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Youth aspirations and entrepreneurial motivation in agriculture: insights from smallholder farmers in OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape

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Agriculture holds untapped potential for youth empowerment and rural development in South Africa, particularly in regions such as the Eastern Cape, where unemployment and poverty are widespread. While often perceived as an unattractive career, a growing number of youth are redefining agriculture as a viable entrepreneurial path. This study explores the motivational drivers, enabling conditions, and challenges shaping youth participation in smallholder agriculture within the OR Tambo District Municipality. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 70 purposively selected youth farmers (aged 18–35) across three municipalities. Thematic analysis revealed that youth engagement is driven by both intrinsic motivations such as passion for farming, cultural identity, and self-reliance and extrinsic factors, including land inheritance, familial support, and selective access to institutional programs. Nonetheless, substantial structural challenges such as limited formal land tenure, financing constraints, and weak institutional support persist. Despite these constraints, youth displayed notable innovation and resilience, leveraging digital tools, value-added processing, and collective marketing to sustain their enterprises. Youth aspirations for scaling up, Agri-processing, and digital entrepreneurship reflect a strong commitment to transforming rural agriculture. The study concludes that aligning agricultural support systems with youth motivations, lived realities, and structural barriers is critical to fostering inclusive and sustainable agripreneurship. Based on the study, it is recommended that policymakers need flexible financing models tailored for youth, gender-sensitive land tenure reforms, and investment in decentralised, youth-focused extension and market access programs. Strengthening rural infrastructure and digital connectivity and embedding youth voices in policy design processes will be crucial for fostering inclusive and sustainable agripreneurship.

KEYWORDS

Eastern Cape, entrepreneurship, gender disparities, motivational factors, rural development, smallholder farmers, youth agripreneurship

1 Introduction

Globally, youth engagement in agriculture is framed as both a challenge and an opportunity. On one hand, rural youth often perceive farming as unattractive, associating it with drudgery, limited returns, and low status (Giwu et al., 2024). This perception fuels migration to urban areas and disengagement from farming livelihoods (Giwu and Mdoda, 2024). On the other hand, agriculture is increasingly recognized as a viable entrepreneurial domain capable of creating employment, fostering innovation, and contributing to food security (Giwu et al., 2025). Youth, with their energy, adaptability, and openness to technology, are well-positioned to drive agribusiness transformation, if enabling conditions are in place (Geza et al., 2021).

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of rural livelihoods and food systems across sub-Saharan Africa, providing both sustenance and employment opportunities for millions of households (Hilson et al., 2021; Nkansah-Dwamena, 2024). In South Africa, smallholder agriculture is central to rural development strategies, particularly in provinces with high unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity (Mokgomo et al., 2022; Ngumbela et al., 2020). In the Eastern Cape Province, despite the sector's potential, it continues to face persistent challenges of low productivity, limited market integration, and inadequate support services (Nontu et al., 2024). Within this landscape, the role of young people in revitalizing agriculture has become a subject of growing scholarly and policy attention (Giwu et al., 2024).

Despite the significant contribution of agriculture to the economy of developing countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa, especially South Africa, the sector is faced with several challenges such as climate change, lack of youth participation, inadequate input supply, lack of credit, lack of infrastructure and agricultural production efforts still left in the hands of aged farmers who presently constitute the major farming population (Kwenye and Sichone, 2016). According to Akrong and Kotu (2022) and IFAD (2019), the lack of youth participation in agriculture is due to negative perceptions about agriculture being less lucrative, labor, and capital-intensive, and activity with low self-esteem makes agriculture unattractive to the youth, hence their low participation in agriculture. Additionally, the low interest of youngsters in agriculture is credited to the poor status of agricultural output in Africa's rural areas (especially in South Africa) due to a lack of government support (Mthi et al., 2021). Baloyi (2020) specified that the lack of youth entrants in agriculture can also be due to limited water and land access, lack of market access and market information, lack of financial support, low returns on investments, and poor access to adequate information. Given these encounters and seeing the negative perceptions that youth have towards principal agriculture, it is anticipated that the sector will experience a poor succession plan and food systems will be hampered.

South African youth face a complex development environment marked by high structural unemployment, limited access to land and finance, and systemic inequalities inherited from historical dispossession (Marumo and Sebolaaneng, 2019). While national policies highlight the importance of youth inclusion in agriculture, practical implementation often falls short of addressing the diverse aspirations of young people in rural areas (Giwu et al., 2024). In the Eastern Cape, smallholder farming remains a livelihood safety net, but its potential as an entrepreneurial pathway for youth is underexplored (Chipfupa and Tagwi, 2021).

This raises important questions about how young people conceptualize agriculture within their life trajectories, and what drives or constrains their entrepreneurial engagement in the sector (Kote et al., 2024).

Existing studies on youth in agriculture have tended to focus on structural barriers, such as land tenure, credit access, and extension support, while paying less attention to the subjective dimensions of youth decision-making (Zulu et al., 2021; Shayo, 2020). Aspirations, motivations, and narratives of possibility are central in shaping how youth perceive and act upon opportunities in farming. Yet, little empirical work has examined these motivational pathways in the South African smallholder context, particularly through youth-centered narratives that foreground their voices and lived experiences.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the aspirations and entrepreneurial drive of rural youth in the OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape Province. Using a narrative-based approach, the study unpacks the diverse motivational pathways through which young people engage in agriculture, as a livelihood, a business opportunity, or a survival strategy. By centering youth perspectives, the research provides nuanced insights into the interplay between aspirations, structural conditions, and entrepreneurial agency. In doing so, the study contributes to policy debates on youth-inclusive agricultural development and offers practical implications for extension services, local government, and development partners seeking to support sustainable youth-led agribusiness in rural South Africa.

