

POSITIONING YOUTH AS LEADERS OF FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE YOUTH VOICES PROJECT IN ARUSHA, TANZANIA

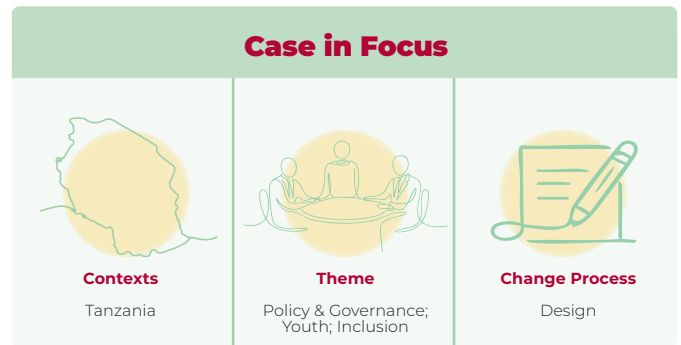


Young people are an influential force in food systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, yet their perspectives remain underrepresented in policy and decision-making. This case study explores how youth leadership programmes can strengthen young people's understanding of food systems, develop their leadership and communication skills, and enable them to engage meaningfully with stakeholders across multiple levels. It illustrates how experiential learning, peer collaboration, and opportunities for collective action allow youth to influence decision-making, advocate for inclusive reforms, and contribute to sustainable transformation. The study highlights how positioning young people as active participants in food systems can gain traction and considers how such approaches could be scaled and institutionalised to ensure that youth perspectives are systematically integrated into food system initiatives.

Motivation

Globally, over 1.2 billion young people aged 15–24 years engage with food systems as producers, consumers, and innovators, with more than 80% living in low- and middle-income countries. Despite their potential to drive innovation and resilience, youth remain underrepresented in policy and decision-making processes. Youth leadership programmes offer critical pathways to address this gap. By combining experiential learning, peer collaboration, and engagement with policymakers, these programmes build leadership, advocacy, and systems-thinking skills, preparing young people to shape agendas and influence decisions.

When linked with collective action, such initiatives allow youth not only to develop individual capacities but also to mobilise sustained pressure for institutional change, co-lead initiatives, and hold policy-makers accountable. This case study explores how a youth leadership initiative in Tanzania shaped young people's food systems knowledge, skills, and ability to lead food systems transformation.



Case Study Context

In this case study, youth leadership in food systems transformation refers to the meaningful participation and influence of young people in shaping decisions, policies, and practices that affect how food is produced, distributed, and consumed within their communities. The study focuses on the Youth Voices project in Arusha, Tanzania, an initiative designed to strengthen young people's agency, representation, and engagement with food-system stakeholders at local and national levels.



The case study is based on data collected between October 2024 and February 2025 from Youth Voices project participants. A total of 30 participants completed an online survey, and 10 were purposively selected for key informant interviews (KIIs). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated, and thematically analysed, and findings were complemented by descriptive statistics from the survey data to provide a comprehensive understanding of how youth leaders perceive their roles, how their perspectives were integrated into decision-making processes, and what capacities and opportunities enable them to contribute to food systems transformation.

This case study was developed as part of the 'Exemplars of Food System Change' project of the Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which seeks to document examples of food system transformation in action and explore what enables and holds back change. You can access the full report for this case study at <https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.67>, and all the case studies here: <https://www.gainhealth.org/exemplars>

Igniting Youth Leadership through Food Systems Thinking

A food systems approach entails collaborative thinking and action, recognising the interconnections among actors, processes, and outcomes across food systems. The Youth Voices project embedded these principles, guiding participants to develop a holistic understanding of food systems while engaging in policy advocacy and grassroots initiatives. This helped to strengthen their understanding of their own role in food systems, build their leadership capacity, and foster strategic partnerships with key food systems stakeholders. Interviewees pointed out that their understanding of food systems expanded considerably, with over half (57%) reporting enhanced understanding of the interconnected stages of food systems, including production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. Prior to the project, participants' knowledge was often limited or narrowly focused on agricultural production:



I have now understood the in-depth meaning and activities of food systems. Now I understand it's from the farm, to processing, distribution, consumption and even food waste.



This enhanced understanding reflects the development of systems thinking, with young people also recognising their role in influencing these systems. Two-thirds of participants reported that the project helped them understand how they can make a difference in food systems. This helped change their self-perception, leading them to view themselves as active change agents for food systems transformation within their communities:



The youth leadership programme is indeed a transformative experience; it has enabled me to understand what food systems really is, how can I be part of everything taking place in food systems and the role I have as a young person, how I can contribute to influencing food systems and the changes I can make.



Developing Leadership Identity from Within

Youth leaders can draw on their personal backgrounds and lived experiences to shape their leadership practice and understand their role within the broader community context. The Youth Voices project sparked a profound transformation in this leadership identity, enabling participants to demonstrate their capacity for proposing solutions to local food systems challenges. As participants interacted with other food systems stakeholders, they developed both the confidence and practical skills to assert their perspectives and influence community-level decisions. This growing self-efficacy was closely linked to enhanced communication skills, enabling youth leaders to express ideas more effectively and participate confidently in discussions with policy makers:



I have become more confident; I believe that I can do it. I am able to speak in public and express myself.



The results align with literature on youth leadership, which emphasises the importance of creating opportunities for young people to believe in themselves and develop the skills needed to lead the process of change within their respective contexts.

Enhancing Youth Leadership Through Peer-to-Peer Engagement

Youth leadership thrives in a collaborative environment that engages diverse actors to achieve shared goals. The Youth Voices project highlighted the importance of peer support in shaping leadership identity and sustaining involvement in food systems transformation. By encouraging interactions among participants and local food systems stakeholders, youth leaders expanded their networks, exchanged knowledge, and gained practical insights, which strengthened their confidence and ability to meaningfully contribute to local food systems initiatives. Peer-to-peer connections enabled youth leaders to learn from each other's experiences and build a network of youth leaders in food systems:



I got a chance to meet other youths who are involved in food systems. It also gave me an opportunity to learn from other youths and build a network. I have met youths who are doing incredible things within this space, and I have been inspired. We have become a family.



These interactions cultivated a sense of solidarity and belonging, which not only supported individual leadership development but also reinforced a shared commitment to addressing food systems issues in their communities.

Integrating Leadership Knowledge and skills into Action

Youth leaders strengthened their understanding of food systems and the structures that underpin them, positioning them to influence local food systems effectively and implement change at both community and policy levels. The Youth Voices project equipped young people with knowledge, skills, and an ability to lead collective action that contributed to achieving national food systems goals. By leading collective action campaigns in their communities, youth leaders were able to advocate for inclusive food policies and influence behaviours and decision-making processes. Interviewees reported that the project equipped them with essential skills that enhanced their leadership abilities:



This programme has educated us on how a leader should be within society. There are many challenges, and we were taught how to overcome them. We were taught how to communicate with society, how as youths we can reach our community and how to talk to them. We were also taught how to convince others and who to engage with so that your objective is met—for example, cultural leaders or religious leaders.



These experiences illustrate how structured leadership programmes can create opportunities for experiential learning, which not only builds skills but also sustains community involvement, promotes accountability, and reinforces leadership capacity beyond formal training.



Strengthening Youth Leadership for Food Systems Transformation amid Structural Constraints

Positioning young people as effective actors in food systems transformation requires not only developing their individual capacities but also addressing structural conditions that shape their agency. The Youth Voices project demonstrated that experiential learning combined with strategic connection with stakeholders enables youth to translate leadership knowledge into tangible action. Through collective action campaigns, participants established relationships with local leaders and food systems actors, gaining access to technical advisory support, potential financial support, and enhanced social capital. Strategic engagement with peers and decision-makers also strengthened their leadership identity, enhanced confidence, and built credibility in local governance spaces.

Nonetheless, structural barriers constrained the scope and sustainability of youth-led action. At the individual level, limited prior technical experience in food systems sometimes reduced their legitimacy and delayed collaborative support, highlighting the need for stakeholders working with youth to acknowledge this experience gap and provide sustained technical support throughout the leadership development process. At the institutional level, bureaucratic procedures and unclear authorisation protocols created delays, underscoring the importance of transparent engagement frameworks and systematic guidance to navigate governance processes. At the community level, the volunteer nature of the leadership programme occasionally conflicted with community expectations, as some community members anticipated financial or material incentives for participation. These challenges were further compounded by insufficient financial and infrastructural resources, limiting the implementation of planned activities and constraining the broader impact of youth-led interventions.



BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO CHANGE

ENABLERS

The influence of youth leaders in advancing food systems transformation in Tanzania was facilitated by:

- *Experiential learning that linked food system thinking with practical action*
- *Support and engagement with local communities*
- *Peer-to-peer interactions that fostered learning, solidarity, and confidence*
- *Opportunities to engage with decision-makers and stakeholders*
- *Acquisition of practical skills, including communication, advocacy, and project management.*

BARRIERS

Barriers that limited its influence included:

- *Perceived lack of technical expertise*
- *Bureaucratic procedures and unclear authorisation protocols*
- *Misalignment between community expectations and project objectives*
- *Insufficient financial resources*
- *Lack of right tools, facilities, and equipment*

Conclusion

Youth leadership programmes can shape more inclusive food systems by positioning young people as active agents of change. This case study demonstrated that experiential learning, peer collaboration, and stakeholder engagement enabled participants in the Youth Voices Project in Tanzania to adopt a food systems perspective and apply it in practice. Through these processes, young people developed leadership, communication, and advocacy skills, built relationships with decision-makers, and contributed to local initiatives addressing food systems challenges. These experiences shifted both skills and self-perception, positioning youth not only as beneficiaries but as contributors to shaping policy and practice. However, structural constraints—limited technical expertise, bureaucratic procedures, unclear authorisation requirements, community expectations for financial incentives, and resource limitations—restricted the scale and sustainability of youth-led action. The findings suggest that beyond formal training, youth leadership programmes require ongoing mentorship, coaching, institutional support, and adequate resources to strengthen agency, enhance credibility with stakeholders, and sustain engagement in food systems processes.



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Resources:

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