



To: Administrator Mark Green, U.S. Agency for International Development
From: Mark Keenum, BIFAD Chair and President, Mississippi State University
Re: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations from BIFAD 174th Public Meeting
Date: July 29, 2019

**174th BIFAD Public Meeting: Building an Evidence Base
on Rural Youth Employment and Livelihoods**

May 8, 2018 | Washington, D.C.

BIFAD convened a public meeting to develop a shared understanding of rural labor markets and youth-specific constraints, discuss the evidence base on programs that aim to improve rural youth employment and livelihoods, outline cross-sectoral opportunities to support and empower youth to take advantage of agricultural system market opportunities, and identify knowledge gaps on which U.S. university and other research partners can generate evidence to address.

Findings:

1. The combination of improvements in health and slow fertility declines have led to “young” nations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, which has in turn led to many development challenges. In both sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the majority of youth live in rural areas.
2. The evidence indicates that rural youth have very diverse livelihoods, that agricultural production is central to those livelihoods, and that many young people face difficulty in finding income-generating activities.
3. Men and women experience the transition from economic dependence to economic independence in different ways. Young females are far less likely to work for someone outside their own family. Young rural women are less likely to be in school, employed, or in training and are more likely to be married and have children, have lower endowments of physical and human capital, including owning land, and have more gender-based constraints on their time and mobility.
4. Structural transformation—the movement of the share of labor out of farming and food into other sectors of the economy—is both a consequence of and contributor to productivity growth in the developing world, and, together with related diet transformation and rapid technological change, is conditioning opportunities for growth, poverty reduction, and rural youth employment.
5. Job opportunities improve through *traditional*, *transitional*, and *modern* stages of food system transformation. In *traditional* production systems, opportunities for youth improve slowly because food supply chains are short, local, and with little value added, and only a few jobs are generated off farm in commerce and transport. As food supply chains lengthen and reach urban areas and small- and medium-sized enterprises expand in

transitional food systems, there are more off-farm opportunities for youth employment in commerce, transport, handling, storage, and labor-intensive activities, and wages begin to increase. In the *modern* stage of rural transformation, because of quality requirements, use of capital on and off the farm increases, and skill requirements rise sharply. Youth, who are usually more skilled, benefit if the education systems improve along with the opportunities.

6. Employment and earnings opportunities depend on the extent of transformation and location, but these are not usually youth specific. We know that youth and non-youth face the same challenges, but research is needed to identify additional steps to address cognitive, experiential and other deficits among youth.
7. Evidence suggests that access to land and basic education are the main youth-specific constraints. Knowledge of new technology is also important; this is mostly gained through agricultural extension (including farmer field schools). Some evidence suggests that extension programs should try a youth focus to better reach youth. Traditional interventions to increase youth employment have focused on supply-side approaches, whereby the assumption is that youth lack the skills needed to get entry level jobs. Entry-level vacancies are assumed to exist, but youth lack the skills to get them. This is usually not true in developing countries. A private-sector-oriented approach—which is designed to increase firm output and growth, thus increasing demand for labor—is likely to be more successful.
8. Most youth employment interventions have been in urban areas, and technical and vocational training have been the most common interventions; however, the evidence suggests that the success of training in increasing youth employment is limited, at best. The results indicate that understanding youth needs and progression to employment is not informing program design. Meanwhile, firm entry is needed to increase labor demand.

Conclusions:

1. A typology can help us to place current and future opportunities for youth and their families across a continuum of rural and agricultural transformation (i.e., what they are doing and what they might be doing). Individual and family-level variables—including education, assets, and the specifics of economic engagement—can be characterized, and generalized inferences can be drawn regarding opportunities and challenges.
2. Age-disaggregated data are needed to answer questions about youth inclusion and support to youth in making the transition from economic dependence to economic independence.
3. New interventions should draw from economic/private sector-oriented approaches, addressing barriers to firm entry and firm growth that limit jobs and the opportunities available.

Recommendations:

1. USAID should continue to focus on eliminating generic economic constraints. Youth and non-youth alike need to have a positive policy environment, operate in a functional institutional environment, and have a physical environment to support them.
2. USAID should identify cognitive, experiential, and other deficits that may be hindering the youth transition to independence.

3. USAID should use demand-driven theories of change in its efforts to increase youth employment; there is limited evidence that supply-side approaches are effective.
4. USAID programming design should take into account how marriage, childbearing, and gender norms surrounding the transition to adulthood shape the opportunities and constraints for youth. Approaches may need to be different for married female youth, especially those with children.
5. USAID should address differential constraints to employment between rural and urban youth, including in access to land and basic education, which are youth-specific constraints.
6. USAID should invest in a gender and age-differentiated learning agenda for youth employment, in order to identify the primary constraints and challenges for youth to access and take up economic opportunities in the food system.
7. USAID should make use of different data collection and analytical approaches. USAID should use randomized impact evaluation methods (Randomized-Control Trials, or RCTs) to unbundle nested constraints to youth employment and to measure employment spillovers of large development investments (e.g., roads, irrigation). USAID should explore the relationship between land markets, land rights and youth employment. USAID should broaden its use of data sources beyond national statistics, including the use of revenue authority data to capture firm and individual networks and economic space transactions; map value chains and job creation across space; and overlay this with large infrastructure projects. USAID should experiment with the gender and youth dimensions of extension programs to advance a research agenda around youth employment.