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Perceptions of Agriculture by Elementary School and College Students in Mezam Division of North West Cameroon: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the perceptions of primary school pupils, secondary, and high school students in the Mezam Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. Existing literature points to declining youth interest in agriculture grounded on a largely negative perception of the sector, however, there is scant data on youth perception of agriculture in Cameroon. In the face of rising youth unemployment, there is a need to generate relevant data that can inform policies relating to youth entry and participation in the country's agriculture. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data from 7 primary, secondary, and high schools respectively. The data were analyzed using the thematic approach, leading to the emergence of themes. The findings of the study indicate that pupils and students have largely positive perceptions of agriculture which are however not translated into high aspirations for career development in the sector, suggesting a need for targeted actions at various levels of the educational system. Further research that addresses perceived determinants of youth attraction to agriculture in the country, will contribute to informing youth-specific policy towards agriculture.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Second World War, global rural exodus has been progressively rising. Statistics from the World Bank (2020) reveal that the global rural population in 1960 was estimated at 66% but in 2020, this population had dropped to around 44%, while the urban population had risen from 34% to 56% over the same period. Davis, Di Giuseppe, and Zezza (2017) point out that in Africa in general and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in particular, there is a massive rural exodus of especially young people towards urban areas. This rural out-migration generally leads to the swelling of the populations of urban slums on the one hand, and on the other hand, the aging of the population of farmers back in the rural areas where the migrating youths come from (UN, 2022). It also leads to a significant brain drain when educated young people move out of their countries to find greener pastures elsewhere. The World Bank (2021), maintains that although the rural population of African countries increased rapidly from 193

million inhabitants in 1960 to 678.5 million in 2021, statistics indicate that the rural population respectively represented some 85.3% of the total population in 1960 as against 58.2% in 2021. These statistics further reveal that the average urban population rate in Africa stood at approximately 47% in 2020 and is expected to continue growing.

The growing rural-to-urban migration of youths in Africa as well as the projected growth of their populations in metropolitan centres has been having and will continue to have significant effects on youth unemployment in the continent (Engler & Kretzer, 2014). Projections by the World Bank (2020) suggest that in 2050, some 27 million young Africans will arrive on the job market every year, most of them without any qualifications, considering that only 40% of children were enrolled for the first year of secondary school in 2011. Young people drop out early from primary schools and are either unemployed or engage themselves in hazardous jobs in the informal sector with very slim chances of transitioning to decent work (ILO, 2013;

Hui & Lent, 2018). Furthermore, young people aged between 15 and 24 in SSA, have fewer opportunities to access the labour markets compared to the active adult population (Haruna, Asogwa & Ezhim, 2019).

In Cameroon, recent statistics (UN, 2022), suggest that rising rural exodus has had very significant effects on demographic transitions over the past 50 years. Indeed, the country's rural population accounted for some 80% of the total population in 1970 as against 20% for the urban population (Folefack 2015). Today however, these trends have been drastically reversed as the rural residents make up 44% of the population while the urban population accounts for 56% (Ndamsa, Njang & Baye, 2017).

Youths constitute the most important force and resource in a given country; primarily because of their generally large numbers and secondly because they are able-bodied and can significantly contribute to the socio-economic development of the country if they are actively engaged in productive activities and are well coordinated in their actions (Avom, Nguenkeng & Tiako, 2021). Youth unemployment and underemployment can therefore constitute a very serious challenge to any country as it can lead to complex social, economic, and political problems (Phakathi & Wale 2018).

The United Nations Organisation estimates the current population of Cameroon at about 28,086,706 with a growth rate of about 2.51% and an almost perfectly balanced sex ratio (14,022,549 men to 14,065,308 women) (UN, 2022). In 2013, the International Labour Organization (ILO 2013) estimated that the population of Cameroon was very youthful as more than 60% of the population was under the age of 25. Today, to buttress these statistics, the World Bank (2021), places the median age of Cameroonians at about 18.7 years, indicating that about half of the population is less than 18.7 years, hence very youthful.

