

The Unsung Heroes Of Global Food System Transformation

STRENGTHENING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL AND NATIONAL DECISION-MAKING



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SUMMARY

The UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) was the first time youth were actively invited to be equal participants in a global food or nutrition summit. Youth played a pivotal role in UNFSS, contributing diverse perspectives to transform global food systems. Through youth-led dialogues, leadership in action tracks, and the UNFSS Youth Constituency, young people influenced policies, showcased innovative solutions for sustainability, and championed intergenerational equity. A key outcome of UNFSS was the Food Systems Pathways, which set out countries' approaches for transforming their food systems to be more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Nourishing Food Pathways programme led by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) focuses on strengthening the design and delivery of national food systems pathways in 11 countries. Believing that food systems transformation cannot succeed without the active involvement of young people, GAIN has integrated the voices of youth into this programme. However, these pathways often lack mechanisms to prioritise or actively involve young people, particularly those with limited access to formal decision-making processes. When youth seek to engage in food systems spaces, they may struggle to apply their skills and knowledge effectively.

This discussion paper examines mechanisms for meaningfully involving young people in food systems decision making and the necessary support to amplify them as leaders. It also advocates for governments and global organisations to establish formal avenues for youth participation. The paper proposes a framework for meaningful engagement, with actionable recommendations to formalise youth involvement. The UNFSS highlighted the critical importance of integrating youth into formal food systems policy processes to build resilient and inclusive systems. Continued support and engagement are crucial to maintaining momentum and ensuring that young people remain at the forefront of global and national food systems transformation efforts.

KEY MESSAGES

- The UN Food Systems Summit (2021) catalysed global youth engagement in food systems, emphasising the critical role of youth in advancing sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems.
- Youth engagement in food systems should be supported by multiple stakeholders (especially governments and global policy bodies) through formal mechanisms and measurement, balancing the flexibility of youth initiatives with the structure of policymaking and programmes.
- A youth engagement framework provides a practical approach for governments and other stakeholders to ensure meaningful and sustained youth participation in food systems decision-making.
- Youth-led initiatives are powerful catalysts for transformative change in food systems. However, challenges in scaling and assessing impact remain.
- Measuring youth engagement: A key gap remains in effectively measuring meaningful youth participation in decision-making. Developing targeted metrics is essential for assessing and enhancing youth contributions to food system policies.

WHY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MATTERS IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY

Young people sit at the heart of our food systems, poised to confront some of the world's most urgent challenges: climate change, environmental degradation, and persistent social inequities (1,2). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where 50–70% of youth live in poverty and the food system accounts for up to 60% of employment opportunities (3,4), young people's insights and leadership are not just important – they are indispensable. Their lived experiences, both as producers and consumers, uniquely position them to advocate for and shape more inclusive, resilient, and equitable policies (1,5).

Today's youth, the largest generation in history with 1.2 billion individuals aged 15–24 (3), remain underrepresented in food system decisions (2). Systemic barriers like rigid policy structures, gender norms, and limited access to information and technology hinder their participation (2,6–8). Addressing these challenges is vital to unlocking their potential, shaping inclusive policies, and ensuring sustainable food systems for the future.

The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS)¹ set a new precedent by positioning young people as essential stakeholders in shaping sustainable, resilient, and equitable food systems (6). For the first time, youth voices were embedded in global policy discussions, with platforms like the Youth Liaison Group and the Act4Food movement, amplifying their perspectives. This inclusion enabled youth to propose innovative solutions, advocate for critical reforms, and collaborate directly with leaders from government, civil society, and the private sector. Similarly, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) emphasizes youth as active contributors and co-creators in policymaking processes (7).

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) aims to support young people as key partners for national food systems transformation pathways as part of its Nourishing Food Pathways (NFP) programme. Its Youth Voices Initiative focuses on strengthening youth leadership and creating platforms for meaningful engagement in policy dialogues. Through these efforts, GAIN seeks to ensure that young people are not merely consulted but are fully contributing to shaping agendas, influencing decision-making processes, and driving systemic change. At the same time, through targeted engagement, governments and policy stakeholders are meant to gain deeper insights into youth participation, enabling them to establish formal structures for youth engagement and identify opportunities for youth involvement in food systems decisions.

In this discussion paper we aim to reflect on our experience engaging with youth during the UNFSS as well as part of our Youth Voices project and discuss frameworks and best practices that can be used for strengthening their participation. This paper, part of GAIN's upcoming Youth Voices series, aims to share lessons, provide case studies, and make recommendations for strengthening youth participation in global and national decision-making.

¹ <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/>

EXPLORING FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY SPACES: WHERE ARE THEY, AND WHERE DO YOUTH FIT IN?

The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) aimed to transform global food systems to support the Sustainable Development Goals. It brought together stakeholders worldwide, resulting in over 100 national strategies, new coalitions, and commitments to promote sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems. The summit emphasised science-based solutions and actively involved youth to drive innovation and change. Youth played a critical role in the UNFSS, contributing through leadership in action tracks, youth-led dialogues, and the Youth Liaison Group. Over 100,000 young people globally engaged with the Summit, collectively identifying priorities and advocating for systemic change (6). Their contributions highlighted the urgency of food systems transformation while demonstrating the critical role of youth in advancing bold, innovative solutions.



Photo 1. Youth representatives at the UNFSS 'Food is the Future' event on 22 September 2021. © Sophie Healy-Thow

Central to the Summit were national food systems transformation pathways—country-led plans outlining strategies to build sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems. These pathways are dynamic, evolving frameworks that reflect ongoing priorities and progress, serving as tools to guide systemic change. As of 2024, 127 countries had developed national food systems pathways, 60% had begun creating implementation or action plans, 70% had integrated their pathway's vision into national strategies or sector plans, and 40% were aligning financial resources with their pathways.² A national convener is the focal point for the food systems pathways. Youth, in theory, can participate through established multi-sector and multistakeholder food systems governance mechanisms. Progress against the pathways is recorded biennially at UNFSS follow up meetings.

A defining moment of the UNFSS was the launch of the Act4Food³ movement: a collective of global youth activists demanding a seat at the table to change food for good. Act4Food emphasises the importance of youth-driven solutions and aims to integrate young people's ideas into formal food systems policies and practices. It has since become a blueprint for impactful youth leadership in food systems transformation (8). Since its launch in 2021, Act4Food has mobilised over 160,000 individuals globally, anchoring its efforts in the 'Actions 4 Change' - a set of ten priority actions collaboratively developed and voted on by young people worldwide. GAIN has provided continued to provide support to Act4Food since the UNFSS.

Act4Food's success is a testament to how platforms like the UNFSS can empower youth to lead systemic change. The movement's global core group of youth champions has strategically advanced its mission, ensuring young people's perspectives remain central to high-level discussions and decision-making processes. By connecting grassroots

² https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/regional-progress-reviews/europe-central-asia/national-pathway-progress-review_unfs-coordination-hub.pdf?sfvrsn=d77d0e7c_3

³ <https://actions4food.org/en/>

mobilisation with global advocacy, Act4Food exemplifies how the UNFSS served as a catalyst for transformative youth-led action and inspired other initiatives like the World Food Forum (WFF). The WFF⁴ is an FAO-led initiative to provide a structured platform for youth to engage directly with policymakers, enhancing their understanding of global and national food system policies and agendas. Emphasising innovation, research, education, and cultural exchange, the WFF empowers young people to lead transformative changes.

Beyond the UNFSS, there are several other key food systems policy spaces:

- **Conference of the Parties (COP):** The COP meetings under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)⁵ assess global progress on climate commitment every year. YOUNGO is the official youth constituency of the UNFCCC to equip youth leaders and professionals with essential skills in climate diplomacy, negotiation, and strategic communication at the national level. Food@COP is a youth-led campaign under YOUNGO's Food and Agriculture working group, which was active at the 2023 UAE COP. This youth group called on the COP presidency to make food at the conference climate friendly. A successful three-year campaign culminated with the first climate-friendly food village at COP28 in Dubai. Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) is another YOUNGO initiative. Its primary purpose is to empower young people to be climate advocates, enabling them to take active roles in global climate dialogues and influence both national and international policy.
- **Committee on World Food Security (CFS):** As an inclusive intergovernmental platform, CFS brings stakeholders together to address global food security and nutrition. There are two main streams at CFS through which young people can engage: the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) and the Private Sector Mechanism (PSM). Both have youth focal groups that engage in making recommendations, providing input, and partaking in the High Level Political Forum.
- **Africa Food Systems Forum:** The Africa Food Systems Forum is designed to mobilise political will and advance the policies, programmes, and investments required to achieve inclusive and sustainable food systems transformation in Africa. The forum provides an opportunity for young people to showcase their innovations and amplify their voices through dedicated youth platforms, and intergenerational dialogues. The theme of the 2025 forum will be Africa's Youth: Leading Collaboration, Innovation and Implementation of Agri-Food Systems Transformation

