

AGRICULTURE, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT, AND THE CHALLENGE FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN RURAL AFRICA

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Résumé : *L'auteur soutient que la revalorisation de l'activité agricole pourrait, sans doute, diminuer le taux de chômage parmi les jeunes Camerounais. Il constate qu'à l'heure actuelle bon nombre de jeunes Africains abandonnent le secteur agricole et poursuivent d'autres activités professionnelles. Il énumère les raisons pour ce choix, et il propose des pistes pour changer la réputation négative de l'agriculture parmi les jeunes. Puis il suggère que des liens positifs pourraient être tissés entre l'enseignement de Jésus et l'expérience agricole.*

Abstract : *The author of this article maintains that the unemployment among the young Cameroonians could be diminished through the rehabilitation of agricultural activity. He observes that currently many young Africans abandon farming and agricultural activity to pursue other kinds of livelihood. He lists several possible reasons for this choice, and he suggests some ways that the negative reputation of agriculture might be changed among African youth. He goes on to suggest that positive links might be made between the teaching of Jesus and the experience of farming in Africa.*

The socio-economic and cultural importance of agriculture in rural Africa cannot be over emphasized considering that more than sixty percent of those who live in rural Africa depend on farming for their livelihood. Agriculture plays a primordial role not only in supplying food to village dwellers as a means to combat hunger, but also for social well-being, as the surplus food is sold to traders who, in turn, supply urban and city markets (World Bank, 2007, InterAcademy Council, 2004).

Cameroon in particular, plays a leading role in supplying food and other agricultural products to neighboring countries such as Chad, Central African Republic, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria (FONJONG, 2004, p.14). Since independence, the economies of most African countries have depended on agriculture (NEPAD, 2013, p.3).

However, despite the important socio-economic and cultural role agriculture plays in rural Africa, many village dwellers continue to live in abject poverty due to a number of factors such as; lack of technical knowledge for better agricultural exploitation, most farm holders who desire to expand

their exploitations are financially handicap (as access to credit is difficult), age and gender variations, land tenure system which make access to land very difficult to some small scale farmers in some parts of Cameroon. Most village dwellers that practice agriculture are of advanced ages, mostly women while most youths (25 – 35 years) are not interested in agriculture. They see agriculture as a sector for the unschooled and for those who have failed in life.

In this article, we will seek to discover the opportunities Agriculture offers for youth employment and the possibilities of integrating agriculture and discipleship. The central research question for this article is: Can Agriculture Serve as a Key for Youth Unemployment in Cameroon and a Platform for Discipleship? To this central research question are associated the following subsidiary questions:

- What population, age groups and sexes are involved in agriculture in the villages of Cameroon? What is their social status and role in the village?
- Why are most young Africans not interested in Agriculture?
- How might young African Christians be motivated to see agriculture more positively, as a potential area for employment, and about following Christ?

Agricultural Actors in rural Cameroon, their Social Status and Role in their Communities

Agriculture is arguably the main source of livelihood of all village-dwellers in Cameroon. Xinshen DIAO and Hazell PETER, (2010, p. 2) argue that this is the case all over Africa. Our intention in this section is to identify the sex and age groups involved in farming, their social status, and the role they play in their communities. My own experience in agricultural extension in rural Africa will partly be the focus in this section. I will also refer to the experiences of other researchers who are working in the villages of Cameroon. Some of the observations mentioned in this section may need further field research.

Since the colonial era, agriculture in Cameroon and Africa in general has always been practiced by the less privileged people with low levels of education. Most of them did not go to school or dropped out of school for varied reasons. During the colonial and post colonial periods, most African families had little access to education and finances. As a result, many were introduced to crop cultivation by their colonial masters. This trend has continued over the years until recently when there has been a proliferation of schools in villages. Considering the importance of education, parents in most villages today encourage their children to go to school so that upon completion, they can have white collar jobs to help them out of misery rather than engage them in agriculture. A study conducted by Foday E. MACBAILEY, (1983) in Muyuka South-West region of Cameroon among plantain and cassava farmers

indicates that they hope their children will pursue one of five occupations, namely, farming, medicine, teaching, politics or business. The study reveals that among the top preference for their children are medicine and business professional. No farmers indicate that they want their children to become farmers because they think farming is for the low class in the society who are less respected and valued.

Most of the village dwellers that carry out agricultural exploitation are the aged. Their ages range between 45 to 65 years. Most of these people have worked toiled every day of their lives in their fields with very little yield or gain in return. They operate small plots, applying traditional agricultural knowledge inherited from their parents and great grandparents. It has always been a difficult process to teach them new ways to cultivate their fields.

