Report

Creating opportunities for young people in Northern Uganda's agriculture sector

Alexandra Löwe and Sanyu Phiona

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About Youth Forward

The Youth Forward Initiative is a partnership led by the Mastercard Foundation, the Overseas Development Institute, Global Communities, Solidaridad, NCBA-CLUSA and GOAL. Its focus is to link young people to quality employment or to starting their own businesses in the agriculture and construction sectors in Ghana and Uganda. The Youth Forward Learning Partnership works across the initiative to develop an evidence-informed understanding of the needs of young people in Ghana and Uganda and how the programme can best meet those needs. The Learning Partnership is led by the Overseas Development Institute in the UK, in partnership with Development Research and Training in Uganda and Participatory Development Associates in Ghana.

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: info@odi.org.uk

www.odi.org
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Cover photo: Olivia surveys the fruits of her labor © Stephan Gladieu / World Bank

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About the authors

Alexandra Löwe is Youth Forward's Learning Partnership Applied Research Lead and Research Fellow in the Overseas Development Institute's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme.

Sanyu Phiona is Youth Forward's Learning Partnership Project Officer at Development Research and Training – Uganda.

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Abbreviations

CAO	Chief administrative officer
DYNAMIC	Driving Youth-led New Agribusiness and Microenterprise
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	Gross domestic product
IDP	Internally displaced person
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MAAIF	Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries
MFPED	Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development
NAADS	National Agriculture Advisory Service
NDP II	Second National Development Plan
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRM	National Resistance Movement
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VSLA	Village savings and loans association
Y.E.T.A.	Youth Empowerment Through Agriculture

Executive summary

This paper explores the realities of young people's livelihoods and their transition to adulthood in rural Northern Uganda. It seeks to shed light on how and why young people find employment in the agriculture sector, to determine the obstacles they face and to highlight the opportunities available to them.

Northern Uganda's agriculture sector

Agriculture is central to the employment prospects and well-being of most Ugandans: 70% of employed Ugandans work in agriculture and the sector contributes 26% to gross domestic product. It is also essential to ensuring food security and improved living standards for all Ugandans (Dalipagic and Elepu, 2014; World Bank, 2017). However, the sector is underperforming compared with the rest of Uganda's economy and its growth has not kept up with the population growth. In part, this is because it fails to attract sufficient government funding: less than 5% of the national budget for 2012-2013 went to agriculture (ONE and 40 Chances, 2013).

Agricultural production in Uganda is dominated by 2.2 million smallholder farms of between 2 and 3 hectares of land. Of these, 93% rely solely or partially on family labour and 53% only use a hoe to till their land (Dalipagic and Elepu, 2014). Rain dependence, low input usage and weak agricultural institutions have resulted in low productivity levels on these farms. As most farmers occupy a disadvantageous place in the value chain, they sell their produce directly at the farm gate for low and unstable prices. Lower levels of livestock ownership post-conflict, land issues and labour constraints all further undermine productivity levels. Few farmers have the capacity to bulk and store their produce without suffering post-harvest losses, which reduces their ability to bargain with traders or to choose to sell their produce when the prices are best. Poorly functioning markets across the region, and resultant price fluctuations, undermine their ability to invest in production-enhancing technologies, such as fertiliser or land-tillage services.

Barriers and opportunities for young people

Young people are a key part of the solution to increasing agricultural productivity in Northern Uganda. The sector holds many opportunities for young people to break the cycle of low-productivity farming, increase their earning potential and contribute to the national economy at large.

The resources young people acquire between the ages of 15 and 25 years are significant in determining their livelihood strategies as adults. There are two primary factors that limit young people's ability to increase their productivity and incomes: the first is the limited time available to them to earn money away from the land, given the labour-intensive nature of tilling and the demands made on their labour by their extended households. The second is the challenges they face in accumulating assets and resources that would increase their productivity, such as farming inputs and tools. Young people contribute at least some, and usually a significant part, of their earnings to the extended family's needs.

Access to finance

Access to markets and financial services is a challenge for most smallholder farmers in rural Uganda, regardless of age. Young people, however, find themselves at an additional disadvantage as formal financial service providers cannot cater to those under 18 without their guardian's permission. Young people reported preferring not to do this, resulting in a loss of control over their resources and a reduced ability to save.

In addition, livestock ownership is skewed slightly against younger people (MAAIF and UBOS, 2010). Given that livestock ownership is also a form of insurance against risk and a way of accumulating savings, this compounds their exclusion from financial services. Similarly, young people, more so than older farmers, lack the infrastructure necessary to store crops and benefit from price fluctuations.

Education and extension services

When young people reach the age of 15 and begin to work a piece of land independently, they are often still in school. This provides a window of opportunity to enhance the farming and business skills they have learned at home. Agriculture is taught in schools and colleges, but the main lesson young people seem to take away from this is that farming is an occupation of last resort. Agriculture is portrayed as the option for those who cannot continue in school and those who do not have the capital to go into alternative self-employment. In the absence of sufficient formal education, extension services have an important role to play in developing young people's agricultural skills. However, politicisation of extension services has had a detrimental impact on young people, who lack the social networks and capital to benefit from these services.

Gender

Girls and women in Northern Uganda are expected to contribute a greater percentage of their time to domestic chores and childcare from an early age. While their brothers become increasingly independent, they become more bound to household chores and disparities in time usage grow with age. This allocation of time results in the transmission of gender roles between generations and mean young women are less well placed to accumulate resources or make productive investments.

Damaging perceptions of young people

Young people in Northern Uganda are often maligned and blamed for all sorts of social ills. This, undoubtedly, owes in no small part to the role of children and young people in the conflict. Nevertheless, this discourse has a tangible impact on the lives of young people, who feel undervalued and unsupported. This failure to recognise the role young people play in agricultural production means policies are not tailored to their specific contexts.

Figure 1. Increasing agricultural productivity in Northern Uganda by investing in young people

Increasing agricultural productivity in Northern Uganda by investing in young people

Agriculture in Northern Uganda consists largely of low-productivity smallholder farms. Youth are the sector's future; policies and programmes to increase productivity should invest in and support young farmers. There are three interrelated areas to address:

Improved skills training

Young farmers receive little formal education or skills training. They learn from their parents and communities, whose knowledge is limited. To increase productivity, youth need training in three key areas:

Agronomics such as soil fertility management, or how to make the most of available technologies and produce more varied crops.

Small business management such as book-keeping, or how to access credit and to invest wisely.

Entrepreneurship such as understanding agricultural markets and developing a business plan.

Tailored financial services and warrantage schemes

Young farmers need credit to purchase inputs and invest in farming technology, yet formal financial services are not widely available. Young people often lack the confidence to access these limited services.

Young people also lack the infrastructure to store their crops, which would help them benefit or protect themselves from price fluctuations.

Tailored, ‘youth-friendly’ financial services and warrantage schemes would help young people increase productivity and earning potential.

More youth-targeted policies, programmes and services

Young people contribute a lot of time and energy to the sector, yet they are often perceived as lazy, drunk and uninterested in farming. As a result, agricultural extension services, policies and programmes tend to overlook them and focus on older household members.

However, it is often easier for young farmers to take advantage of policies, programmes and services aimed at increasing productivity. Young people have fewer family obligations and can therefore take more risks, or experiment with new farming techniques or technologies.

Source: Overseas Development Institute

1. Introduction

It is often asserted that young people are not interested in farming, or even in other opportunities within the agriculture sector, and that they consider agriculture a fallback option for those who cannot find more lucrative occupations. These sorts of statements are rarely grounded in data and often based on assumptions, such as the belief that young people are lazy, aspire to the higher status of urban lifestyles or are simply not aware of what the sector has to offer (for more nuanced accounts of young people and their views on the sector, see Leavy and Hossain, 2014; Tadele and Gella, 2012; Mallett et al., 2016). This youth-focused review of Northern Uganda's agriculture sector looks at how young people actually fare in rural Uganda, which particular challenges they face by virtue of their youth and what opportunities there may be for them. It seeks to shed some light on the question of how and why young people choose to stay in agricultural occupations, and why, as is so often asserted, they may not want to be farmers. For this reason, we focus on smallholder agriculture and young people's chances in this sub-sector, as this is where the majority of Northern Uganda's young people are likely to establish a livelihood.

Uganda's economy has grown rapidly and the country has seen an improvement in living standards in the past 20 years, in both urban and rural areas, which may have resulted in more opportunities for young people. The number of people living in poverty, for example, fell from 56% of the population in 1990 to 19.7% in 2012/13 (MFPED, 2014). As is to be expected, this growth has been accompanied by a decreasing role for agriculture in the economy, with the sector now making up only a little more than 26% of gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank, 2017). Nevertheless, the sector remains essential to the economic prospects and well-being of the majority of Ugandans: not only does it provide work for 70% of the employed population, but also it is essential to national food and nutrition security (Dalipagic and Elepu, 2014).

