

BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

EVIDENCE FROM THE YOUTH VOICES PROJECT IN TANZANIA



GAIN Working Paper n°67

April 2026

Leonard Mulei, Stella Nordhagen, and Miriam Shindler



GAIN Working Paper n°67

Recommended citation

Mulei L, Nordhagen S, and Shindler M. Building Youth Leadership for Food Systems Transformation: Evidence from the Youth Voices Project in Tanzania. Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). Working Paper #67. Geneva, Switzerland, 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.67>

© The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)

This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 IGO licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 IGO; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>). Under the terms of this licence, you may copy, redistribute and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, provided the work is appropriately cited, as indicated below. In any use of this work, there should be no suggestion that GAIN endorses any specific organisation, products or services. The use of the GAIN logo is not permitted. If you adapt the work, then you must license your work under the same or equivalent Creative Commons license. The contribution of third parties do not necessarily represent the view or opinion of GAIN.

The authors used Chat GPT, a generative artificial intelligence chatbot developed by OpenAI, to copyedit this paper and analyse literature that informed its development. The authors reviewed all content suggested by Chat GPT and take ultimate responsibility for the content.

Acknowledgements

The initial design of this study was led by Elizabeth Rusaitis-Graham and Joan Msuya with input from Wendy Gonzalez, Stella Nordhagen, and Miriam Shindler. The current Working Paper was led by Leonard Mulei, Stella Nordhagen, and Miriam Shindler. We are grateful to the GAIN Tanzania team members — Saddam Khalfan Ahmed, Gaston Amos, and Winfrida Mayilla — for their support in data collection. We also express our sincere gratitude to Sayi Makwaia, Tesfaye Bekele, and Roseline Remans from Glocolearning for collecting data, and sharing insights from the project evaluation report, which have greatly informed this working paper. The figures in the Annex were designed by Michael Gichane. Finally, we extend our appreciation to all interviewees for their time and for sharing their perspectives.

This work was supported, and this publication has been produced, through the Nourishing Food Pathways programme which is jointly funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands; the European Union; the government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada; Irish Aid through the Development Cooperation and Africa Division (DCAD); and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). The findings, ideas, and conclusions contained presented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of any of GAIN's funding partners.

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

Globally, the youth population is rapidly growing, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where food systems are central to livelihoods and significantly influence nutritional outcomes. Despite this, young people remain underrepresented in food systems policy and decision-making processes. Addressing this gap requires youth leadership programmes that integrate systems thinking, cross-sectoral collaboration, and experiential learning to better prepare young people for meaningful engagement in food systems transformation. This case study explores how a youth leadership programme implemented in Arusha, Tanzania, enhanced young people's ability to influence food policy processes, advocate for inclusive reforms, and drive meaningful change in their communities.

The findings of this study indicate that personal transformation and identity shifts, community support, and the acquisition and application of leadership skills are key enabling factors for youth leadership development in food systems. However, several constraining factors — including perceived lack of technical expertise among the youth, unclear administrative processes at government offices, insufficient financial resources, misalignment between community expectations and project objectives, lack of tools, facilities, and equipment— limited the ability of young people to influence food systems processes. Overall, this case study provides insights into how supporting youth engagement through leadership programmes can serve as catalyst for amplifying their voices in food systems transformation.

KEY MESSAGES

- Youth leadership in food systems is shaped by the interaction of individual agency, community support, and institutional structures, highlighting the need for programmes that address both personal growth and systemic conditions.
- The GAIN Youth Voices project provided platforms for experiential learning and engagement with peers and decision-makers. Through this, the project contributed to strengthening youth leadership identity, confidence, and capacity to influence food systems policy in Tanzania
- Engaging young people in shaping local and national food policy in Tanzania offers transferable lessons for other types of transformative processes.
- Challenges such as limited institutional support, unclear government engagement protocols with youth, and low community awareness constrain youth participation and the integration of their contributions into food policy processes.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

Young people aged 15-24 years constitute approximately 1.2 billion individuals globally, with nearly 1 billion, or over 80%, living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) — a number that continues to rise (1). Despite their growing demographic presence, young people remain underrepresented in food systems policymaking processes, as existing policies and frameworks fail to address their specific needs and diverse capacities (2,3) or include them in the process. Instead, they are frequently treated as a homogenous group, with limited recognition of their diverse experiences and challenges, and often lack access to structured leadership development pathways tailored to the complexities of food systems (4,5).

Engaging young people in shaping resilient and sustainable food systems policies can position them as key drivers of transformation, bringing their adaptability, innovative thinking, and ability to mobilise action to drive transformation, while acting as vital 'torchbearers' of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (6). One potential way to support youth and strengthen their engagement in policy processes is through youth-leadership programmes that offer young people opportunities to contribute to shaping food system agendas, influencing decision-making processes, and driving systematic change, which may promote both personal growth and social impact (7). Such leadership programmes can also provide spaces for experiential learning, peer collaboration, and access to diverse knowledge networks, helping to sustain community engagement, promote accountability, and reinforce skill development even after formal leadership training ends (8,9). These programmes create environments in which policy advocacy skills development is integrated with peer-to-peer reflection and have the potential to deepen young people's understanding of community issues while fostering critical thinking and collective action, which are key ingredients for driving sustainable food system transformation (10).

Youth leadership programmes have been shown to produce a wide range of positive outcomes. For instance, a review of nine studies on leadership development programmes for young adults published between 2003 and 2015 found that such initiatives significantly enhanced personal and interpersonal skills, including communication, public speaking, decision-making, and conflict resolution (11). In addition to skill development, other studies have linked participation in youth leadership programmes to increased leadership knowledge and application, improved confidence, greater self-esteem, stronger self-efficacy, and improved peer and community relationships (7,8,11–13) enabling young leaders to navigate challenges and lead more effectively (14).

Despite the potential of youth leadership programmes to drive social, economic, and political change, the representation of young people in decision-making in Tanzania remains largely symbolic or constrained. Political and policy leadership continues to be dominated by older generations. For example, as of 2020, the average age of the parliamentarians in Tanzania was 46.8 years, with those aged 35 years and below accounting for only 14.2% (15). Recognising the need to address this imbalance and promote meaningful youth participation, the government of Tanzania has undertaken a series of policy initiatives since the 1990s. The Community Development Policy of 1996 and the National Youth Development Policy of 2007 served as key frameworks for

institutionalising youth engagement. The latter was revised in 2024 to reflect evolving socio-economic contexts and to broaden the scope of youth participation (16).

The implementation of these policy frameworks and government commitments has not consistently enabled substantive participation of young people in policy processes, as youth engagement in decision making remains largely symbolic or constrained in nature. Multiple barriers continue to hinder this engagement, particularly within food systems governance and decision-making processes in Tanzania (16). A summary of these barriers is presented in Box 1. Further, limited investment in structured leadership development programmes and the absence of enabling conditions for sustained engagement have curtailed the transformative potential of youth in the food systems space (17). The paradox then remains: those who will live longest with the consequences of today's food policy decisions often have the least say in shaping them.

Addressing these systemic barriers calls for more than policy reforms; it requires deliberate and context-specific strategies to build youth leadership capacities and create inclusive platforms that foster meaningful participation in food systems transformation. The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit catalysed youth engagement in food systems policy processes with the launch of the ACT4FOOD youth movement¹. Building on this momentum, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) established the Youth Voices project to strengthen youth engagement in national food systems pathways and global fora by promoting meaningful inclusion of youth voices in decision-making processes. Further details about the project activities in Tanzania are provided in Annex 1.