According to the World Bank (2020), the literacy rates among youths aged 15 to 24 in Cameroon are quite high (83.8%) with estimated rates of 87.12% for males and 80.45% for females. However, despite these high literacy rates, Folefack (2015) argues that there is a significant education and training gap in the working-age population as an estimated 43% of that population has either no formal education or incomplete primary education,

while 67% has received no additional training at all after their elementary education. Unemployment is therefore significantly higher among Cameroonian youth as compared to older demographics across all levels and types of education, pointing to persistent education and training gaps (Ndamsa, et al., 2017).

The World Bank (2021) report indicates that unemployment rates among young Cameroonians aged 15 to 24 years varied from 12.34% in 1991 to 6.4% in 2021. Furthermore, Avom et al., (2021) revealed that in Cameroon, 23.8% of young people aged 17 to 35 were unemployed, especially in urban areas where unemployment rates were estimated at 46%. On its part, the Fourth Household Survey (National Institute of Statistics 2015) points out that, approximately 11% of Cameroonian youth aged 15 to 29 years are unemployed, particularly in rural areas, where youth unemployment is estimated at about 37.3% leading to youth exodus to urban areas and increasing decline of economic conditions in the rural areas.

Ngwene and Tangko (2020) argue that creating viable jobs for young people is a precondition for sustainable development and peace in all countries and particularly in countries that have already experienced or are experiencing violent conflict like Cameroon. The government of Cameroon has become aware of the dangers posed by the growing rate of youth unemployment and has been presenting agriculture as a sector with a huge potential for the employment of young people and for partially resolving the problem of youth unemployment.

The agricultural sector in Cameroon is vital to its economy as it accounts for about 22.9% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ball 2016). According to the National Institute of Statistics, (2019), Cameroonian agriculture employs about 60% of the population and therefore stands out as the leading sector in respect of the provision of employment in the country. It also plays a critical role in the creation of wealth for the 2 million households that are involved in it, especially in the rural areas of the country. Though the agricultural technology used is fairly low and yields lag behind non-African developing countries, Cameroon's agriculture has great potential because some 15% of its estimated 475,000 square kilometers of surface area, is arable land. In addition, the five agro-ecological zones and fertile soils, confer to the

country a huge potential for food sovereignty (Ball 2016) and youth employment (Ngwene & Tangko, 2020). However, no study has been carried out to identify and characterize the perceptions and aspirations of primary and secondary schoolgoers with respect to agricultural careers in Cameroon. It is therefore not clear what perception the younger generations of Cameroonians in primary and middle school have of agriculture, and whether they harbor aspirations for the development of careers in the agricultural sector or not. Such information is highly needed by the government and decentralized actors like Regional, Urban, and Rural Councils for the elaboration of future strategies and policies in agricultural and rural development through increased youth involvement in their respective territories.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the perception of agriculture by primary, secondary, and high school youths in the Mezam Division of the North West Region of Cameroon, and their aspirations to enter and build careers in agriculture for self-employment, the employment of their peers and the rejuvenation of the agricultural workforce in a bid to ensure the economic development of their local territories, the fight against poverty and the furtherance of food security and food sovereignty at the local and national levels.

METHODS

The Study Site

This study is a cross-sectional study and was carried out from March to June 2023 in the Mezam Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. This region is located in the western highland plateau zone of the country, where the major occupation of the population is agriculture (Engwali, Mbei & Nfor, 2019). The Northwest region comprises 7 Divisions including Boyo, Bui, Donga-Mantung, Menchum, Momo, Ngoketunjia, and Mezam Division. Mezam Division is constituted of 7 Subdivisions which include: Bamenda I, Bamenda II, Bamenda III, Bafut, Bali, Santa, and Tubah (Atamja & Yoo 2021).

Research Design

The research design used for this study is the qualitative design which according to Creswell & Creswell (2018), is exploratory, descriptive, and contextual in nature. It sought to capture in-depth, the perceptions that participants have of agriculture,

