Journal of Rural Studies 76 (2020) 142–151

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

# Hard work and hazard: Young people and agricultural commercialisation in Africa☆

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ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:*
Transformation
Intensification
Young people
Africa
Zimbabwe
Ghana
Tanzania

ABSTRACT

An emerging orthodoxy supports the proposition that the rural economy – built around agriculture but encompassing much more – will serve as sweet spot of employment opportunities for many millions of young people into the foreseeable future. However, our understanding of how rural young people in Africa take advantage of processes of rural transformation or engage with the rural economy is limited. Drawing on qualitative research conducted with 117 rural young people in three country contexts (Ghana, Zimbabwe and Tanzania), this paper reports the findings on the steps and pathways through which young people construct livelihoods in hotspots of agricultural commercialisation. Overall what emerges from a diversity of backgrounds, experiences and pathways is that the commercialised rural economy within which they operate offer them a variety of income earning opportunities. Family and broader social relations are key in enabling young people to access the needed resources in the form of land, capital, and inputs to begin their ventures. Between family and rental markets, there is little evidence that young people's engagement with crop production is limited by their inability to access land. We also find evidence of asset accumulation by young people in the form of housing, furniture and savings among others, which reflects the combination of relatively dynamic rural economies, enabling social relations, and hard work. However, for many it is a struggle to stay afloat, requiring effort, persistence, and an ability to navigate setbacks and hazards. Our findings challenge a number of assumptions underlying policy and public discourse around rural young people and employment in Africa. We highlight some key implications for policy seeking to promote youth employment in rural Africa.

## 1. Introduction

The argument that the rural economy – built around agriculture, but encompassing much more – can and must provide employment opportunities for many millions of African youth for decades to come has been carefully articulated by Filmer and Fox (2014) amongst others. Indeed, what might be called the 'rural prosperity gospel' has become a principle pillar of policy discourse around Africa's youth employment crisis (e.g. AGRA, 2015; FAO et al., 2014).

An essential element of the argument is that in order to provide decent or simply secure and remunerative employment for young people and others, agriculture in Africa must be transformed. In most accounts, the transformation that is envisaged is described in terms of intensification and commercialisation, and involving one or more of the following: increasing use of technology (including genetics, fertiliser, mechanisation and ICTs), engagement with national, regional and global markets and value chains, more active land markets, entrepreneurship, greater business orientation, and increasing importance of processing and value addition (Filmer and Fox, 2014). The theory is that rural areas where such transformational processes take root will provide more and more diverse farm and non-farm employment opportunities for young people. A number of interventions are commonly

☆ This research was funded by the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) Programme of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC). APRA is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Additional support came through a grant from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).
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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.04.027
Received 5 September 2019; Received in revised form 2 March 2020; Accepted 14 April 2020
Available online 22 April 2020

promoted to enable young people to take advantage of opportunities arising from such rural transformation, including technical and entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, savings groups, and easier access to land, credit, information and markets (FAO et al., 2014).

To date there has been little research looking specifically at how rural young people in Africa engage with or are affected by processes of rural transformation. There are some notable exceptions, including a handful of studies looking at land (Berckmoes and White, 2014; Bezu and Holden, 2014; Kosec et al., 2018), although these are more about population pressure than commercialisation. Specifically, there is little evidence concerning how young people in commercialised rural areas establish themselves in the rural economy; and how these processes, pathways and outcomes are affected by social difference including gender.

If commercialisation increases the value of land, it might be expected that this would create a barrier to young people who want to get into crop production. Similarly, young people, as small scale, poorly capitalised and inexperienced producers, might be expected to have more difficulty meeting the more stringent market requirements associated with value chains. On the other hand, a diversified rural economy supported by agricultural commercialisation might be expected to provide greater opportunity for non-farm self- and wage employment. Do young people use non-farm income to overcome barriers to entry into agricultural production, or do they stay clear of farming?

The objective of this paper is to shed new light on how young people in Africa engage with the rural economy. The analysis draws from three studies undertaken through Agricultural Policy Research for Africa (APRA), which is a 5-year research programme funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Overall APRA focuses on the social and economic effects of different pathways and models of agricultural commercialisation over time.[1] Using a common methodology, 117 rural young people from sites in Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe were interviewed, with a particular focus on how they came to engage with the rural economy (Chigumira, 2019; John and Manyong, 2019; Yeboah, 2019). In this paper we synthesise findings across the three sites. What emerges from a diversity of backgrounds, experiences and pathways is that the commercialised rural economies within which they operate offer them a variety of options and opportunities. Within these contexts, young people take advantage of multiple opportunities for self- and wage employment, on and off the farm. Many call on their family and wider social networks to gain access to land, capital and experience. Between family and rental markets, there is little evidence that young people's engagement with crop production is limited by their inability to access land. However, for many it is a struggle to stay afloat, requiring hard work, persistence, and an ability to navigate the setbacks and hazards (poor weather, sickness, family tragedy, bad luck, theft, business failure, etc.) that affect people of all ages. There is evidence of modest asset accumulation by some young people in these three contexts, for example in the form of residential plots, housing and other buildings, furniture, farmland, vehicles, savings, and children's education.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section introduces three key ideas – agricultural commercialisation hot spots; the distinction between modes of engagement with the rural economy and individual economic activities; and the notion of hazard – before describing the study methods and sites. The focus then turns to the findings: how the participants engage with the rural economy, and how they established themselves; the importance of work experience during childhood and disappointment around education; resource access; hazard; and outcomes and future plans. This is followed by a discussion, at the end of which, some key implications are identified.

[1] See: https://www.future-agricultures.org/apra/.