This case study examines how the Youth Voices project built youth leadership for food systems transformation by enhancing participants' knowledge of food systems, strengthening their skills, and supporting their collective action campaigns². It explores the process by which young people engaged with decision makers at various governance levels, influenced food policy processes, and began to drive meaningful changes in their communities. The case study also identifies the key competencies that young people regarded as most essential for effectively fulfilling their leadership roles in their community.

By analysing participant reflections, this study provides a perspective on whether and how youth leadership development programmes can foster personal growth and/or structural change. With its focus on youth agency and representation, the case study contributes to a growing body of literature on the importance of participatory and intergenerational approaches to food systems transformation.

¹ Act4Food is a global youth-led movement formed during United Nations Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment (UNFSS+2) and runs a pledge campaign to encourage young people to be involved in the food systems transformation. <https://actions4food.org/en/>

² A collective action campaign is a group initiative where youth apply the skills they have learned to identify an issue to tackle, engage relevant stakeholders, and take coordinated action to achieve it together.

BOX 1. BARRIERS TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY PROCESSES IN TANZANIA

Youth Perception and Incentive Barriers: There is limited understanding of what meaningful participation entails, and incentives to engage may be weak. Moreover, most young people in Tanzania view participation primarily as passive presence, such as attending meetings, joining social activities, or performing community tasks like cleaning or repairing infrastructure (32). Further, young people's motivation to engage more substantively may also be constrained, as opportunities for participation in decision-making alone are often insufficient to offset potential opportunities costs, such as engaging in employment and economic opportunities.

Sociocultural Barriers: Traditional norms that emphasise deference to authority often discourage many young people from expressing dissenting views or engaging confidently with older decision-makers. The few young people who access decision-making spaces may encounter disapproval or resistance from older adults, limiting their ability to exercise leadership or influence community agendas. These constraints are often more pronounced for young women, who may face strong gender norms about not being outspoken or prominent outside the home or pressures to focus on care work, marriage, and homemaking.

Institutional and Structural Barriers: Rigid bureaucratic systems and top-down governance structures limit the influence of grassroots actors, particularly youth (33). Although policies exist to promote youth engagement, opportunities for meaningful participation are often limited in practice. This weak connection to governance structures reinforces the belief that participation is limited to executing tasks assigned by leaders or policymakers, rather than actively contributing to decision-making processes. Additionally, high levels of youth turnover and shifting priorities, often driven by transitions such as schooling, entering the workforce, or starting families, further challenge efforts to sustain long-term youth engagement and leadership.

Knowledge and Capacity Barriers: Many young people in Tanzania lack adequate knowledge of the policies and frameworks that promote their engagement in governance and development processes. The lack of awareness is often linked to minimal exposure to local, national, and regional development programmes and weak engagement with governance structures, which serve as critical entry points for accessing information on development initiatives and decision-making (32).

Food Systems Literacy Barriers. Although young people are familiar with visible aspects of food systems such as food consumption, packaging, and waste, they tend to view the broader concept as abstract or highly technical. The less visible areas, including trade policy, environmental impacts, and agricultural governance, are often not well understood or not easily linked to their daily experiences (9,17). This may limit their motivation to engage substantively in food-related policy processes.

METHODOLOGY

This case study employed two methods for data collection: an online questionnaire and key informant interviews (KIIs). These tools were developed in English, translated to Kiswahili, and then pilot tested before data collection. A detailed global protocol was approved for ethical clearance by the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board (HML IRB) and in-country through the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) in Tanzania. The survey was distributed via email, and all the Youth Voices project participants were asked to complete it online. All 30 participants in the first cohort (100%) completed the survey in December 2024.

Additionally, 10 participants from this same cohort were purposively selected to participate in the KIIs. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by a third-party research agency, with each KII lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Prior to each interview, written informed consent was obtained from each interviewee. The interviews were audio-recorded in Swahili and later transcribed, translated into English, and anonymised to ensure confidentiality. A total of 10 KIIs were completed; however, following data quality checks, only 9 KII transcripts (3 from male interviewees and 6 from female interviewees) were included in the analysis.

Data analysis used a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive statistics from the survey data with qualitative narratives identified using thematic analysis to provide more nuanced interpretation of the findings (36). This integration allowed for triangulation of findings and deeper understanding of youth leadership experiences within food systems transformation contexts.

For quantitative analysis, Microsoft Excel was used to summarise and visualise categorical response frequencies and generate descriptive statistics for survey responses. For qualitative analysis, a preliminary codebook was developed collaboratively with a colleague leading a related case study in Bangladesh to ensure consistency and enable cross country comparative analysis. This initial coding framework was subsequently expanded through an iterative process of data analysis. Using ATLAS.ti software, open coding was conducted by analysing each transcript line-by-line to identify emergent themes. The final codes were then organised into categories and subcategories, which were further refined into thematic codes representing key patterns in the data. The most prominent themes were identified to explain participants experiences and perspectives on how the Youth Voices project contributed to strengthening their leadership roles in food systems transformation processes.

RESULTS

Participants from the Youth Voices project in Arusha region completed the survey, with equal numbers of male (15) and female (15) respondents. Their ages ranged between 20 to 25 years, with a mean age of 22.6 years. Geographically, the majority (67%, n=20) were based in Arusha City, while the remaining participants (33%, n=10) were drawn from neighbouring districts of Arusha City. Most participants continued to reside in the same local communities in which they were born and raised.

The results cover three emerging themes from the analysis, reflecting how the Youth Voices project nurtured the development of leadership roles among young people. These include knowledge development and identity transformation, community building and influence, and leadership skills acquisition and application. For each theme, the study also highlights the barriers encountered and the enablers that facilitated the process.

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN FOOD SYSTEMS

There was a strong theme of personal transformation and identity shifts among the young people who had participated in the Youth Voices Project. As illustrated in Figure 1, 67% of respondents reported that the project helped them understand how they can make a difference in food systems. This experience changed their perception, leading them to see themselves as active change agents for food systems transformation within their communities. This identity shift is reflected by interviewee 3:

‘The youth leadership programme is indeed a transformative experience; it has enabled me to understand what food systems really is, how can I be part of everything taking place in food systems and the role I have as a young person, how I can contribute to influencing food systems and the changes I can make.’ (Interviewee 3, female youth leader)