and their aspirations to enter and develop careers in the domain. The target population of the study included pupils in the final class of primary school (Class six), the final year (form five) students in secondary schools, and the upper sixth students in high schools. Considering the ongoing socio-political crisis in the study area, the available population of the study constituted of the pupils and students who could be accessed without any major security problems, and who were willing to participate in the study without fear of being targeted by belligerent youths in their different localities. Functional lay private, faith-based, and government schools were included in the study. A sampling of the school youths was done at the sub-divisional, school, and individual participant levels. All seven sub-divisions were included in the study in each of which, purposive sampling was employed in selecting the educational institutions based on the criteria of easy access, security, and willingness of the school administrations, pupils, and students to participate in the study. A total of seven institutions at each level (primary, secondary, and high school) were selected. In selected primary schools, all pupils of class six were involved in both interviews and group discussions while in both secondary and high schools, a piloting of the questionnaire led the researcher to retain an average of eight students per institution for interviews and eight others for focus group discussions as the ideal size for such discussions is seven to nine (Tümen Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). Proportionate random sampling was used to ensure equal inclusion of male and female students.

Data Collection

A short questionnaire consisting of nine questions (seven closed-ended with multiple options and two open) was used in primary schools. Questionnaires for the college and high school students were identical and consisted of one closed-ended and thirteen open questions. Discussion guides for focus group discussions with the pupils and students were designed consisting of five main questions that aligned with the study questions, formulated to initiate discussions on general issues and then to deepen them as the sessions progressed.

Before the administration of the interviews at each level of the study, the questionnaires were piloted and refined where there appeared to be issues of understanding some questions by the

participants. In the primary schools, the consent of the head teachers was sought, and the class six teachers were enlisted to facilitate parent consent, questionnaire administration, and collection. The researcher then discussed with the pupils which lasted 30 to 45 minutes to probe further into issues of interest to the study. In secondary and high schools, the consent of principals was sought who then assigned the class masters of the classes concerned to facilitate the conduct of the study. Following the administration of questionnaires, focus group discussions that lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour were held with the 8 students who had earlier been retained to participate in that phase of the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed with the N-Vivo software, using the thematic analysis approach based on the six-step process proposed by Creswell (2018) and (Byrne 2022). To get familiarised with the data, the researcher carefully read through all the returned questionnaires to have a detailed and clear understanding of the meanings behind the responses provided by the participants. This was followed by coding in which, sections of the text were highlighted, identifying phrases or sentences with meaning related to the subject of the study. These sections of text were entered into the computer software, and codes were generated. After carefully examining the initial codes and identifying emerging patterns, groups of similar codes were combined to create the most appropriate themes. The themes generated were carefully reviewed and compared with the initial data such that some themes were combined, split, discarded, or new ones created. The themes were then named using succinct and easily understandable names for each of them. During the entire process, the inductive method was used, in which the researcher allowed the data to yield the themes rather than using predetermined themes from existing codebooks

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings provide answers to the questions on how youths in primary, secondary, and high schools perceive agriculture, the underlying determinants of attraction of school-going youths to agriculture and what could be done to make agriculture more appealing and attractive to young schoolgoers to solicit their interest and eventual

entry and stabilization in the sector? These findings are articulated around the themes emerging from data analysis.

Participant Perceptions of Agriculture

The perceptions of participants in the study were conditioned by their broad understanding of agriculture and farming. The students were generally unanimous on their definitions of agriculture and farming. They defined agriculture as the “*cultivation of crops and the rearing of animals either for home consumption or for commercial purposes*”. On the other hand, they generally limited their definition of farming to “*the cultivation only of crops for home consumption*”. However, there were some students who did not see a major difference between agriculture and farming. One of them affirmed that “*There is little or no difference between agriculture and farming but in my opinion, that little difference is how the output is used. In the case of agriculture, the output is used mostly for commercial purposes while for farming the output is used mostly for home consumption*”. On this premise of the understanding of agriculture and farming, analysis of data led to their categorization into two main clusters labeled as positive and negative perceptions depending on the lens through which the participants perceived the subject under consideration. The positive perceptions of pupils and students generally embodied 3 themes including Remunerative nature, Survival Assurance, and Employment Prospects. Similarly, 3 themes depicting negative perceptions generally emerged from the coded data. They were labeled as impoverishing activities, grueling work, and occupations for the underprivileged. These categories of perceptions and the related themes are presented in the sections that follow.