2 The theory of planned behavior (TPB) integrated with the sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF)

This study employs an integrated framework that combines the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 2019; La Barbera and Ajzen, 2021) with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) (Department for International Development (DFID), 1999) to examine youth engagement in agriculture. TPB explains how intentions are shaped by attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control, while SLF situates these motivations within broader socioeconomic and institutional realities. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic lens to understand the aspirations and challenges of young smallholder farmers in the Eastern Cape.

The TPB highlights how positive attitudes toward farming can inspire youth to view agriculture as a source of income, independence, and identity (Ajzen, 2019). Many participants associated farming with self-reliance and empowerment, yet intention alone does not ensure practice. Structural barriers, including insecure land tenure, limited finance, and weak extension support, often constrain the ability to turn intentions into sustainable livelihoods (Kim and Lee, 2021). These findings show that youth motivation is closely tied to both personal confidence and access to enabling resources.

Social norms further shape youth decisions in the rural Eastern Cape, where cultural values and family expectations strongly influence career choices (Sarma et al., 2025; Maziya et al., 2024). For some, ancestral farming traditions instilled responsibility and pride, reinforcing their decision to remain in agriculture. Others, however, faced pressure to pursue modern urban careers, creating tensions between rural opportunities and

urban aspirations. These contrasting influences underscore the role of social environments in either encouraging or discouraging farming pathways.

While TPB effectively explains intention formation, it does not fully capture the structural factors that affect livelihood outcomes (Laheri et al., 2024; Lim, 2024). The SLF addresses this gap by examining how youth mobilize human, social, financial, physical, and natural capital to build agribusinesses (Dong et al., 2024). For example, education and peer networks enhanced innovation and market engagement, while a lack of irrigation or fencing limited productivity. Moreover, high unemployment, insecure tenure, and inadequate policy implementation further deepened vulnerability, showing how broader systems constrain youth agency (Morse, 2025; Natarajan et al., 2022).

A key contribution of the SLF lies in its recognition of capital categories that shape livelihood strategies. *Human capital*, such as agricultural training or secondary education, enabled some Eastern Cape youth to experiment with high-value crops, though others without training relied only on subsistence methods. *Social capital*, including farmer groups and cooperative associations, allowed youth to share tools and access buyers collectively, while isolated farmers struggled to secure fair prices. *Financial capital* was particularly scarce, as many lacked access to credit due to informal land tenure, making it difficult to purchase seed, fertilizer, or mechanization. *Physical capital* challenges were evident in poor rural infrastructure; many youth reported losses from crop damage due to a lack of fencing and insufficient irrigation systems. Finally, *natural capital*, especially land and water, was a critical barrier: many respondents farmed communal or family land without legal titles, limiting long-term investment, while erratic rainfall patterns heightened production risks. These examples highlight how the balance of capital directly influenced whether youth transformed farming intentions into viable enterprises.

Integrating TPB and SLF provides a comprehensive framework that connects individual motivations with structural realities (Liu et al., 2023). TPB explains why youth aspire to farm, while SLF clarifies how they navigate vulnerabilities and resources to achieve or abandon these aspirations. This dual approach demonstrates that motivation alone is insufficient; systemic reforms in policy, institutional support, and resource access are critical to sustainably empowering youth agripreneurs in rural South Africa.

3 Methodology

3.1 Study area

This study was conducted in three municipalities of the OR Tambo District of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, namely, Nyandeni, King Sabata Dalindyebo, and Port St. Johns local municipalities. The OR Tambo district was chosen because it is one of the regions that are major producers of agricultural products, including soybean, maize, sugarcane, and livestock farming (Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2020). Furthermore, amongst districts and metropolitan municipalities in the Eastern Cape, the OR Tambo district has the largest population with about 1.3 million people, of which 86% of the population resides in rural farming areas (Snyman and Coetzee, 2024).

The region covers the coastal portions of the province. It stretches along the coastlines of the Indian ocean for about 160 km, its neighbouring areas includes KwaZulu-Natal province to the North East, Joe Gqabi District of Eastern Cape to the NorthWest, Alfred Nzo District of Eastern Cape to the north, Amathole District Eastern Cape to the southwest and Chris Hani District of the Eastern Cape to the west (Bahta et al., 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the location of the OR Tambo district on the South African map.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

The data was collected by well-trained enumerators in 2023 over a two-month period (June–July) using in-depth face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire was used as a data collection tool. The questionnaire was first pre-treated and overseen by respondents with the help of data collection enumerators. The workshops were also conducted as a platform to administer a questionnaire and discuss with the target group. After workshops, the face-to-face interviews were conducted at communal farmers' homesteads by enumerators using either Isixhosa or English as a language of communication, subject to the respondents' language of preference. The verbal consent was requested from the respondents prior to filling out the questionnaire. The researchers and data collectors utilised interview guides to collect data, coupled with careful probing to gain more detailed/clear responses from the respondents. The questionnaire covered farmers' characteristics and other social demographics, land ownership status, involvement in farming activities, socioeconomic and institutional enablers and barriers to youth engagement.

The target population for this study was the youth farming (age 18–35) community in three municipalities of the OR Tambo district, namely Nyandeni, King Sabata Dalindyebo, and Port St. Johns local municipalities. As a result, purposive sampling of about 70 youth farmers across three municipalities was considered. The sample comprised vegetables, livestock, poultry, crops, and value-adding agro-processing farmers. The purposive sampling approach was found appropriate and chosen because it is well-situated for qualitative research seeking to include information-rich cases, which includes thematic analysis (Campbell et al., 2020).

