

FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURE IN THULAMELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY, LIMPOPO PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. Youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge in developing countries, particularly in Southern Africa. Agriculture presents a viable pathway for poverty alleviation and job creation among rural youth. However, the level of youth engagement in agriculture remains low in many developing countries. This study aims to explore the factors influencing youth participation in agriculture in the Thulamela Local Municipality in Limpopo, South Africa. A qualitative research design was employed, and a snowball sampling method was used to select 16 youth participants from the study area. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that family influence, personal interest, access to technology, and agricultural education significantly affect youth involvement in agriculture. Conversely, barriers such as limited technical support, financial constraints, and the impacts of climate change hinder participation. Based on these findings, the study recommends that policymakers provide financial support mechanisms, such as startup grants, to enable young farmers to invest in essential resources, including machinery and other agricultural inputs. Furthermore, access to mentorship programmes and practical, hands-on agricultural training should be expanded to reach more young people.

Keywords: Youth, agriculture, job creation, Thulamela Local Municipality, agricultural training

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has long been recognised as a cornerstone of poverty reduction and job creation efforts in developing countries (Osabohien et al., 2019). It serves as a primary source of livelihood for millions worldwide, particularly in developing regions where many depend on farming for their income (Osabohien et al., 2019). In Africa, agriculture holds an even more critical role, employing over 60% of the economically active population and contributing significantly to the continent's Gross Domestic Product (International Labor Organization, 2024). According to the latest African Economic Outlook, Africa's working-age population is projected to grow from 705 million in 2018 to nearly 1 billion by 2030 (Khan, 2020). The continent is one of the few regions where both the rural youth population and the overall rural population are expected to continue increasing (Yeboah et al., 2019). Despite numerous government initiatives aimed at improving economic opportunities for young people across Africa, youth

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unemployment remains a major political and socioeconomic challenge (De Lannoy et al., 2020). Youth unemployment in Africa is closely linked to a wider formal employment crisis, posing a significant barrier to economic development. While the youth population is rapidly growing, the formal job market often struggles to keep pace, resulting in high levels of unemployment among young people (Kalleberg, 2020). In response, under the African Union's Malabo Declaration, leaders have pledged to create employment opportunities for at least 30% of the youth within agricultural value chains by 2025 (Mkomwa et al., 2022). Job creation is also a central focus of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Position on Youth (Royo et al., 2022). Although many still view the formal wage sector as the primary solution to youth unemployment, the reality is that the number of youth entering the labour force exceeds available formal wage sector jobs (Khan, 2020).

Yeboah and Flynn (2021) and Feisali and Niknami (2021) argue that creating sufficient numbers of non-agricultural jobs to reduce rising youth unemployment is unlikely to be realized in the short term. As such, agriculture will likely remain a critical source of employment, especially in countries reliant on this sector. This is particularly relevant for South Africa, which continues to experience high youth unemployment rates. According to Statistics South Africa, the country's overall unemployment rate stands at 32.9%, with youth unemployment at 47.7% (Stats SA, 2025). This rising youth unemployment rate significantly affects the livelihoods of young people in rural areas.

This study addresses the critical intersection between youth engagement in agriculture and the urgent challenge of youth unemployment in rural South Africa. To inform job creation policies, it investigates the factors influencing youth participation in agriculture within the Thulamela Local Municipality. This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the methodology employed in the study; Section 3 presents and discusses the findings; and the final section concludes the study and offers policy recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

Study area

The study was conducted in the Thulamela Local Municipality, located in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Thulamela is one of the four local municipalities within

the Vhembe District Municipality, which is one of the five district municipalities established in 2000. The other local municipalities in Vhembe are Makhado, Collins Chabane, and Musina. Thulamela is situated approximately 70 km east of Makhado and 180 km northeast of Polokwane, the provincial administrative capital.

Predominantly rural, Thulamela comprises several towns but is largely characterised by numerous villages. The population and economic activities are mainly concentrated in the local town of Thohoyandou. The municipality faces significant challenges, including high poverty levels (Musyoki et al., 2016). Its agricultural sector includes both commercial and subsistence farming, with subsistence agriculture contributing marginally to the formal economy – accounting for roughly 1% of economic output and generating about 4% of formal employment (Thulamela Local Municipality, 2019). Approximately 47.7% of the Vhembe district's population resides within Thulamela (Stats SA, 2025).