The UNFSS pathways, coupled with these global platforms, provide youth with sustained opportunities to influence policy, advocate for systemic reforms, and drive collective action, creating pathways for their voices to transform commitments into long-term, impactful change. These diverse policy spaces reflect a growing recognition of youth as key stakeholders in shaping food systems policy. Yet, the extent and nature of youth involvement vary widely—from symbolic participation to substantive influence. A structured approach is needed to move from occasional engagement to consistent inclusion. The following framework is practically applicable for governments to design policies and programmes that ensure meaningful and sustained youth participation in decision-making processes.

⁴ <https://youth.world-food-forum.org/who-we-are/about-us/en>

⁵ <https://unfccc.int>

BUILDING BRIDGES: A FRAMEWORK FOR MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY

Drawing on established frameworks such as the Positive Youth Development framework (9) and Lundy Model of Participation (10), the framework in Figure 1 identifies three connected levels of engagement: Consulted, Represented, and Targeted. These levels represent ways in which governments and other actors can effectively involve youth in global spaces and initiatives. The next sections describe each level of the framework in turn.

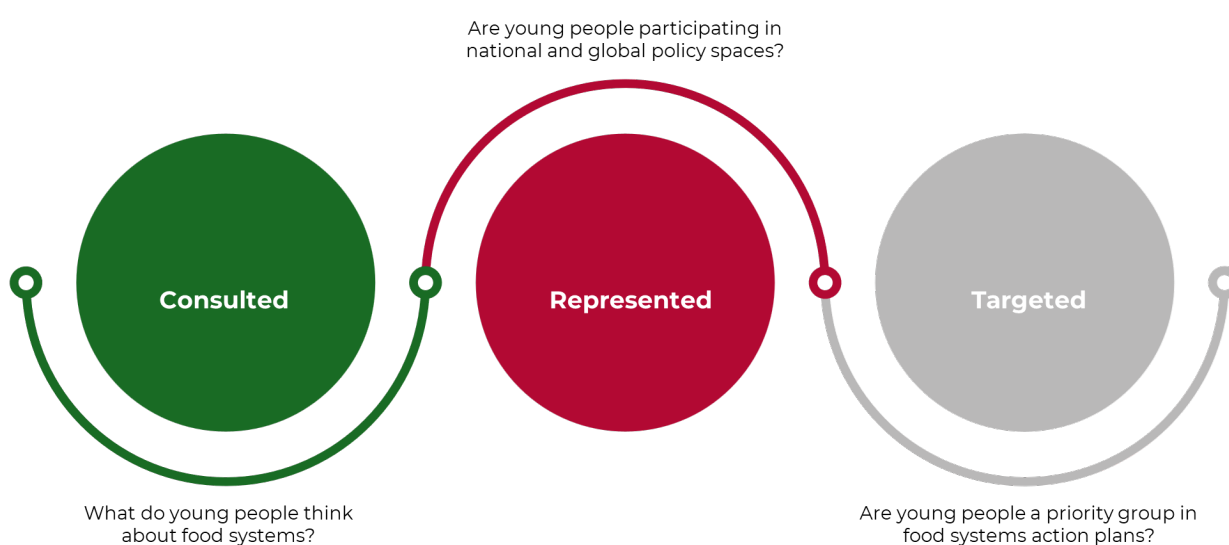


Figure 1. Framework describing levels at which government can engage youth in food systems policy

CONSULTED: INVITING PERSPECTIVES FROM YOUTH (12)

The first level of engagement focuses on inviting youth to share their insights, priorities, and lived experiences regarding food systems. Consultations at this stage provide a vital foundation for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities that young people face in food systems transformation. Policymakers and organisations can employ various mechanisms, such as intergenerational dialogues, workshops, and digital platforms, to create inclusive spaces for diverse perspectives. These consultations allow decision-makers to capture youth-specific priorities and innovative ideas, which can inform the development of policies and programmes.



