

Familiarity Threatens Cameroon: The Motivations of Students who Choose Agriculture

A Policy Brief

April 2019

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In October 2018 Cameroon’s Ministries of Education and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development issued a joint decision to include agriculture in all curricula from 2019 forward. Agriculture is the backbone of the economy and should be taught at all levels. Youths will not only see their parents’ farm, they will also learn its importance to the economy and the latest scientific advances as well. The demand by young Cameroonians for degrees in agriculture, however, may not have been strong in the past. This Policy Brief reports what motivates students to consider agriculture as their major field of study. One noteworthy finding is that familiarity with farming leads to contempt. The more pre-university contact students have with agriculture, the less likely they are to consider agriculture as their major field of study. To encourage more young people to study modern farming methods and commercial agriculture, it is worthwhile for educators and mentors to highlight positive trends and emerging opportunities in the sector. For agriculture to rise in stature as both a field of study and an occupation there is need for an improvement of the attractiveness and work conditions in the sector. Building and implementing effective policies to improve level of education of the girl child and household income at all levels could offer a veritable means to revamp declining youth interest in agriculture. The research provides evidence for supporting the new initiative to raise youth employment, agricultural productivity, and food security in Cameroon.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over 90% of the rural households on the African continent work in the agricultural sector. Almost two-thirds of the continent’s population (61%) is under 25 years of age. In Cameroon, 17% of the cohort was not in employment, education, or training in 2014; Figure 1. Young women face more challenges than young men. Almost a quarter (23%) of Cameroon’s young women is unemployed and 11% of its young men.

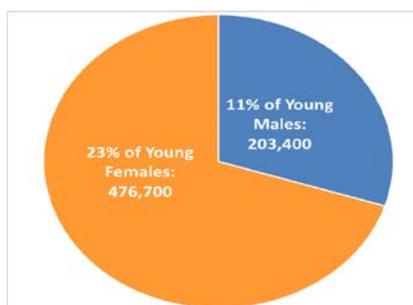


Figure 1: Youth (15-24yrs) Not in Employment, Education or Training, Cameroon, 2014
Source: ILOSTAT (2014)

Cameroon’s agricultural sector is very important to the country. It employs over two-thirds of its workforce (70%) and generates almost a third (30%) of Cameroon’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to Fader, Gerten, Krause, Lucht and Cramer (2013), it was at least 85% food self-sufficient in 2013 (figure 2).

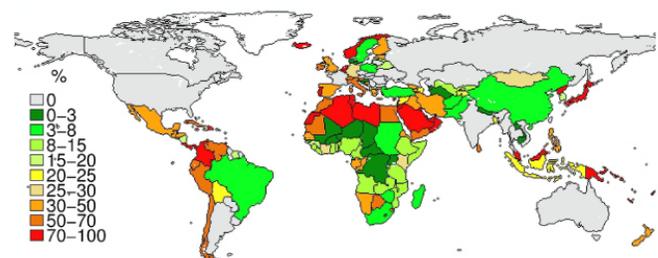


Figure 2: Food self-sufficiency rates
Source: Fader *et al.* (2013)

Despite the fact that agriculture in Cameroon can become even more productive, agriculture has rarely been part of the curriculum through secondary school until now. And a young person wishing to study modern agronomy, crop science,

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plant breeding, or agricultural economics could find the opportunity to study major in agricultural fields only in a few specialized institutions of higher education: the University of Dschang, the Benguela Agricultural Practicing School (Yaounde), the Community Development School of Kumba, the Catholic University Institute of Buea, and the University of Buea.

Is the supply of higher education in agriculture too low, or is it demand? For insight into the answers to this question, here are the main findings from the latest research about the factors motivating youths to major in agriculture in Cameroon.