Positive Perceptions of Pupils and Students

1. Remunerative nature

The remunerative nature of agriculture as perceived by the study participants, was judged by its ability to generate income firstly for individuals and their households, to contribute to manufacturing processes by industries and to bring in revenue for the government. From this perspective, some primary school pupils perceive agriculture as an important remunerative activity as it can generate substantial amounts of income for the individuals and households that are engaged in it. According to them, farmers can sell their produce locally in

village or urban markets and make money which they can use to cater to their needs and those of their families. To make more money, some farmers can engage in the transformation of the products harvested from their farms. Some of the pupils indicated that the transformation of agricultural products can be done at a larger scale as a number of the raw materials flow to industries that transform them into manufactured products. These products are sold for more money than the harvested raw products.

According to the primary school pupils, the products can be sold in local markets or exported to foreign markets to bring in revenue that is used for development purposes. On the other hand, the pupils see agriculture as a sector that contributes to government revenue through the exportation of some farm products without much transformation. The revenue generated is used by the government for the development of the country. Based on their perceptions, the primary school pupils ranked agriculture among some of their projected career choices, though in terms of preference, most of them pointed to other areas such as medicine, teaching, and banking, as the areas in which they aspire to build their future careers. Still, in connection to its remunerative nature, the pupils expressed the opinion that agriculture draws a lot of importance from its ability to provide additional income to some people who are engaged in it as a part-time activity.

In the opinion of most secondary school students, agriculture is important to every country and the farmers involved in it, with its income-generating capacity being one of the key aspects of its importance. Most of them affirmed that agriculture can help young people earn substantial amounts of money if they enter into the domain and develop the patience that it takes to practice. They pointed out that if youths engage in agriculture and start their businesses in the sector, they would generate sufficient income and improve their standards of living. A student declared: *“Agriculture can help a young man like me to start his own business affairs in which he works for himself and not for another person, earn money, and make a good living for himself and eventually for his family”*.

The secondary school students further expressed the opinion that encouraging young and

able-bodied people to get into agriculture, is a sure way of increasing productivity and production of some key commodities that could be exported for foreign earnings, or that could be used locally for import substitution. In this way, the youths would be contributing to boosting the country's economy. Still, in relation to their contribution to the growth of the country's economy, some students indicated that the involvement of youths in agriculture would lead to the increased production of raw materials for manufacturing industries with a resultant increase in manufactured goods that would be sold in the local markets or exported to regional and international markets.

High school students like college students and primary school pupils, also generally perceive agriculture as a remunerative activity that can provide farmers and their families with enough income to improve their standards of living and to contribute to the development of the communities where they live and work. Depending on the specific production activities in which they are engaged, farmers can earn important returns from their investment in agriculture. To illustrate their conviction about the potential of agriculture to generate income for farmers and their families, a student declared; *“I personally think that I will take up agriculture as my life profession because I see agriculture as something really great and I really love it. I have a little past experience in the domain because I learnt some techniques of poultry farming from my aunt. I know it pays a lot, so I will take it up because it could really help me and my family”*. In addition, high school students perceive agriculture as a source of wealth for national economies. To them, it is *‘a source of revenue’*, *‘it helps to increase government revenue’*, *‘it contributes to wealth creation and the economic development of most countries’*. Furthermore, agriculture provides raw materials for many industries and hence plays an important role in industrial development. It is a source of foreign exchange as governments can export agricultural products for foreign earnings while importing products that are not manufactured in the country.

2. Survival Assurance

The theme of survival assurance emerged from the codes based on the perceptions that agriculture contributes to the production of food for humans, the provision of food for the population, food

production for consumption by man and animals, agriculture as the main source of food for our populations and markets and above all, the view that agriculture provides food for the survival of human populations and the animals that they rear.

Most of the primary school pupils expressed the opinion that everyone in every community relies on agriculture for food, irrespective of whether they are farmers or not. To them, food is important for life and without agriculture, there will be no food leading to the starvation of people. Some of them further argued that the quality of the food that is consumed depends on the quality of what the farmers produce. In this respect, most of the pupils indicated that for people to have balanced diets, farmers have to produce a diversity of products.