Rural young people are at a disadvantage compared with their urban contemporaries, as economic growth has been concentrated in cities and poverty rates have not fallen as rapidly in rural areas as in urban areas (Hickey, 2005). In addition, regional inequalities have continued to grow: while poverty rates decreased rapidly in the Central and Western regions, by as much as 90% and 84%, respectively (Byiers et al., 2015), they have declined by a comparatively meagre 39% in Northern Uganda (Rwabizambuga et al., 2015). The basic problems facing Uganda's agriculture sector are well understood, by both policy-makers and donors, and the intention to stimulate agricultural productivity is evident in policy documents. The question this paper poses, namely how these dynamics affect young people, is less well understood.

This paper was written as a part of the Overseas Development Institute's work as Learning Partner to the Mastercard Foundation's Youth Forward initiative. Beyond providing an overview of the agriculture sector in

Box 1. Youth Forward and DYNAMIC and Y.E.T.A. in Northern Uganda

Youth Forward

The Youth Forward initiative is a partnership led by the Mastercard Foundation, the Overseas Development Institute, Global Communities, Solidaridad, NCBA-CLUSA and GOAL. Its focus is to help young people gain good jobs in the agriculture and construction sectors in Ghana and Uganda or to help them start their own businesses. This five-year, $73.2 million initiative will reach more than 200,000 economically disadvantaged young people aged 15–24. The Youth Forward initiative takes a holistic approach that combines market-relevant skills training, mentoring, internships and access to financial services to help young people transition out of poverty and into sustainable livelihoods.

Youth Forward in Uganda

In Uganda, the Youth Forward initiative aims to reach over 174,000 young people in 12 districts in Northern and Western Uganda (see Figure 1). The Driving Youth-led New Agribusiness and Microenterprise (DYNAMIC) consortium is working towards strengthening key agricultural systems that will enable the market to create and sustain employment opportunities for economically disadvantaged young people in the Northern region of Uganda, in the districts of Gulu, Lira, Pader, Agago, Abim, Kitgum, Lamwo and Kaabong. The Youth Empowerment Through Agriculture (Y.E.T.A.) consortium provides young people aged 15–24 years who are not in full-time education with organisational, technical and foundational skills, as well as support to launch commercially sustainable agricultural enterprises in the districts of Masindi, Kiryandongo, Dokolo and Kole. It also helps them gain increased access to financial services.

Northern Uganda, it therefore seeks to provide contextual information that will be of use to the two consortia working in Northern Uganda (the work of Y.E.T.A. and DYNAMIC is described in Box 1). Much of Youth Forward's operational context is beyond the control of the initiative but has the potential to affect the success of the programme and so needs to be understood. This research also serves to highlight where lobbying and advocacy efforts may yield results – not just for participants in the initiative but for all young Ugandans in the agriculture sector.

The paper in Section 3 proceeds to a short description of the research methods and context, before discussing the need to study transitions from childhood to adulthood. Section 4 describes how children grow up to be smallholder farmers in Northern Uganda, and the important milestones they pass on their way to adulthood.[1] Sections 5 and 6 focus on the agriculture sector in Northern Uganda, the constraints to its growth and the manner in which the sector is tied into Uganda's political economy. Section 7 looks at how these broader sector dynamics affect the transitions of young people into agricultural livelihoods. The next section looks at how the transitions of young people into agricultural livelihoods are affected by these broader sector dynamics, and the final sections provide conclusions and recommendations for the Youth Forward Initative.

Photo: Young people drawing the timeline of their childhood and youth, Gulu District, Uganda (Alexandra Löwe, 19 May 2016).

1. It builds on the political economy review of Uganda written by the Learning Partnership (Löwe et al., 2016). This and other reports can be accessed at www.odi.org/projects/2787-youth-forward-learning-partnership

2. Research methods

2.1. Overview

The research consisted of two stages. The first of these involved focus group discussions with young people aged 15–25 in Gulu District, in both rural and semi-urban areas.[2] Usually, we divided the groups into males and females – though on one occasion they preferred to work together – and then asked them to draw a timeline showing the responsibilities they had taken on at each stage of their lives. While we kept our questions as open-ended as possible, at least initially, we did usually suggest they focus on issues such as livestock ownership, access to land, household chores, learning to farm and how and when they first interacted with the market. Once the young people had completed this process, the researchers discussed their timelines with them and asked for clarification where necessary. We chose this method because we wanted to hear from young people how they were experiencing the process of learning to establish a livelihood within Northern Uganda's agriculture sector. The aim was to get an idea of the constraints they faced and the opportunities available to them. These timelines were analysed in order to draw out the experiences young people had in common and, where possible, triangulated against available secondary literature and in discussion with key informants.

The second stage of the research consisted of interviews with key informants, both in Gulu District and in Kampala. We interviewed policy-makers, agriculture experts and representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that worked with young people and/or in agriculture. This process included interviews with young people tasked with representing their generation through structures such as the National Youth Parliament. The aim of these interviews was to understand the context that shapes young people's lives in rural Northern Uganda, including agricultural policies, the interests involved in implementing these and broader economic trends. Findings from these key informant interviews were complemented by a secondary literature review.

2.2. Gulu District

Given that we were able to conduct only 12 focus group discussions, we chose to hold these in Gulu District, one of the districts served by Youth Forward in Uganda. While there are differences in the agroeconomic conditions between districts, our focus group discussions concentrated on how young people acquired agricultural skills during childhood and youth, rather than the exact nature of the skills acquired. This means these transitions point to the important milestones in young people's lives, even if they do not take exactly the same form across all districts. (The Karamoja sub-region, which is atypical as a result of its largely pastoralist culture, is discussed in Box 2.)

Gulu was affected by the brutal conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and government forces, which lasted from 1986 until 2006. The LRA relied heavily on the abduction of children for use as soldiers and atrocities against the civilian population were commonplace. During the conflict, cattle rustling led to increased poverty in certain sub-regions in the north. Best estimates put the number of deaths in the region at 300,000 and to this day approximately 20% of the population live with a disability resulting from the war (Mallett et al., 2016). As the conflict caused the displacement of whole communities, its legacy continues to be felt by young people today. Some of the district's young people grew up in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), which led to interrupted transitions to adulthood.[3]

For young people in Gulu, the conflict has reduced their ability to fulfil their potential in a number of ways. First, their education was interrupted. Those who lived in IDP camps generally had good access to formal education, which was sometimes of better quality than would have been available in their home communities. However, they were often not able to experience and learn the rhythms of agricultural life as they would have done in the absence of conflict. Second, after the conflict, many communities had reduced access to education and health services, owing to the absence of qualified staff. Infrastructure such as roads and transport links were devastated too. The psychosocial impact of the conflict is much harder to gauge, but research into social life in Northern Uganda suggests the conflict

2. Distinctions between rural, urban and semi-urban areas are somewhat arbitrary. For our research, we define those communities that can easily be reached on foot from a trading centre as semi-urban.

3. People's experiences of conflict vary significantly between districts in Northern Uganda. For a comprehensive discussion of the Northern Ugandan conflict, see for example Dolan (2009), Tripp (2010) and Allen and Vlassenroot (2010).

has affected family relationships, resulting in an erosion of support structures for young people (Baines and Rosenoff Gauvin, 2014). Support from donors to the rehabilitation programme of Northern Uganda has been significantly reduced in the past few years, which has created additional pressures on local administrations.

Gulu District, like much of Uganda, has seen its population increase exponentially in the past 30 years, despite the war. In 2014, the population was estimated to be 443,733, compared with 298,527 in 2002, which means population density increased from 90 to 129 people per square kilometre (Government of Uganda, undated). This, coupled with the large number of returnees and limited formal land-titling, has led to an increase in conflict over land in the area (Government of Uganda, undated; interview, CAO Gulu). The young age of the population means the number of people living in Northern Uganda will continue to grow for at least another 30 years.


Photo: Former train station in Gulu Town, Gulu District, Uganda (Alexandra Löwe, 17 May 2016).

Box 2. Young people in Karamoja

The communities of the Karamoja sub-region are historically and economically distinct from those in other parts of Northern Uganda, as the Karamajong have traditionally relied heavily on pastoralism for their livelihoods. However, in the 1950s, the colonial authorities sought to curtail their movement, and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, which has been in power since the late 1980s, has done the same (Welch, 1969; Gelsdorf et al., 2012). Therefore, Karamojong communities also increasingly rely on farming and peasant activities alongside 'traditional activities and coping strategies on which they have always relied… [these include] casual labour, crop farming, local brewing, charcoal making and firewood collection' (Lind et al., 2016). As pastoral cattle-keeping, traditionally the role of men, no longer forms such a large part of the livelihoods system, men have increasingly sought work in urban or semi-urban areas, increasing the load of agricultural work on women (ibid.). While the number of cattle per person has declined in Karamoja, and ethnic conflicts and cattle rustling have further reduced the number of livestock in the sub-region, it remains higher than in the rest of the country. Nevertheless, livestock are still an important mechanism for the accumulation of wealth and for protecting people against shocks and are therefore a key means of ensuring food security (Avery, 2014).

The childhood and youth of those who grow up in Karamoja are different to those of young people in other regions. The available literature on the sub-region suggests gender roles are more pronounced than elsewhere. In addition, rates of school attendance in Karamoja are lower, ranging from 30% to 40%, compared with 83% for Uganda as a whole (UNICEF, 2009). Nevertheless, children are taught agricultural practices and livestock-rearing in much the same as elsewhere in the country, namely by accompanying and helping their parents in their daily activities from an early age. By the age of eight, they are fully tied into the family farming enterprise, and from the age of fourteen onwards they are responsible for their own cultivation and livestock.

