of agricultural enterprises, inadequate access to financial services, lack of agricultural skills and knowledge, and insufficient access to technology and education, among others
- From a policy perspective, our findings have revealed that the current regulatory frameworks in Malawi lack clarity on specific strategies and actions needed to effectively engage youths in agriculture and agripreneurship.
- Despite the challenges, the agricultural sector in Malawi offers a range of opportunities that could attract youth to pursue viable and rewarding careers.
- Establishing a special agricultural funding facility for the youths, enhancing their financial literacy and inclusion, supporting the development of agricultural youth groups or associations and modernizing the agriculture and food systems sector could foster vibrant, effective and sustainable youth engagement in agriculture

1. Introduction

Most of Malawi's population is youthful, with 80 percent aged below 35¹. Specifically, 30 percent are between 15 and 34 years old. Youth unemployment and underemployment remain significant policy challenges in Malawi. The 2018 Labor Force Survey revealed that 21.7 percent of youths aged 15-24 are not employed or in education/training, and about 27 percent of employed youths are underemployed². Factors contributing to this situation include rapid population growth, educational shortfalls, skills mismatch, lack of support programs, and corruption³.

The youth population presents a vast economic opportunity for transforming the country's agrifood systems if the group could be fully employed in productive activities.⁴ With conducive regulatory frameworks, investment in education, skill development, and job creation, the youth have the potential to drive economic growth and development in Malawi.

The Government of Malawi is under immense pressure to create more and better jobs for Malawi's young and rapidly growing population. The agriculture sector presents a vast untapped opportunity for employment, particularly for the youth. However, there is a dearth of information

regarding youth participation in agriculture in Malawi, and especially on challenges, opportunities and pathways for effective youth engagement in the agri-food systems.

Malawi’s existing policies, such as Malawi2063, the National Agricultural Policy, and the National Youth Policy, emphasize youth involvement in agriculture and agripreneurship. Yet, these policies lack detailed strategies for effectively engaging youth and overcoming barriers to their participation. The National Youth Policy of 2023 suggests allocating at least 15 percent of resources in national projects to youth, but there are no clear guidelines or mechanisms to implement this quota, which is essential for young people’s meaningful participation in development.

This study aims to investigate the challenges and opportunities for effective youth engagement in Malawi’s agricultural sector. It offers policy recommendations to boost youth employment in the country. The study used mixed methods, including a thorough literature review and focus group discussions with young people to understand their views on employment in the agrifood systems. Further insights were gained from the National Youth Council of Malawi’s (NYCOM) National Youth Conversations Initiative, which fosters youth dialogue on national development, particularly under the new country’s Agriculture, Tourism, Mining, and Manufacturing (ATMM) strategy.

2. Barriers to youth engagement in Agriculture

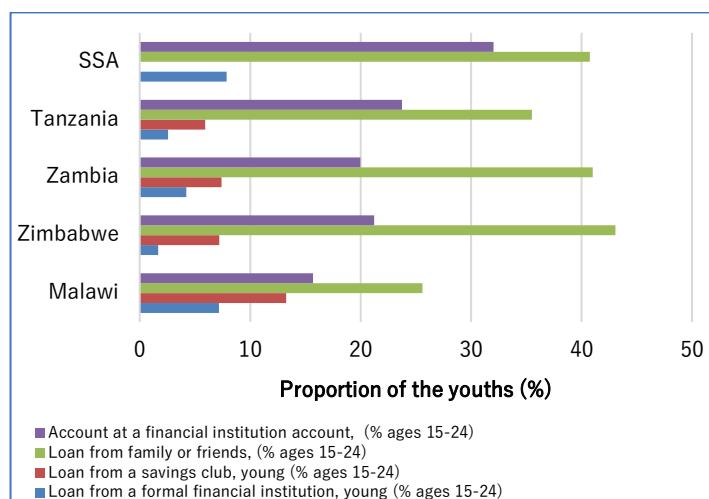
The study identified the following challenges that hinder youth engagement in agriculture:

Limited access to land: Limited access to land and land tenure security is crucial for youth employment

in agriculture. This relates to diminishing land sizes as a result of mounting population growth, inefficient inheritance laws, and high land costs. The land rental market is emerging as an alternative strategy for improving land accessibility for the youth in Malawi.

