

Becoming a young farmer in Ethiopia: Processes and challenges

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April 2014

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Abstract

The Ethiopian government's Agricultural Development Led Industrialization strategy emphasises the instrumental role that rural youth could play in transforming the agricultural sector. However, there exists a significant body of literature documenting the unfavourable attitudes many young people hold towards a future in agriculture. Despite their negative attitudes, the fact remains that many rural youth are likely to adopt farming as their principal or only means of livelihood, either by choice or the lack of other options. Rural youth encounter a number of insurmountable problems when they set out to be farmers. Other than attitudinal issues, the many difficulties that young people in Ethiopia have to traverse in the process of becoming a farmer, even when they are willing to be one, have not been adequately explored. Drawing from two different qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in the Amhara and SNNP regions, this paper explores the process(es) through which rural youth enter into and become farmers, and the challenges and opportunities they come across in this transition. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with different groups of rural youth as well as older farmers and key informant interviews with different stakeholders were conducted in 2011 and 2012. Overall, our findings show that education, access to land, asset base, gender and local context are important factors which significantly affect who becomes a farmer and who does not. Our findings particularly draw attention to the influence of education and gender. The impact of being educated, both in terms of its effect on the desirability of a future in farming as well as complicating later entry into farming, is one that needs to be recognised by policymakers. The role of gender in young men's and women's choice to become farmers, the routes they take to becoming farmers and the lives they lead as farmers is also a key area for further research and policy dialogue. Finally, facilitating meaningful access to land for rural youth along with the expansion of both on-farm and off-farm livelihood opportunities in the agri-food continuum is another area which needs to be addressed urgently.

Introduction

There has been considerable interest in the future of small scale family farming in sub-Saharan Africa and its role in generating employment for the sub-region's growing number of youth and its development at large. Can small scale family farmers feed a nation? Can farming accommodate the large and ever growing number of rural youth in the sub-region? Can small scale farmers compete in the global market and perhaps benefit from the recent rise in food prices (Sumberg et al. forthcoming; Sumberg and Okali 2013; White 2012)?

Well before the launch of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) in 2003, and especially since then, numerous arguments have been made regarding the special role of agriculture in reducing poverty and initiating broad based, equitable and accelerated economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa (Sumberg et al. forthcoming; Christiaensen et al. 2011; Binswanger-Mkhize and McCalla 2010; World Bank 2007; Christiansen et al. 2006; Dorward et al. 2004; Johnston and Mellor 1961). A similar argument has been at the core of the Ethiopian government's Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy, which has been in place for nearly two decades. What is worthy of note here is also the critical role the state has envisioned for rural youth to play in bringing about the overall transformation of the agricultural sector. The government considers ensuring the continued participation of young people in the agricultural sector to be of vital importance for two main reasons. First, it fears that an uncontrolled influx of young people from rural areas to urban centres will likely overwhelm the urban economy's capacity to provide employment. Hence it proposes that as much as 70 percent of the rural youth and children currently attending school should remain where they are and be prepared to pursue a life in agriculture (MOI 2002). Second, and perhaps more importantly, it considers the rural young and especially those with some education under their belts to be vital instruments in the transformation of the agricultural sector. In this view the older generation of farmers is seen as either unwilling or unable to adopt the attitudinal, technological and other changes which are necessary to bring about the required transformation (Ibid).

There also exists, however, a significant body of literature documenting the unfavourable attitudes many young people hold towards a future in agriculture (Tadele and Gella 2012; Tafere and Woldehanna 2012; Camfield 2011; Tafere 2010; Abebe 2008). Growth in the non-agricultural sectors of the economy, especially in the service and industrial sectors; increased exposure of young people to the influences of education and the mass media; increased migration to urban areas; and severe land shortages are all likely to further exacerbate this negative attitude. Nevertheless, many rural youth are likely to adopt farming as their principal or only means of livelihood, either out of choice or the lack of other choices. Who becomes a farmer, for what reasons, and the structural and contextual factors that facilitate or impede the transition from rural childhood to young

farmerhood remain poorly understood. In this paper, we explore the processes through which rural youth enter into and become farmers as well as the challenges and opportunities of this transition.

Context of the three research sites

This article is based on two qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in Ethiopia. The first study, commissioned by the Future Agricultures Consortium, was conducted between June and July 2011 with the objective of exploring what characteristics of agricultural life make it attractive or unattractive to rural youth. In addition, the study also looked at young men's and young women's perceptions of 'agricultural life' in general and the major forces which influence this. The research was conducted in two rural sites purposefully selected to represent two different agro-ecological zones and farming traditions. The first of these, Chertekel kebele,³ is a small food secure agricultural village surrounding a small town in the Gozamen woreda of the East Gojjam Zone in the Amhara Region. The second site, Geshgolla kebele, is found in the south of the country in the Qedida-Gamella woreda of the Alaba Tembaro Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) region, and is characterised by severe land shortage and food insecurity. Although farming constitutes the principal livelihood in the kebele, the income from farming is often insufficient to cover household needs. As a result, farmers engage in seasonal trade and daily labour in nearby towns to supplement the little income they gain from farming.

The second study, conducted between June and September 2012, was done as part of an MPhil thesis by the second author. It was aimed at exploring the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth in relation to education, farming and notions of rurality in Guai, a rural village in East Gojjam Zone in the Amhara Region. Although found in the same geographic location as Chertekel, and in many ways similar to it in terms of farming traditions, there are several features that make Guai unique. Land holdings in Guai are relatively less fragmented, and farming in Guai is a highly profitable endeavour. The kebele is also one of the major surplus producers in the country and touted by the regional and local government administrations as a shining example of the success of the government's agricultural extension programme.