3. Why study youth transitions?

3.1. Youth' as a social construct

'Youth' is a socially defined concept that describes the period of transition between childhood and adulthood. During this period, the social, personal, political and cultural responsibilities of individuals change, as does the role they play in their household and national economies as they mature. While youth is often defined in terms of age, this kind of definition is an inadequate approximation of what this life stage entails, as the experiences lived by this group vary so much, even among young people in the same culture. The responsibilities of a 15-year-old, for example, are very different to those of a 25-year-old.

Further, many historical studies have shown that the concept of 'youth' has not existed in all cultures and that many do not distinguish between youth and adults (Zelizer, 1985; Cunningham, 2009). This is not to say that the concept of life stages is not relevant in those contexts, but rather that they are determined by how societies and economies are organised and shaped by political institutions. Ideas around youth and childhood vary to such an extent across cultures that there is no 'single universal definition of *childhood* in [either] international humanitarian [or] human rights law' (Rosen, 2007: 297).

A useful starting point for studying 'youth' is the notion that, during this transition, young people already take on some adult roles in society. As Deborah Durham writes, 'beyond the important observation that different societies do define and demarcate youth differently, even within a society people of a wide range of ages are often treated as youth, and people of a wide range of ages claim the space of youth, at specific times and in specific places' (Durham, 2000: 113). In addition, young people themselves often define 'youth' differently to their elders, seeking to claim the privileges of adulthood at a younger age. This approach allows for the questions of agency and resource control, which are important to this study, to be answered, including how and when young people are able to control economic resources and when they can make independent decisions. Naturally, such an approach must be context-specific, as the roles and levels of independence achieved by adults vary between societies and cultures.

3.2. Young people's liminal status and place in society

Generally, however, young people or youth are seen as 'not yet adults' and incomplete in their transition to becoming an adult (Nandy, 1985). This view, in conjunction with the demarcation of youth as a category distinct from children and adults, has often resulted in this group being imagined as a threat to the stability of a society or culture. At its most extreme, this manifests itself in the portrayal of youth – usually young men – as the source of violent conflicts and wars, as in much of the literature on Africa's 'youth bulge' (e.g. Urdal, 2004; Sommers, 2011). In Northern Uganda, where young people were central to the civil war, albeit often involuntarily, they continue to evoke fear and to be seen as a threat by some, and are often named as the cause of many of the region's social problems, including land conflict, low levels of agricultural production and poverty (interview, CAO Gulu). In their more everyday forms, views like these allow for the disregard of young people's opinions about the issues that concern them, as they are seen as inferior in their understanding of the world and are not yet afforded the status of full citizens (Hawkins and Meshesha, 1994 in van Eerdewijk, 2007).

Both the liminal status of young people and their political, social and cultural position in a society can provide useful insights into social conflicts and the changing nature of a political, economic or agricultural system. In the words of Deborah Durham, 'To pay attention to youth is to pay close attention to the topology of the social landscape – to power and agency; public, national and domestic spaces and identities, and their articulation and disjunctures; memory, history and sense of change; globalization and governance; gender and class' (Durham, 2000: 113). This applies to the question of young farmers too: by studying their transitions into adulthood, we can shed light on the changing nature of production in Northern Uganda. Furthermore, it allows us to take a closer look at who has a vested interest in young people's participation in, or exclusion from, agriculture.

4. Transitions from childhood into agricultural livelihoods

This section details transitions from childhood to adulthood, as described by the young people who took part in our focus group discussions. Every young person's experience in Northern Uganda will be different and may deviate from those described here in small or important ways. The aim, however, is to identify the most important milestones in a typical life trajectory, in terms of learning farming skills, engaging with markets and acquiring land. There are significant cultural and economic differences between districts in Northern Uganda that will determine the exact timing of young people's transitions, the lessons they learn about the kinds of crops and animals that are reared in their communities and the way they gain access to land.

In particular, the experience of growing up was very different for those young people who were displaced and spent much of their childhood living in IDP camps. That said, even those young people who reported growing up in these camps were, in many instances, involved in their parents' farming activities, as it was not unusual for IDPs to continue to engage in agricultural activities where they retained access to some land. Nevertheless, the stylised trajectory described below followed by young people in Gulu provides a useful focus for this review of the agriculture sector in Northern Uganda and points to how young people's experiences may interact with the economic, institutional and political realities that shape the sector.[4]

4.1. Ages 0–10: the early, learning years

Children's introduction to farming in Northern Uganda begins at a very early age, long before any formal education or training could take place, and initially takes the form of unstructured play. Out of necessity, parents take their children to the field while they farm, often even before they can walk.[5] When they are old enough, they help their parents with very simple tasks such as putting seedlings into holes prepared by their parents and closing these. In the process, young people reported being introduced to some very important fundamentals, such as spacing for different crops, inter-cropping and the different conditions necessary to grow a variety of plants. By the age of five, children had spent a significant amount of time on minor farming tasks, had helped out in an ad hoc fashion and had learned some very basic (but nevertheless important) farming concepts. While this work was unstructured and their knowledge rudimentary, it formed the basis for their future learning.

From the age of five, the responsibilities children take on increase considerably: primarily, they are now expected to care for livestock in the family household, particularly small ruminants (e.g. goats) and poultry.[6] Children of this age are expected to help older siblings take goats and sheep out to graze. They also begin to engage with the market, conducting very small transactions for their parents, usually by going to nearby shops to buy small quantities of household necessities. For young girls, this is also the age at which they are increasingly responsible for looking after younger siblings. This means that, when they accompany their mothers to the fields, they look after their younger siblings while their mothers work, and help out with farming work when their mothers are feeding younger children or taking a break.

Young people reported that they started school from about the age of five, although many remarked that, while this was the ideal, it was not always possible to start school 'on time' and schooling was sometimes delayed for financial reasons or as a result of conflict and insecurity. As children get older, school work takes up more of their time,

4. This was borne out by subsequent research on young people's aspirations in Kiryandongo, Kaabong, Kitgum and Agago districts.

5. In the case of child-headed households, older siblings or other relatives take on the role of parents.

6. Cattle ownership is limited to wealthier households, and usually only older young people (those over the age of 18) are given the responsibility of looking after large livestock.

as do farming and household chores, meaning their leisure time gradually decreases with age.

From the age of about seven, children also learn to use a hoe and so begin to acquire further basic skills, such as the creation of raised beds. Young people reported that, from around the age of nine, children start tilling their parents' or other relatives' land, and they are given increasingly more responsibility for this task as they become physically stronger. Children start to learn to cook from this age, but girls are expected to spend more time on this activity than their brothers, with this gendered division of labour increasing with age.

4.2. Ages 10–15: contributing to the household endeavour

From around the age of 10 years old, children and their labour become a real asset to the household, contributing significantly to the family farming endeavour. By the age of 10, they are involved, to some degree, in all farming activities though they may not yet spend much time on the most arduous tasks, such as tilling. As they grow older, the amount of heavy work they do increases gradually, and the overall number of hours they work, alongside their schooling, increases too. They are also seen as more competent participants in markets, now frequently being entrusted with the responsibility of selling farm produce and purchasing inputs such as seeds or fertiliser. It is from the age of 10, therefore, that they begin to learn about the unpredictability of produce markets. Some young people mentioned learning about the importance of storage to manage, and possibly benefit from, price increases at this age.

To offset some of the time now spent working on the family's land, young people passed on responsibility for the grazing of sheep and goats to their younger siblings. In the absence of younger siblings, these responsibilities usually fell to female members of the household. This reflects the fact that men tend to own and be responsible for cattle, while women tend to care for and own smaller animals, such as goats and chickens. It is, therefore, also at this age that gendered divisions of labour and resources become more significant: although most tasks were completed by both genders, boys spent more time working on the family land or grazing cattle (where the household owned these), while girls spent more time on domestic chores, such as cooking and childcare.

4.3. Ages 15–20: moving towards autonomy

Adolescents are given the opportunity to apply their skills with some degree of autonomy from a relatively early age. In this life stage, they will have a plot of land to farm, and most will establish households of their own and start to have children.

4.3.1. Investing in land

When young people are 14-15, their parents give them a piece of land to farm independently. Usually, this land will be communally owned or belong to a close member of the family, who allows the young person in question to use it. At this stage, this does not seem to infringe their capacity to maximise the earning potential of their land, as they are too young for a formal loan, and as they are able to draw on family resources for inputs and tools.

Young people take investment in their first piece of land seriously: their parents provide them with some capital and some of the initial inputs that they require, such as seeds for the crops of their choice, but where possible young people strove to augment their investments. It was not unusual for them to engage in petty trading or piece work on other people's land in order to fund further investment. Income-generating activities engaged in by this age group included brick-making, charcoal-burning and, for the women and girls, brewing beer.

While boys and young men in particular have the ability to earn an income at this stage and enjoy the freedom to spend at least some of it as they wish, it is often difficult for them to save, either because they are too young to have a bank account or to feel comfortable participating in a village savings and loans association (VSLAs) or, sometimes, because there are not many banks or other financial service providers in rural areas. In addition to these constraints, young people often lacked the knowledge or confidence necessary to access financial services and to manage their finances well. Some young people reported spending some of their income on gambling or drinking as they did not yet have a family that they felt responsible for or because they did not have access to a savings account of their own.

4.3.2. Accumulating livestock

Respondents aged 15–20 reported wanting to accumulate their own livestock, usually goats and poultry, but said this was a long and arduous process, especially in the absence of savings practices. Few of them thought this was something they would be able to achieve until much later in life, given both the price and the labour demands of cattle. Young women also perceived themselves to be less likely to own cattle, even once older, but hoped this might be something their husbands would either bring into the marriage or acquire later. As young women of this age less frequently reported being involved in the production of cash crops than their male contemporaries, they expected to accumulate the resources necessary to keep small ruminants or poultry, but generally not cattle.

4.3.3. Establishing a household

Living arrangements also change at this age, bringing greater autonomy for young people, particularly young men, and a sharper division of labour between males and females. When they are 15, for example, young men usually move out of their parents' house into their own houses. While young women usually continue to live in the family home until they marry, women are responsible for the construction of housing and so young women help their mothers build their brothers' new homes. That said, as young women marry at a much younger age than young men, they often do not move out much later than their male contemporaries. For men, the age of marriage is determined in large part by their ability to access sufficient funds for a bride price, so wealthier men tend to get married younger.

The process of establishing a household separate from that of their parents is, however, a gradual one for young men: they may farm their own plot of land and live in their own accommodation, but they only gradually become an economic unit that is distinct from their parents' household. Initially, they continue to eat with their families rather than cooking for themselves (and this often continues until they are married), and they make their farming produce available to the household for consumption, selling only what is left over. Any profits they make will often also contribute to a wide range of necessities in the extended family, ranging from school fees to clothes for younger siblings. Young men can, therefore, not be said to constitute their own households; instead, they remain tied into their parents' household finances.

4.3.4. Becoming a parent

Young females talked about expecting to have or having had their first child between the ages of 15 and 20. This is not simply because of limited family planning services, as many young women and men talked of the social pressure to have children in order to be viewed as an adult and a full member of the community. Young people who went to secondary school had access to more sexual and reproductive health education and felt justified in delaying child-bearing.

4.4. Ages 20–30: late adolescence and full economic and community participation

4.4.1. Control over resources

According to the respondents, it is really only from the age of 20 or so that young people begin to live in their own, comparatively economically independent, households. This is partly as a result of social and cultural norms: for example, both young men and women must be married in order to be considered heads of their households. However, it is also to do with their ability to access certain resources and to be able to exert control over them. Importantly, young men gain much more tangible control over land – the most important resource in farming – from around the age of 18. They are afforded not only use of but also more significant control over larger pieces of land, where available. They report more freedom in making significant decisions about its use, such as whether they should focus on the cultivation of cash crops or food crops. This is more complicated for women, who are afforded usage rights, but not ownership, over a part of their husband's land when they marry. Should they get divorced, they once again rely on their parents or extended family for access to land on which to grow their food.

This extra level of control over their resources and livelihoods is also significant in that it allows older young people more control over their finances. Although they still have family responsibilities – either towards their own children or towards siblings and parents – they have greater autonomy over how any surplus is spent, and they feel able to join VSLAs. Young people reported appreciating being able to open a bank account at 18 or feeling more confident in later adolescence about joining a VSLA, and said this gave them greater control over their resources. However, lack of formal land titles often holds young people back from acquiring loans from banks, much as it does their parents. Other forms of collateral, such as microfinance groups and savings, are options for youth groups, but only if financial service providers and VSLAs help young people learn the right skills and overcome any obstacles they may face to participation (Ahaibwe and Kasirye, 2015).

4.4.2. Access to extension services

Importantly, young people reported that it was also at this age that they had their first encounters with extension services.[7] While they complained that these focused on older and more established members of the community, they nevertheless had some interaction with them or had attempted to seek advice on farming techniques or new crops. Many complained that the president's initiative, Operation Wealth Creation,[8] was targeted at more established households and that it neglected younger people.[9] This neglect may well be the result of generally inadequate extension agent to farmer ratios as well as 'self-exclusion', as young people cannot afford to purchase the fuel that farmers normally supply to extension agents if they want them to visit their farms. In addition, extension services are only relevant to those farmers who can also afford to implement the farming techniques in question.

7. These are the agricultural training services provided by the Ugandan state to smallholder farmers.

8. Operation Wealth Creation replaced the government extension service, called the National Agriculture Advisory Service (NAADS), in 2013. Operation Wealth Creation was implemented by the Ugandan military. For further discussion of the implications of this, see Section 6.1.

9. The implications of extension service reforms are discussed in Sections 6 and 7.4.

Where possible, young people still attended secondary or tertiary education in their early 20s. Secondary schools also teach farming skills, but our respondents seemed ambivalent about the quality of education they received in the subject. Young people said that the focus in many schools was on non-agricultural learning, with agriculture being an option. This gives the impression that agriculture is a necessary subject only for those who do not succeed at other, higher-status, occupations.

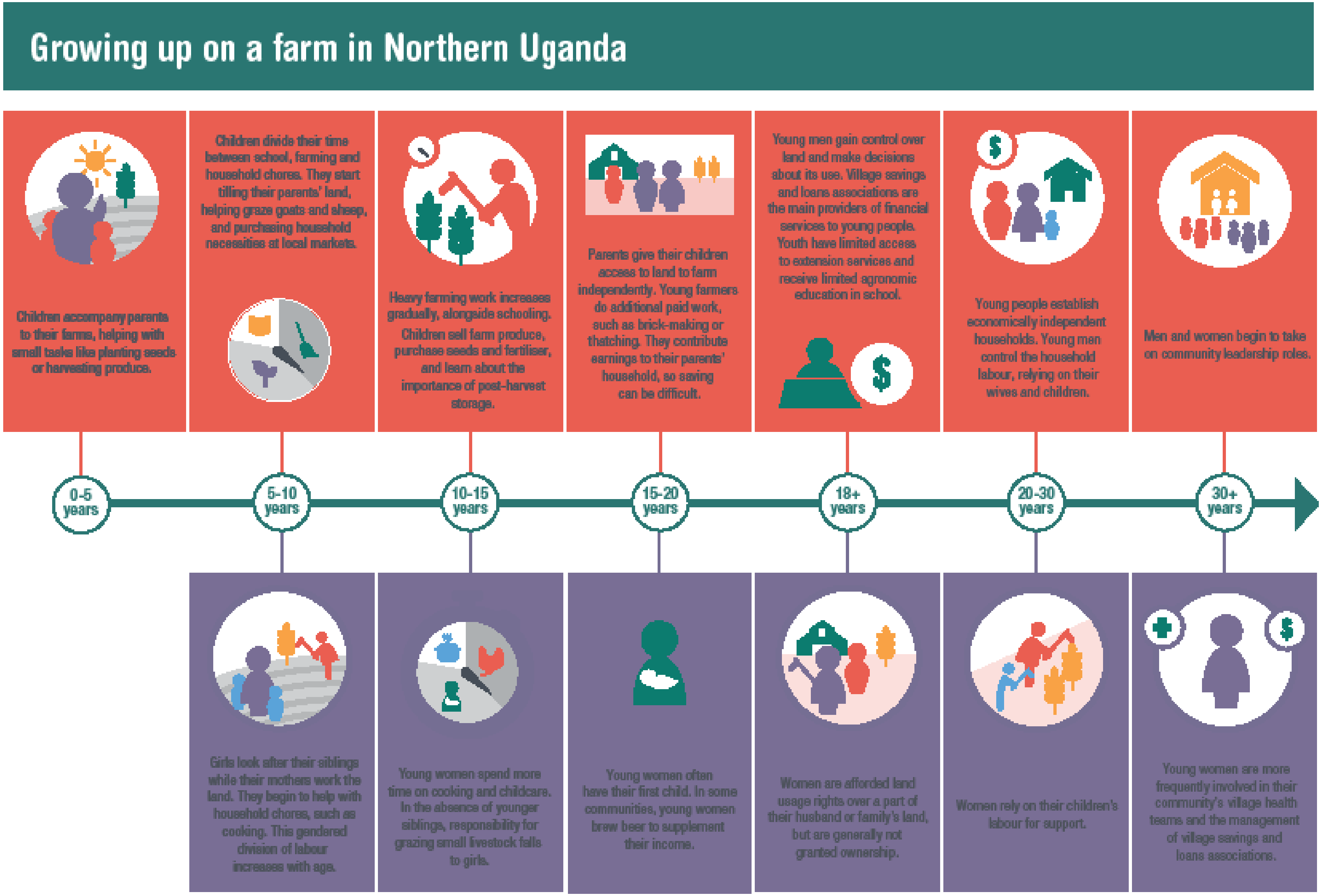
4.4.3. Attaining full adulthood

The social status of full adulthood is attained by becoming a fully active member of the community and, especially for young men, by becoming the head of their own household. Young men talked about having control over the labour of other members of the household, which they could use on their land, from their early or mid-20s onwards. Men are more frequently able to rely on the labour of other members of the household than are women.

Positions of leadership within communities were more likely to be filled by those over the age of 30 and young people of both genders felt their youth precluded them from playing these sorts of roles. Each council in Uganda elects a youth councillor to represent the views of young people in their municipality or district, but young people said that only those who were very well connected – usually with the local NRM structures – had any chance of attaining these positions. Young women were, however, frequently involved in their community's village health teams and spoke more often of being involved in the management of VSLAs (usually as secretaries). Both these positions carry considerable responsibility, even though they may not enjoy high social or political status.

Photo: Young women drawing the timeline of their childhood and youth, Gulu District, Uganda (Alexandra Löwe, 20 May 2016).

Figure 2. Growing up on a farm in Northern Uganda



Source: Overseas Development Institute

5. Northern Uganda's agriculture sector as the context for young people's livelihoods

The experience of being young and growing up to be a smallholder farmer does not, of course, happen in isolation from the social, political and economic environment that shapes farming in the region.

5.1. Overview

The agriculture sector in Northern Uganda is currently underperforming compared with other economic sectors. While it has benefited from the liberalisation measures introduced in the 1980s, its growth has not always kept up with that of the population. This owes in no small part to the fact that, despite contributing 22% of national GDP, employing around 70% of the population and producing most of the food consumed domestically (Dalipagic and Elepu, 2014; FAO, 2015), it fails to attract sufficient levels of government funding: less than 5% of the national budget went to agriculture between 2006/07 and 2012/13. This falls significantly below the target of 10% that the Government of Uganda set itself in the context of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, in order to sustain agricultural growth rates of 6% or higher (ONE and 40 Chances, 2013). Other national policy documents, such as the National Development Plan and the Agriculture Sector Development Strategy and Investment Plan, also recognise the importance of the sector, but these programmes are inadequately funded.

These low levels of investment have meant the agricultural transformation to which policy documents aspire remains elusive. Production in Uganda is still dominated by 2.2 million smallholder farmers who cultivate between 2 and 3 hectares of land on average, by relying on family labour and minimal technology. According to one study, the vast majority of farmers (93%) rely at least in part on family labour, while 53% use only a hoe for land opening (Dalipagic and Elepu, 2014). The use of oxen has declined compared with in the late 1980s as a result of the civil war and, in some regions, extensive cattle-rustling (ibid). For irrigation, farmers rely almost entirely on rainfall, which allows for two crops a year in most regions. Low input usage (e.g. low usage of pesticides), limited access to markets and weak agricultural institutions have resulted in low productivity levels. Fertiliser usage in Uganda is particularly low: the World Bank estimates usage at 2.2 kg per hectare of arable land, compared with the global average of 119 kg per hectare and 18 kg per hectare for sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2016).

The majority of farmers occupy a very disadvantageous place in the value chain, selling their produce directly at the farm gate for low and unstable prices. Very few have the capacity to bulk and store their produce, which reduces their ability to bargain with traders or to choose when they sell their crops (Dalipagic and Elepu, 2014). Limited market access also limits their choices about which crops to produce. While production of cash crops such as cotton used to be common in Northern Uganda, it declined as a result of price volatility, which saw farmers turn towards food production as food can be eaten or sold locally (ibid.). While this does protect households against food insecurity and the fluctuation of food prices, it also reduces overall earning potential.

Very little industrialisation has taken place in Northern Uganda, which is reflected in its dependence on agriculture. Where industry exists, it consists largely of agricultural processors, such as mills or rice hullers, as well as wood and metal workshops and some construction. Subsistence farming is the most common occupation, with approximately 57.8% of households making their living in this way. An even larger percentage – 85% – of the population is involved in agriculture in some way, even if it is not their primary occupation. Cash crop production is centred around simsim, rice and groundnuts, rather than the once vibrant production of cotton and tobacco.

5.1.1. Role of livestock

According to the national livestock census of 2008, only 26.4% of households in Northern Uganda, excluding the Karamoja sub-region, own cattle, with a mean and median herd size of 5.5 and 3, respectively. In the Karamoja sub-region, cattle ownership is the highest in the country, with 53.6% of households owning cattle, and mean and median herd sizes of 20.8 and 15 (MAAIF and UBOS, 2010).[10] However, small livestock ownership is much more widespread, and 79% of households in Northern Uganda own some small livestock. Livestock ownership by household percentage is detailed in Table 1.

Livestock ownership is an important part of the household economy as it provides fertiliser, additional income, draught power and proteins. In addition, livestock are a means by which households can save and protect themselves against the risks associated with smallholder farming, such as crop failures. This goes some way to explaining the low productivity of livestock in Uganda, as the priority for many households is self-insurance (Behnke and Nakirya, 2012). As a result, per capita meat production in Uganda is only 11 kg per year, compared with 14 kg in Kenya and 94 kg in Canada, and milk production is only 11 litres per capita per year (ibid.). Households that do not own livestock are at a considerable disadvantage, as this frequently means they do not have any savings, are poorly insulated against any unforeseen crises and will struggle to recover from shocks. Research shows those without livestock generally also have only the most rudimentary of productive assets, such as hoes, but lack other assets, such as bicycles or ploughs, that would allow for an upward spiral of productivity and income (Ellis and Bahiigwa, 2003).

Table 1. Household livestock ownership in Northern Uganda (2008, %)

Region	Cattle	Goats	Sheep	Pigs	Chickens
Northern Uganda	26.4	47	11.5	9.3	57.6
Karamoja sub-region	53.6	53.7	46.0	4.7	52.9

Source: MAAIF and UBOS, 2010

5.2. Crop production in Northern Uganda: barriers to increased productivity

The majority of those who depend on agriculture in Northern Uganda are caught in what has been termed a 'low-productivity poverty trap', where a combination of low yields, fluctuating prices, poor infrastructure and weakly integrated markets conspire to make it extremely difficult for small-scale producers to increase their productivity and improve their living standards (Tittonell and Giller, 2012; Poulton et al., 2006). The only means by which individual farmers can protect themselves against these dynamics is increasing and diversifying their production levels, either through intensification or by increasing the area of land under cultivation. The latter is difficult in Northern Uganda, given the combination of population pressure and, counter-intuitively, labour shortages at critical times during the agricultural season. How these dynamics stand in the way of intensification efforts by smallholders is described below, while the final section discusses in more detail the manner in which they are particularly pertinent to young people.

5.2.1. Low use of fertiliser

Undoubtedly, the most effective way of increasing household income is for farmers to grow higher-value cash crops and to invest in yield-increasing technologies, particularly fertiliser. However, high price fluctuations often make fertiliser application unprofitable, as crops may sell at prices that do not cover the cost of inorganic fertilisers (Bold et al., 2015). The reliance on rainfed agriculture means one poor rainy season can wipe out farmers' working capital if their fertiliser does not yield returns or leave them in financial difficulties if they have taken out a loan for the inputs (Okoboi and Barungi, 2012). Insurance products that could mitigate these risks are in their infancy in sub-Saharan Africa and not widely available in Uganda.

There is some evidence that fertiliser adoption is associated with household characteristics, such as the gender and age of the head of household, with female and younger heads of households being less likely to use fertiliser (Nayenga, 2008). For female-headed households, this is because they are poorer, on average, and extension services, run largely by men, tend to exclude women. Younger farmers are also less likely to use fertiliser, as they are less likely to have accumulated or be able to borrow the working capital necessary (ibid.). Furthermore, Okoboi and Barungi (2012) demonstrate that fertiliser use in Uganda is linked to education levels, larger families (as households have a greater reserve of labour for its application) and livestock ownership (which both renders fertiliser more profitable and is a proxy for wealth). While these authors find that, when household composition is controlled for, the age of the head of household does not affect fertiliser usage, it is worth noting that most young people do not have large households whose labour they can draw upon. Households that have access to extension services, credit, irrigation and storage tend to increase their fertiliser usage. Importantly, those who have regular access to an extension agent are also more likely to use fertiliser

10. For more details on the Karamoja sub-region and how it differs from the rest of Northern Uganda, see Box 2.

and to reap the full benefits of this (Okoboi and Barungi, 2012).

Two further factors mitigate fertiliser use in Uganda. The first is that fertiliser is exceptionally expensive in Africa, compared with the market prices of agricultural produce, and nowhere more so than in landlocked countries, owing to transport costs. Smaling et al. (2006) estimated that an African smallholder must sell between 6 and 11 kg of grain in order to be able to purchase just 1 kg of inorganic fertiliser, compared with 2–3 kg in Asia. Where poverty levels are high and access to credit is limited, fertiliser is beyond the economic reach of many smallholders, and certainly beyond the reach of young farmers who have not accumulated much working capital or who have not got much of a savings history and so are considered an even higher risk by financial service providers than more established farmers.

Second, the quality of fertiliser available to farmers may reduce its usefulness. Bold et al. (2015) found that, of the samples they tested from markets across Uganda, 80% deviated from their stated nitrogen contents to such a degree that their use was not profitable. Only just over 7% of samples yielded an economic return of 30%, the minimum that a farmer should be able to expect from good-quality fertiliser. Farmers were well aware of the poor quality of the fertiliser available to them, and so were naturally reluctant to buy it (ibid., 2015). Of course, much can be done to increase yields in the absence of inorganic fertiliser, but this precludes some very effective integrated soil management systems, which make use of a combination of organic and inorganic fertiliser and better farming techniques. In addition, to use these techniques, farmers need better skills. Educating them has proven difficult, given the nature of Uganda's extension services (see Section 6.1 for a further discussion of these).

5.2.2. Poorly integrated markets

Smallholder producers, with their average landholdings of 1.12 hectares, produce relatively small quantities of produce. According to the 2008 agricultural census, their yields for grains are between 54% and 75% of the national average (UBOS and MAAIF, 2010). This means not only that they do not have much negotiating power with buyers, but also that they depend on small-scale traders who purchase and aggregate smaller quantities of grain, but who typically offer lower prices (interviews, Gulu District). As links to value chains and national markets are tenuous, owing to poor infrastructure, prices tend to be more volatile and profit margins for both food and cash crops are unpredictable. This, in turn, renders the application of fertiliser and other yield-enhancing technologies, such as pesticides or mechanised ploughing, a more risky investment. Uganda's limited integration into regional and international harvests is a further problem here, as this increases the price of inputs and limits the markets for fresh produce (Gregory and Bumb, 2006).

5.2.3. Land and labour constraints

Despite population growth, the primary constraint on farming households in Northern Uganda does not yet appear to be the availability of land. However, for now, somewhat counter-intuitively, the bigger problem is the shortage of labour at certain critical times of the year. The most significant constraint here is the amount of labour a household can lay claim to or pay to till its land, prior to planting (interviews, Gulu District). This is a particularly binding constraint for young farmers and female-headed households, who have only very young children and therefore a small pool of labour at their disposal within their households.

5.2.4. Insufficient extension services

Knowledge about farming techniques that may increase productivity is not readily available, owing to the limited extension services provided by the Government of Uganda: the ratio of extension officers to farmers is approximately 1:3,140 compared with the recommended ratio of 1:400 (Mabaya, 2016). It is worth noting that Uganda's farmers have a great deal of specialised knowledge on how to produce crops in their specific agroeconomic contexts with the means available to them; however, there is room for this to be supplemented with the findings of agricultural research and to be updated.

6. The political economy of agriculture in Uganda

Beyond the structure of the agriculture sector, rural young people's opportunities are also affected by Uganda's political economy, which is tied into the patronage networks that are pervasive in Uganda. These help the NRM retain and consolidate control over political, economic and state institutions (Löwe et al., 2016). This section introduces some of the ways in which the implementation of agricultural policy is influenced by the NRM's desire to maintain the political settlement that cements its power, before outlining some of the most important policies in the agriculture sector. It is important to note that, while Uganda has many of the policies necessary to stimulate agricultural growth and productivity, these are often not implemented, owing to the political dynamics described here.

6.1. Agricultural policy and the political settlement

6.1.1. Agricultural advisory services and the maintenance of patronage networks

Advisory services are essential for agriculture-driven development, but in Uganda they also serve the purpose of maintaining patronage networks, distributing resources to the lower ranks of the NRM and, to a lesser degree, purchasing the votes of rural constituencies (Kjaer, 2015). Unfortunately, this tension has had detrimental effects on the quality of services provided.

The politicisation of extension services began with a promising initiative by the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) to reform the inefficient and ineffective extension service: in 2001, Parliament voted for the establishment of the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS), which was tasked with creating an extension service that was based on demand and led by the private sector. A NAADS Secretariat was created, outside of but under the supervision of MAAIF, in an effort to give NAADS some independence from the Ministry. Nevertheless, in the run-up to the 2006 presidential and parliamentary election, President Museveni introduced changes to NAADS, which saw farmers receive subsidised or free inputs, such as fertiliser and seeds (Kjaer, 2015). Giving out free inputs was a way of winning over rural voters and of delivering on the campaign promise that the NRM would deliver 'Prosperity for All' (ibid.).

Following the election, Museveni set up a separate unit under the Presidency to take responsibility for input distribution. According to Ntambirweki-Karugonjo et al. (2015), this owed to the corruption and poor performance of NAADS, while Kjaer (2015) argues it was a move to retain control over input distribution, with the aim of providing resources to NRM supporters. In any case, committees were set up at district level to oversee this process further, with the stipulation that the district chair and the local NRM leader must be involved.

In 2010, NAADS was suspended temporarily, which rendered President Museveni's statement that it failed to serve smallholder farmers true (Kjaer, 2015). In June 2014, the president entrusted the army with the task of input distribution under an initiative entitled Operation Wealth Creation. According to Kjaer, the NRM has long depended on allowing key ruling coalitions to benefit from their positions within government, the civil service or the economy, and she argues that Operation Wealth Creation is no exception.

Since 2014, therefore, the army – without any agricultural expertise – has been charged with distributing farming inputs to Uganda's farmers. For young people, this means extension services have become less accessible: it was widely reported, by both young farmers and their elders, that access to the services and inputs provided by these new service delivery agencies had been politicised. In other words, those with close ties to the NRM were given preferential access. Very few young people have the political skills or experience needed to benefit from such services and will have had the years needed to cultivate political networks.

At the time of our fieldwork, the reestablishment of a government-run extension service was under discussion, but it was not yet clear exactly what role this service would play or what form it would take, and how it would work with Operation Wealth Creation (interview, Director of Crop Resources, MAAIF).

6.1.2. Land grabbing

Poorly administered and overlapping land tenure systems mean land grabbing and land disputes are very common in Northern Uganda. One type of land grabbing that occurs frequently is the result of gradual encroachment, borrowing or long-term displacement, which means boundary markers and memories have been eroded by time. The traditional institutions that managed land conflicts were eroded during the war, because of the large loss of life and displacement of large sections of the population. Many young people subsequently found themselves landless and with few options other than to try and make a living in towns and cities. A smaller number of land disputes result from land being appropriated by force or intimidation (Mabikke, 2011).

Another concern to Uganda's political economy is the grabbing of land by elites, which took place prior to the resettlement of IDPs after the end of the conflict with the LRA. On this occasion, according to our interviewees, elites were given leases for large tracts of land in Northern Uganda before returnees had had the chance to reclaim their land (e.g. interview, World Bank). Once resettled, returnees do not know how to defend their, often traditional but untitled, land rights (Mabikke, 2011). While it is unlikely that the government will revoke these leases, because the NRM needs to maintain the support of elites, the World Bank has encouraged the introduction of taxation on unused land so as to at least provide incentives for using the land (interview, World Bank). However, other interviewees did not believe this effort would meet with much success; in the words of one interviewee, 'Would you tax yourself?' (interview, anonymous government official).

Tenure insecurity affects all farmers in Northern Uganda, but particularly those who are trying to purchase new land, or who wish to take over land that had previously been worked by someone else or to bring communally owned land under cultivation for the first time. As tenure rights are often not formalised, those trying to expand the land they work are particularly vulnerable to uncertainties around ownership. They may also struggle to access land where large-scale farmers are occupying large swathes of it. These issues therefore affect young people disproportionately. In our focus group discussions, uncertainty over land tenure was often seen as almost inevitable, while the problem of accessing any land at all was raised much more frequently as a struggle faced by young people.

6.2. Main agricultural policies and programmes

A number of policies are designed to assist agricultural development, most importantly the Uganda Vision 2040 and the Second National Development Plan (NDP II), which both prioritise agriculture. The NDP II focuses on the commercialisation of the sector. It has identified and planned investments along several major value chains, namely cotton, coffee, tea, maize, rice, cassava, beans, fish, beef, milk, citrus fruits and bananas (Government of Uganda, 2015). These were chosen for their potential to improve food security as well as contributing towards foreign exchange earnings, through exports to both regional and international markets. In order to improve Uganda's competitiveness in the region, the focus here is on ensuring better regulation is in place and safety standards for products are enforced. The Agriculture Sector Strategic Plan guides the priorities for MAAIF for the period from 2015/16 to 2019/20. It has made increasing agricultural production and productivity, increasing access to critical farm inputs, improving agricultural markets and value addition its priorities. Other policies and programmes that support the agriculture sector are described below.

6.2.1. National Employment Policy

The National Employment Policy acknowledges the capacity of agriculture to absorb labour and create employment, especially the labour of Uganda's very young population. This policy looks to encourage rural employment creation through investment in agricultural enterprises, promoting agro-processing, providing the most dynamic smallholders with yield-increasing technologies and stimulating the expansion of rural financial service providers.

6.2.2. National Youth Policy

The National Youth Policy focuses on ensuring young people are integrated into the national development processes that are the focus of other policies, to enable them to be prepared to make the most of the opportunities available to them. This is to be achieved through support to vocational training centres, so that young people acquire practical skills that are relevant to the job market, as well as through improvements in literacy levels. Microcredit, market information and extension services are an integral part of the strategy to develop youth enterprise in both the agriculture sector and other sectors; as is supporting the implementation of the 1998 Land Act, which was designed to increase access to land, and the rights of all landowners, but especially young people.

6.2.3. Restocking Programme

This programme is targeted at Northern Uganda, following almost three decades of cattle rustling and conflict, which decimated the cattle population. The programme provides heifers to households identified by the community itself and chosen households are then obliged to pass the first calf on to another household in the community. The programme is not specifically targeted at young people. Instead, preference is given to households most in need, which tend to be the more established households with children, to which young people belong to varying degrees.

