

BEYOND TOKENISM

MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN BANGLADESH'S FOOD SYSTEMS



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The photograph on the cover page shows a group of Youth Voices project participants. All photographs were taken with consent for use in publications.

SUMMARY

Youth participation is increasingly recognised as essential for transforming food systems, yet many young people remain underrepresented in formal decision-making, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. In Bangladesh, recent policy momentum and growing youth mobilisation have created new spaces for engagement, yet how these developments translate into meaningful influence over planning and policy processes in practice remains unclear.

This qualitative case study explored how youth engage in Bangladesh's food system policy development through 27 semi-structured interviews with youth leaders and policymakers. Youth participants were purposively selected from GAIN's Food System Youth Leadership initiative while policymakers were selected based on their roles in nutrition, food systems policy, and youth development. Data were analysed thematically using hybrid deductive-inductive approach.

Participants described increasing opportunities for dialogue and collaboration through training programmes, consultation meetings, and youth networks. Although being invited into policy discussions did not guarantee real influence, many viewed these opportunities as an important starting point toward more meaningful engagement. Mentorship, leadership development, and supportive networks enabled participation, while limited speaking time, reliance on existing connections, and evolving power relations shaped how youth contributions were experienced.

Youth engagement in Bangladesh's food system governance is becoming more visible but remains uneven in its influence on decision-making. Strengthening sustained participation pathways, trust between generations, and clearer mechanisms for collaboration may help move youth engagement beyond symbolic inclusion suggesting that increasing access represents an important foundation for more meaningful youth participation in food system governance.

KEY MESSAGES

- Youth participation in food system policy in Bangladesh is expanding, with more opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.
- Although being invited into policy discussions does not guarantee real influence, participants viewed these opportunities as an important starting point toward more meaningful engagement.
- Leadership training, mentorship, and supportive networks help young people engage more confidently with policymakers.
- Access to policy spaces often depends on existing connections or structured platforms.
- Broader shifts in youth visibility through recent youth-led civic engagement in Bangladesh appears to be creating more opportunities for youth participation in policy discussions and processes.
- Strengthening trust, clearer participation pathways, and sustained collaboration between youth and policymakers may support more inclusive food system decision-making.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The global food system faces increasing pressures from climate change, the rising burden of non-communicable diseases and widening inequities in access to nutritious food (1,2). Over one billion young people globally are affected by these challenges and have the potential to play a key role in driving food system transformation (3,4). As a result, the inclusion of youth voices in policy processes is now widely recognised as essential for achieving sustainable and equitable food systems. Youth bring lived experience, creativity, and innovative thinking that can strengthen food systems policy development and help connect community realities to decision-making processes (5,6). However, despite growing global attention, young people remain under-represented in decision-making, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (4,7).

Evidence suggests that youth participation is expanding through consultations, advocacy, and public campaigns. However, these forms of engagements often remain short-term and do not always translate into meaningful influence over policy decisions (7). Youth engagement often remains consultative with limited influence on final decisions, highlighting the gap between participation and actual decision-making power (4). Without structured inclusion mechanisms, youth engagement risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation provides a useful framework for distinguishing meaningful youth engagement from tokenistic involvement, emphasising progression from consultation towards youth-led action and shared decision-making with adults. Evidence from studies applying the framework indicates that it provides a practical approach for assessing the quality of youth engagement and guiding programmes towards more meaningful youth engagement (8,9).

Global initiatives such as the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization's Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems report highlight the importance of collaboration and intergenerational partnership as critical levers for transformation (10,11). These developments reflect a broader shift from viewing youth as beneficiaries to recognising them as contributors to policy development.

In Bangladesh, these global dynamics take on particular importance. As one of the countries with the youngest population, efforts to transform Bangladesh's food system require embedding youth perspectives within policy and decision-making processes. The National Youth Policy 2017 formally recognises young people as central to national development and calls for their leadership development as well as their participation in decision-making platforms (12). Similarly, Bangladesh's National Pathway to the UNFSS (2025) identifies youth engagement as a strategic priority for accelerating sustainable food system transformation and aligning national priorities with global commitments (13).

Despite these policy commitments, structural barriers continue to limit meaningful youth participation. National analyses highlight that while Bangladesh has made progress in youth education and employment, young people still face challenges in accessing policy processes and influencing decisions (14,15). These challenges include limited access to participation forums, lack of structured pathways for engagement and insufficient recognition of youth contributions within decision making processes (15). These challenges are also shaped by difference in power, experience and institutional roles which influence how youth contributions are perceived and valued within policy processes. In addition, meaningful participation often depends on whether young people have access to training, mentorship and supportive networks that enable them to navigate policy environments

effectively (16–19). These findings underscore the importance of establishing mechanisms that channel youth perspectives into policy and decision-making processes, including those related to food systems.

These structural gaps have become more apparent in the context of recent political development in Bangladesh, where youth mobilisation, particularly through student-led movements, has gained visibility and contributed to national discussions on policy and decision-making (20,21). While this mobilisation has demonstrated the collective agency and political power of young people, it has also raised expectations among youth themselves, policymakers, and wider society for their inclusion in formal decision-making processes. However, the extent to which this political momentum has translated into sustained, institutionalised youth engagement within formal policy domains, including food systems, remains unclear.

