



**NEVER TOO YOUNG
FOR LEADERSHIP IN
FOOD SYSTEM
TRANSFORMATION.**

**NEVER TOO OLD
TO LEARN HOW
TO SUPPORT IT.**

Key messages

- We know in our bones that youth must be part of the solution to the key crises facing our planet – but why and how exactly? Here we provide government policymakers, businesspeople, civil society members and development partners in the food systems space with some ways to advance meaningful youth engagement.
- 2025 could emerge as a ‘Year for Youth’ with conferences like the Africa Food Systems Forum placing youth engagement front and centre by positioning youth as leaders of food system transformation and encouraging co-creation and co-implementation.
- We recommend three actions for stakeholders to adopt to improve their contribution to meaningful youth engagement across their work and on the global stage: institutionalize engagement, investment, and metrics.

Young people are the key to speeding up food system transformation

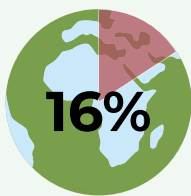
With just five years left to achieve the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the current state of global food systems is alarming, and the rate of transformation is too slow. Young people are a large and growing segment of the population. They have to live with the consequences of food system decisions longer than anyone else on the planet, yet they are routinely denied access to decision making processes. This is wrong on two counts. First, this exclusion of youth is effectively an oppression of youth. Is oppression too strong a term? No, it is not. Oppression arises from power imbalances, it is characterized by unfairness and damage caused to the excluded party by decisions taken, exclusion that is systemic or prolonged, and diminished agency. The current situation has features of all 4 of these dimensions.

If the first “wrong” is intrinsic, the second is instrumental. Simply put, young people bring new and valuable things to the table. They see into the future because there is more of it to see from their perspective. They are unencumbered by baggage about hierarchy, institutions and face, so they can collaborate across silos. They ask tougher questions because they are less defensive about the decisions that led to the current situation. They influence in ways that most people over 35 cannot understand. Their idealism has not been blunted by careerism. In short, young people have the right to try to accelerate food system transformation and they have the tools that no one else has to actually do it. We desperately need their skills and insights to speed up food system transformation.

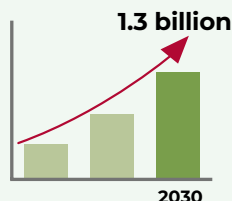
Box A Youth – a large and growing segment of global population



There were approximately **1.2 billion** individuals aged **15 to 24 years** in 2015.



This accounts for **16%** of global population.



By **2030**, the youth population is projected to grow to nearly **1.3 billion**.



60% of Africa's population is under **25 years** old.



This is the **largest** generation of youth in history.

Source: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>



Thanks to much hard work, mostly by young people, things are slowly improving. Youth are increasingly being recognized for their changemaking work and potential. But we have just begun to scratch the surface.

Youth movements like Act4Food¹, the World Food Forum (WFF)², the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network³, and YOUNGO⁴ have amplified the voices of young people and seen them claiming their seats at influential tables such as the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Youth have not only demanded a seat at the table, but they have created their own tables with additional chairs. Still the road points uphill, and its way is not smooth. Youth continue to face barriers such as lack of funding, tokenism, and limited access to knowledge and data.

1 See <https://actions4food.org/en/>

2 See <https://www.world-food-forum.org/>

3 See <https://scalingupnutrition.org/>

4 See <https://youngoclimate.org/>

Youth cannot do it alone; it is a shared responsibility to transform food systems

Meaningful engagement means it is no longer enough to merely invite youth to the conversation. Invitation simply perpetuates power imbalances. We need governments, businesses and other stakeholders to establish formal avenues of youth engagement in food systems policy decision-making spaces. The sooner the better.



Stephanie Sargeant, Global Youth Campaigns Coordinator for Act4Food, advocating for meaningful youth engagement in food systems policy spaces at the UN Food Systems Stocktake +4 (UNFSS+4), July 2025.

This year, a wave of momentum is building to take youth engagement to the next, more institutionalized level. The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Kampala Summit in January 2025 saw African governments commit to measuring and advancing youth engagement in food systems. A Youth Preparatory Conference in Bangkok was organized ahead of the UNFSS+4 Stock take that took place in July 2025. The Africa Food Systems Forum in Dakar, Senegal (August-Sept 2025) is themed 'Africa's Youth: Leading Collaboration, Innovation, and Implementation of Agri-Food Systems Transformation'.

We believe these are not symbolic events – they are calls to action to all of us.

So how do we make the jump from intent to implement? Below are three recommendations.

1. Institutionalize engagement of youth representation

Youth engagement is merely symbolic until youth are formally integrated into food systems governance. At a national level, this could involve establishing youth advisory boards across ministries or assigning for formal roles in national coordination bodies.

Box B Case Study: Bangladesh



Nearly one-third of the population is under **15** years old.



Youth are actively reshaping food systems at local levels and are recognized as agents of change.



Youth representation in national bodies such as the Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC) and District or Upazila Nutrition Coordination Committees (DNCCs/UNCCs) is integral to strengthen meaningful youth engagement and integrate youth voices.

For more concrete, context-specific recommendations, GAIN will be publishing three policy briefs focusing on Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Tanzania.

When preparing for global engagements, as you draft your concept notes for conference panels or side events, remember to ensure there is a youth representative, not only in the planning and organization stages, but also with a speaking role. Youth are not simply beneficiaries, but partners and co-creators.

At GAIN, we embody this principle through our youth-centred programmes operating locally in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Tanzania, and globally through Act4Food, a youth-led and initiated movement for food systems transformation that demands youth seats at decision-making tables.

Act4Food exemplifies globally aligned, locally grounded action. Currently working with young leaders across 27 countries, as well as 23 alumni leaders, it combines online and offline platforms to help ensure consistent and effective cooperation to align with local objectives, and to come together as a collective across countries. Act4Food's current collective actions centre on school nutrition, indigenous food, and the role of multi-national corporations in transforming food systems.

To learn more about key mechanisms for meaningfully involving young people in food systems decision making, take a look at GAIN's recent Discussion Paper 'The Unsung Heroes Of Global Food System Transformation'⁵.

2. Investment

Invest, invest, invest! Investing in youth is an investment in future prosperity with multiple tangible and intangible benefits.

Leaders must intentionally strengthen the capacity of youth to: (1) mobilise resources to support their vision; (2) facilitate inclusive processes that develop to effective actions; and (3) implement those actions. For example, we need direct investment to support job creation, viable and interesting employment opportunities in food systems. By working with institutions like Citi Foundation and Mastercard Foundation, we can address unemployment and underemployment, by pushing for inclusive markets and strong institutional coordination to support youth and women. In addition, (4) we must generate and share knowledge. GAIN's recent Food Systems Dashboard (FSD) competition and the webinar to profile the work of the winners, integrated the young winners of the 2024 FSD Competition and experts in their field to explore how the winners' projects may be replicated or scaled⁶.

3. Metrics

How do we know if young people are being included, are making change and are influencing others? GAIN recently published a [Working Paper](#) "Measuring Youth Engagement in Policy Processes"⁷. Following a systematic search, the paper reveals diverse approaches, including quantitative indicators as well as qualitative frameworks. It is vital that we know how engaged youth are, how easy it is for them to engage and what difference that engagement makes.



Youth Leaders in Tanzania with Minister of Agriculture Hon. Hussein Bashe for the Ministry of Agriculture Budget Hearing session, May 2025.

Reflect and act

We know that young people have boundless potential to transform food systems – but not if their hands are tied by systems that exclude them. For those of us with power to influence, it is our responsibility to do everything we can to promote and accelerate young people's agency – locally, nationally and globally. We call on governments, policymakers, businesses and civil society groups to take a step back, to reflect, and refine your ways of meaningfully engaging with youth.

We look forward to seeing you at the Africa Food System Forum and other global and national moments on the road to 2030, as you confidently engage with young people to accelerate food system transformation. The late great Kofi Annan said it best "you are never too young to lead, and never too old to learn". **Take it from us!**

⁵ GAIN [Discussion Paper n°19](#): The Unsung Heroes Of Global Food System Transformation

⁶ See <https://www.gainhealth.org/events/country-food-systems-dashboard-journey-webinar>

⁷ GAIN [Working Paper](#); Measuring youth engagement in policy processes, 2025.

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