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Evidence Brief

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Enhancing Agricultural Productivity and Opportunities for Youth

Making farming and the wider food economy a choice young people want, not a fallback they accept

Key messages

- **Agriculture absorbs young people but rarely rewards them.** It is the largest employer in Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda and rural Kenya, and a major one in Nigeria and Senegal, but most of this work is informal, low paid and close to subsistence.
- **Young people are not rejecting farming.** They are responding to the numbers. High costs, unreliable markets and insecure access to land make small-scale farming a losing venture for many. Fix the economics, and attitudes will follow.
- **The better jobs lie beyond the farm gate, but so does most of the value.** Processing, storage, transport and input supply offer more productive work, yet investment has favoured capital-intensive processing that employs few young people.
- **The main problem is delivery, not a lack of policy.** Every country has agricultural strategies. They are weakened by incentives that reward investment volume rather than jobs, poor coordination between ministries and political capture of programme funds.
- **There is a window to act now.** Under the Kampala Declaration of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), African Union member states have until 2028 to build its targets on youth and women into national plans. That is the moment to set youth employment targets and tie public incentives to them.



Source: GettyImages

> The question for policy is therefore not whether agriculture matters for young people. It is why a sector that employs so many offers them so little, and what it would take to change that.

Introduction

Agriculture employs more young people than any other sector in several African countries, yet it pays them the least and offers them the fewest routes to something better. This evidence brief looks at why that is, and at what governments, regional bodies, the private sector and development partners can do to change it.

We draw on the first phase of the political economy analysis carried out under the Activating Policy to Create Mass, Fulfilling and Dignified Jobs for Africa's Youth initiative in eight countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda. The study combined policy reviews, analysis of national survey data, more than 350 key informant interviews and 60 focus group

discussions with young people.[1] We set out what the evidence shows, the commitments countries have already made, the lessons from country experience and the actions that follow, with a lead named for each. We close with indicators for tracking progress and the questions the evidence cannot yet answer.

Background and Rationale

Across Africa, the youth employment problem is mostly a problem of poor-quality work rather than joblessness. About 83% of employed young Africans work in the informal economy, and at least one in four is not in education, employment or training.[2] In most of the study countries young people are working, often long hours, in arrangements that are unproductive and insecure. Agriculture is where many of them work, especially in rural areas, and where low productivity is most deeply rooted.

African governments have made agriculture and youth a shared priority for more than a decade. In the 2014 Malabo Declaration they committed to create jobs for at least 30% of young people in agricultural value chains by 2025. By the fourth continental review of progress, only 11 countries reported being on track.[3] The Kampala CAADP Declaration, adopted at an extraordinary African Union summit in January 2025 and in effect since January 2026, sets the agenda to 2035. Its targets include raising agrifood output by 45%, halving post-harvest losses, tripling intra-African agrifood trade and ensuring that women, youth and other marginalised groups make up at least 30% of those empowered across value chains.[4] The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), open for trading since January 2021, and its 2024 Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade add regional markets and specific commitments to young traders.[5]

The study finds that sectoral frameworks for agriculture exist in every country but are undermined by a bias towards capital-intensive investment, weak coordination between ministries and limited public investment in value chains that employ many people.[6] The question for policy is therefore not whether agriculture matters for young people. It is why a sector that employs so many offers them so little, and what it would take to change that.

What the Evidence Shows

Agriculture absorbs young people but does not reward them

Agriculture took in between 33.8% and 44.1% of employed youth in Rwanda over the study period, mostly in informal, low-wage subsistence work. It accounted for 29.1% of employed youth in Nigeria's 2022 labour force survey and about 32% of all jobs in Senegal, against 23% in industry.[7] In Ghana's northern regions, employment rates above 85% rest on subsistence farming and informal rural livelihoods rather than on productive wage work, and young people in the Northern, Savannah, Oti and North East regions have about 90% lower odds of formal employment than their peers in Greater Accra.[8] Rural informality is 5 to 10 percentage points higher than urban informality across the sample, and in Kenya informal agricultural work sits at the bottom of the income distribution.[9] High employment in rural areas is therefore not a sign of healthy labour markets. It is a sign that young people have no other option.

The economics, not attitudes, keep young people away

Young people's distance from farming is often described as a problem of attitude. The evidence points elsewhere. Kenya's country study describes an agricultural succession crisis, with the average farmer now 60 years old, and explains it in plain terms:

> "A youth from Makueni showed us, on a flip chart, his total cost of production versus his revenue. The cost of production was 25% higher than what he earned. That is why agriculture is structurally unattractive to young people, not because of attitude, but because the economics are broken." **Development partner, Kenya**

Subsistence producers also sell to local middle traders who buy at prices that squeeze their margins.[10] Where the work can pay, young people do see value in it. Rwandan youth described agriculture, like trades and construction, as potentially dignified when it brings stable income, legal protection and respect, and a Kenyan official put the task as making agriculture

> "so appealing that we demystify the narrative that it is for the old, the illiterate, the dirty."[11]

Land and assets come first

Kenya's study names land as the foundational barrier: without secure access to land, credit, inputs and irrigation achieve little. The barriers are steeper for young women. In Kenya's arid and semi-arid counties, exclusion from land inheritance, limits on girls' mobility and early marriage compound one another, and in Senegal women face barriers to credit and property under both statutory and customary rules.[12] Mobility matters too:

> "It's more difficult for women, men can travel to far places to farm, but it is difficult for women." Focus group participant, Oyo, Nigeria

South Africa shows the long shadow of dispossession. The Natives Land Act of 1913 removed the agrarian fallback that young people elsewhere rely on, which helps explain why South Africa's informal economy, farming included, absorbs far fewer excluded young

people than in any other study country. In commercial farming districts, the country study documents young women paid in alcohol rather than wages under the historical dop system, and abuse by supervisors with little recourse.[13] Across all eight countries, women are concentrated in the least productive parts of agriculture, not by choice but because of discrimination, care duties, mobility limits and social norms.[14]

The better jobs are beyond the farm gate, but so is the value

Storage, transport, aggregation, processing and input supply can offer more productive work than primary production. So far, young people have gained little from them. Value-chain development in coffee in Ethiopia, dairy and horticulture in Uganda, and tea and horticulture in Kenya absorbed few young people, because value addition clustered in capital-intensive processing rather than in upgrading for smallholders.[15] In Kenya, about 70% of hides and skins are wasted because they cannot meet international market standards, while Ethiopia's deliberate investment in its leather and cut-flower sectors has produced visible results.[16]

> "They invested in extension services, gave incentives, trained their people... The difference is intention." **Development partner, Kenya, on Ethiopia**

Where firms built the capacity to upgrade, results followed: Uganda's gains from regional trade have been strongest in dairy, fish and coffee.[17] A Ugandan manufacturer suggested working from a reliable buyer backwards: "Instead of just giving youth money to plant maize, work with us to provide the correct seeds, and then buy the final produce from them."[18] Unreliable electricity, high logistics costs and scarce finance for small firms hold back off-farm jobs across the study countries.[19]

Policies exist, but incentives and delivery fail

Public incentives usually reward the size of an investment, not the jobs it creates. In Uganda, tax holidays went to firms whose employment grew only modestly. Kenya's export processing zones created enclave jobs without skills transfer, and Ghana's industrial policy has historically favoured politically connected, capital-intensive projects.[20] The study concludes that Ghana's Planting for Food and Jobs and One District One Factory programmes need redesigning around how many decent jobs they create, rather than project headcounts.[21] Programme funds are also open to capture. In Uganda, young people described deductions from Parish Development Model grants:

> "They say PDM gives you one million, but you end up getting 900,000." **Focus group participant, Jinja, Uganda**

In Ghana, party operatives control beneficiary lists, and in Senegal opportunities concentrate around Dakar. In both, rural youth are left furthest behind, a pattern repeated across the sample as programmes cluster in cities.[22] Table 1 brings the country evidence together.

Table 1. Agriculture and youth employment: what the study found in each country, and where reform can start

Country	What the study found	Where reform can start
Ethiopia	Largest employer; growth driven partly by agricultural commercialisation created fewer jobs than promised; coffee value chain absorbed few youth.	Build on the deliberate approach used in leather and cut flowers: extension, targeted incentives and training.
Ghana	Workers leaving agriculture moved into low-productivity services; northern employment rests on subsistence farming.	Redesign agricultural and agro-industrial flagships around employment intensity; cocoa processing as a regional value chain.
Kenya	Average farmer aged 60; land is the foundational barrier; about 70% of hides and skins wasted.	Five-year youth-in-agriculture programme with land leasing, cooperative purchasing and ring-fenced extension officers; leather value chain.
Nigeria	Agriculture is 29.1% of youth employment; young women face mobility limits; trade agreements weakly applied across federal and state levels.	Clarify federal and state roles in applying the AfCFTA; design programmes around young women's mobility constraints.
Rwanda	Deliberate shift to irrigation, mechanisation, greenhouses and agro-processing, yet youth agricultural work remains mostly informal.	Add age to the off-farm jobs target in the agriculture plan; attach youth hiring conditions to investment incentives.
Senegal	Agriculture is 32% of jobs; rural employment rate 31.8% against 43.8% urban; frontier regions poorly reached.	Youth employment criteria in agro-processing (groundnuts, horticulture, dairy) and the blue economy.
South Africa	Land dispossession removed the farming fallback; abuse and payment in kind in commercial farming districts.	Programmes designed for rural women; sector plans with age-disaggregated employment targets.
Uganda	Largest employer; trade gains in dairy, fish and coffee where firms upgraded; capture of Parish Development Model funds.	Open beneficiary lists and audit parish allocations; back value chains with proven upgrading capacity.

Source: AFIDEP and CAP YEI (2026), Sections 4.1, 4.5, 4.7 and 6.3.

Continental and Regional Commitments

Countries do not need new commitments to act. Table 2 shows the instruments already in place and what they mean for young people in agriculture.

Table 2. Continental commitments relevant to youth in agriculture

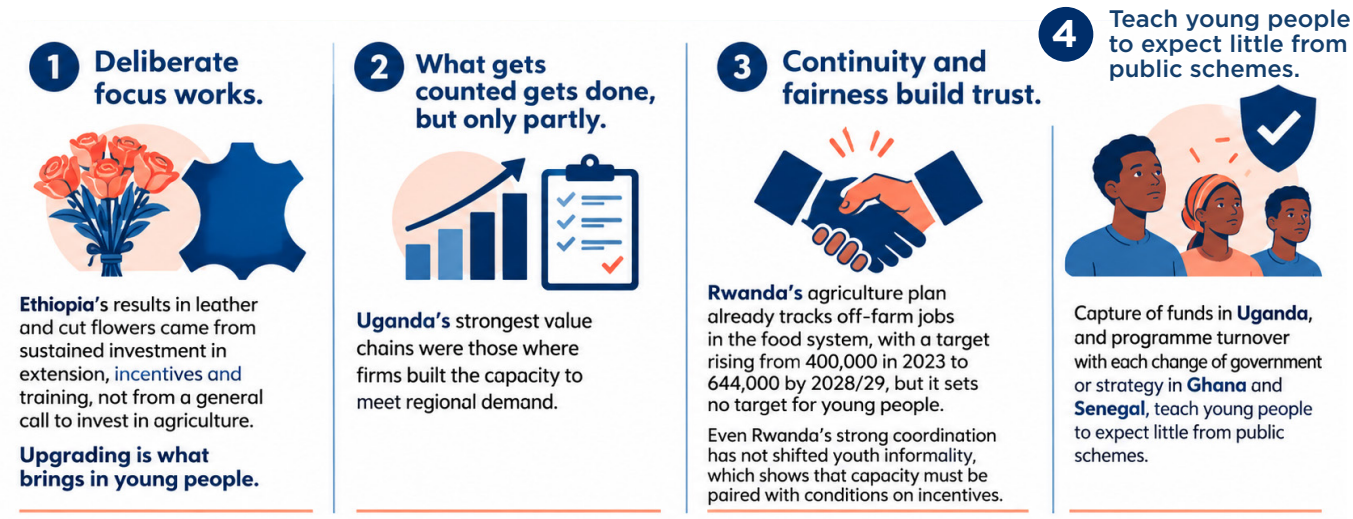
Instrument	What it commits countries to	What the evidence says
Malabo Declaration (2014)	Create jobs for at least 30% of young people in agricultural value chains by 2025.	Only 11 countries reported being on track at the fourth continental review.
Kampala CAADP Declaration and CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026 to 2035)	Raise agrifood output by 45%; halve post-harvest losses; at least 30% of those empowered in value chains to be women, youth and marginalised groups; climate-resilient and green jobs for youth; national plans aligned by 2028.	The 2028 deadline is the natural point to add youth employment targets and tie incentives to them.
African Continental Free Trade Area and its Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade (2024)	Tariff removal on 90% of tariff lines; the Protocol requires action on young traders' collateral, lending and information barriers and on age-disaggregated trade data.	Trade gains go to countries that already have productive capacity; market access alone will not create jobs for young producers.
African Youth Charter (2006) and Agenda 2063	Right to gainful employment (Charter, Article 15); reduce youth unemployment (Agenda 2063).	The first continental review scored the jobs goal at 16%; targets lack named owners and funding.

Sources: African Union instruments as cited in notes 3 and 4; AFIDEP and CAP YEI (2026), pp. 3 to 4 and 49.

Lessons from Country Experience

Four lessons stand out. Deliberate focus works. Ethiopia's results in leather and cut flowers came from sustained investment in extension, incentives and training, not from a general call to invest in agriculture. Upgrading is what brings in young people.[23] Uganda's strongest value chains were those where firms built the capacity to meet regional demand. What gets counted gets done, but only partly.

Rwanda's agriculture plan already tracks off-farm jobs in the food system, with a target rising from 400,000 in 2023 to 644,000 by 2028/29, but it sets no target for young people. Even Rwanda's strong coordination has not shifted youth informality, which shows that capacity must be paired with conditions on incentives.[24] Continuity and fairness build trust. Capture of funds in Uganda, and programme turnover with each change of government or strategy in Ghana and Senegal, teach young people to expect little from public schemes.[25]



Who Needs to Act

Change in agriculture depends on many actors, from continental bodies to traditional authorities who allocate land. Table 3 sets out the main ones and the part each plays.

Table 3. Institutions to engage and their role

Level and institutions	Role in improving opportunities for youth in agriculture
Continental and regional: African Union Commission, African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), AfCFTA Secretariat, regional economic communities (for example the Economic Community of West African States, the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the East African Community)	Track how national plans take up the Kampala Declaration through the CAADP Biennial Review; support the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade; ease cross-border trade and harmonise standards.
National government: ministries of agriculture, lands, finance and planning, trade and industry, and youth; investment promotion agencies (for example the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre and the Uganda Investment Authority); national statistics offices	Set youth employment targets in sector plans; attach job conditions to incentives; fund extension and storage; secure land rights; collect and publish data broken down by age, sex and location.
Local government and traditional authorities	Allocate and lease land; deliver extension services; select programme beneficiaries fairly and openly.
Private sector: processors, off-takers, input suppliers and financial institutions	Offer assured markets and fair prices; provide finance suited to young producers; create off-farm jobs and apprenticeships.
Accountability actors: supreme audit institutions (for example the Ghana Audit Service and Senegal's Cour des Comptes), parliaments, youth-led civil society and research bodies	Audit programme spending and allocations; scrutinise incentive deals; give young people a voice in design and monitoring.
Development partners	Align funding behind national plans rather than separate projects; fund tracer studies and better data on youth in agriculture.

Sources: AFIDEP and CAP YEI (2026), Sections 5.4, 6.3, 6.4 and 6.7; AFIDEP (2026), Uganda country report.

Policy Recommendations

The following actions follow from the evidence and build on the study's cross-country recommendations.[26] Each names the actors from Table 3 best placed to lead.

- **Count jobs, not only harvests.** As countries align national plans with the Kampala Declaration by 2028, they should add youth employment targets to agriculture and agro-industry strategies, covering the number of jobs, earnings and job security, broken down by age, sex and location, with annual public reporting. Rwanda's off-farm jobs indicator is a starting point that needs an age breakdown.

  Lead: Ministries of agriculture and planning, national statistics offices; AU Commission and AUDA-NEPAD through the CAADP Biennial Review.

- **Open up access to land.** Put in place land-leasing frameworks and cooperative arrangements that give young people secure, affordable access to land, and remove gender gaps in inheritance and property law and practice.

  Lead: Ministries of lands, local governments and traditional authorities.

- **Make farming pay.** Link young producers to assured buyers through cooperative purchasing and agreements with processors, invest in aggregation, storage and cold chains, and fund dedicated extension officers for young farmers as a protected budget line.

  Lead: Ministries of agriculture, processors and off-takers, farmer organisations.

- **Grow jobs beyond the farm gate and tie incentives to them.** Prioritise labour-intensive value chains such as agro-processing, leather, fisheries and agro-forestry. Make tax holidays, land allocations and infrastructure connections conditional on youth hiring, wages and retention, not only initial hires, and fix the power, logistics and finance constraints that hold small agribusinesses back.

  Lead: Ministries of finance, trade and industry; investment promotion agencies.

- **Reach young women and rural youth by design.** Set participation targets for young women that match their share of the population, and fund childcare, transport support and mobile delivery so programmes work in remote areas, not only around capital cities.

  Lead: Ministries of gender, youth and agriculture; local governments.

- **Protect public programmes from capture.** Use open recruitment, publish beneficiary lists, audit local allocations and provide grievance channels that young people trust.

  Lead: Supreme audit institutions, local governments, youth-led civil society.

- **Make trade work for young producers.** Ratify and apply the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, simplify paperwork for small cross-border traders, and help producers meet product standards so that market access turns into jobs at home.

  Lead: Ministries of trade, regional economic communities, AfCFTA Secretariat.

Making Reform Happen

These reforms are not mainly technical. Tying incentives to jobs runs against the interests of capital-intensive incumbents and well-connected investors, and anti-capture rules run against the local brokers who benefit from discretion over who receives support. The study finds that conditional incentives can draw support from finance ministries seeking fiscal discipline, labour ministries and youth-focused civil society.[27] Reform is most likely to move where administrative capacity already exists, and the study identifies Rwanda as the most realistic near-term test of employment-conditioned incentives.[28] Elsewhere, smaller visible wins, such as published beneficiary lists or one redesigned flagship programme, can build the credibility that larger reforms need. Young people, through youth councils and civil society, should help design and monitor these changes rather than only receive them.

> Reform is most likely to move where administrative capacity already exists, and the study identifies Rwanda as the most realistic near-term test of employment-conditioned incentives.

Monitoring, Accountability and Evidence Gaps

Progress should be tracked annually through six indicators, each broken down by age, sex, location and, where possible, disability:

(1) the number of young people working in the agrifood system, on and off the farm;

(2) their earnings and hours of work;

(3) jobs created for young people per unit of public incentive given to agribusiness;

(4) the share of young people, especially young women, with secure access to land;

(5) the share of programme beneficiaries in rural and remote areas; and

(6) progress in aligning national plans with the Kampala Declaration by 2028, as reported through the CAADP Biennial Review.

Important gaps remain. The study examined agriculture as part of its wider analysis of productive sectors, so we still lack a clear count of young people in farming and off-farm food work and what they earn. We do not yet know the costs and returns of youth farming by crop, scale and type of tenure, or whether the Makueni example holds more widely. We need to understand why some value chains took in young people while others bypassed them, how leasing, inheritance and cooperatives shape who can farm, and how climate shocks are changing rural livelihoods. Tracer studies of agricultural programme participants are also needed. The studies are cross-sectional, and age bands and survey methods differ between countries, so cross-country figures should be read as broad patterns rather than precise comparisons.[29] Closing these gaps would let governments put money where it creates the most dignified work for young people.


Source: Pexels

The Way Forward

Agriculture already provides work for millions of young Africans, and in several of the study countries it employs more of them than any other sector. Whether it remains a fallback or becomes a choice depends less on persuading young people than on changing the conditions they face: secure land, fair prices, reliable buyers, jobs beyond the farm gate and public money that rewards employment. The commitments are already on paper. What is needed now is intention: clear owners, budgets and measures of success for each commitment.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is one of a series of thematic evidence briefs drawn from the cross-country political economy analysis of youth employment conducted by the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) and the CAP Youth Empowerment Institute (CAP YEI), in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda.