Youth Are Not The Problem; Broken Systems Are. It's Time To Put Them at the Centre of Agri-Food Systems

For years, the narrative has been the same: "Young people are not interested in agriculture." "They lack skills." "They want quick money."

But evidence from a study commissioned by AGRA and the Council of Governors (CoG) in five Kenyan counties; Bungoma, Kakamega, Kirinyaga, Meru, and Nakuru tells a radically different story. Young people are already in agri-food systems. The real problem is not their willingness or capability. The problem is that most youth are trapped in the lowest-value, highest-risk and least profitable parts of the agricultural economy.

They dominate informal retailing, small-scale production and casual labour, where incomes are unstable and vulnerability is high. Yet, they remain significantly excluded from the more profitable and resilient segments of the value chain such as aggregation, processing, logistics, mechanisation services, quality assurance, warehousing and structured marketing.This exclusion is both an economic failure and a policy failure.

Agriculture contributes about **20**% to the **GDP** in Kenya and employs **over 40**% of the total population and nearly 70% of the rural population (KNBS, 2023). Beyond its economic weight, agriculture underpins food and nutrition security, drives foreign exchange earnings and is central to climate adaptation. However, youth remain largely excluded. Although they constitute more than 75% of Kenya's population, only **28.5**% are engaged in agriculture and food systems.

Unlocking this potential is both an economic and social necessity. Engaging youth in agribusiness can drive job creation, digital innovation, climate-smart enterprises and value addition. Even so, barriers persist, including limited access to land and finance, lack of structured markets, low prices, late payments and fragment institutional delivery.

Most importantly, we continue to train youth without creating functioning economic pathways for them to succeed. The findings from the AGRA-CoG study are particularly revealing. While enormous investments have been made in youth agribusiness training programmes, training alone has not translated into sustainable incomes. In fact, 58 percent of surveyed youth identified low and volatile prices as their biggest challenge. 16 percent cited low demand, while a mere 3 percent identified lack of market information as a major constraint. This is not primarily a skills problem. It is a market systems problem.

Young people are trained in poultry production but have no reliable buyer for their eggs. They learn horticulture but lack cold storage or aggregation centres. They are certified in mechanisation but cannot access a tractor through leasing. Skills without assets, working capital, and structured offtake are like fuel without an engine, plenty of energy, zero movement.

What must we do then? At the onset, Government at both levels must shift from funding activities to funding pathways. This means embedding youth agribusiness priorities in long term plans with dedicated budget lines, not simply in policy documents as aspirational commitments.

Critically, governments must use their procurement power. County governments buy food for hospitals, schools and other institutions. Ring-fencing some of that demand for youth-led enterprises and ensuring timely payment creates immediate, predictable cash flow. That is more powerful than any training manuals.

Development partners must also stop funding parallel projects that operate outside county systems. The test of success should not be how many youth were trained, but how many have stable incomes after 24 months. Partners should support blended finance instruments guarantee schemes, equipment leasing and matching grants that reduce first-loss risk for youth.

The private sector, including processors, aggregators and retailers, must see youth not as a social project but as a supply chain opportunity. Youth can be reliable out-growers, last-mile distributors, and quality assurance agents if given contracts.

Youth must organise. Individual efforts in fragmented markets fail. Youth-led cooperatives, savings groups and service enterprises can aggregate volumes, share assets, and negotiate better prices. Youth must also demand accountability including tracking whether programmes actually deliver market access.

The bottom line is this: youth disengagement from agriculture is a rational economic response to broken systems, not a cultural or motivational deficit. Where markets are structured, payments are predictable, and risks are shared, youth thrive.

The Model County Youth in Agribusiness Strategy developed by CoG in partnership with AGRA provides a practical pathway forward. It emphasises market-driven opportunities, staged financing, institutional coordination, climate resilience, value addition and skills aligned to actual economic demand. This is the kind of systems thinking Kenya urgently needs.

It is time we stopped asking how to "fix" young people and started asking how to fix the systems that continue to exclude them. This way, agri-food systems will finally deliver what they have promised for decades: decent livelihoods for the generation that will inherit them.

Written by Mary Mwiti, EBS – Chief Executive Officer, Council of Governors

https://www.the-star.co.ke/opinion/star-blogs/2026-06-23-mwiti-youth-are-not-the-problem-broken-systems-are