

Rural Youth Transitions to Farming in Ethiopia: Processes and challenges

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Abstract

There exists a significant body of literature documenting the unfavourable attitudes many young people hold towards a future in agriculture. In addition to their unfavourable attitudes to farming, rural youth encounter a number of insurmountable challenges on the road to becoming a farmer even when they are willing to be one. Drawing from two different qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in Ethiopia, this paper explores the processes through which rural youth transit to farmerhood and the challenges and opportunities they come across in the process. We argue that being educated not only reduces the desirability of a future in farming for rural youth but also considerably complicates late entry into farming. Gender is also an important factor in that the choice of becoming a farmer is not the same for young women and men. Not only that, women and men take different routes to becoming farmers and live out different lives as farmers. We conclude that education and the predominance of the urban, non-agrarian way of life in the imagined futures of rural youth, as well as the many obstacles most rural youth face on the way to becoming a farmer, are making the transition into adulthood and farming a lengthy and complicated process. However, at the same time, young people are not in a passive state of waitness as is often argued in much of the existing literature. Instead, they try to make the best of a bad situation by entering into farming in circumstances they perceive as far from ideal while still maintaining their hopes of achieving their long-term aspirations.

Keywords: rural youth, farming, agriculture, youth transitions, gender, Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

Well before the launch of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) in 2003, and especially since then, numerous arguments have been made regarding the *special* role of agriculture in reducing poverty and initiating broad-based, equitable and accelerated economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa. Although there has been considerable debate and diverse views on the role of agriculture, especially that of smallholder farming, in overall economic growth, there appears to be a consensus over the fact that growth in the agricultural sector will have the greatest impact in reducing poverty for countries whose population is predominantly rural and agrarian (World Bank 2007; Binswanger-Mkhize and McCalla 2010; Birner and Resnick 2010; Brooks *et al.* 2013; Christiaensen, Demery, and Kuhl 2011; Christiaensen, Demery, and Kuhl 2006; Dethier and Effenberger 2012; Diao *et al.*, Hazell, and Thurlow 2010; Dorward *et al.* 2004; Johnson 1993; Johnston and Mellor 1961; Wiggins, Kirsten, and Llambí 2010).

Consequently, it is often argued that agricultural growth has a higher return in terms of poverty reduction than growth in the non-agriculture sectors of the economy in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of poor people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. In recent years, however, questions regarding the ability of the agricultural sector to absorb the ever-increasing number of young people in the region and the role young people can play in transforming agricultural productivity and output have attracted the attention of researchers and policy makers (Brooks *et al.* 2013; Sumberg *et al.* 2014; Sumberg and Okali 2013). Some have argued that farming is ideally suited for the young who have the energy, potential for innovation, and the physical strength that the profession requires and that African states can harvest the “youth dividend” by strengthening young people’s participation in farming (Brooks *et al.* 2013).

On the other hand, there is also a substantial body of literature that narrates the difficulties young people in Africa are currently facing in their transition to adulthood. ‘Waithood’ has become a recognized term used to describe this prolonged, protracted, and complicated and, at times, suspended

transition from childhood to adulthood. Whether this state of ‘waithood’ also complicates young people’s entry into farming is rather unclear as much of the existing literature which documents the transition to adulthood among African youth tends to be concerned with urban youth and their transition from education to paid employment (see for example, Camfield 2011). More often than not, the literature also points to the role of globalisation and growing uncertainties in the face of ever-changing local and international contexts – as opposed to local structural and social inequalities – in explaining this waithood. As some authors have already pointed out, very few studies are done on youth livelihoods and livelihood transitions in contemporary rural Africa (Porter *et al.* 2010). By exploring the questions of who, among rural youth, are able to become farmers, how they manage to do so, and the factors which facilitate or impede the transition from rural childhood to young farmerhood in rural Ethiopia, it is our belief that this paper will bridge the existing gap in the current literature.

There already exists a significant body of literature documenting the unfavourable attitudes many young people in Ethiopia hold towards a future in agriculture (Tatek Abebe 2008; Sosina Bezu and Holden 2013; 2014; Camfield 2011; Getnet Tadele and Asrat Gella 2012; Yishak Tafere 2010; Yishak Tafere and Tassew Woldehanna 2012; Brooks *et al.* 2013). Growth in the non-agricultural sectors of the economy, especially in the service and industrial sectors; increased exposure of young people to the modernizing influences of education and the mass media; increased migration to urban areas; and severe land shortages are all likely to further exacerbate this negative attitude. Nevertheless, many rural youth are still likely to adopt farming as their principal means of livelihood in the absence of other choices. Despite impressive growth rates in the last five years, less than 10% of young people in Ethiopia are able to progress beyond the first cycle of secondary schooling.¹ In the face of limited choices for anything else, most rural youth have to confront the reality of venturing into a life of farming. The answers to who becomes a farmer and for what reasons may hence appear to be straightforward in such a context. Nonetheless, the process of becoming a farmer and the structural and contextual factors that facilitate or impede the transition from rural childhood to farmerhood

largely remain uninvestigated and poorly understood. It is, therefore, these challenges and opportunities, which rural youth encounter in the road to becoming a farmer that we investigate and portray in this article based on two different qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in Ethiopia.

Our findings highlight a number of emerging complications and contradictions in the transition of rural youth to adulthood and farmerhood. On the one hand, changes in farming in the last decade and a half, such as increased use of chemical fertilisers and herbicides; the introduction and widespread adoption of improved crop varieties; and market oriented, local agro-ecologically specific specialisation in high-yielding or high-return crops have made agriculture a more profitable and a relatively more desirable means of livelihood for established farmers. Contrary to what previous research tends to show, farming is becoming a desirable means of livelihood for many rural youth, at least, for the short-term future. On the other hand, opportunities for young people's entry and transition into farmerhood are severely constrained by social and structural inequalities as well as the cost of education, thereby making the transition a lengthy and complicated endeavour. Nevertheless, many rural youth perceive entry into farming as an essential first step in the transition to adulthood and continue to hold on to their long-term aspirations of a better life beyond farming.