## 2. Framework, methods and sites

### 2.1. Framework

In addition to the large literature on agricultural and rural transformation (Binswanger-Mkhize and Savastano, 2017; IFAD, 2016; Jayne et al., 2018) and the much more limited research literature on the livelihoods of young rural Africans (Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2019; Chamberlin et al., 2018; Honwana, 2012; IFAD, 2019; Yeboah and Jayne, 2018), this analysis is rooted in a local economy perspective on agricultural commercialisation. In contrast to approaches that focus on the individual, farm, commodity or sector (Hinderink and Sterkenburg, 1987; Poulton, 2017), a local economy perspective starts with economic and employment opportunities associated with the commercialisation of agricultural production, but it also encompasses the activities that support (e.g. seed and fertiliser sales) and/or add value (e.g. marketing processing and transportation) to this production. It includes all the other economic activities that are enabled by or linked to agricultural commercialisation such as businesses offering goods or services that are purchased with income derived directly or indirectly from commercialisation, and policies at various levels that impact agricultural commercialisation and intensification. Agricultural commercialisation as a place-based economic and rural development phenomenon is about much more than producing and selling agricultural products, and therefore the commonly used Household Crop Commercialisation Index[2] is of limited value.

Using this perspective, and building on the framework provided by Wiggins and Proctor (2001), it is instructive to consider two stylised local rural economies – one a commercialisation 'cold' spot, where agricultural commercialisation is not well developed or intensive, the other a 'hot' spot where commercialisation is well developed. In the commercialisation cold spot, we would expect that, aside from domestic work, the local economy is dominated by small farm production based primarily on family labour, with perhaps some very limited use of agricultural wage labour. Both the farm-service economy and the non-farm economy are limited, and they provide few economic opportunities for young people (or anyone else). If they are not farming on their own account or working on the family farm, young people may leave the local economy by moving to other rural areas and/or urban areas in search of opportunities. Money, goods, knowledge, skills etc. may flow back to the local rural economy as a result.

In a commercialisation hot spot, while farm production continues to be important, it is a smaller part of the story. In addition to greater demand for wage labour on farms, there are opportunities for non-farm employment and self-employment. We would also expect these local economies to be more dynamic as indicated by, for example, more rapid growth in individual and household incomes, and the development of new businesses and services. Nevertheless, like young people in commercialisation cold spots, those in hot spots might also decide to explore and exploit different opportunities in other rural and/or urban areas.

If indeed there are more and a greater diversity of economic opportunities for young people in the commercialisation hot spot, the central questions become: which young people are able to take advantage of these different opportunities, and how do they take the initial steps to engage with a highly commercialised local economy?

In analysing young people's efforts to build their livelihoods, we distinguish between 'modes of engagement' with the rural economy on the one hand, and actual income generating 'activities' on the other. Four possible modes of engagement are considered: (1) farm self-employment, (2) on-farm wage labour, (3) non-farm wage labour, and (4)

[2] The Household Crop Commercialisation Index (HCCI) is usually computed as the ratio of the gross value of all crop sales per household per year to the gross value of all crop production (Strasberg et al., 1999).

non-farm self-employment or business operation. Within each of these there are many possible activities: farm self-employment might entail production of cereal crops, horticultural crops or purely commercial crops like cocoa, cashew or tobacco, while non-farm wage labour might entail working in a hair dressing shop, as an assistant in a shop or canteen, or as a house builder's helper. The assumption is that there are differential resource, knowledge and social barriers to entry, both between and within the different modes of engagement, which will have important implications for who is able to take advantage of any given opportunity.

Finally, we draw on Richards (1986) who put the notion of 'hazard' at the centre of his analysis of small-scale rice farming in Sierra Leone. Richards conceived of hazard as including accidents, weather events and mistakes by rice farmers that have (or could have) negative impacts, and in some cases, impacts that are cumulative. For Richards, a family illness that then affects farming operations represents hazard, as would early rains that disrupt land preparation, or a decision to plant a late maturing variety in what turns out to be a dry year. As will become evident, young people's efforts to initiate, sustain, and grow their income generating activities can also be badly affected by hazard. The notion of hazard has much in common with the idea of 'idiosyncratic risks' (or idiosyncratic shocks) in the economics literature (Dercon and Krishnan, 2000), which affect only one individual, household or family. An important difference between hazard and idiosyncratic shock is that Richards included mistakes in the former, while they play no part on the latter.

### 2.2. Methods

The research was organised around two questions: (1) in commercialisation hotspots, what pathways do young people use to get themselves started in economic activities? and, (2) how are the pathways available and outcomes experienced influenced by factors of social difference, including gender? Three commercialisation hot spots were identified: Techiman North District in Brong Ahafo, Ghana; Dumila Ward in Morogoro, Tanzania; and Mvurwi farming area, Mazowe District, Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe. Together they represent some of the historical and agro-ecological diversity within which agricultural commercialisation is intensifying.

A snowball sampling strategy was used with the objective of capturing a broad range of modes of engagement, economic activities, and social and economic backgrounds. The focus was on individuals who could be considered in the early stages of livelihood building. In practice the samples included individuals aged from 16 to 35 years. While the upper end of this range is pushing the limit for youth and young people, we wanted to include them because they can provide insights into livelihood pathways. Further, Honwana's claim that 'the majority of young Africans today live in waithood' (2012, p.20; 2019, p.8), if true, would suggest the need to consider those individuals whose chronological age might be outside standard definitions of youth.

Data were collected through individual interviews, with 35, 42 and 40 interviews being completed in Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe respectively. The same interview schedule was used across the three sites covering (1) the background of the interviewee, (2) a history of his/her economic activities and (3) plans for the immediate and more distant future. On average, interviews lasted between 50 and 60 min. Before each interview, a statement of consent covering the objectives and expectations of the interview was read in the local language. Permission was sought to record the interviews with a digital audio recorder. The audio files were transcribed, and the transcripts compared with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. QDA Miner Lite software was used to code the interview transcripts.[3]

The key markers of social difference used in this study were gender, age, origin (local or migrant), and years of formal education. A description of the interviewees in relation to these markers is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**
Interviewee characteristics.

