Do Pineapples Grow on Trees? Young People and Farming in Thailand, Uganda, and South Sudan

GENERAL NEWS

October 31, 2017

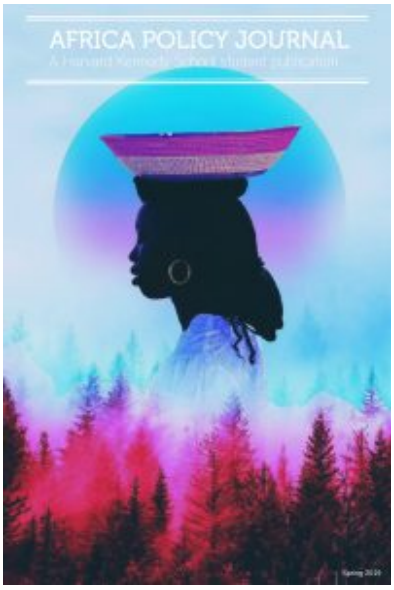
By Patrick Kabanda

Op-Ed/Commentary

In recent years, the first thing that normally comes to mind when talking about food crises is climate change. Indeed, "given our failure to act on greenhouse gases," as Paul Krugman has warned, "there will be much more, and much worse, to come."[1] But there is another worrying trend in the disruption of food production. In Africa and in Asia, many young people despise farming despite the huge potential on these continents to grow food for global consumption. Although this problem isn't limited to Africa and Asia, unless effective action is taken, this trend will continue to hurt the social agricultural practices that have sustained African and Asian homesteads for millennia.

Consider Thailand, a place known for its rice production and whose sun and landscape easily transported me to my native Uganda. Rice farming in this Southeast Asian nation, as Thomas Fuller says, "has long been the domain of the young and able-bodied who had the strength to stoop for hours in the searing sun, transplanting rows of rice plants, one seedling at a time." Today, however, rice farming, a backbreaking and muddy practice, is suddenly left for the old in Thailand. Young people are staying longer in school and vast metropolises like Bangkok are luring the "country's best and brightest to careers in air-conditioned workplaces."[2] In 2012, only 12 percent of Thai farmers were "younger than 25, down from 35 percent in 1985, according to government statistics, and their average age jumped to 42 in 2010 from 31 in 1985."[3]

As Fuller observes, with industrialization engulfing the world, the move away from rice paddies in Thailand and elsewhere is not surprising. But for countries like Thailand rice cultivation "is entwined with the country's identity, and its livelihood."[4] When you visit rural Thailand, it's unlikely that you will escape the daily practice of having rice for breakfast, rice for lunch, and rice for dinner — at least that was my observation when I spent the summer of 2012 in Chiang Rai working with the Mae Fah Luang



Foundation's Doi Tung Development Project. When young people understand 'modernization' as emancipation from practices like farming, how do we deal with the toll this takes on their cultural identity? In the language of ecological metaphors, this incites tsunamis of divisions between the old generation and the young generation.

As the older Thai generation dies off, "experts worry that Thailand may have trouble finding people to work its 13 million hectares (32 million acres) of rice paddies." For a country known as the world's leading exporter of rice — in 2011, Thailand's rice exports fetched more than US$6 billion — the economic implications of this are considerable.[5]

In Africa, the shortage in food production has never been the elephant napping on the African savanna. International media report countless stories of starving African children, with pictures of babies with protruding bellies. But for many who grew up growing their own food, these stories never quite paint the whole picture. In Uganda, where I grew up, we imported most of our domestic items — from matchboxes to soap. Nevertheless, food such as sweet potatoes, cassava, maize, and the like came from our own backyard. Blessed with fertile soil and rain, it didn't matter that we grew up in the city. In my household, we grew crops in small-scale gardens that abutted the city center. These micro gardens were, and are still, crucial to the African homestead.

Even though climate change is a reality, and chunks of Africa are barren, there is still plenty of arable land on the continent. There is land to grow food to feed Africa and much of the world. There is also land to grow forests to help curb soil erosion and cool the environment. In a country like South Sudan, its political problems aside, you mostly hear about oil. But when I was in that nation's Equatorial State, I was stunned to see perpetual

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acres of virgin arable land. Like other African nations, South Sudan could significantly contribute to the global breadbasket.

That goal will be difficult to achieve if African youth continue to disparage farming. With the advent of modern technology, young people are more inclined to spend hours on a computer than a minute in a garden. As I visit villages to conduct musical activities at schools that have computers, it's common to find 10, 20, and even 30 young people fixated on a laptop. Whether they're playing computer games or practicing English grammar, the technology exerts a fascination.

Computer literacy, to be sure, should be part of the African curriculum. Computer know-how could accelerate practical skills and teach better farming techniques. That said, too many institutions teach students to use a computer just so that they can get an office job. In South Sudan, for example, most of the students I met wanted to get an education so that they wouldn't have to farm. "It's a dirty job!" screamed a group of students in one classroom.

As young people flock to cities to find "clean" jobs, savvy African urbanites and plutocrats, the Chinese, the Saudis and other foreigners are grabbing acres and acres of land for agriculture — including cultivating biofuel crops — or other industrial projects. In Uganda's case, land has become a contentious issue. But instead of engaging in land debates and embracing agro-based entrepreneurship, many young people are more likely to become excited about running businesses like motorcycle taxis (or boda-boda).

While governments could help to shape policies that make agriculture 'modern' and appealing, they would rather overspend on the military. Education, agriculture, and infrastructure are often on the periphery. The social problem remains: How can agriculture be turned into an appealing profession that attracts

young people? How can young people be convinced that they can make a decent living as farmers?

Some of my Western friends have asked, “What does a pineapple tree look like?” I cannot imagine being asked the same question by children in tropical Africa. They would know that pineapples do not grow on trees. Or would they? As I observe young Africans today crowded around a laptop or weaving through traffic on their boda-bodas, I wonder who will be growing the pineapples, yams, cassava, groundnuts, and maize in years to come. Back in the Kingdom of Thailand, I am sure many older Thais will be disturbed if the younger generation asks of rice paddies, “Why are these ‘swimming pools’ filthy?” As we embrace modernity from Thailand to Uganda to South Sudan, climate change gets all the attention. But isn’t it time to also address modernity’s consequences on the way young people see farming?

Patrick Kabanda is writing a book based on his working paper, The Creative Wealth of Nations.

References

[1] Paul Krugman, “Droughts, Floods and Food,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2011,, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/07/opinion/07krugman.html.

[2] Thomas Fuller, “Thai Youth Seek a Fortune Away From the Farm,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/05/world/asia/thai-youth-seek-a-fortune-off-the-farm.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[3] Fuller, “Thai Youth Seek a Fortune Away From the Farm.”

[4] Fuller, “Thai Youth Seek a Fortune Away From the Farm.”

[5] Fuller, “Thai Youth Seek a Fortune Away From the Farm.”

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2 thoughts on “Do Pineapples Grow on Trees? Young People and Farming in Thailand, Uganda, and South Sudan”

Elizabeth Cornell Wilkin
November 5, 2017 at 8:25 PM
Permalink

Hi Patrick,

I am so glad you address this issue. It’s daunting, and frightening – given the scope of people’s attitudes, and giant corporations seeking profit from agricultural innovation, which may feed and fuel multitudes, but not necessarily in the best way.
God bless you and your work!

Nancy B. Miller
November 4, 2017 at 10:06 PM
Permalink

Very interesting article, Patrick.

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