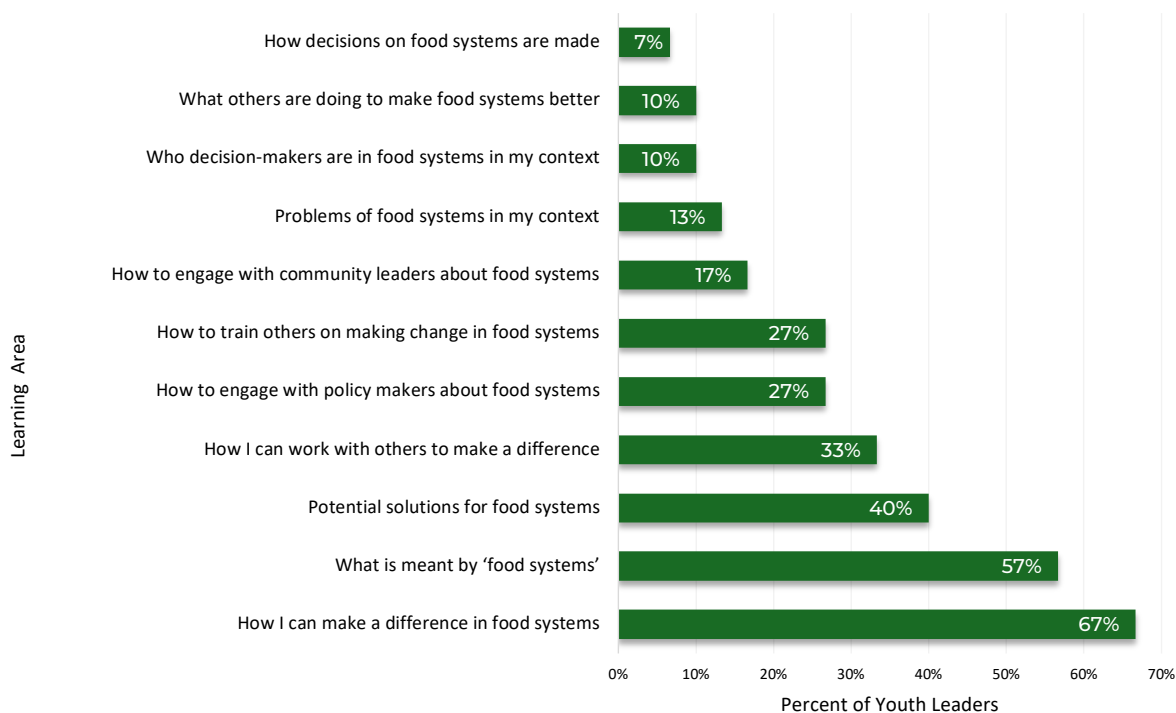


Figure 1. Key Learnings for Youth People participating in the Youth Voices Project

In addition, as shown in Figure 1, 57% of respondents reported that their understanding of food systems had deepened through the project. This enhanced knowledge strengthened their role and capacity to contribute to food system transformation, as Interviewee 8 explained:

'I have now understood the in-depth meaning and activities of food systems. Now I understand it's from the farm, to processing, distribution, consumption and even food waste. Learning from this project has expanded my knowledge on this issue. My perspective has changed completely' (Interviewee 8, male youth leader)

The Youth Voices project also stimulated a fundamental shift in participants' leadership identity. By participating in the project, young people demonstrated their ability to be leaders in their community by providing solutions to local food systems issues or collaborating with others in food systems. This is illustrated by Figure 1, which shows 40% of respondents learned more about how they could personally provide solutions for food systems. This was further reflected in the qualitative interviews. For instance, Interviewee 6 noted that the project created opportunities for youth to discuss local food system issues and propose potential solutions:

'Most of these connections have provided a space for us to share more of the concerns or issues happening within our communities' (interviewee 6, female youth leader)

Through the Youth Voices project, participants were also able to identify and engage other stakeholders within the food system. As shown in Figure 1, 33% of respondents mentioned that they had opportunities to collaborate with peers, food system professions, and decision makers. This is illustrated by interviewee 3:

'I met a lot of decision makers, youths who are in this space. We [young people in Arusha region] also met youths outside of Arusha. We also met youths who are in the health and nutrition space which is linked to food systems' (Interviewee 3, female youth leader).

Although youth leaders had opportunities to work alongside peers and other stakeholders on local food system issues, Figure 1 reveals that few learnt how to engage effectively with community leaders (17%) and food systems decision makers (10%). As a result, their efforts were at times met with criticism due to their limited technical expertise. For example, initial scepticism from local nutrition officials created barriers to collaboration, as these officials question the accuracy of information that the young people posted on social media to educate their communities and they withheld their support. As interviewee 7 explained:

***'Food/nutrition officers were not ready to support us because we [youth leaders] lacked expertise. So, they questioned about the things we posted on social media to educate others. This made it difficult for us; they weren't giving us the support that we needed.'* (Interviewee 7, female youth leader)**

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND INFLUENCE

Across all nine interviews, interviewees consistently emphasised the importance of the support and influence of the other participants in shaping their leadership journey and sustaining their engagement in food systems transformation. The respondents also mentioned that the programme expanded their networks through various meetings between local food systems stakeholders and the youth. Figure 2 shows that 77% of

respondents benefited from learning opportunities through the meetings and engaging with new people in the Youth Voices Project. This was supported by the peer-to-peer connections that enabled them to learn from each other’s experiences and build a network of youth leaders in food systems, as reported by interviewee 1:

‘I got a chance to meet other youths who are involved in food systems. It also gave me an opportunity to learn from other youths and build a network. I have met youths who are doing incredible things within this space, and I have been inspired. We have become a family.’
(Interviewee 1, male youth leader)

These peer connections also facilitated skill development by exposing Youth Voices project participants to more experienced leaders, motivating them to enhance their own capabilities, as highlighted by interviewee 4:

‘I have managed to be around other better leaders with more skills and more experience than me. This has given me more pressure to learn more.’ ***(Interviewee 4, male youth leader)***

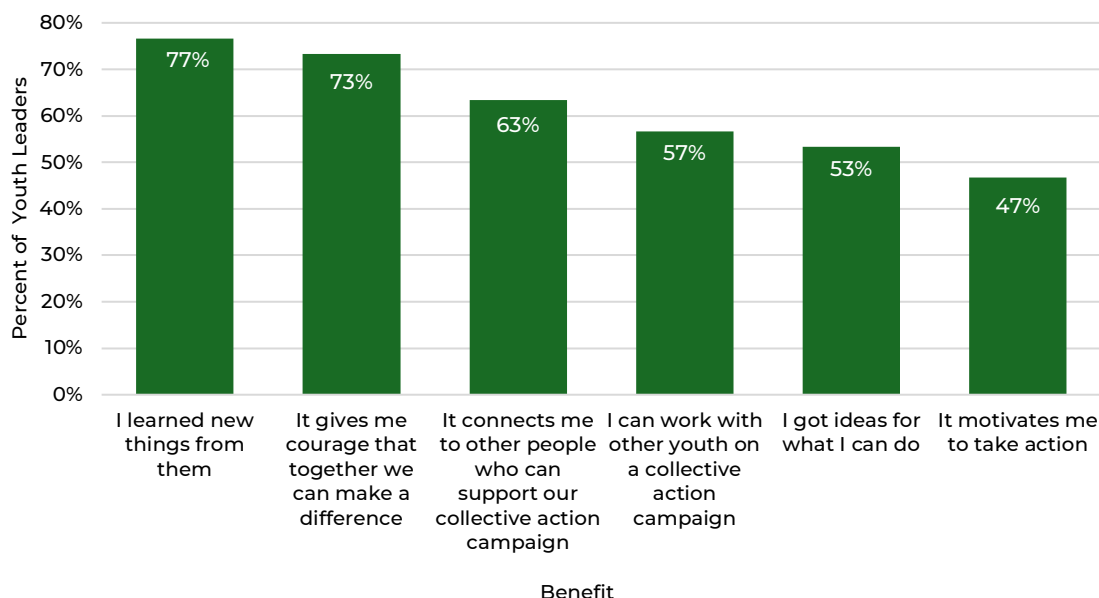


Figure 2. Key Benefits for Youth Leaders’ Engagement with New People during Youth Voices Project

By connecting with other youth engaged in food systems work, participants also gained courage, inspiration, and a sense of belonging. As illustrated in Figure 2, 73% of respondents gained courage from the belief that together they can make a difference. The platform created a community space where youth could engage local decision makers to influence food systems decisions in their communities, as noted by interviewee 7:

‘From my observation, decision makers can see that youths are able to participate and give their thoughts in food systems. Through the project we have engaged with them, they have listened, and our thoughts have been recognised. Through this they have realised that

young people need to participate in these discussions.' (interviewee 7, female youth leader)

The Youth Voices project facilitated various meetings between the local stakeholders and the youth leaders. From the survey data, 96% (n=29) of respondents interacted with policymakers. Examples of such engagement were mentioned by interviewee 1, who explained that the Youth Voices project exposed him to local government authorities with whom he engaged at various meetings:

'The programme enabled me to meet local government authorities that are within my community and to interact with them closely. I would be called for various meetings invited by these leaders, and I used this space to educate others' (Interviewee 1, male youth leader).