In response to these challenges, several initiatives have emerged to strengthen youth engagement in Bangladesh. One such initiative is the Youth Voices project implemented by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), as part of its broader Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which seeks to promote more meaningful youth engagement in food system policy processes. The project combines multiple components including leadership and policy-oriented training, support for youth-led collective action and opportunities for engagement with policymakers at local and national levels. These components are structured around four interlinked pillars; community building, capacity building, collective action, and engagement with policy culture particularly within policy and decision-making processes which are designed to progressively strengthen youth participation at the policy spaces (22). Through these components the initiative aims to strengthen youth capacity, improve their access to policy discussions and create pathway for more sustained engagement. By linking training with practical experience and engagement opportunities, the project seeks to move beyond one-off consultations towards more continuous and meaningful youth participation in policy processes (22).

Alongside such programme-based approaches, broader platforms such as the SUN Youth Network Bangladesh was launched as part of the global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement that also aims to build youth leadership, strengthen advocacy, and connect youth initiatives with national policy priorities (23). Supported by GAIN and government agencies including Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Food, and Ministry of Youth and Sports, the SUN Youth Network provides platforms for youth participation, promotes collaboration, and facilitates dialogues between youth and policymakers.

Engagement may also vary across levels with local-level interactions often providing more immediate opportunities for dialogues and collaboration while national-level engagement remains more formal and structured. While such initiatives provide more important entry points, questions remain about how youth engagement is experienced in practice.

There is limited evidence on how youth and policymakers perceive youth's roles and their access to policy spaces, what factors enable or constrain meaningful collaboration between youth and policymakers as well as how engagement translates into influence within policy processes.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring how youth leaders and policymakers engage on food system policy in Bangladesh. It examines the perceptions, opportunities, and barriers that shape meaningful collaboration through four key questions:

- 1. What is the current state of engagement between youth leaders and policymakers in food system policy and decision-making processes?*
- 2. How do youth leaders and policymakers perceive youth's access to, their participation, and their level of influence within food system policy spaces, including both physical access to participation forums and involvement in decision-making processes?*
- 3. What factors enable and hinder meaningful dialogue and collaboration between youth leaders and policymakers in food system decision-making processes?*
- 4. What opportunities exist to strengthen mechanisms for youth engagement in policy processes to enhance youth voice, inclusion, and influence in food system transformation efforts?*

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to understanding how youth–policy interfaces can be institutionalised in Bangladesh's food-governance landscape and provides insights for strengthening inclusive food system transformation globally.

BOX 1. THIS CASE AS AN 'EXEMPLAR' OF FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

As detailed in Annex 1, this case study, beyond its own merits, can be seen as one approach to trying to achieve a more inclusive process of food systems transformation—which is expected to result in a broader set of issues being addressed, leading to more holistic and inclusive outcomes.

It thus offers some potentially generalisable insights about fostering transformative change. Specifically, it demonstrates how youth can be supported to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions. It also highlights some of the challenges in this, such as limited speaking time, reliance on existing networks for access, and uncertainty about how their contributions influenced final decisions.

Generalisable lessons from this case, along with those from a wide set of case studies on different topics and in diverse settings, will be used to inform broader understanding of food system transformation as part of the 'Exemplars of Food System Transformation' initiative.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY DESIGN AND SETTING

This qualitative case study, part of the Exemplars of Food System Transformation (Box 1, Annex 1), explored how youth leaders and policymakers engage in food system governance processes in Bangladesh. The study was conducted under the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)'s Nourishing Food Pathways programme as part of the Youth Voices project. The case study sought to document experiences, perceptions, and mechanisms of youth–policy engagement within Bangladesh's evolving food system landscape.

SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

A purposive sampling strategy was applied for this case study. Initially, with the support of the project coordinator of GAIN's Youth Voices project in Bangladesh, a list of participants who attended GAIN's youth leadership training on food system transformation was identified, and a list of national and local policymakers involved in health, nutrition, food governance, and youth development was also identified. A total of 27 individual interviews were conducted. These included 19 youth from three cohorts of GAIN's youth leadership training and 8 policymakers from relevant ministries and agencies involved in youth development, nutrition, and food governance. This composition enabled triangulation between perspectives of youth actors and institutional decision-makers.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected in four phases between June 2024 and December 2025. Semi-structured discussion guides were designed in alignment with the study's research questions and informed by programme documents and consultations with GAIN's programme team. Due to participants' geographic dispersion, most interviews with youth leaders were conducted online. In contrast, seven of the eight interviews with policymakers were conducted face-to-face, enabling in-depth engagement. Among these, two interviews were held outside Dhaka during a field visit undertaken by the researcher in collaboration with GAIN's Youth Voices programme team. One policymaker interview was conducted online due to scheduling constraints. The in-person interviews with the policymakers were conducted in collaboration with the local team leading the Youth Voices evaluation Glocolearning. All interviews were conducted in Bangla and audio-recorded with participants' verbal consent. Recordings were translated into English and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

Data were organised and analysed using ATLAS.ti. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (24). A hybrid deductive–inductive strategy guided coding: an initial codebook was developed based on the study objectives and interview guides, which was iteratively refined through team discussions. As analysis progressed, emergent ideas were inductively coded to capture new insights, ensuring that both predefined and participant-driven concepts were represented. Codes were then clustered into broader categories, from which overarching themes were developed to reflect patterns across the data.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board (HML-IRB). All participants were briefed on the purpose and scope of the study

before participation, and verbal informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained using pseudonyms in transcripts and reports. All digital data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis identified that youth engagement in food system policy processes in Bangladesh is evolving, with respondents describing increasing opportunities for interaction though some practical and structural challenges remain. Across interviews, participants reflected on changing attitudes toward youth participation, how youth and policymakers perceive each other's roles, factors that support or limit collaboration, and possible ways to strengthen youth engagement in food system decision-making.

INCREASING YOUTH-POLICY ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement in food system policy dialogues was described as becoming more visible across both local and national platforms. Respondents highlighted consultations, youth forums, collective action initiatives, and informal dialogue as common ways youth interacted with policymakers. Policymakers noted a growing openness toward youth participation.

'Currently they are also working as part of the government. The government is listening to them... Earlier, their words may not have been given so much importance by the upper class, but now they are giving importance' (Policymaker 3).

Many emphasised that youth now act not only as participants but also as contributors in policy design and implementation:

'In the past, youth had limited opportunities to participate in decision-making... However, there is now a noticeable shift, with many newly joining and actively engaging in decision-making and other processes' (Policymaker 4).

The consistency and scope of youth participation have also improved. As one policymaker noted, 'Recent youth movements indicate a clear shift... Youth participation in various sectors has increased from both ends there is no doubt about that' (Policymaker 5). What was once symbolic involvement is evolving into substantive engagement in policy processes:

'Previously, youth participation in policy discussions was often tokenistic... However, this has changed. Youth are now actively involved, and efforts are being made to strengthen their participation' (Policymaker 5).

Overall, respondents agreed that youth engagement in Bangladesh's policy landscape is expanding, supported by more inclusive institutional practices and positive government attitudes. Youth leaders' experiences also supported these observations. Several described attending consultation meeting and contributing to discussions related to food systems and youth engagement.

Participants reported increased opportunities to attend consultation meetings with policymakers at both local and national level, particularly on topics related to food systems and nutrition. These included consultations on Plan of Action for National Pathway Document on Food Systems Transformation, Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit country commitments, climate change-related consultations including Conference of

Parties (COP), national policy-making processes and future planning for the SUN Youth Network in Bangladesh. The youth were also involved in training module development for Food System Youth Leadership Training which is led by Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) of Ministry of Food, in collaboration with Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Department of Youth of Ministry of Youth and Sports, GAIN and SUN Youth Network Bangladesh. 'Yes, till now I have attended three meetings with Food Planning and Monitoring Unit of Bangladesh Ministry of Food... consultation meeting on training module, UN Food System Summit action areas and future activity plan on Sun Youth network.' (Phase 4, Cohort 3, YL 1, M)

For some participants, these opportunities provided their first exposure to policymaking processes. As one participant stated,

'I have had the privileged to attend two meetings, one is for UNFSS and another is for NAP at DAE in Rajshahi. Through this, I have first time experienced what steps are followed to develop a policy and what are the things are considered in developing a policy.' (Phase 4, Cohort 3, YL 3, M)

These experiences suggest that youth engagement is expanding through organised platforms, although participation continues to depend on how existing government systems and policy processes operate.

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH ACCESS TO POLICY SPACE, ENGAGEMENT AND INFLUENCE

Respondents described the relationship between youth and policymakers as generally supportive, though shaped by differences in experience and responsibilities. Policymakers highlighted youth creativity and new ideas while emphasising the need for guidance within policy processes.

'Young people may lack work experience... However, with proper guidelines and advice, they can perform their tasks with great efficiency' (Policymakers 1 & 2 (interviewed jointly))

'Youth can think out of the box... We can support them from our experience so that nothing harmful happens, and we are very optimistic about the youth' (Policymaker 3)

Policymakers also described today's youth as more mature, proactive, and influential than previous generations.

'Unlike previous generations... today's youth have become sources of support and inspiration for their families. Their influence and capacity-building potential can catalyse positive changes in food policies and practices' (Policymaker 3).

Youth participants also reflected on how engagement requires preparation and effective communication. Several explained that presenting reliable information helped them communicate more confidently with policymakers.

'When I am trying to influence someone, I must give them reliable information... I must make his understand in a way that he takes my talking positively.' (Phase 1, Cohort 1, YL 10, M)

Accessibility was often described in practical terms. Youth explained that access to policy discussions sometimes depended on networks, introductions from teachers or organisations, or participation in youth platforms. While some youth described

policymakers as increasingly approachable, they also noted that formal procedures and limited meeting time could shape how much they were able to contribute.

PERCEIVED ENABLERS OF MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION

Respondents identified several enabling factors that participants described as supporting effective youth-policy collaboration, including training opportunities, mentorship, supportive networks, and structured platforms that bring youth and policymakers together.

Continuous learning and exposure were viewed as important for meaningful participation. Interviewees frequently highlighted the role of training programmes in strengthening youth knowledge and confidence:

‘Organisations like GAIN are conducting various programs to strengthen youth capacity. Expanding such initiatives and familiarising them with policy-making processes will empower them to participate more actively’ (Policymaker 4).

Training programmes were described as transformative, cultivating both leadership and a sense of responsibility among youth.

‘Capacity building is absolutely necessary... After the training, many developed a strong sense of commitment and urgency to take action. This sense of urgency is what we call leadership’ (Policymaker 5).

Youth participants similarly explained how the Food System Youth Leadership initiative strengthened their ability to engage policymakers.

‘I knew little about policy... after attending the FoSYL training I learned practically how to conduct policy influencing effectively and properly talk to the policymakers backed with evidence from the community level.’ (Phase 4, Cohort 3, YL 1, M)

Participants also described how NGOs, youth networks, and experienced policymakers helped youth connect with decision makers and understand how policy discussions work.

‘NGOs and prominent personalities should build a liaison between these two parties... selecting young people from the local level, and then they will talk to ministers. This process is called inclusion; it's a wonderful method’ (Policymaker 6).

Policymakers also emphasised that with proper mentoring, youth can become credible co-actors in policy formulation and execution.

‘If we engage and mentor youth effectively, they can do outstanding work... They can also advocate within their families, promoting leadership in food and nutrition’ (Policymaker 5).

Institutional platforms such as the SUN Youth Network and Bangladesh Youth Mock Parliament were also described as important spaces where youth could connect with policymakers and take part in consultations.

‘FPMU are reaching to the youth through Youth Mock Parliament network, SUN Youth Network for consultations...’ (Phase 4, Cohort 3, YL 1, M).

Besides, participants described that regular interaction with local administrative actors supported their ability to engage in food system activities. These relationships created opportunities for ongoing dialogue, feedback, and responsiveness enabling youth to

connect their community level initiatives with local decision-making processes. For example, one participant described maintaining regular communication with local authorities to discuss community challenges and ongoing initiatives to address them: 'Every month I sit with the local administration and update them about my community action campaign... they take necessary steps to address challenges.' (Phase 4, Cohort 3, YL 1, M).

Overall, participants' experiences suggest that training, mentorship, and supportive networks help create conditions where youth and policymakers can engage more effectively. While these enabling factors strengthened opportunities for participation, participants also reflected on challenges that influenced how meaningful that engagement could be in practice.

BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

While many participants described improving access to policy discussions, they also highlighted challenges that shaped how meaningful or influential that engagement could be. Some youth shared that being invited to consultations or dialogue spaces did not always translate into having strong voice in decision-making.

Some youth participants felt that although opportunities to attend discussions had increased, their contributions were not always reflected in final outcomes. While policymakers increasingly recognise the importance of youth participation, several youth respondents described persistent tokenism. Engagement is often rhetorical rather than substantive, with youth invited to discussions but excluded from core decision-making.

'Youth engagement in policymaking is mostly confined to the theoretical stage... Policymakers often say that 'youth are the future,' but by saying this, they keep postponing real engagement' (Phase 1, Cohort 1, YL 2).

Even when youth were able to attend consultations, practical constraints influenced how much they could contribute. Limited speaking time during meetings was described as a common challenge. As one youth noted, 'Policymakers give us very little time to talk... the challenge is how we can express our thoughts effectively' (Phase 1, Cohort 1, YL 3, M).

Participants also described that engagement with policymakers often depended on access to existing networks, introductions, or organised platforms for interaction. Many explained that, without a recognised point of contact or a formal mechanism for engagement, opportunities to communicate with policymakers were limited. Participants therefore emphasised the importance of structured and inclusive mechanisms that could provide clear and accessible pathways for youth to engage in policy discussions rather than relying on informal connections. As one participant stated, 'If we do not have a point of contact, we are not able to communicate... we need a platform for it.' (Phase 1, Cohort 1, YL 8, F).

Bureaucratic rigidity and the absence of formal participatory mechanisms further limit their involvement:

'There may be barriers to youth participation in policy discussions, as some might not take them seriously or consider them less experienced. However, with proper guidance, they can contribute even more effectively than others' (Policymakers 1 & 2).

Collectively, these findings indicate that institutional practices, cultural expectations, and communication constraints continue to shape how youth engagement unfolds, often

limiting opportunities for young people to move from consultation toward meaningful involvement in decision-making.

OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN YOUTH-POLICY ENGAGEMENT

Looking ahead, respondents outlined several strategies to strengthen youth participation in food system governance. Suggested approaches included expanding training programmes, increasing mentorship opportunities, and strengthening youth networks that connect local initiatives with national policy discussions. Participants also emphasised the need to institutionalise meaningful youth participation through mechanisms such as co-creation models, policy mentorship programs, and representation at different administrative levels from local councils to national and global platforms:

'Investing in youth policy participation is similar to investing in public health... Empowering youth in food and nutrition leadership will have long-term benefits for the country'
(Policymaker 5).

Participants emphasised that sustained support for youth leadership and inclusive engagement mechanisms could help ensure that youth voices remain integrated into food system policy processes over time.

Overall, participants' experiences suggest that youth engagement in food system policy is becoming more visible and structured, supported by training and networks, while the depth and consistency of youth influence continue to depend on how participation unfolds within existing policy processes.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how youth leaders and policymakers in Bangladesh engage on food system issues, exploring perceptions, enabling factors, and challenges shaping meaningful collaboration. The findings suggest a gradual shift toward greater recognition of the value of youth consultation and dialogue. However, although youth participation has become more visible and structured, participants' experiences indicate that limited formal pathways and existing social norms continue to shape how influential youth engagement can be in decision-making processes.

EVOLVING STATE OF YOUTH IN POLICY ENGAGEMENT

The increasing participation of youth in food system policy processes in Bangladesh reflects a broader global shift toward greater inclusion of young people in policy discussions (25). At the national level, this trend is reinforced by recent developments in which youth voices have become more visible in public discussions and civic engagement. In particular, recent youth-led mobilisation in Bangladesh has been widely noted for its scale and political significance including its role in shaping national debates and policy discussions (21). This has contributed to greater recognition of young people as active participants in public and policy processes, which may partly explain the growing openness among policymakers toward youth engagement observed in this study.

Policymakers in this study viewed youth as credible contributors to food and nutrition discussions, reflecting evolving narratives around youth leadership both nationally and globally. Opportunities have expanded for Bangladeshi youth to be involved in various high-level processes related to food systems related processes, such as the UN Food Systems Summit, Bangladesh's Nutrition for Growth (N4G) commitment-generating process, and the climate related dialogues such as UNFCCC Conference of Parties (25). In

many of these spaces, youth engagement has largely taken the form of consultations, dialogues, and opportunities to share perspectives with policymakers and stakeholders.

These developments also reflect broader global shifts in governance where youth are increasingly recognised as important stakeholders in addressing challenges related to food systems, climate change, nutrition, and sustainability. International policy platforms have also emphasised participatory and multi-stakeholder approaches that encourage the inclusion of young people in policy discussions and decision-making processes reflecting wider recognition of youth as important actors in sustainable development (26). Within food systems discussions, this became particularly visible during the UNFSS, where young people participated through national and independent dialogues, youth constituencies, and global consultation platforms focused on food systems transformation (27). Similar forms of youth engagement have also been seen within global climate processes such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where youth constituencies and youth-led climate movements have become increasingly visible in advocacy and negotiation spaces (28). In nutrition-related initiatives, platforms linked to nutrition programme have similarly promoted youth engagement through youth networks, leadership initiatives, consultations, and multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms (29). These developments reflect a broader international shift toward recognising youth not only as beneficiaries of policy but also as contributors to policy dialogue, advocacy, and collective action related to sustainable development and food system transformation.

PERCEPTIONS OF POWER DYNAMICS IN YOUTH IN POLICY ENGAGEMENT

While youth leaders in this study perceived policymakers as increasingly open and approachable, the relationship remained shaped by differences in experience, institutional roles and decision-making authority. Policymakers value youth innovation, enthusiasm, and new perspectives, but they often stressed the need for guidance suggesting that youth participation still needs to be guided by adult experience and oversight (30). Similar findings by Huambachano et al. (31) emphasise the importance of mentorship, intergenerational trust, and supporting relationships in enabling more equitable collaboration between youth and adults.

Youth participants also recognised that meaningful engagement requires more than simply being invited into policy spaces. They described the need for preparation, clear communication, and reliable information in order to contribute confidently to discussions with policymakers. They also highlighted the need for sustained learning opportunities and clearer pathways through which their contributions could influence policy decisions. In addition, access to policy space is not always straightforward, as participation often depends on personal networks, organisational connections or involvement in youth platforms.

These findings suggest that while opportunities for dialogue are expanding, participation does not always translate into influence over decisions. Young people may be increasingly invited to participate but the extent of their contribution remain shaped by formal procedures, limited meeting time, informal networks, and the authority of adult decision makers. These dynamics reflect broader debates in the literature suggesting that even when young people are included in discussions, the underlying power structures may still shape whose voices influence decisions (32). Overall, the findings reveal that expanding access to dialogue does not automatically redistribute decision-making authority. Genuine youth inclusion therefore requires more than an open invitation. It requires clear and

sustained institutional pathways through which youth contributions are recognised, meaningfully considered, and able to inform policy outcomes.

ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Training opportunities, mentorship, and supportive networks emerged as important factors shaping youth policy collaboration. These findings align with previous research highlighting the dual importance of skills development and supportive social networks in fostering youth empowerment (19,25,31). Leadership training, exposure visits, and policy-literacy programmes have proven effective in translating youth enthusiasm into more structured policy engagement (19). Notably, these elements reflect the core design of the Youth Voices project, which intentionally integrated capacity building, networking, collective action, and opportunities for engagement with policymakers. The consistency between the project's design and participants' experience suggests that combining these components may help create more meaningful and sustained pathways for youth participation in food system governance. Besides, beyond individual capacity, recent political developments have also highlighted the collective agency of young people. The 2024 student-led protests in Bangladesh showcased the significant capacity of young people to influence national policy and challenge long-standing governance structures (20). This increased visibility and legitimacy of youth leadership has important implications for food system policy processes as youth have become more recognised in political spaces and their contributions to food system transformation efforts have similarly gained importance. These evolving dynamics serve as an enabler for more meaningful youth participation in shaping food policies, engaging in food system dialogues, and advancing sustainability and equity agendas.

However, at the same time, the study highlights how engagement is influenced by practical and structural realities. Youth described challenges related to limited speaking time, reliance on existing networks for access, and uncertainty about how their contributions influenced final decisions. These experiences align with research showing that young people are often included in consultation processes but may have limited influence over final policy decisions (33). Furthermore, structural and sociocultural factors highlighted in South Asian governance contexts shape how youth participation is interpreted and valued (14). These findings suggest that enabling factors and constraints often exist together shaping youth engagement by influencing both access to policy spaces and the extent their influence within decision-making processes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

The evidence from this study suggests that strengthening youth engagement requires moving beyond occasional or one-off participation towards more structured and sustained forms of involvement in policy processes. While opportunities for dialogue and consultations are increasingly available, many young people in this study remained uncertain about whether and how their contributions influenced final decision-making processes. Similar patterns have been observed globally across broader youth participation literature, where young people are increasingly engaged through consultation and participatory initiatives but are not consistently integrated into formal decision-making processes (4,34,35). This study revealed that meaningful participation requires institutionalised mechanisms that provide young people with clear and continuous opportunities to contribute to policy development.

However, institutionalising youth participation is only one part of the solution. Formal structures such as youth advisory councils, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination and clearly defined participation pathways can improve continuity and increase opportunities for youth contributions to inform policy decisions (13,16). Yet participants in this study also described challenges related to confidence, communication skills, policy literacy, and understanding how policy process's function. These findings suggest that creating opportunities for participation must be accompanied by sustained investment in youth leadership development, advocacy skills, and experiential learning to enable young people effectively (16–19).

The Youth Voices project implemented by GAIN reflects one example of this integrated approach by combining capacity building, support for collective action, and opportunities for youth to engage directly with policymakers and contribute to policy discussions (22). Participant's experiences suggest that these complementary components helped strengthen both their confidence and their ability to participate in policy discussions, reinforcing the importance of combining institutional opportunities with investment in youth capacity.

Building on these foundations, collaboration between youth and policymakers should be strengthened through more structured and continuous forms of engagement, including joint planning processes, transparent feedback mechanisms, and greater clarity about how youth contributions influence decisions. Such mechanisms can strengthen accountability while reinforcing young people's trust in participation processes. At the same time, these opportunities must remain inclusive. Particular attention should be given to ensuring the meaningful participation of young people from rural, indigenous, and low-income communities whose perspectives are often under-represented. Diverse participation has been shown to improve both the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy processes (36,37).

In Bangladesh, several policy documents including the National Food Systems Pathway, the Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition, and the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy recognise the importance of inclusive approaches and create entry points for youth engagement (13,38,39). However, these documents do not yet define formal roles or operational mechanisms for youth participation. This contrasts with Bangladesh's National Youth Policy, which explicitly positions young people as partners in achieving development goals including in agriculture and food security (12). Translating these commitments into practice will require embedding youth representatives within national and sub-national decision-making bodies, strengthening institutional coordination, and continuing to invest in youth leadership and policy engagement capacity (25).

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalised to all youth–policy interactions in Bangladesh or other settings. The analysis reflects the perspectives of a limited group of youth leaders and policymakers actively engaged in food system governance, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences, particularly those of marginalised or rural youth. Data were derived primarily from interviews, introducing the possibility of social desirability or recall bias. Participants may have emphasised achievements or under-reported challenges to align with institutional expectations. Document review was used to support the findings, but the study primarily captures interview-based perspectives. Future research could expand this work by following youth engagement over time or combining different research approaches.

Geographical and institutional representation was also constrained by the location of active youth networks, potentially limiting insights from regions or groups that engage informally or outside structured programmes. In addition, this study reflects a particular moment in time and does not assess how youth participation evolves into sustained influence or policy change. Finally, while the paper's discussion situates the findings within broader national developments that have increased the visibility of youth in public domain, the study did not directly examine political movements or wider sociopolitical dynamics. Future research could explore how these broader contextual factors interact with formal policy engagement over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how emerging relationships between youth and policymakers shape participation in food system governance in Bangladesh and may inform similar efforts in comparable contexts.

CONCLUSION

Youth-policy engagement in Bangladesh's food system governance is becoming more visible, with growing recognition of the role young people can play in policy discussions. Participants in this study described positive shifts in attitudes toward youth leadership and increasing opportunities for dialogue. Although being invited into policy spaces does not guarantee real influence, many viewed these opportunities as an important starting point toward more meaningful and sustained engagement. These findings suggest that strengthening youth participation will likely involve creating clearer and more consistent ways for young people to engage, investing in leadership and policy learning opportunities, and building trust between leaders and policymakers.

For youth engagement to drive food system transformation, Bangladesh must move beyond consultation and build institutional frameworks that formalise participation, invest in youth capacity, and track policy influence through transparent monitoring. Meaningful youth engagement should be seen not as symbolic but as a strategic investment fostering ongoing collaboration across generations, which may help support more inclusive and responsive approaches to food system governance. While this study focuses on Bangladesh, the insights may also be relevant for other low- and middle-income contexts where youth participation is expanding but still evolving. Supporting youth as active partners not only as future leaders but as contributors in the present may help shape more inclusive pathways toward food system transformation.

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ANNEX 1. THIS CASE AS AN 'EXEMPLAR' OF FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

THE EXEMPLARS OF FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

Addressing interlinked challenges related to food systems, such as malnutrition, climate change, and equity in food systems employment, requires integrated approaches that work across all aspects of food systems, as opposed to in sectoral silos. The 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) crystallised widespread agreement on the need for this kind of 'food system transformation' to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and other development goals. However, concrete examples of what food system transformation can look like in practice remain limited, and not much is known about the factors that can foster or inhibit these transformative steps or processes.

The 'Exemplars of Food System Transformation' initiative, part of a multi-donor programme led by GAIN called Nourishing Food Pathways, thus seeks to document case studies of food system transformation in action. By considering individual cases on their own, as well as viewing a diverse set of cases jointly, the initiative seeks to better understand the process of food system transformation, including facilitating factors and how they can be fostered and barriers and how they can be overcome. Through a compendium of examples, as well as generalisable lessons, the work seeks to inform and inspire others seeking to transform food systems.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The overarching research question for the 'Exemplars' is thus: How does food system transformation come about, and what fosters or hinders food system transformation? To answer this overarching question, the initiative is guided by a framework that divides the transformation process into five phases, based on the Kaleidoscope Model for policy change (4), and identifies factors that promote change within each phase (see Figure A1). These factors are primarily drawn from the Kaleidoscope Model, with additional factors drawn from the 'Three I's' framework, social movement theory, the advocacy coalition framework, Baker et al (2018), Cullerton et al (2016), and (on accountability) Garton et al (2022) (5–7).

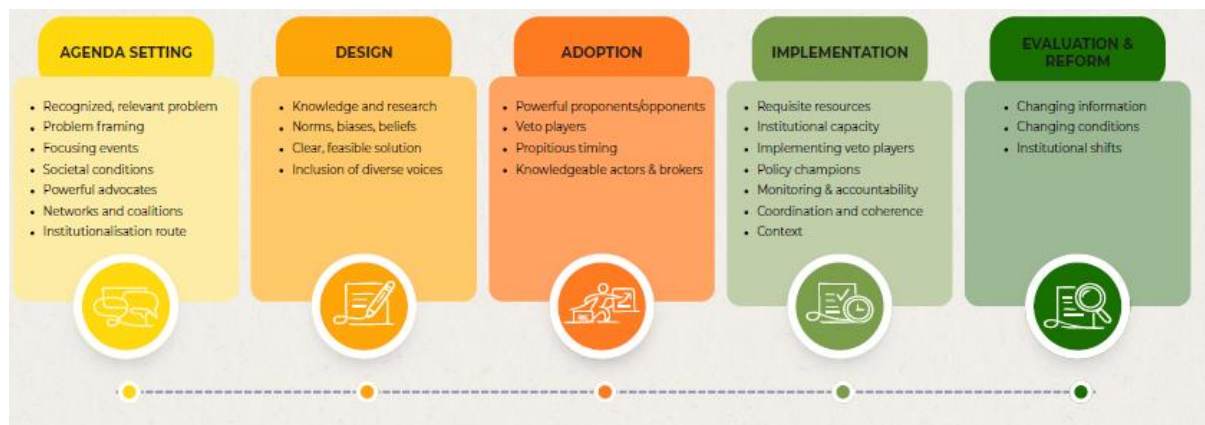


Figure A1. Exemplars Framework for Analysing Change Processes

The exemplars framework specifies a set of research questions that connect to each phase and can be applied to individual cases where relevant. The framework is meant to be a

flexible tool, which can be adopted to context but should provide structure for viewing the cases jointly.

In addition, this process-focused framework can where helpful be embedded in a larger framework that considers not just the studied change or intervention but also the context in which it occurs, the stakeholders with which it interacts, and how it affects food system drivers, activities, and outcomes (Figure A2).

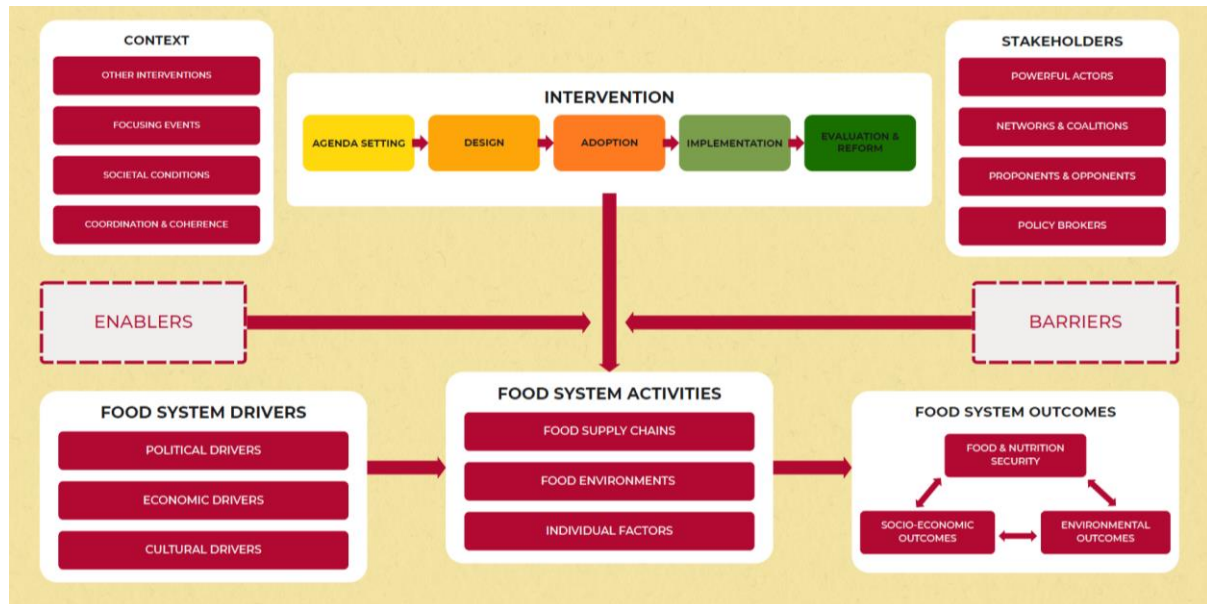


Figure A2. Exemplars Framework for Understand Change Processes within Context

This common framework for identifying research questions and focuses is used to facilitate synthesis and comparison across the studied cases.

How does this case fit within the Exemplars?

This case focuses on a key element of achieving equitable and inclusive food systems transformation: including a diversity of voices in the process. Including diverse voices may make it more likely that the priorities chosen for transformation reflect those of all of society, with no groups excluded or having their interests unrepresented, and that the approaches used to advance those priorities are equitable and inclusive. Inclusion of diverse voices can also make it more likely that those approaches are effective and less likely that they have deleterious unintended consequences, as more considerations are taken into account during the decision-making process. Specifically, this case focuses on inclusion of young people who, as noted in the main text, are a critical population to engage in food systems transformation.

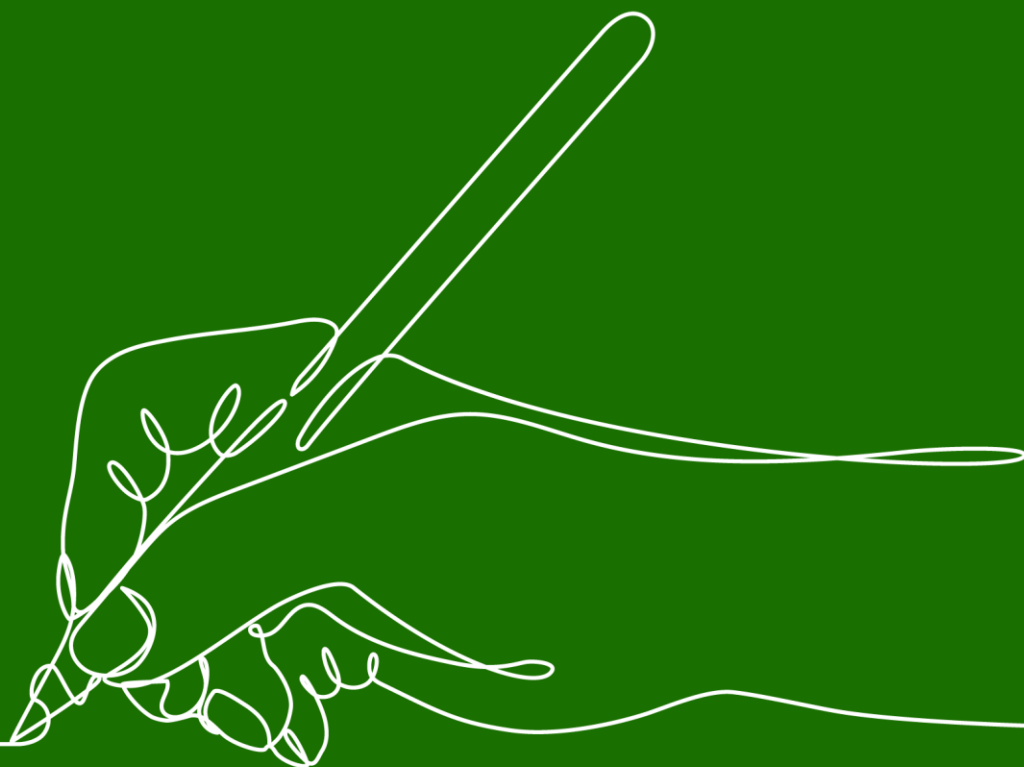
Within the exemplars process framework, this case is an indirect one: while most other cases examine a specific change (e.g., developing a new policy, implementing a programme to address a food systems challenge) and how that change happens (including through the steps shown in Figure A2), this case focuses on the background mechanisms that shape those change processes. Specifically, it considers how young people can be supported to become effective actors in food systems transformation, with their views considered in food systems policy and action. This ties to the 'Inclusion of diverse voices' element in the 'Design' portion of the Exemplars framework (Figure A2), recognising that

inclusion of diverse voices does not happen by accident, but rather requires the people holding those voices to be ready, able, and willing to engage. Where young people are found to *not* be included in a given food systems change process, as is often the case, a lack of youth leadership capacity may often be among the causes.

This case unpacks the complexity that flows into that 'Inclusion of diverse voices' step. It shows how personal transformation and identity shifts may help prepare youth to engage in food system transformation; this highlights how 'diverse voices' reflect individuals and their own personal experiences and capacity, with personal transformation sometimes being a step required before participation in larger, systemic transformation. It describes opportunities for youth to amplify their voices through connection and shared learning, but also how the extent to which their views were voiced or heard could be limited by institutional or socio-cultural barriers. It underlines the importance of practical skills and competencies in enabling youth to make their voices heard. Overall, the case indicates that concerted, deliberate interventions can help to prepare those holding 'diverse voices' to engage in food system transformation – making it more likely that efforts to include them in design can be effective and positive shape transformation.

Empowered youth leaders can go on to affect many other parts of the change process shown in Figure A1: helping to set the agenda for what are considered the relevant food systems challenges and solutions; forming or joining networks and coalitions to advocate for change; serving as advocates for change; and helping to broker knowledge among different types of food system actors. Through all those steps in the change process, their involvement can help ensure any intervention, be it policy-based or programmatic, is more inclusive of the priorities and perspectives of young people. A companion case study (GAIN Working Paper 72) explores how youth can directly affect food systems change through collective action.

Within the broader food system framework (Figure A2), having young people as engaged, active, and effective members of the 'Stakeholders' who are involved can influence the entire course of how food system transformation happens.



ABOUT GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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