2. Context of the Research

The article is based on two qualitative studies of rural youth in three farming communities in Ethiopia. The first study, funded by the Future Agricultures Consortium², was conducted between June and July 2011 with the objective of exploring what characteristics of agricultural life make engagement in agriculture attractive or unattractive to rural youth. In addition, the study also looked at young men's and young women's perceptions of 'agricultural life' in general and the major forces which influence this. The research was conducted in two rural sites, Chertekel and Geshgolla, in the Amhara and SNNPR Regions, respectively. These sites were purposively selected to represent two different agro-ecological zones and farming traditions. Geshgolla Kebele is more oriented to cash crop production than Chertekel

Kebele and school enrolment appears higher. Land shortage is much more severe in the Geshgolla: most households have landholdings of 1 or 2 *timads* or less, the *woreda* being the second most populous in the country. The area is becoming increasingly prone to food insecurity with successive years of irregular seasonal rains: a number of farmers interviewed were more or less dependent on the government Productive Safety Net programme.

The second study, conducted between June and September 2012, was done as part of an MPhil thesis by the second author and aimed to explore the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth in relation to education, farming and notions of rurality in Guai, a rural village in north-west Ethiopia. The three sites present a revealing glimpse of the current state of small-scale household farming in Ethiopia, with Geshgolla and Guai occupying the opposite ends of a continuum between sites of food insecurity and surplus production, and Chertekel lying in between.

Agriculture, as a whole, and family farming, in particular, have undergone significant changes in Ethiopia in the last two decades. The government of Ethiopia has allocated, on average, about 15% of its development budget in the decade 2002/3–2011/12 to agriculture and this has enabled it to launch one of the most extensive agricultural extension programmes in Africa (Kassahun Berhanu and Pulton 2014). For example, the number of extension workers has risen from just 2,500 in 1995 to well over 45,000 in 2009 (*Ibid.*). This impressive growth in the provision of agricultural extension program services, along with growth in infrastructure, has tremendously transformed family farming in terms of productivity, profitability, and even desirability. However, its pace and extent are not uniform across the country. This means that rural youth coming of age in the three communities we studied have experienced the changes of the last decade and a half in quite different ways, and are now facing quite different opportunities, and need to overcome obstacles and challenges, which are unique to their local contexts. In exploring the transition to farming in these three communities, we hope to bring into focus these local circumstances in addition to the broader national and international contexts all of which have significant implications for the future of rural youth and their entry into farming in

Ethiopia, where farming has, for centuries, been seen as a life of endless labour with little gain.

3. Methods

We generated primary data using in-depth and key informant interviews, group interviews, and focus group discussions. Interviews and focus group discussions were held with young students who were still attending school (both in primary and high school), young people who have either discontinued or completed their schooling, and young and older farmers. Key informant interviews were also held with local agricultural extension workers known as Development Agents, local government leaders, and personnel in the Rural and Agricultural Development and Youth Affairs offices of the respective districts. In total, 127 people (see Table 1) participated in the two studies. All the informants were selected through purposive sampling and we analysed the data thematically. Informed consent was secured from all informants; however, all names included in the text are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Summary of research participants

Participants	Kebeles						Total		
	Chertekel		Geshgolla		Guai		M	F	T
	M	F	M	F	M	F			
DAs and <i>kebele</i> admin. staff	3	-	6	-	4	1	13	1	14
Older farmers	6	-	9	8	-	-	15	8	23
Young farmers	7	5	6	-	11	10	24	15	39
In-school youth	5	5	7	7	19	8	31	20	51
Out-of-school youth	6	5	8	7	7	7	21	19	40
Total	27	15	36	22	41	26	104	63	167

4. Findings

4.1. Becoming a farmer: Whose choice is it?

Many studies have noted the strong aversion among rural youth in Ethiopia, and especially those in school, towards a future life of farming (Tatek

Abebe 2008; Sosina Bezu and Holden 2013; 2014; Camfield 2011; Getnet Tadele and Asrat Gella 2012; Yishak Tafere 2010; Yishak Tafere and Tassew Woldehanna 2012). These studies, however, do not show sufficiently the difficulties that young people have to confront and the challenges they have to traverse to become farmers even when farming is a desirable occupation or when they are willing to be farmers despite its undesirability. Our interviews with young people reveal that rural youth's perceptions of their choices are complicated and, in some ways, paradoxical. Those without education see farming as their only choice, and assume that education would have increased their options. Yet, they often also see farming as the *best* option, a view which is also shared by many of those who did go to school but end up still trying to enter farming subsequently, and who often find that their education is an obstacle rather than an asset to a successful farming career. They often, therefore, continue to aspire to an alternative career beyond agriculture, even while acknowledging that farming is a more lucrative short-term option.

During the interviews held with young farmers in all the three villages, 'the absence of any other option' was the most frequently given answer to the question of 'why one becomes a farmer'. This lack of other alternatives was visible despite differences in age, gender, marital status, level of education and family background among the young farmers we interviewed. In all the three sites, becoming a farmer is not a goal purposefully set and pursued by the youth; it is rather an unavoidable fate. The possibility of becoming a farmer was a situation best avoided altogether, more often than not, through education. This was particularly the case for the young farmers we interviewed in Geshgola, where nearly all of the interviewees had, at least, started high school education. In the other two villages in the north west of the country, never having been to school or not having the right level of schooling was the most significant factor in determining one's likelihood of becoming a farmer. Out of the 33 young farmers interviewed in the two villages of Guai and Chertekel, only five had ever gone to school. Among these young farmers, it was one's lack of education that surfaced as the principal reason for becoming a farmer. The following excerpts from two interviews illustrate this.

Back then, it was not like it is now. When we were children, parents were not forced to send their children to school. And mine didn't either. I grew up looking after cattle instead of going to school. So, when I came of age, farming was the only occupation I knew how to do and the only way of life I could lead. So I became a farmer. I could not have done anything else. (*Wubante, Male farmer, 25*)

I think it is all the same for all of us here; none of us went to school. If our parents had sent us to school, we would not probably have become farmers. I myself never went to school. I did not even grow up with my parents. They sent me away to work for another farming family as an "abelegna"³ from an early age. I had to work for my keep and I have had to fend for myself ever since I was a small child ... And I know nothing else I can do except farming. I cannot even write my name. If you give me a piece of paper that says 'put the bearer of this letter in jail' and ask me to give it to the police, I would take it to them and hand myself in like that; I wouldn't know any better. Sometimes, I think I would have done better if I had become a trader. But how could I? I am not so good at adding up numbers. Anything above five gets me all confused. How can I become a trader when I am like that? If my parents had sent me to school, I wouldn't have been like this; would I? (*Asre, Male farmer, 28*)

For those who grew up without an education, the entry into farming was something that came naturally with the transition from childhood to adulthood. They were never sent to school when they were children. Instead, they grew up looking after cattle and sheep, helping their parents or custodians on the farm; and some were even given away to other families as extra hands for hire. Farming has therefore been what they did starting from their early childhood and they knew almost nothing else that would provide them with a living. Other ways of earning a living were rarely visible, and even when they were visible, they were only to be considered if entry into farming became impossible.