Photo 2. School workshop for the UK National Food Strategy Youth Consultation @ The Food Foundation

The National Food Strategy, commissioned by the UK government, aimed to create a better food system. As part of this, the Food Foundation was invited to consult young people in England through school and youth workshops to understand their concerns about food, health, and the environment. The consultation captured their lived experiences and priorities for change, ensuring their voices shaped the strategy and influenced future food policies. The findings were published in the report ***Your Future, Your Food*** (12).

The CO-CREATE Dialogue Forum Tool⁶ demonstrates how structured consultations can translate youth perspectives into

actionable outcomes. In countries like Norway, Portugal, and the Netherlands, the initiative fosters intergenerational discussions that empower young people to collaborate with policymakers and stakeholders (13). In Portugal, youth participants presented policy recommendations at City Hall to influence local governance on food systems reform (14). In Norway, youth-driven dialogue inspired a parliamentarian to advocate for a ban on unhealthy food advertisements targeting children under age 18 (14). These examples illustrate how meaningful consultations, when paired with responsive action from decision-makers, can amplify youth voices and drive policy impact.

However, consultation alone cannot drive meaningful change unless findings are integrated into decision-making processes. Youth voices must go beyond symbolic inclusion to form the foundation for actionable reforms. Mechanisms for feedback and transparency are critical to maintaining trust, ensuring that young people see how their contributions are valued and applied.

REPRESENTED: INCLUDING YOUTH IN DECISION-MAKING

Representation marks a pivotal level of engagement where young people move beyond consultation to actively participate in governance structures. This stage positions youth as key stakeholders and collaborators, playing formal roles in shaping policies and influencing decisions. Mechanisms such as youth advisory boards, councils, and technical committees enable young people to contribute directly to policymaking processes, advocate for their priorities, and ensure their voices are integrated into governance frameworks.

Through representation in governance processes, youth actively shape the policies and systems that impact their communities. Participation in advisory boards, technical committees, and policymaking forums allows young people to bring fresh perspectives, challenge entrenched practices, and foster innovation in food systems governance.

In Nigeria, youth have been strategically integrated into the National Food Systems Technical Working Group, forming part of the core task team on food systems

⁶ <https://eatforum.org/initiatives/co-create/>

implementation. This involvement enables them to contribute to developing foundational frameworks such as the National Priority Action Plans, the National Food Systems Transformation Pathway, and the Implementation Strategy. By embedding youth perspectives into these guiding documents, Nigeria ensures that its food systems transformation reflects the priorities and insights of its younger generation.

Efforts like the Hawai'i Youth Food Council (HYFC)⁷ and the Asia Indigenous Youth Platform (AIYP)⁸ demonstrate how institutional mechanisms can embed youth perspectives into decision-making processes. HYFC, in partnership with the Hawai'i Public Health Institute and state-level policymakers, focuses on policies that prioritise sustainability and food justice, ensuring that young voices influence local food systems transformation. Meanwhile, AIYP advocates for policies that protect indigenous agricultural practices and promote food sovereignty. By engaging with the Asia Regional Plan for the Implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, AIYP highlights the intersection of food systems, cultural heritage, and policy advocacy. This approach strengthens the resilience of local food systems and ensures that indigenous knowledge informs national and regional policy frameworks.

However, youth representation is not without challenges. Limited capacity, entrenched hierarchies, and resistance to change can undermine the effectiveness of youth participation. To address these barriers, representation must be supported by comprehensive capacity-building programs, mentorship opportunities, and sustained institutional backing. By creating an enabling environment, youth can effectively bridge the gap between communities and governance, ensuring that food systems policies are equitable, inclusive, and reflective of diverse priorities.

TARGETED: PRIORITISING YOUTH AS BENEFICIARIES

Youth should be targeted as a priority group in food systems pathways and action plans to ensure these strategies address both their immediate needs and long-term aspirations. In many regions, youth represent a substantial portion of the population. The food systems pathway action plans provide a crucial opportunity to tackle key challenges faced by youth, such as high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and limited access to decent work especially in rural areas, as well as issues of inadequate nutrition stemming from poor dietary diversity, and limited availability of affordable, nutritious food options. Governments and other organisations should prioritise youth-specific policies, mentorship programmes, and financial support mechanisms that provide opportunities to youth.