Thulamela was selected for this study because of its large working-age youth population, which faces high unemployment rates (Thulamela Integrated Development Plan, 2020/21). The municipality has an estimated population of 618 462.00, of which 58.8% are in the working age group (15–64 years). About 58.8% of the youth are unemployed (Stats SA, 2025), making Thulamela an ideal setting to explore youth participation in agriculture. The area features a variety of agricultural activities, ranging from small-scale family farms to larger commercial operations, offering a comprehensive perspective on the sector. Previous studies, such as August (2020), highlight that rural youth often disengage from agriculture due to socio-economic and cultural barriers. Thulamela thus presents a critical opportunity to examine these issues and identify possible interventions to boost youth involvement in agriculture. This study was conducted in four villages in Thulamela Local Municipality: Muledane, Maungani, Manini and Tswinga. These villages are predominantly rural, with most households practising subsistence agriculture. They were purposefully selected based on their distinctive agricultural practices and youthful populations, which are expected to provide valuable insights, as recommended by local agricultural extension officers.

Sampling procedure

The study sample comprised young people (male and female) aged between 18 and 35 years who were actively

involved in agricultural activities. A snowball sampling technique, a non-probability method commonly used to identify and recruit participants through referrals (Raifman et al., 2022), was employed to select participants. Locating young farmers actively engaged in agriculture in the study area was challenging due to their limited numbers and the absence of a formal farmers' register. Therefore, snowball sampling was chosen for its effectiveness in accessing hard-to-reach populations. Initially, the aim was to collect data from 30 youths involved in agriculture. However, sampling continued only until data saturation was achieved at the 16th participant. At this point, consistent patterns emerged, providing a coherent explanation, and no new insights were being generated.

Data collection

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. This method provides flexibility to explore topics in greater depth based on participants' responses (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). Semi-structured interviews proved effective, making the interview process engaging and insightful. Participants were able to express themselves freely, unconstrained by the fixed questions in the interview guide. To ensure accuracy and completeness, interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. This allowed for a thorough capture of their opinions and responses.

The interview guide included a standardised set of questions: a) What factors influence youth participation in agriculture? b) What are the youths' perceptions of agriculture? c) What are the barriers and challenges inhibiting youth participation in agriculture? and d) What are the possible supports and solutions that can be used to encourage youth participation in agriculture? In addition to the interviews with youth participants, two agricultural extension officers from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Thulamela Municipality were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing youth in agriculture and to corroborate the survey findings.

Data analysis

The textual data were reviewed multiple times to develop a comprehensive understanding of the transcripts. Recurrent themes were identified, systematically coded, and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. The analysis was supported by ATLAS.ti (version 8), a qualitative data analysis software. To

enhance the credibility and rigour of the findings, several quality assurance measures were employed, including prolonged engagement with participants, debriefing sessions, and ongoing observation (Ibrahim, 2012). Quantitative data from the survey were coded and analysed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were computed to analyse the data. The findings were presented in a table to provide a clear and concise visual representation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents

The socio-economic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The largest age group, representing 63% (10 participants) of respondents, was between 24 and 29 years old. Educational backgrounds varied, with a sizeable proportion (44%, or 7 respondents) having attained tertiary education, indicating that many participants pursued education beyond secondary school. This finding aligns with Abdullah and Sulaiman (2013), who noted that individuals with greater agricultural knowledge generally feel better prepared to enter the farming sector. Their study highlights a well educated population of young farmers possessing diverse skills to enhance their farming activities. Regarding occupational status, the largest group of respondents (38%, or 6 participants) were part-time farmers, indicating that farming serves as a secondary occupation. Full-time farmers accounted for 31% (5 participants), suggesting farming is their primary livelihood. Most respondents were from Muledane (31%), followed by Maungani and Manini, each contributing 25% (4 participants). These three villages represent significant hubs of youth engagement in agriculture within Thohoyandou. Additionally, a majority of participants (81%) were single, which may afford them more time and flexibility to dedicate to farming activities without family-related responsibilities.

Income levels varied among respondents; approximately 38% (6 participants) earned between R10,000 and R20,000 per annum¹. This is below the threshold for a reasonable standard of living, as noted by Francis and Webster (2019), who identified R7,911 per month as necessary to maintain such a standard in South Africa.