The three sites present a revealing glimpse of the current state of small scale household farming in Ethiopia, with Geshgolla and Guai occupying the opposite ends of a continuum between food insecurity and surplus production, and Chertekel lying in between. While agriculture as a whole and farming in particular have undergone significant changes in the country in the last decade and a half, the extent and pace of this change has been extremely uneven. This in turn has meant that rural youth coming of age in these three communities, who have experienced the changes of the last decade and

Table 1: Summary of participants

| | Chertekel | | Geshgolla | | Guai | | Total | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | T |
| Key informants | 3 | - | 6 | - | 4 | 1 | 13 | 1 | 14 |
| Older farmers | 6 | - | 9 | 8 | - | - | 15 | 8 | 23 |
| Young farmers | 7 | 5 | 6 | | 11 | 10 | 24 | 15 | 39 |
| In-school youth | 5 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 19 | 8 | 31 | 20 | 51 |
| Out-of-school youth | 6 | 5 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 21 | 19 | 40 |
| Total | 27 | 15 | 36 | 22 | 41 | 26 | 104 | 63 | 167 |

a half in quite different ways, are now being presented with quite different opportunities and need to overcome obstacles and challenges which are unique to their local circumstances. In exploring the transition to farming in these three communities, we hope to bring into focus the local circumstances in addition to the broader national and international contexts which have significant implications for the future of rural youth and their entry into farming in a country where farming has for centuries been seen as a life of endless labour with little gain.

Methods

We generated primary data using various qualitative techniques, a combination of in-depth and key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews (both group and individual) were held with young students who were still attending school (both in primary and high school), young people who have either discontinued or completed their schooling, and young and older farmers. In addition to the group interviews, a few individual interviews were held with selected participants from the group interviews to explore issues of interest in greater detail. Key informant interviews were also held with local agricultural extension workers known as Development Agents, kebele administrators and personnel in the respective woreda agricultural development and youth affairs bureaus. A total of 127 people were interviewed. Informed consent was secured from all informants and all names included in the text are pseudonyms.

Findings

We present our major findings in three sections. The first explores the choice, or lack thereof, of entry into farming. The second presents the various structural and contextual barriers that complicate young people's entry into farming and discusses their implications. The third discusses the desire and perceived opportunities for a transition to non-farming livelihoods among rural youth.

Becoming a farmer: whose choice?

During the interviews held with young farmers in all three villages, the most frequently given answer to the question of why one becomes a farmer was to point to the absence of any other options. This perceived lack of

other options and alternatives was prominently visible despite differences in age, gender, marital status, level of education and family background among the young farmers. In all three sites, becoming a farmer was not something they purposefully pursued. To the contrary, the narratives seem to indicate that some did try to avoid the possibility of becoming a farmer altogether, more often than not through education. This was particularly the case for the young farmers we interviewed in Geshgolla, nearly all of whom had at least begun high school. In the other two villages in the north of the country, it appeared that never going to school was the most significant factor in determining the likelihood of becoming a farmer. Out of the 28 young farmers interviewed in the two villages of Guai and Chertekel, only five had ever gone to school. And it was one's lack of education which was often the first to surface as the principal reason for becoming a farmer, as the following excerpts from the interviews show.

It wasn't like it is now back then. When we were children, parents weren't forced to send their children to school. And mine didn't. I grew up looking after the cattle instead of going to school. So when I came of age, farming was the only thing I knew how to do and the only way of life I could lead. So I became a farmer. I couldn't have done anything else. (Wubante, Male farmer, 25)

I think it is all the same for all of us here, none of us went to school. If our parents had sent us to school we wouldn't probably have become farmers. I myself never went to school. I didn't even grow up with my parents. They sent me away to work as an *abelegna*⁴ from an early age. I had to work for my keep and I have had to fend for myself ever since I was a small child... And I know nothing else I can do except farming. I can't even write my own name. If you gave me a piece of paper that says 'put the bearer of this letter in jail' and asked me to give it to the police, I would take it to them and hand myself in like that, I wouldn't know any better. Sometimes I think I would have done better if I had become a trader. But how could I? I am not so good at adding up numbers. Anything above five gets me all confused. How can I become a trader when I am like that? If my parents had sent me to school I wouldn't have been like this, would I? (Asre, Male farmer, 28)

For those who grew up without an education, the entry into a life of farming was something that came naturally with the transition from childhood to adulthood. They were never sent to school when they were children. Instead, they grew up looking after the cattle and the sheep, helping on the farm and sometimes were even given away to other families as extra hands for hire. Some even spoke grudgingly of their parents' failure to send them to school, which they felt was an injustice. Farming has been what they did from childhood and they knew nothing else that would provide them with a living. Farming was their tradition, their way of life, and the most natural thing to do. Other ways of earning a living were rarely visible, and even when they were visible were only to be considered if entry into farming became impossible.

However this absence, perceived or real, of other means of livelihood did not mean to most of the participants in Chertekel and Guai that they were forced to walk down a dead-end path. Young farmers in the two farming communities in the Amhara Region felt that they were none the lesser for becoming farmers. This was despite the existence of various challenges, which we will return to later on, that have prevented them from making the most of their farming. Almost all of the young farmers in Guai and most of those in Chertekel saw farming not just as their only option for making a living, but also as their best option. They felt that farming was the most profitable and financially rewarding option of livelihood available in their locality. This view was not just held by those who never went to school and ended up becoming farmers. Although most of the young farmers never went to school and therefore saw themselves as unable to be anything other than be farmers, a few of them did go to school, some even as far as completing high school. They felt farming gave them a chance to lead decent lives, which their education did not. Esubalew, a young man who found himself in the precarious position of being unable to pass the national school leaving examinations at grade 10, described how he ventured into life as a farmer as follows.