| Characteristic | Ghana | | Tanzania | | Zimbabwe | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| **Age** | | | | | | |
| 24 or younger | 37% | 25% | 61% | 63% | 25% | 50% |
| 25–30 | 37% | 31% | 39% | 37% | 40% | 25% |
| 31–55 | 26% | 44% | 0% | 0% | 55% | 25% |
| **N** | **19** | **16** | **23** | **19** | **20** | **20** |
| **Origin** | | | | | | |
| Native | 47% | 56% | 35% | 37% | 40% | 30% |
| Migrant | 53% | 44% | 65% | 63% | 60% | 70% |
| **N** | **19** | **16** | **23** | **19** | **20** | **20** |
| **Education** | | | | | | |
| None | 16% | 13% | 0% | 11% | 0% | 0% |
| Some primary or junior secondary | 53% | 81% | 83% | 84% | 75% | 95% |
| Some senior secondary or tertiary | 32% | 6% | 17% | 5% | 25% | 5% |
| **N** | **19** | **16** | **23** | **19** | **20** | **20** |
| **Relationship status** | | | | | | |
| Single/no relationship | 37% | 25% | 70% | 32% | 25% | 30% |
| Married or in a relationship | 63% | 75% | 30% | 37% | 75% | 65% |
| Divorced or separated | 0% | 0% | 0% | 32% | 0% | 0% |
| Widowed | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 5% |
| **N** | **19** | **16** | **23** | **19** | **20** | **20** |

### 2.3. Sites

In Ghana the study was conducted in the Tuobodom and Adutwie communities, Techiman North District, Brong Ahafo Region.[4] Tuobodom, with a population of about 13,700, is the administrative capital of the district which is situated in the central part of the region. It is an active centre for the marketing of agricultural produce. The influx of traders from within and outside Ghana to the weekly market is a significant driver of agricultural commercialisation and other economic activities. Adutwie is a small settlement (population of about 700) situated along a stretch of road five miles from Tuobodom. Both Tuobodom and Adutwie are relatively well connected by year-round feeder roads to the town of Techiman, one of the two biggest urban centres in the region and a major market centre for agricultural produce.

Agricultural commercialisation was already evident around Tuobodom in the 1960s. With its open vegetation and relatively small trees, it was a more suitable environment for commercial agriculture than the high forest further south. At the time, the availability of land enabled establishment of state-owned commercial farms, state-sponsored projects that promoted the use of modern farm inputs, and the development of large private farms. During this period there was investment in infrastructure to support agricultural commercialisation, including input distribution depots, mechanised ploughing services, a canning factory, the road network and irrigation. By the 1970s this infrastructure was fully established, and in nearby Wenchi, 'large private farms began to develop around the state farms, encouraged by the cheapness of land and availability of subsidised inputs distributed by government agencies' (Amanor and Pabi, 2007: 56). The 1970s also saw

[3] https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/.

[4] After a referendum in December 2018 on the creation of new administration regions, the erstwhile Brong Ahafo Region was split into three new regions. The study site is in the current Bono East Region.

a revamp of collapsed state farms and government-led commercial agricultural projects, alongside investment by agribusiness entrepreneurs and state bureaucrats (Konings, 1986).

A decade later, in the 12 months from August 1982 to May 1983, the region experienced drought and a lengthy *harmattan* period that resulted in widespread bushfires. By destroying cocoa trees, the fires reopened land for food crop production in marginal cocoa areas like those around Techiman North. The 1980s also saw the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and led to the removal of agricultural input subsidies. This severely affected all farming activities including those of state farms, large private farms and smallholders (Amanor and Pabi, 2007). Today, with favourable agro-ecological conditions, the area receives state support including extension services, input subsidies, and infrastructure development. Techiman North District is well known for food production and foodstuff commerce (Asuming-Brempong et al., 2013).

Agriculture and related economic activities provide livelihoods for most people in the Tuobodom and Adutwie sites. Current estimates suggest that more than half (55 percent) of the economically active labour force are engaged in agriculture (Techiman Municipal Assembly, 2016), including in crop and livestock production, fisheries and agroforestry. Tomato and green pepper have joined yam, sweet potatoes, cassava, cocoyam, maize and plantain as important food crops. Other commercial crops include cashew, cocoa, mango and orange.

For the most part, families hold agricultural land in Tuobodom and Adutwie, while individual family members hold use rights. Under the matrilineal system largely practiced in the area, the preferred heir of a man is his eldest sister's son (Hill, 1970: 123). The practice of matrilineal inheritance does not guarantee that young people will inherit land from their own fathers unless it is a gift of his personal land made during his lifetime. In their study of young tomato growers at a nearby site in Brong Ahafo, Okali and Sumberg (2012) observed that the rental of plots was frequent during the dry season. Kidido et al. (2017) note that purchasing land is not an option for many young people in Techiman because of high cost and, in any case, land sales are infrequent.

In Tanzania the study took place in Dumila Ward, in the Kilosa District of Morogoro Region. With a total population of around 34,000, the ward is located 69 km northwest of Morogoro town and 300 km west of Dar es Salaam. It is on the plains of the Mkindu River and is at the junction of three main tarmac roads: one goes to Kilosa town, one to the national capital Dodoma, and one to the city of Morogoro. Another important transport link in Kilosa district is the Dar es Salaam-Kigoma railway that runs through Kilosa town.

The district was historically known as a centre for sisal production, which was initiated in the 19th century under the German administration and later expanded under the British. When production peaked in 1964 at around 250,000 tonnes, Tanzania was the world's largest exporter of sisal (Kimaro et al., 1994; Westcott, 2009). However, by 1985 sisal production had fallen to only 32,000 tonnes, due to bureaucracy, over-centralization, and the increasing popularity of synthetic fibres (Kimaro et al., 1994; Sabea, 2011). The decline of sisal production had important consequences for agriculture in Kilosa district: in the 1990s, the sisal estates were converted to paddy and maize production, and later in the 2000s horticulture was introduced.

This favoured location with its excellent transportation links gives the ward a strong comparative advantage in relation to agricultural commercialisation and associated activities. Economic activities include farming and livestock keeping, trading of agricultural and other products, transportation, and many others. Lorries plying the route between the cities of Dodoma and Morogoro stop in Dumila, and agricultural produce such as vegetables and fresh maize is sold along the main Dodoma-Morogoro road. There is a daily market in Dumila village where products including clothes, agricultural goods, and home appliances are available. There are many migrants in the Dumila area, in part because of the ready availability of land for farming.