3.3 Analytical method

This study employed an inductive qualitative thematic analysis to analyse narrative data generated through in-depth interviews and facilitated group discussions with youth involved in smallholder agriculture. Thematic analysis was selected because it is one of the most widely utilised approaches for analysing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within rich qualitative datasets (Bree and Gallagher, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2025; Kurade et al., 2025). Its suitability lies particularly in its ability to foreground participants' lived experiences, aspirations, and socio-economic realities without imposing rigid analytical preconceptions. Through this approach, the analysis uncovered key themes explaining youth aspirations, entrepreneurial drive, and structural constraints within agricultural participation.



FIGURE 1

Map showing the study area, OR Tambo district municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Source: Reproduced from [Giwu et al. \(2025\)](#), with permission from Taylor and Francis.

Data were collected through 70 interviews conducted by trained enumerators, with all participants providing informed consent. Respondents included youth farmers as well as young people involved in agriculture through household support or employment. To encourage interaction and ensure inclusive participation, respondents were organised into 10 focused discussion groups, each comprising seven participants. Interviews lasted approximately 15–20 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, enumerators recorded detailed field notes to capture non-verbal cues, contextual dynamics, and situational observations that enhanced interpretive depth. This prolonged engagement with participants facilitated the identification of recurring meanings and ensured thematic saturation.

The thematic analysis was explicitly inductive and data-driven, meaning that no predefined themes or coding frameworks were imposed before analysis. The analytical process was grounded in data familiarisation rather than analytical preconception. Transcripts were read and re-read repeatedly to ensure immersion in the data, after which initial codes were generated directly from participants' narratives. Interview recordings were listened to multiple times to ensure transcription accuracy and to refine emerging codes. Coding continued iteratively until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new conceptual insights emerged from the data. Microsoft Excel was used as the primary qualitative data management and analysis tool. While specialised qualitative software packages such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, and QSR were considered, Excel was selected due to its cost-effectiveness and accessibility, as the acquisition of proprietary software licenses was financially prohibitive. In addition, Excel's minimal hardware requirements reduce software-related errors, while its filtering and sorting functions enhance transparency, triangulation, and controlled quantification of qualitative data ([Nowell et al., 2017](#)). Handwritten transcripts and enumerator notes were converted into electronic format and organised by interview question, with enumerator prompts highlighted in bold. Duplicate entries arising from simultaneous note-taking during group discussions were carefully identified and removed before analysis.

Each response unit (cell) in the Excel dataset was assigned to a thematic category, with colour coding applied to facilitate systematic comparison across transcripts. Through iterative clustering and

refinement, 18 themes were identified and grouped into three overarching domains: (i) *motivational factors influencing youth engagement in agriculture* (six themes); (ii) *enablers and constraints to youth participation in agriculture* (six themes); and (iii) *gendered access to agricultural resources and opportunities*. Gendered experiences emerged as both a standalone thematic domain and a cross-cutting analytical lens shaping access, agency, and participation across other themes. The analysis conducted by the authors identified quotes that were congruent with the overarching themes. Next, the authors reviewed themes before defining and naming them. Lastly, once themes were finalized by the authors, the write-up of the report began.

Recognising the inherent subjectivity of thematic analysis and the potential for response bias and power dynamics several measures were implemented to enhance analytical rigour. Enumerators were explicitly instructed to maintain reflexivity and openness to alternative viewpoints throughout the data collection and coding processes. Trustworthiness was further ensured by following the credibility, dependability, and confirmability guidelines proposed by [Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and follow-up clarification with participants, allowing them to validate or revise interpretations of their responses. Dependability was ensured through consistent application of data collection and analysis procedures, while confirmability was achieved through peer debriefing and independent review of coding decisions, theme development, and interpretive claims by multiple researchers.

Although the core analysis remained qualitative and interpretive, descriptive summary statistics (frequencies and percentages) were subsequently used to characterise the distribution of themes, sub-themes, and youth socio-economic demographic attributes. This quantification was undertaken solely to enhance contextual clarity and illustrate the relative prominence of themes, rather than to imply statistical inference or generalisability. Descriptive analysis was conducted using STATA software. Qualitative narratives and illustrative quotations remained central to interpretation, ensuring that participants' voices and contextual meanings were preserved. The actual analytical approach ensured that the study remained firmly grounded in participants' lived realities while enabling a transparent, systematic, and methodologically robust synthesis of complex qualitative data.

TABLE 1 Socioeconomic and farmer characteristics of youth farmers.

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–24	24	34.3%
	25–30	31	44.3%
	31–35	15	21.4%
Gender	Male	40	57.0%
	Female	30	43 %
Education	No formal schooling	13	18.6%
	Secondary education	43	61.4%
	Post-secondary (diploma/certificate)	14	20.0%
Farming experience	1–3 years	22	31.4%
	4–7 years	35	50.0%
	8 + years	13	18.6%
Land tenure	Formal ownership/title	30	42.9%
	Informal/family access	40	57.1%
Main enterprise type	Vegetables	48	68.6%
	Livestock	29	41.4%
	Poultry	24	34.3%
	Maize/Field crops	15	21.4%
	Value-added agri-processing	13	18.6%
Additional income sources	Social grants	50	71.4%
	Casual/part-time jobs	18	25.7%
	Family remittances	13	18.6%
Received institutional support (Gov/NGO)	Yes	8	11.4%
	No	62	88.6%
Marital status	Single	40	57%
	Married	18	26
	Widowed	12	17

4 Results

This section presents and discusses the key findings aligned with the study's objectives. Results were drawn from narrative interviews with 70 youth smallholder farmers (aged 18–35) across Nyandeni, KSD, and Port St. Johns local municipalities of the OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape Province. Three major themes emerged: motivational drivers, enablers and constraints, and entrepreneurial experiences and identity.

4.1 Socioeconomic and farmer characteristics of the respondents

The demographic profile of youth farmers in Table 1 reflects a young, balanced, and moderately educated cohort, with the majority aged between 25 and 30 years. These results concur with August (2020), Chipfupa and Tagwi (2021), and Giwu et al. (2024) that active youth in agriculture is between 25 and 30, as the perception that agriculture is demanding and requires energy, and this is the active age that can manage the demanding side of agriculture. The study found that males dominate the agricultural enterprise with 57%. These

results reflect the prevailing cultural norms in Africa that sideline females when it comes to farming, granting men better access to productive resources and land to practice agricultural enterprises (Mbah et al., 2016; Bergman Lodin et al., 2019; Thibane et al., 2023; Giwu et al., 2025). Educational attainment was relatively high, with over 61% of the respondents having completed secondary school and 20% holding post-secondary qualifications, suggesting a solid knowledge base for agricultural innovation. These results are in line with Cheteni (2016) and Giwu et al. (2025), who stated that young farmers are more literate and know how to access relevant information, which will enhance agricultural enterprise and access markets. However, formal land ownership was limited to only 42.9% of participants, with most youth (57.1%) relying on informal or family-based access, particularly among female respondents. Despite their motivation and experience (half of the respondents had been farming for 4–7 years), this insecure land tenure undermines their ability to invest confidently or access finance.

Economically, while agriculture served as the primary activity for many, it was rarely the sole source of livelihood. The overwhelming majority (71.4%) supplemented their income through social grants, reflecting the precarious nature of youth farming in rural areas.

The dominance of vegetable farming (68.6%) indicates low-entry barriers but also suggests vulnerability to market saturation and price fluctuation. These results concur with Thibane et al. (2023) that vegetable farming is the most practiced farming activity, as the youth prefer it as it is less demanding and does not require more energy as compared to other enterprises. Only a minority (18.6%) engaged in value-added processing, pointing to untapped potential for enterprise development. Alarming, just 11.4% of participants reported receiving any government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) support, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive and targeted institutional engagement to unlock the full potential of youth agripreneurs in the Eastern Cape Province. The study found that most of the young farmers were single, and this assisted them in operating the farm as they worked long hours and invested all in the business. These results agree with August (2020) and Madende et al. (2023) that young single farmers operate farms much more easily and focus more than married farmers.

4.2 Motivational factors influencing youth to choose agriculture as a career and entrepreneurial venture

Table 2 below presents the motivational factors influencing youth choices of agriculture as a career and entrepreneurial venture. The results revealed that a significant proportion of youth smallholder farmers in the Eastern Cape were motivated by intrinsic values and identity-driven motivations, rather than economic and opportunity driven motivations.

As highlighted in Table 2, passion for farming and connection to land emerged as the most prominent motivational factor, cited by 71.4% of participants. This suggests that agriculture is not merely an income-generating activity for most youth, but represents a deep-rooted connection to culture, land, and self-expression. This intrinsic drive reflects an orientation toward farming as a valued pursuit in itself, beyond external incentives. A young woman emphasised this sentiment: “I always knew farming was part of who I am. I do not see it as just planting; it’s building a future with my own hands.” Her statement underscores the emotional fulfillment and personal empowerment that youth associate with agricultural work.

Family involvement in agriculture, identified by 62.9% of the respondents, was the second most cited motivator. For more than half of the youth, entry into farming was strongly influenced by family involvement. Many participants described being introduced to farming at a young age through their parents or grandparents. This exposure laid a foundation for agricultural skills development and a sense of responsibility to carry forward the family legacy. For instance, youth noted that “I grew up in a farming family, everything I know about survival comes from my parents’ fields,” “My grandmother taught me how to plant and harvest. I am continuing what she started” and “Farming runs in our blood. I inherited both the land and the skills,” underscoring the crucial role of intergenerational knowledge transfer as young people view their entry into agriculture not only as a career move but as a continuation of familial and communal identity. These illustrative responses also emphasise how growing up in households where parents or grandparents farmed created both familiarity and obligation for these youth.

TABLE 2 Motivational factors reported by participants.

Motivational factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Passion for farming and connection to land	50	71.4%
Family involvement in agriculture	44	62.9%
Need for self-employment and income generation	39	55.7%
Lack of employment opportunities elsewhere	33	47.1%
Cultural/ancestral responsibility to continue farming	21	30.0%
Government/NGO support and training	12	17.1%

Economic factors, though not primary, played a substantial role in shaping youth motivations. A significant portion (55.7%) of respondents cited the need for self-employment and income generation as key drivers for choosing agriculture. Illustrative responses from participants such as, “I wanted to make my own money and be my own boss, farming allowed me that,” “Instead of waiting for a job, I decided to create one through farming” and “This is how I feed my family now—what I grow, I sell, and I reinvest” reflect that income generation was frequently framed as a tool for autonomy and independence rather than simple survival. For many, farming was not a last resort but a deliberate entrepreneurial choice.

