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Of Bulls and Bulbs. Using Drawing Exercises to Explore the Aspirations of Rural Zambian Youth

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Abstract

During the last years, policymakers and development-practioneers focused heavily on making farming more attractive for the rural youth in Africa. To reach this goal, different actions are proposed, often emphasising the need for modern technology and information and communication technologies (ICTs). These proposed actions are mostly based on anecdotes and prior policy beliefs, but not on empirical evidence since scientists have largely neglected this topic. This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the aspirations and perceptions of young people and therefore to the formulation of policy actions that fit these aspirations. Two research methods were used to explore the aspirations and perceptions of rural youth: interviews and drawing exercises, a novel method in this context that allows for both a qualification and quantification of aspirations. The results show that the rural youth has very diverse opinions and aspirations. In contrast to the literature, young people were found to reflect carefully about the good and bad sides of farming, rural and urban life, and of foreign countries. Imagining their future farm, young people mostly envisioned increasing farm diversity, using draught animals and applying more fertilisers. Few respondents mentioned the use of modern technologies such as tractors, and none mentioned ICTs. While it is difficult to generalise our results, the findings suggest that policymakers and development-practioneers need to pay more attention to the actual aspirations of the rural youth to avoid well-intended but misguided policies. The study also highlights the potentials to use drawing exercises as reserach tools. While our analysis remained mainly qualitative, the drawings of the respondents could also be analysed and coded with scores to calculate aspiration levels. Using drawing exercises both as a qualitative and quantitative research tool would allow for the generation of valuable insights into what young people aspire, both for policymakers and as indicators of aspiration levels that are interesting for researchers.

Keywords: Africa, aspirations, drawing exercice, future farm, youth, youth bulge, Zambia