Agriculture remains the economic mainstay and main source of employment; it is characterised by small-scale crop production (food and cash crops), plantations and estates (sisal and sugar) and livestock production (mainly cattle, goats, sheep, poultry) (United Republic of Tanzania, 2012). Vegetable crops like tomato and onions are also important. However, Dumila also has a bustling off-farm and non-farm rural economy, with its market being central to the district and broader region, and its agricultural input dealers, bars, restaurants and transport services.

In Zimbabwe the study site was the Mvurwi farming area (previously known as the Mvurwi Intensive Conservation Area), Mazowe District, Mashonaland Central Province. Located approximately 100 km north of the capital, Harare, the area is serviced by a small urban centre, Mvurwi town, which is one of the administrative centres for the province.

Mvurwi is located in the high-altitude region (Highveld) and is characterised by savannah type vegetation. The area straddles agro-ecological region II,[5] which receives in the range of 700–1050 mm of rainfall per annum and is considered to have high potential for farming. It is dominated by sandy soils derived mostly from granite, which are suitable for intensive tobacco production (Sukume et al., 2015). The area includes both commercial and smallholder farms: smallholder crop production is largely dependent on rainfall, while the larger commercial farms supplement with irrigation. A range of crops, including tobacco, maize, soybeans and horticultural crops, are grown, and ranching is also practised.

Agricultural commercialisation dates to the period between 1890 and 1930, when European settlers established commercial farms and mines in the district (Kwashirai, 2006). In 1907, the British South African Company, which managed the colony, launched a commercial farming programme focused on tobacco, maize, cotton, wheat, sorghum, groundnuts and sunflower. By 1909, a Department of Agriculture was established as well as key technical institutions such as agricultural research stations which provided extension service support to white farmers (Kwashirai, 2006). The colonial government established a Land Bank in 1912, which was critical to settler success as it provided them with subsidised credit (Kwashirai, 2006). The production of tobacco and maize received major research and financial support because of their commercial and food value respectively.

During the colonial era and through the post-independence period before the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) of 2000, close to 84 percent of commercial farming within the Mvurwi area was concentrated on tobacco production, alongside maize, wheat and soybean production (Scoones et al., 2018). Beef production for export to the European market was another key activity. The state supported white commercial farmers through a variety of policies and subsidy programmes.

Under the FTLRP the Government of Zimbabwe resettled 5290 people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities (Matondi and Chikulo, 2012), which resulted in a tri-modal agrarian structure of commercial (A2 schemes), smallholder (A1 schemes) and communal (smallholder and/or subsistence) farming. Subsequently, new farmers and new models of commercial agriculture have emerged including several high capital investment joint ventures. Production following the FTLRP has continued to focus on tobacco, albeit now by smallholder producers. However, since most smallholders, particularly A1 farmers, do not have capital, they enter into contract farming arrangements with tobacco buying companies (Scoones et al., 2018). Profits from tobacco sales gave many smallholder farmers disposable income that they in turn invested in small and medium enterprises such as grocery shops, sawmills, food outlets, hairdressing salons, butcheries, beer-halls and

[5] Zimbabwe's agro-ecological regions reflect rainfall regime, soil quality and vegetation, which map to farming types and potential productivity. Most agriculture in Zimbabwe is located in Regions I, II and III, which have favourable conditions for intensive crop and animal production (Mayo, 2000).