However, this absence, perceived or real, of other means of livelihood did not mean those who became farmers felt they were forced to walk down a dead-end path. Almost all of the young farmers interviewed in Guai and most of those in Chertekel saw farming not just as their only option for making a living, but also as their best option. They felt that farming was the most profitable and financially rewarding option of livelihood available to

anyone in their locality. This view was not unique to those who never went to school and ended up becoming farmers. While most of the young farmers never went to school and, therefore, saw themselves as unable to be anything other than farmers, a few did go to school, some even as far as completing high school. Nevertheless, they too felt farming gave them a chance to lead decent lives, which their education did not. Essubalew, a young man, who did not pass the national school leaving examination at grade 10, describes how he ventured into farming as follows.

I started farming just with nothing. I only had the clothes I wore when I came back to my parents after completing high school. I started out by working as an *'abelegna'* for my parents in 2008 and earned seven quintals of wheat that year⁴. The next year, I sold some of that wheat and rented with the money one *'gemed'* (roughly equal to a quarter of a hectare) of farmland from my family. They also gave me another *'gemed'* to cultivate free of charge for that year. I sold the rest [from the seven quintals he earned the previous year] to buy fertilisers and seeds; and a few clothes for myself. By the end of the year, I got 18 quintals of wheat from those two *'gemed'*s of farmland. Therefore, the next year, I was able to rent five *'gemed'*s of farmland for a total of 15 quintals of wheat. I planted maize over the two *'gemed'*s of the rented land and wheat over the three *'gemed'*s. The wheat didn't give much yield that year; I only got seven quintals once I paid up the land owners for the 15 *'gemed'*s. The maize gave me nine quintals of grain. Overall, I got about Birr 7000 [about US\$350] that year. With that in hand, I got married, started a family of my own, and started living independently. I now have a daughter and I am able to take care of myself and my family. (*Essubalew, Male farmer, 28*)

Young farmers with some level of education in Geshgola also argued that due to the combined effects of education, increased farm productivity and high returns from some cash crops such as *qhat* and haricot beans, both the farming and non-farming populations have come to value farming as a viable means of livelihood and a good way of life. One of the participants went on to remark that he praised God for making him a farmer instead of a civil servant. 'Even the educated and the civil servants now envy farming', another participant added. Yet, not all young people, who come back to their village after leaving or completing school, succeed in their attempt to become farmers. From the interviews with young farmers as well as interviews held with local government officials in all three sites, it was clear

that young people, who have progressed to secondary school and especially those who have completed high school, find it particularly difficult to get started as farmers.

As we have indicated earlier, more than a handful of studies have noted the strong aversion among rural youth in Ethiopia, and especially those in school, towards a future life in farming (Tatek Abebe 2008; Sosina Bezu and Holden 2013; 2014; Camfield 2011; Getnet Tadele and Asrat Gella 2012; Yishak Tafere 2010; Yishak Tafere and Tassew Woldehanna 2012). These studies do not show sufficiently the difficulties that young people have to confront and the challenges they have to traverse to become farmers even when farming is a desirable occupation or when they are willing to be farmers despite its undesirability. Getnet Tadele and Asrat Gella (2012) also noted that rural youth consider farming as their 'last resort'. Many rural youth, who are in school, do consider farming as a fallback option in case they do not succeed in their education and fail to get to the non-farming careers they seek. While this may be a sound plan, many who do try to fall back to farming, find it more difficult than they anticipated. Years spent in pursuit of education have a price and this may have far more serious consequences than the negative attitudes to rural life and farming, which education may have fostered.

The effects of education appear to be two-fold here. One is that education significantly elevates the desire and hope for non-agricultural, urban-based, salaried employment. In this regard, the choice of becoming a farmer predominantly remains to be the choice of those who have little or no education and, therefore, little or no non-agricultural skills, which they could consider to be engaged in other alternative livelihood opportunities. However, with increased investment in education (time, effort and resources), entry into farming education becomes even more difficult for those who fail in their education. The difficulty emanates from two points. One is that education increases youth aspirations to a life beyond farming, and that makes their going back to farming psychologically daunting. Two, the time, efforts and resources spent in pursuing education come at the cost of gradual but accumulative process of asset building, which could have

facilitated the relatively smoother transition of youth with no education in to young farmerhood.

For many years now, school enrolment has thus steadily risen and almost 100 per cent of all eligible-age children are enrolled in school in Ethiopia. According to figures from the Ministry of Education, the Net Enrolment Ratio for the first cycle of primary education (grades 1–4) has reached 95.5 per cent for the 2012/2013 academic year (MOE 2013). From what used to be a largely illiterate society, a new generation is emerging, the vast majority of which will be schooled. This should certainly be a cause for celebration; but a danger lurks just beneath and a backlash against rising education vis-à-vis agriculture is already happening or waiting to happen. The impact of being educated, both on the desirability of a future in farming as well as complicating later entry into farming, is one that needs to be explored further and recognised by policymakers.

4.2. Beginning from scratch – returning to farming after leaving school

Our findings suggest that education increases youth aspirations to life beyond farming. When educated, youth find those aspirations blocked, they turn to farming as the best short-term solution. However, they find that their schooling is a hindrance to becoming successful farmers.

Growing up in farming communities invariably involves participation in various farming and non-farming activities for both boys and girls. Boys look after cattle, sheep and goats in the grazing fields starting from a very early age. Once they reach about ten years of age, they take part in weeding and harvesting, and can even start ploughing by the age of 14. Girls also participate in weeding and harvesting but, in most cases, they are not required to plough land or look after cattle. Instead, they help their mothers and older sisters in fetching water, cooking food, looking after backyard gardens, feeding and taking care of poultry, milking and milk processing, washing clothes, looking after younger siblings, and cleaning the house and animal barns. Primary school education takes rural children and youth away from these activities for at least some of the time. If they do make it to high school, this takes them even farther away from participation in farming

activities, as most students have to move to the nearest town on a semi-permanent basis in order to attend high school.