Like the primary school pupils, most of the secondary school students in the study expressed the opinion that the most important role of agriculture is its contribution to food production. In their opinion, agriculture is the primary source of food for all segments of the population in society. As the population continues to grow, so too will food needs grow and hence agriculture will become increasingly important. According to the students, the involvement of youths in agriculture would contribute to increased production of food that will be needed for the feeding of the rapidly growing population of the country. The production of quality food to feed human beings and the animals they also raise for more food and sales, would best be done through agriculture. To emphasize this point of view, one of the students insisted that: *“Without agriculture, there would be food shortages, famine and the decimation of the human population and that of the animals that depend on humans for their food and survival”*. Another secondary school student affirmed that: *“Agriculture provides the food we need to survive. Indeed, it will help young people to produce food for consumption and for sale and thereby ensure the survival of humans and the domestic animals that depend on humans for their feeding and survival”*.

According to many of the high school students in the study, agriculture plays an important role in food production required for home consumption. This perception is reflected in the point of view of one of them as follows: *“Today, the majority of young people think that farming is reserved for poor and average people which is wrong because if*

there is no farming or agriculture in our society, there will be no food and food industries. So if young people like us engage in agriculture, we will be contributing to providing food to every individual and helping our country to grow”. Some of the students went further to point out that national, regional, and global food security depends on the agricultural and food production systems that countries put in place as well as the importance that is given to agriculture.

3. Employment Prospects

This theme emerged from the data, guided by the perceptions of participants regarding the potential of agriculture to provide employment to people in various communities. Most of the primary school pupils perceived agriculture as an important activity because in addition to its ability to generate income, create wealth, and provide food to farmers, the community, and society as a whole, it can also provide employment to people. They indicated that they are willing to go to the farm on weekends or during their holidays to help their parents or relatives with their farm work. By so doing, they learn a lot about farming and gather experiences that could become useful to them later in their lives. To make the point, a pupil said: *“Many of my classmates may not see the job of a farmer as a good one. I think that farming is good. If you have some land and money, you can start a small farm and work hard so that it grows”*.

Many secondary school students on their part perceive agriculture as a source of employment and especially, self-employment. In their opinion, with the rapidly growing population of the country and the rising difficulty of securing employment in the formal sector (public and private), farming can provide a good employment opportunity. This perception is reflected in the words of a student who argued that *“Farming in particular can play a very important or useful role in our lives. It can help us to satisfy our monetary wants, build careers and to develop more skills to be better professionals in life”*.

Most of the high school students in the study expressed the same point of view as the primary school pupils and secondary school students with respect to the employment prospects that agriculture holds. In their opinion, not only does agriculture have the potential to provide jobs in general, it can serve as an important source of employment for

youths who are increasingly faced with the ever-rising problems of unemployment in society. In this respect, two high school students respectively declared as follows: *“Agriculture can make me self-employed, it can help me to make a lot of money and to become an important and well-noticed person in society”*. *“Agriculture is really important because it will provide employment to the rapidly growing numbers of young people. In addition, it will teach them to learn how to work to take care of themselves rather than just sitting idle and involving themselves in such negative activities as scamming, theft, and so on”*.

These findings of positive perceptions are supported to a certain extent by (Chikezie et al., 2012) who reported that some youths in their study had positive impressions of agriculture and were ready to actively participate in most farming activities. Similarly, Filmer & Fox, (2014) found that the majority of youths in sub-Saharan Africa who reside in rural areas have a positive perception of agriculture and generally work in family farms and in household enterprises. In that same respect, a study by Mussa (2020) which targeted Ethiopian youths aged 18 – 35 years who were engaged in agriculture, revealed that they had a positive attitude toward farming, and preferred to continue working in the agricultural sector including farming, food and fishery activities rather than withdrawing to take up occupations in another sector.

According to Mussa (2020), the sizeable share of youths who indicated farming as a preferred occupation, and that they would prefer to stay in the activity, clearly goes against the narrative that rural youth are abandoning agriculture. Interestingly, when asked about the most desirable attributes of a job that they considered in their occupational choices, the youths pointed to good working conditions and wages as the most desirable job attributes, while factors such as better quality of life, ability to help others, experience matching and normal working hours were considered as less desirable job attributes. This implies that jobs in agriculture could be fulfilling if young people who take them up work under good conditions with attractive wages or income flows (Sumberg, Yeboah, Flynn & Anyidoho, 2017).

