

HARNESSING YOUTH POTENTIAL FOR TRANSFORMING PAKISTAN'S FOOD SYSTEMS

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KEY MESSAGES

- Youth are Pakistan's strongest, but most under-utilised asset in its ambition to achieve a nutrition-sensitive, climate resilient, and inclusive food system. Youth-led initiatives are reshaping local food systems and yet, they remain largely absent from formal governance.
- This policy brief introduces a practical framework to enable meaningful youth engagement in food systems policymaking and recommends concrete actions to institutionalise youth participation across national and provincial platforms.
- Institutionalise youth participation in food systems governance through mechanisms such as embedding Pakistan Scaling Up Nutrition Youth Network (SYN) in national and provincial platforms, assigning youth advisory roles and quotas in policy-making bodies, to ensure their participation in key policy processes and implementations.
- Build a pipeline of national youth leaders through Youth Food Policy Fellowship; creating structured links between SYN and youth programmes; and aligning youth-focused programs like *Kamyab Jawan* to food systems priorities to enable the next generation with the necessary skills and networks to lead policy.
- Strengthen coordinated action and dedicated financing by establishing a Youth in Food Systems Working Group, aligning mandates across ministries, developing a clear coordination framework, and allocating dedicated budgets to support sustained youth-led engagement, capacity building and innovation.
- Implement monitoring and accountability mechanisms through youth engagement scorecard and digital feedback tools, to track meaningful participation, measure impact and ensure integration into food system governance.

FROM POTENTIAL TO POLICY ACTION: EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR THE FUTURE OF PAKISTAN'S FOOD SYSTEM

Pakistan's URAAN Plan sets out a bold national vision to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and to become an inclusive, prosperous, and climate-resilient upper-middle-income country by 2035¹. With ten diverse agro-ecological zones², year-round cultivation potential³, and one of the



¹ <https://uraanpakistan.pk>

² [Agro-ecological zones of Pakistan](#)

³ Government of Pakistan. National Pathways for Food Systems Transformation in Pakistan (A Strategic National Pathway Document). Pakistan: Ministry of National Food Security and Research, Government of Pakistan; 2021.

populations⁴, the country is well-positioned to achieve this ambition. Pakistan is self-sufficient in major staple crops and ranks among the world's top producers of wheat, rice, sugarcane, and milk. Yet more than 37 million people remain food insecure whilst rates of micronutrient deficiencies and stunting continue to rise⁵. Persistent challenges of climate vulnerability, natural resource degradation, water stress, post-harvest losses, weak market linkages, and limited dietary diversity continue to undermine national food and nutrition security. At the same time, the agriculture sector, which employs over one-third of the workforce and sustains rural livelihoods, remains underinvested and increasingly exposed to climate-related shocks⁸. Transforming food systems (**Box 1**) to be sustainable, equitable, and resilient is therefore, not only essential but critical to deliver on the national development and economic goals.

Box 1: What are food systems?

Food systems comprise all the people, institutions, places and activities that are involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and ultimately, disposal of food products. Food systems influence diets by determining what kinds of foods are produced, which foods are accessible and peoples' food preferences. They are critical for ensuring food and nutrition security, people's livelihoods, and environmental sustainability^{6,7}.

In response, Pakistan has adopted a comprehensive National Food Systems Transformation Pathway³, informed by nationwide consultations as a part of the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). This pathway outlines a bold and forward-looking agenda to build a food system that is nutrition-sensitive, climate-resilient, inclusive, and better equipped to serve the present and future generations. Its priorities are reflected across national frameworks like the National Food Security Policy⁹, the Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy (PMNS 2018-2025)¹⁰, the Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production for Sustainable Food Systems¹¹ and URAAN Pakistan: 5Es National Economic and Transformational Plan 2024-2029¹.

Young people are central to this transformation. With nearly 64% of the population under the age of 30, and 29% between the ages of 15 to 29, Pakistan holds a demographic dividend that presents both an opportunity and a responsibility. If this opportunity for youth engagement remains underutilised, the country risks leaving millions behind¹. National frameworks including the UNFSS Pathway and URAAN Pakistan recognise youth as essential actors in food system transformation and outline priority actions including capacity strengthening, entrepreneurship development, green jobs, digital literacy and innovation, and access to concessional financing. However, these frameworks treat youth as beneficiaries and fall short in defining a role for youth in decision-making, implementation, or accountability mechanisms. Aligned with this, other national strategies such as National Food Security Policy⁹, PMNS 2018-2025¹⁰, the Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production for Sustainable Food Systems¹¹ and National Adaptation Plan 2023¹² acknowledge the value of youth participation but make no formal provisions within their technical, implementation, or monitoring structures. This gap demonstrates a lack of engagement with the generation that will be most affected by the decisions of today.

As Pakistan shares progress in UNFSS+4 national stocktake and moves towards the implementation of its URAAN Pakistan Plan, this is a timely opportunity to structurally integrate youth engagement in policy processes. This policy brief aims to support stakeholders in identifying clear entry points for action and present a practical framework for enabling meaningful youth participation (**Box 2**) for Pakistan's food systems transformation.

Box 2: What is meaningful youth engagement?

Meaningful youth engagement is the process of recognising, enabling and valuing young people as agents of positive change. It requires actively, intentionally and systemically including them as partners and co-leaders in policymaking, planning, implementation and accountability processes¹³.

4 United Nations. Developing Youth Skills for the Future: A Vision from Pakistan. Available from un.org

5 WWF. Solving the great food puzzle: Pakistan - Food System Type 3; 2024. Available from [Panda.org](https://panda.org)

7 <https://www.foodsystemsdashboard.org/information/about-food-systems#a-food-systems-framework>

8 Government of Pakistan. National Pathways for Food Systems Transformation in Pakistan (A Strategic National Pathway Document). Pakistan: Ministry of National Food Security and Research, Government of Pakistan; 2021

9 Government of Pakistan, Ministry of National Food Security and Research. National Food Security Policy [Internet]. Ministry of National Food Security and Research; 2018. Available from ADB.org

10 Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform and World Food Programme. Pakistan Multi-sectoral Nutrition Strategy (PMNS 2018-2025). Pakistan: Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform; 2018. Available from pc.gov.pk

11 Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Climate Change. Pakistan National Action Plan on SDG 12: Sustainable Consumption and Production; 2017. Available from: [SWITCH-Asia](https://switch-asia.org).

12 Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination. National Adaptation Plan Pakistan 2023; 2023. Available from: [UNFCCC.int](https://unfccc.int)

13 United Nations. Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision making Processes. 2023. Available from: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf>

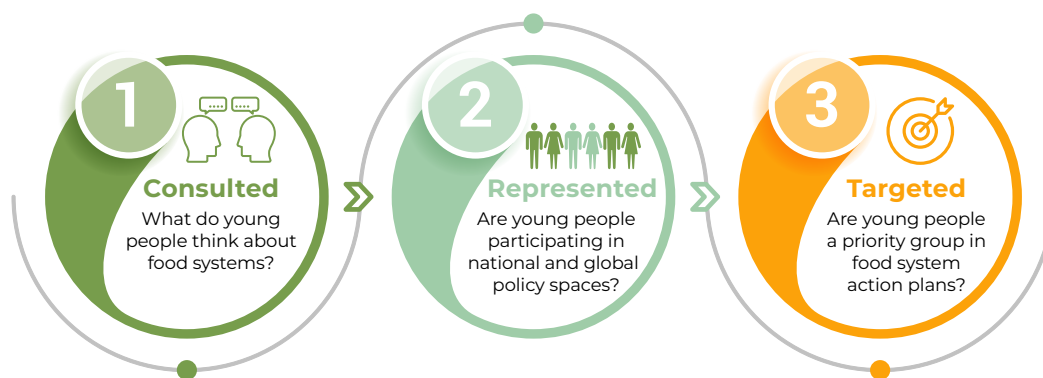
FRAMEWORK FOR MEANINGFULLY ENGAGING YOUTH IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY

Achieving sustainable, equitable, and inclusive food system is not possible without the active participation and leadership of young people. Recognising this, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) has embedded Youth Voices as one of the core pillars in its Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which is supporting the design and delivery of national food systems pathways in 11 countries, including Pakistan. Drawing on established models, Youth Voices had developed a practical and adaptable framework to support governments and other actors in engaging youth actively and effectively in food systems governance¹⁴.

Three progressive levels of youth engagement and practice

The framework depicted below briefly describes three progressive and interconnected levels of engaging young people into decision-making processes¹⁴:

Figure 1: GAIN framework describing levels at which government can engage youth in food systems policy



1. Consulted: Youth are engaged as contributors whose perspectives, needs and priorities help inform food policy. This requires inclusive, participatory mechanisms such as intergenerational dialogues, workshops, and digital platforms that reach youth across geographies, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. To be meaningful, consultations with youth must also include feedback loops between youth, policy makers and other actors to demonstrate how inputs shape decisions.

2. Represented: Youth move beyond consultation to serve as formally represented actors with decision-making roles. This includes participation in governance structures as members of youth advisory groups, technical committees, national councils, and/or multi-stakeholder platforms. To be effective, these roles must be backed by institutional mandates, clear terms of reference and capacity-building support to ensure meaningful influence.

3. Targeted: Youth are recognised as targeted beneficiaries and co-architects of food systems transformation. This includes policies and investments that address youth's immediate needs and long-term aspirations, such as access to land, finance, training, technology and market opportunities, as well as programmes that support innovation, entrepreneurship, and employment in the agri-food sector. Realising this level of engagement requires cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial coordination to ensure that efforts are coherent, scalable, and rooted in long term systems change.

These three levels are cumulative and interdependent, each offering an opportunity to strengthen youth leadership across policymaking, implementation and accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, youth must be consulted, represented and targeted through policy simultaneously to ensure engagement is meaningful, sustained and embedded across food systems governance processes.

WHERE YOUTH FEATURE IN PAKISTAN'S POLICY SPACES

Pakistani youth are driving innovative solutions that are reshaping food systems.¹⁵ They are actively influencing how food is produced, distributed, and consumed through community mobilisation, technology, advocacy, and entrepreneurship. A compelling example is Rizq¹⁶, a youth-led social enterprise addressing food insecurity, food waste, and nutrition inequity. Through its *Rizq Bachao*¹⁷ programme, it has recovered over 2 million kilograms of

14 Parikh P, Khunga M and the GAIN Youth Voices team. The Unsung Heroes of Global Food Systems Transformation: Strengthening Youth Participation in Global and National Decision-Making. Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). Discussion Paper #19. Geneva, Switzerland, 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36072/dp.19>

15 Ajaz Ahmed. Youth and Food Systems Landscape Analysis in Pakistan. Pakistan: Social Protection Research Centre (SPRC) Islamabad, Pakistan; 2024

16 <https://rizq.org>

17 <https://rizq.org/our-work/food-and-nutrition/rizq-bachao/>

surplus food and redistributed more than 6.5 million meals to food-insecure communities. With support from Lahore University of Management Sciences, GAIN and private sector partners such as Cargill, Rizq has established community-owned *RizqBanks*, implemented food safety protocols and professionalised its logistics systems. In 2023, it co-developed the “Disposal of Excess Food Regulation 2019” with Punjab government, setting a legal precedent for food recovery systems. Several other youth-led initiatives such as *Team Pindi*, *Mehak Foundation*, and *Haqooq-e-Insaniyat* are working across diverse regions to provide emergency food relief and improve food security, livelihoods, and environmental outcomes¹⁵.

Rizq¹⁶: Tackling food waste, fighting hunger - from grassroots action to policy reform

Founded by university students in Lahore, Rizq is a youth-led social enterprise tackling hunger, food waste, and nutrition inequity across over 15 cities in Pakistan. Through its growing network of local food banks, mobile meal services, and targeted ration programmes, Rizq has rescued over 2 million kilograms of food, delivered more than 20 million meals and mobilised over 10,000 youth volunteers to support over 800,000 food-insecure individuals.

Rizq’s approach integrates multiple complementary initiatives, some of which are:

- Rizq Bachao rescues surplus food from farms, homes, events, restaurants, and catering services, and redistributes it via a growing network of local food banks.
- Rizq Ration programme provides six-month food assistance to low-income households using poverty scorecards and hunger indices to ensure fair and effective targeting.
- Rizq Khana is a mobile food cart providing nutritious, affordable meals using “pay-what-you-can” model.
- Community programmes like Rizq Daig and Dastarkhwan provide free meals to daily wage workers and vulnerable groups in food insecure areas.
- Rizq also advances climate-resilient food production and rural livelihoods through initiatives such as model farms and sustainable agriculture pilots.

Through Rizq Youth Republic, active in over 30 universities, young people are trained and mobilised for advocacy, community engagement, and policy processes. Rizq’s partnerships with the government, development organisations (such as GAIN, UNICEF) and private sector (like Cargill and PepsiCo) have helped them effectively scale operations and impact. Importantly, Rizq collaborated with government and civil society organisations on Punjab’s “Disposal of Excess Food Regulation 2019”, which was passed by the Punjab Food Authority.

Kamyab Jawan

In parallel, youth-led agri-tech innovations are addressing broader food systems challenges. In Punjab, AgriBot has enabled farmers to reduce water use by 45 percent and fertilizer use by 52 percent, whilst boosting yields by 30 percent and creating 1200 jobs for rural youth. In Singh, Green Warriors trained 1500 young people to convert crop residue to biochar, carbon-rich fertilizer, increasing soil organic carbon by 40 percent and generating \$200,000 in carbon credit revenues. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, CropGenius supported tomato farmers in Swat with AI-driven pest forecasts and natural pesticide recipes, resulting in a 37 percent increase in harvest and a 45 percent reduction in pesticide costs. These initiatives highlight the capacity of young people to tackle interlinked crises of rural youth employment, food insecurity, and environmental degradation¹⁸ and drive inclusive, climate resilient transformation of food systems from the ground up.

Policymakers recognise the potential of youth and are creating opportunities for them. The National Youth Development Framework (NYDF)¹⁹ outlines the Government of Pakistan’s commitment to making policymaking representative and inclusive of youth voices. A National Youth Council (NYC), comprising of young people from all provinces and regions, has been established under the patronage of the Prime Minister. The *Kamyab Jawan* programme, also under the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), focuses on 3 Es: education, employment, and engagement,

18 <https://agrieconomist.com/youth-led-solutions-for-pakistans-challenges>

19 Prime Minister’s Office, Islamic Republic of Pakistan. National Youth Development Framework 2020. Directorate of Electronic Media and Publications, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; 2019. Available from: [Kamyab-jawan](https://www.kamyab-jawan.gov.pk/)

with six aligned initiatives implemented through various relevant ministries, organizations, associations, and development sector partners to help youth realise their potential. At the provincial level, the recent launch of Balochistan's first-ever Youth Policy marks progress²⁰. While youth policies vary in scope, they generally focus on education, employment, skills development, and civic engagement.²¹

The URAAN Pakistan Plan presents a more strategic and integrated approach, positioning youth as central to national transformation. Its Green Revolution 2.0 initiative will train 1,000 young Pakistani agri-graduates in China and enhance domestic youth capacity in agri-food systems. Complementary initiatives like the *Ba-Salahiyat Internship Programme* and Summer Scholars Fellowship offer young people hands-on experience to priority areas such as food, water, and climate resilience.

In parallel, the National Agriculture Education Accreditation Council (NAEAC) under Higher Education Commission (HEC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and GAIN, is integrating food systems into university curricula^{22, 23}. New courses now introduce students to food security, climate adaptation, sustainable value chains, and governance. These are currently being delivered across 12 universities with plans to scale them to all food sciences-related higher education institutions in the country, having a projected reach of over 15,000 students in the next two years. Many institutions also host innovation labs and student-led incubators tackling food systems challenges.



A joint initiative between NAEAC and GAIN also supported over 250 youth representatives from higher education institutions through structured internship opportunities. As a part of this programme, youth were introduced to the Food Systems Dashboard and trained to understand and analyse the complexities of food systems. This initiative aimed to strengthen their data literacy and evidence-based decision-making skills, enabling them to meaningfully contribute to food systems transformation within their local contexts.

Youth have also started to participate in national dialogues and policies. Young people played a visible role in shaping Pakistan's UNFSS 2021 commitments, with over 1,000 youth engaged through the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council (PARC) and partner organisations and institutions. The Pakistan Scaling Up Nutrition Youth Network (SYN), supported by the Planning Commission Nutrition Section, SUN, and GAIN, is focussed on enabling young people to contribute to food and nutrition policies such as the National Multi-sectoral Nutrition Policy, the Provincial Healthy Diet Strategies, and the Food Based Dietary Guidelines for Better Nutrition. This reflects a recognition of youth as contributors to food systems transformation.

Building on this momentum, the launch of consultations for Pakistan's first *National Youth and Adolescent Policy (NYAP)* this year marks a significant step forward. Led by the Prime Minister's Youth Programme, this inclusive process aims to engage 50,000–60,000 young people across 25 cities ensuring their voices shape a policy structured around 4 Es: education, employment, environment, and engagement²⁴. This process signals a shift towards embedding youth perspectives in governance processes. **Despite these promising developments,**

20 [Balochistan cabinet approves youth policy 2024](#)

21 PILDAT. A Study of Youth Policies in Pakistan. Pakistan: Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency PILDAT; 2020

22 [PR No 127 National consultation workshop introduces new courses on food system transformation in Pakistan. 2024](#)

23 [HEC endorses food systems-related courses as regular curricula. 2025](#)

24 [Consultations on National Youth and Adolescent Policy](#)

youth participation in governance still needs strengthening and coordination to ensure their voices are integrated. In addition to engaging youth through consultations and capacity-building initiatives, they should be included in policy co-design, implementation, and oversight. National policies, including the National Food Security Policy (2018) and URAAN Pakistan Plan must include youth as key stakeholders in decision-making processes and structured mechanisms in governance. The NYC and SYN offer promising platforms for sustained structured engagement of young people in policy processes. These platforms should be strengthened with dedicated budgets and formal integration with national food systems governance mechanisms.

At the provincial level, youth policies vary in scope and mechanisms for engagement²¹ and should be updated and aligned with the national priorities on food systems and climate resilience, and supported with budgets and resources to ensure delivery. Youth Affairs Departments or Directorates present in most provinces should be leveraged as mechanisms for structured participation, such as youth councils, advisory groups, or youth-inclusive consultations. The newly approved Balochistan Youth Policy reflects a commitment towards youth and effective implementation will be crucial, particularly in expanding opportunities for rural youth and young women, and in strengthening youth engagement in governance. Linking youth-led innovations and initiatives to policy and investment will be essential to deepen youth participation in transforming local and national food systems.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO ENABLE YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICIES

Pakistan has laid a strong foundation for youth engagement in food systems policy processes. Youth-led initiatives are vibrant and reshaping local food systems. Institutional interest in these initiatives is high, and government commitment growing. This progress in youth engagement in the policy system is promising but not sufficient. If Pakistan is to achieve its SDG targets and the ambitions of the URAAN Pakistan Plan, young people must be integrated into the formal governance structures of the food system, not just as participants but as co-creators and leaders.

To achieve this, Pakistan should implement a focused set of actions across provincial and national levels. The recommendations below build on existing opportunities and offer practical steps for government ministries and partners to take forward:

Create formal roles for youth in food systems governance, embedding their perspectives in decision-making, implementation and accountability.

Institutionalise youth participation by integrating them into the formal governance structures at national and provincial levels, ensuring their contributions are recognised, sustained and linked to accountability.