A compelling example is Tanzania's Building a Better Tomorrow: Youth and Women Initiative for Agribusiness (BBT-YIA)⁹. Launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, BBT-YIA strategically empowers youth to drive agricultural transformation by addressing systemic barriers such as limited access to land, finance, and markets. The initiative has allocated over 77,000 hectares of irrigated land to youth through block farms¹⁰ and Youth Agribusiness Parks, providing a foundation for scalable and sustainable agribusiness ventures. Complementing this, BBT-YIA offers tailored mentorship, hands-on training, and

⁷ <https://sites.google.com/hiphi.org/hyfc/home?authuser=0>

⁸ <https://aippnet.org/asia-indigenous-youth-platform-aiyp/>

⁹ <https://bbtkilimo.co.tz/>

¹⁰ Block farming is a model where a large parcel of land is divided up into individual plots, thereby clustering farmers together while providing services and products to all of them.

access to a Youth Start-up and Growth Catalyst Fund, projected to mobilise TZS 72 billion (USD \$26.8 million at time of writing) to support youth-led enterprises.

Food systems pathways are fundamentally about fostering coherence and alignment within government to address complex, interconnected challenges. The action plans offer a valuable opportunity to bring together government departments traditionally focused on food systems with those that specialise in youth-related issues. By engaging departments responsible for education, skills development, and youth empowerment, these pathways can ensure a holistic and coordinated approach that integrates food and youth agendas.

YOUTH AS CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

Governments play a vital role in engaging youth in food systems policy, while youth-led initiatives are equally crucial for driving meaningful change. Advocacy is often the first step for youth in influencing food systems. Youth-led campaigns and initiatives play a critical role in raising awareness, promoting accountability, and pushing for reforms that prioritise equity, sustainability, and healthier food environments. The Fix My Food initiative¹¹, led by UNICEF East Asia and Pacific, highlights the power of youth-driven advocacy in addressing food systems challenges. This campaign tackles the region's shift from traditional diets to highly processed foods, which has led to rising rates of childhood obesity and undernutrition. Through workshops and collaborative events, young advocates engage directly with policymakers, influencers, and food entrepreneurs to promote policies that enhance access to nutritious and affordable food. In Timor-Leste, Cambodia, and the Pacific Islands for example, youth advocates have campaigned for restrictions on marketing unhealthy foods to children, demonstrating how targeted advocacy can drive meaningful policy reforms to protect children's health (15).

Initiatives from Bangladesh, the United Kingdom, and Indonesia show how integrating technology with grassroots action can amplify youth voices and drive transformative changes. The Bhalo Khabo Bhalo Thakbo ('Eat Well, Live Well')¹² campaign in Bangladesh exemplifies a youth-led campaign aimed at improving adolescent food choices. Launched by adolescents with support from GAIN, the campaign encouraged young people to pledge to use their pocket money to purchase nutritious foods, fostering healthier eating habits nationwide. Through a multifaceted approach that combined school-based events, dynamic social media engagement, and engagement with policymakers, the campaign reached over one million adolescents. A key component was its e-learning platform, which provided interactive modules on nutrition and food safety, enabling adolescents to learn, self-evaluate through quizzes, and receive online certificates, thereby promoting informed dietary choices (16). The campaign inspired global youth movements, such as the Act4Food movement (17).

Similarly, Bite Back 2030¹³ in the United Kingdom, a youth-led movement focused on creating healthier food environments, has driven significant regulatory reforms, including stricter advertising regulations and transparent food labelling. Bite Back 2030 contributed to the UK Government's decision to restrict junk food advertising online and on television before 9 pm (18,19). The movement also played a pivotal role in advocating for the

¹¹ <https://www.unicef.org/eap/fix-my-food>

¹² <https://www.bhalokhabobhalothakbo.com>

¹³ <https://www.biteback2030.com>

extension of free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring vulnerable children still had access to nutritious food. Its Community Food Champions programme has engaged over 750 young people to lead local campaigns, fostering grassroots leadership and influencing community-level food policies.

Building on the previous mentioned institutional and network-driven approaches, the youth-led initiative Shaasan¹⁴ in Nepal provides a compelling example of how youth are harnessing technology and innovation to address systemic governance challenges. Shaasan, spearheaded by the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, leverages technology to transform governance and accountability. Through its innovative mobile app, Shaasan enables citizens to report public issues directly to their representatives, with reports categorised, geotagged, and made publicly visible. Representatives are evaluated through scorecards based on responsiveness, fostering transparency and action. Beyond the technology, Shaasan has trained over 1,200 youth in leadership and policy advocacy, bridging the gap between citizens and elected officials across 67 districts. By empowering youth to actively participate in governance, Shaasan promotes accountability and inclusivity in addressing food systems challenges (20).