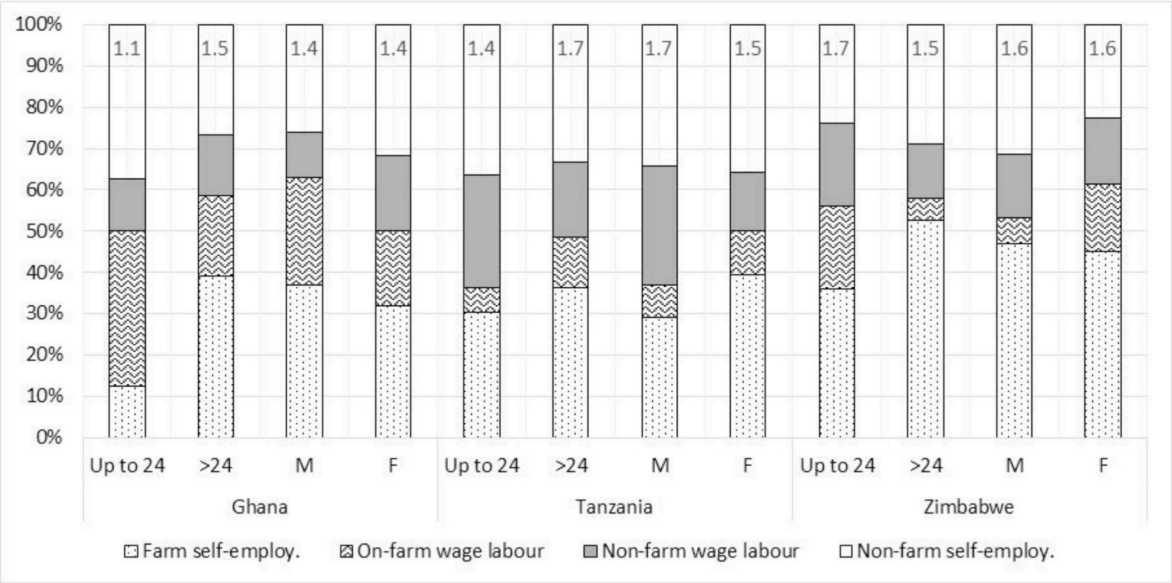


**Fig. 1.** Shares of mode of production by age, gender and site.

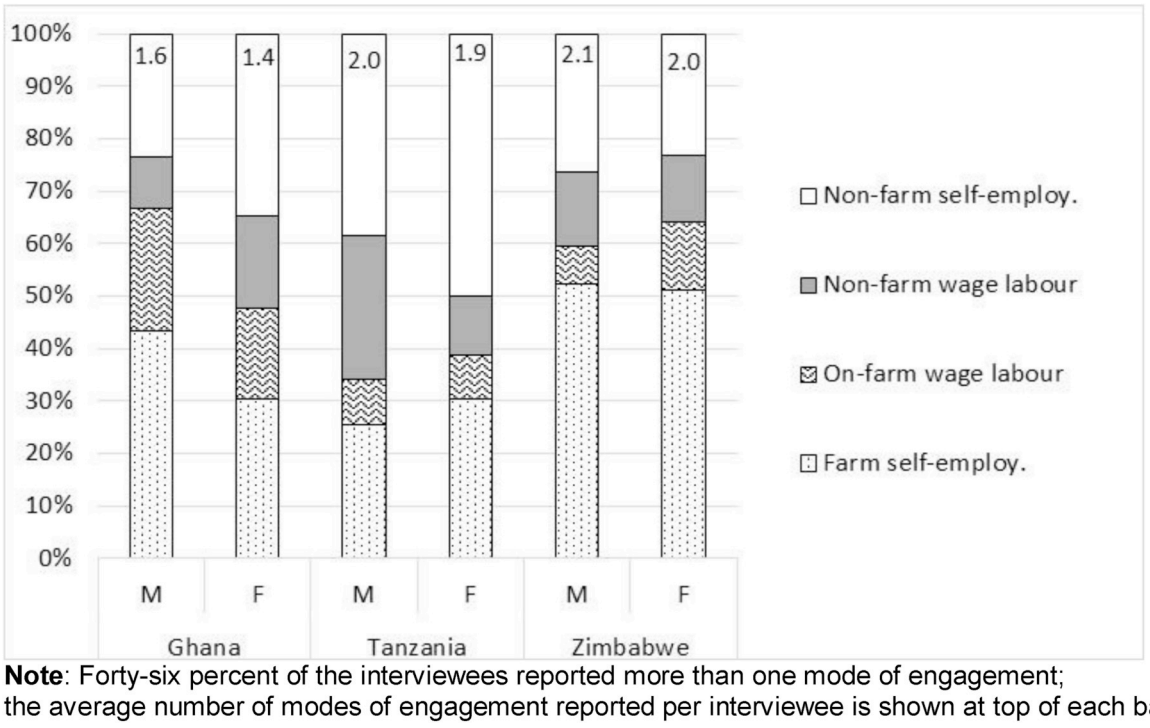


**Fig. 2.** Shares of modes of engagement.

hardware shops. Mvurwi town serves as a commercial centre with input suppliers, transporters and others serving the needs of commercial farming within the district. There has been a notable increase in the town's economic vibrancy since land reform.

## 3. Youth engagement with the rural economy

### *3.1. What they are doing, and who is doing what*

While not necessarily representative of the broader population of young people, the 117 interviewees were selected purposively to capture markers of social difference and a range of economic activities across the four modes of engagement. Fig. 1 shows the shares of modes of engagement by site. Farm self-employment accounted for just over half of the reported engagements in Zimbabwe and less than 30 percent in Tanzania, where non-farm self-employment accounted for 43 percent. On-farm wage labour was twice as frequent in Ghana compared to either Tanzania or Zimbabwe (see Fig. 2).

The share of interviewees reporting only one mode of engagement ranged from 48 percent (Zimbabwe) to 60 percent (Ghana), and only in Tanzania did an appreciable share (12 percent) report more than two modes of engagement. The share of interviewees who engaged in farm self-employment ranged from 49 percent (Ghana) to 70 percent (Zimbabwe), but relatively few were only producers (11, 12 and 20 percent in Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe respectively). In both Ghana and Tanzania, around half of individuals did not engage as producers,

**Table 2**
Activities associated with the different modes of engagement.

| Mode of engagement | Activity | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Ghana | Tanzania | Zimbabwe |
| Farm self-employment | • **Commercial crops**: cocoa & cashew<br>• **Food crops** (for sale &/or consumption): yam, maize, groundnut, millet<br>• **Vegetables** (primarily for sale): tomato, pepper, green paper, garden egg | • **Food crops** (for sale &/or consumption): rice, maize, pigeon pea, millet, beans.<br>• **Vegetables** (primarily for sale): tomatoes, carrots, green paper, onions.<br>• **Livestock:** pigs, chicken, goats, | • **Commercial crops**: tobacco<br>• **Food crops** (for sale &/or consumption): maize, soya beans, beans, potatoes<br>• **Vegetables** (primarily for sale) |
| On-farm wage labour | • Cashew harvesting; working on pig farm; day labour | • Planting & harvesting vegetables; paddy harvesting; working on parents' farm | • Tobacco planting, weeding, spraying, harvesting and grading; maize planting, weeding and harvesting |
| Non-farm wage labour | • **Food processing**: *gari* 'factory' worker<br>• **Catering**: chop-bar attendant<br>• **Services**: security guard, transporter of agric. products with motor tricycle | • **Catering**: bar manager, helper at street food stall<br>• **Shop work**: barber, shop worker<br>• **Services**: market porter, helper at milling machine, motorcycle driver, house builder, toilet digger, stump remover | • **Catering**: canteen assistant<br>• **Petty trade**: flea market attendant<br>• **Shop work**: till operator, hardware shop worker, hardware shop manager, shopkeeper<br>• **Services**: bricklayer, teacher, cell phones repairer |
| Non-farm self-employment/ business operator | • **Food prep. &/or sale**: porridge, *kenkey*, fish<br>• **Petty trade**: farm produce, vegetables<br>• **Food/drink processing**: *gari*, *pito*<br>• **Commodity trading/buying agent**: cashew<br>• **Services**: hairdresser, transport of agric. products with motor tricycle, hiring of sound system | • **Food prep. &/or sale**: street food, snacks<br>• **Petty trade**: food crops, tomatoes, chickens, used clothing, electronic goods<br>• **Shop**: soft drinks, bar, grocery, barbershop, phone repair, phone charging<br>• **Commodity trading/buying agent**: maize<br>• **Services**: credit provision, car repair, motorcycle transport<br>• **Small manufacture**: bricks, furniture | • **Petty trade:** fruit & vegetables, flea market<br>• **Shop**: grocery, motor spare parts, farm inputs, butchery, hardware & farm equip, used tractors<br>• **Services**: lorry hire, transport/taxi, grinding mill |

**Note**: Many activities were reported by more than one interviewee.

while in Zimbabwe this was 30 percent.

