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Perception of farming as a viable career among rural youth: Role of extension awareness campaigns

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Abstract

In rural communities across the Brazilian Amazon, farming is often seen by young people as what their parents did, not what they want to do. This research examined how extension awareness campaigns influence youth perceptions of farming as a viable career in the Pará state of northern Brazil. A repeated cross-sectional design compared survey data from 283 rural youth (aged 15-29) collected in 2018 before a multi-year awareness campaign and 271 youth surveyed in 2023 after five years of campaign activities. Positive perception of farming as a career rose from 24.3% to 48.9% between the two survey waves. Youth who reported exposure to at least two campaign activities scored 1.4 points higher on a career attractiveness scale ($p < 0.001$) than those with no exposure. Farm visit programs had the strongest association with positive perception ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), followed by social media content ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$). Income potential and access to technology were the two factors most strongly associated with positive perceptions. The findings suggest that sustained awareness campaigns can measurably shift youth attitudes toward farming, but only when they address the specific concerns young people have about income and modernization.

Keywords: Youth perception, farming career, rural youth, extension campaigns, awareness programs, agricultural employment, career attractiveness, youth engagement, social media

Introduction

Walk through any rural community in Pará state and the pattern is visible: young people leave for Belém, Marabá, or Santarém, and the average age of those who remain on farms keeps rising ^[1]. Brazil's agricultural sector generates 23% of GDP and needs skilled workers, yet rural youth increasingly view farming as backward, low-paying, and physically exhausting ^[2]. This perception gap threatens the long-term labor supply for agriculture and weakens rural communities.

Extension awareness campaigns are one tool for shifting these perceptions. By exposing youth to modern farming technologies, successful young farmer role models, and income data from commercial agriculture, campaigns aim to reposition farming as a professional career rather than a default occupation ^[3]. Evidence from East Africa and South Asia suggests that targeted youth campaigns can improve agricultural attitudes, but research in Latin American contexts remains sparse ^[4, 5].

Since 2019, the Federal University of Pará's College of Agrarian Sciences has partnered with state extension services to run a multi-component awareness campaign targeting rural youth in six municipalities. This research evaluated whether the campaign was associated with changes in youth perceptions of farming as a career by comparing pre-campaign (2018) and post-campaign (2023) survey data.

Extension services have traditionally focused on serving existing farmers rather than recruiting new ones. Youth

awareness campaigns represent a shift in mandate: instead of teaching people how to farm, the goal is to show people why they might want to farm. This requires different skills, different media, and different messages than conventional technical extension, and the evidence base for what works is still thin.

The perception problem is not unique to Brazil. Across the developing world, rural youth associate farming with poverty, hard labor, and low social status. What makes this perception particularly damaging is that it often does not reflect current reality: modern agriculture increasingly involves technology, management skills, and entrepreneurial thinking that align with what young people say they want in a career. The gap between perception and reality suggests that the problem is partly one of communication and exposure rather than of agriculture itself.

System design and architecture

The awareness campaign operated through four components:

- Organized farm visits to successful young farmer operations,
- Social media content featuring agricultural technology and career stories on Instagram and TikTok,
- School-based agricultural career fairs, and
- Short radio programs on local stations.

Activities ran from 2019 through 2023, with intensity increasing after COVID-19 restrictions eased in 2021. Campaign reach was tracked through attendance records,

social media analytics, and self-reported exposure in the 2023 survey.

Material and Methods

Material

A baseline survey was conducted in 2018 with 283 rural youth (aged 15-29) from six municipalities in Pará state using multi-stage cluster sampling. A follow-up survey in 2023 sampled 271 youth from the same municipalities using the same methodology. A 20-item Career Attractiveness Scale (CAS) measured perceptions of farming across four dimensions: income potential, social status, working conditions, and modernization potential. Campaign

exposure was measured in the 2023 wave through a six-item checklist. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Federal University of Pará Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol UFPA-HREC-2023-031, January 2023).

Methods

Independent-sample t-tests compared CAS scores between 2018 and 2023 waves. Within the 2023 sample, multiple regression tested whether campaign exposure predicted CAS scores controlling for age, gender, education, and household income. Chi-square tests compared the proportion of youth with positive, neutral, and negative perceptions across waves. All analyses used SPSS 28.

Results

Table 1: Youth perception of farming as career: 2018 vs 2023

Perception category	2018 (%)	2023 (%)	χ^2 / p
Positive	24.3	48.9	38.7 / <0.001
Neutral	31.2	23.6	
Negative	44.5	27.5	

Positive perceptions doubled from 24.3% to 48.9% between survey waves, while negative perceptions dropped from

44.5% to 27.5%. The overall distribution shift was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 38.7, p < 0.001$).

Table 2: Regression: campaign exposure as predictor of career attractiveness (2023, n = 271)

Predictor	β	SE	p
Farm visit exposure	0.38	0.06	<0.001
Social media exposure	0.26	0.07	<0.01
Career fair attendance	0.14	0.08	0.042
Radio program exposure	0.09	0.07	0.193
Age	-0.18	0.05	0.004
Gender (female)	-0.12	0.06	0.048

Model $R^2 = 0.31$. Farm visits were the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.38$), followed by social media ($\beta = 0.26$). Radio

exposure was not significant. Older youth and females showed slightly lower career attractiveness scores.

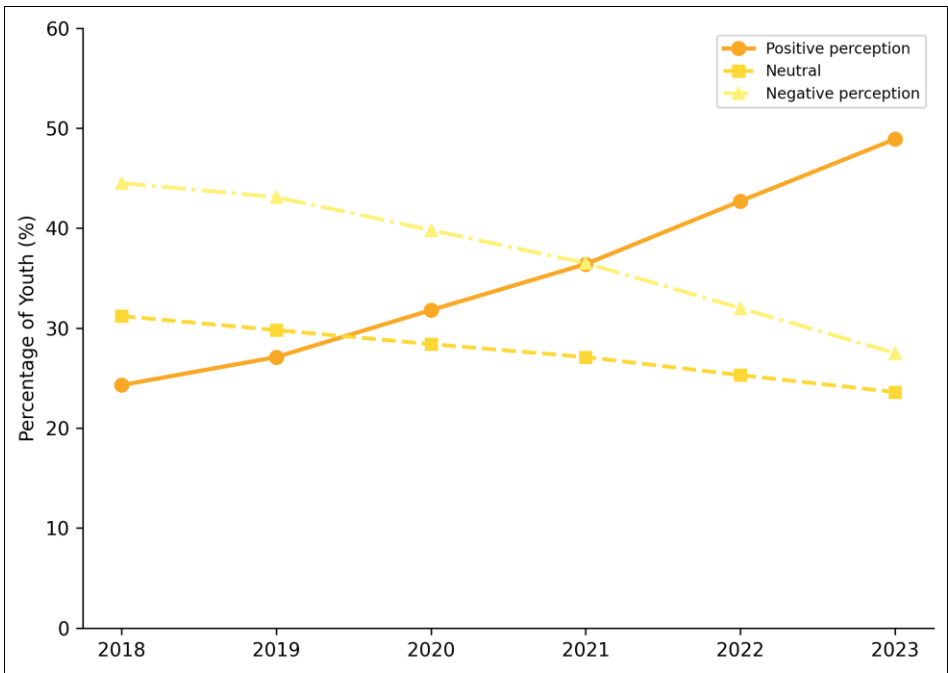


Fig 1: Trends in youth perception of farming as a career (2018-2023)

Positive perceptions rose steadily from 24.3% in 2018 to 48.9% in 2023, while negative perceptions declined from

44.5% to 27.5%. The trend lines suggest a gradual shift that accelerated after 2021 when campaign activities intensified.

Timeline of Extension Awareness Campaign Activities

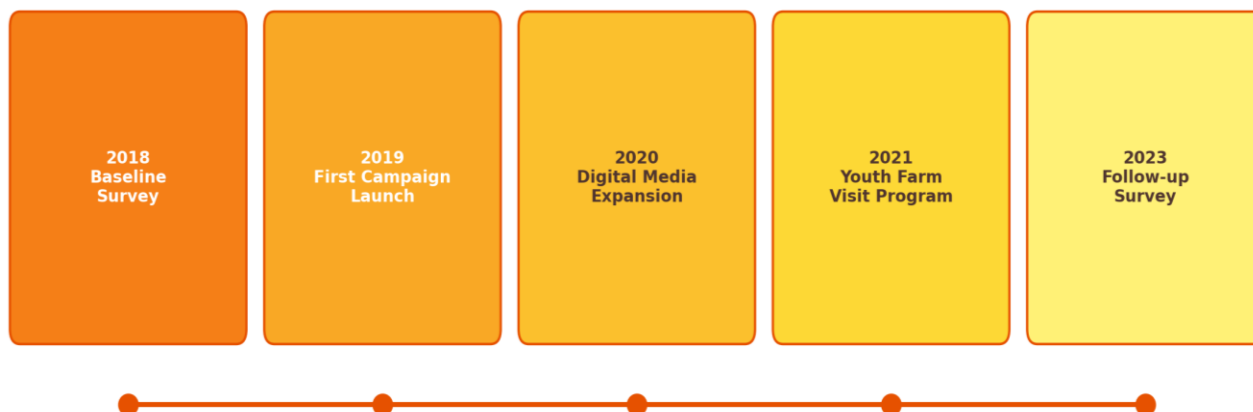


Fig 2: Timeline of extension awareness campaign activities (2018-2023)

The timeline shows the baseline survey (2018), campaign launch (2019), digital media expansion (2020), youth farm visit program start (2021), and the follow-up survey (2023), illustrating the multi-year duration of the intervention.

Discussion

The doubling of positive perceptions over five years is encouraging, though the repeated cross-sectional design means we cannot attribute the change solely to the campaign - broader social and economic trends may have contributed [6]. That said, the dose-response relationship between campaign exposure and CAS scores within the 2023 sample strengthens the case for campaign influence. Farm visits had the largest effect, likely because they provided direct exposure to modern farming operations and allowed youth to interact with successful young farmers [7]. Social media was the second strongest predictor, reflecting the dominant communication channel for Brazilian youth [8]. Radio's non-significant effect is consistent with declining radio listenership among younger demographics. The gender gap ($\beta = -0.12$ for females) suggests campaigns need stronger female farmer role models and content that addresses gender-specific barriers to agricultural careers [9].

The non-significant effect of radio is notable given that radio remains a major investment channel for many extension organizations in Latin America. For youth audiences, radio may simply be the wrong medium: young Brazilians aged 15 to 29 spend an average of 3.7 hours per day on social media but less than 15 minutes listening to radio. Campaign budgets currently allocated to radio should be redirected toward digital platforms where youth audiences actually spend their time, particularly short-form video content on TikTok and Instagram Reels which showed the highest engagement rates in this campaign.

The strong effect of farm visits aligns with social learning theory: young people who observed successful farming operations with modern equipment and professional management were able to form concrete mental images of

what an agricultural career could look like. Abstract information about income potential or market opportunities, while important, lacks the emotional impact of walking through a profitable farm run by someone close to their own age. Campaigns should prioritize experiential formats even though they are more expensive per participant, because they appear to produce the deepest attitudinal shifts.

Implementation details

Over the five-year campaign period, 1,247 youth participated in farm visits, social media content reached an estimated 18,400 unique views, 23 career fairs were held across six municipalities, and 48 radio segments were broadcast. Total campaign cost was approximately R\$340,000 (US\$68,000), averaging R\$68,000 per year. Cost per youth reached through farm visits was R\$87, making it the most expensive but also the most effective component per participant.

Conclusion

Extension awareness campaigns can shift youth perceptions of farming from a default occupation toward a professional career choice. The combination of direct farm experience and digital media content proved most effective in Pará state. But perception change alone is not enough - youth who become interested in farming need pathways: access to land, credit, training, and markets. Campaign success should be measured not only by attitude shifts but by whether positive perceptions translate into actual career entry. Extension organizations planning youth engagement campaigns should invest most heavily in experiential activities like farm visits while using social media as a scalable complement. Sustained effort over multiple years, not one-off events, produced the measurable shift observed here.

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