¹ As of 18 May 2025, 1 USD was equivalent to R 18.04

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents ($n = 16$)

Variable	Frequencies	Proportion
Age		
18–23	2	12.5
24–29	10	62.5
30–35	4	25
Level of education		
Secondary School	4	25
Tertiary	7	44
Vocational	5	31
Employment Status		
Formally Employed	1	6
Full-Time Farmer	5	31
Part-Time Farmer	6	38
Unemployed	4	25
Gender		
Female	6	37
Male	10	63
Marital Status		
Married	3	19
Single	13	81
Total income received from selling agricultural products (per annum)		
50 000 And above	1	6
R10 000-R20 000	6	38
R21 000-R30 000	4	25
R31 000-R40 000	2	12
R50 000 And above	3	18.8
Type of agriculture		
Both	5	31.3
Crops	7	43.8
Livestock	4	25

Source: survey data (2024).

Nearly 25% of respondents (4 participants) earned between R21,000 and R30,000 per annum. This income distribution shows that most participants make less than

R30,000 per annum, suggesting that farming has yet to become a reliable or high-income source for young people in the study area. Young farmers often face significant initial costs for land, equipment, and other essential farming inputs. Crop farming was the predominant agricultural activity, accounting for 44% of respondents, which may be due to strong local demand for crops. Approximately 31% practised mixed farming, while 25% engaged primarily in livestock farming. These findings correspond with Myeni et al. (2019), who reported that only 20% of farmers owned livestock, with the majority (80%) having none. Regarding experience, about 56% of the participants had four to six years of farming practice, suggesting that many are still developing their agricultural skills. This underscores the need for ongoing education and support programmes to help young farmers acquire new knowledge and improve productivity and sustainability in the sector.

Factors influencing youth participation in agriculture

Table 2 and Figure 1 present the findings on factors influencing youth participation in agriculture in the study area. The factors were categorised into five themes: economic opportunities, family influence, technology, personal interest, and agricultural education.

Approximately 69% of participants (11 out of 16) identified the financial benefits of farming as their primary motivation for engaging in agriculture. For example, one participant noted, “We were motivated to engage in agriculture to make money through breeding and selling livestock”. This finding aligns with Magagula and Tsvakirai (2020), who found that farming provides young people with economic opportunities, particularly in rural areas with limited job prospects. Agriculture enables youth to support their families and sustain themselves financially. Another participant stated, “Agricultural revenues helped me to raise my standard of living, and I was able to pay for my household needs”. However, it remains unclear whether improved incomes will attract more young people to farming. For instance, Tadele and Gella (2012) found in Ethiopia that income improvements do not necessarily lead to increased youth participation in agriculture. Additionally, the emphasis on improved living standards may be linked to South Africa’s high youth unemployment rate. According to Stats SA (2025), youth unemployment rose to 46.1% in the first quarter of 2025, a 9.2% increase compared to the same

period in 2015. This highlights the dire economic situation in the country and the potential role of agriculture in absorbing the youth into productive economic activities.

Table 2. Factors influencing youth participation in agriculture

Theme	Frequency	Proportion
Economic opportunities	11	69
Family influence	8	50
Technology	6	37.5
Personal interest	11	69
Agricultural education	8	50

Source: survey data (2024).

About 50% (8 out of 16) reported that family influence played a significant role in shaping their interest in agriculture. Participants discussed their initial exposure to farming, which often came through their families. One participant shared, “I grew up in a big family where

my grandfather taught me and my cousins how to farm. We used to grow spinach, tomatoes, onions, and cabbage in our home garden and enjoy the harvest. We even planted orange trees, and till today, we are enjoying and selling fruits”.

Participants raised in farming households gained the knowledge and skills necessary to remain in the agricultural industry. Another participant recalled how their grandfather and relatives taught them to grow crops like tomatoes, onions, and spinach, which influenced their decision to pursue a career in agriculture. This supports the findings of Magagula and Tsvakirai (2020), who emphasised the importance of family background and intergenerational knowledge transfer for sustaining farming customs. Participants familiar with farming from an early age, viewed it as a logical career choice, consistent with research on family legacy’s impact on agricultural engagement (Holloway et al., 2021).