Youth are not only key players in shaping the future of food systems, but also powerful catalysts for meaningful and transformative change. Their advocacy, leadership, and innovative approaches have proven to be effective in driving policy reforms, raising awareness, and fostering more sustainable, equitable, and healthier food environments. From grassroots campaigns to tech-driven solutions, youth-led initiatives like the Fix My Food campaign, Bhalo Khabo Bhalo Thakbo, Bite Back 2030, and Shaasan are creating real-world impact, showing how young people can influence the systems that affect their lives. As these initiatives continue to grow, supporting youth to be leaders in food systems advocacy is not just a necessity—it is a critical pathway toward a more resilient and inclusive global food system. However, many youth-led initiatives are in their early stages and face challenges in scaling and implementation (21). To fully realise the contributions of youth as catalysts of change, it is crucial to understand and address the systemic challenges they face.

AMPLIFYING YOUTH VOICES: GAIN'S VISION FOR INCLUSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS

At GAIN, we are committed to supporting and enabling youth to be represented and consulted in national and global food policy discussions, in alignment with the framework for meaningful youth engagement described above. To achieve this goal, we have developed a youth and policy programmatic framework, shown in Figure 2, which outlines four key areas of action: community building, capacity building, collective action, and policy culture.

¹⁴ <https://shaasan.org/>

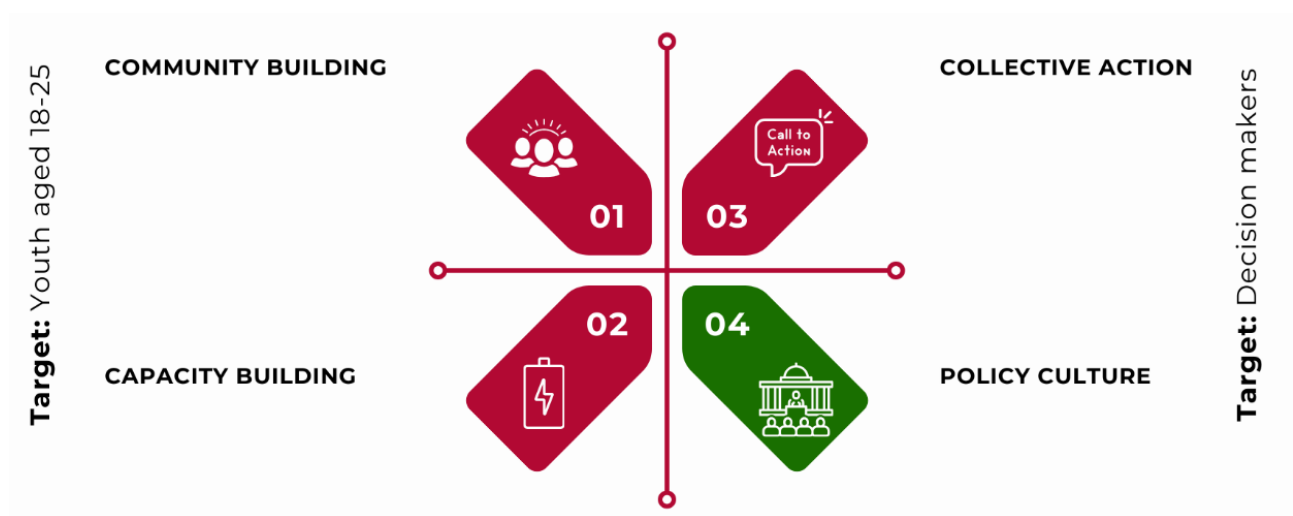


Figure 2. GAIN's youth and policy programmatic framework

GAIN operates across these four domains—community building, capacity building, collective action, and policy culture—to foster meaningful youth engagement in food systems. The **community building** domain focuses on facilitating youth leadership development and fostering a sense of community, helping young people connect and collaborate on shared goals. Through **capacity building**, GAIN enhances youth knowledge and skills about food systems, equipping them to influence change. Both domains directly target and support young people to take action. The **collective action** domain leads coordinated efforts to contribute to or influence food systems policies, amplifying youth voices in the policy-making process. Meanwhile, **policy culture** works to engage government stakeholders, ensuring that youth participation in food systems policy becomes a priority. Together, these domains aim to sensitise decision-makers on the importance of youth involvement, establish formal structures for engagement, and identify key policy opportunities, positioning youth as critical contributors to shaping sustainable food systems.