I started with nothing. I only had the clothes I wore when I came back to my parents after completing high school. I had absolutely nothing. I started out by working as an *abelegna* for my parents in 2008 and earned seven quintals of wheat that year.⁵ The next year, I used some of that and rented one *gemed*⁶ of land from my family. They also gave me another *gemed* to cultivate free of charge for that year. I sold the rest [from the seven quintals he earned the previous year] to buy fertilisers and seeds; and a few clothes for myself. By the end of the year, I got 18 quintals of wheat from those two *gemed*s of land. So the next year I was able to rent five *gemed*s of land for a total of 15 quintals of wheat. So I planted two *gemed*s of maize and three *gemed*s of wheat. The wheat didn't give much yield that year, I only got 7 quintals once I paid up the 15 for the land owners. The maize gave me 9 quintals. All in all I got about

7000 Birr [about US\$390] that year. With that in hand, I got married, started a family of my own and started living independently. I now have a daughter and I am able to take care of myself and my family. (Esubalew, Male farmer, 28)

Young farmers with some level of education in Geshgola also argued that due to education, increased farm productivity and high returns from some cash crops such as *qhat* and haricot bean, both the farming and non-farming populations have come to value farming as a way of life. One of the participants went on to remark that he thanks God for making him a farmer instead of a civil servant – 'even the educated and the civil servants now envy farming', another participant added.

Yet, not all of those who come back to their village after leaving or completing school succeed in their attempt to become farmers like Esubalew or young farmers from Geshegola. From the interviews with young farmers as well as interviews held with kebele and woreda level officials from the south and north, it was clear that those who do finish high school often find it difficult to get started as farmers. The existing literature has plenty to say on the negative attitudes rural young people have towards farming. Tafere and Woldehanna (2012), Tadele and Gella (2012), Camfield (2011) and Abebe (2008) are only a few among the many authors who have noted the strong desire among rural youth in Ethiopia, and especially those in school, not to end up like their farmer parents. What these studies do not show sufficiently, however, is the many difficulties that young people have to confront in the process of becoming a farmer, even when they are willing to be one. Although farming may appear as a last resort for many rural youth who are either attending or have completed school, there are often other factors beyond attitude which make even this last resort inaccessible. Three factors particularly stand out in this regard: lack of assets; norms and expectations around gender; and landlessness. We discuss these in turn in the subsequent sections.

The bumpy road to becoming a young farmer

Beginning from scratch – returning to farming after leaving school

Many rural youth who are in school do consider farming as a fallback option in case they don't succeed in their education and fail to get to the non-farming careers they seek. While this may appear a sound plan, many who do try to fall back to farming find it to be more complicated than they anticipated. Although there has been remarkable success in expanding primary education, many rural youth have to move to nearby towns to attend high school. The move is often an arduous and demanding one for parents and students alike. The two to four years of high school study away from family are also expensive. In the event of failing to proceed to higher education, many rural youth who

have devoted their time, effort and limited resources towards their education come back empty handed and ill prepared to start life as a farmer. Compared to those who never went to school, they have few assets with which they can begin, as illustrated by the following quote from a group interview session.

I think those who have attended school to grade 10 or beyond find becoming a farmer very hard ... they have spent most of their lives as students and yet don't have anything to show for it. I have never gone to school but my younger brother did and he came back after finishing grade 10. He couldn't go any further. So he became a farmer. But he had to start from scratch. I, on the other hand, already had two oxen when I was his age. So I think it is not just that they think farming is beneath them, it is also that they have nothing and have to start from nothing. They have to go back to their parents and ask them for their help. Their parents sent them to school thinking they will learn and then get jobs. When that doesn't happen and they come back to them with nothing but their bare hands, I think everyone will be a little disappointed and frustrated. (Chekol, Male farmer, 27)

Growing up in farming communities invariably involves participation in various farming and non-farming activities for both boys and girls. Boys look after cattle, sheep and goats in the grazing fields starting from a very early age. Once they reach about ten years of age they take part in weeding and harvesting, and can even start ploughing by the age of 14. Girls also participate in weeding and harvesting but are not allowed to plough land or look after cattle. Instead, they help their mothers and older sisters in fetching water, cooking food, looking after backyard gardens, feeding and maintaining poultry, milking and milk processing, washing clothes, looking after younger siblings and cleaning the house and animal barns. Primary school education tends to take rural children and youth away from these activities for at least some of the time. If they do make it to high school, this takes them even farther away from participation in farming activities, as most students have to move to the nearest town on a semi-permanent basis. While those who continue their education to high school become farther removed from farming, those who never started school or don't continue their education to high school remain involved in farming. As they approach the latter half of their teenage years, young men start the process of becoming independent farmers. They can work for other families as *abelegna*, work on plots owned by their families or farm land of others on sharecropping terms. They may be given one or two cows, a few sheep or similar to tend to as their own and take full ownership of their produce, including any newborn calves or lambs. Through a somewhat slow but progressively accumulative process, they build up the resources they would need to start out as independent farmers. By removing themselves from involvement in farming in favour of their education, rural youth who continue

with their education to high school skip this process of gradual asset building which is crucial to their transition into farming.

Rural youth who have completed high school often find themselves stranded between two worlds once they discover they cannot proceed further with their education. Their hopes of securing a professional career through education are more or less shattered. At the same time, they also lack the key assets needed to start farming. In a group interview with young high school graduates, the dilemma of where to start now that their education has ended was referred to repeatedly. Many of the high school graduates found it difficult to contemplate a future life in farming simply because they did not see a way in. The following quotes from two out of school youth in Guai who returned to their families after failing the national school leaving examinations at grade 10 aptly capture this dilemma.

It is not that we don't want to be farmers, it is just that the way is shut. Our area is well known for its fertility and yield. Being a farmer here pays off well. But it is not just about whether we want to be farmers or not, it is difficult to be a farmer when you have no land to farm, no oxen to plough it with, no seeds to plant, and no fertilisers to grow the seeds. You can't just be a farmer, you need to have some money to rent land and buy inputs (Alebel, male, 21, completed high school in 2008)

A single bull ox costs anywhere between 5 to 8 thousand Birr [about US\$275-450] these days. I can't even think of buying one let alone two and you need two to draw the plough. And then there is the cost of seeds and fertilisers. If you had maybe 6 or 8 gemedes of land you can rent out half of it and use the money from that to cover the cost of fertilisers and seeds and so on so that you can cultivate the other half. But our families have 3 or 4 gemedes of land and they need all of that to get by. There is no land they can spare for us. How can we get to be farmers in such a situation even if we wanted to? (Degu, male, 20, completed high school 10 in 2010).