While those who continue their education to high school become farther removed from farming, those who never started school or did not continue their education to high school remain involved in farming. As they approach the latter half of their teenage years, young men start the process of becoming independent farmers. They can work for other families as *abelegnas*, work on plots owned by their families, relatives or others in the community on sharecropping terms. They may be given one or two cows by their parents or a few sheep which they tend to as their own and take ownership of newborn calves or lambs from the families whom they worked for. Through a somewhat slow but progressively accumulative process, they build up the resources they would need to start out as independent farmers. By removing themselves from involvement in farming in favour of their education, rural youth who continue with their education to high school forego this process of gradual asset building, which is crucial to their transition into farming.

The two to four years of high school study away from family, for many students from rural areas, is also expensive. In the event of failing to proceed to higher education, many rural youth who have devoted their time, effort and limited resources towards their education return ill prepared to start life as a farmer. Compared to those who never went to school, they have few assets with which they can begin. The following quote from an interview with Chekol illustrates the situation.

I think those who have attended school to grade 10 or beyond find becoming a farmer very hard ... They have spent most of their lives as students and yet do not have anything to show for it. I have never gone to school but my younger brother did and he came back after finishing grade 10. He could not go any further. Hence, he became a farmer, and he had to start from scratch. Whereas, I already had two oxen when I was of the age he began farming. So, I think it is not just that the schooled youth think farming is not their preference; it is also that they have nothing for what it takes to be a successful farmer and have to start from scratch. They have to go back to their parents and ask them for their help. Their parents sent them to school thinking they would learn and get jobs. When that does not happen and the children return to their parents with bare

hands, I think everyone will be a little disappointed and frustrated.
(*Chekol, Male farmer, 27*)

Rural youth who have completed high school, therefore, find themselves stranded between two worlds once they discover that they cannot proceed further with their education. Their hopes of securing a professional career through education are more or less shattered. At the same time, they also lack the key assets needed to start farming. In a group interview with young high school graduates, the dilemma of where to start now that their education has ended was referred to repeatedly. Many of the high school graduates found it difficult to contemplate a future life in farming simply because they did not see a way in. The following quotes from the interviews with youth in Guai aptly capture this dilemma.

It is not that we do not want to be farmers; it is just that the way is shut. Our area is well known for its fertility and yield. Being a farmer here pays off well. But it is not just about whether we want to be farmers or not; it is difficult to be a farmer when you have no plot of land to farm, no oxen to plough with, no seeds to plant, and no fertilisers to compensate for fertility decline of the soils. You can't just be a farmer; you need to have some money to rent land and buy inputs (*Alebel, male, 21, completed high school in 2008*)

A single bull ox costs from 5 thousand to Birr 8 thousand [about USD 275–450] these days. Moreover, you need two oxen to draw the plough; but I cannot even think of buying one let alone two. Then, there is also the cost of seeds and fertilisers. If you had, may be, six or eight gemeds of land, you can rent out half of it and use the money from that to cover the cost of fertilisers and seeds and so on so that you can cultivate the other half. Nevertheless, our families have three or four gemeds of land and they need all of it to get by. There is no land they can spare for us. How can we get to be farmers in such a situation even if we wanted to? (*Degu, male, 20, completed high school in 2010*).

Land scarcity is, perhaps not surprisingly, another important factor with significant effects on the transition of rural youth to young farmerhood. Our findings show that rural youth who come of age in areas with severe land shortage such as Geshgolla, where household holdings are minimal, households are relatively large, and possibilities for land rental and sharecropping are virtually non-existent, see no possibility for pursuing farming in the future. In such areas, success through education and securing

a salaried job at the end is touted as the only option for rural youth. Other options such as migration and pursuing opportunities in the rural non-farm economy come into consideration only when the education-employment trajectory fails to materialise.

While the issue of landlessness among rural youth is something that arose in every discussion we had with young and older farmers and is an important factor in the transition to becoming a farmer (we will return to this later on), starting out life as a farmer requires a lot more than just land. Oxen, a variety of farming equipment from ploughshares to sickles, seeds, and inputs such as fertilisers and a host of other accessories all require capital, which most school-leavers are not in a position to afford. Although some young people are willing to start from scratch and do so (as we have seen in Essubalew's case earlier), for most, the thought of becoming a farmer with nothing at hand is very daunting.

Opportunities which, in the past, would have allowed young people to start from scratch have been gradually eroded. In Guai, for example, desperate youth were able to venture out into the uncultivated lowlands of the Abay (Blue Nile) river gorge that borders Guai to the southwest. However, the river gorge was infested with malaria and going there carried the risk of losing one's very life. Yet, for those who needed going somewhere to start and were willing to take the risk, it provided them the opportunity. Young men went there in groups, cleared bushes and cultivated sesame. They disclosed that it required little investment, just hard work and the seeds and food to last a few months there, and generally gave a tremendous return. This has changed in the last five years when the government evicted what it claimed were illegal squatters, mapped the entire area, and started leasing it to investors. Land that used to be free for anyone willing to face the risks of working on it now costs more than Birr 800 (USD 40) per hectare per year. Furthermore, one has to be an investor to get it. Many of the young people, who were farmers already or were considering farming, lamented the fact that they were barred from a route that had been open to others before them. For many of the young people in Guai, it was somewhat ironic and frustrating that farming as an occupation was becoming more and more inaccessible as it became more and more profitable.

4.3. Gender and farming – the ‘choice’ for young women⁵

Rural agricultural life in Ethiopia is extremely gendered. In much of the country, traditional family farming has always been seen as a ‘man’s business’ where women only take part as caretakers and helpers to the men, who are seen as the ones who do the ‘real farming’.

Sixteenth century accounts of Portuguese travelers as well as studies in the last decade all mention the seemingly time-immune fact that men plow the fields while women take care of their houses (Regassa Aboma 2006; Becher 2006; Frank 1999; Messay Kebede 2009; McCann 1995; Mebrat Gebreslassie 2011). In virtually all Amharic folklore, whether he is portrayed as wise or foolish, hard working or lazy, poor or rich, ‘the farmer’ is invariably portrayed as a man. This gendering is not just limited to folklore and oral traditions; it is also widely prevalent in the public and political discourses. As Frank (1999: 3) notes,

...in terms of semantics, throughout Ethiopia, both within government bureaus and communities, the term ‘farmer’ is used synonymously with the word for ‘man’. It is clear that whether rural women contribute to the process of agricultural production to a greater or lesser extent, they are generally perceived as marginal players.