Activities associated within the individual modes of production are shown in Table 2. The range of crops grown, and activities undertaken is wide. Clearly these young people are engaged in many aspects of the rural economy, and their activities extend well beyond agricultural production.

Detailed information on the scale, success or income generated by the various modes of production or activities was not consistently collected. We cannot therefore discuss their relative importance or their contribution to individual livelihoods. However, many and perhaps most of these activities have low barriers to entry, require relatively limited skills and limited technology, and appear to be undertaken on a small scale. Further, some are undertaken on an occasional, part-time or seasonal basis. At the level of the individual young person, there is also a certain amount of fluidity between modes of engagement and activities.

Some notable exceptions to this generalisation include the production of commercial crops (cocoa and cashew in Ghana, and tobacco in Zimbabwe); commercial livestock production; owning a motorcycle or motor vehicle for provision of transport services; doing business from a shop premises; commodity trading (e.g. cashew in Ghana, maize in Tanzania), and teaching. These activities have higher barriers to entry in terms of long-term access to land, skill and/or capital.

The key markers of social difference used in this study were gender, age, origin (local or migrant), and years of formal education. There was evidence that, within the three sites, the markers of social difference were associated with different modes of engagement. In Ghana, men were engaged with the rural economy more through on-farm wage labour, and women through non-farm wage labour. The sub-groups of locals and young people over 24 years were more engaged with farm self-employment but were also more diversified (having more than one mode of engagement), and less involved in on-farm wage labour. Those with less education were more involved in farm self-employment, more diversified, more engaged in non-farm self-employment, and less involved in on-farm wage labour. In Tanzania, women were more involved in farm self-employment and less involved in non-farm wage labour. The over 24s were more engaged with farm self-employment, more likely to only do this, and more involved in on-farm wage labour; while the under 25s were less likely to be involved in farm self-employment only, and more involved in self-employment. Finally, in Zimbabwe, men were more involved in non-farm self-employment, while the over 24s were more involved in farm self-employment and less involved in on-farm labour and non-farm wage labour. Locals were more involved in farm self-employment and less involved on non-farm wage labour, and those with more education were more likely to be involved in farm self-employment only, less likely to be diversified, and less involved in on-farm wage labour.

By contrast, there was little indication that these markers of social difference helped explain the specific economic activities undertaken. The exceptions were that almost all those doing day labour on farms in Ghana were male migrants, but this was likely influenced to some degree by the snowball sampling strategy. Also at this site, the vast majority of those involved in food or drink preparation and sales through self-employment were women, while those involved in these activities through wage work were all migrant women. In Tanzania, only women planted and harvested vegetables for wages, while the majority of those doing any kind of on-farm labour work were migrants.

### 3.2. Starting out: experience at home and disappointment around education

The interviewees' entry into the rural economy was shaped, in large part, by (1) the skills and experience gained earlier in life and (2) disappointment with school careers. Interviews provided numerous examples of young people acquiring basic skills and experience from family members. Across the three sites, many interviewees linked their current activities to skills they learned while helping relatives with farming or other activities. These experiences provided them with the few marketable skills they had. The most common experience was helping parents or other relatives on their farms. A male interviewee from Zimbabwe said:

> 'I got the passion for agriculture from my grandmother whom I used to visit during holidays and assist her farming activities and so gaining the skills, and also from my experience from our own farm.

My father retired from the banking sector to undertake full time farming'.

Other examples include a 23-year old Ghanaian woman who learned gari-processing from her mother, and the 26-year old Tanzanian who helped his uncle build houses and now does this as a second job. A 23-year old woman from Ghana described how financial constraints prevented her from completing apprenticeship training to become a seamstress and compelled her to join the family *pito* brewing business which her mother eventually turned over to her. Thus, early experiences gained working with or for others provide a means of livelihood for young people as other options are closed off.

Interviewees who are currently self-employed in the non-farm sector reported learning through unpaid work for friends and relatives. For example, a 34-year old hardware shop owner was mentored by a friend who had a similar business, while a 30-year old hairdresser, who also sells porridge (a skill she learnt from her mother), attributes her ability to manage her small businesses to working as a young adult in local restaurants. A variation on this general pattern is provided by a young man in Ghana who holds a secondary school certificate. When he did not hear back from the rural bank to which he had applied for work he joined his brother, an established tomato farmer, and learned to grow tomatoes. He eventually also gained access to an acre of land. In this young man's case, however, tomato farming went from being a default to a preferred activity, to the extent that when the bank eventually offered him a job he turned it down.

The second theme that ran through the interviews was disappointment with educational careers. Interviewees expressed dismay about their inability to continue in education or training which, they believe, would have opened the prospect of skilled work or formal employment. For many, financial difficulties or a lack of interest in school put an early end to their formal education. Others linked their poor school performance to the paid or unpaid work they did while studying which, ironically, was often undertaken to help defray the cost of their schooling. In Zimbabwe a young woman recounted:

> "I used to work in people's fields when I was going to school so that I could afford school fees and other needs at school. At times I could work on weekends and […] that was enough for me to buy stationary. I did this when my father was ill and could not provide for me. My father was ill for about two years before he died. I could also get employed as a house maid in town during the school holiday […] I could use that money to partly pay my school fees and my relatives could assist with the remainder. Unfortunately, last year I failed to raise money for myself and dropped out of school.

### 3.3. Accessing resources

This section focuses on access to key resources to support economic activity. Resource requirements vary significantly between modes of engagement and individual activities: farm or non-farm wage labour may require no specific resources other than physical strength, whereas other activities may require land, equipment, labour and other inputs, or a shop and inventory. In general, resource requirements are limited by the relatively small scale and nature of the activities. While interviewees referred to difficulties in accessing land and/or capital, most seem to have succeeded in doing so to one degree or another, although it is not clear whether resource availability actually constrains the scale or productivity of their activities.