The issue of landlessness among rural youth is something that arose in every discussion we had with young and older farmers and one we will return to in a later section. But there are other assets needed to start out in farming. Oxen, seeds, fertilisers, a variety of farming equipments from ploughshares to sickles and a host of other accessories all require capital which most school leavers are not in a position to afford. Although some young people are willing to start from scratch and do so (as we have seen in Esubalew's case earlier), for most, the thought of becoming a farmer with nothing at hand is very daunting.

Opportunities which, in the past, would have allowed young people to start from scratch have been gradually eroded. In Guai, for example, desperate youth were able

to venture out into the uncultivated wilderness of the Abay (Blue Nile) river gorge which borders Guai to the southwest. This area was infested with malaria and going there carried the risk of losing one's very life. But for those who needed somewhere to start and were willing to take the risk, it provided them the opportunity. Young men went there in groups, cleared land and cultivated sesame. It required little investment, just hard work and the seeds and food to last a few months, and generally gave a tremendous return. All this changed about four years ago when the government evicted what it claimed were illegal squatters, mapped the entire area, and started leasing it to investors. Land that used to be free for anyone willing to risk their lives working on it now costs more than 800 Birr (US\$40) per hectare per year, and one has to be an investor to get it. Many of the young people who were farmers already or were considering farming lamented the fact that they were barred from a route that had been open to others before them. The rags to riches stories of a few years ago, whether true or not, along with the claims of being locked out of farming vividly capture the feeling many young people in Guai have that farming as an occupation is becoming more inaccessible as it becomes more and more profitable.

Gender and farming – the 'choice' for young women

Rural agricultural life in Ethiopia is extremely gendered. Traditional family farming in much of the country has always been seen as a 'man's business' where women only take part as caretakers and helpers to the men, who do the 'real farming'. The issue of gender and farming is one we explore in greater detail in a related paper (see Gella and Tadele 2014) but here we make a few points regarding the ways that gender comes into play in the transition to farming. Young girls who have never gone to school tend to be married at an early age, usually to older males who have already started farming – they therefore end up becoming farmers themselves. Those who complete high school but do not continue their education also face the same option once they go back to their families. On the other hand, young men, whether they have been there their entire lives or have come back after finishing high school, get the option to work on their own as *abelegnas*, renting and sharecropping plots from their families and others. Although these opportunities appear to be getting narrow and costly for many young men, they are altogether absent for young women. Young men get to accumulate a few assets before becoming independent farmers, getting married and starting a family. The fact that women are excluded from activities such as ploughing and some forms of harvesting means that they are denied such options and opportunities to build up their asset base and enter into farming on an equal footing with their male counterparts. The choice is often between getting married into a life of farming or migrating to a town or city and trying their luck there. The gendered nature of agricultural and rural life, therefore, has serious implications on young men and women's entry routes to agriculture and their lives afterwards. Although the transition to farmerhood is one that is marred by many difficulties for both young men and women, and especially those who have had

education, young women's options are often far more limiting than those of young men.

'Hammering water won't make it any thinner': the growing problem of landless rural youth and the perpetual reproduction of subsistence farming

The Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation of 2005 as well as the Federal Constitution state in unequivocal terms the right of anyone who intends to engage in farming to access land.⁷ In principle, the only preconditions needed to exercise this right are an intent to engage in farming and proof of residence in the particular area where the land is sought. This 'right' has, however, attracted numerous criticisms due to its practical inapplicability, since individual holdings in much of the country are already minimal and there is simply no land which young people can make claims on. As a result, despite their explicitly stated right, many rural youth in Ethiopia today are effectively landless. According to the 2012 Agricultural Sample Survey, rural youth in the age range of 18-29 years accounted for only 21 percent of rural land holders (with women's share being a meagre three percent). Bezu and Holden (2013) similarly find that the average age of the household heads (which is often the same as the land holder) in their sample of 615 households in the Oromiya and SNNP regions was 43 years, and only 15 percent of household heads were in the age range of 15-29 years. In our case, we found no young farmers or high school leavers who had the intent to engage in farming owned land.

The issue of landlessness among rural youth is not something peculiar to the three research sites, nor is it a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. Researchers who have done extensive studies in the field such as Rahmato (2008: ch. 6) point out that landlessness among rural youth has been a recurring affair encountered by successive generations of youth who came of age after the state-led land redistributions that have been implemented by the last two regimes in the country.

In our studies, we find that land shortage is particularly severe in Geshgolla where average household holdings are less than one *gemed* (0.25ha) and population pressure is among the highest in the country (key informant interviews). Here, the only way young people can get farm land is through the government's resettlement program, which means leaving their village. This means that most of the people who grow up in the area have no realistic chance of pursuing an agricultural life within their community, even if they wish to do so. When combined with the fact that the area has benefited from the presence of a number of missionary schools over many years, most people either proceed to a non-agricultural life through education or migrate out once they have had a certain level of education. Farming here is not appealing to most young people due to the scarcity of land. The shortage of land is so severe, according to key informants, that most of the conflicts in the area (usually among siblings and relatives) are caused by disputes over land rights and ownership. In the face of such a severe shortage of land, young people simply do not believe that the small plot

of land that they might get hold of from their parents will be enough to make a living, let alone tempt them to stay. Key informants as well as young and older farmers point out that some of the best minds in the country have originated from their area and that there are a lot of people who have become famous personalities following a successful education. This, they suggested, was partly because people here take education very seriously, as it is quite literally the only way of securing a viable livelihood. This also implies how aspirations and achievements are shaped by context. Young people in Geshgolla seemed to be more aware of alternative career opportunities, and they prepare to compete from an early age. They find inspiration in the examples of seniors in their schools and neighbourhoods who have made it to high positions.