Most of those involved in farming family plots are elderly women. While most of the men concentrate their efforts on cultivating cash crops like cocoa, coffee, palm-nuts, and cotton. Today many of these men are aging and have little strength to continue working in the farms. Consequently, some of those farm plots have been fully abandoned, or are worked when the children who are being educated outside the village return home during the holidays. The direct result is that yields of most of these farms continue to drop due to lack of man power.

This situation has motivated many of the women whose husbands can no longer work to take over the exploitation of these farms (MENGESHA, 1990, p. 2). Some of the men also have decided to get married to younger women in the villages who have not had the opportunity to study in the hope that they will take over these farm plots. Some parents who have many children also decide to send some of their children whom they think are brilliant to continue studies, while those they think are academically weak stay at home, get married and continue the exploitation of their parents' farms.

Most of the women involved in agriculture have been poorly educated, and have many children to care for. Many of them live in poorly constructed homes lacking electricity, water, and good sanitary toilets. These women must expend enormous effort to sustain the kind of yields that will allow them to survive. This observation leads some to argue that: "The notion that 'women are the weaker sex' is no longer tenable as women form the backbone of agricultural labour and it is estimated that, they produce 40% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and 50% of developing nations' food." (NUHU, *et. al.*, 2004, p.1).

Some young people are also involved in rural farming. Most of the youth involved in agricultural exploitation are those who have not been privileged to acquire education. And although many of them have no formal or informal training, they have embraced agriculture as a last resort to earn a living. The

report of the African commission (2009) reveals that over 200 million people are involved in agriculture today in Africa, and that the youth account for 65% of that work force. Many observers feel that the agricultural sector in Africa and in Cameroon in particular, offers enormous potential for employment of many more young people. The government of Cameroon has encouraged the young people to engage in agriculture through the different programs put in place captioned as, “Second Generation Agriculture”.

However, despite the government’s call for young people to engage in agriculture, many still do not see the sector as a potential for full employment. A report from the World Bank affirms this saying:

Agriculture in Africa has untapped potential to create jobs, both directly and indirectly. In order to attract young people, agriculture will need to be more dynamic and appealing than it is now, and young people will need to view the sector more positively than they do now. The farms that offer attractive opportunities will have to be quite different from those that most young Africans know. Worldwide and historically, farming as a profession has rarely carried high prestige. Colloquial terms for farmer in English, such as “hayseed” and “clod-hopper,” reflect the low status of the profession even where it yields incomes higher than the national average. Thus, it is not surprising that most young people in the developing world express a desire to leave farms. (2013, p.9)

Many factors explain the reluctance of Africans to engage in full-time farming. These include a lack of mechanized tools, limited access to fertile lands, few financial guarantees and a lack of means to transform agricultural produce. Most African young people, especially those who have received a certain level of education find it difficult to use local, primitive, back-breaking tools such as machetes and hoes to farm. The fact is that agricultural practices are still carried out using local and rudimentary tools which do not guarantee high crop yields. Access to fertile land which can permit them to carry out large-scale or industrial agricultural exploitation is also a problem. Considering the financial risks involved in agriculture, many young people are hesitant. They simply do not have the financial guarantees they need to counter the risks. The fact that there are no clear policies put in place to assist young people in the transformation of their agricultural produce is also a big handicap. Most of what is produced in Cameroon is in its primary state and the lack of industrial transformation of the produce into finish products is not motivating. In fact, one can say that agriculture is still seen by many young people as a primitive activity suited only for the uneducated. In the past, it was a sort reserved for those who failed in school. All these factors continue to prevent many African young people from engaging in agriculture even though it would boost food security according to FAO, publication (2013, p.8).

This being the case, let us now examine how the teaching of agricultural skills, the mechanization of farming tools, the institution of a good land tenure system, as well as access to financial credit and good agricultural policies might motivate African young people to engage more fully in agricultural development.

How African Young People's Perception of Agriculture Might be Changed

One of the greatest obstacles for agricultural exploitation in rural Africa is that it is perceived as a primitive activity. This includes both the way farming is practiced, and the tools which are available. I have already established that many of the Africans involved in agriculture are unschooled and lack modern agricultural skills. Undeniably, many of them have never received formal training, advice from an agricultural technician, or even participated in an agricultural seminar. Instead, their practice reflects what they have learned from their parents or seen others do. For this reason, farming is seen as backward or primitive rather than modern or scientific. BAGCHEE is one of many observers who think that agricultural education is becoming increasingly important in order to change this faulty perception (1994, p. 224).

