

2



# viewpoint

DECEMBER 2011

## Putting young people first

Creating opportunities in rural areas  
for young women and men

Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty



# Putting young people first

## Creating opportunities in rural areas for young women and men

Today's generation of young people – defined by the United Nations as those aged 15 to 24 – is the largest in history. In the developing world as a whole, they make up on average 20 per cent of the population.

Young people have power and persistence. In the right conditions, a substantial young generation offers countries a priceless resource for economic development and social progress.

However, in the current climate and for differing reasons, many developed and developing countries are struggling to provide their young people with a future, either in cities or in rural areas.

Unfolding events in the Arab region, and more sporadic incidents in Europe and elsewhere, are testimony, among other things, to the consequences of populations that are both young and unemployed. Although the level and the nature of grievances differ, when young people are frustrated by poverty, unemployment and lack of rights, they do not sit by passively. They act.

At the end of 2010, there were about 75 million young people worldwide struggling to find jobs. Many more were in poorly paid or part-time work.

On average in the Arab region, an estimated 24 per cent of young people are now jobless and levels in several European countries more than match this. In the United Kingdom, the latest figures in November 2011 show 1 million young women and men out of work – or 20 per cent. Spain has a staggering 44 per cent of its young people unemployed, with Greece not far behind at 36 per cent.

Meanwhile population growth continues. The number of 15 to 24-year-olds in the Near East and North Africa is projected to rise by at least 7 million over the next 10 years, meaning that more than two thirds of the population will be under 24.

This is both a valuable window of demographic opportunity and a challenge.

Asia is home to the world's largest population of young adults – 745 million in 2010. And many countries in this region are experiencing a 'youth bulge', where 15 to 24-year-olds make up the largest segment of the population. Today in India, half of the population is under 25.

Sheer force of numbers means that we urgently need to harness the power and creativity of young adults on every continent.

The young generation of today has shown that, given the opportunity, it can move mountains. Young people have embraced new media and used it to make their voices heard.

We need to listen to them. But we also need to do more – we need to respond to the issues they are voicing. We have to provide opportunities for these energetic young people to contribute to society and to the big battles humanity faces today – against hunger, poverty, environmental degradation and climate change.

### **We need young people in rural areas**

One of our greatest global challenges – feeding the world – is also our greatest opportunity. With world population set to peak at over 9 billion in 2050 – and projections that food production will need to rise by 70 per cent – creating opportunities for young farmers and workers in rural areas is crucial.

We need them to produce, process and market the food that will feed the world. We also need them to play their part – as entrepreneurs, service providers and wage earners – in the development and economic growth of their communities, because at least 70 per cent of the world's poor people still live in rural areas.

And we need them to lend their weight and their will to the fight for good governance and social progress at all levels.

## Creating opportunities so young people choose to stay

Young people are the most precious resource a rural community can have. But today, many rural communities are losing their young people because there are often so few incentives for them to stay.

When young rural women and men cannot get an adequate education, make a living or create a secure home, they move to sprawling urban areas or to foreign countries they believe offer more hope. Some make good and continue to contribute to their communities by sending money home. Too many others become mired in urban poverty. This is a tremendous loss of human potential for their families, and for their nations.

The key to meeting the world's future food needs – and to fighting the hunger and poverty that is concentrated in rural areas – is to create an environment that will encourage and enable young women and men to remain in their communities. They need opportunities to improve their own lives, obtain decent work and pursue prosperity.

Basic education is essential to poverty reduction. Yet still today, in many countries, one young person in every four is illiterate – and most of them are women. The proportion of young people with basic education deficits is greater in rural than in urban areas, because schools are underfunded, and poor children are often taken out of school early to be put to work. The majority of child labourers work in agriculture – some 60 per cent.

Young people also need vocational training, apprenticeships and further education to give them relevant knowledge and skills. In the Near East and North Africa, governments have made significant investments in education, but the education system is not delivering a workforce that meets employers' demands. As a result, in some countries more than half of graduates do not find jobs.

## How IFAD helps

Targeted programmes can make a difference. An IFAD-supported project in **Madagascar** is providing apprenticeships and job opportunities for young rural workers and building a stable, skilled workforce for Malagasy small businesses. So far, over 1,500 young apprentices have been trained, and we aim to reach 8,000 over the next five years.

The project matches young women and men to businesses of all kinds, including pottery-making, tool-making, weaving, shops and farms. Apprentices take their new skills home with them, teaching their parents and making their families more prosperous.

In **Viet Nam**, a school in Tuyen Quang Province funded by an IFAD-supported project, has provided technical and vocational training to nearly 10,000 rural people – most of them young and unemployed. The project has also built and equipped vocational schools in three upland districts, enabling young people from ethnic minorities to get training, and giving scholarships to those from particularly deprived areas. Courses include accounting, motorbike repair, agro-forestry, welding and tailoring.

But education and training alone are not enough to guarantee sustainable self-employment, or to support start-ups that will employ wage earners. Young adults' access to finance in rural areas is vital.

In **Benin**, IFAD supports the establishment and growth of financial service associations – owned by rural people – that offer credit and savings products. More than 190 village banks across the country have provided about FCFA 13.7 billion in credit – or US\$27.4 million – to over 83,000 clients, primarily in rural areas. Nearly half of this amount has been given to young women and men.

The loans are used in many ways. Microentrepreneurs have invested in their rural businesses – from taxi-bike companies to shoe shops. Farmers are buying improved seeds and other inputs, and increasing their productivity. Parents are sending their children to school and paying for health care. Families are rebuilding their homes.

When basic education, training and finance are available, young rural people seize these opportunities. They empower themselves and build their skills and confidence; they participate in community decision-making and take management roles in local organizations.

For many years, IFAD has been working with poor rural people of all ages – particularly through community-based and producers' organizations – to increase such participation. We are now specifically supporting young people's groups. In 2011 we set up the Global Youth Innovation Network (<http://www.gyin.org/>) in collaboration with key youth partners. The network is a learning platform that connects young entrepreneurs so they can learn from each other and share innovations.

### Renewing political commitments and investing

Putting young rural people first is not an option, it is an obligation.

Some governments and regions have recognized this and are making commitments and taking action. To make good on their commitments, governments must make long-term investments in rural infrastructure that provides services for young people. Targeted investment transforms rural areas into vibrant 'rural cities', leveraging the impact of education, training and finance, and encouraging young women and men to stay and contribute their energy and drive to their communities.

It is vital for the world's future food security that we offer the next rural generation not only hope, but the tools they need to prosper and thrive. IFAD will continue to work with all our partners – and above all with young rural people themselves – to enable them to fulfil their potential.

by **Kanayo F. Nwanze**

President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development



International Fund for  
Agricultural Development  
Via Paolo di Dono, 44  
00142 Rome, Italy  
Telephone: +39 06 54591  
Facsimile: +39 06 5043463  
E-mail: [ifad@ifad.org](mailto:ifad@ifad.org)  
[www.ifad.org](http://www.ifad.org)  
[www.ruralpovertyportal.org](http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org)

Contact  
Sabel NDure-Barry  
Executive Assistant to the President  
Tel: +39 06 54592200  
[s.ndure-barry@ifad.org](mailto:s.ndure-barry@ifad.org)