6.2.4. Youth Livelihoods Programme

This programme is a government microcredit initiative aimed at young people. As such, it has fallen victim to the same problems often experienced by government microcredit schemes: repayment rates are low, urban young people are said to benefit more than rural ones and the distribution of programme benefits is said to be politically motivated (interviews, anonymous). The extent of these dynamics is difficult to ascertain, as official announcements about the programme in national media state repayment rates of above 90%, but this runs contrary to the opinions expressed by district interviewees, who felt this figure could not possibly be correct (interviews, Gulu District). These same interviewees also criticised the programme for being ambiguous in its aims and lacking in training elements, which means young people often do not have the skills necessary to run the businesses they are launching. This sets many young people, especially those with fewer years of education, up for failure (interviews, National Youth Council).

Photo: Girls drawing the timeline of their childhood and youth, Gulu District, Uganda (Alexandra Löwe, 18 May 2016).

7. Opportunities and obstacles for Northern Uganda's young people in the agriculture sector

Section 4 of this paper followed the trajectory of children in farming communities in Northern Uganda as they become adults, Section 5 looked at the social and economic dimensions of the sector that will form the basis of these young people's livelihoods and Section 6 discussed the political economy of agricultural production and development in Uganda. This section seeks to bring these three parts together to highlight the opportunities and obstacles that are particularly pertinent to young people who are entering the sector.

7.1. Going beyond subsistence production

The most important economic development in young people's lives between the approximate ages of 15 and 25 is the gradual acquisition of land and the ability to determine its use. The community-supported nature of this process affords an opportunity for young people to move out of a 'low-productivity poverty trap' and establish a more productive and higher-income livelihood. The resources young people acquire in these critical years determine the livelihood strategies available to them during full adulthood.

There are two primary factors that limit young people's ability to increase their productivity and incomes: the first is the limited time available to them to work and earn money away from the land, given the labour-intensive nature of tilling and the demands of their extended households on their labour. The second is their ability to accumulate assets and resources that would increase their productivity, such as inputs and tools. By the time they are 15, young people contribute at least some, and usually a significant part, of their earnings to the extended family's needs. This means any income their work generates will not necessarily go towards to their own schemes or asset accumulation. Likewise, they are often unable to save any surplus income, which increases the incentive to spend it. The positive side of this particular coin is that they are still able to rely on the resources of the family for their farming endeavours, which provides an important safety net, as without assets they are exposed to a greater degree of risk than more established households.

Of particular importance here is not only that young people acquire productive assets, such as land and tools, as well as working capital, but also that they obtain the means to deal with risk and uncertainty, by acquiring insurance assets or savings. Currently, young people grow food crops, which they know they can sell, rather than cash crops such as cotton, which are potentially more lucrative, though more risky. Taking risks in the absence of buffers becomes more and more problematic as young people become heads of their own households, and the period between the ages of 15 and 20 provides a window of opportunity for moving up into higher-value crops and acquiring insurance assets or savings.

Given that young people are often not yet head of their own households, they may be overlooked for important programmes, such as the Restocking Programme or Operation Wealth Creation, which could assist them in acquiring such buffer assets. As discussed above, these initiatives have often fallen victim to patronage networks, which further disadvantages young people who do not have the necessary social or political connections.

Similarly, there are opportunities for off-farm employment in rural Uganda that could benefit young people, if they developed the right skills and if their basic food security were safeguarded. These include providing ploughing services, engaging in aggregating and transporting crops for sale at local markets and supplying their communities with inputs in suitable quantities. However, this also depends on the availability of good-quality inputs at local trading centres and access to credit and financial services to acquire the basics required to engage in trade. The extremely high and sometimes regressive taxes payable on off-farm work will also disadvantage young people attempting to accumulate capital for their farming endeavours.

7.2. Access to finance and markets

Access to finance and markets is a challenge for most smallholder farmers in rural Uganda, regardless of their age, but young people find themselves at an additional disadvantage. Financial service providers cannot cater to those under the age of 18, unless they have their guardian's permission, even though they may be engaging in economic activity. The under-18s that we interviewed reported that they preferred not to seek permission from their parents, resulting in a loss of control over their resources and a reduced ability to save.

In addition, livestock ownership is skewed slightly against younger people (MAAIF and UBOS, 2010), which compounds their exclusion from financial services, given the importance of livestock as a means of insuring against risk and accumulating savings. Without livestock, youth are less resilient to shocks, are less able to build up the assets required for investment and have less manure at their disposal, which also means the returns they can expect to any inorganic fertiliser they purchase are lower. Young people face a difficult situation: they are excluded from the savings that would allow them to accumulate livestock, and have only limited access to livestock, which serve as a means of saving. The slow process of acquiring livestock and gradually increasing the number of animals or poultry in their possession could be sped up by improving their access to financial services.

Similarly, young people's ability to make the most of market opportunities depends on their access to infrastructure and facilities, particularly the ability to store crops in order to benefit from price fluctuations. Most smallholders, regardless of age, do not have the necessary post-harvest handling skills or adequate storage infrastructure to take advantage of these fluctuations, meaning the profits fall to better-capitalised traders. Where young people do not have their own granaries, their crops can sometimes be stored in the granaries of the extended family network.

7.3. Formal and informal education

When young people reach the age of 15 and begin to work a piece of land independently, they are often still in school, and there is the potential for this to complement their practical learning. However, it seems that while agriculture is taught in schools and colleges, the main lesson children and young people take away is that farming is an occupation of last resort. Agriculture is often the only livelihood option for those who cannot continue school and those who do not have the capital to go into alternative self-employment, which has higher start-up costs. Perhaps most importantly, pupils are given agricultural tasks as a punishment for bad behaviour. In addition, the agricultural skills that are taught in school were not considered to be particularly useful by our young interviewees. Complementary skills, such as book-keeping, which can help young farmers make the best production decisions for themselves, are not adequately taught either. Farming activities and formal learning are, therefore, largely competing activities that need to be squeezed into the limited time available to young people.

7.4. Politicisation of extension services

The politicisation of extension services has had a detrimental impact on these services throughout Uganda. The effect on young people, however, has been particularly harsh, as they lack the social networks and capital that have allowed some people to benefit. Furthermore, where young people have been involved in political mobilisation in Northern Uganda, it has been for minimal benefit. One such example is the Crime Preventers initiative, which trains young people as community police officers, promising them access to programmes, resources and services, including Operation Wealth Creation and the NAADS. It also gives them the equipment necessary to fulfil this role, such as bicycles. It seems, though, that, by participating in this initiative, young people risk social exclusion (as it is a very direct form of support of the state and the NRM, which is negatively regarded in much of Northern Uganda). Crime preventers are also expected to take part in potentially dangerous activities, such as political rallies. Rebecca Tapscott concludes that 'due to persistent poverty and unemployment, youth…are willing – even eager – to do poorly paid work that supports causes they disagree with if there is hope for future employment' and that the regime 'distributes just-enough resources to just-enough citizens to produce a just-enough convincing image of opportunity' to engage young people's interest (Tapscott, 2016: 2).

In addition, young people have been disadvantaged by the change in the nature of the extension services provided. Many advisory and training services were replaced with distributed resources, which means young people lose out, because these are generally given to older farmers and cannot be passed on in the same way skills can.

7.5. Access to land

As we have seen, the transfer of land usage rights marks the beginning of young people's transition to active economic participation. There is currently enough land to provide each young person with a small plot, but increasing pressure on availability will soon begin to affect young people. The population is expected to almost double in the next 15 years in Uganda (UNDESA, 2015), meaning it is unclear whether young people will be able to access more land as they get older and take on adult responsibilities. The experience of other countries has demonstrated that such land pressure may result in the lengthening of the liminal and socially constructed period of youth, as inheritance becomes the primary means by which land is accessed (White, 2012; Löwe, forthcoming, 2017). Often in such situations, young people move away from rural environments to cities where they can find work. There is some evidence that this is happening in Uganda, whether that is in the often-repeated assertion that young people 'are not interested in agriculture' or in the increasing number of young boda boda drivers. In some cases, this move out of agriculture may be temporary, while young people earn their living off-farm until they can return to access land; in yet other cases, young people may have multiple sources of income at any given time (White, 2012).

In addition to the overall availability situation of land, unclear tenure systems may disadvantage young people disproportionately. As only about 20% of land in Uganda is formally titled, the vast majority of smallholder farmers are subject to tenure insecurity and are unable to use their land for collateral. Young people are likely to be further affected by this situation in two ways. First, the land they inherit is likely to be less fertile than has been the case to date, given the decreasing fertility of land. It is estimated that between 20% and 90% of land in Uganda is affected by soil erosion, depending on the district (Mabaya, 2016). This, of course, means farmers must invest more capital in soil fertility management, which is difficult to do without land titles that allow for this same land to be used as collateral to access credit. Second, land grabbing, which is exacerbated by unclear tenure systems, is becoming increasingly common in Northern Uganda as pressure on land increases.