Personal curiosity and passion also emerged as strong motivators. The majority of participants (11 out of 16) cited passion as their primary reason for engaging in agriculture. Several highlighted how their early

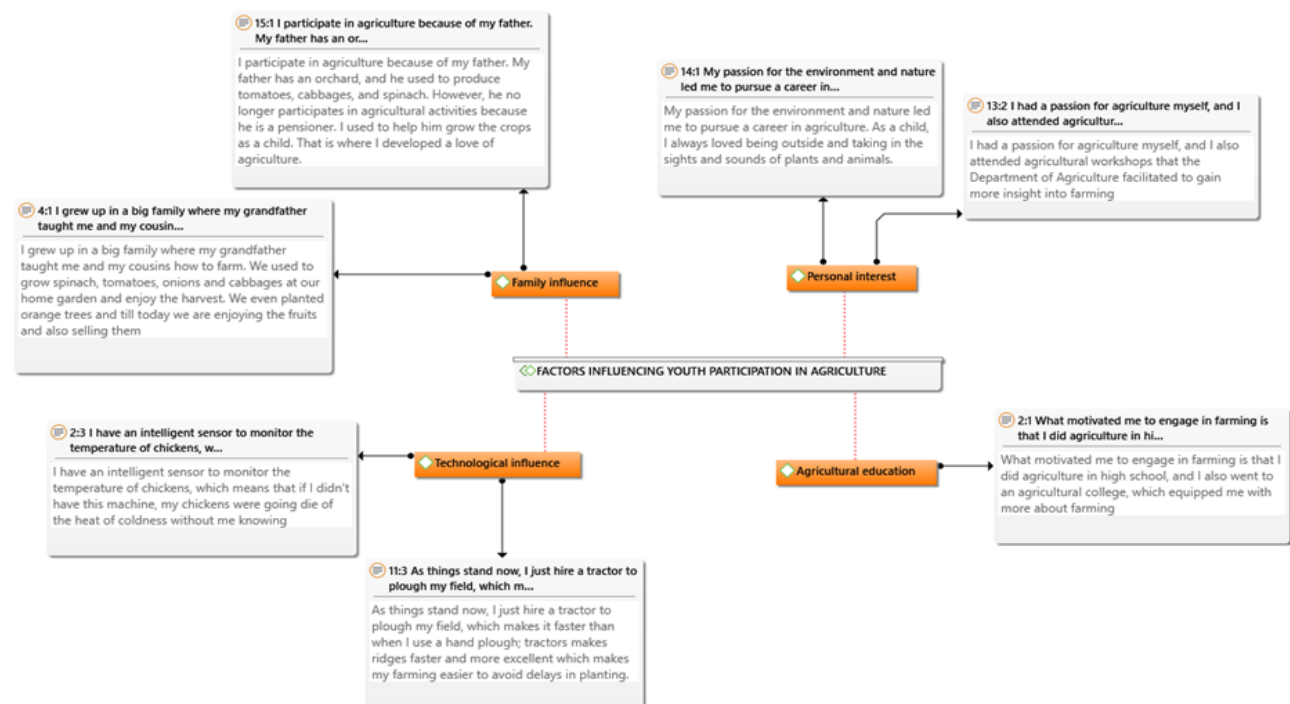


Fig. 1. Summary of the factors influencing youth participation in agriculture
Source: survey data (2024).

love of farming inspired them to pursue agricultural programmes and courses later in life. One participant mentioned attending agricultural seminars sponsored by the provincial Department of Agriculture to deepen their knowledge. This personal dedication reflects a genuine desire to contribute to the sector and is vital for sustaining farming vocations among youth. Participants also noted their love for nature, the environment, and the appeal of sustainable farming methods as influences. Geza et al. (2022) similarly found that young people's interest in agriculture often drives them to seek further education and training to improve their success prospects.

Agricultural education and training were also important influences. Approximately 50% (8 out of 16) said their interest was sparked by studying agriculture in high school or tertiary education. One participant studying agriculture at university stated, "It encouraged and aided in developing a strong passion for farming." Similarly, a participant from an agricultural college explained, "The practical knowledge they gained from their education inspired them to work in agriculture". Educational programmes that teach the science, technology and business aspects of farming can encourage youth to view agriculture as a viable career. Geza et al. (2022) argue that education positively influences youth participation in agriculture, while Bezu and Holden (2014) note that education may improve youth access to information beyond their immediate environments. Conversely, McMillan and Harttgen (2014) observed that only 2% of African university graduates specialise in agriculture, while 40% of those working in agriculture lack formal education. Given the context-specific nature of our findings, South Africa's high youth unemployment rate may be driving even highly skilled people to find opportunities in agriculture.

