

## **Agricultural livelihoods of rural youth in the drylands of Midelt, Morocco: An assessment of realities, viewpoints, challenges, opportunities and aspirations**

**Introduction** – Scientists and stakeholders of the agricultural research for development (AR4D) community agree that more sophisticated, empirical evidence is required to be able to better understand and take account of the specific situations of rural youth in agriculture (Geest 2010; Proctor and Lucchesi 2012; CRP on Dryland Systems 2015; Leder 2015; Pyburn et al. 2015). Active involvement of youth in farming is necessary for sustainable agricultural production systems, but it is generally assumed that farming is unattractive as more young people turn away from the sector to pursue other livelihoods (Bennell 2007, 2010; Heide-Ottosen 2014; Pyburn et al. 2015). World regions characterized by drylands such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are particularly affected by high rural outmigration and youth unemployment (ILO 2015, 2016). To effectively engage youth in agriculture, it must be understood how they envision desirable farming futures and what it takes to close the gaps between current realities and aspirations (Proctor and Lucchesi 2012; CRP on Dryland Systems 2015). This master's thesis – embedded in a research study commissioned by the CGIAR Research Program (CRP) on Dryland Systems and carried out in the Midelt Province, Morocco – investigates the situations of rural, farming youth in the three agricultural livelihood systems (ALSs) of dry areas: pastoral/agro-pastoral, irrigated and rainfed. The Midelt Province is located between the High and Middle Atlas Mountains. Traditional nomadic and sedentary forms of pastoralism as well as annual and perennial crop production play a vital role in local farming systems. While agriculture is the main employer, other income opportunities are limited. Midelt is characterized by harsh natural conditions, particularly in terms of very low annual rainfall. With limited rainfed farming potential, crop production heavily relies on irrigation. Extensive dry pastures are used for livestock grazing. Demographically, young people comprise a large proportion of Midelt's population (HCP 2016), thereby making the study site highly relevant in view of the thematic context of the research.

**Materials and methods** – Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the research applied a multi-perspective, participatory approach to (i) provide a diagnostic analysis of the realities, viewpoints, challenges, opportunities and aspirations of rural, farming youth in the research site and (ii) determine possible entry points for support and intervention aiming at improving the livelihoods of the youth. While the participatory approach forms the basis of the research to empower the youth to speak out and share their outlooks in an atmosphere of openness and trust, complementary opinions from other actors (key informants and youth influencers) were included to obtain a holistic understanding of the issues at stake and to triangulate information. Overall, the research included 106 individual in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions (FGDs) with young men and women from 24 villages located in seven different communes in the Midelt Province, 34 interviews with key informants and youth influencers, a multi-stakeholder workshop held in Midelt, as well as the analysis of spatial and further secondary data.

**Results and discussion** – Due to the lack of rural infrastructure and services, the realities of the surveyed youth are characterized by a number of unfulfilled basic needs, i.e. limited access to education, training, health care, potable water and sanitation, etc. In addition, young women are affected even more by this than their male peers. The surveyed youth's low educational attainments were found to be a complex result of culture and gender, far distances, the absence of teachers, no reported school attendance control and the (seasonal) obligation of children/youth to support farming activities and income provision. Consequently, youth are cut out of most job opportunities other than subsistence agriculture with small land and livestock holdings. Value added activities in remote places do in fact not exist and innovations in this regard are extremely limited. Based on their current situations, there are not many options for young people to make a living. To exacerbate this, present farming systems and activities are highly constrained as well. Productive resources – i.e. land, water, financial capital – are limited, fragmented and mostly inaccessible. The latter has much to do with the fact that the rural population is not formally organized in interest groups such as associations

or cooperatives. Without being organized in formal interest groups, youth and the local population in general are unable to tap into existing governmental support opportunities that may allow a better access to and use of productive resources. While previous research draws a link between youth unemployment and access to farming land (Bennell 2007), the findings suggest that limited access to productive resources is a root cause of youth underemployment in rural areas.

Most of the identified challenges were in fact not youth-specific. This puts a strong emphasis on applying research approaches that include the investigation of larger structural issues instead of looking through a narrow youth lens when dealing with young people (Mader 2016). Poor rural infrastructure and services – relating to the highly unfulfilled basic needs – are a key challenge in rural life and consequently for the young people too. Above all, missing roads have multi-dimensional impacts: affecting access to education, health care, markets, etc. This does not only apply to the studied context, but is generally valid.