In the two kebeles of Chertekel and Guai in the north, landlessness is less severe. Land for rent and sharecropping is still available, even if young farmers say it is often difficult to get as much as they would want and the sharecropping terms are often in favour of the land owners. Land can be rented for a single season in return for cash payments ranging from 600-800 Birr per gemed (US\$ 120-180 per hectare). There are also other arrangements for renting land. These include *siso*, whereby the land owner is given 1/3 of the harvest; *ikull*, where the harvest is shared equally between the land owner and the renter; and *qurtt*, in which the renter agrees to give a specific amount of grain, very often wheat, in return for the right to cultivate the plot for a year (although the amount of grain given depends on the fertility and location of the particular plot, the most often agreed upon amount appears to be between three and five quintals of wheat per gemed). Of these different arrangements, land owners were often said to favour the cash for rent and *qurtt* arrangements. The sharecropping arrangements of *siso* and *ikull* inherently involve the sharing of risks, since whatever is harvested is then divided between the land owner and the renter. In contrast, both the cash for rent and *qurtt* arrangements shift all the risk to the renter since the owner is guaranteed the agreed upon amount either in cash or in kind irrespective of the amount harvested.

For young farmers who do not own their own land, the only way of making a living out of farming is to enter into these arrangements, even if they feel that they are being exploited. There haven't been any land redistributions since 1997. Nor does any future redistribution look feasible in the near future since the government wants to avoid land fragmentation. All of the young farmers interviewed (or for that matter anyone else who is below 30) were not yet 18 at the time of the last land redistribution and, as a result, were ineligible to get land at the time. The only means of acquiring land that remains open for young people is through intergenerational transfers such as inheritances and temporary transfer of land rights. But according to the accounts of young farmers interviewed, as well as informants from the local land administration office, rates of intergenerational transfers remain very low. Apart from the inevitable and more or less automatic inheritance

that occurs in the event of the death of either one or both parents, the transfer of land or use rights to children before the death of parents is uncommon. Data obtained from the woreda administration indicate that in the previous calendar year there wasn't a single case of land transfer from parents to children while parents were alive, and only four transfers of land ownership rights through inheritances. The interviews with young farmers seem to corroborate this evidence. Parents don't give out farm land for their children; instead, they allow them to either rent it from them or use it free of charge for a year or two until they can get enough to start out as farmers themselves. Some of the young farmers spoke grudgingly about their parents and felt that they were being too selfish.

Our parents just want our labour. Mine gave me two gemeds for a few years while I lived with them and worked for them. But once I got married and moved out, they took it away from me because I wasn't working for them anymore. (Bayabel, Male, young farmer)

What our parents give us is just a piece of land to put our houses on, nothing more. They might give us a plot or two for a year to work on but that is just so that we can get up and start on our own feet. And we have to behave well, if they think we are misbehaving or are not helping them as much as they think we ought to, they won't blink twice before renting the land to someone else. I think we have come of age at a bad time. (Masresha, Male, young farmer)

But other participants felt their parents were not to blame. There was simply, in their view, not enough land for everyone.

People have 6 or 7 children, they can't give every one of their children land, they simply don't have enough. So they may give you a little land to put a shade on and then may be if they are kind and caring give you a *gemed* of land or two to work on for a year or two. And once you are able to stand by yourself your younger ones will use the same land to get started as you did. I don't think we could ask more of our parents. What else can they do? There are just too many people and too little land. My father wanted to give me two *gemeds* of land but I told him I will manage, I am young and can work here and there. I would rather do that than see my family struggle to survive while I take their land and get rich. So I don't think we should blame our parents that much. (Alamir, Male, young farmer)

Obtaining farm land from other people through sharecropping and renting agreements is also becoming more and more difficult. The prices are going ever higher, and land owners were often said to be unwilling to rent their land to people they don't know or to whom they are not related.

These days they [farmers who own land] don't even care for sharecropping, they prefer *qurt*, they will ask for 3 or 4 quintals of wheat for just one gemed of land. And that is very risky. If it was sharecropping, you share the risk as well. At the end of the year, you split in half what you got out of the land no matter how large or small the harvest is. But it doesn't work like that for *qurt*. You have to pay them that 3 or 4 quintal of wheat no matter how much or little you got out of their land. They won't care if you have to sell your oxen to pay them, they just want their pay. And that is not fair. It all depends on the fertility of the land and weather (which is often unpredictable) but even when you get the most out of it, maybe you will get 7 or 8 quintals of wheat from it at the most. And you cover everything yourself, you buy the seed you buy the fertilisers, you buy the pesticides and you work on it all season. And the owner takes half of it just because he owns the land. It really is frustrating but we have no other choice (Wubante, male young farmer).

As frustrating as it may be, young farmers have no choice but to try and make a living by renting and sharecropping farm land from others. And many of them do earn enough to make a living. But they feel that they are being exploited. The young farmers interviewed in Guai cultivated between three and six gemed of land per season. Had they owned the land they worked on, they argued, they would have turned their lives around for the better instead of struggling to make a living. As things currently stand, they see themselves as instruments for other people's enrichment, as the following excerpts from interviews with young male farmers clearly show.