The framework was informed by the experience of the Health Heroes Campaign¹⁵ in Indonesia, which supported young people to advocate for improved food labelling and healthier food environments within their schools and communities. In addition, it has shaped the Youth Leadership Initiative¹⁶ implemented through Act4Food and in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Tanzania.

LESSONS FROM YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

Critical lessons can be gathered from initiatives to engage young people as leaders and active participants in transforming food systems.

¹⁵ <https://healtheroes.id>

¹⁶ <https://www.gainhealth.org/youth-leadership-initiative>

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH IS KEY TO EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Understanding youth is key to effective engagement in food systems. Youth are diverse, with different needs based on age, gender, and context. Some are still in adolescents and while others stand on the cusp of adulthood. These factors need to be taken into consideration when planning effective engagement activities with youth.

Youth may prefer informal channels or digital communication and may be drawn to quick, visible results. These approaches can contrast with formal governance structures, making it challenging to bring youth into formal decision-making. To close this gap, efforts should focus on building trust between policymakers and youth, finding communications approaches that are youth friendly, and creating platforms that reflect youth realities (2,21–23). Youth may not have the same skills as adult policy experts, so strategies must be adapted to their unique strengths and challenges.

INSTITUTIONALISING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ENSURES SUSTAINABILITY

Decision-makers face persistent challenges in meaningfully engaging youth in governance and policymaking. Many public institutions lack formalised mechanisms and accessible pathways for youth participation, leaving young people with limited opportunities to contribute (24). Formalised structures, such as youth advisory boards, quotas for young representatives in decision-making bodies, and dedicated youth desks within ministries, are critical for sustained youth participation (25,26). These mechanisms foster accountability, embed youth representation in governance processes, and create pathways for young voices to influence policies meaningfully (2).

CAPACITY BUILDING IS IMPORTANT BUT NOT THE SOLE FOCUS

Supporting youth with knowledge, leadership skills, and resources enables them to navigate policy spaces, advocate for equitable systems, and lead impactful initiatives (2,7,24,27,28). Such capacity-building efforts must be ongoing, inclusive, and adaptive to evolving policy challenges. But efforts to engage youth must go beyond just capacity building. While one-off trainings can provide valuable skills, they are insufficient for enabling youth to fully participate in policy spaces. To create meaningful and sustained engagement, these training opportunities need to be complemented by long-term support systems and institutional structures. This includes creating ongoing mentorship, access to resources, and platforms where youth can continuously contribute and have a role in decision-making processes. Capacity-building efforts should extend beyond youth themselves and serve as an opportunity to enhance support for government officials and global actors in effectively engaging with young people. Box 1 showcases one example of a long-term institutional partnership that goes beyond capacity building.

Box 1. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network in Bangladesh

The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network in Bangladesh, endorsed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, actively engages youth in nutrition, food, and health sectors. It unites youth-led organisations to transform food systems, ensuring young people contribute to sustainable solutions. Recognising diverse youth needs, the network promotes inclusive programmes. In partnership with GAIN, it conducts Food Systems Youth Leadership Training, empowering marginalised youth to drive nutrition improvements. To institutionalise youth engagement, it integrates young voices into policy making, enabling participation in key platforms like the Nutrition for Growth summit. Youth-led advocacy conducted by the network has achieved tangible results, such as Minhajul Islam's successful campaign for nutritious school meals in Lalmonirhat. The Youth Action Group strengthens advocacy efforts, collaborating with civil society and government stakeholders. Beyond advocacy, the network fosters long-term youth involvement through mentorship, training, and leadership programmes. It leverages digital tools and grassroots networks to ensure participation of young people across the country.

TECHNOLOGY AND GRASSROOTS NETWORKS AMPLIFY IMPACT

Leveraging digital platforms alongside community-driven initiatives bridges participation gaps and enhances scalability (23,24,29). Hybrid models combining digital tools with in-person engagement expand access for rural and marginalised youth. Platforms such as mobile applications and virtual forums facilitate youth contributions to governance processes, while grassroots advocacy ensures their perspectives are anchored in local realities (14,23,30). While technology can serve as a catalyst for engaging youth and overcoming barriers to participation, alternative low-tech and no-tech models should also be explored to reach rural and other harder-to-reach youth.

CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION STRENGTHENS OUTCOMES

Multi-stakeholder partnerships—including governments, civil society, and private-sector actors—amplify the impact of youth engagement (8,16). Collaborative approaches ensure that solutions are comprehensive, inclusive, and aligned with the needs of young people. Co-creating solutions, sharing expertise, and aligning efforts across sectors are essential for sustainable food systems transformation.

MEASURING MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION


Initiatives like the UNICEF-led Technical Advisory Group on school-age and adolescent nutrition metrics, and the Child and Adolescent-centred Nutrition Indicators, developed by the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University, have made significant strides in developing nutrition metrics for youth. However, while these efforts extend beyond basic nutrition indicators, a key gap remains in effectively measuring youth engagement in food systems decision-making. This gap highlights the need for more targeted metrics to assess how youth are actively involved in shaping food systems and policies.

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A recent GAIN working paper reviewed existing metrics and methods (31) identifying diverse approaches while emphasising the need for comprehensive, contextualised evaluations. The analysis highlights the importance of capturing cultural and geographic variability and addressing the lack of effective tools to fully understand the complexity and impact of youth engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The actionable recommendations outlined here aim to guide governments, development practitioners, and youth organisations in creating sustained and transformative youth partnerships. These recommendations focus on practical solutions to ensure that young people are not only participants but also key decision-makers in food systems governance.

Recommendations	
Institutionalise engagement 	1. Create formalised youth advisory boards or councils with decision-making power in local, national, and regional governance frameworks.
	2. Mandate youth representation for key fora such as national nutrition committees, national and international events, or food systems pathways working groups.
Strengthen capacity 	3. Organise bootcamps, immersive programmes, and trainings to build policy literacy, advocacy skills, and leadership competencies.
	4. Facilitate mentorship programmes and intergenerational dialogue between youth and experienced leaders to foster knowledge transfer.
Facilitate participation 	5. Provide stipends or financial incentives to enable participation.
	6. Use high-, low-, and no-tech models , combining digital tools with in-person engagement, to improve reach and participation.
	7. Develop context-specific, localised approaches that address the realities of youth and, in particular, rural and marginalised youth.

Connect and collaborate 	8. Strengthen multi-sectoral partnerships to leverage collective expertise, resources and co-create effective solutions.
Measure progress and impact 	9. Establish youth-led monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms to assess inclusivity, responsiveness, and government commitments in food systems governance. 10. Design and adopt youth-centric indicators to track contributions to policy, innovation, and leadership.

CONCLUSIONS

Youth engagement in food systems policies is not just an opportunity—it is a necessity. Young people have demonstrated their ability to drive meaningful change through advocacy, innovation, and leadership. UNFSS set a new precedent for youth inclusion, but sustaining this momentum requires deliberate action from governments, international organisations, and stakeholders across sectors. We have seen a dramatic increase in youth engagement in food systems, though there is concern that many existing initiatives tend to engage the same group of young people, which may limit opportunities for broader participation. Strengthening the mechanisms for meaningful involvement of youth in food systems decision making is crucial to ensure that we are reaching a diverse and broad group of young people.

Youth engagement should not fall solely on young people to create opportunities in food systems. Governments and global policy bodies must establish formal mechanisms for youth involvement and measure these engagements. A balance is needed between preserving the organic, flexible nature of youth initiatives and integrating them into the formal structures of government and policymaking.

A comprehensive youth engagement framework offers a practical approach to supporting governments and other key stakeholders to create the necessary conditions for sustained, impactful youth participation in food systems decision-making. This framework can help decision makers understand how to enable youth to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions and initiatives. While youth-led and -involved initiatives have already proven to be powerful catalysts for transformative change, challenges such as scaling these initiatives and assessing their long-term impact remain significant obstacles. The absence of reliable, consistent methods for measuring youth participation in decision-making also represents a key gap that must be addressed. Developing appropriate metrics will not only help assess the current level of youth involvement but will also provide insights into areas that need improvement.

Focusing on these areas will allow us to better understand and amplify the contributions of young people, ensuring that they play a central role in shaping the policies that define food systems.

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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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