Although it was found that youth's perception of rural life and farming is not per se negative, these findings need further differentiation. Young men and women have mixed views about their current ALSs, whereby female youth expressed themselves more negatively than their male peers. This is likely due to the fact that agriculture as a profession strongly came out as a male domain where women have no or less of a say. However, also the male youth had limited decision making capacity. Decision making regarding agriculture and personal matters of youth was mainly the fathers' priority. This supports the findings of previous research (Bouzidi et al. 2015) whereby youth might be considered as equal stakeholders in rural and agricultural development in theory, but it does not hold true in reality. The perception of current farming systems has much to do with their low or even negative financial profitability. No relation could be identified between youth's educational attainments, type of farming, etc. and their perception of agriculture. Overall, farming per se did not seem so unattractive to many if the conditions were better. Particularly male and also a number of female youth envisioned viable rural and agricultural livelihoods. Their aspirations could possibly be matched with their perceived and existing opportunities: the improvement of current ALSs and the development of post-harvest infrastructure and activities. However, the youth do not have the capacity to overcome their challenges. Young men aspire to have their own profitable farm, while female youth made access to basic education and training their priorities. Further findings show that rural outmigration is not a first choice for many but often driven by precarious living conditions, i.e. based on push factors. Overall, the findings suggest how youth's current situations relate to their perceived and existing opportunities as well as their aspirations.

**Conclusions and recommendations** – Implications are twofold: Firstly targeted towards the specific, studied context for improving the livelihoods of rural youth, and secondly consisting of implications for the thematic field of youth in agricultural research and development. The specific recommendations for future action and research in the study site are shown in Figure 1: Further research should seek to improve local ALSs, foster organizational development and evaluate the cost/benefit of possible support and interventions. Moreover, youth require better access to infrastructure (above all basic education), training and capacity building (e.g. through a mentoring program). Direct support should aim at structuring the local agricultural sector and developing post-harvest infrastructure and activities for inclusive growth.

General implications include that similar, participatory research approaches – taking account of the diversity of youth – be replicated, scaled up and out to make further scientific experiences and progress in this relatively unexplored field of research, to enable cross-comparisons between different contexts, and to inform decision and policy making actors about possible entry points for support and intervention in different geographical settings. Fostering decent rural and agricultural livelihoods for present and future generations must be recognized as a means to slow down rural outmigration and urbanization and create inclusive economic growth (Ghanem 2015) – not only in a Moroccan context, but generally where the rural and agricultural sectors are of critical importance. Finally, it remains to be said that livelihoods research should categorically be paired with practical support and interventions.

## References

- Bennell P, 2007. Promoting Livelihood Opportunities For Rural Youth. Knowledge and Skills for Development.
- Bennell P, 2010. Investing in the future: Creating opportunities for young rural people.
- Bouzidi Z, Faysse N, Kuper M, Billaud J-P, 2015. Les projets des jeunes ruraux: des stratégies diversifiées pour accéder au foncier et obtenir l'appui de l'État. *Alternatives Rurales*, 13–24.
- CRP on Dryland Systems, 2015. Youth Strategy, accessed on 15.10.2016, <http://drylandsystems.cgiar.org/sites/default/files/YouthStrategy.pdf>
- Geest K van der, 2010. Rural Youth Employment in Developing Countries: A Global View. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division, accessed on 15.10.2016, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/al414e/al414e00.pdf>
- Ghanem H, 2015. Agriculture and Rural Development for Inclusive Growth and Food Security in Morocco. *Global Economy and Development Working Paper*, 82, 1–19.
- HCP, 2016. Démographie - Province: Midelt. Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) du Royaume du Maroc, accessed on 12.10.2016, <http://rgphentableaux.hcp.ma/Default1/>
- Heide-Ottosen S, 2014. The ageing of rural populations: evidence on older farmers in low and middle-income countries. HelpAge International, London, United Kingdom, 23 p.
- ILO, 2015. Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015: MENA region retains highest youth unemployment rate in the world. International Labour Organization (ILO), accessed on 05.09.2016, [http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_412797/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_412797/lang-en/index.htm)
- ILO, 2016. Youth unemployment rate estimates and projections by region 2007-2017. International Labour Organization (ILO), accessed on 05.09.2016, [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/maps-and-charts/WCMS\\_212431/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/maps-and-charts/WCMS_212431/lang-en/index.htm)
- Leder S, 2015. How should we engage youth in agriculture? CGIAR Research Program (CRP) on Water, Land and Ecosystems, accessed on 09.09.2016, <https://wle.cgiar.org/thrive/2015/12/01/how-should-we-engage-youth-agriculture>
- Mader P, 2016. Should we stop talking about “youth”? Institute of Development Studies (IDS), accessed on 08.10.2016, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/should-we-stop-talking-about-youth>
- Proctor FJ, Lucchesi V, 2012. Small-scale farming and youth in an era of rapid rural change. Knowledge Programme Small Producer Agency in the Globalised Market, London, United Kingdom, The Hague, Netherlands.
- Pyburn R, Audet-Bélanger G, Dido S, Quiroga G, Flink I, 2015. Unleashing potential: gender and youth inclusive agri-food chains. *KIT Working Papers*, 7, 1–16.