At each of the three sites the two most common ways that interviewees reported accessing capital to initiate new activities was through family or friends and from earnings or savings from their other work activities. Together these accounted for 69, 79 and 73 percent of cases in Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, with family and friends alone accounting for 38, 54 and 30 percent of cases respectively. In some cases, capital from family and friends was in the form of a loan, and in others, a gift. One male in Ghana accessed capital from an MFI, while in Zimbabwe three males took bank loans and one woman took a loan from a savings group. There is some indication in all the countries that dependence on family and friends for capital decreases with age. While the amounts of capital obtained were generally quite small and, in some cases, took the form of physical inputs like seeds or cooking ingredients, there were also a few examples of family members making significant capital available: the parents of a 25 year-old male from Ghana purchased a motorised tricycle for him so he could start a transportation business. Another 25-year old from Ghana used a loan from a MFI to purchase a similar tricycle.

At all sites the two most common ways that interviewees reported accessing land for farming was through family (including in-laws) and by renting. The former accounted for 44, 36 and 44 percent of cases in Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe respectively while renting accounted for 44, 59 and 31 percent of cases respectively. In Ghana and Zimbabwe men were more likely to rent than women, while in Zimbabwe, women were more likely to use land they accessed through family or inheritance. In Ghana there were two cases of the use of share-crop arrangements that allowed interviewees to engage in potentially lucrative cashew production. Only one interviewee, a 25-year old man from Tanzania, reported that he had purchased the plot on which he farms.

Other than the under 25-year olds in Zimbabwe accessing land more commonly through family, and the same age group relying more heavily on renting in Ghana, there is little indication that age affects how land is accessed.

### 3.4. Hazard

Hazard – accidents, weather events or mistakes – are experienced by all rural residents. The need to navigate hazard is not unique to young people, but we might expect that they are potentially more vulnerable to the negative effects of hazards. Interviewees gave numerous examples of hazards across all modes of engagement and many different activities. These can be grouped into two categories.

The first are personal, and most often health-related, hazards, including accidents, injuries, sickness and family tragedy. For example, an unmarried, male university graduate from Tanzania explained that the main challenge with being a part-time worker was that most of the jobs were seasonal and there were times when there was no work. Most of the money he earned was used for food and rent which meant he was unable to save much. The other challenge was sickness – he sometimes had to work even when he was unwell, and when he could not work, he had to rely on his meagre savings. After another interviewee from Tanzania had finished primary school, he was employed by his brother-in-law at a restaurant. He worked there for six months but had to stop after falling seriously sick. Finally, a 24-year old man from Zimbabwe recounted how family pressures has stalled his efforts to save towards furthering his education:

> I moved out to stay with my uncle in Mvurwi town after finishing school while looking for something to do in life. I wanted to supplement my O level subjects and proceed with education but, due to financial difficulties, I could not do that. I started working in my uncle's butcheries just to assist him. I was not earning a salary but sometimes he would give me some money. In 2012 I went to do mining as a *mukorokoza* (artisanal miner) and earned Z$50 to Z$100 per week. I used the money to get a driver's license. My aim was to work and raise money and proceed with school, but I found out that the money would not sustain me because of many responsibilities – I have my father with health problems since 2012 and young brother who is still in school, and I need to assist them financially. So I put off the plan for my education.

The second category of hazards are business-related and include prolonged drought and unreliable rainfall, low demand for produce or services, theft, police harassment, non-payment, loss of savings,

agronomic mistakes, and economic upheaval. For example, a 21-year old male from Ghana lost his savings when the micro-finance institution he was saving with collapsed. In Tanzania, a 25-year old male set up a shop selling phones after his Advanced Secondary Education exam, but the business did not do well and he was forced to close it. At the time of the interview he was working part-time in his sister's shop. A male interviewee from Zimbabwe narrated his experience of non-payment for work done:

> I found a job at a certain timber company; I do not remember its name. I decided to join that company so that I could at least have a fixed, reliable source of income. I was assisted by my Form 4 Woodwork teacher to get this job. I was one of the best woodwork students at school […] The job was a good opportunity for me to apply what I learnt at school. The company specialized in timber cutting. I worked for six months without being paid. At times we could even work over-time. If we ask the employer about our salaries, he could start accusing us about crimes we did not commit. I then informed my employer of my intention to quit. We agreed that he would give me half of my six month's salary in kind.

Whether working on one's own farm, as a wage worker, or a business operator, hazards such as these are part of daily life, and to navigate them successfully requires experience, social capital and, sometimes, the liquidation of hard-won assets.

### 3.5. Outcomes and imagined futures

The interviews provide concrete evidence of active asset accumulation on the part of some individuals, in the form of, for example, residential plots, housing, furniture, motorcycles and motor tricycles, savings, and children's education. It is also clear that significant work and business experience has been gained. Through hard work and persistence in the face of hazard, these young people have grasped one or more of the opportunities offered by the commercialised rural economy in order to help build their livelihoods.

Interviewees often pointed to their ability to save money as a small sign of success in those early steps in livelihood-building. Some young people convert savings from farming or wage-work into additional or alternative income-opportunities. A 22-year-old described doing domestic work in Dar es Salaam for a year before returning home to open a bar, using her savings as start-up capital. Others invest their savings into further education or training. Being able to pay for children's schooling or support a household were also mentioned as important gains, as was accumulating property. For example, a 22-year-old female reported that through her food-vending business, she was able to save in the community bank and had managed to rent a house and buy furniture.

However, farming, self-employment and/or wage labour does not always provide a viable livelihood. A young Zimbabwean and her family were left struggling after the death of her mother. Her mother's income as a farmworker had allowed her daughter to complete her O Levels. Unfortunately, she failed her exams and could not pursue her preferred career as a teacher. She started working off-farm for wages and then married in 2014. The couple now farm full time but do not grow enough to sell on a regular basis or provide them with regular income.

When asked about how they imagined their futures, the majority of interviewees focused on plans to expand, diversify or, in some cases, stop their current activities. They also hoped to procure valued assets such as a building plot and house. Farming figured in the imagined futures of many, as did non-farm self-employment and further education or training. In addition, marriage, children and children's education were important in the future plans some interviewees. For example, a 29-year old Zimbabwean man who farms maize and tobacco commercially said he wanted to be a dentist (doctor) but school was the problem. So now, he wants to work as hard as he can and continue to send his children to school. In ten years' time, he wants to own land as this will prevent him from being chased away. Strikingly, although formal employment was mentioned by a few, migration out of the rural environment did not figure at all prominently in their imagined futures or future plans.

