

# How to put the youth back in agriculture

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Misconceptions about working in agriculture have long bogged down the number of young people opting for a career in this industry. Africa's young population is often discouraged by the image of punishing work and poor, weather-beaten farmers, so attracting youth to agriculture is no small feat. However, new technologies, methods and thinking have started to change the minds of many. Howard blight

We chat to Howard Blight, founder of Agricolleges International (ACI) which aims to prove to young people that agriculture can be fun and profitable and is aimed at inspiring youth from all walks of life to pursue agribusiness entrepreneurship.



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## ■ **What are some of the major misconceptions entertained by the youth regarding the agriculture industry and how can this be addressed?**

One of the major misconceptions we have come across is that the youth believe agriculture is still an old-fashioned industry. In reality, access to technology, information and better communication, along with vastly improved equipment are enabling farmers and agri-experts around the world to change the way we think and improve how things are done.

Another misconception is that farming has high barriers to entry, particularly when it comes to the capital needed to set up and operate large tracts of farming land. The exciting thing is that, as technology evolves, it is also reducing these barriers. Vertical farming, for example, is enabling young agripreneurs to build sustainable businesses in warehouses in the middle of town. Technology has also brought us drones for crop assessments, smartphones to set irrigation systems and the computers in planters for precision row-crop soil preparation, planting and harvesting.

We need to address these misconceptions through education and building awareness among the youth, as well as through training and skills development in the areas where the industry currently has large gaps. It is important that agricultural schools and colleges, which provide the major pipeline of potential entrants into the agri-economy, to keep their curriculums up to date and are able to teach students about the incredible tools that are now available, the use of technology and the growing connectedness among farmers.

## ■ **Why is it essential that we engage with and encourage our youth to consider careers in agriculture?**

Food security in Africa and the rest of the world is a growing issue. Food demand in Africa is expected to rise by over 70% by 2050 due to population growth, and agricultural land and water are scarce commodities in many parts of the world. The result is that many farmers are growing their businesses vertically and using the latest technological practices. This, in turn, requires more skilled people who are capable of working in this environment.

At the same time, there is a huge need for small and emerging farmers to build sustainable businesses, but to do this they too need to improve the way they work and build their knowledge and skills. What this means for the youth is that at almost every level there is both opportunity to build skills and find exciting, relevant work in agriculture, while also making a difference to the food security concerns that are looming over the next two decades.

To compound on this, the commercial farming sector of our agri-economy must participate in the agri-transformation philosophy of the sharing of knowledge with the emerging farmers. This is Ubuntu. I am because we are. This is part and parcel of the Agricollages way of thinking.

#### ■ ***What are the main barriers for agripreneurs?***

As mentioned above, one of the biggest barriers to entry is the capital and knowledge required, to set-up and operate large tracts of farming land. Another barrier has been the cost of the education needed to build agri-skills. E-learning makes education much more accessible and affordable to the youth, emerging farmers and existing farm workers, who want to build on their current knowledge. We are looking for investors to help develop a sustainable bursary system that can support highly motivated and ambitious students from disadvantaged backgrounds, to obtain reputable agricultural qualifications.

Our President, Cyril Ramaphosa, in his SONA, has made it clear that both agriculture and skills development are among the key areas that government will be focusing on in the coming months and years. Our hope is that this will help to support ACI's drive to bring more people into the industry.

#### ■ ***While the youth flee to the cities to escape rural or agriculture-related careers – a fact lamented by many – should we not place equal emphasis on encouraging and enabling urban agriculture startups?***

Absolutely, yes! As this migration towards cities takes place, an increasing number of urban gardens and farms have taken root already. This growth in urban agriculture is helping poor people cope with food scarcity and hunger. It also offers many people a viable income as they are able to find markets for their produce as well as feed themselves. So much is being achieved through sheer necessity - imagine what could be achieved with additional support, knowledge and resources?

Roadside traders could be transformed into the farmers of the future as community vegetable gardens, roadsides and rivers converted into city farms, vertical window food gardens, and horizontal pipe or water gardens. Teaching young people to implement urban agriculture through a variety of modern methods and practices would not only improve their yields and income potential but also give them a sense of achievement and the self-confidence that they may be struggling to achieve

through meaningful employment elsewhere.

ACI is able to educate people to implement urban agriculture with health and sustainability in mind, and this is a great step towards creating a more sustainable future in all countries throughout the African continent.

■ ***Technology and a new way of thinking has seen agriculture and agribusiness change a lot over the past decade, but how friendly is agriculture in SA and Africa to tech-savvy youth?***

There can be no doubt that the technology explosion, and access to cellular phones, in particular, has reached even the most remote parts of Africa. Farmers are also steadily changing their methods, through the use of more technology and adding skills and efficiencies to their operations. This all bodes very well for a tech-savvy youth population that wants to be connected and to work in an exciting, modern environment.

It is also true, however, that we still have a long way to go in terms of catching up to the rest of the world in this regard. We need to build skills and knowledge that are appropriate to our situation and conditions, and we need to be able to modernise and change our courses and curriculums when and where necessary so that we stay relevant and up-to-date.

We are in the fascinating position, where we need to grow emerging, small-scale farmers and teach them how to use traditional methods more effectively and sustainably, while also developing a young and vibrant group of agripreneurs who are looking further into the future, where their more advanced skills and understanding of technology will provide them with a wealth of exciting and dynamic careers in this industry.

## ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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