This was supported by additional information from the GAIN project's staff³, who reported that they facilitated participants to access multiple opportunities to engage in policy processes. For example, staff noted that through the project, youth leaders contributed to the review of the National Food and Nutrition Policy, the Joint Multi-Sectoral Nutrition, and consultations for Tanzania's National Development Vision 2050. They also participated in two sensitisation meetings with the Arusha City Council management team and engaged directly with over 50 technical and political leaders. GAIN also facilitated youth leaders' participation in the 2025 Africa Food Systems Summit, where youth leaders participated in high-level panel discussions, including a dialogue with the former President of the United Republic of Tanzania, Hon. Jakaya Kikwete of the United Republic of Tanzania.

Engagement with leaders and other stakeholders provided youth leaders with opportunities to interact and secure support, thereby facilitating their efforts to further food systems transformation. As illustrated in Figure 2, 63% of respondents made connections with food systems stakeholders who could support their collective action campaigns. This was also reported in the qualitative interviews, where these relationships became evident as local stakeholders began to recognise and offer support for accessing resources that could enable youth leaders to implement their collective action campaign activities, as shared by interviewee 7:

'A leader in Arusha recognised the youths and he mentioned that he would be willing to support us to access anything, e.g. loans. This leader is a good contact to access such things.' (Interviewee 7, female youth leader)

However, youth engagement with government authorities was hampered by unclear administrative protocols, resulting in significant delays as youth leaders had limited awareness of the permits and approvals required to implement their collective action campaigns. This challenge is illustrated by the experience of interviewee 8 and his group while implementing a collective action activity in a school:

³ This information was collected outside the formal research process of this case study to complement and enrich the data from the KIs and the survey. See this brief for more information

'We weren't aware of the protocols that we needed to follow for various permits that we needed. For example, we needed permits to grow trees at a school we were implementing our collective action activities.'
(Interviewee 8, male youth leader)'

LEADERSHIP SKILLS ACQUISITION AND APPLICATION

Reflecting the aims of the Youth Voices Project, the interviews focused closely on acquisition and application of leadership skills. In the context of food systems' transformation, youth leadership skills refer to the capacity of young people to engage meaningfully and confidently within food systems, advocate for inclusive food policies, and influence behaviour and decision-making through collective action campaigns.

The Youth Voices project helped equip young people with the confidence to lead within the food system's space. Interactions among youth leaders participating in the project may have contributed improved leadership capabilities, including increased confidence, improved ability to express ideas, and stronger motivation to engage in youth-led initiatives. For example, as shown in Figure 3, 80% of respondents felt more confident to take action on food systems challenges, while 63% experienced an increase in motivation to engage in youth-led initiatives.

Figure 3 further shows that approximately 53% of respondents had greater confidence to take up leadership roles. This was well noted through the interviews where participants generally shared the perception that the project played a central role in strengthening their leadership abilities, particularly with regards to public speaking and community engagement skills. Interviewee 1 described how the training strengthened his ability to lead and communicate within his community:

'This programme has educated us on how a leader should be within society. There are many challenges, we were taught how to overcome them. We were taught how to communicate with society, and how as youths we can reach our community and how to talk to them. We were also taught how to convince them and who to engage with so that your objective is met e.g. cultural leaders, or religious leaders to engage with.' (Interviewee 1, male youth leader)

Additionally, a similar percentage (53%) of respondents reported improved ability to communicate ideas and opinions, which in turn enhanced their confidence in communicating with food system experts and decision makers. This growth in self-confidence is demonstrated by interviewee 3, who described how the Youth Voices project enhanced her belief in her own capabilities and public speaking abilities:

'I have become more confident; I believe that I can do it. I am able to speak in public and express myself.'(interviewee 3, female youth leader).

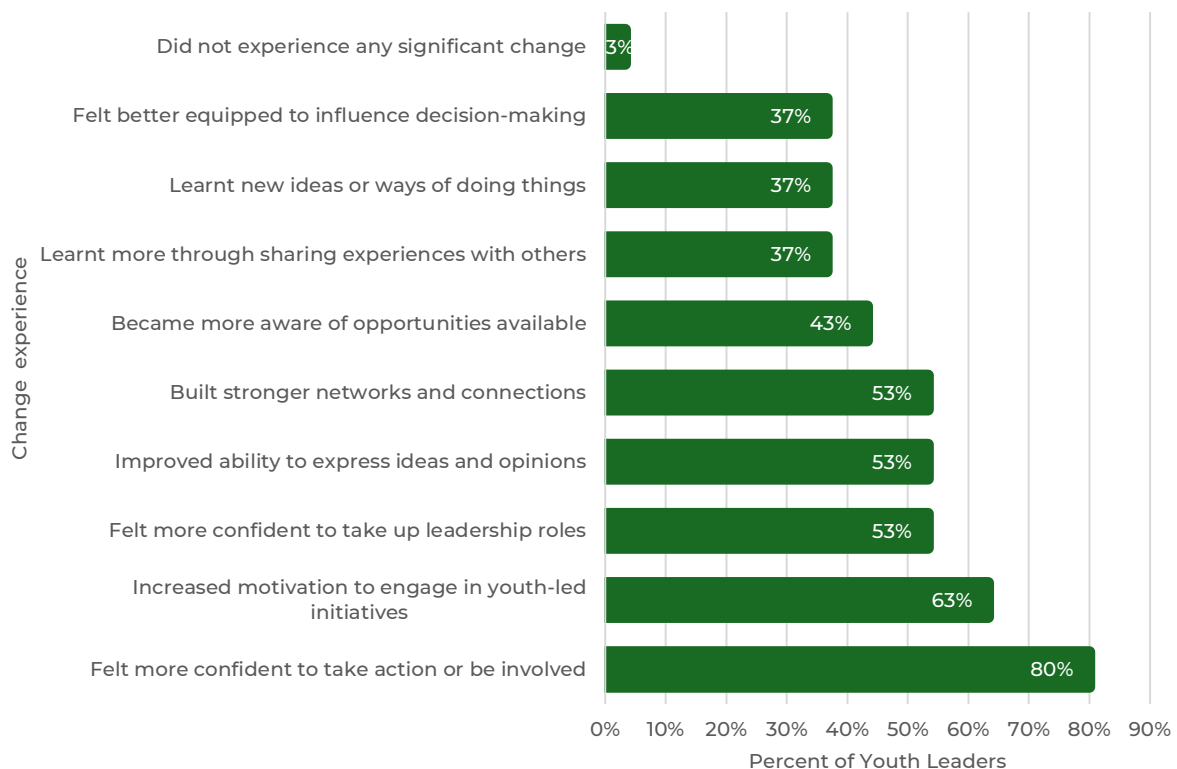


Figure 3. Change experiences for Youth Leaders’ Interaction in the Youth Voice project

