

Farming, a viable way of life: youth and a multi-generational approach

“My son doesn’t want to work on farm, but we want to keep it for a younger farmer to come in, but it is so hard to make a living, there is nothing for young people to grow into.”

Global Dialogue Participant

Groups from North Uist, South West Scotland, the Borders, Fife, South Lanarkshire, the Highlands, Oyo State, Milpa Alta, Mexico City, Johannesburg, Stellenbosch, Molow, Coastal Kenya, the Philippines, Indonesia¹⁶ and Laos all spoke about their concerns over the lack of young people involved in farming, and consequently the long-term sustainability of this livelihood.

The groups discussed their concerns over factors that make farming an undesirable and financially unviable livelihood for younger generations. These include changes in land-use away from agriculture, a narrative of farming as ‘backward’, and a contrast between the intensity of labour required and financial returns.

The groups from South Lanarkshire and Oyo State emphasised how land-use change driven by carbon-offset and profit-driven policies make farmers’ jobs more precarious:

“We are going down a road where small farms are gotten rid of, where land is bought for trees; there is a big push to buy land to grow trees. You can get more money for it. Farms are displaced and then there is nothing for young people to grow into.”

Participants from Oyo State said that land-use change away from agriculture and towards other industries made farmers less likely to want their children become farmers themselves. Similarly, older generations of farmers shared a concern for what climate change will mean for the continuation of the livelihood.

The idea of ‘backwardness’, that farming is not being considered a modern way of life, was echoed across conversations. Yet, how people understood the idea in practice differed.

For one Scottish participant the idea of ‘backwardness’ was tied to the practicalities of the job: “a lot of people think farming is backward. The idea you work seven days a week and you don’t have holiday.” They emphasised how this view of farming was concurrent with an approach where in a rush towards modernity, labour is being stripped off in favour of mechanisation making farming “a lonely business.”

For people in Oyo State and Bandung, ‘backwardness’ was linked to engaging in local food practices and to differences between rural and urban places. In Nigeria, this is seen in the younger generations’ preference for “modern maize” as opposed to Millet porridge, a practice picked up through migration to urban areas. The group from Indonesia shared the same concern in addition to young people not wanting to stay in rural areas.

Finally, some participants highlighted how in their contexts, farming is labour-intensive with little returns, making it even less likely for young people to want to become farmers.

Groups from Johannesburg and Oyo State agreed that “farmers and food producers find it difficult to encourage young people to take farming seriously as a viable and valued occupation. Youth often see farming as hard work with little economic reward, especially when there are other jobs available in the cities.”

Scottish participants similarly highlighted how “Our children don’t want to be farmers. They saw us work our socks off. They inherited passion but not the desire to do this work.”

Overall, as stated by the group from the Philippines, participants from many places shared a worry of how the current generational gap will lead to a lack of farmers in the future.

How can youth be engaged in farming?

“Youth is a super important theme to talk about, we are killing their future, we have to make them part of decision making, how do we share the purpose of caring for life through growing food and working the land?”

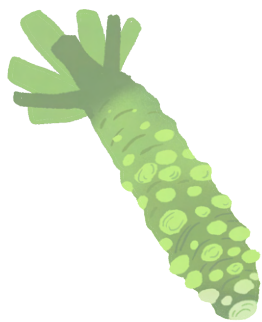
Global Dialogue Participant

Most groups also shared ways in which they were working to engage younger generations as well as work in a multi-generational approach.

To (re)engage youth in farming, the groups from Coastal Kenya, Indonesia¹⁷, North Uist, and Oyo State have focused on sharing local, Indigenous sustainable farming methods as a tool to work across generations.

The group from Coastal Kenya focuses on sharing Traditional Knowledge on indigenous food systems, particularly best traditional practices on crop wild relatives, indigenous vegetables, herbal medicine and bee-keeping. They have also developed educational programs which have been incorporated into schools where Kaya Elders speak with students about the social, cultural, and environmental importance of indigenous foods. These approaches have enabled them to see an increase in the number of young people involved with conservation of sacred Kaya forests and the rich agrobiodiversity within the landscape, about 20-30% of members of the group are youth.

