

## Rural Youth in Agriculture and Rural Development of Uzbekistan

### Key Messages

- Uzbekistan's long-term commitment to rural livelihoods transformation is expected to happen amid a demography of 60 percent under the age of 30.
- The youth are resource that can promote economic growth, only if skilled and employed.
- Absence of well-paid jobs and low productivity in the rural sector are the primary motives for rural unemployment and massive youth migration.
- Addressing rural youth unemployment and slowing down migration is a necessary condition for the intended long-term and inclusive rural development vision of Uzbekistan.
- For Uzbekistan's rural transformation to harness the potential of the youth, all policies, strategies and interventions need to coherently demonstrate that agriculture value chains are rewarding careers and that they provide sustainable opportunities for the rural youth.

### Growing Labor Force

The recently approved 2020-2030 agriculture development roadmap of Uzbekistan provides mechanisms for implementing major reforms in nine priority areas in agriculture and rural development<sup>1</sup>. The roadmap is a reflection of the government's commitment to long-term rural livelihoods transformation that is expected to happen amid a 'youth bulge' in the country's demography. More than 60 percent of the Uzbekistan population is under the age of 30<sup>2</sup>. This is an evidence of a growing labor force, with more than 500 thousand

youth joining the labor force, annually. By 2030, Uzbekistan is projected to have the 5th largest labor force in central Asia and Eastern Europe region. A large number of the youth reside among the 50 percent rural population. This working age population is a resource that can promote economic growth for the country, only if skilled and employed.

### The Problem

Youth unemployment is increasingly threatening Uzbekistan. The 1991 youth policy and follow up strategies give due attention to youth unemployment. As a result, the country reduced its youth unemployment rate from 23 percent in 1998 to 10 percent in 2017. In 2016, Uzbekistan ranked 53rd out of 183 countries in the Youth Development Index, with overall score of 0.68 (very high) that was better than the previous YDI of 2010<sup>3</sup>. Notwithstanding the government's efforts in job creation, the rate of youth unemployment remained as high as 9.7 percent in 2018, and 10.3 in 2019 with the youth unemployment twice as likely as the older generation, even more among young girls who are much less likely to have access to the job market.<sup>4</sup>

Research shows that rural youth unemployment, followed by distress migration is generally triggered by declining interest of the youth in agriculture, coupled with lack of access to farm land and weak youth and inconsistent policies.<sup>5</sup> Uzbekistan is not an exception. Absence of well-paid jobs and low productivity in the rural sector are the primary motives for rural unemployment and massive international and internal youth

<sup>1</sup> The ten- years agriculture development strategy was approved by the government in September 2019. Decree of the President—7865, 2019. *The Strategy for the Development of Agriculture Sector in Uzbekistan (2020-2030)*.

<sup>2</sup> Youth in Uzbekistan are between ages 14 and 30 (Uzbekistan: Factsheet, 2014) Youth Policy Labs, *Uzbekistan: Factsheet*, <https://www.youthpolicy.org>

<sup>3</sup> The Commonwealth 2016. Global Youth Development Index.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, 2019. *Youth Unemployment Rate for Uzbekistan*, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series>

<sup>5</sup> Deotti and Estruch, 2016. *Addressing rural youth migration at its root causes*, FAO.

migration. Official records indicate up to 400 000 migrants from Uzbekistan, while independent analysts suggest that the figure could be as high as two to seven million<sup>6</sup>.

Studies indicate that most rural youth migrants from Uzbekistan have vocational or secondary education and more than 80 percent of them are men<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, the growing number of unemployed young people living in the rural areas and their migration have resulted in human capital losses in rural areas of the country and have posed challenges for sustainable agriculture and rural development. For instance, migration preceded and resulted in the agricultural sector reform of the early 2000s that led to the closing down of agricultural cooperatives (*shirkats*) and the creation of individual farmer enterprises with large areas of farmland that happen to be difficult to manage<sup>8</sup>.

Also, the migration of men has resulted in the phenomena of ‘missing men’ and ‘left behind’ rural women. This has created gender imbalance in rural households and added to the responsibilities of women. These women need to find other means to earn income and work on family farms<sup>9</sup>.

## Way Forward: Engage the Rural Youth

### Why?

Addressing rural youth unemployment and slowing down migration is a necessary condition for the intended long-term and inclusive rural development vision of Uzbekistan. Agriculture and rural development interventions have the potential to increase the absorption of the work force into the rural labor force at scale. Accordingly, encouraging young people to stay in agriculture livelihoods and rural areas is an effective long-term strategy for not only building the human and social capital in rural communities, but also the socio-political stability of the country. Assuring rural youth engagement in the planning, implementation and monitoring of agricultural and rural development interventions reduces problems of ageing farmers.

Moreover, encouraging the participation of landless young people to gain agricultural knowledge and to provide advisory services introduces modern technologies and bridges digital literacy gaps in the community. At the same time, it helps the youth to learn from indigenous and traditional problem-solving approaches.

Therefore, engaging the youth in agriculture reforms and allowing them to realize their full productive and innovative potential is an urgent need. This need for engaging the youth has fortunately been recognised in the 2020-2030 agriculture roadmap, under the ‘rural development’ strategic priority<sup>10</sup>.

### How?

For Uzbekistan’s rural transformation to harness the potential of the youth, all policies, strategies and interventions need to coherently demonstrate that agriculture value chains are rewarding careers and provide opportunities for the rural youth to stay actively involved. To this end, encouraging media messages, agricultural education and advisory services can be used to highlight the value of agricultural value-chains to young male and female experts.

Policy makers should strive to make farming and agri-food chains attractive to young farmers and thus the views of young farmers should be taken into consideration. This calls for ensuring coherence between the agriculture sector and other youth empowerment policies. It also needs better understanding of the consequences of well-planned agri-food and rural interventions for the rural youth. More so, policy makers need to explore meaningful and productive engagement of the landless rural youth as legitimate providers of new agriculture knowledge and other rural services.

Practical strategies may also include implementing projects that explicitly target the rural youth or have quotas for youth participation. Such programmatic interventions for the youth may however need on-the-job training. It may also involve allocation of farmland and capital fund for the youth on affordable rent/lease basis. Innovative mechanisms for investments in agriculture, through remittances from the youth migrants and diaspora funds should also be looked up.

In this respect, it is encouraging that the 2020-2030 Agriculture Strategy envisages to develop and implement projects supporting young farmers through special trainings and interest-free loans for agriculture start-ups.

It is also noted that the youth union of Uzbekistan (the highest national body coordinating the youth) is a member of the working committee that oversees the

<sup>6</sup>, <sup>8</sup>, <sup>9</sup>FAO, 2019. *Gender, agriculture and rural development in Uzbekistan*.

<sup>7</sup> Seitz, 2019. *International migration and household wellbeing*, World Bank

<sup>10</sup> Decree of the President—7865, 2019. *The Strategy for the Development of Agriculture Sector in Uzbekistan (2020-2030)*.

implementation of the agriculture roadmap. The details are yet to be seen.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, properly representing and engaging the rural youth and building their capacity in policy decision making and implementation of agricultural and rural development interventions are vital for Uzbekistan. Otherwise, the ‘youth bulge’ of today can be a future burden.

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