My greatest wish is to be able to put my labour and hard work to my own benefit. I am however a means for other people's enrichment. If I put my labour on my own land, I would have been able to change my life within a few years. I am young and strong now and my labour is the only wealth I have. But it won't be there for the rest of my life. I will grow old and weak. What saddens me so much is the fact that I am unable to use my labour for my own betterment while it lasts. (Essubalew, Male, young farmer)

Just put yourself in our position. We pay for everything, we pay for the seeds, we pay for the fertilisers, we pay for the pesticides and we work ourselves to death. And the land owner takes half of what we produce. Sometimes it might even be as much as 3 quarters of it. So the return is very little. It is like trying to grind water, no matter how hard you try you are back where you started. If it was our own land and we work this hard for three or four years, we would have gotten something that would have been enough to change our lives. Right now, it is like we are pounding water, it doesn't matter how much hard work we put in to it. In the end,

we are only labouring to enrich other people and there is nothing we can do about it. (Dagnachew, Male, young farmer)

The emergence of a class of landless rural youth is recognised as a major problem by local government officials in all three study sites, and there have been differing responses. In the two northern sites of Chertekel and Guai, local governments have attempted to address the issue by organising landless youth into cooperative groups of 20-40 members and allocating them communal land for agricultural use. However, passing communal land, which is often used for grazing and other purposes, to such groups can only be done if more than 80 percent of the local community approve of it. As a result, such transfers are fairly rare; and even when they do happen, they tend to involve the assignment of very insignificant plots of land to a rather large number of youth. Perhaps as a result, local governments encourage such groups to practice non-conventional farming methods such as irrigation farming, animal fattening, poultry and beekeeping rather than the usual seasonal, rain fed farming. The use rights gained from such land transfers were also intended to be temporary. Once a group accumulates enough capital to start a business endeavour of its own, these lands were intended to be passed on to a new group of landless youth who would in turn pass it on to the next. This policy has however failed. In both kebeles, youth groups who have been assigned such land have not been able to accumulate any assets thus far. They describe their communal agricultural endeavour as a sideline activity and their individual farming activities as their main means of livelihood. And not surprisingly, any new transfers of communal land to new groups have been frozen indefinitely by the regional government. In its place, local governments are now contemplating ways in which rural youth can work on the lands of their parents during the long dry season during which farm lands stay uncultivated. Through water harvesting and the use of small streams for irrigation, local government officials argue, landless youth can effectively use the long dry season to cultivate the land of their parents. This, however, remains to be seen, as no practical work has thus far been done in this regard.

In the southern site of Geshgolla, land shortage is severe, communal lands are something of a rarity, and land is already being cultivated three times a year. The response here has, therefore, been to encourage landless youth to take up the government's offer for resettlement. The success or failure of this intervention remains unclear since figures on the number of people who have taken up resettlement were unavailable. Nevertheless, many participants of the group interviews expressed deep attachments to their community and their land, which they often described as blessed. In light of such deep rooted attachments, and considering that landless youth are not particularly on the top of the priority list for resettlement, we remain sceptical of the success of the intervention.

Contemplating future transitions to non-farming livelihoods

Although most of the young farmers feel that they had no choice other than being a farmer, there was also a clear desire amongst many to progress to non-farming livelihoods in the long run. Young farmers, and those who have not gone into farming but were willing to consider it, held the view that farming should ideally be a stepping stone to a better, preferably urban based livelihood. Most of the young farmers in Guai saw opportunities for a better life in the future and drew aspirations from the lives of those in their community who have been able to become wealthy businessmen.

God willing, I hope that I would one day become a businessman if I can. I am a farmer today because I can't be anything else. But that doesn't mean I have to be a farmer for the rest of my life. Farming, as much as I don't want it, is the base for everything else. It is a stepping stone to my future as a businessman or an investor. I can sit here all day dreaming about how I want to be a very rich investor but it won't just happen like that. I have to start somewhere, and farming for me is the spring board to a better life. I am young now, I have the labour and the energy to work hard, save up for a few years and then move to town and lead an easier life when I get a little older; or if God wills it and I am fortunate, I will save enough to start a business in town long before I get old and weak. Farming is not a good way to make a living when you are old and frail. (Essubalew, Male, young farmer)

I think at the end of the day what we all want is to get some wealth and live a good and comfortable life in town. Whether you can make better money as a farmer or a business man is different for everyone of us. But my plan is to be able to buy a truck after a while, maybe in share with someone else. (Yitayih, Male, young farmer)

It is all God's will isn't it. As the saying goes 'Man plans but only God knows'. I have started out as a farmer but that is not what I want in the long term. If I can, I will try to save a little and join the business world in 5 or 6 years from now. I would rather have a business or two in town and become an investor, rather than ending up a farmer for the rest of my life. (Amare, Male, young farmer)

A few of the successful young farmers from Geshgolla also felt that they could start a grain trading business in the local town during market days if they could manage to buy a weighing scale. The desire to use farming as a stepping stone to a better non-agricultural life was stronger among the high school graduates interviewed. Although they felt that their entry into agriculture and farming was barred, they saw farming as the best starting point on their way to securing a better life.

As long as it is something that can help me change my life to the better I don't care what it is [that I do]. And around here, farming is what gives you that opportunity to turn your life to the better. All the successful business people, even the ones who own a fleet of trucks, started from farming. Not just here, even the ones in Debre Elias [nearest town and woreda capital] started from farming. You farm a few years and once you save up a bit, you start a business in town or you buy a truck. If the business goes well, you rent out your land and move in to town. That is how it works around here. Everyone was a farmer when they began. (Walelign, Male, 18, completed grade 10 in 2011)

But not all participants shared these views. There were some among the young farmers we interviewed who felt that farming was the best livelihood they will ever have, since they either liked life as a farmer or saw themselves as being unable to do anything else. Those who have already established families especially felt that they should stick to their current life of farming and bring up their children as best as they could rather than introducing instability and uncertainty into their life by moving on to something else.

I have already started a family and have two kids, and I have already become a farmer. So I can't just throw it all up and look for something else to do even if I wanted to. Not that I want to, but even if I did, my life isn't my own anymore. I have a family and kids to worry about. So I would rather live here for the rest of my life, be as good a farmer as I can and bring up my children as best as I can. (Yille, Male, young farmer)

When asked if they would ever abandon farming for another livelihood option, some participants from Geshgolla also said that they could not or would not totally abandon farming; without it they would have 'no base', as it is their single most important livelihood source. This was more so for those who had small plots of *qhat* which they claimed gave them as much as 5,000-6,000 Birr per year from two seasonal harvests.