It should be noted that the way farming was done in the past is probably no longer sufficient. Many crops no longer give the same yields they did in the past. Subsistence farmers in villages in Cameroon confirm this observation. This is why we must move from the way agriculture was practiced in the past by our parents and great grandparents and learn new farming practices. For example, when agriculture was introduced during the colonial era, the soils on which crops were grown were abundant, and therefore not over exploited. Very little chemical fertilizer was applied because the soil was rich in nutrients, ensuring healthy crops and a bountiful yield. Their healthiness enabled these crops to resist various diseases, attacks from fungi, bacteria, and pests. To replenish the nutrients that had been used up after a certain period of cultivation, the land was left to fallow for three to five years before it could be worked again. Most of the food crops were grown in this manner as only cash crops such as cocoa, coffee, and palm-nuts maintained the same plot for cultivation.

Things are no longer the same today. Much of the land on which the farmers grow their crops in Cameroon has become less productive. We are going to mention some of the reasons for this state of affairs, but we do not claim to have all the answers.

The African population has increased significantly since the post-colonial era. Increasingly, people have embraced subsistence farming causing

a shortage of farming and grazing land in Cameroon and many parts of Africa today and a further worsening of the poverty state of the people (MENGISTEAB, 1996, p. 6). In some villages in Cameroon today there is such a scarcity of cultivable land that many farmers must grow crops on the same plot of land each year.

Moreover, throughout Cameroon many farmers practice slash-and-burn agriculture. This means that during the planting season they clear their farms and burn down all the farm debris directly in the field. This has a serious negative impact on the soil. The heat from the fire penetrates the soil, heating all its nutritive elements, causing many of them to evaporate. Burning also destroys the soil structure, favoring soil erosion. Crops grown in these impoverished fields produce smaller yields.

Village farmers also employ destructive tilling methods which form ridges or beds that break apart the soil particles rendering them too fine and compact. The loose soil particles do not retain water well. For the soil to retain water rain must constantly fall for a long period of time. Climate change has made this a problem today. Most farmers also suffer serious damage from pests and diseases which attack their crops because they do not have a good knowledge of how to protect their crops.

Teaching young people modern agricultural techniques might guarantee an agricultural production that is sustainable and that can constantly supply raw food stuff to the local people as well as the markets. The acquisition of technical skills therefore by many youths may permit a high production of both food and cash crops. The result would be higher income to these families. A better understanding and knowledge in farm practices could also reduce agricultural risk. This could motivate young Africans to invest in agriculture since they could hope to recover their investment and reap a higher margin of profit at the end of each planting season.

Better profits accompanied by the use of modern tools (agricultural mechanization) which decrease physical effort could attract young people into the sector. It could change their perception of agriculture as a domain for the unschooled. Better agricultural policies linked to modern technical skills in the production of various crops could guarantee many of the young farmers a regular monthly income is not unlike that of civil servants. In fact, the monthly take home for these young farmers could exceed that of most civil servants.

Increased production due to modern farm techniques would not only bring in high income to the young farmers, it might also booster the economy of the nation and supply quality food and cash crop products such as banana, cocoa and coffee to the world market:

There is abundant literature and persuasive evidence to suggest that measures to improve smallholder farmers' capacity to increase food

production and productivity, and to link to markets, will both enhance their purchasing power and increase wider food availability and so contribute to domestic and global food security. (FELICITY & VALERIO, 2012, p. 23)

Connecting Agriculture to Discipleship for a Holistic Equipping of African Young People

It is my impression that most African Christians separate their work from their understanding of what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. This is done consistently by people be they in churches or Para-church organizations, and I must acknowledge that I have practiced mission this way in the past. This is contrary to the view promoted by ELLISTON (1989) who recommends that training Christian development workers should seek to integrate new information and experience into a solidly biblical Christian worldview. He thinks that in the past technical skills were brought to farmers to help them in their secular activity only to enable them to be involved in what was understood to be the most important activity, evangelism and church planting.

If ELLISTON is right, young African farmers should be taught that the moment they come to Christ through faith, their perspective of work must change to reflect a biblical mindset (Colossians 3:17-23). This means that they should understand that all of their activities take place within the context of the Kingdom of God. There must be a transformation of their minds such that they can begin to see their farming from a Biblical worldview. This would mean, for instance, that their fundamental purpose of farming would be the stewardship of the land the Lord has placed under their care.

PERKINS (2003) explains Jesus' parable of the sower and the soil as a unique example of this perspective. The parable of the sower is among the nine parables that Jesus shared with His disciples and one of the most detailed. Here Jesus is not merely telling a story to better communicate with the masses. Rather, He is revealing the great truth that God has begun to rule through Him. This is something revealed to those who are willing to hear and listen to Him and hidden from those who are not ready.