Interviewees expressed strong appreciation for the practical skills that they gained through the programme, particularly stakeholder relationship-building and project management. As illustrated in Figure 3, through the Youth Voices project, 53% of respondents expanded networks and connections. They also gained skills in stakeholder mapping and understanding of formal engagement protocols, skills that significantly enhanced their ability to collaborate with institutions and local communities, as reflected in interviewee 7’s experience:

‘I wasn’t aware of the food systems stakeholders. Now I can easily access them than before. We can easily go to them and introduce ourselves to them. It also makes it easy for them to trust us because they are aware of us’ (Interviewee 7, female youth leader)

The participants emphasised how these stakeholder engagement skills would be helpful to them in the future, to confidently approach various food systems stakeholders, participate in policy dialogues, and secure support for their collective action campaigns. Based on the KII responses, young people identified a wide range of stakeholders that they planned to work with, including government officials (local leaders, nutrition officers, decision makers), educational sector representatives (teachers, school headmasters, education officers), community members (parents, elders, peers, social media content creators), and non-governmental organisations. This stakeholder identification capacity was highlighted by interviewee 2:

***'I also learned how to identify stakeholders that we can work with. How to collaborate with others.'* (Interviewee 2, female youth leader).**

However, despite gaining these stakeholder engagement skills and identifying potential partners, youth leaders reported challenges when attempting to collaboratively work with these partners. For example, while through the project participants volunteered to support their communities in addressing food systems issues, this volunteer approach often conflicted with community expectations, as community members expected financial compensation or material support in return for their time and participation in collective action activities. This challenge is well illustrated by interviewee 1, who described how misunderstanding from their community led to resistance, requiring the youth leader to invest additional time in building trust and clarifying their role as volunteers.

***'Some people require money because you are using their time, some people ask for certain support (money, etc) even though you are only giving education. They expect you to give them something.'* (Interviewee 1, male youth leader)**

The Youth Voices project further equipped the participants with project management skills that enabled them to plan and implement collective action campaigns. From the survey data, 43% of respondents engaged with other stakeholders in the food systems, gaining a better understanding of the approaches they could use in their engagements to ensure the success of their activities. This acquisition of project management skills is illustrated by interviewee 8, who explained how he developed skills in project execution, collective action campaign preparation, and community engagement:

***'I have learned how to prepare collective action and the types of procedures to follow when it comes to executing the project activities. I have also learned how to help the community to understand what I've learned.'* (Interviewee 8, male youth leader).**

The application of project management skills among youth leaders was constrained by insufficient financial resources, which limited their ability to implement planned activities. They reported difficulties in covering basic logistical costs such as transportation, materials for collective action, and other expenses required to facilitate activities. These financial constraints affected various aspects of their work, as illustrated by interviewee 9:

***'We needed funds for transportation, and other expenses to cover for the youth on that day.'* (Interviewee 9, female youth leader)**

The resource challenges also included fundamental infrastructure and expertise needs. For example, interviewee 5, who was engaged in implementing a school meals activity with her colleagues, explained how lack of funds affected their work:

***'To execute on these things [school meals], we need funds. Some schools don't even have kitchen appliances or water. In addition, we need to hire a nutritionist, as our group does not have an expert in nutrition matters, either within the youth group or externally.'* (Interviewee 5, female youth leader)**

DISCUSSION

This study examined the experiences of youth leaders who participated in the Youth Voices project in Tanzania's Arusha region, revealing three key factors that influence youth leadership development in food systems: personal transformation and identity shifts, community building and influence, and leadership skills acquisition and application. The findings demonstrate both the potential and challenges of developing youth leadership for food systems transformation.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR LEADERSHIP IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The study revealed that the Youth Voices project supported personal transformation and identity shifts, which may be an important step in preparing to lead food systems transformation. Most participants indicated that the project helped them recognise their potential to make a difference in food systems. This finding aligns with literature on youth leadership, which emphasises the importance of creating opportunities for young people to believe in themselves and develop the skills needed to lead the process of change within their respective contexts (7). The identity transformation described by participants reflects what IFAD (19) term 'leadership identity development,' where individuals progress through stages of increasing self-awareness, which is critical in committing to collective action (p. 404).

However, this personal transformation was accompanied by challenges related to limited technical expertise. The scepticism expressed by local nutrition officials toward youth leaders' social media content highlights a tension between youth enthusiasm and professional credibility. This finding suggests that while youth development programmes work towards personal transformation, stakeholders within food systems networks should manage their expectations and prioritise supporting young people to build technical competence over time, rather than criticising them for what they do not yet know. Similar challenges have been documented in other youth leadership contexts, where young people's innovative approaches may be dismissed due to their perceived lack of expertise, as they typically engage with food systems from positions of less experience and institutional power compared to established professionals (9).

STAKEHOLDER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The Youth Voices project created a supportive community that likely played a crucial role in supporting young people's participation in food systems processes, though with some noticeable challenges. The project created avenues for collaboration with peers, local communities, and decision-makers, which enhanced youth leaders' credibility and provided opportunities to join meetings and events previously inaccessible to them. These relationships helped participants expand their perspectives, build confidence, and feel supported in their leadership journey. The project seems to have been able to position youth leaders within spaces that include decision-makers in ways that not only enhanced their visibility but also legitimised their voices, enabling them to advocate for community needs more confidently.

The Youth Voices project also created spaces for young people to connect, share, and learn from one another. These peer-to-peer interactions cultivated a deep sense of

solidarity and belonging that not only supported individual leadership development but also reinforced a shared commitment to addressing food systems issues in their communities. Participants also described how exposure to more experienced leaders motivated them to enhance their own capabilities, while collective engagement fostered courage and inspiration among them. This transformation is consistent with literature on youth empowerment programmes, which highlights that exposure to real-world challenges and engagement with diverse stakeholders fosters confidence and agency (23).

However, institutional barriers and a socio-cultural challenge presented significant obstacles to youth-led initiatives. Youth engagement with government authorities was hampered by unclear administrative protocols, creating delays as participants navigated unfamiliar permit requirements and approval processes. The volunteer nature of the Youth Voices project frequently conflicted with community expectations, as some community members expected financial compensation or material support in return for their time and participation in collective action activities. This created misunderstandings that led to resistance, ultimately requiring youth leaders to invest additional time in building trust and clarifying their role as volunteers. These challenges are consistent with the observation that socio-economic factors can constrain young people's involvement in food systems (4). Addressing these barriers calls for trust-building strategies and supportive policy environments that value non-material contributions while recognising youth as legitimate development actors (5).

YOUTH LEADERSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURAL IMPLEMENTATION CONSTRAINTS

Additionally, findings show that the Youth Voices project contributed to strengthening participants' leadership capabilities through experiential learning, networking, and targeted training, positioning participants to engage more effectively in community-level food systems transformation. Beyond gaining an understanding of food systems, youth leaders developed communication skills that enhanced their ability to engage with their local communities and increased their confidence in communicating with food system experts and decision-makers. This aligns with Lamm et al (21), who emphasise that strong communication competencies are critical for addressing the complex and interconnected challenges inherent in food systems.