Discussion

Although there has been considerable debate and diverse views on the role of agriculture, especially that of smallholder farming, in overall economic growth, there appears to be a consensus over the fact that growth in the agricultural sector will have the greatest impact in reducing poverty for countries whose population is predominantly rural and agrarian. This is mainly because the relative contribution of a sector to poverty reduction depends not only on its effects on growth but also on its 'participation effect' (Dorosh and Mellor 2013; Christiaensen et al. 2006). Consequently, it is often argued that agricultural growth has a higher return in terms of poverty reduction than growth in the non-agriculture

sectors of the economy in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of poor people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. This argument has also been at the centre of the development policies of Ethiopia for the last two decades. Growth in the agricultural sector, it is argued, is vital since it will provide the 'push' to jump-start the rest of the economy and, more importantly, will be more participatory as it will benefit the largest proportion of the population. Once the necessity of an agricultural lead development strategy has been established, the government then goes on to argue that growth (and transformation) in the agricultural sector needs to be primarily labour intensive and capital saving. For this reason, the government has envisioned a rural, agricultural future for the majority of rural⁶ youth. It has also pinpointed the vital role that educated youth will play in transforming the country's agriculture from its current subsistence orientation to a market and business oriented one.

These arguments, together with the fact that the country's population is predominantly young and predominantly rural, make an investigation of the transition to farming among rural youth a profoundly timely and imperative task.⁹ The transition of rural children into young farmers in rural Ethiopia has for long been a more or less 'natural' extension of the transition from childhood to adulthood. According to our findings, this transition no longer seems to progress naturally. Our findings hint at a number of emerging contradictions. On the one hand, the expansion of education is making the transition to adulthood, and especially the transition to farmerhood, both lengthy and difficult. On the other, education is considered to be a crucial ingredient to the task of transforming the country's agricultural sector.¹⁰ Changes in farming in the last decade and a half such as increased use of chemical fertilisers and herbicides; the introduction and widespread adoption of improved crop varieties; and market oriented, context specific specialisation in high yield or high return crops have made agriculture a more profitable and a relatively more desirable means of livelihood for established farmers. For rural youth and young farmers, however, lack of meaningful access to farmland, the ever rising cost of land rentals and sharecropping that come as a result, and the cost of inputs have made farming an endeavour requiring substantial assets, thereby increasing its inaccessibility.

Overall, our findings show that education, access to land, asset base, gender and local context are important factors which play significant roles in determining who becomes a farmer and who does not. Education appears to be important in two ways. On the one hand, our findings, as well as the findings of many others, show that education significantly elevates the desire and hope for non-agricultural, urban based, salaried employment. In this regard, the choice of becoming a farmer predominantly remains the choice of those who have little or no education and therefore little or no non-agricultural skills, as they cannot perceive of any other livelihood opportunities open to them. But with increased investment in education (time, effort and

resources spent pursuing education), entry into farming in the event of failure in one's education becomes more difficult. Time, effort and resources spent in education come at the cost of the gradual but accumulative process of asset building which facilitates the relatively smoother transition youth with no education make to young farmerhood. For many years now, urban and rural school enrolment has steadily risen and almost 100 percent of all age-eligible children are enrolled in school in Ethiopia. According to figures from the Ministry of Education, the Net Enrolment Ratio for the first cycle of primary education (grades 1-4) has reached 95.5 percent for the 2012/2013 school year (MOE 2013). From what used to be a largely illiterate society, a new generation is emerging the vast majority of which will be schooled. This should certainly be a cause for celebration, but a danger lurks just beneath and a backlash against rising education vis-à-vis agriculture is already happening or waiting to happen. The impact of being educated, both in terms of its effect on the desirability of a future in farming as well as complicating later entry into farming, is one that needs to be recognised by policymakers and explored further.

Land scarcity is, perhaps not surprisingly, another important factor with significant effects on the transition of rural youth to young farmerhood. Our findings show that rural youth who come of age in areas with severe land shortage such as Geshgolla where household holdings are extremely minimal, households are relatively large and possibilities for land rental and sharecropping are virtually non-existent see no possibilities for pursuing a farming future. In such areas, success through education and securing a salaried job at the end is touted as the only option for rural youth. Other options such as migration and pursuing opportunities in the rural non-farm economy come into consideration only when the education-employment trajectory fails to materialise. It should be noted here that rural youth in general and those who are either in education or have completed secondary education in particular are eager to show a desire for a non-agricultural urban based livelihood. Our previous study (Tadele and Gella 2012) as well as those of others capture this tendency aptly. For example, only 56 out of 593 rural youth interviewed by Bezu and Holden (2013: 35) stated farming as their preferred future livelihood while 343 desired an urban based, salaried employment which they hoped to reach through their education. In this regard, the availability or scarcity of farmland seems to have very little to do with the desire to pursue a farming livelihood. Nevertheless, the desire is likely to lead to more concrete actions in areas where entry into farming is perceived to be impossible due to factors such as land shortage. Youth in Geshgolla were more aware of migration as a strategy, knew more people who had migrated and were more likely to migrate themselves than those in Chertekel, while youth in Guai showed little awareness of or desire to migrate. Bezu and Holden (2013: 41) similarly find that a significantly larger proportion of youth migrate out from Wollaita, an area that is similar to Geshgolla in terms of population pressure, land scarcity and livelihood, than the other four areas they included in their study. In contrast, youth in communities where

there are greater opportunities for access to farm land such as Guai and Chertekel were more likely to enter into farming when their earlier desires for a salaried urban based livelihood failed to materialise, even if they had reported a similar aversion to a future life of farming. While it might not have led to the belief that farming is impossible and rarely resulted in outmigration, the negative effects of landlessness among rural youth are nevertheless visible in these two communities too. Land rental and sharecropping terms favour the land owner both in the high prices they carry as well as the shifting of all risk to the landless party. The cost of agricultural inputs, which have to be borne by the cultivator, and the inability to find as much land as one is able to cultivate even on terms that are extremely favourable to the owner, have made the life young farmers lead one of continual struggle for subsistence.