In this parable Jesus portrays a common man in a rural setting (a farmer) with a bag of seeds walking along his field and scattering them everywhere. This picture of a Middle Eastern farmer is not unlike that of a young farmer laboring in rural Africa. He freely scatters his seeds as the story goes without worrying about the fertility of the soil. The important thing was sow the seed. The sower assumed the fertility of the soil. Jesus says that some of the seeds fell on a hard path which they could not penetrate and were eaten by birds. In another case, the seeds fell on rocky soil. These seeds survived for a while, because the surface soil had some moisture and heat. But soon the sun dried

the soil and the plants which had begun with a good germination began to die since their roots could not penetrate the rocky layer. In the third scenario, the seeds fell on thorn bushes. They began well, but as the thorns whose roots were very strong in the soil started growing rapidly, the young cultivated plants were strangled. The thorns that were growing naturally eventually, took all the water and nutrients causing the plants to die. Finally, other seeds fell on fertile soil; this soil was neither hard as the path soil, nor shallow due to rocky layers or with thorns rather, this soil was well ploughed with a lot of moisture and nutrients. The seeds did very well, developing strong roots which tapped into the available moisture and nutrient. The result was a great harvest of a hundred, sixty and thirty-fold.

Jesus explains that this parable is about the Kingdom, that is, God's reign in Christ (Mark 4:18 and Luke 8:11). The seed which is God's word lies bare in hearts of some people as Satan does not allow it to work in them to bring transformation of their lives. Satan knows the power of the word and he knows the best way of blunting its force is to keep it from sinking into human hearts. Often Christians find it difficult to read the Bible, not to mention understanding its contents. At times this is due to sin which still crowds their life as well as the spiritual forces of darkness which keep them from applying it. Jesus was underlining the importance of allowing the word to work in their lives for transformation to take place.

The shallow rocky soil is those who hear the word and quickly embrace and enthusiastically begin to grow as they show their love for the Lord. But when trouble or persecution comes in to their lives because of the word, they fall away. The truth is that these people have not embraced the whole message of the gospel. They have not understood that as disciples of Christ, they are called to carry their cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38). They have not counted the cost of being a disciple of Jesus.

The seeds which fell among thorns represent those individuals who receive the word into their lives to some degree; yet do not become fruitful because the word has been choked by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. They have not experienced a deep and thorough work of repentance. The act of wealth accumulation has completely distracted them from allowing the gospel to bring a life transformation. This could be a beneficial lesson for young farmers in Africa today if they were taught to farm not just for the accumulation of wealth but also as a means of allowing the gospel message to produce a harvest in their lives. In the last part of the parable, Jesus presents those seeds which fell on good soil and they are described as those who hear the word, understand it, and allow it to bear fruit in their lives. This fruit might be identified with that of the Spirit which Paul would mention years later (Galatians 5:22-23). These people do not only produce a harvest but help others to know Jesus and to bear fruit in their

lives as well. Permit us to suggest that both the seed and the sower had no problem as the sower here refers to Jesus.

Young farmers in Cameroon might understand more than others just how important it is to break up their hard hearts in the same way that they must prepare their land. They need to remove everything that would hinder the word of God from bearing fruits in their lives. I think this parable shows how important farming is and suggests ways farmers might integrate their faith with what they do every day.

Farming can, and should be done to the glory of God and to the advancement of his Kingdom. The African farmer who has committed himself to Christ should come to understand that he is a steward and that his caring for the land is an act of worship. As a steward of the land according to Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15, he should work the land in a way that leaves the future generation with fertile land. This is one reason why good farming practices should be observed. Young African farmers should not only lead in church (Ephesians 4:11-12) but also in their community, for that is where discipleship happens (Matthew 28:18-20).

Our suggestion is that young Christian farmers be taught in Africa how to farm in a way which leads to the communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ in their communities. Let there be a total integration of the Kingdom of God, without separating the spiritual from ordinary life. We believe a young Christian farmer in rural Africa has as the responsibility to make Christ known in their communities through the various farming activities they carry out. The practical principles which are applied in farming can, we believe, be used to help young African farmers grow spiritually and become increasingly like Christ. Just as Jesus used agrarian life to teach His disciples eternal principles, it might be beneficial in the training of people in rural Africa.

Conclusion

It is evident that agricultural development is one of the economic keys for many African economies, including that of Cameroon. It is also clear that this would entail the development of rural areas of the country and could provide new avenues for employment of young graduates if the sector is modernized. Today many voices are calling African young people to engage in agricultural exploitation. For this to happen, they need to be empowered technically and financially. There must be a good land tenure system coupled with good agricultural policies which allow them to carry out large exploitations in agriculture.

As Christ followers, we suggest that farming can be done as an activity which glorifies God and advances his Kingdom. The young African in his field

should be brought to understand that he is a steward of Creation. This should motivate him to learn and apply good farming practices.

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