Abstract. Despite the aggressive growth of agricultural sector and rigorous agricultural development programme in Sarawak, the number of youths participating in the industry is fairly low. Most farmers are often said to be left behind in achieving success in the economic development in Sarawak, while most of them are only interested to farm for their livelihood and less concerned about the economic development. Thus, this research study examined the factors behind the slow progression of agropreneurs among the youth in the smallholding plantation entrepreneurship industry. A qualitative data with phenomenological approach was conducted to allow an in-depth understanding and deep emergence with youth farmers as much as possible. Data interviews of 8 semi-structured interviews on a sample youth agropreneurs were conducted in a convenient places as agreed by the participants. Sampling method was done via both purposive and snowball samplings. The current study revealed that the commonly reported problems arose upon different background of youth farmers include high cost of production, market ambiguity, natural problem and government induced factor. All respondents described how these challenges and barriers affecting their development as agropreneurs to succeed in smallholding plantation agropreneurship industry. The result shown will provide useful information for government authority, yield useful insight for agriculture agencies and help to formulate the action plan for the youth development strategies.

Keywords: Agriculture, Sarawak, Agricultural development, Smallholder, Agropreneurship.
present but also in the future who is responsible to shoulder the economic development including agriculture as well as rural sectors. As the matter of fact, many young people are discerning about the type of job they are willing to accept and do. In this perspective, Mohamed Ismail et. al., (2015) stated that many young people think that agriculture is not a vocation to produce successful businessman or entrepreneurs. According to Hunter (2015), farming, forestry, and fishing is menial works that most of young people are not willing to experience, thus these jobs are left to foreigners and older people. Nevertheless, not only that they are being prissy but also demanded a luxurious amount of remuneration although they are still fresh graduates. The decision is mostly made based on their educational level but not solely on their experiences and skills.

Although there are some successful young agropreneurs who proved that agriculture as a profitable industry, the number or percentage involved is still too small (Aidit & Husnizam, 2005). Most of the farmers exiting the industry half-way due to certain constraints such as lack of financial assistant and also unable to find a suitable marketing channel. There are several factors which can affect rural youth participation in agriculture. These factors includes economic factor such as inadequate credit facilities, low farming profit margins and lack of agricultural insurance, initial capital and production inputs (Akpan et. al., 2015). Next, is a social factor when public perception toward farming and parental influence to move out of agriculture and environmental issues including inadequate land, continuous poor harvests, and soil degradation. A study done by Luckey et al., (2013) stated that wrong perception and inadequate exposure of the actual scenario of agricultural-based sectors dictate the participation of youth in Agriculture. Besides, inadequate infrastructure and necessary inputs also hinders youth’s involvement in agricultural and rural development activities (Aphunu & Atoma, 2010)

Government has created many initiatives to bring youth into the international level to overcome the employment issues. Collaboration from private sectors, entrepreneurs, educational institute and donors has been collaborated to provide youth employment. However, Man (2007) stated that majority of youth are hoping that the government and private sector to give their 100 percent commitment and effort to produce intellectual young farmers. The youth also need the government to put more effort in developing agriculture sector in the future besides improve trainers’ capability and knowledge to create effective training program. Therefore, education and training are important to create interest and positive attitude toward agriculture sector as stated by Aphunu and Atoma (2010).

**Method.** This study involved 8 in-depth interviews with youth farmers in Sarawak. Sampling was made using both purposive and snowball sampling. Each interview was qualitatively and manually analyses involving searching recurring themes across a data set. For the purpose of this study, the thematic analysis was driven by a few particular analytic questions. In this case, questions was emphasized on the barriers and problems faced by youth farmers for their farm development. The data was transcribed and translated in understandable manner. The themes identified, coded, and analysed were an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set in the interviews. Themes or patterns within data will be identified in a theoretical or deductive or ‘top down’ way (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis is driven by the researchers’ theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst driven. For the purpose of this study, themes were identified at a latent or interpretative level, an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications often in relation to previous literature. The researchers will identify and examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organises and describes data set in detail. In conclusion, thematic analysis will be utilised because the area of investigation is new and the focus of study is the barriers associating with youth farmers in smallholding plantation crops.