Technology also emerged as a key factor, cited by 6 out of 11 participants. Respondents described various technological tools that enhance farm productivity and profitability. For example, one noted, "Compared to traditional hand tools, utilising tractors to plough fields speeds up planting and takes less time and labour." Another explained, "Temperature sensors monitor poultry farming conditions and help to protect the birds from harsh weather". Young people perceive technological advances as critical to luring youth into the sector. Milone and Ventura (2019) similarly reported that access to technology increases youth willingness to work in agriculture by improving productivity and reducing physical

labour. In today's tech-driven world, integrating modern tools and techniques makes farming more appealing and feasible as a career choice for young people (Magagula and Tsvakirai, 2020). In this study, vocational training may have contributed to the emphasis on technology.

Barriers limiting youth participation in agriculture

Table 3 and Figure 2 present the findings on the barriers limiting youth participation in agriculture. These barriers were categorised into four major themes: Financial constraints, lack of training and skills, insufficient support programmes, and climate change. Approximately 75% (12 out of 16) of participants cited a lack of financial resources as the primary constraint to their involvement in agriculture. Some respondents stated that "Capital is the most significant challenge affecting youth engagement in agriculture." Participants explained that "It is challenging for young farmers to invest in necessary resources like land, seeds, equipment, and fertilisers because they sometimes have limited access to finance." One participant noted that "The prohibitive expense of purchasing land forced them to start farming in their backyard". Another commented that "Their inability to expand their farming operations or expand activities was hampered by financial constraints". These findings align with existing literature, including Ahmad et al. (2020), which identifies financial limitations as a major barrier to youth entry into the agricultural sector.

Table 3. Barriers limiting youth involvement in agriculture

Theme	Frequency	Proportion
Financial constraints	12	75
Lack of training and skills	11	69
Lack of support programmes	8	50
Climate change	7	44

Source: survey data (2024).

Without sufficient financial support, young farmers often struggle to sustain their agricultural activities. A study by Chipfupa and Tagwi (2021) in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa found limited institutional support (such as access to credit) for youth in agriculture. Enhancing financial assistance could play a pivotal role in increasing youth participation in the sector.

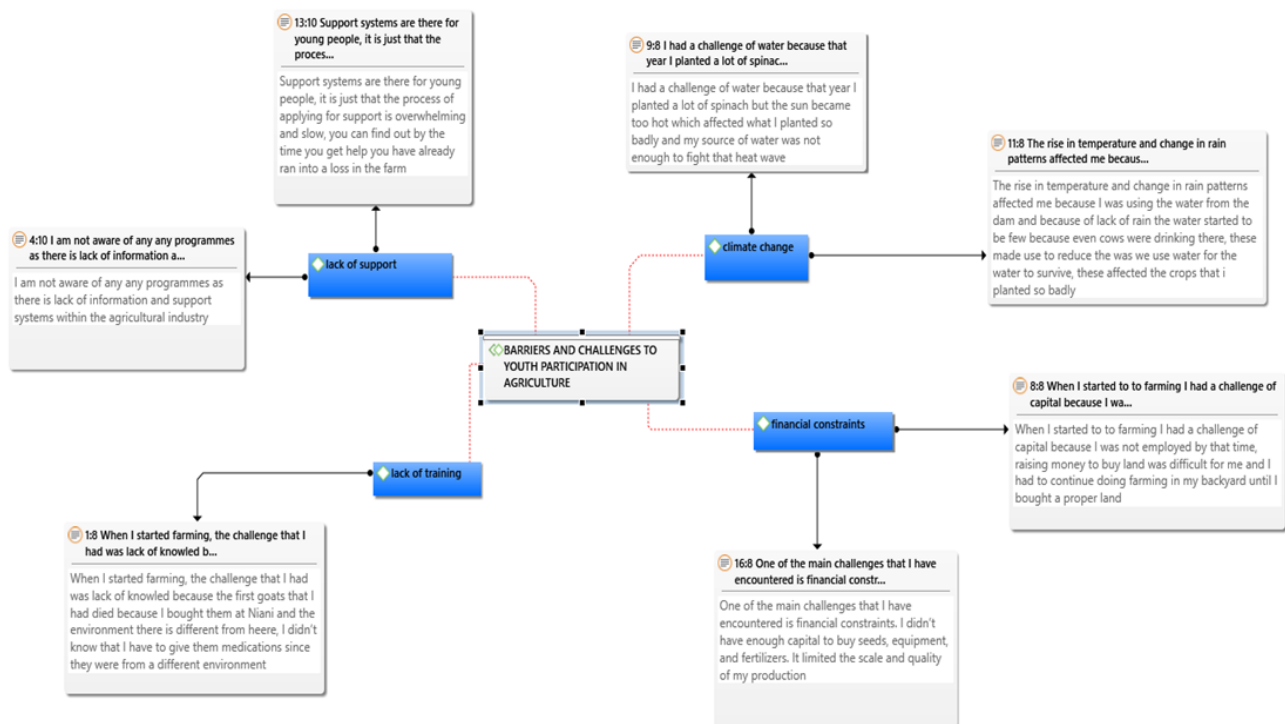


Fig. 2. Summary of factors limiting youth participation in agriculture
Source: survey data (2024).