Moreover, the findings suggest that acquiring practical skills such as stakeholder relationship-building and project management enhanced youth leaders' ability to identify relevant partners, as well as to plan and implement their collective action campaigns. Youth leaders acknowledged gaining skills with stakeholder engagement, including mapping relevant actors, navigating government protocols, and fostering trust with local institutions. This finding aligns with an IFAD study(22), which postulates that youth inclusion in rural transformation processes depends on building strong intergenerational and institutional networks.

The study also found that participants gained project management capabilities, such as collective action campaign planning, coordination, and mobilisation. These competencies enabled them to deploy different approaches when working with diverse food systems stakeholders. This result is in line with previous findings emphasising that

strategic planning and visioning are critical leadership skills for addressing the complex and interconnected challenges inherent in food systems (21,23). Nevertheless, applying these skills to actual activities was constrained by structural factors, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and gaps in technical expertise. Such constraints mirror observations that youth leadership potential cannot be fully realised without enabling environments, financial investment, and institutional support (22,24). This reinforces the position of the 2023 Global Hunger Index (1), which frames youth leadership not only as a function of individual capacity but as a process embedded within systemic structures that must actively facilitate and resource youth participation in decision-making for food systems transformation.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The case study demonstrates that youth leadership development is shaped by the interactions between individual agency, community support, and institutional structures. For youth leadership programmes to be effective, they must address both personal development and systemic conditions to ensure sustained youth participation in food systems transformation.

At the individual level, programmes should prioritise experiential learning that is explicitly rooted in food systems by bringing exposure to food systems spaces (e.g. farms, communal kitchens), engagement with decision makers and actors across the supply chain, and targeted skills to participate in food systems policy making. This kind of grounded practice is what allows youth leaders to move from abstract understanding to genuine participation. Equally important, but distinct, is the relational dimension of leadership development: by intentionally connecting to peers across geographies and to decision-makers within policy institutions, youth leaders build a supportive community that strengthens their leadership identity and confidence to engage in food systems policy spaces. The study has shown that supportive mentorship, coaching, and gradual exposure to a technical understanding of food systems are necessary to help youth translate the knowledge into the technical language that food systems policy recognises.

At the institutional level, creating enabling environments requires clear engagement protocols that define how youth interact with policymakers, alongside community sensitisation initiatives that shift perceptions and build acceptance of youth contributions. Moreover, stakeholders working with youth leaders should acknowledge that participants may have limited prior technical experience and therefore provide sustained technical support throughout the leadership development process. These structural conditions are essential because they foster enabling environments that resource young people, provide institutional support, and facilitate meaningful participation in food system policy processes.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Despite the practical contributions of the case study, there are several limitations that must be addressed. First, the study participants were limited to youth who were recruited in the first cohort of the Youth Voices project located in Arusha region, Tanzania. Since participants were selected for a leadership development programme, they may not be representative of the broader population of young

people participating in food systems work. While this study provides valuable insights into youth leadership development, findings should be interpreted within the context of this specific programme and participant group rather than generalised to all youth involved in food systems work across different cultural, political, and economic environments.

A second limitation relates to the timing of data collection, which occurred before the youth leaders were heavily engaged in policy activities. Consequently, the study may not have fully captured whether young people were able to influence or engage in policy-making processes. Lastly, the study relied on self-reported data collected via an online survey and KIIs conducted while participants were actively involved in the project. While these data collection methods provided valuable insights into youth leaders' perceptions and experiences, they are subject to potential biases, such as selective recall, the tendency to present oneself in a favourable manner, and social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses they perceived as favourable to the programme rather than fully candid assessments of their experiences. This may have been reinforced by cultural norms that discourage participants from openly expressing negative perceptions. Consequently, the findings may underrepresent critical perspectives, focusing on positive processes and limiting insight into weaker aspects of youth leadership programmes for food systems transformation.

These factors may have affected the accuracy and objectivity of the responses. Future youth leadership studies could address this limitation by complementing self-reported data with longitudinal assessments from expert external interviewers. Ratings from these external assessors could then be compared with participants' self-assessments collected through pre-and post-project surveys, providing an additional perspective to validate and enrich the findings.

CONCLUSION

Since the United Nations Food Systems Summit of 2021, young people have become increasingly vocal in advocating for their engagement in food system governance and transformation. Sustaining this momentum requires deliberate investment in nurturing advocacy, innovation, and leadership capacities through real-world, community-based learning experiences. The Youth Voices project has demonstrated a viable model for amplifying youth voices in food systems by creating community spaces that foster both personal transformation and development of service-oriented leadership identities. Through these spaces, participants began to shift their self-perception from passive beneficiaries to active agents of change, developing confidence and competencies necessary for effective food systems leadership.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of youth engagement in food system transformation, limited research has explored the specific processes and mechanisms through which such engagement translates into enhanced leadership capacity and influence. The present case study provides evidence-based insights into how supporting youth engagement through leadership programmes can serve as catalyst for amplifying their voices in food systems transformation.

REFERENCES

1. von Grebmer K, Bernstein J, Wiemers M, Reiner L, Bachmeier M, Hanano A, et al. 2023 Global Hunger Index the Power of Youth in Shaping Food Systems. Bonn / Dublin; 2023 Oct. Report.
2. Piselli D, Loni SS, Colyard K, Nordquist S. The role of youth in achieving the SDGs: supporting youth-led solutions for sustainable food systems. In: *Achieving the sustainable development goals through sustainable food systems*. Springer; 2019. p. 229–45.
3. Mugo V, Kinyua I. Youth engagement in agriculture and food systems transformation in Kenya. In: Clemens Breisinger MKJM and JN, editor. 2023. doi:10.2499/9780896294561_14
4. Glover D, Sumberg J. Youth and Food Systems Transformation. *Front Sustain Food Syst*. 2020;Volume 4-2020. doi:10.3389/fsufs.2020.00101
5. HLPE (High Level Panel of Experts). *Promoting Youth Engagement and Employment in Agriculture and Food Systems* [Internet]. 2021. Report. Available from: <http://www.fao.org/3/cb5463en/cb5463en.pdf>
6. Chhetri DP. Leaving No One Behind: Youth and Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. In: Deb Sibnath and Deb S, editor. *Handbook of Youth Development: Policies and Perspectives from India and Beyond* [Internet]. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore; 2023. p. 373–86. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4969-4_22 doi:10.1007/978-981-99-4969-4_22
7. Oyedare IO, Kaufman E, Council A. Building the future: a practice-based approach to youth leadership development. *Journal of Leadership Education*. 2025 May 6. doi:10.1108/jole-07-2024-0085
8. Naseem F. The role of Youth Leadership Development Program: The case of immigrant communities in Canada. *Child Youth Serv Rev*. 2020;116:105168. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105168>
9. Zamiri M, Esmaeili A. Strategies, Methods, and Supports for Developing Skills within Learning Communities: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Adm Sci*. 2024;14(9). doi:10.3390/admsci14090231
10. Huambachano M, Arulingam I, Bowness E, Korzenszky A, Mungai C, Termine P, et al. Knowledge networks to support youth engagement in sustainable food systems. *Front Sustain Food Syst*. 2022;Volume 6-2022. doi:10.3389/fsufs.2022.867344
11. Karagianni D, Montgomery AJ. Developing leadership skills among adolescents and young adults: a review of leadership programmes. *Int J Adolesc Youth*. 2018;23(1):86–98. doi:10.1080/02673843.2017.1292928
12. Cahyati CS, Nurhayati S. The impact of youth basic leadership training on generation z's leadership skill enhancement. Vol. 13. 2024;13:118–27.
13. (UNICEF) United Nations Children's Fund. *Young people's participation and civic engagement. Decent Jobs for youth, Generation Unlimited*. [Internet]. 2020. Report.

Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/documents/young-peoples-participation-and-civic-engagement>

14. Liu Z, Venkatesh S, Murphy SE, Riggio RE. Leader development across the lifespan: A dynamic experiences-grounded approach. *Leadersh Q.* 2021;32(5):101382. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2020.101382>
15. Stockemer, D., & Sundström, A. Introducing the worldwide age representation in parliaments (WARP) data set. *Social Science Quarterly* 2022, 103(7), 1765-1774.
16. The United Republic of Tanzania. National youth development policy 2007, 2024 edition. 2024.
17. Mlay D, Mbirigenda S. Youth Perception of Participation in Decision-Making in Local Communities in Urban Tanzania: The Case of Dar es Salaam City Council. *Tanzania Journal of Development Studies.* 2023. Report.
18. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol.* 2006;3(2):77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
19. Dugan JP, Komives SR. Influences on college students' capacities for socially responsible leadership. *J Coll Stud Dev.* 2010;51(5):525–49. doi:10.1353/csd.2010.0009
20. Rosch DM, Caza A. The Durable Effects of Short-Term Programs on Student Leadership Development. Volume 11, Number 1–Winter 2012. 2012;11(1):28.
21. Lamm KW. Assessing Leadership Capacity in the Food System: The Issue Leadership Scale. *Foods.* 2023;12(20). doi:10.3390/foods12203746
22. IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development). 2019 Rural Development Report. Creating opportunities for rural youth. 2019. Report.
23. Wade AA, Grant A, Karasaki S, Smoak R, Cwiertny D, Wilcox AC, et al. Developing leaders to tackle wicked problems at the nexus of food, energy, and water systems. Iles A, Chang ME, editors. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene.* 2020 Mar 13;8:11. doi:10.1525/elementa.407
24. FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). Youth and agriculture: Key challenges and concrete solutions [Internet]. 2021. Report. Available from: <https://www.fao.org/3/i3947e/i3947e.pdf>
25. The Republic of Tanzania. National Roadmap and Action Plan for Sustainable Food Systems Transformation by 2030. 2024. Report.

ANNEX 1: A BRIEF ON GAIN YOUTH VOICES PROJECT IN TANZANIA

The GAIN Youth Voices project was a three-year initiative (2023-2025) implemented as part of GAIN's broader Nourishing Food Pathways (NFP) programme. NFP focuses on strengthening the design and delivery of national food systems pathways in 11 countries in Africa and Asia. Building upon the unprecedented youth engagement achieved during the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, the Youth Voices project aimed to strengthen youth engagement in national food systems pathways and global fora by advancing the meaningful inclusion of youth voices in decision-making processes. The project was implemented in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Tanzania and supported the global youth-led movement Act4Food.

In Tanzania, the Youth Voices project sought to address the marginalisation and tokenistic involvement of youth by promoting their inclusion and influence in food systems transformation. Through a combination of policy advocacy and grassroots initiatives, the project strengthened youth participation, build leadership capacity, and foster strategic partnerships with key food systems stakeholders. To achieve this, the project was implemented through four interconnected areas: community building, capacity building, collective action, and policy culture (see Figure A1).

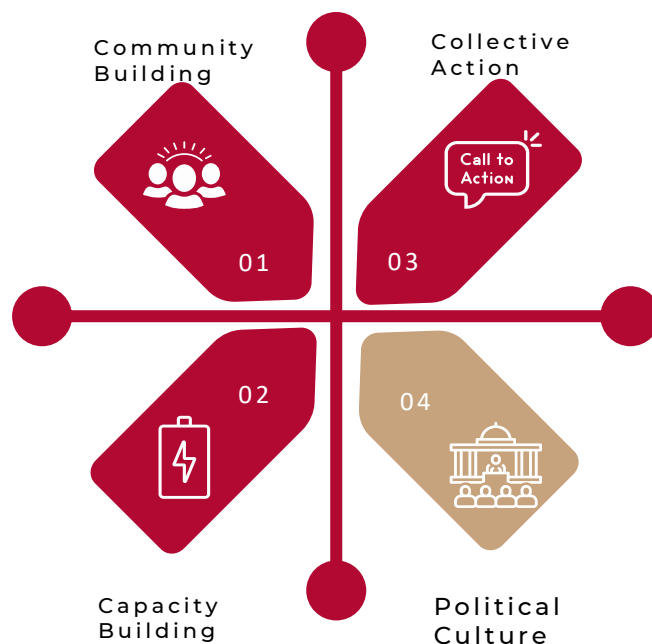


Figure A1. Domains of the Youth Voices

Through community building, the Youth Voices project established a robust and sustainable network of 90 Food Systems Youth Leaders drawn from seven regions: Arusha, Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Iringa, Kagera, Kilimanjaro, and Mwanza. These youth leaders were connected through regional networking sessions, WhatsApp groups, and social media platforms, which were intended to foster peer-to-peer learning, exchange of experiences, and collaboration on innovative solutions to food system challenges.

The capacity building domain focused on equipping youth leaders with the essential skills and knowledge required for meaningful change. By participating in the youth leadership initiative, they developed critical competencies in policy advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and project planning. They also deepened their technical understanding of food systems while strengthening their communication, leadership, and community mobilisation skills, empowering them to advocate for food systems transformation within their communities and beyond.

The collective action domain was meant to bring youth leaders together to work on common food system issues that contributed to or aligned with the national pathways for sustainable food systems transformation in Tanzania (25). Youth leaders independently identified the issue they wanted to address and then formed groups to coordinate their efforts based on the common priorities. The Youth Voices project

provided technical assistance to help them develop and implement the youth leaders' collective action, which took place through events and advocacy, communications, and community awareness.

The policy culture domain was intended to ensure that youth voices in food systems policy and decision-making were translated into meaningful engagement with government stakeholders at multiple levels. The Youth Voices project sensitised and advised decision makers at different governance levels on engaging youth in food systems policy dialogues.

Through the Youth Voice project, youth leaders in Tanzania launched the Tanzania Youth Alliance for Food Systems (Vijana4Food)⁴ to champion young people to actively engage in shaping the future of the country's food systems. This movement fosters youth leadership promotes equitable access to nutrition-related services for improved youth health and wellbeing, and advocates for policies that enhance sustainable agricultural practices and nutrition. It also forges partnerships with stakeholders at local, national, and international levels to ensure that young people contribute ideas, influence policies, and drive solutions that make food systems more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

ANNEX 2. 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

⁴ <https://vijana4food.or.tz/>

GAIN Working Paper n°67

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 A2). 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).

