

Why is youth so invisible?

The role of youth in natural resources development in Kenya and Uganda



Over 25 percent of the world's population – some 1.7 billion people – are between the ages 10 and 24. In Kenya and Uganda it is 35 percent. Many are born into poor rural families who rely on natural resources (NR) for their livelihoods. 'Youth are our future' is a popularly held viewpoint. So why is youth so 'invisible'? Why is there not greater investment in understanding their role in realising our aspirations for tomorrow? This research suggests that youth are major stakeholders in using NR for livelihood activities. Their role must be better understood if they are to have adequate opportunities to build livelihoods on their own terms.

'Youth are our future' is a well-meaning phrase but the adult world usually interprets this as support for vulnerable young people. It focuses on areas of public policy concern such as the lives of street children, juvenile delinquents, youth combatants, and school drop-outs. Little is known of the vast majority of the 1.7 billion young people who live in rural poverty and whose lives will never make the headlines.

Rural Youth Livelihoods Project

Kenya and Uganda are typical of many developing countries where the rural youth population is growing. Their interests and needs are not well understood as they begin to formulate their livelihood strategies, particularly their access to local natural resources. This gap in understanding is now seen as a constraint to

developing suitable policies and services to support them. Indeed, failure to consider youth in NR policy and practice is likely to result in continued cycles of rural poverty.

The Rural Youth Livelihoods Project was set up to address this gap. Its aim was to support the efforts of rural youth by providing policy-makers, development practitioners and educators with a clearer picture of the role of NR in their lives and livelihoods strategies.

Researching youth

Evidence was gathered from young people about their interests and their livelihoods. Visits were made to field-based organisations in both countries to see how the interests of young people were reflected in rural development projects. In Uganda a year-long programme investigated the work of youth groups in Soroti and Tororo Districts using focus group discussions and interviews with individuals. Reflective journals were used to capture the uncertain twists and turns of the formative processes of livelihoods development over time. A self-administered photographic survey also identified the use of assets and resources of particular importance to young people. Towards the end of the project a formal questionnaire survey gathered information from 180 youth across three districts in Uganda and 120 youth in two districts in Kenya. The survey was stratified on the basis of school attendance (primary school, secondary school and school leaver).

Visits were also made to a range of government organisations in both countries to review the extent to which the interests of youth were 'visible' in current rural and related cross-cutting development policies and strategies.

It is now time to mainstream youth in NR-related development policies



Challenging the 'received wisdom'

The 'received wisdom' in Kenya and Uganda, is that young people are not interested in deriving a livelihood from natural resources. This is also embedded in local policies and institutions. Yet the field data from this project challenged this wisdom. For the vast majority of rural youth using NR was a key feature in their formative lives and livelihoods, although the dependency on them did vary considerably from one person to another. Some engaged extensively in arable, horticultural and livestock production but for others it was little more than keeping a few chickens, or growing some vegetables to meet immediate social expenses. Income from NR was also used in a variety of strategic and long-term ways such as meeting school expenses, gaining income for further investment in NR, or accumulating investment capital for other income-earning activities.

For many a broad and varied income-earning portfolio was essential. Youth from poor families could not rely on farming as their sole source of income as this required access to land or money to rent land and this was not usually available to them. So 'mixing and matching' farming with other income earning activities was common among both young men and women. An acknowledged comparative advantage of young people was their strength and stamina, a characteristic they exploited to generate income by labouring for other people e.g. land preparation, carrying goods to market. Common pool resources also provided opportunities, especially for young men, to work independently or in groups to dig sand, make bricks or produce charcoal.

Natural resources were important because of their immediate practical use, their long term strategic value and the rich portfolio of opportunities they offered. The range of available arable and horticultural crops provided opportunities to work on the family farm while meeting the demands of the school year; harvesting and processing from common pool resources met the needs of those with little or no capital; and chickens and small stock rearing provided self-reproducing capital for those wishing to accumulate assets.

Young people also had needs by virtue of their situation – growing up but not yet adult. Their livelihood portfolios varied from season to season; they were opportunist and often short-term as they tried to manipulate their activities to meet rapidly changing needs. They were not marked by consistent attempts to accumulate financial capital or other assets. Rather, there was considerable adjustment to accommodate changing circumstances, events and interests – a new school, Christmas, a bicycle. The income earned may, to an adult, seem of little consequence. But if it was enough to buy those schoolbooks, that new dress or this bicycle, then it was significant from the perspective of a young person.

The research also suggested that over time, youth livelihood strategies do become more focused and the number of activities undertaken accordingly reduces. As formative livelihoods take shape, activities such as charcoal production and brick-making decline and in their place they move towards activities based on more sustained use of natural resources and land management.

'Invisible' in rural development policy

Youth were only occasionally 'visible' in NR-related policy documents. Most commonly, their particular interests and concerns were subsumed within the broader category of 'disadvantaged groups' or 'women'. When youth was mentioned, they were often portrayed at one and the same time as victims – chronically poor, economically at risk, socially vulnerable – and villains – seeking urban life styles and livelihoods rather those of farming or related agri-business, environmental vandals, criminals, and worse. Such images associate all young people with problems and crises. They emphasise youth dependence on the adult world and detract from youth as rural constituents in their own right. The mis-match between youth activities and aspirations as found in the field studies, and youth as presented and dealt with in policy, pointed up the problem. Policy does not address the particular needs and interests of rural youth because those working on it do not understand what young people do, especially their involvement in NR management, and more generally in the rural economy.

Rethinking youth

The challenge facing development workers is to recognise the qualities of 'youthhood' and to meet the needs of young people as they move toward adulthood. Rural development agencies have been slow to realise this and the potential of building partnerships with young people. Rural service providers need to put aside their fixed and predominately negative views on youth and adopt a more open and inclusive dialogue with young people about their livelihood strategies. It means recognising that young people already make a considerable contribution to rural life. The challenge is to find ways to facilitate the 'inter-generational exchange' that lies at the heart of sustainability.

In sum, it is now time to mainstream youth in NR-related development policies. This will not be an easy task but it has the potential to provide sustained benefits for young and old alike and to make an appreciable contribution to achieving goals for sustainable management of natural resources on which so many livelihoods depend.

R8211 Understanding and enhancing youth livelihoods in rural East Africa



Paul's story

Paul lives comfortably in a mud-brick house with a tin roof in Uganda. He owns 1.5 ha of land and grows coffee, maize and bananas. But in 1986 he left primary school before graduating. He had no land because his father had sold it to buy a new sewing machine in an unsuccessful attempt to revive his faltering tailoring business.

Paul's first enterprise was brewing local beer using bananas he bought from money earned as a farm labourer. He used his savings from brewing to hire 0.75 ha of land to grow maize and beans. Following a successful maize harvest, he bought a second-hand bicycle and used it to carry firewood to the nearest town. In 1992, he joined a rotating savings and credit scheme with some friends. This only lasted eight months, but it was long enough for Paul to receive a payout. With this he went to Kampala, and bought second-hand clothes, which he took back and sold in his local village market. He earned enough to start trading in coffee by agreeing prices with farmers when the beans were still growing. Paul has continued to expand his farming activities growing cabbages and tomatoes, at times renting more land to expand production.

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