What Students Think

Five hundred and fifty one (551) students enrolled in the University of Dschang and the University of Buea in the West and South West Regions of Cameroon respectively were surveyed. A questionnaire designed to document who they are and why they chose their majors was used during August and November, 2018. The universities were chosen because they have the highest enrollments each year, mixed cultural settings, are relatively affordable, and convenient for students from across the nation. Both universities offer curricula in agricultural and non-agricultural fields such as technology and medicine.

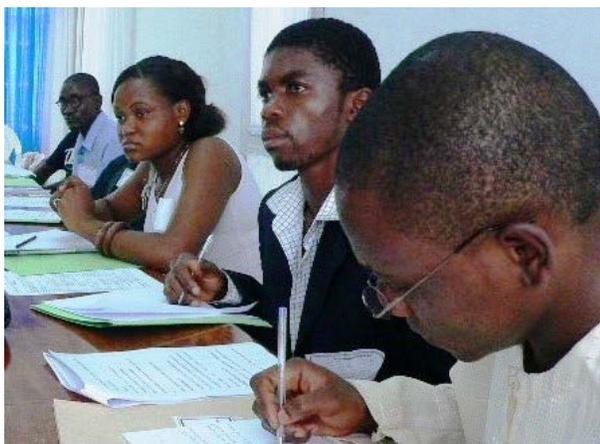


Photo : <http://www.cidrcam.org/>

Contact with Agricultural Experts

Students who have had some form of contact with agricultural experts before enrolling to the university are significantly less likely to choose agriculture as a major. This might be due to the

fact that although being experts, their stories and working conditions are not exemplary enough to motivate student to consider agriculture. Experts' limited awareness of the value of the agricultural sector in the country and/or failure to model work opportunities with exciting new technologies could have been a further discouragement to students. Familiarity with agriculture therefore leads to contempt.

Because pre-university students' contact with agricultural experts and role models discourages them from choosing agriculture, an improvement of the attractiveness and work conditions in agricultural sector could offer a veritable means to revamp declining youth interest in the sector.

Perceived Employment Opportunities

The study found that students who perceive good opportunities for gainful employment in agriculture are more likely to major in agriculture. To encourage more young people to study modern farming methods and commercial agriculture, it is worthwhile for educators and mentors to highlight positive trends and emerging opportunities in the sector.

Pre-University Farming Experience

It was found students with farming experience prior to enrolling in higher education are less likely to choose an agricultural major. This phobia is associated with drudgery and irksomeness observed and/or experienced. This finding is another basis for our claim that 'familiarity leads to contempt' for agriculture.

Mother's -Level of Education

The study equally showed that an increase in mother's level of education increases students' chance of taking up agriculture. This is most probably due to mother's increased awareness of the strengths and opportunities in the agricultural sector as their level of education and exposure increases. This is coupled with common observation that mothers have an outstanding influence over their children's career choice.

Family Wealth is a Plus

Students from homes with higher monthly incomes are more likely to take agriculture as a university. This may be associated with their relative ease to secure startup capital for their agribusiness.

Pre-University Academic Performance

This study also revealed that excellent students are less likely to take up agriculture as a university major. This may well reflect the fact that agriculture is not as attractive and competitive as other celebrated/respected professional sectors in the society like medicine and engineering. Students thus enroll in agriculture because they cannot meet up with the minimum requirement of these preferred disciplines. Agriculture is often a last resort. Showcasing the respectability of students majoring in agriculture through different platforms

can raise the attractiveness of the sector to younger students.

In sum, students majoring in agriculture in Cameroon have not met agricultural experts, perceive good opportunities for gainful employment in the sector, have little or no personal experience in the sector, are mostly influenced by their mothers, are average students and are from wealthier families. All these findings indicate that for agriculture to rise in stature as both a field of study and an occupation there is need for an improvement of the attractiveness and work condition in the sector and building and implementation of effective policies to improve mother's level of education and household income at all levels.

As Cameroon's agricultural sector continues to evolve from subsistence to market-oriented, educators should continue to encourage both young women and young men to engage in the sector.