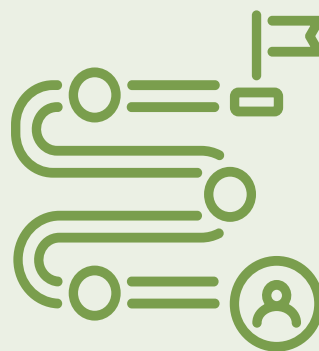
- Formally designate the SYN as the youth platform for food systems within the Planning Commission, to ensure youth perspectives consistently inform policy and are integrated in monitoring and accountability tracking.
- Introduce youth quotas and advisory roles within key government bodies such as the National Food Security Council, Nutrition Steering Committees, review committees, and provincial planning platforms, to ensure youth voices influence programme design, implementation and resource allocations
- Ensure structured youth participation in major policy processes, including the UNFSS+4 stocktake, the National Food Security Policy, and URAAN Plan implementation, so that national commitments and progress tracking is inclusive of youth voices



Build youth capacity and expand pathways from participation to influence, ensuring a pipeline of future leaders.

Transform youth potential into policy influence into impact through leadership programmes and targeted capacity building.

- Launch a “Youth Food Policy Fellowship”, placing young leaders in relevant ministries to gain direct experience in policy discussions and processes to gain hands-on experience in governance mechanisms.
- Align national youth programmes such as the Kamyab Jawan, Start-Up Pakistan with food systems transformation priorities to provide enterprise support and dedicated funding tracks to youth-led initiatives and enterprises.
- Create structured linkages between SYN and national youth programmes such as Kamyab Jawan to efficiently transition youth from skills development to governance roles and responsibilities.
- Deploy technology such as SMS, WhatsApp, and Google Forms to widen access for youth from rural and marginalised communities and improve participation.



Implement monitoring and accountability tracking of youth participation in food systems policy, to ensure inclusivity and meaningful engagement.

- Track engagement by all relevant ministries through a “Youth engagement scorecard” integrated within the national monitoring and evaluation frameworks.
- Leverage digital tools (e.g. SMS, WhatsApp, and Google Forms) to measure youth participation and impact, create feedback loops between youth and authorities; and to track accountability across governance levels.



By structurally embedding youth in governance, building their capacity, resourcing their participation, and tracking accountability, Pakistan can translate its youth potential into sustained leadership for food systems transformation and advancing national commitments.

CALL TO ACTION

Pakistan stands at a crossroads, to leverage its most powerful demographic for inclusive, resilient development or risk leaving that opportunity behind. With over 64% of the population under the age of 30, and 29% between the ages of 15 to 29 youth are Pakistan’s largest demographic group and its strongest asset for driving inclusive, sustainable, and climate-resilient food systems transformation. With strong national frameworks like the URAAN Pakistan Plan and NYDF, the foundations are in place to include youth in food systems government in the country. What is needed now is action to include this demographic for national and economic progress. This requires systematically engaging youth in food systems governance to enable them as current and future leaders.

Institutionalise youth participation within national coordination structures, assigning formal roles in governance bodies and ensuring youth participation in policy reviews and implementation	Invest in youth capacity and participation pathways through food systems fellowships and alignment of national youth programmes with food system priorities.	Strengthen coordination and financing across youth initiatives, ministerial mandates, and multistakeholder platforms to ensure continuity and expand systemic engagement.	Implement monitoring and accountability mechanisms, including youth engagement scorecard and digital feedback tools, to track participation, measure impact and ensure inclusivity.
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This is a defining moment where Pakistan must choose either to institutionalise youth as partners in shaping the systems they will inherit or risk sidelining the very generation whose leadership is essential to achieving national development and economic goals.



QUOTES

“Young people are the driving force for change because of their knack for social networks and a grasp of communication technologies”. **(Expert)**

“There is a need to review school curricula, vocational training programs, and university courses related to agriculture, food technology, nutrition, and environmental sciences to improve the education, awareness, and skills to prepare youth for active participation in food systems.” **(Academic)**

“The leadership should start in early education. She said that health- and environmental-friendly sustainable food production and consumption should be part of the syllabus in schools. She said this is a time-consuming process, however, there is no other way to effectively educate youth about food systems to bring a positive change in Pakistani food and agriculture systems. Furthermore, young people should be trained and incentivized to participate in sustainable agricultural practices, and universities and relevant institutions must introduce such programs to fill the gap in the knowledge and skills of young people. She also believes that there should be media campaigns about health- and environmental-friendly sustainable food production and consumption to aware the masses.” **(Food quality advocate)**

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