The available pathways leading to a life of farming, therefore, significantly differ for young men and women. Growing up, boys and young men get the option to work on their own and accumulate a few assets, either on their parents’ plots or for other people as hired helping hands. Once they accumulate assets, they can then decide between getting married and settling for a life of farming, or venturing into other ways of earning a livelihood such as trade. For young women, such choices are rarely available since there are few to no ways they can accumulate assets by working independently as unmarried young women in the village. Young girls who have never gone to school tend to be married at an early age, usually to older males who are established farmers and therefore end up becoming farmers themselves. Young girls who complete high school and fail to go beyond also face the same option of entry into farming through marriage once they go back to their families. The choice is often between getting into a life of farming through marriage, and migrating to the nearest town and trying their luck there.⁶ When they do enter into farming, the route they take,

that of becoming a farmer by marriage rather than becoming a farmer by their own choice and right, further reinforces their subordinate position.

Options such as working as *abelegnas*, or hired hands, who rent in and sharecrop plots from one's own family or others, are important opportunities available to young men that can help them accumulate a few assets before they become independent farmers, get married and start a family. The fact that women are excluded from activities such as ploughing and some forms of harvesting means that they are denied the same options and opportunities to build up their asset base and enter into farming on an equal footing with their male counterparts. The only entry point into farming that is open to young women is that of marrying a farmer.

Gender, therefore, comes out as an important element in shaping the transition to farmerhood and the lives young men and women lead afterwards as farmers. The synonymy of 'farmer' with 'male farmer' in symbolism as well as public and political discourse, and, with it, the placement of activities that are, at least symbolically, considered key to a farming livelihood, such as ploughing, sawing and harvesting under the male domain, mean that women cannot be considered to be farmers by themselves without a husband or a male helper. The fact that young unmarried women are denied the same or parallel opportunities for working independently and building an asset base, further erodes the possibility of women becoming farmers on their own, even when they are either willing to challenge cultural norms or abide by them and hire a male helping hand. As a result, the only path to a life of farming open to young women remains one that involves marrying a farmer and becoming a farmer. The full impact of this gendered nature of farming on young women's desire to pursue a farming livelihood and their future prospects as farmers needs further study. The fact that it does not present a tempting future to young women is, however, self-evident. (For detail discussion of gender and farming in Ethiopia, please refer to Asrat Gella and Getnet Tadele (2015).

4.4. Landless rural youth and the perpetuation of subsistence farming

The Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation of 2005 as well as the Constitution of Ethiopia state, in unequivocal terms, the right of anyone who

intends to engage in farming to access land.⁷ In principle, the only preconditions needed to exercise this right are intent to engage in farming and proof of residence in the particular area where the land is sought. This 'right' has, however, attracted numerous criticisms due to its practical inapplicability, since individual holdings in much of the country are already minimal and there is simply no land which young people can make claims on. As a result, despite their explicitly stated right, many rural youths in Ethiopia today are effectively landless. According to the 2012 Agricultural Sample Survey, rural youth in the age range of 18–29 years accounted for only 21 per cent of rural landholders with women's share being a meagre 3 percent (CSA 2013). Sosina Bezu and Holden (2013) similarly find that the average age of the household heads (which is often the same as the land holder) in their sample of 615 households in the Oromiya and SNNP regions was 43 years, and only 15 percent of household heads were in the age range of 15–29 years.

In our studies, none of the young farmers or high school leavers we interviewed owned land. Land shortage is particularly severe in Geshgolla where average household holdings are less than one '*gemed*' (0.25ha) and population pressure is among the highest in the country (key informant interviews). Here, the only way young people can get farmland is through the government's resettlement program, which means leaving their village. This means that most of the people who grow up in the area have no realistic chance of pursuing an agricultural life within their community, even if they wish to do so. When combined with the fact that the area has benefited from the presence of a number of missionary schools that have existed for over 50 years, most of the young people either proceed to a non-agricultural life through education or migrate out once they have had a certain level of education. The shortage of land is so severe, according to key informants that most of the conflicts in the area (usually among siblings and relatives) are caused by disputes over land rights and ownership. In the face of such a severe shortage of land, young people simply do not believe that the small plot of land that they might get hold of from their parents will be enough to make a living.

As they lacked any feasible means of accessing land, youth in Geshgolla were more aware of migration as a strategy, knew more people who had migrated and were more likely to migrate themselves than those in Chertekel, while youth in Guai showed little awareness of migration or desire to migrate. This is in line with previous findings, such as those by Sosina Bezu and Holden (2014) who found that a significantly larger proportion of youth migrated out from Wollaita, an area that was similar to Geshgolla in terms of population pressure, land scarcity and livelihood, than the other four areas they included in their study.

Key informants as well as young and older farmers from Geshgolla mentioned that some of the best minds in the country had originated from their area and that there were a lot of people who had become famous personalities following a successful education. This, they suggested, was partly because people here took education very seriously, as it was, quite literally, the only way of securing a viable livelihood. This also implies how aspirations and achievements are shaped by context. Young people in Geshgolla seemed to be more aware of alternative career opportunities, and they were prepared to compete from an early age. They found inspiration in the examples of seniors in their schools and neighbourhoods who had made it to high positions.

In the other two sites in the northern highlands of the country, landlessness is less severe. Land for rent and sharecropping is still available, even if young farmers say it is often difficult to get as much as one wants and the sharecropping terms are often in favour of the land owners. Land can be rented for a single season in return for cash payments ranging from Birr 600–800 per '*gemed*' (USD 120–180 per hectare). There are also other arrangements for renting land. These include *siso*, whereby the land owner is entitled to a third of the harvest; *ikull*, where the harvest is shared equally between the landholder and the renter; and *qurt*, in which the renter agrees to give a specific amount of grain, very often wheat, in return for the right to cultivate the plot for a year (although the amount of grain given depends on the fertility and location of the particular plot, the most often agreed upon amount appears to be between three and five quintals of wheat per *gemed* of farmland). Of these different arrangements, landholders were often said to

favour the cash for rent and *qurttt* arrangements. The sharecropping arrangements of *siso* and *ikull* inherently involve the sharing of risks, since whatever is harvested is then divided between the landholder and the renter. In contrast, both the cash for rent and *qurttt* arrangements shift all the risk to the renter since the owner is guaranteed the agreed upon amount either in cash or in kind irrespective of the amount harvested.

For young farmers who do not hold farmland, the only way of making a living out of farming is to enter into these arrangements, even if they feel that they are being exploited. There has not been any land redistribution since 1997. Nor does any redistribution look feasible in the near future since the government wants to avoid land fragmentation. All of the young farmers interviewed were not yet 18 at the time of the last land redistribution; and, as a result, were ineligible to hold land at the time. The only means of acquiring land that remains open for young people is through intergenerational transfers such as inheritances and temporary transfer of land use rights. However, according to the accounts of young farmers interviewed, as well as informants from the local land administration office, rates of intergenerational transfers remain very low. Apart from the inevitable, and more or less automatic, inheritance that occurs upon the death of either one or both of the parents, the transfer of landholding or use rights to children before the death of parents is uncommon.

The interviews with young farmers corroborate this. Parents do not give out their rights over farmland to their children; instead, they allow them to either rent it from them or use it free of charge for a year or two until the children get enough to start out as farmers themselves. Some of the young farmers spoke grudgingly about their parents and felt that the landholders were being too selfish.

Our parents just want our labour. Mine gave me the use rights over two *gemedes* for a few years while I lived with them and worked for them. Once I got married and started my own household, they took the use right away from me because I was not working for them anymore. (Bayabel, Male, young farmer)

What our parents give us is just a piece of land to put our houses on, nothing more. They might give us a plot or two for a year to work on; but that is just so that we can get up and start on our own feet. And we have

to behave well, if they think we are misbehaving or are not helping them as much as they think we ought to, they won't even hesitate to rent out the land to someone else. I think we have come of age at a bad time. (*Masresha, Male, young farmer*)

Whereas, the other participants, such as Alamir, felt their parents were not to blame. There was simply, in their view, not enough land for everyone.

People have six or seven children; they cannot give land to every one of their children; they simply do not have enough. So, they may give you a little land to put a shade on and then may be if they are kind and caring, they could give you a *gemed* of land or two to work on for a year or two. Once you are able to stand by yourself, your younger ones will use the same land to get started as you did. I do not think we could ask more of our parents. What else can they do? There are just too many people but too little land. My father wanted to give me two *gemed*s of land but I told him I will manage, I am young and can work here and there. I would rather do that than see my family struggle to survive while I take their land and get rich. Therefore, I do not think we should blame our parents that much. (*Alamir, Male, young farmer*)

Obtaining farmland from other people through sharecropping and renting agreements is also becoming increasingly difficult. The prices are ever increasing, and landholders are often said to be unwilling to rent their land to people they don't know or to whom they are not related. Excerpts:

These days they [farmers who hold land] do not even care for sharecropping; they prefer *qurt*, they will ask for three or four quintals of wheat for just one *gemed* of land. That is very risky. If it was sharecropping, you share the risk as well. At the end of the year, you split in half what you got out of the land, no matter how large or small the harvest is. Whereas, if it is *qurt*, you have to pay them those three or four quintals of wheat, no matter how much or little you got out of their land. They will not care if you have to sell your oxen to pay them; they just want their pay. That is not fair. It all depends on the fertility of the land and weather (which is often unpredictable); Even when you get the most out of it, maybe you will get seven or eight quintals of wheat from it at the most. Moreover, you cover everything yourself, you buy the seed, fertilisers, the pesticides, and you work on it all season. The landholder takes half of it just because he owns the landholding right. It really is frustrating; but we have no other choice. (*Wubante, male young farmer*)

As frustrating as it may be, young farmers have no choice but to try and

make a living by renting and sharecropping farmland from others. In fact, many of them do earn enough to make a living. However, they feel that they are being exploited. The young farmers interviewed in Guai cultivated between three and six *gemedes* of land per season. Had they held the land they worked on, they argued, they would have improved their lives instead of struggling to make a living. As things currently stand, the youth see themselves as instruments for other people's enrichment. Excerpts:

My greatest wish is to be able to put my labour and hard work to my own benefit. I am, however, a means for other people's enrichment. If I invest my labour on my own land, I would have been able to change my life within a few years. I am young and strong now and my labour is the only wealth I have. Nevertheless, it won't be there for the rest of my life. I will grow old and weak. What saddens me so much is the fact that I am unable to use my labour for my own betterment while the energy is with me. (Essubalew, Male, young farmer)

Just put yourself in our position. We pay for everything, we pay for the seeds, we pay for the fertilisers, we pay for the pesticides and we work ourselves to death. The land owner [holder] takes half of what we produce. Sometimes it might even be as much as three quarters of it. So, the return is very little for us. It is like trying to pound water, no matter how hard you try you are back where you started. If it was our own land [if we owned the landholding right] and we work this hard for three or four years, we would have gotten something that would have been enough to change our lives. Right now, it is like we are pounding water, it doesn't matter how much hard work we put into it. In the end, we are only labouring to enrich other people and there is nothing we can do about it. (Dagnachew, Male, young farmer)

The emergence of a class of landless rural youth is recognised as a major problem by local government officials in all the three study sites, and there have been differing responses. In the two northwestern sites of Chertekel and Guai, local governments have attempted to address the issue by organising landless youth into cooperative groups of 20–40 members and allocating to them communal land for agricultural use. However, passing communal land, which is often used for grazing and other purposes, to such groups can only be done if more than 80 percent of the local community approve of it. As a result, such transfers are fairly rare; and even when they do happen, they tend to assign very insignificant plots of land to a rather

large number of youth. Perhaps as a result, local governments encourage such groups to practice non-conventional farming methods such as irrigation farming, animal fattening, poultry and beekeeping rather than the usual seasonal, rain-fed farming. The use rights gained from such land transfers are also intended to be temporary. Once a group accumulates enough capital to start a business of its own, these plots of land are intended to be passed on to a new group of landless youth who would in turn pass it on to the next. This policy has, however, failed. In both sites, youth groups who have been assigned such land have not been able to accumulate any assets thus far. They describe their communal agricultural endeavour as a sideline activity and their individual farming activities as their main means of livelihood. In addition, not surprisingly, any new transfer of communal land to new groups have been frozen indefinitely by the regional government. In its place, local governments are now contemplating ways in which rural youth can work on the lands of their parents during the long dry season during which farmlands stay uncultivated. Through water harvesting and the use of small streams for irrigation, local government officials argue, landless youth can effectively use the long dry season to cultivate the land of their parents. This, however, remains to be seen as no practical work has thus far been done in this regard.

In the southern site of Geshgolla, land shortage is severe; communal lands are something of a rarity, and land is already being cultivated three times a year. The response here from the government has, therefore, been to encourage landless youth to take up the government's offer for resettlement. The success or failure of this intervention remains unclear since figures on the number of people who have taken up resettlement are unavailable. Nevertheless, many participants of the group interviews expressed deep attachments to their community and their land, which they often described as blessed. In light of such deep-rooted attachments, and considering that landless youth are not particularly on the top of the priority list for resettlement, we remain sceptical of the success of the intervention.

Youth in communities, where there were greater opportunities for access to farmland, such as Guai and Chertekel were more likely to enter into farming when their earlier desires for a salaried urban-based livelihood failed to materialise, even if they had reported a similar aversion to a future life of

farming. While it might not have led to the belief that farming was impossible and rarely resulted in outmigration, the negative effects of landlessness among rural youth were nevertheless visible in these two communities, too. Land rental and sharecropping terms favoured the landholder both in the high prices they carried as well as the shifting of all risk to the landless party. The cost of agricultural inputs, which had to be borne by the cultivator, and the inability to find as much land as one was able to cultivate even on terms that were extremely favourable to the owner, have made young farmers lead a life of continual struggle for subsistence.

4.5. Contemplating future transitions to non-farming livelihoods

Although most of the young farmers we interviewed felt that they had no choice other than being a farmer, there was also a clear desire amongst many to progress to non-farming livelihoods in the long run. Young farmers, and those who had not gone into farming but were willing to consider it as an option, held the view that farming should ideally be a stepping stone to a better, preferably urban-based non-farming livelihood. Most of the young farmers in Guai saw opportunities for a better life in the future and drew aspirations from the lives of those in their community who have been able to become wealthy businesspersons. Excerpts:

God willing, I hope I would, one day, become a businessman if I can. I am a farmer today because I cannot be anything else. However, that does not mean I have to be a farmer for the rest of my life. Farming, as much as I do not want it, is the base for everything else. It is a stepping-stone to my future as a businessman or an investor. I can sit here all day, dreaming about how I want to be a very rich investor; but it won't just happen like that. I have to start somewhere, and farming for me is the springboard to a better life. I am young now; I have the labour and the energy to work hard, save up for a few years and then move to town and lead an easier life when I get a little older; or if God wills it and I am fortunate, I will save enough to start a business in town long before I get old and weak. Farming is not a good way to make a living when you are old and frail. (*Essubalew, Male, young farmer*)

I think, at the end of the day, what we all want is to get some wealth and live a good and comfortable life in town. Whether you can make better money as a farmer or a businessman is different for everyone of us. However, my plan is to be able to buy a truck after a while, maybe in share with someone else. (*Yitayih, Male, young farmer*)

It is all God's will; isn't it? As the saying goes 'Man plans but only God knows'. I have started out as a farmer but that is not what I want in the long-term. If I can, I will try to save a little and join the business world in five or six years from now. I would rather have a business or two in town and become an investor, rather than ending up a farmer for the rest of my life. (*Amare, Male, young farmer*)

As long as it is something that can help me change my life to the better, I don't care what it is [that I do]. Around here, farming is what gives you that opportunity to turn your life to the better. All the successful business people, even the ones who own a fleet of trucks, started from farming. Not just here, even the ones in Debre Elias [nearest town and *woreda* capital] started from farming. You farm a few years and once you save up a bit, you start a business in town or you buy a truck. If the business goes well, you rent out your land and move into town. That is how it works around here. Everyone was a farmer when they began. (*Walelign, Male, 18, completed Grade 10 in 2011*)

A few of the successful young farmers from Geshgolla also felt that they could start grain trading business in the local town during market days if they could manage to buy a weighing scale. The desire to use farming as a stepping-stone to a better non-agricultural life was stronger among the high school graduates interviewed. Although they felt that their entry into agriculture and farming was barred, they saw farming as the best starting point on their way to securing a better non-farming life.

We would like to reflect here a little on what these aspirations mean to the current literature on youth transitions in Africa and specifically to the concept of waithood that has become predominant in recent years. The argument is that the majority of African youths today are in a prolonged state of anxiety suspended between childhood and adulthood as they grapple with their apparent inability to become fully independent adults – both in terms of securing their livelihoods and assuming the social responsibilities of adulthood (Honwana 2014). Honwana makes it a point to argue that this state of waithood — youth's inability to access basic resources to become independent adults — does not result from a failed transition on the part of the youth themselves. Rather, it is a result of what she terms as 'a breakdown in the socio-economic system supposed to provide them with the opportunities to grow up'. She goes on to add that 'unsound economic policies, bad governance, corruption and absence of civil liberties are often

at the origin of this problem’.

The findings in this regard lend support to this argument as far as rural youth perceive that they are barred from becoming farmers, mainly owing to structural inequalities that limit their access to land and the resources that farming requires. We, however, argue that such structural barriers are only part of the challenge in the transition to farmerhood for many rural youth. The transition is further complicated by education and the high aspirations that it creates among rural youth. Nevertheless, in the face of all of these, rural youth still perceive entry into farming as a key step in their transition to adulthood as well as moving towards their higher aspirations that they continue to hold. As such, rural youth transitions into farmerhood and adulthood, while becoming lengthy and complicated, are not primarily characterised by a state of waithood and suspended situation. Honwana (2014:19–20) herself makes this point when she states that ‘waithood should not be understood as failed transition’ and points out that youth continue to engage with and makes the best of ‘whatever opportunities arise in a constant effort to improve their situation’. Where we differ with her is in her assertion that waithood ‘is becoming a more permanent state and, arguably, gradually replacing conventional adulthood’ for many African youth. In light of our findings, we argue that the fact that many rural youth hold on to their aspirations of ‘becoming more than just farmers’ should not be taken as evidence of a never-ending state of transition to adulthood. It should rather be seen as a reflection of the way education influences aspirations and the manner in which rural youth can still hold onto higher aspirations as a means of dealing with the disconnect between their imagined futures and current opportunities. Such mismatches should not always be assumed to exist either. As we found out, for example, not all of our participants were dreaming of a life beyond farming and experiencing a disconnect between their aspirations and their current lives.

There were some among the young farmers we interviewed who felt that farming was the best livelihood they will ever have, since they either liked life as a farmer or saw themselves as being unable to do anything else other than farming. Those who have already established families especially felt that they should stick to their current life of farming and bring up their

children, as best as they could, rather than introducing instability and uncertainty, into their life by moving on to something else.

I have already started a family and have two kids, and I have already become a farmer. Therefore, I cannot just throw it all up and look for something else to do even if I wanted to. Not that I want to, but even if I did, my life is not my own anymore. I have a family and kids to worry about. So, I would rather live here for the rest of my life, be as good a farmer as I can and bring up my children as best as I can. (*Yille, Male, young farmer*).

5. Conclusion

We have explored the transition of rural youth in three rural communities in Ethiopia from rural childhood to young farmerhood. This transition and the ways rural youth traverse the road to becoming a young farmer is a key subject, which has received little attention and which needs to be explored further. While our study is limited and exploratory in nature, it highlights important dimensions of this transition among rural youth in Ethiopia, which add further nuances to the current scholarly and policy discussion surrounding the potential and futures of rural youth and family farming in the country and in the continent. Our studies draw particular attention to the following key issues.

First is the intricate relationship between rural youth and education and the ways in which education impacts the desire as well as capability of rural youth when it comes to engaging in farming. While education is often considered a key element in transforming traditional subsistence farming to a more profitable market oriented one, enrolment in education seems to further complicate the transition of rural youth to farming. The cost of long-term engagement in education on the asset bases of rural youth as well as the opportunities for gradual asset building that are missed in the pursuit of education make later entry into farming very difficult.

Second, gender is also an important factor in shaping the transition affecting the opportunities and pathways available to rural youth. Opportunities for gradual asset building that can facilitate smoother entry into farming are being constricted for both young men and women. Young women, however,

have far narrower opportunities than men and their entry pathway into farming is limited to marriage.

Third, the near absolute exclusion of rural youth from land ownership, the ever-increasing cost of land renting and sharecropping, as well as the asymmetrical sharing of risks in sharecropping have made farming further inaccessible and undesirable to rural youth.

Understanding and addressing the impacts of education and gender on the desirability and accessibility of farming as a meaningful livelihood option for rural youth; facilitating meaningful access to farmland; and the expansion of both on-farm and off-farm livelihood opportunities in the agri-food continuum are steps that need to be taken urgently if young people are to uphold their faith in agriculture. Otherwise, their faith in agriculture could very well falter and dissipate and the promise agriculture holds may prove no more than just that.

Regarding the broader discussion on youth transitions and the role of youth in farming in Africa, our findings indicate that the transition to adulthood, at least as it relates to becoming a farmer in the context of Ethiopia, is becoming more complicated and lengthier, especially for educated youth. Education and the predominance of the urban, no agrarian life in the imagined futures of young people, as well as the many obstacles on the way to being a farmer, seem to make transition into adulthood and farming a lengthier and more complicated processes for many young people. Nevertheless, at the same time, young people are not just sitting and waiting; they are not stuck in a state of suspension between childhood and adulthood. They try to make the best of a bad situation by entering into farming and working as farmers in circumstances they perceive as far from ideal and maintain their hopes of achieving their long-term aspirations. Hence, youth continue to see farming as a viable means of livelihood by itself, or at the very least, one that is good enough to take them to their long-term aspirations for an urban-based non-farming life. In this regard, facilitating youth transitions to farming by addressing some of the structural barriers we highlighted thus far can go a long way in not only making the complicated path to adulthood easier to navigate but also for tapping the

potential youth in general and educated youth in particular can have in transforming agriculture.

Notes

- ¹ Data from the Ministry of Education's annual statistical abstract for the 2012/13 school year state that there has been a 15.5% average annual growth rate for higher education (undergraduate) in the last five years. Despite this, however, data from the same publication indicate that the Gross Entry Ratios for both the 2nd cycle of secondary school and higher education remain below 10% at 9.5 and 8.9 percent respectively (MOE 2013).
- ² The Future Agricultures Consortium (<http://www.future-agricultures.org>) is a UK Government funded alliance of research organizations seeking to provide timely, high quality and independent information and advice to improve agricultural policy and practice in Africa. The Consortium involves over 90 senior researchers and post-graduate students from leading African and UK institutions working with a wide range of partners. It receives funding from the UK Government. It has regional offices in East Africa (Nairobi, Kenya), West Africa (Accra, Ghana), Southern Africa (Cape Town, South Africa) and Europe (Brighton, UK).
- ³ *abelegna* is a hired hand (always a man or boy), often hired for a year's work and paid either in cash or kind (this many quintals of this or that crop). The *abelegna* lives with the household he works for as a family member and the household provides for his needs. Often it is the parents and not the boy or the man that receives the payment in cash or kind.
- ⁴ It is somewhat unusual for a family member to work for his own family under these arrangements.
- ⁵ The issue of gender and farming in Ethiopia is one we explored in greater detail in a FAC working paper which is available at http://www.future-agricultures.org/component/docman/doc_details/1868-gender-and-farming-in-ethiopia-an-exploration-of-discourses-and-implications-for-policy-a-research#.VBwtbhbCCao. The revised version of this working paper was published in the EJSSH, 11(2) (see Asrat Gella and Getnet Tadele 2015)
- ⁶ Some young (and a lot of older) women do engage in the preparation and selling of traditional alcoholic drinks, mainly *areqe* (a local alcoholic drink). However, this too requires startup capital. The unique advantage of being an *abelegna* is that it requires no startup costs. As long as young men and boys are willing to work for others, even their immediate needs for clothing, shelter and food are covered

by the host family. In a way, young women lack such choices of beginning from nothing to gradually build up their assets.

⁷Article 5(1) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's Rural Land Administration and Land Use Proclamation (Proclamation No. 456/2005) states, 'Any citizen of the country who is 18 years of age or above and wants to engage in agriculture for a living shall have the right to use rural land.'

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