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Young and ready to move

Empowering the new generation in the rural areas

"Do not throw money at us, do not invite us anymore to conferences in your countries, come to meet us at our places, to see our ventures, learn from them and engage as partners!"

This is the condensed statement young African *agripreneurs* spelt out at this year's Annual General Assembly of the Global Donor Platform on Rural Development GDPRD. Roughly 120 people from donor agencies of the OECD countries, global and regional partners from Africa (mainly) and Asia, including agricultural entrepreneurs and students met in Berlin on 13th and 14th June 2018.
Empowering the new generation in the rural and peri-urban areas was the objective of the exchanges during one and a half days. Presenters and participants agreed: "Youth" is not a topic. Young people are the key stakeholders that need to be engaged and integrated into any future agricultural investment. And: If anyone still doubted before the meeting, all became aware: The Young are ready to move.

Fascinating stories of young people managing big farms or marketing processed pumpkins confirmed: Indeed, opportunities for young and initiative people exist. Some Governments (e.g. Kenya) provide privileged access for young entrepreneurs in their tenders and private banks offer soft loans to them. At other places, youth organizations emerge and occupy open political space to defend their interests.

Overall the situation looks, however, bleak: Up to 20 million young people are joining the job market every year in Africa. At the same time, Africa exports jobs: the continent imports millions of tons of food produced and/or processed elsewhere. Furthermore, just a small portion of the value added in coffee, cocoa and other agricultural products remains in the continent, at the farmers', processors' and transporters' level. The global commodity exchanges do not consider African livelihood needs. Seen through a historic lens the African farmers, contrary to Asian countries, financed for decades the development of their national economies and the public sector - through meager producer prices, lacking investments in infrastructure, research, education and other public services.
At the same time 200 billion USD leave Africa, 50 billion in illicit money, 100 million through tax evasion and the rest through pension funds not invested on the continent.
Young people have high aspirations. However, the reality does not provide them many options yet. Only one out of two people complete primary schooling in rural Africa. 40 percent of workers are underqualified. There are huge gaps between expectations and reality. Thus, frustration among the young people is a widespread phenomenon.

"More donor policies and strategies include youth issues. However, specifically linking youth empowerment with rural development is still quite new for many of them." The **compendium "Donor engagement with rural youth"** **(Maria Lee, May 2018**, click link) presented by the GDPRD reveals the priorities of the donor engagement: 1. capacity development / technical and Vocational Training and Education - TVET; 2. business development and 3. access to finances. Less priority is given to access to land; support to organizations, to ICT in agriculture and to sexual and reproductive health and right issues.
But: Donor agencies and donor Governments are also shifting their narratives, away from poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihoods in the global South more prominently towards their interests in issues linked to security such as migration. European security and migration policies demand for "responsive policies" from African countries.

Back to the “ground realities”: There was large agreement on the ways to go, in empowering and partnering with youth and in responding to the challenges ahead: Action is about

… setting quantitative targets for the integration of youth in agricultural programming and developing the set-up ***with*** and not only for young people;

… creating and securing access to land (in terms of tenure security and community recognition), to finances, to technology/knowledge, to information, to legal advice;

… providing access to training: technical skills, business skills as well as soft skills: “to know where to go, to which door to knock and how to do that”;

… developing technological innovations (digital in particular) and partnering in start-ups with incubation, counselling, etc. and appropriate financial models.

In doing so, one needs to look beyond just agricultural production, to look downward the value chain to processing, transport and marketing and to other sectors such as (rural) tourism and construction. As agriculture is in general a risky activity, de-risking becomes important for farmers, for *agripreneurs* down the value chain as well as for the financial actors involved.

Public investments remain critical: No one can do without transport and communication infrastructure, energy supply, new knowledge, education/training and health related basic services. Changes are not just economic or technical, they are essentially political and cultural. Trust in the abilities and capacities of young people starts from childhood and is built by parents, families and communities. Local political power is widely vested in the hand of the older generations. The young need space to express themselves and to unleash their capabilities and ideas.

Youth are not all the same. Not all young people will be entrepreneurs or youth leaders. Not everyone lives within an enabling environment and disposes of high energy and ample social capital and access to finances and opportunities. Many and maybe the majority of the young will secure their livelihoods with very basic employment. The question about “*How to leave no one behind?”* remains to be answered still, as well after a stimulating and forward-looking exchange.

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