Another key barrier identified was the lack of agricultural training. Most participants (69%) reported that their inadequate knowledge leads to poor decision-making, such as failing to adapt farming practices to environmental conditions or causing livestock to die from neglect. One participant shared their experience of losing money after purchasing goats without understanding the necessary care requirements. This highlights the need for hands-on training and context-specific agricultural training. Young farmers lack the technical know-how required to maximise output. Geza et al. (2022) stress that lack of training and inadequate skills are a major deterrent to youth involvement in agriculture. Giuliani et al. (2017) similarly point to a lack of training in both agricultural and financial practices as a significant barrier. Mulema et al. (2021) further cite a lack of agriculture expertise, restricted market access, and poor infrastructure as market-related constraints discouraging youth participation in agribusiness in both Vietnam and Zambia. Moreover, Ng'atigwa et al. (2020) suggest that public-private partnerships and extension services can improve youth access to agricultural innovations

and skills. As Moore (2015) and Ng'atigwa et al. (2020) argue, successful youth integration into agriculture depends on strong social networks, skills and training, and access to productive resources. Addressing these gaps through accessible and relevant training programmes could significantly enhance youth success in agriculture.

Half of the participants (50%) reported the lack of adequate support programmes as a major barrier in the study area. Although many were aware of such programmes, they described the application processes as burdensome and inaccessible. One participant noted that “The lengthy and challenging processes required to obtain support meant that by the time help arrived, they had already experienced losses.”

Participants also reported a general lack of awareness about available support services, making it difficult for young farmers to navigate existing systems. This finding is supported by Metelerkamp et al. (2019), who emphasise the critical role of support programmes in fostering youth success in farming. According to Mokgomo et al. (2022), such programmes have positively impacted the beneficiaries' income levels. Despite

government efforts, however, agricultural support in South Africa remains limited (Aliber and Hall, 2012).

Climate change emerged as another significant barrier, cited by 7 out of 16 participants. Respondents highlighted that extreme weather patterns – such as heatwaves and erratic rainfall – have negatively impacted their agricultural productivity. One participant described how a heatwave destroyed their crops due to water scarcity, while another explained how falling dam levels reduced their ability to irrigate crops and rear livestock. These examples illustrate agriculture's growing vulnerability to climate change, particularly for small-scale farmers with limited adaptive capacity. The lack of access to climate-resilient technologies and infrastructure increases the risk for young farmers, a challenge also noted in prior studies (e.g., Geza et al., 2022). Yeboah et al. (2019) argue that, without adequate infrastructure, resources, or knowledge, young people working in agriculture may struggle to adapt to changing conditions. Supporting youth involvement in the sector therefore requires addressing the impacts of climate change – through improved water management, climate adaptation strategies, and the promotion of sustainable farming practices.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the absence of a reliable database of young farmers in the local municipality, this study employed a snowball sampling approach. While effective for reaching hard-to-access populations, this method introduces the risk of sampling bias, as respondents often refer individuals within their own social networks. Data were collected across four villages within the same administrative region, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other areas. Future research should broaden the sample to include a more diverse range of young agricultural practitioners across South Africa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the factors influencing youth participation in agriculture in Thulamela Local Municipality, South Africa. The findings reveal that youth involvement in agriculture is driven by access to finance, family influence, and a personal passion for farming. Agriculture is widely viewed as a viable pathway for addressing rural

youth unemployment and poverty through the creation of sustainable livelihoods. However, challenges such as climate variability, financial constraints, and limited agricultural knowledge hinder the sustained engagement of youth in the sector. These findings underscore the complex and dynamic nature of youth participation in agriculture – marked by both enthusiasm and structural barriers. In light of these insights, the study offers both short-term and long-term recommendations to enhance youth participation in agriculture. In the short term, policymakers should prioritise accessible financial mechanisms, such as start-up grants, to assist young farmers acquire essential resources, including machinery and other agricultural inputs. In the long term, there is a need to integrate agriculture more meaningfully into school curricula and to invest in climate-resilient agricultural infrastructure.

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