## 4. Discussion and implications

The picture that emerges across these three African agricultural commercialisation hot spots is one of young people working hard and actively engaging with the rural economy through a variety of modes and activities. In most cases the scale of these engagement is relatively small, and most activities are characterised by low barriers to entry and low returns – exactly what we would expect to find in the early stages of livelihood building.

Several important differences were observed across the three sites. In terms of agriculture, in addition to a variety of food crops and livestock, young people were involved in purely commercial crops in Ghana (cashew) and Zimbabwe (tobacco), while those in Tanzania produced vegetables and rice primarily for sale. In contrast to the other sites, the Tanzanian site is still seen as offering ample opportunity to access land, and thus still attracts new migrants.

Nevertheless, there were also important commonalities. For example, young people at all sites engage in a wide range of farm and non-farm, self-employment and wage activities. Engagement is some activities is mediated by social markers like gender, but generally these rural economies seem to offer young people a range of opportunities. To one degree or another, crop and/or livestock production is in the activity mix of many young people.

The critical role of family and friends in providing young people with initial access to key resources including capital, land and work opportunities is also evident across the three sites (also see Flynn and Sumberg, 2017). This is the case for both young men and young women. Along similar lines, several interviewees reported undertaking one or more of their economic activities together with a parent, sibling, spouse or other relative. Young people are co-constructing livelihoods together with and through family members.

At the same time, in each of the sites a significant number of young people access farmland through short-term rental arrangements. While the notion that young people are disadvantaged because they do not 'own' land is common in the policy literature (AGRA, 2015; FAO, 2010), at least in these sites, between rental and family land, it is not at all obvious that constrained access to land is a significant issue. Among the interviewees, young people who did not own land were involved in commercial vegetable (Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe), rice (Tanzania), cashew (Ghana) and tobacco (Zimbabwe) production, amongst other crops. Being in a commercialised rural economy for a time, and developing the right networks, enabled even immigrants to access land for commercial agriculture. This is not to say that these same arrangements will necessarily be satisfactory into the future if, for example, some individuals want to increase the scale of their activities or invest in irrigation technology or tree crops. However, it does suggest that the focus on ownership of land as one of the key constraints in the early stages of rural livelihood building may be misplaced.

Most of the young people interviewed in this study expressed disappointed with their experience of formal education, and particularly having to drop out because they could not afford the fees (despite in many cases working at the same time as attending school). Rather than formal education, it was experience gained as children working at home that initially enabled them to engage with the world of work. Thus, while many did not have a very favourable start regarding their working lives, through hard work, applying the skills they accrued primarily as children, persistence and resilience in the face of hazard, they are able to build livelihoods and in some cases accumulate assets.

While we can assume that some members of this cohort of young people have already migrated out, our data provide no indication that

those remaining are driven by a strong desire to pack up and go. Quite the contrary; overwhelmingly their plans for the future include expansion and/or diversification of activities within the rural economy. Additionally, to varying degrees these sites attract migrants, sometimes many from the same community. If as a young person you find yourself in a rural area with few prospects of formal employment, a commercialisation hot spot is probably as good as it gets.

On the other hand, there is little that emerges from these three sites that looks like the young people have arrived in the sunny uplands foretold in the rural prosperity gospel. For example, the idea of engagement with agricultural value chains is central to narratives about rural transformation and decent work for youth. Reardon (2015) distinguishes value chains from supply chains and suggests that the latter are associated with higher value products and value addition, safety requirements and quality differentiation, while Toenniessen et al. (2008) link engagement with value chains to farmers converting 'their surpluses into value-added products and other profitable outputs' (p.239). Many of the young people interviewed for this research were involved in commercial activities around agricultural products, however, little of this activity seemed to be associated with either quality differentiation or value addition. It is not that they are being excluded from thriving and remunerative value chains, but rather that while there is active agricultural commercialisation, the process of rural transformation as not yet fundamentally changed the landscape of opportunity Chamberlin et al., 2018.

One way to understand the early work histories of young people like those in this study – their stories of hard work and hazard – is as a training ground, on which they gain valuable experience, accumulate some capital, and are better placed to take advantage of new opportunities in the future. But will the rural economy, even in commercialisation hotspots, be able to provide those opportunities?

In conclusion, this study challenges several key elements of public and policy discourse around rural youth in SSA. Specifically, there is little evidence from these three rural commercialisation hot spots that young people are not interested in agriculture or the rural economy; need to have their 'mind-set' changed in relation to the rural economy; or are unable to access land or capital even if they want to farm. The fact that young people seek to build livelihoods in these areas challenges the assumption in policy discourse that migration to urban areas is the default option for rural young people.

These findings call into question the most common proposals for youth-specific interventions in rural areas including provision of preferential access to land and credit. It is not at all clear whether additional training or skills would make a material difference to the lives of young people like these, and neither is it clear whether existing markets and their own management skills would allow them to make effective use of additional resources or absorb additional capital. On the other hand, without much better basic education, including but not limited to literacy and numeracy skills, it is hard to see how the pathways and outcomes of the next generation of young people will change for the better. The sense of disappointment that many of the interviewees shared regarding their experience of formal education, highlights again the need to address both the quality of provision in rural acres, and just as importantly, the cash costs that put 'free' education out of the reach of many rural children.

Our findings draw attention to a new potential area for intervention – the use of social protection measures to help minimise downside risks associated with hazards, so that the young people's hard-earned assets are less vulnerable to loss. Measures that Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2007) describe as 'preventative social protection', including both formal and informal social insurance mechanisms, might play an important role in de-risking the initial phase of rural livelihood building. A new focus on preventative social protection could help align public and policy discourse around Africa's rural youth with the reality of their lives.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Thomas Yeboah:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Easther Chigumira:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Innocensia John:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Nana Akua Anyidoho:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **Victor Manyong:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **Justin Flynn:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **James Sumberg:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge the very helpful comments by Christine Okali and three anonymous reviewers.

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