7.6. Gender

As described above, from an early age young girls and women in Northern Uganda are expected to contribute a greater percentage of their time than are boys to domestic chores and childcare. While their brothers are becoming increasingly independent, they become more bound to household chores. Disparities in time usage grow with age.[11] All of this adds up to afford young men greater freedom over the way they spend their time, as well as liberating them from many of the daily household chores. Young women, on the other hand, remain tied into the larger household's reproductive needs, caring for both older and younger siblings. In addition, many will have their own children to care for, perhaps while still living with their parents (if the children are born out of wedlock).

When young women move out, it is usually to marry, and so this also entails increased domestic responsibilities. As a result of their role within the household, they are less able to focus on their economic activities and acquire resources – whether these are financial capital or livestock – and so have less to invest in their productive activities. Given the politicisation of extension services, it is also likely that women are less likely to access these services, and young women certainly reported a greater reluctance to make use of them. While men complain of not being able to afford the bride price necessary to marry at the same age that young women do, the process of acquiring this wealth provides them with a few years to establish themselves economically.

The other noteworthy gender difference is in the ownership of land: while young women are also provided with a piece of land to work when they are aged 15 or so, they are not considered the owners of this land. While young men do gradually come to consider the land they are working as their own, women are considered to be working their family's land and are expected to work on their husband's land when they get married. This is reflected in the national statistics quoted in NDP II, which states that only 28% of women in Uganda own land, compared with 72% of men, while the majority of the 6 million-strong labour force working in smallholder agriculture are women (Government of Uganda, 2015). Women are also especially likely to be affected by insecure land tenure, where they do own land. Disputes between widows and their deceased husband's family are very common (Mercy Corps, 2011).

7.7. Damaging perceptions of youth

It is not uncommon for young people to face the challenge of persuading society at large that they do not correspond to the age-old stereotype of being lazy, responsible for the majority of crimes and frequently drunk or wasting time. However, the extent to which our informants were willing to malign young people in Gulu for their laziness was surprising. It was not uncommon for policy-makers and community leaders to speak with disdain about how unwilling young Ugandans were to work. This can – at least partially – be explained by the history of conflict in Northern Uganda, which has significantly affected young people's transitions and their ability to acquire the skills necessary for successful livelihoods in the agriculture sector. Many young people spent parts of their childhoods in IDP camps, where they were unable to work the fields alongside their parents. However, when speaking to young people, we found that, while they felt themselves to be lacking in opportunities, they were very eager to make a living.

11. N.B. Gender distribution of tasks varies between areas, so the customs described by our respondents in Gulu are not necessarily the same as the ones practised across all Youth Forward districts.

This view of youth is linked to broader discourse around chronic poverty in Uganda, where many of the poorest have not shared in the benefits of growth (Lawson et al., 2003) and the political elite 'make a close association between long-term poverty and [the] failure to be "economically active"' (Hickey, 2005: 1001). This discourse has served to absolve the political elite, first and foremost the NRM, of the failure to ensure growth was more broad-based, but has resulted in a stereotyping of poor, rural Ugandans as lazy and unproductive (ibid.). Another paper reports that the poorest community members are often described as drunkards and so excluded from the benefits of rural development programmes (Woodhouse, 2003).

In some instances, the attitude of policy-makers and older people has undoubtedly been aggravated by the intergenerational elements of the LRA conflict, when children and young people were abducted and forced to commit atrocities against their own communities. It seems that, in Gulu, this discourse has been adopted by many policy-makers who are engaged with young people and whose policies fail to provide any meaningful opportunities for them. The Youth Livelihoods Programme is a case in point: a poorly designed programme placed the onus to succeed on young people, who were expected to be 'entrepreneurial' and to use the credit they were given access to without any meaningful additional training. When the programme failed to deliver tangible results, rural young people were blamed for being too 'politicised' to use the loans correctly or too impatient to invest their money wisely (interviews, Gulu District).

This rhetoric has a tangible impact on the lives of young people and it is no surprise that young people feel undervalued and frequently express the desire to move into urban environments, in the hope of building their future there. The greater surprise, given this rhetoric, is that such a large number of young people still felt they wanted to use their agricultural skills and acquire further farming knowledge, in order to try and make a living in the sector.

Photo: Young people taking part in a focus group discussion on how they acquired farming skills in their childhood and youth, Gulu District, Uganda (Alexandra Lowe, 19 May 2016)

8. Conclusion

Having looked at the gradual process through which the majority of young people enter agriculture in Northern Uganda and compared this with the prevalent dynamics and political context of the sector, we were able to draw some conclusions about the prospects of young people in agriculture. While agriculture can be a very lucrative business in Northern Uganda, young people struggle to access opportunities. By virtue of their youth, they frequently do not yet have permanent access to land, and, because of population growth, it is unclear how much land they will inherit. An additional constraint for young people is their inability to save, as a result of family obligations and poor access to trustworthy savings services, and to invest in their agricultural activities. This stands in the way of their ability to accumulate both productive assets and buffers that would help protect them against risk and loss.

Young people, as we have seen, fall neither into the category of children nor into that of adults, which frequently proves disadvantageous. Their labour power is not always their own to employ as they wish. While this has advantages in terms of the assistance they receive from their communities, in terms both of embarking upon economic activities and of being protected from unforeseen circumstances, it slows down their ability to accumulate assets or capital and to become more productive farmers. This liminal status, therefore, has the ability to affect their lifetime income as it is partially responsible for keeping them stuck in low-productivity agriculture. This is made worse by the fact that financial services are often difficult for young people to access. If they could access credit soon after they start farming, they could make greater investment in productivity-enhancing technology, such as mechanised ploughing. As we have seen, greater access to savings products or livestock would help mitigate the effects of poor access to other financial services.

Moreover, not only are youth a liminal category within their communities, but also they are seen as such by society more broadly. They are not heads of their own households, and they are frequently overlooked by the providers of extension services, particularly where this involves the distribution of inputs. Young farmers learn their skills and knowledge from their parents and, as a result, cannot refresh the sector in the way one might expect from a new generation of producers who have received formal training in agricultural practices. Furthermore, such training would assist young people to gain the skills needed to move beyond the activities carried out by their parents' generation. With training, they could perhaps process and store produce or provide services and inputs to farmers.

There are opportunities in farming for young people in Northern Uganda and a willingness among young people to explore those, but the obstacles that stand in their way are not insignificant. Not least, the stated belief of policy-makers and older generations that young people are 'lazy' and simply do not want to farm does them a great disservice. While the policy framework is in place to address some of these issues, implementation of some of it remains a challenge because of the entrenched influence of political and patronage networks, and, in a context where a bloody and destructive conflict has damaged trust between the generations, attitudes take time to change.

Recommendations for Youth Forward

We can make a number of recommendations for Youth Forward's work in Northern Uganda on the basis of this review of the agriculture sector.

1. Encourage a change of attitude towards young people.

The poor reputation that young people in Northern Uganda have in society puts them at a real disadvantage. This reputation owes, in large part, to the role children and young people were forced to play during the conflict. By contributing to a gradual change in attitudes towards young people and their role in society, the Youth Forward Committee would assist young people greatly in their efforts to establish sustainable livelihoods and to be innovators in the agriculture sector.

2. Take young people's financial obligations towards their parental households into account.

Young people are part of broader family and community networks. This means the money they make is not always theirs to keep, save or invest. Even if their productivity levels and income increase as a result of the skills they attain directly or indirectly as Youth Forward participants, they may not be better off. This needs to be kept in mind by the Learning Partnership in any future evaluation activities.

3. Help young people gain access to trustworthy savings services.

Frequently, young people's control over their finances was limited by their lack of access to savings services. In these cases, young people reported that their money went into supporting their extended family, or that they chose to spend the money on entertainment. This tendency was compounded by the fact that young people often felt there were no appropriate investment opportunities for them – the means of making money that they were aware of required much larger capital than they were likely to accumulate. Young people lost their motivation and thought saving was not worth their while. This points to the need to make access to trustworthy savings services a priority for Youth Forward participants and to encourage them to develop realistic savings and business plans.

4. Increase the provision of training.

Young people learn their farming skills almost entirely from their parents, while school and college curricula do not focus on the practicalities of running a small farming business. Young people lack the basic book-keeping skills to know if their farming labour is earning them a profit and they do not know how to increase their profits through more strategic engagement with market opportunities. These skills are being taught as part of the training being delivered by Y.E.T.A., while DYNAMIC is working to increase the provision of training services through the private sector. Our research confirms how important these activities are in Northern Uganda, given the inadequate extension services provided by the state.

5. Make use of the 'window of opportunity' provided by the family support young people receive at the start of their careers.

Because young people are still supported by their parents when they begin to farm their first plot of land, there is a real window of opportunity for them to experiment and learn about the potential of modern farming techniques. During this phase, they will not be as risk-averse as when they have established their livelihoods. This may mean involving parents to a greater degree, in order to ensure their support, but if it can be done this is an excellent time for young people to test unfamiliar farming practices.

6. Support young people to supplement their income by working away from their own land.

Young people often make ends meet through work as day labourers. This is likely to become a more important source of income for them as land shortages begin to bite. Finding ways in which they can increase their earnings while working away from their own farm should not be neglected. They could, for example, provide services to other farmers, perhaps by enabling them to buy good-quality fertiliser in smaller, affordable quantities, or they could provide extension services to their peers.

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Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0) 20 7922 0399

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