The group from Bandung is focusing on engaging youth to be farmers, eat local food and live in rural areas. To do this, they specifically focus on working with multiple generations simultaneously so that young people learn about indigenous plants and food production from their elders. To make the process more engaging and viable they support demand for the products through social media marketing and creating direct links between consumers and producers.



Mazuma Coastal Kenya

Mazuma is a vegetable high in Iron used to treat measles.

Object brought by participants to represent something that they are proud of in their food systems.



Global Dialogue Participants share their hopes and concerns for our food systems

The group from North Uist shared how they have been encouraging youth to move back to the islands and take part in crofting, a traditional small-scale farming system used across Scotland. By involving young people they hope to bring fresh ideas into long-standing practices. Further, this small-scale food production method is better adapted to geographical challenges like poor soil fertility and weather conditions.

In Oyo State they are following a biocultural heritage mode and setting up community seed banks with the aim of “empowering the community” to care for these local varieties and to change the youth’s approach to local foods.

Involving young people and the multiple kinds of knowledge Exchange: Milpa Alta, México and Highlands, Scotland

The group from the Highlands was keen to find out if food growing education in school was the reason behind the success behind the group of young producers from Milpa Alta. The members from the Milpa Alta group said that their farming knowledge did not come from school but rather was passed on through family generations. One person said that their reason for growing food is driven by their connection to Milpa Alta, having been born there, and having “a collective and ancestral call for the land and the products, and to keep them alive.” Milpa Alta group members compared the knowledge they hold to other kinds of knowledge “out there” which are not about how to produce food agroecologically but instead encourage the use of agrochemicals.

Farming as a financially viable and empowering livelihood

While the groups from Stellenbosch Laos and Milpa Alta also spoke about the importance of traditional Indigenous local food systems, their contributions focused on changing the narrative around the value and financial viability of farming, to one where farming is seen as an empowering activity. To do so, the group from Stellenbosch works on communicating how local farmers are creating sustainable jobs for themselves, while growing food for their families and the local community.

The group from Laos had focused on promoting farming as a good source of income for young students alongside their studies. The group organises workshops on planting, storing, and selling food at markets to support farmers to be self-sufficient. A young farmer taking part in the dialogue shared that youth unemployment was a significant issue in their country. Yet she has found that engaging with this group, where farming techniques are passed on through family relationships, has provided her with favourable working conditions: **“I enjoy the autonomy that came with deciding what to grow, eat, and sell.”** The fact that resources were used circularly on the farm and that she could still live close to her home made the work even more attractive.

The Milpa Alta group, made up of young producers, shared how for them producing food in sustainable ways driven by Indigenous practices was part of a broader socio-political movement to reclaim their territory. This made them see their work as intrinsically valuable.

Groups also spoke about broader approaches that should accompany the work to engage younger generations. The group from South Lanarkshire saw the role of government investment as critical. They highlighted that this investment should equal those being made in renewable energy sources. In the dialogue between México City, Milpa Alta, Coastal Kenya, Oyo State, and South Lanarkshire, participants agreed that when farming is discussed in schools it needs to be presented as a “serious, viable, and desirable way of living, rather than a leisure activity”. Similarly, groups from the Philippines and Molokai thought it crucial for young people to “learn the skills and recognise it as vital for their future”, to ensure that farming is seen as inherently contemporary.

Thus, for many Global Dialogue participants the engagement of youth is vital to ensure that this livelihood continues and is seen as a sustainable and valuable profession and way of life.



Hoe **Oyo State, Nigeria**

Hoes have been passed down from generation to generation, to ensure food security. The challenge of using this cannot be overemphasized. This is what we have and what we are still using. This is connection to our tradition.

Object brought by participants to represent something that they are proud of in their food systems.