Inadequate access to financial services and start-up capital: Limited access to finance and low levels of financial inclusion are significant constraints for youth engagement in agriculture in Malawi. Formal financial institutions are hesitant to provide loans to the youth due to their lack of collateral and financial literacy. For example, only about 15 percent of youths in Malawi have accounts with financial institutions and less than 10 percent obtain loans from them (Figure 1). Most youths secure loans from friends or family.

Figure 1: Youth Financial Inclusion in Malawi and SSA



Source: 2021 World Bank financial inclusion database

Insufficient access to technology, knowledge, information and education: The youth need access to agricultural information, extension services, and modern technologies to enhance productivity and efficiency. Limited internet connectivity, high data costs, and low digital literacy limit access to such information. Additionally, the education system may

not adequately prepare the youth for careers in agriculture. Many young people, especially in rural areas, lack the requisite agricultural skills.

Unattractiveness of employment in agriculture:

The nature of the available employment opportunities in agriculture makes them unappealing to young people. Agriculture is perceived as a labor-intensive venture with low returns because of limited modernization and digitization.

Low profitability of agriculture enterprises:

Low profits and the high-risk nature of agricultural production contribute to youth disinterest in agriculture. This is due to both local and external shocks. These include, but are not limited to, market volatility, weather variability, and environmental degradation.

Limited access to reliable markets:

Access to reliable agricultural and well-structured markets is crucial for young farmers to be engaged in agriculture. Agricultural marketing in Malawi is constrained by high transportation costs, poor infrastructure, lack of structured markets, and limited market information.

Generalizing the youth:

Policymakers often generalize the youth as a homogeneous group, which hinders effective and inclusive youth engagement policies. Recognizing their diversity based on age, location, social class, and gender is crucial for tailored policy interventions that ensure sustainability and inclusivity in agriculture and food systems.

Exclusion of youth from policymaking processes:

Youth engagement in policymaking is crucial for designing inclusive and sustainable agriculture policies. However, this study finds that policy

frameworks often neglect the youth, leading to disenfranchisement. The inclusion of youth in policy-making processes can bring innovative ideas on how they could be engaged in agriculture.

3. Opportunities for youths in the agriculture and food systems sector in Malawi

Despite these challenges, the agricultural sector in Malawi offers a wide range of opportunities that could attract youth to pursue viable and rewarding careers, as presented below.

Broad range of agricultural entrepreneurship opportunities:

The agriculture sector offers a broad spectrum of entrepreneurial prospects, ranging from small agribusinesses to large commercial enterprises. Youth can engage in various activities across and along agricultural value chains, including, production, value addition, agro-processing, marketing, and providing services like agricultural inputs and insurance.

Availability of profitable and high-value chains:

While Malawi's youth are mostly engaged in low-value agricultural activities, there are high-value chains like wheat, legumes, soybeans, groundnuts, and livestock. Young people can engage in these profitable areas through their own production and marketing, or participation in contract farming, out-grower schemes, and by forming groups and cooperatives.

Agriculture finance:

Access to agricultural finance and credit is crucial for enabling Malawi's youth to obtain necessary assets and inputs for agricultural production, processing, and transportation. Various financial service providers and microfinance institutions, including the Malawi Agriculture and Industrial Investment Corporation (MAIIC), the National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF),

and the Smallholder Agricultural Finance and Investment Trust (SAFIT), can offer loans and support to youth engaged in agriculture and agripreneurship. Moreover, several banks, such as Standards Bank, Centenary Bank, and NBS Bank have also committed to providing loans to the youths backed by reputable organizations like the Clinton Development Initiative (CDI). The youth can also leverage on government-led projects like the Agriculture Commercialization Project (AGCOM).

Mega and Anchor Farms initiative: The government has launched the Mega Farm initiative to transform the country's agrifood systems. Utilizing idle agricultural schemes and former youth bases, the initiative aims to develop medium- and large- scale farms, including youth incubator farms, to promote agricultural commercialization. The National Youth Council of Malawi is collaborating with the Mega Farm Unit to maximize the benefits for the youth from this initiative.

Modernization of agriculture: Modernizing agriculture through digitalization and innovation has the potential to transform agrifood systems, thus making it attractive to the youths. With widespread internet and smartphone use, young people are well-positioned to adopt technologies like drones, satellite imagery, Internet of Things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI) for data-driven agriculture. They can create apps for soil, crop, and livestock monitoring, waste management, and weather forecasting. Blockchain technology also offers new possibilities in the agrifood supply chain.

Regional integration and international trade: Africa has initiatives aimed at fostering agricultural value chains at the regional level, increasing market access, and promoting economic integration and intra-trade. The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and

Youth in Trade aims to provide equal opportunities for women and youth in intra-Africa trade. AfCFTA has digital-based instruments that offer opportunities for youths, such as the African Trade Observatory, AfCFTA Digital Trading Hub, and the AfCFTA Digital Payment Hub. AfCFTA holds immense potential to provide opportunities for trade for Malawi's youths.

Changing diets: There is a rising demand for healthy foods, including organic foods causing a shift towards health and sustainable consumption patterns (Mkhize & Ellis, 2024). The Malawi2063 calls for the production and exportation of high-value crops and organic foods. This offers a great business opportunity for Malawian youths.

Education, skills development and incubation programs: Malawi offers numerous educational and skills development programs aimed at equipping youth with the necessary expertise for careers in agriculture and food systems. These programs are available at different institutions. Additionally, organizations like Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training (TEVET) Malawi and various technical colleges are playing an important role in technological innovation, creating affordable solutions for the agricultural sector. Incubation and acceleration programs have also been implemented by different organizations to support the youths and small-scale entrepreneurs to build their entrepreneurial capacity.

Enabling policy frameworks for youth empowerment: The existing policy frameworks in Malawi, such as the Malawi2063 Vision, recognize youth as pivotal to national development, especially in agriculture. International frameworks like the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the African Union

Agenda 2063 also support the creation of entrepreneurial opportunities for youth in the agriculture and food systems sector, which aligns with Malawi's goals.

4. Key policy actions for addressing the challenges and unlocking the opportunities for youth engagement in agrifood systems

To better harness the greater potential of the youth in the agriculture and food systems sector, there is a need to empower and support the youth across and along all agricultural value chains. The study makes the following recommendations:

- a. Establish a special agricultural funding facility for the youths:** The youth need support to access agricultural inputs, irrigation equipment, and processing technology for their enterprises. The fund could also be used to support agricultural mechanization for the youth.
- b. Enhance financial literacy and inclusion among the youths:** There is a need to develop financial services that are accessible to the youths. Tailor-made financing mechanisms for the youths and youth-led saving schemes can help them access assets, markets, and technologies, and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility.
- c. Support the development of agricultural youth groups or associations:** Youth associations or cooperatives provide easy access to agricultural inputs, loans, credit, and extension services. They also foster a sense of community and collaboration, enhance entrepreneurial and leadership skills, and increase negotiating power in agriculture. These groups promote innovation and creative thinking

and provide a space for sharing ideas and establishing support networks.

- d. Modernize the agriculture and food systems:** Modernizing agricultural production systems could reduce Malawian youths' disillusionment and disinterest in agriculture. Promoting youth-led innovations and leveraging digital tools could motivate them to engage in agriculture for rewarding and profitable livelihoods.
- e. Design, strengthen and implement youth-focused policies, initiatives and programs:** The existing policies and laws in Malawi acknowledge the importance of youth in driving agricultural transformation, but they are not fully implemented. It's important to consider the diverse nature of the youth when developing and implementing policies. Malawi also needs to establish a comprehensive "National Youth Strategy for Youth Engagement in Agriculture," like other countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. There is need to make intentional investments necessary to create more opportunities for youth across and along the agricultural value chains.
- f. Define and set up mechanisms for implementing youth quotas in various agricultural programs and investments:** Malawi's youth currently have limited access to social safety nets and agricultural investment programs. This is due to the lack of clear policy provisions for youth involvement in large-scale agricultural investments, as stipulated in the National Youth Policy of 2023. Efforts are needed to increase the number of youths benefiting from social safety nets and agricultural investments to improve their access

to production inputs and enhance agricultural productivity.

g. Create vibrant youth-focused and inclusive platforms for policymaking processes:

Malawi's youth are marginalized in agricultural policymaking. There is a need to establish platforms establish vibrant platforms and enhance youth-led dialogues within the agriculture sector to enable them to interact with policymakers and their fellow youths.

h. Raise awareness of the diverse opportunities available for the youths within the agriculture sector:

This study reveals significant economic opportunities for Malawian youth in agriculture and food systems. Improving access to information and raising awareness of agripreneurship can reduce barriers to entry and positively influence youth engagement in this sector.

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Contact: Maggie Munthali (Email: m.munthali@mwapata.mw)

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