On the other hand, farming was a way of asserting agency in the face of structural economic exclusion for other youth. Lack of employment opportunities elsewhere was indicated by nearly half (47.1%) of participants as a motivator to choose agriculture as a career and entrepreneurial venture. Statements such as “After graduating with no job, I came back to the village. Farming was what I had, and I realized I could make something out of it,” “After finishing school, I stayed home for two years without a job. Farming became my only chance,” “There are no jobs here, but there is land. So, I chose to make something from what I have” and “When no one would hire me, I returned to the land. It was my last option, but now it’s my plan,” reflects the strategic reframing of farming from being just a fallback position to a pathway to earn a livelihood. A less prominent but still important factor was the cultural and ancestral responsibility to continue farming, identified by 30% of respondents. These participants spoke of land as sacred and farming as a symbol of identity, continuity, and communal strength. Illustrative responses include: “This land belongs to my family; it’s my duty to keep it alive,” “I farm because it’s part of our tradition. My ancestors worked here, and now it’s my turn,” and “It’s more than business, it’s about honouring where I come from.” Such expressions suggest that for a portion of youth, agriculture was not merely an economic activity but a way of preserving heritage and maintaining a connection with their lineage. This perspective positions farming as both an obligation and an honour, where the act of cultivation ensures that family traditions and community survival are upheld.

Finally, only 17.1% of youth cited government or NGO support as a motivating factor, underscoring a significant disconnect between youth aspirations and institutional visibility. While some benefitted from programs such as training workshops or small grants, most

described these interventions as insufficient, sporadic, or inaccessible. As one participant noted, “I joined an NGO youth program that gave me seedlings and training; it opened my eyes to farming as a business.” Another explained, “I got a grant that helped me buy tools, but we need more follow-up support to grow.” These accounts also reveal the limitations of existing interventions, which were often described as insufficient, sporadic, or difficult to access, particularly for those in remote villages.

4.3 Socio-economic and institutional enablers or barriers to youth engagement

The findings presented in Table 3 summarises the socio-economic and institutional enablers and barriers identified by participants. While many young people in the Eastern Cape are highly motivated to pursue farming, they encounter a variety of institutional and systemic barriers that severely constrain their productivity and entrepreneurial growth. The results reveal that while some socio-economic and institutional factors served as enabling conditions for youth in agriculture, most were experienced as critical barriers, limiting the extent to which motivated youth could expand or commercialise their activities as presented in Table 3.

Among the few enablers reported, land access emerged as the frequently cited, with 61.4% of youth indicating they had access to communal, family, or inherited land. However, this access was often informal, insecure, and unequipped, particularly for young women. Many expressed frustrations that the quality and productivity of that land were often compromised due to the absence of critical support infrastructure, such as fencing, irrigation, or storage, which made it difficult to use productively. One of the female participants touchingly remarked: “They give us land in the village, but no fence, no borehole, no tractor. What do I do with just dry soil?” This account highlights a common reality of land access without infrastructure or capital investment, ultimately limiting its utility and turning a potential asset into an ongoing burden.

Access to extension support and agricultural training (both crucial for enhancing technical knowledge and business acumen) was reported as low. Only 27.1% of respondents had access to any kind of extension services, while just 31.4% had received formal training. The youth who did receive extension assistance described extension visits as infrequent, generalised, or irrelevant to their specific needs as young agripreneurs. The lack of sustained, tailored extension services was considered a key barrier to improving productivity and innovation. Furthermore, 68.6% of participants felt excluded from agricultural training programs or complained about their

urban-centric delivery and language inaccessibility. While these can be valuable, participants described them as limited in scope and follow-up. This suggests that training alone, without mentorship and linkages to resources, had a limited long-term impact. The lack of youth-specific extension officers or mentorship initiatives emerged as a consistent frustration, underscoring the perception that existing agricultural support systems are designed for older, more established farmers.

Constrained access to finance emerged as the most severe constraint faced by youth farmers, with 84.3% of participants reporting limited access to finance. Most had applied for loans, grants, or funding from institutions such as the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), or commercial banks, but were unsuccessful due to the lack of collateral, formal business registration, or credit history. One young male farmer summarised this systematic exclusion: “We are ready to farm, but loans are impossible to get unless you have collateral and I have none.” This reality has forced many young people to rely on personal savings or family contributions, which are often insufficient to support commercial-scale operations. The results suggest that current financial systems remain inaccessible to rural youth, effectively stalling innovative and scalable youth agribusiness potential.

Another major hurdle was market access, with 81.4% of respondents reporting difficulty in connecting with consistent, fair, and profitable markets. The majority relied on local informal sales, often fetching low prices and lacking contract security. There was minimal support for linking youth with institutional buyers, agro-processing hubs, or cooperative marketing platforms. Several participants expressed frustration that, despite producing quality vegetables or livestock, they were unable to access local school feeding schemes or government nutrition programs due to bureaucracy or lack of awareness. One participant lamented: “I grow quality spinach and cabbage, but they buy from the city instead of us.” This points to a failure in integrating rural youth into formal agricultural value chains, further stifling their income potential and sense of professional legitimacy.

Closely related to these barriers is the lack of access to agricultural inputs and equipment, as reported by 71.4% of participants. Most youth operate with basic hand tools, poor-quality seeds, and no irrigation systems, which drastically reduces productivity and increases labor demands. Access to inputs was often cited as being tied to larger, older cooperatives or politically connected farmers. Even in instances where youth could afford inputs, transportation and storage challenges further constrained their efficiency. This input-related exclusion contributes to persistent inequality within rural farming communities, where youth are structurally positioned on the

TABLE 3 Perceived enablers and constraints to youth agricultural participation.

Category	Enablers (Freq)	%	Constraints (Freq)	%
Land access	43	61.4%	27	38.6%
Access to extension support	19	27.1%	51	72.9%
Access to finance/credit	11	15.7%	59	84.3%
Market access	13	18.6%	57	81.4%
Agricultural training	22	31.4%	48	68.6%
Access to agri-inputs/tools	20	28.6%	50	71.4%

periphery of meaningful production. Furthermore, this may reflect how resource constraints perpetuate low productivity cycles and stall scaling.

4.4 Lived experiences and entrepreneurial journeys of youth smallholder farmers

The entrepreneurial landscape among youth smallholder farmers in the Eastern Cape is both diverse and dynamic, reflecting a spectrum of motivations, resources, and business models. Based on the participants' narratives, three distinct categories of engagement emerged: subsistence-based farming with informal sales (48.6%), formal small-scale agribusiness (30.0%), and innovation-driven agripreneurship (21.4%). These entrepreneurial pathways presented in Table 4 highlight the diverse ways in which youth engage in agriculture, from subsistence to innovation-driven ventures. Not only do these categories represent different stages of agricultural enterprise development, but they also reflect the varying levels of support, access, and vision that young farmers possess (Mpetile and Chinyamurindi, 2021). For many in the subsistence category, farming is primarily a means of meeting immediate household food needs, with surplus produce sold informally to neighbors or local vendors.

These youth often face structural constraints such as limited land, inputs, and technical support, making it difficult to scale up. Yet their narratives reflect strong resilience and resourcefulness. Illustrative responses included: *"I plant tomatoes and spinach in the garden. I sell to my aunties and people at church. It's not a lot, but it helps me buy seeds again."* Such accounts demonstrate how even the most resource-constrained youth still seek to engage in productive economic activity, using low-risk, incremental approaches. Although their agricultural enterprises are not formalized, their activities contribute to local food security, informal economies, and youth livelihoods.

A growing number of youth (30%) are moving into formal small-scale agribusinesses, often structured around registered cooperatives or family-run enterprises. These farmers often benefit from collective resource sharing, increased bargaining power, and better access to markets. As one male participant explained, *"We formed a co-op of five. Together, we hire a tractor, buy in bulk, and market as a brand now."* Such models help to mitigate common challenges such as high input costs and market exclusion. These youth show greater entrepreneurial orientation, investing in packaging, branding, and customer relationships to differentiate their produce in increasingly competitive local markets.

Perhaps most striking is the emergence of a new wave of digital and innovation-based agripreneurs (21.4%), who are leveraging technology, creativity, and niche markets to expand their reach. Despite infrastructural and connectivity limitations in rural areas,

these youth are using social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok to advertise products, attract customers, and learn new techniques. For example, a female farmer remarked, *"I grow spinach and sell it to local schools. I learned how to package better and use Facebook to get more buyers."* These tech-savvy youth represent the evolving face of agriculture, positioning themselves not just as producers but as brands and business owners with clear market identities.

4.5 Gendered experiences and participation in youth agripreneurship

The study revealed a clear pattern of gendered disparities in access, participation, and agency within the smallholder farming sector among youth in the Eastern Cape. Table 5 presents the gender differences and participation.

While both male and female youth displayed high levels of motivation, their experiences deviated significantly due to structural inequalities and cultural norms. A particularly striking contrast was observed in land access. While 60% of male youth reported formal land ownership, only 25.7% of female youth had land officially registered in their names. In contrast, most female participants relied on informal access through family ties, with 65.7% citing this as their primary route to land use. This imbalance reflects patriarchal inheritance practices, where land is commonly transferred through male lineage, often excluding young women from ownership and limiting their authority over agricultural decisions. As one female farmer explained, *"Even though I work the land every day, it's still registered under my uncle's name. I had to ask him just to plant spinach."* Her account illustrates the dual challenge of legal insecurity and the psychosocial burden of negotiating access within her own household. On the contrary, male youth expressed relatively unhindered access to land and a sense of entitlement in dealing with agricultural authorities. One male respondent noted, *"As a guy, it's easier to get help or speak to officials. They trust that I know farming, even if I just started."* Such narratives reflect not only a gender bias in institutional perception but also in the distribution of support services.

Gendered discrepancies were also evident in access to support systems and leadership opportunities (including extension services, training, and cooperative leadership). Only 20% of female youth reported access to extension support, compared to 34.3% of males. Similarly, just 17.1% of young women occupied leadership roles in cooperatives or farmer groups, in contrast to 40% of young men.

Despite these systemic disadvantages, female youth demonstrated notable entrepreneurial innovation, especially in value-added agricultural activities. Over half (54.3%) of female respondents were engaged in processing, packaging, or direct-to-consumer sales, compared to just 22.9% of males. This suggests that while young

TABLE 4 Youth agricultural enterprise types and characteristics.

Enterprise type	Number	%	Key features
Subsistence + informal sales	34	48.6%	Home gardens, small sales to neighbours'
Formal small-scale agribusiness	21	30.0%	Registered co-ops, packaging, and sales to local markets
Innovation-based agripreneurs	15	21.4%	Use of social media, niche crops, and value-added products

TABLE 5 Gendered access to agricultural resources and opportunities.

Resource/opportunity	Male youth (n = 35)	%	Female youth (n = 35)	%
Formal land ownership	21	60.0%	9	25.7%
Informal land access (e.g., family)	10	28.6%	23	65.7%
Access to extension support	12	34.3%	7	20.0%
Leadership in a cooperative/group	14	40.0%	6	17.1%
Access to training opportunities	15	42.9%	9	25.7%
Engaged in value-added activities	8	22.9%	19	54.3%

TABLE 6 Youth aspirations for the future in agriculture.

Future aspiration	Frequency	% of respondents
Expand into commercial farming	44	62.9%
Launch an agri-processing or value-added product line	27	38.6%
Employ or mentor other youth	25	35.7%
Create digital farming platforms (YouTube, online markets)	18	25.7%
Access export markets	11	15.7%
Leave farming if no institutional support is provided	20	28.6%

women may have less land and fewer resources, they are maximizing the value of what they do have by targeting niche markets and creating differentiated products. Many described selling jam, pickled vegetables, herbal teas, and pre-packed greens to schools, churches, and local events, strategies that demonstrate creativity, adaptability, and market insight. These strategies allowed female farmers to maximise the value of limited resources while navigating physical constraints such as smaller plots or a lack of heavy equipment by focusing on quality and branding.

4.6 Youth aspirations for the future in agriculture

The aspirations expressed by youth smallholder farmers in the Eastern Cape, summarised in Table 6, reflect a powerful narrative of strategic ambition, grounded in real-time struggles but oriented toward a transformative agricultural future.

Table 6 illustrates that 62.9% of the participants expressed a clear desire to expand into commercial farming within the next 5 years. This ambition signals that young farmers are not merely engaging in agriculture for subsistence or temporary survival, but are actively envisioning scale, growth, and formal economic participation. For many, this includes dreams of acquiring more land, purchasing modern equipment, and establishing formal enterprises. Illustrative of this vision, one male participant explained, *“I dream of having my own processing plant. I want to create jobs for other youth like me, not just farm alone.”* This sentiment reflects a vision that goes beyond personal gain and taps into collective empowerment and rural transformation.

A significant number of youth (38.6%) also aspired to develop agri-processing or value-added product lines, indicating a shift from traditional raw production to entrepreneurial diversification. Several participants highlighted aspirations such as producing bottled sauces, herbal teas, or pre-packed produce for sale to schools and clinics.

Evidently, these youth see value in creating branded products, packaging goods for formal markets, and capturing more value from the agricultural value chain. This ambition is especially prevalent among female youth, who often linked their goals to the informal value-added activities they were already undertaking.

Digital engagement also emerged as a forward-looking aspiration, with 25.7% of respondents expressing interest in building online platforms through YouTube tutorials, social media marketing, or digital sales. A participant described plans to *“create a mobile app connecting rural farmers with buyers in towns, while others aspired to become “Agri-influencers,” sharing farming content online to attract customers and build networks.”* Such accounts reflect a growing interest in using digital tools to enhance visibility, reach customers, and expand networks.

Another notable finding is that 35.7% of participants hoped to employ or mentor other youth, demonstrating that their aspirations extend beyond individual success to include social impact and community development. Some spoke of establishing youth-led cooperatives, while others envisioned training centers where they could pass on farming knowledge. This demonstrates that some young farmers frame their futures not only in terms of individual advancement but also in terms of collective development.

Only a small share of youth (15.7%) expressed aspirations to access export markets, yet this reflects a forward-looking vision that extends beyond local and national opportunities. These participants associated international market access with better prices, income stability, and greater recognition of their produce. Such aspirations highlight the global outlook of some youth farmers, who see international trade as a pathway to higher income and recognition of their products.

Despite these hopeful aspirations, conditional optimism was also evident. A notable 28.6% of youth indicated that they would consider leaving farming if current institutional neglect persisted. This narrative was reflected by one female participant who remarked, *“If the government does not support us, many of us will give up. We cannot keep doing everything with nothing.”* Such responses underline the fragility of youth engagement when supportive structures are lacking.

5 Discussion

The findings highlight that youth engagement in agriculture is not simply a product of necessity but is deeply embedded in intrinsic and cultural motivations. Many participants described farming as a passion and a continuation of ancestral responsibilities, positioning agriculture as both a livelihood and an identity. This resonates with [Thephavanh et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Pesambili \(2024\)](#), who also found passion for agriculture to be a strong intrinsic motivator for youth choosing agriculture as a career and entrepreneurial venture. The intergenerational transmission of farming practices within families further reinforces agriculture as a socially embedded activity rather than an individual economic choice ([Giwu et al., 2024](#)). At the same time, youth framed farming as a strategic entrepreneurial pathway in contexts of limited rural employment, consistent with findings by [Mpetile and Chinyamurindi \(2021\)](#); [Thephavanh et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Kote et al. \(2024\)](#). While unemployment initially acted as a “push factor,” sustained participation was driven by a combination of passion, family heritage, and prospects for self-employment. This challenges conventional narratives of reluctant youth farmers ([White, 2012](#); [Ahaibwe et al., 2013](#); [Girdziute et al., 2022](#)), suggesting instead that farming is being reframed as an intentional career choice. Similar to [Njeru \(2017\)](#), [Rietveld et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Kazungu and Kumburu \(2023\)](#), the duality of “necessity and opportunity” reflects resilience and entrepreneurial orientation among rural youth.

Despite the strong motivation, the study underscores persistent structural barriers that undermine youth potential. Limited access to finance, weak market integration, and inconsistent extension services emerged as systemic obstacles hindering the active engagement of youth in agriculture. These findings align with [Geza et al. \(2022\)](#), [Madende et al. \(2023\)](#), and [Kote et al. \(2024\)](#), who highlight constrained access to productive resources and poorly aligned support mechanisms for youth. The mismatch between youth needs and institutional offerings was evident in narratives of land without infrastructure, training without mentorship, and grants without continuity. Enablers such as family land access and peer collaboration partially offset these barriers, reflecting the importance of supporting livelihood capital such as social capital that can be leveraged to enhance access to key livelihood capitals such as natural capital ([Madende et al., 2023](#)). However, structural deficiencies in formal support systems continue to reinforce cycles of underperformance and vulnerability ([Kristensen and Birch-Thomsen, 2013](#); [Songca et al., 2024](#)). The limited visibility of government and NGO interventions reflects a persistent disconnect between policy frameworks and youth realities, echoing [Geza et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Songca et al. \(2024\)](#). This gap indicates that without tailor-made support initiatives and development frameworks, youth enthusiasm risks being undermined by systemic neglect.

At the same time, youth demonstrated resilience through cooperative ventures, informal mentorship, and creative responses to resource constraints. These narratives reveal youth as active agents in reshaping agricultural practices. This mirrors findings by [Yami et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Begho and Daubry \(2025\)](#), which show that rural youth are not passive spectators but use adaptive strategies, leveraging livelihood assets such as social networks to build meaningful and resilient livelihoods. Digital engagement, value addition, and informal resource pooling highlight how youth blend tradition with innovation, reframing farming as entrepreneurial independence rather than drudgery. These findings align with [Irungu et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Ayamga et al. \(2023\)](#), who reported that digital tools enhance participation and

market access among young agripreneurs. A recent [FAO and WFF \(2024\)](#) report further emphasises the role of digital technologies in engaging youth as agents of agrifood system transformation.

While insecure land access is a general challenge for youth across Africa, it is particularly pronounced for young women. Male youth in this study benefited from higher rates of formal land ownership and greater institutional legitimacy, while female youth often relied on insecure access through family ties. This reflects patriarchal inheritance norms documented across African societies that restrict the access of land, resources, and decision-making opportunities among women ([Lecoutere and Wuyts, 2021](#); [Makhetha, 2024](#); [Masenya, 2024](#)). Similar findings have been reported by [Ahaibwe et al. \(2013\)](#), [Mokati et al. \(2024\)](#), and [Begho and Daubry \(2025\)](#). Gender disparities were also evident in access to extension services and leadership roles, reinforcing patterns of exclusion previously highlighted by [Ragasa et al. \(2013\)](#). Yet, the narratives by female youth also illuminate innovative and entrepreneurial agency. Female youth are disproportionately engaged in value-added activities such as processing, packaging, and direct sales, effectively transforming [Katjiteo \(2024\)](#), who found that women strategically repurpose social roles to gain economic and social leverage. Rather than passive exclusion, young women are carving unique entrepreneurial pathways that challenge conventional gender hierarchies in rural economies.

The aspirations expressed by youth reflect a forward-looking entrepreneurial vision extending beyond subsistence. Most participants envisioned scaling into commercial farming, acquiring modern equipment, and employing others, suggesting readiness for structural transformation if enabling conditions are provided. Similar to [Njeru \(2017\)](#) and [Sumberg and Hunt \(2019\)](#), youth in this study articulated agriculture as a future-forward career path, one tied to innovation, leadership, and community upliftment. Aspirations to expand into value addition further underscore entrepreneurial ambition, as reported by [Henning et al. \(2022\)](#). Digital engagement aspirations further highlight how youth are redefining farming identities to include content creation, marketing, and Agri-influencing, consistent with emerging studies on digital agripreneurship ([FAO and WFF, 2024](#)). Although only a small proportion of participants aspired to access export markets, this nevertheless reflects ambition to link rural production to global value chains, a finding that suggests a latent but significant potential if policy support is aligned. At the same time, nearly one-third indicated conditional optimism, noting they would consider leaving agriculture if institutional neglect persists. This echoes [Sumberg et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Geza et al. \(2021\)](#), who caution that youth enthusiasm is fragile in the absence of systemic reforms. Thus, while aspirations demonstrate entrepreneurial readiness, sustainability depends substantially on tailored, youth-inclusive and context-sensitive policy interventions.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the motivational factors, enablers and barriers, lived entrepreneurial experiences and aspirations shaping youth participation in agriculture in the OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape Province. Findings revealed that youth are motivated by passion, cultural identity, and the pursuit of autonomy rather than by necessity alone. They display resilience and innovation, creating diverse agripreneurial models that range from subsistence to digital-driven enterprises. Their narratives reveal not only a determination to redefine farming as entrepreneurial and future

oriented, but also a strong potential to contribute to national priorities such as youth employment creation and food security. While youth possess both the energy and innovative drive to revitalise and transform agriculture, their narratives reveal that they remain structurally excluded from the very systems meant to enable their participation. Systemic barriers such as land insecurity, financial exclusion, weak extension, poor infrastructure, and gendered inequities continue to undermine their aspirations. Unless addressed, these barriers risk eroding youth motivation and weakening the agricultural sector's transformation prospects. The study concludes that aligning agricultural support systems with youth motivations, lived realities, and structural barriers is critical to fostering inclusive and sustainable agripreneurship.

Considering youth in agriculture are not passive beneficiaries but active agents of rural transformation, creating an enabling environment can drive inclusive, innovative, and sustainable agricultural futures in South Africa. Leveraging youth's potential as pioneers of agricultural development requires deliberate youth-centred and gender-sensitive interventions that move beyond short-term projects toward long-term structural reforms. Policy reforms should prioritise flexible financing models tailored to youth with limited collateral, gender-responsive land tenure reforms, and decentralised extension and market access programs that embed mentorship. Strengthening rural infrastructure and digital connectivity would further enable innovation-driven agripreneurship, while embedding youth voices in policy design can ensure that interventions are both relevant and sustainable. If policy frameworks align with the aspirations and lived realities of youth, they can catalyse a new generation of agripreneurs capable of transforming South Africa's rural economy into a dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable sector.

Further research could extend the reflective narrative analysis to other districts or provinces in South Africa, given the heterogeneous nature of youth as a social group characterised by diverse livelihood assets endowment, interests, capabilities and support needs. Future studies might also explore additional themes, such as the influence of migration dynamics on youth agripreneurship pathways, the role of psychological capital in sustaining entrepreneurial motivation, and how climate change shapes adaptive strategies and long-term agricultural engagement.

Data availability statement

The data for this study will only be made available through the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Verbal consent was requested from the respondents prior to filling out the questionnaire.

Author contributions

LeM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. OL: Conceptualization,

Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YZ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LuM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YN: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

LM was employed by SA Canegrowers Association.

The remaining author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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