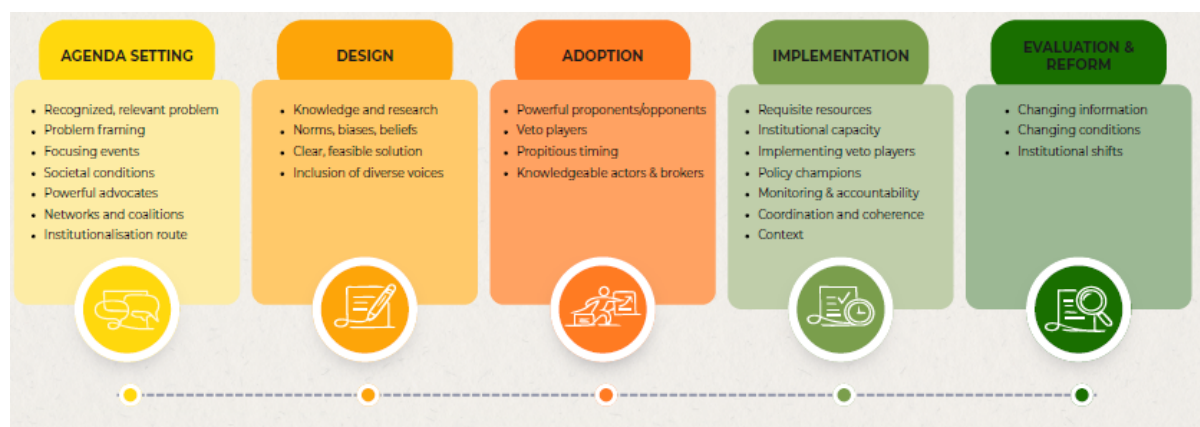


Figure A2. Exemplars Framework for Analysing Change Processes

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 A3).

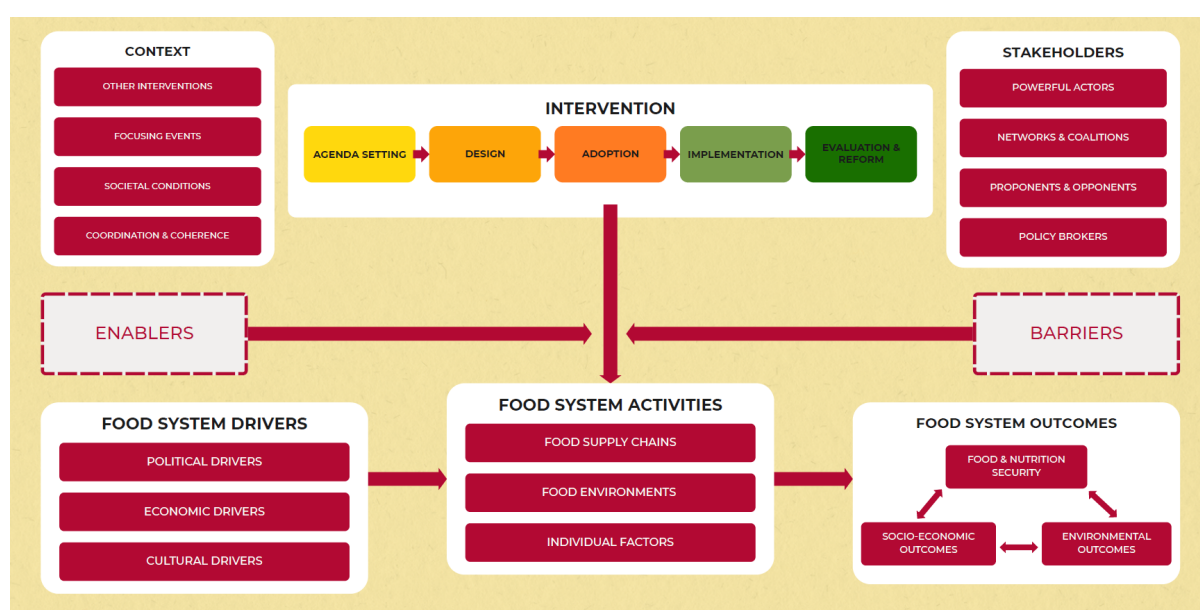


Figure A3. Exemplars Framework for Understand Change Processes within Context

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.

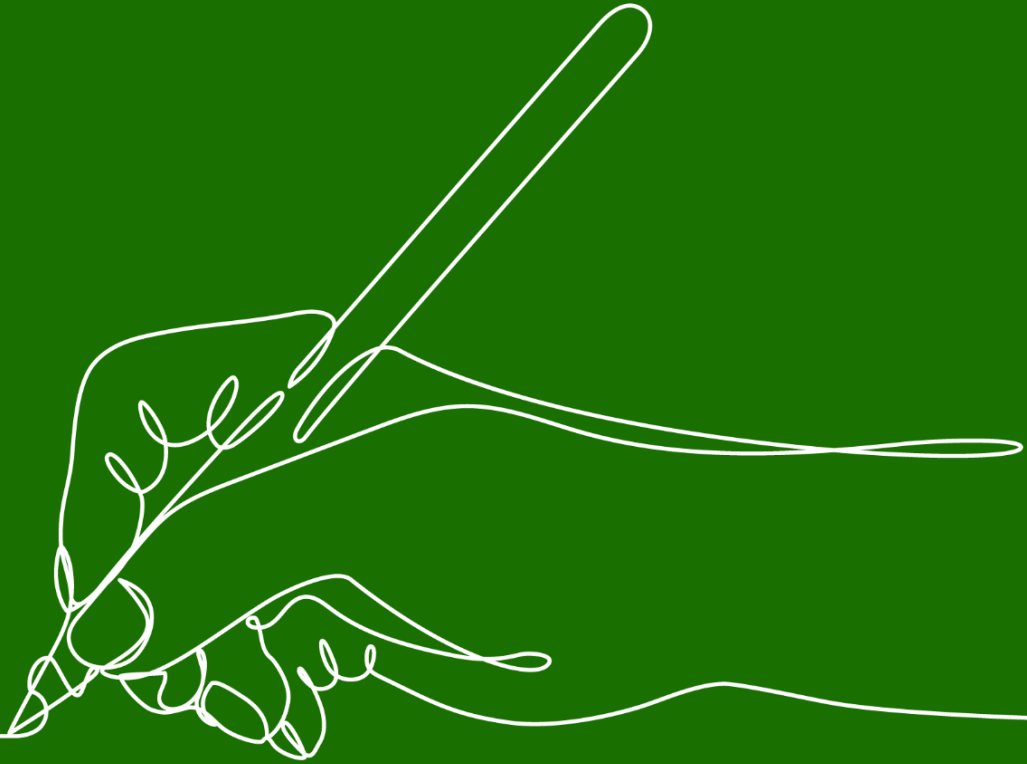
This case unpacks the complexity that flows into that 'Inclusion of diverse voices' step. It shows how personal transformation and identity shifts may help prepare youth to engage in food system transformation; this highlights how 'diverse voices' reflect individuals and their own personal experiences 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 A2: 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

GAIN Working Paper n°67

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 68) explores how youth can directly affect food systems change through collective action.

Within the broader food system framework (Figure A3), 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.

ABOUT THE GAIN WORKING PAPER SERIES

The GAIN Working Paper Series provides informative updates on programme approaches, research and evaluations, and on topics of relevance for our work. The full series may be accessed at <https://bit.ly/gainpub>

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition

Rue de Varembé 1202 | Geneva | Switzerland | info@gainhealth.org

 www.gainhealth.org

 GAINalliance

 GAINalliance

 Gainadm

 GAINalliance

 Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition