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We're ready, the system's not – youth perspectives on agricultural careers in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In light of rising levels of youth unemployment in South Africa, now at 50 per cent, research was undertaken to better understand the paradox of young people turning away from agricultural employment in spite of such high levels of unemployment in the country. The research brings to light new evidence of youth perspectives on contemporary attitudes, experiences and expectations of work in the agricultural sector in South Africa.

The research took a narrative-based approach using SenseMaker as a tool for blended qualitative and quantitative data collection. A sample of 573 youth narratives was drawn from across three sites in the KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Western Cape provinces of South Africa.

Findings show that attitudes towards careers in agriculture vary greatly. While a set of negative perceptions emerged from the narratives as anticipated, approximately one third of the respondents expressed a clear interest in and passion for agriculture. This interest persisted in spite of a range of pervasive social norms and stigmas. However, these positive aspirations tended to be at odds with the kinds of jobs created by an increasingly corporatised food regime.

The research addresses two key policy documents: The National Development Plan and the National Youth Policy, contributing toward the growing body of literature seeking to understand how agricultural policy based on principles of “accumulation from below” may be formulated. It also provides an empirical evidence base for activists, educators and policy-makers interested in the role of the agricultural sector in addressing youth unemployment in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa.

KEYWORDS

Youth; employment; agriculture; South Africa; narrative inquiry; accumulation from below

JEL CLASSIFICATION

D70; F66; J00; J2; J24; J43; Q19

For narratives to flourish, there must be communities to hear ... for communities to hear there must be narratives which weave together their history, their identity, their politics.

Plummer (1995, 87)

1. Introduction

Persistent unemployment has become synonymous with the youth experience across South Africa. Sixty two per cent of South African youth (people aged 15–35 years) are unemployed (ILO, 2017) and of these 60 per cent have never been employed (Spaul, 2013). When the

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ranks of youth faced with persistent under-employment, and those employed at below what is considered to be a living wage are added to this, a clear youth employment crisis emerges.

As a primary source of formal and informal livelihoods in South Africa, the food system has been highlighted as a central pillar in the national strategy to address unemployment (NPC, 2012). This paper speaks to this national policy discourse. In particular, the South African National Development Plan (NDP), that highlights the opportunity for the creation of an additional one million jobs in the agricultural sector, and the National Youth Policy (NYP), which calls for a focused approach towards addressing the current youth skills crisis through legislative frameworks around youth (NPC, 2012; NYDA, 2015).

1.1 Considering the need for a transition in the food system

The NDP clearly states that the targets for agricultural job creation will not be met if future expansion of agricultural production “takes place within the current [agricultural] structure by merely expanding large-scale commercial farming” (NPC, 2012: 225). The NDP thus acknowledges the widely held view (Folke *et al.*, 2002; Nellermann *et al.*, 2009; Holt-Gimenez & Patel, 2009; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Aliber & Hall, 2012; Stuckler & Nestle, 2012; FAO, 2017) that far-reaching changes in the structure of the food system are needed if social objectives are to be realised. The essence of this is that the current trends of increasing concentration and industrialisation of the food value chain must be transformed to achieve an environmentally restorative system of production controlled by a much wider proportion of the population. At a southern African level, it is widely recognised that converting struggling subsistence farms into the surplus generating small enterprises is needed in order to unlock future employment prospects in the sector (Holt-Gimenez & Patel, 2009; IFAD, 2014; Filmer & Fox, 2014; Aliber & Hall, 2012; Stuckler & Nestle, 2012; Losch, 2016; ASSAf, 2017; FAO, 2017).

In South Africa, since 1996 the number of commercial farming units dropped from 60 900 to 39 900 in 2007. Of the current total, only 1.5 per cent (673) of commercial farms account for a third of total gross commercial farm income (Bernstein, 2013; DAFF, 2013). In the food retail sector the market share of the major retail chains has risen from below 10 per cent in the late 1980s to around 68 per cent in 2012 (Reardon *et al.*, 2003; Bernstein, 2013). Similar trends exist across the food system, from milling to finance and fertilisers (Metelerkamp, 2014). Despite this, Hall (2009), Aliber and Hall (2012) and Cousins (2010, 2013) stress that inclusive agricultural futures capable of turning the tide on poverty and rising inequality are possible. Collectively they point towards a potential future in which South Africa’s four million subsistence farmers incrementally expand production resulting in income-generating surpluses. They argue that in doing so resources and social capital accumulate in the hands of rural (and one could argue urban and peri-urban) farmers in a bottom-up process of wealth creation. This refers to a process of egalitarian agrarian reform referred to as “accumulation from below” – the antithesis of market-orientated “trickle-down” developmental approaches. The theory follows that by actively promoting the emergence of a viable small-scale farming sector, the growing divide between black subsistence farmers and an increasingly consolidated white commercial sector, could be ameliorated.

However, despite identifying the need for a structural transition within the food system, none of the literature advocating for change within the food system, including the NDP, grapples with the critical question of young peoples’ interest in taking up the difficult work that this will entail. This data gap extends to a regional level despite recognition that converting struggling subsistence farms into the surplus, generating small enterprises is needed in order to unlock future employment prospects for young people in the sector (Holt-Gimenez & Patel, 2009; Aliber & Hall, 2012; Stuckler & Nestle, 2012; Filmer & Fox, 2014; IFAD, 2014; Losch, 2016; ASSAf, 2017; FAO, 2017). In this paper we seek to probe this issue.

What the NDP, NYP and others (Filmer & Fox, 2014; IFAD, 2014; Losch 2016) highlight is that new jobs cannot be created in isolation from the wider food system in which these jobs are embedded. These jobs also cannot be pursued at the expense of long-term social justice or environmental sustainability – otherwise the challenges faced by youth in the future will be exacerbated (NPC, 2012; White, 2012; IFAD, 2014; ReNAPRI, 2014; Haggblad *et al.*, 2015; Minde *et al.*, 2015; Tschirley *et al.*, 2015; Losch, 2016).

Efforts to transform the agricultural system are not new and, where these efforts have surfaced, questions concerning the status of agricultural education and support services are generally not far behind. In the lead up to South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 a deep divide existed between the training and support provided to white commercial agriculture and all other farmers. This was reflected in training institutions as well as the state led extension service. Ten years later, in 2005, the Department of Agriculture released a new National Education and Training Strategy (DoA, 2005). This strategy aimed to address persistent issues facing agricultural training and support 10 years into democracy. The strategy spoke to a broad audience, spanning land reform beneficiaries, home gardeners and AgriBEE beneficiaries. In spite of the radically different needs to each of these groups, the strategy outlined four key issues of primary concern: inequalities in the provision of, and access to, AET; mismatches in supply and demand of AET; poor course articulation; and inadequate competency among teachers and extension workers.

Fast forwarding 12 years to 2017, a national consensus study of comparable magnitude and focus to the 2005 DoA report was released – this time by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf, 2017). Comparing the findings of these two documents suggests that little has changed in the intervening period. This disadvantages poor youth, in particular, who rely on training as a way of transitioning into remunerative employment.

1.2 Zooming in on youth

Enabling a sustainability transition within the food system is a complex, structural project (Swilling & Anneck, 2010). Such a transition will partly require responding to the youth employment crisis by encouraging youth to participate in food-system-based livelihoods that are socially just and environmentally sustainable. Given the complex relationship between youth unemployment, social inequality and structural shifts within the food system, there is a need to better understand how young people might be inspired and supported to actively participate in a transition towards a just food system.

However, as White (2012), Swarts and Aliber (2013) and others (Kritzinger, 2002; Leavy & Smith, 2010; Proctor & Lucchesi, 2012; Cognac, 2014; Leavy & Hossain, 2014; Losch, 2016) have highlighted, conventional opinion identifies a confounding situation in which youths are turning their backs on jobs in agriculture despite high levels of unemployment. According to White, this apparent contradiction may stem from the way the problem has been studied in the past. In addressing this, White suggests that:

A youth studies perspective [can help] us to understand the lives of young people and their paradoxical turn away from farming in this era of mass rural unemployment and underemployment; it also provides a reminder of the need and the right of young people to be properly researched – not as objects, but as subjects and where possible as participants in research.

White (2012: 9)

This paper responds to the gap identified by White and others (Leavy & Smith, 2010; NYDA, 2015), using a narrative-based approach to contribute the first empirical data to the currently thin literature on youth attitudes, expectations and experiences of employment within South African agriculture. In particular the research applies a youth studies perspective in response to the growing body of literature calling for an improved understanding of the viability of an agricultural development agenda premised on the principles of “accumulation from below” (Hall, 2009; Cousins, 2010, 2013; Aliber & Hall, 2012).

1.3 Global context

While this paper seeks to provide an empirical foundation for understanding youth attitudes towards agriculture in South Africa, the findings have resonance for many other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and beyond, on the role of youth in agriculture. Accounting for 32 per cent of employment globally, agriculture is critical for contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 8 on Decent Work. Yet, despite its importance, agriculture battles with negative stigmas and seldom tops young people's lists of career aspirations (Cognac, 2014). Thus, certain insights from this paper will be important for others working on similar problems elsewhere – particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, we hope that the methodological approach may support the adoption of more youth-centric approaches towards sustainability transitions in other fields.

2. Approach

The study used SenseMaker® as a narrative collection and signification framework. Through a combination of narrative sharing and self-signification by respondents, the process produces a blend of qualitative and quantitative data well suited to the analysis of complex social phenomenon (Lynam & Fletcher, 2015). The approach is founded on the assumption that individuals and societies make sense of the world through the assemblage of fragmented narratives, and that in probing for narratives around a given topic valuable insights can be gained into underlying values and attitudes (Deprez *et al.*, 2012; Kurtz, 2014).

The power of the SenseMaker® lies in its application as a narrative pattern-detection software system capable of making sense of individual narratives on scales which elucidate values and attitudes at a societal level (Deprez *et al.*, 2012). In our case using individual youth perceptions towards work in agriculture to create a picture of the social values common to youth as a broader national entity.

Youths were asked to share a short personal story based on the following prompt: "Share a real or imaginary story about a time when you or another youth in your community faced a difficult decision around a career in agriculture." Each respondent was then asked to self-signify their story based on a set of four triads, four dyads and three multiple-choice questions (for an example of the questionnaire, see Appendix A). This self-signification provided a more objective means through which trends in the narratives could be classified by providing a plausible alternative to analysts coding narratives retrospectively (Lynam & Fletcher, 2015). Fourteen questions of a demographic and psychographic nature were also included. Data was processed using SenseMaker Explorer®.

A target population of youth between the ages of 16 and 35 was selected from three sites, each from a distinct climatic and cultural region in South Africa: the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo Province. Given the agrarian nature of the research, the sampling approach favoured rural areas with high youth population densities and a mix of traditional farming and large-scale commercial agriculture. The Western Cape sample site was the exception. Here, a sample of urban youth living in informal settlements between urban centres and farming landscapes was taken. Each sample site was located within, or in close proximity to, agriculturally active landscapes. A non-probability based, convenience sampling approach was used in each of the three regions. The majority of interviews were conducted at home or in places of learning. Data was collected on tablets using SenseMaker Collector® and local fieldworkers were recruited in each location to provide first-language support to respondents.

In total, three teams of field workers undertook 14 days of interviews between 15 November 2016 and 4 March 2017. Seven hundred and one (701) youths responded to the story prompt and completed the signification framework across the sample sites. Of these 701, 128 were excluded due to fieldworker errors. This provided a final working sample of 573 with an even gender distribution. The language breakdown of the sample was as follows: Tsonga 44 per cent; Xhosa, 28 per cent; Zulu, 18 per cent; other languages 10 per cent. Forty two per cent had one or more family member

Table 1. Youth respondent profile.

Gender	Female 52%			Male 48%		
Age	15–18 21%	19–22 32%	23–26 21%	27–30 14%	31–34 13%	
Home language	Tsonga 44%	Xhosa 28%		Zulu 18%	Other 10%	
Schooling completed	Gr8 3%	Gr9 1%	Gr10 8%	Gr11 34%	Gr12 39%	Tertiary 14%
Work history	Had had a job 35%		Had run own business 8%		Neither of above 57%	

Note: *n* = 573.

employed in agriculture, while only 14 per cent had any form of tertiary qualification. Fifty four per cent had never been employed or run their own business.

The narratives were divided into two categories: those whose narratives expressed a positive attitude towards work in agriculture and those whose narratives did not. The triad presented in the next section in Figure 1 was used to assess attitudes towards work in agriculture. Stories were considered to reflect a positive attitude towards work in agriculture when they were signified as either >50 per cent “Regard work in agriculture as an exciting career path” or >75 per cent “Regard work in agriculture as a useful stepping stone to something better”. Stories were considered to reflect a lack of interest or negative view when they were signified as either <50 per cent “Regard work in agriculture as an exciting career path” or <75 per cent “Regard work in agriculture as a useful stepping stone to something better”.

Youth like those in your story regard work in agriculture as...

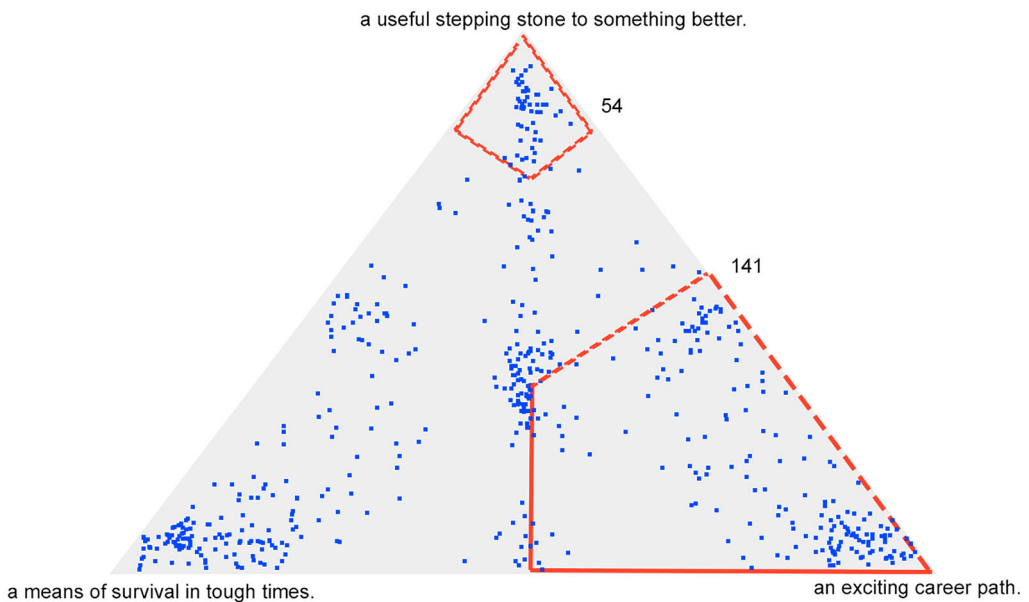


Figure 1. Selection of narratives considered to reflect positive attitudes toward agricultural work.

Positive and negative narratives were analysed separately using a basic textual analysis to provide qualitative context. This assisted in identifying emerging themes within each of the categories (Boxes 1 and 2).

3. Results

Thirty-six per cent of the total stories were positive with regards to agriculture in that they depicted a possible/positive future in agriculture (206 out of 573). As per the demarcated areas in [Figure 1](#); this 36 per cent was comprised of 26 per cent of respondents who signified youth in their stories to regard work in agriculture as an exciting career path at strength >50 per cent and 10 per cent signified work in agriculture as a stepping stone at a strength >75 per cent. Negative stories represented 64 per cent of the total, of which 21 per cent signified work in agriculture as a means of survival at >75 per cent. Examples of positive and negative narratives are given in Boxes 1 and 2. No significant difference was discernible between linguistic groupings.

Text box 1. Sample of negative stigma narratives

What others will say syndrome

My friend was unemployed and the only option she had was working for someone as a gardener in the neighbourhood, as time went by her peers started dissing her calling her a servant. This really affected her into such an extent where she stopped working and she stayed at home with no income and nothing to help feed her siblings.

Career in agriculture

My decision on making agriculture as a career was never easy due [to] the people around me they used to tell me negative things about agriculture like things such [as] agriculture is for old people and I'm too young to choose agriculture as my career I then became nervous not knowing what I must do but when time goes by I've attended a youth meeting in our community and it opened my eyes wide open because I was blinded by my friends deceiving me not to go for agriculture but then I'm glad I managed to do something better for myself in agriculture.

Career with your interest

I have one of my brother who done agriculture and take a career which base on agriculture. My parents use to ask us when you grow up you want to be? My brother was supposed to fake his dreams because they will start to discourage him if he talk about agriculture by ask him questions like "where a you going to get the land to farm". He done a searcher about for them to understand some opportunities base on agricultural still not accept it. When he go to university want to do his dream career they told him they will not pay his fees, he quit.

The youth in agriculture

It was this year when I discovered that there was some young girl who was in matric and was interested in a career in agriculture. She had so many challenges as this career is not taken seriously especially the youth of today. Even her family and her peers bullied her and teasing her about taking a career in agriculture. They negatively told her about how awful and hardworking agriculture is and that she will be working in farms for the rest of her life which was not true at all. A career in agriculture is useful and an achievement to be better.

The sun can change my skin colour

They [youth] do not like agriculture as their choices because they are lazy of using heavy tools that can destroy their hands and they also look at working at the gardens. Youth loves their bodies especially girls. They say their skin will be changed and they will become darker every day.

Abuse in industry

I once went to a certain farm to buy tomatoes, while I was there, there was a huge argument between the white boss and a worker who put wrong grades of tomatoes, she was kicked and fell on tomatoes in front of the customers, I started to have questions about working in agriculture.

Is agriculture really for grannies?

I was 17 and had to put through my university application. I sat my parents down and told them that I wanted to do farming as one of my career choices. They said no, farming was for old people and they didn't put me to school to get dirty running after pigs. They wanted me to do an office job. I had to choose between my parents funding and career.

Text box 2: Sample of pro-agriculture narratives

Happy times

It was 2014 when I attended an after-school programme that was based on agriculture. On my own view agriculture would be good career to choose. That was one of my best years in life. We were attending the garden, learning how to plant different types of crops and pesticide. The best thing I enjoy in agriculture is animal studies. It would not be difficult for me to choose agriculture as my career.

Love to be in agriculture

Back in 2006 I remember my friend having a very serious problem in choosing agriculture as a career. Each and every family member was telling him to go for law but he insisted on doing agriculture. So he continued doing agricultural studies as a first choice of his own, we kept on supporting one another. As I'm saying he is now owning a very big farm and has his own workers I'm proud of him.

Future Entrepreneur

There was a young male who was studying agriculture at a college and had a vision of creating an agriculture business. The challenges he faced sharing thoughts is he knew he wanted to start something in this area. Just because there's a land availability but unsure what specific agriculture business he would start up around here. Simply because the target market will be around this place and not so much people here, looks like he wouldn't make that much profit either. This was a complicated decision to make.

Fees must fall challenges

I studied the agriculture in Fort Hogs College in Alice. My interest that made me to do the agriculture is open the academy to teach our youth about farming. The job opportunities are few in SA so we need to wake up and do business but my effort to do that fell down because of fees must fall, our college end up closing down. The student burnt down all the college building and my dream not come true.

Love it at last

Personally I like working in agriculture and that started after I got a job at a local NGO here in Site C, Khayalitcha called Iliso Care Society. I didn't know anything about gardening but because I got this position here I was forced to know everything happening here in this NGO. I'm enjoying every minute I visit the guys who are more hands-on in garden.

Agriculture as career

Since 2009 about 3 of my family and friends are working as an agriculture, is giving me more power to be in agriculture industry because they always give me a strong motivation how agriculture is good in people's lives and how it helps people, so to me is very easy to choose agriculture as my career.

Agriculture is the best

Someone tried to make money in selling chickens his business went very successful and I like his style of making money to support his family now his a successful young man with so I decided to make some change of making money I want to do agriculture as a career.

Text box 3: Sample of narratives requesting support

Don't have information about agriculture

I found it difficult to take agriculture as career because I don't have much information about it. myself I stay at rural area and in rural area there no much opportunity to work as agriculture and there no people who do agriculture that I can grab information to them.

Lack of qualified teachers

I taken it as a career I face many challenges firstly at school lack teachers who teacher agriculture and motivation. I share it with my brother that I'm interest in agriculture and he told me take it even your school have teacher they will register with another school, so I was suppose to study on my own. on weekends spend lot of time in my garden to help me to understand it practical.

Fees destroy careers

There was a young girl that I know named Lulu. She grew up from a poverty family. She used to have small garden. She loved agriculture, she hope to produce more and she wanted to take agriculture to be her profession but she didn't due to lack of money.

The darkness in my future

There is a young boy called Siphon in my community, he is living with his grandfather and he liked agricultural programmers but the problem was that his grandfather could not afford to pay fees for Siphon continue with his study after finishing grade 9. So Siphon had to drop up at school he was interested in agriculture because of his grandfather, he like planting veg at his yard but the vegetables didn't succeed.

Job less

I've study agriculture at university it was a very good career path I enjoy doing it a lot while my friends were against it but I carry on finish my year but the problem came when I have to apply for a job I didn't get any job and that was painful to me and it felt like it a waste of time because my parent have faith on me now I'm sitting home with my degree but I still have hope.

Farming Is Great

It happened in summer when me and my friend intend to start a career in agriculture. We mainly targeted cattle farming when all of sudden terrible draught striked. All the heifers we invested on were moped away. We approached the government for help, we were promised to be compensated. Till now to our surprise nothing happened. We tried some follow up applications but to no success. We feel hard done by the government, the results were a failure.

Losing hope

I was involved in a chicken project, and I faced lot of challenges because I didn't have enough space, I was living in a informal settlements my chicken were dying every day. It changed all my dreams because I gave up my dream.

The second triad provided respondents with the opportunity to specify what motivated the youth they described in their stories. Three triad points representing a personal, community and environmental perspective were provided as per Figure 2. The results suggest that within the context of agriculture, the desire among youth to make a good living and support their communities was strong, with interconnected motivating factors. Ninety per cent of the sample indicated a preference, >50 per cent to either one or other of these nodes in the triad. A particularly strong clustering is notable adjacent to “make a good living”. Environmental concerns were less important with only 5 per cent of respondents weighting environmental conversation as a strong (>75%) motivating factor. These weightings were consistent with the textual analysis of the narratives.

In terms of career aspirations (Figure 3), responses with a preference of greater than 75 per cent towards any given node were considered to denote strong career aspiration. This suggested a moderate aspirational preference towards starting a personal business (20%), followed by those hoping to find stable employment (12%). Those seeking income-generating opportunities came in lowest at 8 per cent.

Characters in your story were motivated by a desire to...

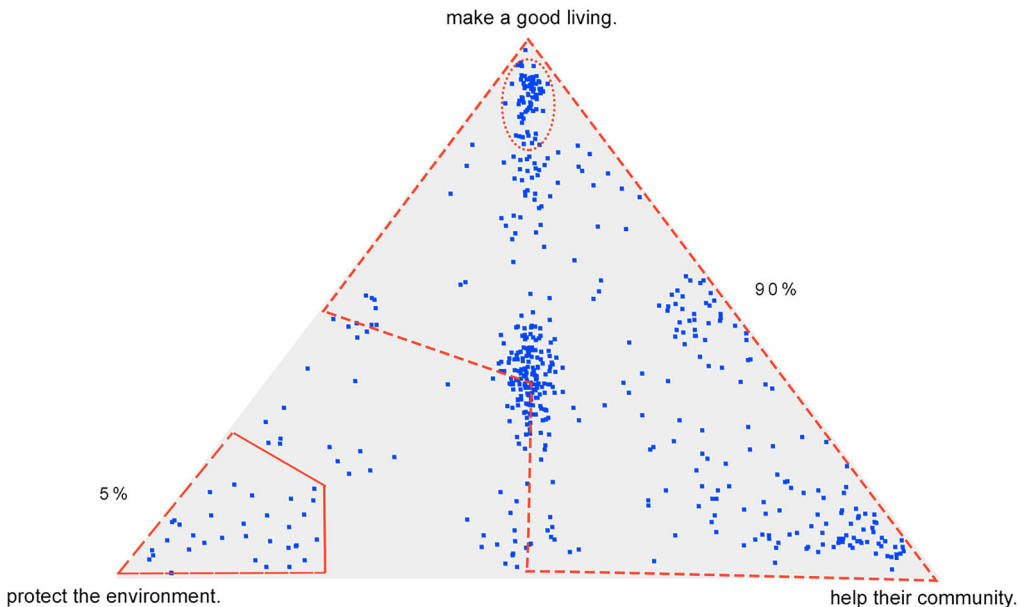


Figure 2. Motivating factors.

Youth in your story were hoping to...

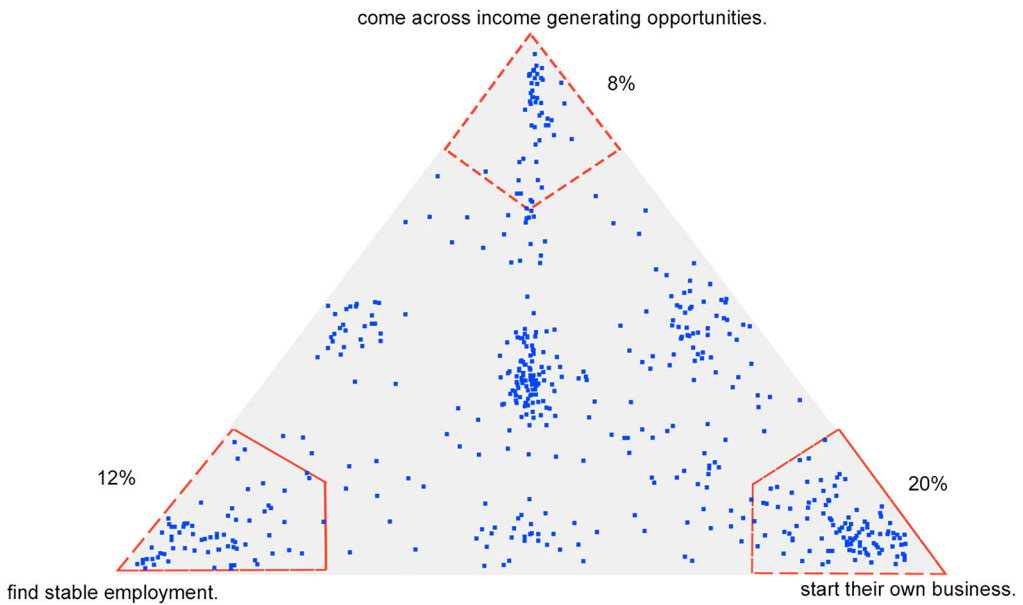


Figure 3. Career aspirations.

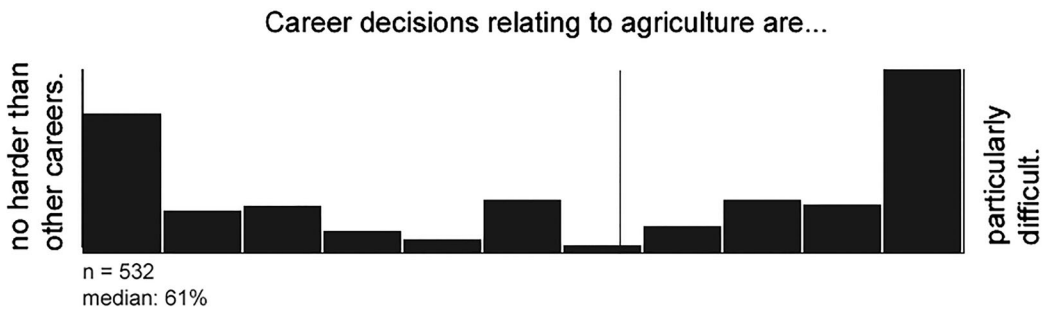


Figure 4. The difficulty associated with making career decisions in agriculture relative to other fields.

The difficulties youth face in making decisions about careers in agriculture relative to careers in other fields provides a useful marker in determining the extra-ordinary pressures surrounding agricultural careers. [Figure 4](#) suggested choices relating to agriculture were harder than other career fields.

Of the 532 youth who responded to the question, a strong cluster of 156 (29%) felt strongly that making career choices relating to agriculture was particularly difficult, and the majority (61%) associated with this statement to some degree.

4. Discussion

For those interested in the promotion of a sustainability transition within the South African food system, this data suggests three potentially encouraging trends in the way youth think about their

futures. All three carry substantial policy implications and warrant mention, as they relate directly to calls for a socially restorative process of agricultural development based on the principles of accumulation from below.

The value youth place on work with social outcomes and their interest in entrepreneurship are discussed more briefly, as they were somewhat tangential to the main objective of the study. Following this, the main question of attitudes towards work in agriculture is discussed in more depth.

4.1 Passion versus profit

The first trend – the value youth place on work with social outcomes – is that, despite their apparent financial poverty, for many young South Africans, careers are much more than about making money (see [Figure 2](#)). Careers with a strong social outcome or benefit appeared to matter to many young people. Youth wanted to be seen as active agents of social transformation within their communities.

Interrogating this finding in relation to the broader literature in South Africa is a complex task given the relationship between achieving financial security and the ability to support extended social networks living in poverty in the context of collectivist cultures.¹ On the one hand, there is evidence that engagement with social issues (not to mention environmental ones) does not feature prominently in the aspirations of South African youth (Emmett, 2004; Mattes, 2012; Swartz *et al.*, 2012). Swartz *et al.* (2012), in particular, speak about the relationship between youth's narrow focus on making money and their ability to construct a sense of identity and belonging through material accumulation of consumer goods.

Swartz *et al.*'s (2012) position, which may be indicative of broader assumptions on contemporary youth culture, appears to run contrary to our findings in two ways. Firstly, our data indicated that, for many youth, providing assistance to their communities was more important than making a good living (see [Figure 2](#)). Secondly, the non-financial social outcomes accruing from work in agriculture appeared to assist youth to craft a sense of identity and belonging within local and national narratives.

Matlala and Shambare (2017) offer a perspective that provides some support in bridging Swartz's findings and our own.

Matlala and Shambare (2017) use the term "Black Tax" to define the societal expectation, which translates to a social norm that employed black South Africans provide financially for their extended family networks living without income. It is seen as an additional social-welfare tax which white people in South Africa are not subject to due to the comparative financial security of their family networks. They argue that the motivational dynamics around so-called "black tax" have not been sufficiently understood, and that the shared social value accruing from youth's income-seeking activities in South Africa is often antecedent of the pursuit of financial incomes (Matlala & Shambare, 2017). This is a point we return to later in the paper as we consider negative stigmas around agricultural careers, but for now, accepting Matlala and Shambare's position suggests a very natural fit between youth's stated desire to make a good living and to help their community.

4.2 Entrepreneurial aspirations

The second potentially encouraging trend when considering the prospective role of youth in expanding the small scale farming sector is that many youths clearly aspire to starting their own agricultural businesses in spite of the lack of skills, role models and resources.

In saying this, it is important to differentiate between what youth may like to imagine themselves doing and the reality of incubating small-scale businesses in South Africa. Overall, South Africa's entrepreneurial track-record for small enterprises remains poor (Herrington *et al.*, 2010) and there is evidence to suggest that youth with little exposure to career guidance or opportunities tend to

attach their ideas to the most remunerative career options visible to them, often with little connection to the reality of what is required to achieve these dreams (Swartz *et al.*, 2012). The notion of having a dream and following it came up repeatedly in the narratives that young people shared. However, in considering the dreams and aspirations of youth, Swartz *et al.* warn that, despite the generative aspects of big dreams, many of South Africa's young people display a "willingness to operate on wishful thinking" (Swartz *et al.* 2012: 9). Swartz suggests that through this common practice of wishful thinking, insufficiently rooted in a pragmatic appreciation for the present, youth are bound to fail.

In light of the above, there is clearly a need to interpret the social orientations of South African youth, and their entrepreneurial aspirations, with caution. However, considered in parallel with the strong interest in agriculture, discussed in more detail below, the fact that entrepreneurial dreams rooted in some form of complex social orientation are a feature of many young peoples' visions for themselves is cause for some optimism.

4.3 Exploring youth attitudes towards work in agriculture

Speculation that youth are, as a whole, not interested in agriculture was not supported by this research. While many stories did reflect negative attitudes towards agriculture and a lack of interest in the sector, 36 per cent of the story respondents reflected positive perceptions and an interest in careers in the sector. This raises two questions:

- Are negative attitudes towards agriculture different to attitudes towards other sectors such as, for example, engineering or the arts?
- With so many youth displaying an interest in agriculture, does it matter that many others are not interested?

Negative stigma around agriculture appears to be particularly pronounced and carry a social aspect that extends beyond a basic lack of interest or aptitude one would expect for other sectors. Themes from the narratives emerged around agriculture being for the poor, the dirty and the elderly on the one hand, or simply for white people² on the other. These negative perceptions mirror findings from earlier studies into youth attitudes towards food gardening in the Eastern Cape Province (Moller, 2005). Agriculture was also perceived by many as a risky career path that involved a lot of hard work for little financial reward. A range of narrative clusters also emerged that spoke to some of the specifics of the stigmas and disincentives around work in agriculture (Textbox 1, Figure 4.). An example of this among female respondents was a cluster of stories making specific reference to the impact which working outside had on the colour of their skin. Considering these factors, it is unsurprising that 61 per cent of respondents felt that it was harder to make career decisions relating to agriculture than other careers (see Figure 4).

The stories youth told suggest that this negative perception mattered to those who were interested in agriculture for a number of reasons. Particular among these were themes of peer pressure, shaming and substantial family pressure when considering agriculture as a career choice. However, given these social pressures, the fact that over a third of stories presented reflected positive sentiments towards work in agriculture beyond the ability to support basic survival, suggests two things:

Firstly, that despite social stigma and negative attitudes, the agricultural sector still has a very important role to play in the lives of youth in South Africa. Even for those who do not perceive it as an exciting long-term career path, agriculture represented a stepping-stone to other goals to some, and an important survival strategy for others. This appeared to hold true for both rural and urban youth.

Secondly, the fact that just over a quarter of respondents signified their stories to indicate that youth see agriculture as an "exciting career path" in spite of powerful, deep-seated social stigmas points towards a degree of intent and fortitude among youth that should not be ignored. For

many youth, agriculture really is simply not an option, representing something that “is not cool”. However, in contrast to this, a substantial group of youth exist who see a generative future for themselves in the agricultural sector. In the regions where the study was based, this pro-agriculture sentiment could represent more youth than even the most optimistic job creation targets set by the NDP could accommodate. Once again, this was not limited to rural youth. Agro-ecologically orientated urban farming movements seem to be drawing increasing youth attention too.

4.4 Conceptual framing of experience of South African youth interested in agriculture

The apparent interest of youth in agriculture, and the struggles many seem to face attempting to craft careers for themselves within the sector, leads to two questions: Where do they feel support is needed most? and How should these calls for support be understood?

A textual analysis of the narratives among interested youth suggested that, by and large, youth experienced a relatively common set of deficiencies as they progressed along an agricultural career pathway. As reflected in Text Box 3 above and Figure 5 below, these ranged from a lack of awareness and career information at earlier stages towards more practical resource- and information-related concerns the further their career path progressed. Their desire to progress along an agricultural career path appeared to be motivated by a range of practical and emotional factors, which persisted in spite of an underlying set of de-motivating social pressures towards agriculture and youth in general.

4.5 Linking youth narratives to calls for food system reform

In responding to the NDP statement that the 1 million jobs targeted in agriculture will not be met under the current structure of the agricultural sector, as well the NYP’s call for the engagement of youth as active champions of their own development, this research suggests the following:

1. That although many youth *aspired* to owning their own businesses, conventional employment by either the state or the “white” commercial farming sector is, in reality, where most youth *expect* to find careers in the agricultural sector.

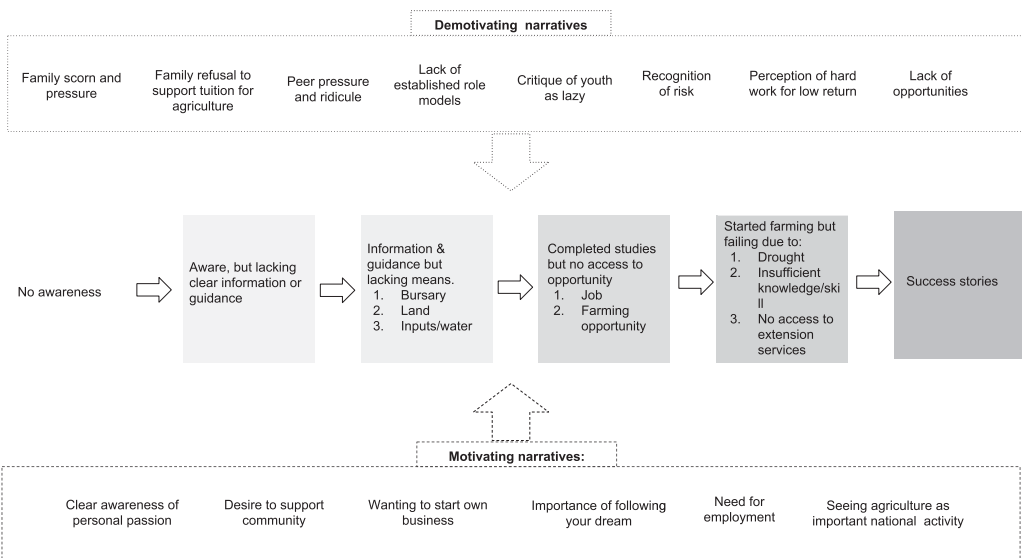


Figure 5. Conceptual synthesis of youth experiences as they pursue careers.

2. A prominent set of narratives emerged around people who had strived to start their own agricultural enterprises. However, within this set of narratives, very few stories of success emerged. Stories were about those who had tried but failed. Within this set of narratives, there seemed to be an expectation that the state was largely responsible for supporting the establishment of these farming enterprises.

There are a number of potential warnings that can be identified from this. Of particular importance to the focus of this paper are the potential dangers of marketing agriculture as a career to youth in the absence of a structured process for the localisation and de-monopolisation of the food system. The notion of “following one’s dreams” featured prominently across the narratives collected and linked in many cases to the need to feel relevant to one’s community and country (see [Figure 5](#)). However, despite their power, the dreams of youth are a dangerous currency to deal in. Swartz *et al.* observe that:

[By] dealing in dreams, young people in the country’s townships appear to be writing themselves into the nation’s narrative by constructing their own sense of opportunity and, thereby, belonging. Yet the deferment of dreams in many of these young people’s lives can have devastating social consequences (Elder, 1998) and failed dreams can even return as a form of violence against young people, excluding them from the nation, citizenship and the possibility of belonging that they so desire.

Swartz *et al.* (2012: 33)

We assert that without substantial reform to the highly consolidated nature of the food system, the only realistic trajectory for agricultural employment for all but a tiny fraction of the most privileged youth is that of a low-skilled wage-worker in an increasingly large-scale agri-food industry in which they have no agency. These are jobs which some narratives referred to as “slave labour”. In a review of the agricultural skills landscape in Southern Africa, Minde *et al.* (2015) noted that 90 per cent of South Africa’s employment opportunities in the agri-food sector required *at most* high-school graduation. The supposedly “advanced” nature of the South African food-system and the “flat” nature of the employment pyramid are cited as reasons for this (Minde *et al.*, 2015: 114). However, when considered from a youth studies perspective this humiliating career trajectory is unsurprisingly fundamentally incompatible with young people’s visions for their own futures.

To elaborate on this, youth exiting a failing school system struggle to achieve the pass-marks required for basic agricultural training at a tertiary level (Spaul, 2013; NYDA, 2015); the fraction that do manage to qualify for entry subsequently battle to fund their studies at these institutions (Cloete, 2016; Le Grange, 2016). The narratives shared in our study suggested that, on graduation, many of these youths fail to find work or start their own farms; this indicates a fundamental mismatch between the agricultural careers of graduates’ aspirations, training opportunities and available employment opportunities. These narratives mirror the findings of other recent research which indicates that South Africa experiences an “inverted AET pyramid” in which there is an oversupply of training institutions offering technical academic qualifications for more senior positions in the large-scale commercial sector, and far too few focussing on skills for smallholder farmers (ASSAf, 2017).

Weak professional networks, lack of career guidance and poor work-readiness among youth with little to no work experience may also contribute to the challenges of securing private sector employment (NYDA, 2015). These challenges appear to leave the state as the primary employment destination in the minds of agricultural graduates, despite its very limited capacity to absorb inexperienced graduates. Put bluntly, expecting a significant number of currently unemployed youth to be absorbed as formal employees into agriculture in the future is not realistic given the current structure of the food system and long-term agricultural employment trends (Venter, 2016). Expecting them to be absorbed as agricultural employees in ways which resonate with their sense of dignity is even less realistic. Adopting a youth-centric approach to growing employment opportunities within the

framework of the existing food regime will not change this (Losch, 2016). This infers that transforming the experience of youth in agriculture requires a substantial transition within the structure of the food system.

In considering food-system transformation, Aliber and Hall (2012), amongst others, (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Cousins, 2013; ReNAPRI, 2014) have argued extensively for an approach that recognises the limitations of big-agriculture and supports rural accumulation from below. The perspectives and experiences of youth provided in this research support this approach and clearly indicate fertile ground among youth for such an approach.

5. Implications

Through their narratives, youth also clearly communicated their needs within the sector. While a wide number of suggestions and requests emerged from the 573 narratives which were collected. With a few exceptions, these could broadly be grouped under four main themes:

- Career guidance and information at school level to assist them in making informed decisions about their futures.
- Support to study agriculture and other related fields.
- More job opportunities in the sector.
- Better support in the form of start-up inputs, extension services and drought relief to those who do start their own farms.

Indirectly this suggests the following three points.

5.1 The importance of mentors and role models

Firstly, more role models and mentors are needed who are visible to aspirant youth and are able to provide guidance and support. Beyond the need for local actors who can serve as beacons as youth attempt to navigate difficult career choices, there appeared to be a need among youth for role models who could demonstrate that their aspirations were not simply unrealistic fantasies. The importance of mentors is widely recognised across many fields (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Gibson, 2004), and is particularly important in terms of building civic engagement (Emmett, 2004), entrepreneurial competence (Bosma *et al.*, 2012) and context-specific agricultural success (Haggblade *et al.*, 2015).

However, because successful growth into livelihood-level farming is highly dependent on emotional and financial support from intimate support circles, the importance of visible role models also needs to be considered in light of the dynamics between youth, their peers and their parents. Insights from our data into the pressures youth face from their immediate community suggests that agricultural career guidance through high school may be as much about directly supporting youth as it is about sensitizing the communities on whom they rely. Matlala and Shambare's work into the notion of "black tax" in South Africa suggests that youth's dreams and passions are, quite often, subservient to the family's expectation to provide for them financially. The expectation is that the family be paid back for time and money spent raising young people.

This may go some way towards explaining the intense pressure some youth faced from their families *not* to pursue agriculture despite their stated interest and satisfaction they derived from it. This reiterates the need to focus on sensitisation and career guidance that considers the communal context in which the career decisions of youth get made, particularly in more traditional rural areas.

5.2 Pioneers need better state support

Secondly, improved support and investment into what appears to be a relatively prolific set of aspirant micro-farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs are needed to ensure that a viable and vibrant

alternative to the large-scale monopolistic agricultural sector is able to emerge. The NDP, National Growth Plan and the first cycle of the Medium Term Strategic Framework all provide some form of overarching mandate to individual departments for this (Drimie, 2016). However, while all of these documents target aspects of the agricultural system and, at times, may seek to drive integration across departments, the overarching policy landscape remains acutely incoherent (Drimie 2016). This “profound lack of coherence”, has “important implications for a food system that is faltering in many respects” (Drimie, 2016: 1). This may suggest a stronger role for the Office of the Presidency is needed in order to improve policy alignment.

The fact that a small number of profitable smallholder farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs are appearing already, in spite of a dearth of official support, is testament to the viability of these forms of production (Okunlola *et al.* 2016) as well as to the scale of what could be achieved with a substantial ramping-up of context-sensitive support (Fan *et al.*, 2013; Okunlola *et al.*, 2013). While a review of the extensive body of literature on how to support the emergence of smallholders is not the intention of this paper, Aliber and Hall’s (2012) work to which this paper refers extensively suggests that spending to improve shared infrastructure and extension support in just a few regions where the majority of smallholders are concentrated, as opposed to trying to invest into specific farmers across the country, may be the most effective means of investing limited financial resources.

5.3 New approaches to skills development and communal learning

Thirdly, methods of grassroots learning and information sharing are needed that are capable of transcending education and extension services beset with long-term structural challenges (ASSAf, 2017). A growing body of work around peer-to-peer learning as a model for agricultural extension has emerged which points towards this approach (Gwandu *et al.*, 2014; Kelly *et al.*, 2017). The narratives collected from youth corroborate current literature that suggests the current education system is failing in terms of the quality and relevance of the education it delivers, while at the same time being crippling in terms of the costs of tuition (NPC, 2012; Spaul, 2013; NYDA, 2015). Similarly, while much has been written about the revival of the state-led extension service, few gains have been made in practice (ASSAf, 2017).

It seems clear that agricultural curricula, at both school and tertiary level, need to be focused on the skills youth need to realise careers as farmers on small- to medium-sized farms rather than the specialised demands of the large-scale commercial farming sector. This was recognised to an extent in the DoA’s 2005 AET strategy as well as ASSAf’s 2017 consensus study, yet progress in the intervening 12 years punctuating these two reports seems to have been very slow.

However, if we accept that the shift from subsistence to livelihood level production is a slow process consisting of, among other things, the incremental accumulation of capital, competencies and market linkages, what does this mean for the way we train and support youth? Similarly, what would an appreciation for the fact that an agrarian transition is not something which takes place within the individual, but rather within an intergenerational family network, mean for the kinds of support we offer?

In light of trends emerging elsewhere in the educational sector (Hakkarainen *et al.*, 2004; Capello & Faggian, 2005; Johnson & Johnson 2013; Beers *et al.*, 2016; Quendler & Lamb, 2016; Töytäri *et al.*, 2016) we speculate that the dominant mentality of training as an event experienced by youth between high school and their working lives may need to make way for a less intensive but more sustained process of life-long learning which understands successful family farming as a communal competency. This would mean providing training which helps young rural people and their families incrementally overcome practical knowledge barriers as they expand production and develop as farmers over decades. This implies considering training which supports the different roles various family members play within the farming enterprise and involves multiple generations within a community.

Given the increasing recognition of the power of applied, place-based learning (Sobel, 2004; McInerney *et al.*, 2011; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014; ASSAf, 2017), our findings imply the need to consider cost-effective modes of learning that take place within rural communities rather than at campuses in urban centres. Instead of families within an area saving to send a few individuals out to learn, there may be merit in reversing this process by pooling financial and non-financial resources to embed skilled resources within communities to train a wider number of people for a few weeks at a time. In this way, course content could be linked to practical examples within learners' own contexts, and while the content could be pitched at a specific audience, entire communities could, to some degree, benefit from being able to join classes and student presentations. Soil analysis could be taught based on students' own soils, watershed management on their own watersheds, etc. The Department of Higher Education and Training's proposed idea of community colleges (based in existing communal infrastructure such as schools or community halls) could be one potential opportunity for pursuing this (DHET, 2013 in ASSAf, 2017). At present, civil society organisations and private sector extension services may be better positioned to deliver on this than state actors.

Insights from Majee *et al.*'s (2017) work in the Theewaterskloof region of South Africa suggests that the impacts of designing these kinds of intergenerational learning processes could extend well beyond the agrarian dimensions, with positive implications for much wider communal health and wellbeing.

6. Conclusions

The research provides the first empirical study into youth attitudes and expectations of agricultural careers in South Africa. Results showed that attitudes towards careers in agriculture varied greatly. While a set of negative perceptions emerged from the narratives as anticipated, over one third of respondents expressed a clear interest and passion for agriculture. This interest persisted in spite of a range of pervasive social norms and stigmas. This raises the need to begin questioning the commonly accepted truth that youth are not interested in agriculture. From a youth perspective, our findings suggest that the interests and expectations of youth are more than sufficient to warrant substantial investment into engaging them as active co-creators in the re-design of the food system based on the principles of accumulation from below.

However, at present youth's vision for themselves within the sector appears to be contrary to the current reality, in which 90 per cent of jobs within South Africa's supposedly "advanced" commercial agricultural sector comprise low-skilled minimum wage positions (Minde *et al.*, 2015). With the exception of a privileged and predominantly white minority, this places youth who choose to enter the agricultural sector in a structurally conflicted position that is humiliating and contrary to their sense of internal agency. Considered in this light, the turn away from agriculture is not paradoxical, it is a sign of how far youth will go to avoid engaging in what some narratives referred to as "slave labour".

Accordingly, if the agricultural sector remains a source of disappointment, uncertainty and humiliation for bright-eyed youth who attempt to engage in the sector, the turn away from the sector in the face of high unemployment is likely to continue. Given the scale of the youth crisis in South Africa and the need for a structural transition within the food system, failing to engage the passion and energy of today's youth in this challenge would be a great loss and one which society can ill afford.

Notes

1. Because collectivist cultures emphasise people's interdependence within the group, people's behaviour is largely regulated by group norms rather than personal attitudes (Vogt & Laher, 2009).
2. The dominance of white farmers in agriculture is largely a result of South Africa's recent history with apartheid.

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Appendix A. Sensemaker questionnaire



Welcome to our Sense Maker questionnaire, we'd like to invite you to add your voice to a Stellenbosch University research project which aims to improve the way that training organisations like the Sustainability Institute respond to the needs of young people in South Africa. Its an opportunity for you to share your individual experiences and ideas, so there really are no right or wrong answers.

This study is being done because we believe youth voices matter and need to be heard! However, participation is completely voluntary, so if you feel like this is not for you, that's cool too.

Also you will have the choice to keep the answers you provide completely anonymous if you like. The responses you provide in this process will not in any way influence your admission into any training programme or job position you may be applying for through Harambee.

By continuing with this survey I confirm that:

- I have had the process explained to me in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
- All issues related to privacy and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide have been explained to my satisfaction.

This study has been approved by the Humanities Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at Stellenbosch University as part of Luke Metelkamp's PhD research and will be conducted according to accepted and applicable national and international guidelines and principles.

Field Worker Name: _____

Location: _____

Time: _____

Date: _____



Think of a real or imaginary example of a time when you, or another young member of your community, were faced with a difficult decision about a career in agriculture.

Provide a short description of this event in the space below:

Please give your story a title:

Overall the tone of my story was:

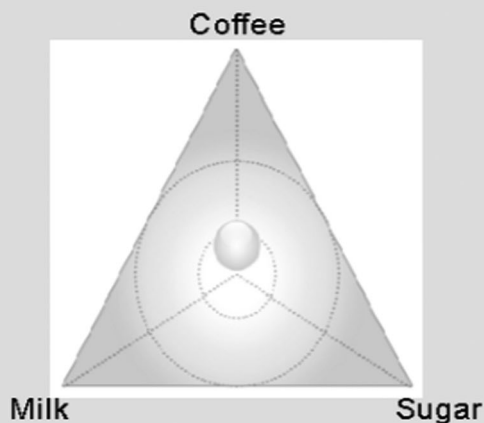


Add your name and surname:

Keep it nameless

Warm up example:

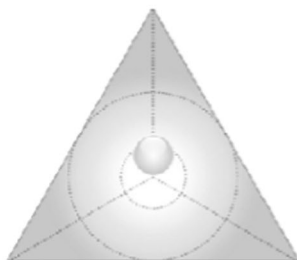
How do you like your coffee?



1. Black Coffee
2. Milky Coffee
3. Milky Coffee with sugar

People in your story tend to regard work in agriculture as...

a useful stepping stone to something better

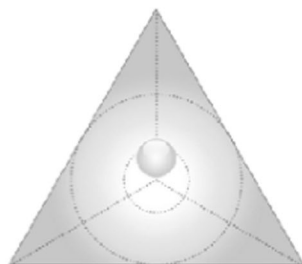


a means of survival in tough times an exciting career path

N/A

People in your story were hoping to..

come across income generating opportunities

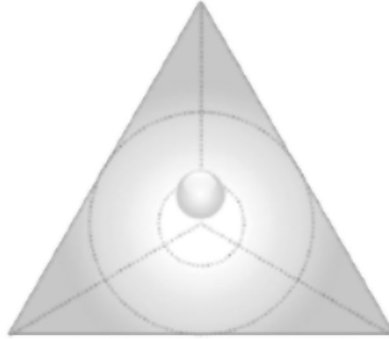


find stable employment start their own business

N/A

Characters in your story were mainly motivated by a desire to...

make a good living



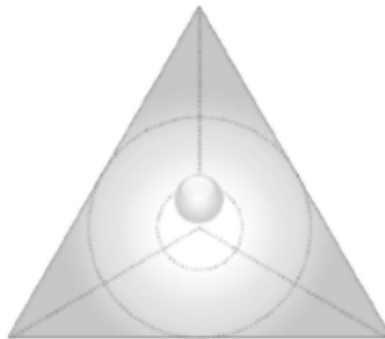
protect the environment

help their community

N/A

The main challenges youth in your example faced were...

in their personal lives



at place of learning or work

because of a lack of opportunities



The decision in the story I described was challenging because...

making decisions regarding employment is always challenging.



making choices around working in agriculture is particularly difficult.

N/A

The story I just shared shows that youth...

see no hope for themselves.



have hopes that are completely unrealistic.

N/A

Looking back on things, characters in my story would have done better if they...

accepted the facts and moved on with their lives



worked harder to rise above their challenges.

N/A

Youth like those the ones I described in my story tend to see themselves as...

agents of change.



workers in a bigger system.

N/A



How common is your story?

- Very rare
- Uncommon
- Relatively common
- Very common

Who do you feel needs to hear your story?

- Other youth
- My family
- Training organisations
- My Friends
- The government
- Employers

Other

- N/A

Youth in your story felt...

- Proud
- Empowered
- Overwhelmed
- Ashamed
- Motivated
- Calm
- Depressed
- Lost/Confused
- Inspired
- Lazy
- Angry

Other

- N/A



Now just a few questions about you:

Age

- 15-18 years 19 - 22 23-26
 27-30 Older than 30

Gender

- Female Male
 N/A

Home language**Level of schooling completed****Number of family members employed in agriculture:**

N/A

Work history

- I have had a job before I have run my own business
 Neither of the above



7/9

I would like to be invited to participate in a feedback session with other story tellers in 2017 to hear more about the outcomes of this process

YES / NO

Contact details:
