

Why education is the next big trend in African agriculture

 By [Howard Blight](#)

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Human survival depends on a few things, the most basic being food, water, warmth and rest. When it comes to food, the United Nations estimates that global food production must increase by 70% by the year 2050 to meet world population needs. In September, the latest edition of the annual [United Nations report](#) on world food security and nutrition reported that, after steadily declining for over a decade, global hunger is back on the rise.



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According to the report, hunger affected 815 million people in 2016 (that's 11% of the global population), including 20% of Africa's population, while multiple forms of malnutrition also threatened the health of millions. The report singles out conflict as one of the key drivers behind the issues, but increasingly this is being compounded by climate change issues with droughts or floods, as well as the global economic slowdown playing a significant role in the deterioration of food security and nutrition.

With an estimated 243 million people in Africa going hungry, we need to recognise the changes that are taking place in the agricultural sector and use them to help drive positive change in food security on the continent.

Four key trends require immediate scrutiny: *consolidation, transformation, technology and agri-education*. Importantly, the upscaling of agricultural education is the crystalising requirement to strengthen and contextualise these trends.

Consolidation for growth

The trend towards the consolidation of commercial farming enterprises worldwide has grown in recent years as farmers look to gain from economies of scale, leveraging greater buying power against ever-rising prices of seeds, fertiliser and equipment. The result of this trend is that large farms are becoming even larger as partnerships and joint ventures are formed.

In Africa too, this trend is taking hold amongst big farmers - but it is also emerging among smaller-scale farmers. These small farmers are beginning to pool their resources, making use of one tractor or combine harvester, for example, to work several pieces of land. There's a **cooperative approach** developing and in time we may even see the emergence of an Uber-like tractor service, where a small-scale farmer is given financial assistance to buy a tractor so that he can plough his own field as well as 20 other small fields, and receive payment once the crops are harvested. This simple practice would give farmers who previously had no access to a tractor the ability to plough deeper into their lands and, for the same cost of seeds and fertiliser, improve their yields.

An important impact of consolidation is the effect that this will have on the skills required to manage these larger tracts of land. Different types of qualification and experience will be in demand as better skilled and more knowledgeable farm and section managers are brought on board. For the small farmer too, increased efficiencies will lead to a new learning curve and the need for a growing set of skills.

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An agri-transformation mindset

In Africa, commercial farmers are acknowledging the need for a change in mindset. From the traditional farm owner/farmworker mindset, a new willingness to share information and build skills within the industry is beginning to emerge. The concepts from within Ubuntu, are emerging

To build skills and knowledge, however, requires more than just the will to do so. It also requires access to increased training and education in the various fields of agriculture. There is a need to help smaller farmers to build a greater depth of knowledge about how to deal with pests and diseases, costs and efficiencies, soil and water management and much more. With these skills, small-scale farmers will increase their yields, grow their income and ultimately improve employment and opportunity in the sector.

Interestingly, even the shift towards urbanisation across the world has lent itself to agri-transformation and skills development. Significant growth in urban farming, where every person has the opportunity to sustain themselves through small-scale farming operations on rooftops, in buildings and along pavements, is taking skills-transfer and turning it into income-earning opportunities.

Technology in farming

We know that we need to bring new skills and more young people into the agricultural fold. An ageing farmer population in Africa means that the industry is lacking both modern skills and energetic youths to implement the ability to grow things. Fewer young people are following in the older generations' footsteps, thus are being lured by air-conditioned offices and the city buzz.

Fortunately, agriculture is catching up with modern technology trends. The ability to attract young people back into the industry is becoming increasingly possible as drones are brought in to survey lands, equipment is controlled by the click of a button and farmers get connected and in touch through their many online devices.

The agri-industry needs to build a pipeline of skilled, young people who have both a contextual understanding of technology and a passion for the industry. Technology and the explosion of internet access across Africa are making information and learning accessible to all. For the first time, technology is now enabling students to learn online, gaining access to modern course-work and a host of extraordinary applications that can enhance their skills and learning. Township areas are coming alive with Wi-Fi access, making data cheaper and enabling a flexible work and learning environment.

As these skilled youngsters enter the agri-economy, they will also be better equipped to take farming into the future, using available technology to farm more efficiently and effectively.

The hope then, is that the next great trend in the agri-sector is one of increasing agri-education and skills development. Starting from a low base of the current poor productivity levels in Africa, a rapidly expanding population and a shortage of skilled young people entering the industry, we have an opportunity to significantly increase the prospect of food security on the continent.

ABOUT HOWARD BLIGHT

Howard Blight is the founder of Agricolleges International. Blight has been involved in the development of educational institutions for more than 35 years. He was the founding chairperson of the independent English medium boarding school in Limpopo Province, Stanford Lake College, and the chairman of Unicorn Preparatory School for eight years. Running his own farm near Tzaneen, Limpopo, he is also a horticultural consultant and naturalist.
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