In this study, however, despite their overall positive perception of agriculture, the primary school pupils rather indicated preferences for future

careers that are more non-agricultural. When asked about their future career preferences many of the pupils indicated that they would like to become medical doctors to cure people and save lives, make substantial financial gains for themselves, respect the will of their parents, or simply out of their love for the job. The choice of agriculture or farming as a future career option only came in fourth position after the medical doctor, teacher, and banker which to them are prestigious and well-recognized jobs.

According to Sumberg, et al, (2017) and Boateng and Löwe, (2018), positive perceptions expressed at an early age such as by primary school pupils may not be a real indication of their attraction to the career area, as such perceptions may be driven by the participants’ youthful sentiments rather than real aspirations. However, secondary and high school students who are more mature, generally held similar positive perceptions of agriculture, attributing their opinions to the sector’s crucial role of providing food for human survival, income for farmers, their households, and their communities at large, wealth for the country through foreign exchange earnings from the exportation of raw materials, employment opportunities for young people and the production of raw materials for industrial transformation with a resultant increase in value and consequently, more earnings. Though they indicated that agriculture is an important domain, their preference for future jobs also targeted human medicine (doctor), engineering, nursing, law, and teaching, with agriculture only coming in fifth position for secondary school students and in sixth position for high school students after teaching, medicine, engineering, nursing, and business. These results are similar to those of (Mussa, 2020) who found that the majority of adolescents in rural Ethiopia would like to be medical doctors later in life followed by teaching and other non-farm jobs, with farming preferred only by a small proportion of the youths.

The study findings also resonate with those of Mukembo, Edwards, Ramsey, and Henneberry (2013) who reported that the majority of youths who joined Young Farmers’ Clubs in secondary schools in Eastern Uganda were interested in pursuing a career in human medicine/nursing/pharmacy as their overall first choice, veterinary medicine as their second choice overall, and

agricultural engineering as their third choice. This implies that school youths may have a positive perception of agriculture, but do not have strong career aspirations for it.

Furthermore, the trends emerging in this study suggest that as youths progress in their education from primary to high school, their interest in agriculture tends to drop as they face the difficult reality of career choice (Brown & Lent 2016). They tend to prefer jobs that are more remunerating, prestigious, or that confer a better social standing than agriculture (Leavy and Smith 2010). Tafere and Woldehanna, (2012) came to similar conclusions in their study in Ethiopia where they reported that children keep changing their occupational aspirations over time mainly based on their educational achievements. While they found in their study that farming had been identified by very few children as their aspired occupation, those who could not go further in their schooling and failed to achieve their aspired educational levels tended to progressively look more favorably to agriculture and were more willing to take up farming as a career, as time went on. Davis et al., (2017) concluded in their study that income in most rural areas of Africa still derives from on-farm sources and that some 92 percent of rural households are involved in farming to some extent. In these areas, agricultural income represents 69 percent of the total income for the average rural household, making agriculture by far the most important source of household income. This may explain why the youths in this study perceive agriculture positively, even if they do not have high aspirations for careers in the agricultural sector.

Negative Perceptions

Despite the positive perceptions recorded in relation to agriculture, some of the participants at all three levels of education clearly expressed negative perceptions of agriculture which were grouped under three themes. The constituent details of these themes are presented in the sections that follow.

1. Grueling work

Whereas all of the primary school pupils in the study clearly indicated that farmers are important people in society, some of them expressed some negative perceptions of farming in particular and agriculture in general. In their opinion, farm work is very hard. Although they are ready to help their parents and relatives on their farms or to work on

the school farm, they declare that farm work is too tedious. Farm work requires long hours most of the time under the sun, with little rest, and tends to make farmers fall ill very often and grow old very early. The work is made even more difficult due to the use of crude tools. Expressing their dislike for farming, one pupil said: *“No matter what, I cannot accept to take agriculture as my profession, to go to the farm every day with a cutlass and a hoe like I see some old people doing. It is not a good profession for young people”*.

