



Redefining Agricultural Education through Vocational Training: Start Them Early Program in Kenya

Youth unemployment crisis

Unemployment in Kenya has increased exponentially since independence. Among the unemployed, the youth comprise the largest portion of 75% as indicated by the 2019 census. Despite being one of the most educated, creative, energetic, innovative, and techno-savvy labor forces in the country, the absorption of young people in working environments has not been commensurate. The economy, therefore, ends up with dependent young people who resort to crime, radicalization, drugs, and substance abuse among other issues. Consequently, questions about alternative employment sources in the country. Researchers and developmental partners agree that agriculture offers high-value employment opportunities for the ever-growing population in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the willingness to pursue agriculture as a career among the youth is low and masked by several negative perceptions which thrust them towards other alternatives (Mukembo *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, agricultural production has been relegated to the rural people whom are often elderly, retired, or uneducated (Sumberg & Okali, 2013). The sector is therefore reeling from an ageing labor force, leading to declined productivity. However, youth involvement in the would lead to increased production, increased employment, adoption of improved production technologies, and enhanced food self-sufficiency (Osabohien *et al.*, 2021).

This policy brief highlights experiences of the Start Them Early Program (STEP) and derives appropriate policy recommendations that could further scale-up STEP’s methodology by

mainstreaming into extracurricular clubs and vocational training syllabuses.

About STEP

STEP is an initiative of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) which aims to understand and demystify their perception of agriculture and trigger a positive mindset change. This goal coincides with the national 4K clubs’ initiative relaunched by the president on 4th June 2021, and the Young Farmers’ Clubs of Kenya (YFCK).



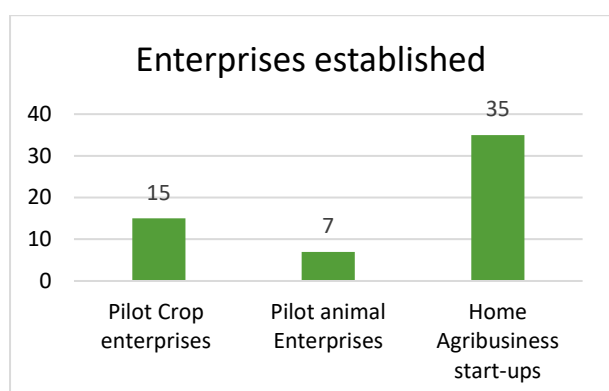
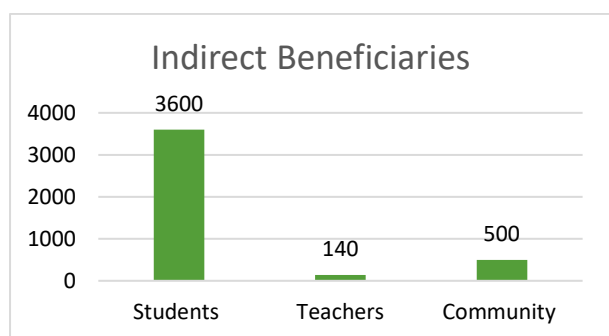
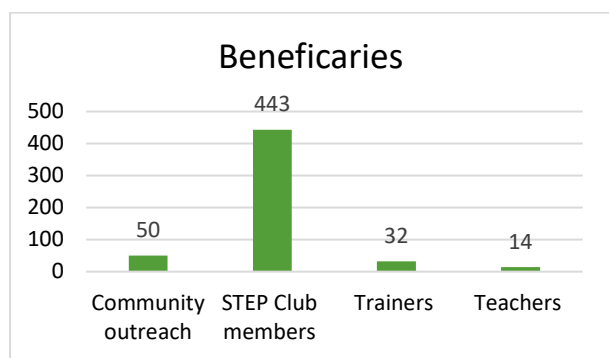
Program Impact

STEP started in 2019. Clubs were non-existent then. In the last two years, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has been able to establish six (6) diverse clubs and intervene in six public secondary schools. The clubs have a total **membership of 443 students** (36% young women and 64% young men).

Public Secondary School	County
Mwiki secondary	Nairobi
Muongoiya secondary	Kiambu
Afraha High school	Nakuru
Kisayani secondary	Makueni
St. Phillips Gikindu sec.	Murangá
Bathi secondary	Kiambu

At the beginning of the program, 52% of the students (Mulei *et al.*, 2020) had no plans of pursuing agriculture or agribusiness; but, after two years of implementation, only 9% of the students had no intentions of involving in agriculture; suggesting that an extensive reach of students through the STEP model would change perceptions towards agriculture and agribusiness. The students have shown an increased interest in their participation in agriculture: crop production 63%, small animal production 49%, and agricultural marketing 21% as their future focus areas in agriculture.

Most of the clubs have engaged in income-generating enterprises (71%) and have ploughed back the profits (78%), repaired farm equipment (18%), or paid school fees for needy club members (5%).



Key Messages

The work STEP has been instrumental in:

- Providing an alternative source of income and employment for the school going young population in Kenya. This reduces unemployment, improves livelihoods, increases production in the sector, and hence income generation.
- Being a platform for inclusion by motivating interests and participation in agriculture as a production sector, increasing agricultural professionals in the country. This positively impacts research, training, quality production, and skilled labor.
- Reorganizing agricultural production mechanisms by inducing new ideas in the system which are easily accessible. This improves the know-how and creativity in the arable lands in the country.
- Holistic capacity building in agriculture where different actors bring various capacities, willingness to collaborate, and utilization of skills gained assures sustainability.
- Peer to peer support as the youth support their home agribusiness projects and work together to benefit their local communities.
- Social connections formed during club activities, group home agribusiness, and competitions have improved their well-being.





Key Policy Recommendations

These transformations can be scaled if the government and educators promote the mainstreaming of vocational training by:

1. Intensifying youth sensitization efforts to combat youth's lethargic attitudes towards agriculture.
2. Focusing more investments on transitioning students to practice agriculture beyond school as an incentive.
3. Supporting new partnership approaches and formal mentorship programs that have been tested in the areas of youth skills development.
4. Accompanying business and personal skills development training with ICT and small mechanization training to bring youth up to date with modern technologies.
5. Developing standards, consistent across the clubs; that determine what students should be able to do once they complete the program. A monitoring system should be set-up to check the progress in the mastery of these standards by the club patrons and students.
6. Recognize the need to develop vocational and professional capacities within the schools.
7. Lobby for the formalization of extra-curricular activities within the curriculum.



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