**Results.** During the interviews, issues that impact negatively toward youth development in agricultural entrepreneurship were identified. The aim was to understand the challenges of farmer’s
development along their participation in the industry as well as understanding why there is a lack of youth who are willing to commit in agricultural entrepreneurship, while identifying the gap between a successful entrepreneur and a failure during their involvement in agropreneurship. From the conversation with eight participants, the analysis revealed that the commonly reported problems arose upon different backgrounds of youth farmers which include high production cost, market ambiguity, natural problems, and government-induced factors.

**Theme 1: High Production Cost.** Most of the participants remarked that financial problems would be the most prevalent issue when it comes to working in an agricultural business environment. Mr. Douglas stated that at the early stage it was difficult to manage his profitability since there was a lot of cost he had to cover when he first established his company:

*So far, it is difficult to bring forward all the income that I have gained, since the company is still new, it is difficult since I have a lot of debt and besides, some other companies have not paid me -* Douglas

Adi also thought that high start up cost became the reason why most farmers gave up on farming:

*...to start up a land for farming required high cost, we have to rent a machine, it required for about rm100 to rent a machine for an hour!...* - Adi

The study indicated that high cost of production or start up cost became the reason why most youth farmers are not eager to expand their land size as well as continuing to embark in agricultural business. High cost incurred especially on input cost such as fertilizers, pesticides, cost of road construction and others. As such, Marlia and Clive agreed that they required subsidies and incentives in order to cover up the cost of buying fertilizers and pesticides.

**Theme 2: Market Ambiguity.** Another barrier arose was due to the market ambiguity. This refers to the uncertainty of the price and market demand of commodity product. Regardless of the size of their farm or the even the type of crops they are cultivating, most participants found that the uncertainty of the price and demand of commodity crops limit their decision-making and operation:

*it’s been years, I have to stop tapping the tree(rubber), since rubber has no more value, If I cut down the all the tree, there is nothing going to change, so, for the time being, I focused on other things, if the price goes up, I will start harvest the latex’’* - Bonny

Similarly, another participant acknowledged the same problem that he has to face along his journey:

*For example, currently, rubber did not have much value, nobody want to tap the tree anymore, the production (yield) in Sarawak is declining’’* - Douglas

On the other hand, one participant stated that it is challenging to meet with the demand since the demand of the agricultural produce was always ambiguous:

*The demand for the pineapple production were ambiguous, there will be the time, when people demand it for the feast, they wanted the bigger fruits (grade A)....* - Sarkawi

He also added that there is a time when he is unable to provide enough supply of his production especially during the peak season:

*During the festive season, wedding feast for example, there is a lot of demand, since recently, people get married almost every week, so I have to supply it every week too. Sarawak is very big, so when we are known as a pineapple supplier, people will consistently come to get the fruits here, for M36 variety, there is the time where the supply is not sufficient, sometimes, the fruits have yet to ripe but the demand is still there...’’* - Sarkawi

**Theme 3: Natural Problem.** Since agricultural sector is very vulnerable to some factors such as climate change, pest and diseases outbreak, and other natural and environment problems, it is difficult for the farmer to ensure and predict the sustainability of their production as well as their profitability. As such, half of the participants agreed that natural problem became one of their main concern since they have suffer from lost in term of profitability and reduced in production. Amongst them, Clive described how it affects his farm operation by saying “For the insect’s infestation, worm infestation is one of the main problems and when it attacks the crops, the yield will be reduced and affected”.
Another two participants acknowledged that natural problem can be a main facet that affects their yield: 

*The main problem that I have encounter in my farm is insect’s infestation. Insect’s pest such as worm attacks the paddy during flowering stage. Besides, strong wind also became a problem in my farm. When the paddy was stroke by the strong wind, it blown away all the grains, leaving the empty grains behind. Moreover, rat’s infestation can also be seen as it attack on the paddy’s stalk and broke it...* - Tyler 

*I just started to plant the paddy this year, this is because, last year was flooding season and my paddy field was flooded by the water* - Alice 

However, Sarkawi described that pest and diseases were not his main concern for as long as there is a proper management at the early stage of planting, besides, he also highlighted that the animal pest such as rats only affect a small amount from his total production, which, only affecting a small amount his profitability and yield 

**Theme 4: Government-induced factor.** Another factor lead difficulties to of development was the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of government or agricultural bodies to provide enough assistance and intensive training to develop these youth farmers. This issue was more well-known especially for those smallholders who are living in the villages:

*Government and agricultural agencies should provide more opportunities. Okay, they did provided opportunities but the information regarding to the development programmes and activities did not reach the farmers .it is not intensive enough to attract more people to participate in agricultural activities”*- Adi 

One of the participant lamented as below when she was asked about whether she has received or apply any assistance from any of the agricultural bodies: 

*I did asked for incentives, however, I have yet to hear any news regarding to my application”*- Marlia 

*So far I have not received any training from any of the agricultural agencies includes department of agriculture itself since I haven’t heard any news or development programs that they have offered”* - Clive 

A recurrent theme in the interaction with the participant has indeed indicated that the ineffective and inefficiency of agricultural bodies or agencies had cause the inability of youth farmers to expand their agricultural activities. 

**Discussion.** As expected, high cost of production is the main concern for most farmers whether during their first stage of participation or even when they wanted to expand their farm size. This is due to the inability to seek for appropriate funding, debt during their first establishment or even cost incurred to buy input such as fertilizers and pesticides. This is in line with Afande et al., (2015) stated that most young people do not have access to funding for agricultural purposes. Although all of them were categorised under smallholding farmers, however, the problem arise due to cost are varies. As such, farmers who are doing farming in rural area often have problem to buy input. This might due to their access to the supplier to get the fertilizers and pesticides in town. On the other hand, those smallholders who have larger land size are more prone to debts. 

Next is the problem arises due to the market ambiguity. The volatility of the price of commodity crops especially for those who involved in plantation crops such as oil palm, rubber, pepper, and paddy causing threat to farmer’s development as well as affecting their decision-making along their participation in the industry. This is parallel with Alom et al., (2012) where apart from increasing production, search and opportunity cost, price volatility also accelerates risk and uncertainty. Moreover, another similar risk is difficult to enter the market due to strong competition and price-squeeze apart from the high demand at the market and they were also affected by the price variability of the agricultural produce. Looking at the nature of agricultural production, it is difficult to foresee and estimate the exact amount of cash flow since the production is ambiguous. 

Another challenges faced by farmers is problem arises due to natural or biological occurrence such as natural disaster and pest infestation. Based on the data interview, farmers who
are cultivating paddy were most likely to be impacted by flooding which, of course reducing their grain’s production as well as disturbing their income earning. This is supported by Sivakumar (2005), where natural disaster resulted in loss in potential production due to disturbed flow of goods and services, loss of production capacities, and increased of cost of production.

According to Abdul Raman et al., (2014), young agropreneurs who has fewer experiences often seek for advisors or training expert that could give them appropriate guidance on knowledge about farming practices to manage their business. In this perspective, inefficient government assistance leads to underdevelopment of farmers since they were left ‘clueless’ whenever they seek for help. Most of the participants who are located at the rural area complained that although they have asked for incentive but some agencies are not responded to their request. However, the participants explained that the agencies will only be there to assist them to initiates the farming only for short period. Thus, the government should pay more attention on those youth who are mostly located n rural area. A leader should be appointed to integrate the farm produce of one locality in order to increase the living standard of the farmers. Intensive programmes from extension agent should be available to enhance the knowledge of farmers of villagers regarding to where, when and what to seek of look for to start a farm.

Conclusion. Based on the findings of this study, it is found that several conclusions can be made; the commonly reported problems reported are related to high financing cost especially during the first stage of land operation. Other than that, market ambiguity and natural problems are also top of the lists. A post-harvest related activity is also an emerging sub-theme to be found and lastly is due to ineffectiveness of government assistance. These barriers create doubts in the mind of many youth to give full commitment especially in plantation industry, hence, despite of the rigorous growth of the needs of agricultural produces, most youth are still hesitate to involve in plantation industry.

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