A similar trend emerged among secondary school students whose general perception of agricultural or farm work is its demanding and stressful nature. Some of them pointed out that agriculture is not a suitable profession for real life because it is a stressful activity especially as regards the aspect of crop production which requires a lot of back-breaking work that is rendered even more tedious because of the use of primitive tools and poorly adapted equipment. In the words of a student: *“Agriculture or farming is pure slavery. Farmers are slaves to others in their communities, they work too hard for too little, yet, we live in an age of advanced technology which is not being put to use in agriculture”*. In the opinion of these students, the type of agriculture that is practiced in most parts of the country cannot be attractive to youths who see on various social media how farm work and various agricultural operations are made much easier, pleasurable, and attractive in other countries. In the view of some high school students, agriculture is characterized by its burdensome nature as it needs a lot of effort and time. It is an activity that is very stressful and demanding to carry out. Those who are engaged in agriculture, either work with their parents when they are young and simply take over the farms when their parents can no longer carry out farm work or die, or they take up farming as they have no other alternative.

The arduous work requirements of agriculture make it an unattractive occupation for young people. Some of the students are of the opinion that agriculture is all about clearing the land, tilling it, planting food crops, and maintaining them so that farmers have food for consumption irrespective of how much work is done. They further advance the argument that the people in their communities have no other gainful employment but agriculture since they depend on it for their food, income, and

employment. To them, it is a way of life in which they have grown and cannot get out of it. According to these students, some of the members of their communities perceive agriculture as a profession that is not fit for young, educated people. One student cited their parent who declared that: *"If I accepted to go into agriculture, it is because when we were young, we did not have the kind of education that you young people have today. I cannot advise you to go into agriculture and I will never let any of my children go into agriculture to suffer the same way that I am suffering"*.

To further support this point of view, another student laid blame on their teachers who try to portray agriculture as a sector with a lot of opportunities for decent work and money, whereas this is not the case. The following statement is illustrative of the student's view: *"We have learnt in our lessons that agriculture is the backbone of the country's economy. Some of our teachers put in a lot of effort to encourage us to get into agriculture and to become great agriculturists tomorrow, so that they would be very proud to have educated us and made us see agriculture as a sector where one can build a solid career. However, the picture they paint is not a true picture. Agriculture cannot make young people great and rich. It is nothing but suffering under very hard work and harsh conditions"*.

2. Impoverishing activity

The underlying argument about this theme is that agriculture or farming renders the farmer poorer rather than making them grow richer. Whereas primary school pupils did not have any opinion in connection with agriculture as an impoverishing activity, some secondary and high school students had some negative perceptions of agriculture from this angle.

According to some secondary school students, the level of education that they will attain does not warrant that they go into farming as it will only lead to poverty. In their opinion, the financial investments and the sacrifices that their parents have made and will continue to make to bring them to an acceptable level of education require that they take up lucrative jobs to ensure returns on the investments. To them, it is a waste of time getting into agriculture because it does not give quick money and as a student put it; *'Everybody sees it; farmers do not generate much money from their*

work, so the impression that agriculture can make people rich is totally wrong. Those in agriculture do not only remain poor but instead grow poorer". Another student maintained that: *"Agriculture is carried out in a primitive way leading to soil degradation, low yields and declining income making the farmers poorer and poorer. It does not give a lot of money as many people think"*.

Some high school students went further to label agriculture and specifically farming as an occupation for the poor who cannot develop an alternative plan to get rich. In their perception, only those who want to stay poor or have no ambition to grow rich, go into agriculture.

3. Occupation for Underprivileged

This theme emerged from the codes that captured the level of prestige and social consideration that the study participants attribute to agriculture and farmers. Just as in the case of the theme of agriculture as an impoverishing activity, primary school pupils did not perceive agriculture and farming from the perspective of an underprivileged occupation. On the other hand, some secondary school students expressed the opinion that agriculture is meant for the illiterate, poor, old, and unemployed people with no other job opportunities in life. For some others, farming is a poor man's job, working for poor villagers and rural people in general.

From the perspective of some high school students, agriculture is reserved for underprivileged people as there is no level of prestige attached to it: *"The way farmers dress, the level of poverty that they exhibit and the fact that they are not given any consideration in society all contribute to exposing their job as one for underprivileged persons"*. On these grounds, these students point to other alternative non-farm sources of livelihood than agriculture as potential areas for their future careers, as they consider farm life less attractive and of low social status.