## Annex

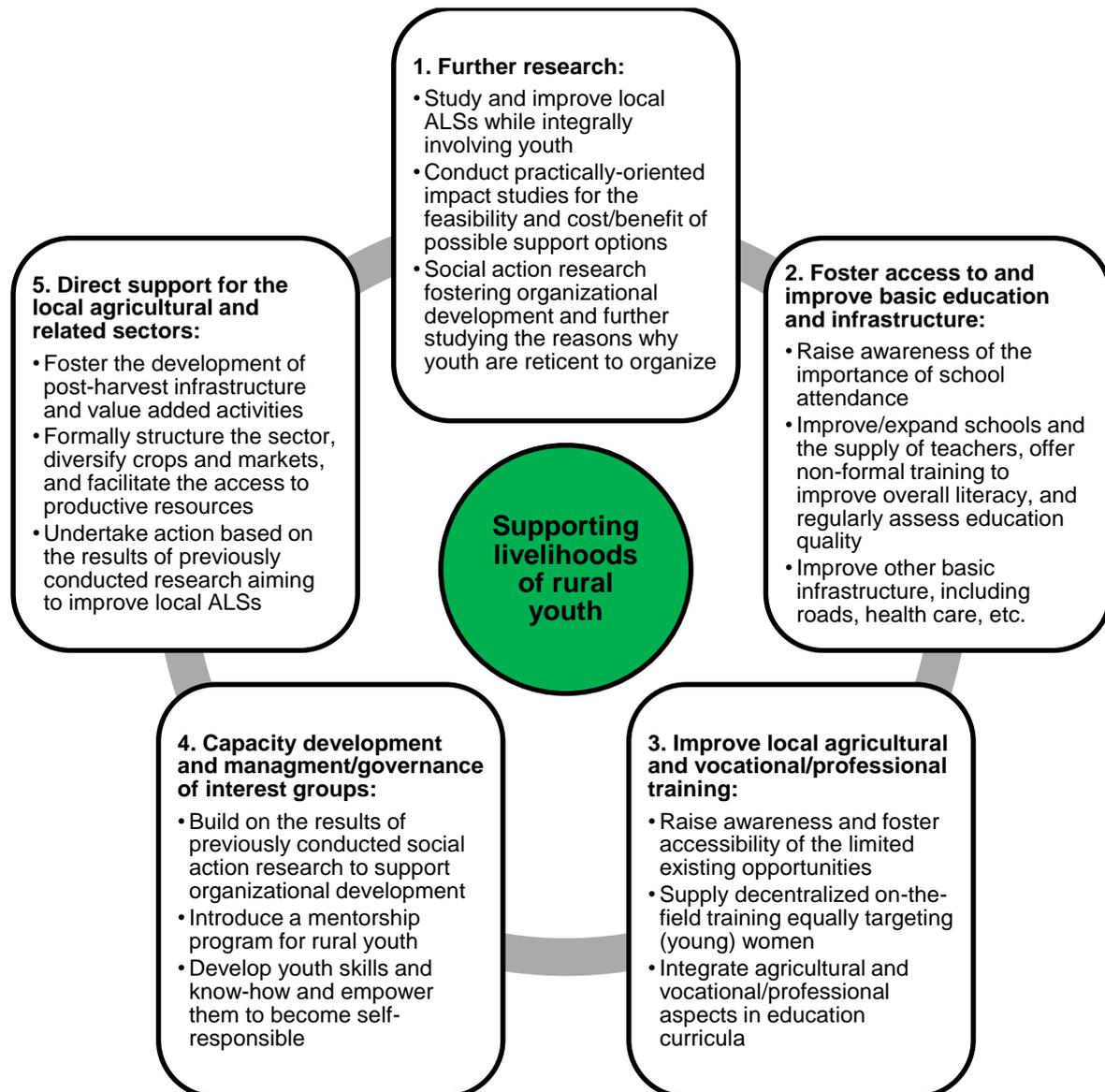


Figure 1: Recommendations for supporting the livelihoods of rural youth in the Midelt Province, Morocco