Gender also comes out as an important element in the transition to and life of being a farmer. The synonymy of 'farmer' with 'male farmer' in symbolism as well as public and political discourse, and with it the placement of activities that are, at least symbolically, considered key to a farming livelihood such as ploughing, sawing and harvesting under the male domain, mean that women cannot be considered to be farmers by themselves without a husband or a helper. The fact that young unmarried women are denied the same or parallel opportunities for working independently and building an asset base further erodes the possibility of women becoming farmers on their own, even when they are either willing to challenge cultural norms or abide by them and hire a male helping hand. As a result, the only path to a life of farming open to young women remains one that involves marrying a farmer and becoming a farmer's wife. The full impact of this gendered nature of farming on young women's desire to pursue a farming livelihood and their future prospects as farmers is one which needs further study. The fact that it does not present a tempting future to young women is one that we think is self evident.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the process of becoming a young farmer in the context of three rural communities in Ethiopia where small scale family farming presents young people with various promises ranging from one of mere subsistence to potentially high returns and profitability. We have explored who, among the rural youth, becomes a farmer, for what reasons, and the factors which facilitate or impede the transition from rural childhood to young farmerhood. This transition and the ways rural youth traverse the road to becoming a young farmer is a key subject which has received little attention and one which needs to be explored further. The existing literature which documents the transition to adulthood among African youth often deals with the issue in connection with globalisation and changing local and international contexts. It also tends to be concerned either with urban youth or the transition from education to work (for example Kabiru et al 2013; Mains 2012; Camfield 2011; Porter 2010; van Blerk 2008; Ansell 2004).

While our study is limited and exploratory in nature, it highlights important dimensions of this transition which add further nuances to the current scholarly and policy discussion surrounding the potential of rural youth as well as agriculture. Chief among these are the following.

First is recognising the intricate relationship between rural youth and education and the ways in which education impacts the desire as well as capability of rural youth when it comes to engaging in farming. Despite the fact that education is considered a key element in transforming traditional subsistence farming to a more market oriented, business minded one, increased exposure to education seems to reduce the desirability of farming among rural youth and further complicates the transition to farming even when youth overcome this undesirability. The undesirability of farming is one that has been documented well in the literature, but the cost of long term engagement in education on the asset bases of rural youth as well as the opportunities for gradual asset building that are missed in the pursuit of education make later entry in to farming even more complicated. The real and opportunity costs of years spent in education also come in the face of technological and structural changes in farming which have significantly increased both the cost of engaging in and return from farming.

Gender is also an important dimension of the transition affecting the opportunities and pathways available to rural youth. While opportunities for asset building are getting constricted for young men and women, young women have far narrower opportunities and their entry pathway into farming is mainly limited to marriage. The near absolute exclusion of rural youth from land ownership, the ever increasing cost of land renting and sharecropping, as well as the asymmetrical sharing of risks in sharecropping have further made farming inaccessible and undesirable to rural youth.

Understanding and addressing the impacts of education and gender; facilitating meaningful access to farming land for rural youth; and the expansion of both on-farm and off-farm livelihood opportunities in the agri-food continuum are steps that need to be taken urgently if young people are to uphold their faith in agriculture. Otherwise, their faith in agriculture could very well falter and dissipate and the promise agriculture holds will remain no more than an empty one.

End Notes

- ¹ Getnet Tadele is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia
- ² Asrat Ayalew Gella is an independent researcher and consultant
- ³ A kebele is the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, comprising a set of neighbouring hamlets in rural areas. The woreda is the next unit and is made up of a set of adjacent kebeles.
- ⁴ *abelegna* is a hired hand (always a man or boy), often hired for a year's work and paid either in cash

or kind (this many quintals of this or that crop). The *abelegna* lives with the household he works for as a family member and the household provides for his needs. Often it is the parents and not the boy or the man that receives the payment in cash or kind.

- 5 it is somewhat unusual for a family member to work for his own family under these arrangements.
- 6 A gemed is a measure of land that is roughly equal to a quarter of a hectare.
- 7 Article 5 (1) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's Rural Land Administration and Land Use Proclamation (Proclamation No. 456/2005) states, 'Any citizen of the country who is 18 years of age or above and wants to engage in agriculture for a living shall have the right to use rural land.'
- 8 In a document which appeared in 2002 to expound the rural and agricultural development policy and strategies of the government, the necessity of containing as much as 70% of the rural youth where they are and preparing them to pursue a life in agriculture is clearly made. While this document is now quite dated, there is no clear evidence that this has changed.
- 9 Children under the ages of 15 constituted nearly half (45 %) of the total population in 2007 and a whopping 88.5 percent of them were growing up in rural areas (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia [CSA], 2010).
- 10 Huffman (2001:372), who explores the link between education and agriculture, concludes by noting that there exists a "sizeable body of empirical evidence" on the effects of education in agriculture and that the return of education increases substantially as a country goes from traditional agriculture to modernizing. He, however, points out a number of gaps in the existing literature and stresses the need for a critical look at this relationship. In the case of Ethiopia, we are not aware of any studies on the effect of education on agricultural productivity and adoption of technology. The importance of education and the need to cultivate a new generation of educated farmers is however continually raised in government policy documents, the state media, as well as local level government officials in charge of agricultural development.

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This **Working Paper** was written by **Getnet Tadele** and **Asrat Ayalew Gella** for the **Future Agricultures Consortium**. The FAC Working Paper series publishes work in progress by FAC members. All papers are technical research papers which have been peer reviewed, and are available in open access format. The series editors are **Paul Cox** and **Beatrice Ouma**. Further information about this series of Working Papers at: www.future-agricultures.org

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