The negative perceptions expressed by some pupils and students are in agreement with the findings of Boateng & Löwe (2018), Leavy & Hossain (2014), and (Perry, 2009) who in their works showed that youths do not perceive agriculture as a rewarding or respected profession. They are supported by Njeru, Gichimu, Lopokoiyit & Mwangi (2015) who reported that Kenyan youths see agriculture as a less worthwhile domain or as a

last resort for under-achievers hence influencing their attraction to agriculture and aspirations for the development of careers in the sector. The findings are also in concordance with those of Noorani, (2015) according to who, despite the recognition of the potential of agriculture internationally, there is a decline of youth interest and engagement in the sector. They argue that the lack of incentives and drudgery are some of the reasons why youth are disinterested in agriculture in most parts of the world. The study findings also align with Abdullah and Sulaiman (2013), who reported that youths do not see agriculture as the thing to do unless everything else fails and that it is not perceived by many as an activity that provides a good standard of living.

The assertion by some pupils that their schools tend to contribute to the negative perceptions that they have of agriculture as school authorities transform it into a form of punishment which ends up alienating them from the domain is confirmed by Njeru, et al., (2015), who reported that when students are sent to dig the school farm as a form of punishment for a mistake or some form of indiscipline, they end up developing a strong dislike for any agriculture-related activity. Agricultural activities are therefore seen as deserving for wrongdoers, thereby limiting the youth's interest and any enthusiasm to pursue livelihoods in agriculture. As a result, opportunities for agriculture-led growth among the youth are reduced, thereby, leaving the activity in the hands of the aging rural population and consequently leading to low productivity and the strengthening of the argument that agriculture is for old people (Maïga, Christiansen & Palacios-Lopez, 2015).

Furthermore, the promotion of non-farm prestigious occupations by the media alongside poor messaging about agriculture, largely contributes to the perception of the sector as one for the old, poor, uneducated, and hence underprivileged people in society. Kuis, Miltovica & Feldmane, (2014) and Akosah-Twumasi, Emeto, Komla & Malau-Adul (2018) concluded that under such circumstances, youths would have no other alternative than to develop a preference to work in other sectors due to the discomfort and perceived low status of agricultural work. This could partly explain why some students in the study do not see agriculture with a good eye and would rather work in an office

or aspire for a job that is highly prestigious in the eyes of society. This points to the fact that in many parts of Africa, in addition to economic reasons, societal acceptance and culture, gender norms, and social status attributed to farmers play crucial roles in forming youths' perceptions of agriculture and especially farming (Adebo and Sekumade 2013). As Chipfupa and Tagwi (2021) affirm, social influence may have a determinant role in the perspective from which youth including elementary school pupils and college students perceive agriculture.

CONCLUSION

Despite the potentials that exist in agriculture for youth employment in Cameroon, and government efforts to attract youths to the field, the perceptions of primary, secondary, and high school students on agriculture are rather mixed. Though most of them see agriculture from a positive perspective, few of them aspire to go into agriculture and develop careers in the sector. The positive perceptions held by some school youths indicate that a proportion of them would go into agriculture if the necessary factors were in place to attract them. It is important that such conditions be carefully identified and enhanced to pave the way for youths who are attracted to agriculture, to enter and find niche careers for themselves in the field. On the other hand, several actions must be engaged to encourage those youths who hold negative perceptions of farming and agriculture in general, to progressively view the sector from a more positive perspective. Investments need to be made in agriculture to expand youth opportunities in the field, and to create an enabling environment for youths who are interested in entering and building careers in the sector. Such investments could include productivity-enhancing strategies aimed at increasing returns to agricultural employment, human capital development through adapted training that is gender inclusive, upskilling of practicing young farmers who would serve as models for attraction of their peers, but above all, working to transform agriculture into a sector that creates jobs that offer good working conditions and better prospects of income and professional career development.

As concerns agricultural education and training, a clear policy needs to be developed, accompanied by a review of the curricula on which

the existing educational system is grounded. Early and well-structured agricultural education delivered through an approach that blends practical work with some of the theoretical topics handled in agriculture and related fields would prepare the minds of young pupils and students to perceive agriculture more positively, to better understand it, and hence to develop stronger occupational aspirations for it. These actions require careful research to build strategies that are adapted to the existing and future contexts in the country.

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