

YOUTH COLLECTIVE ACTION AS A CATALYST FOR FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

A CASE STUDY FROM THE YOUTH VOICES PROJECT IN TANZANIA



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The photograph on the cover page shows Youth Voices project participants implementing a collective action activity on market cleanup to promote food safety and hygiene in Buguruni market. All photographs were taken with consent for use in publications.

SUMMARY

Young people represent a critical yet underutilised force in transforming food systems. By actively engaging youth in transformation processes, they can co-lead initiatives, shape agendas, and influence policymakers to address their priorities and make decision-making more inclusive. Collective action is a powerful mechanism through which young people organise around shared food systems priorities to generate sustained pressure for policy change while building capacity for long-term engagement in governance processes. However, despite the growing visibility of youth-led movements, the pathways through which young people's collective voices shape and become institutionalised within national food and nutrition policies remain underexamined, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This case study addresses this gap by examining how youth-led collective action campaigns in Tanzania are initiated, structured, and sustained, and how youth leaders and decision makers engage with one another while integrating collective action initiatives into the local and national food policy processes.

The results of the case study highlight factors enabling the establishment of and sustained youth collective actions in Tanzania, including alignment with community needs and government priorities, ability to mobilise peers and communities, and opportunities to work with decision makers. The youth collective action campaigns also met several challenges, including operating with informal structures that lacked official recognition and institutional frameworks, youth mobility, operational capacity, and management of multi-sectoral collaborations. The GAIN Youth Voices project in Tanzania shows how youth collective action can help catalyse food system transformation. However, stakeholders engaging with such initiatives must consider the lived experiences of young people and intentionally embed their participation within

KEY MESSAGES

- Youth collective action can be a powerful driver of food system transformation, enabling young people to mobilise peers and communities to generate locally relevant solutions that address food system challenges.
- The GAIN Youth Voices project established mechanisms for young people to integrate their collective voices into national policy processes in Tanzania.
- Integrating youth collective action campaigns into local and national food policy in Tanzania offers transferable lessons for other types of transformative processes (see Annex 1).
- However, challenges remain that limit the sustainability and effectiveness of the youth collective action in influencing food systems policy processes in Tanzania.

formal decision-making structures that drive food system transformation.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

In recent years, young people have led protest movements demanding change and systemic reform from governments perceived as unresponsive to their needs. A wave of Generation Z¹-led mobilisations in multiple countries- including Bangladesh, Kenya, Indonesia, Nepal, Madagascar, and Peru, among others – has emerged to express their (1,2)frustration over economic inequality, authoritarian tendencies of elected governments, and the exclusion of young people from policymaking (1,2). In many cases these movements have used digital platforms to mobilise, organise and amplify their message, contributing to the transnational diffusion of youth-led mobilisation across countries. Although the outcomes of these movements have been mixed (3), in several cases they have reshaped political processes and policies intended to respond to their needs (2). These movements have the potential to foster meaningful youth engagement, ensuring that young people not only contribute to but also co-lead initiatives, shape agendas, and hold decision-makers accountable (4,5). Such engagement can be impactful when youth aspirations are integrated into national policies tailored to local needs and account for diverse knowledge and experiences of young people (6–8). However, in low- and middle-income countries, young people's ideas, needs, and perspectives continue to receive limited attention in shaping policies that directly affect their food security and overall well-being (6,9,10).

Collective action, defined as coordination of individuals' efforts to achieve a common goal, emerges as a powerful mechanism through which youth can meaningfully engage and influence food systems policy outcomes (11). As the 2023 Global Hunger Index report observes, 'young people worldwide are forming their own organisations and initiatives, reshaping perceptions of global challenges while driving social innovation and demonstrating a willingness to be part of the solution' ((12), p. 27). When young people organise collectively around shared food systems priorities, they can generate sustained pressure for policy change while developing their own capacity for long-term engagement in governance processes (11). Global youth movements such as Act4Food², Slow Food Youth Network (SFYN), and Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD) have inspired and informed national and local initiatives in Tanzania. Young people have localised these agendas by mobilising around issues of nutrition, agroecology, climate resilience, and sustainable food production, ensuring that global discourses align with community needs. For instance, the SFYN in Tanzania has been active in promoting agroecological practices and food sovereignty at the grassroots level (13,14), while YPARD Tanzania has provided a platform for young professionals and agri-preneurs to engage in policy dialogue and knowledge exchange (8,15).

The United Nations Food Systems Summit (2021) catalysed global youth engagement in food systems policy processes as a means of fostering resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability (19). Building on this momentum, the Nourishing Food Pathways (NFP) programme, led by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), sought to

¹ Young people born in the late 1990s to early 2000s

² Act4Food is a global youth-led movement formed during UNFSS+2 and runs a pledge campaign to encourage young people to be involved in the food systems transformation. <https://actions4food.org/en/>

strengthen the design and delivery of national food systems pathways across 11 countries, integrating youth voices into its activities to ensure their perspectives shape policy and implementation. To advance this goal, GAIN established the Youth Voices project within the NFP programme to strengthen youth leadership, develop their capacity, and create inclusive spaces where young people actively shaped food system agendas, influenced decision-making processes, and drove systemic change. Simultaneously, the project engaged governments and policy stakeholders to generate impetus for engaging youth in food systems policy. This dual approach was meant to not only support the establishment of formal structures for youth engagement but also to identify opportunities for youth participation in food systems decision-making processes at the local, national, and global levels (17).

The Youth Voices project used collective action as one of its key interventions to promote meaningful youth engagement. Young people formed campaigns aimed at influencing either national food systems pathways or global decision-making spaces (or both). These campaigns were structured around the identification of strategic moments for engagement, the articulation of specific objectives, and the development of a clear course of action. The overall purpose was to consolidate and project a unified youth voice on priority issues, thereby pushing for inclusion of youth issues within policy processes at local, national, and global levels. This approach is consistent with the collective action theory that suggests that when marginalised groups organise strategically, they can amplify their voice and enhance their influence within governance processes (11).

Drawing on this programmatic and theoretical foundation, this case study examines the processes through which youth-led collective action campaigns in Tanzania were initiated, structured, and sustained. It further explores how the youth leaders and decision makers engaged with one another while integrating collective action initiatives into local and national food policy processes. The case study addresses these objectives through two research questions:

RQ1: Can youth find an elevated voice and impact in their local food system by forming a collective action campaign?

RQ2: How can youth leaders and decision-makers at the local and national levels engage in food system issues in ways that are meaningful and effective?

METHODOLOGY

STUDY POPULATION AND DATA COLLECTION TIMELINE

To understand how youth collective action can shape food system transformation, this case study focused on the first cohort of the GAIN Youth Voices Project. This cohort of youth leaders were based in Arusha, Tanzania. Data collection involved two rounds of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Prior to data collection, a comprehensive global protocol was submitted and approved for ethical clearance by the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board (HML IRB). Data collection for this case study was conducted concurrently with the Youth Voices Project evaluation activities. The external evaluator further obtained ethical approval from the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) in Tanzania and developed two KII guides in English, which were translated into Swahili to

match the language of the study population. During data collection, each study participant was briefed on the case study objectives and procedures and provided written informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The KIIs were conducted face-to-face, each lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

The first round took place in February 2025 and involved 10 youth leaders from the Arusha region, all of whom were part of first cohort of the Youth Voices Project. These participants were purposively selected based on their involvement in the collective action campaigns. A total of 10 KIIs were conducted with youth leaders; however, following data quality checks, only 9 transcripts were included in the analysis. These 9 youth leaders (3 male and 6 female) from the Arusha region, represented 30% of those engaged in the Youth Voices Project. All 9 participated in youth advocacy campaigns, while three were involved in school meals initiatives, four in nutrition education, one in both school meals and nutrition education, and one in both nutrition education and food safety and food waste management.

The second round of key informant interviews was conducted in April 2025 with stakeholders who had either collaborated with or provided support to the youth leaders during the implementation of collective action activities. A total of 24 stakeholders were purposively selected from state and non-state actors and institutions where youth activities were implemented, including schools and local markets, of whom 15 completed the planned KIIs. The remaining 9 stakeholders, mostly state actors, could not be interviewed due to scheduling constraints related to preparations for the national elections in Tanzania. The 15 stakeholders (10 male and 5 female) included 2 representatives of state actors, 7 representatives of non-state actors (community-based organisations (CBOs), farmer organisations, youth forums, and local and international NGOs), and 6 representatives from institutions where collective action activities were implemented, such as secondary schools and a local market. All 24 KIIs (9 with youth and 15 with stakeholders) were audio-recorded in Swahili, then transcribed, translated into English, and anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis

This case study employed a qualitative analytical approach. The data analysis was conducted through multi-stage process. In the first stage, the anonymised KII transcripts were read thoroughly and key words and phrases that aligned with the research questions were annotated. A preliminary codebook was developed collaboratively with a colleague conducting a parallel case study in Bangladesh to facilitate cross-country comparison analysis. In the second stage, the preliminary codebook was refined and uploaded into ATLAS.ti software. Each transcript was then analysed, with interviewee's response coded according to the established codebook to identify patterns and themes within the data. In the third stage, the resulting codes were organised into categories and subcategories based on thematic relationships and conceptual similarities. In the fourth stage, these categories were further refined and consolidated into thematic codes that captured key patterns within the data. Finally, the most prominent themes were identified and synthesised to document how youth collective action campaigns shaped for food systems transformation in Tanzania.

RESULTS

The results of the case study are organised in four subsections. To provide context for those results merging from the data collection, the first section draws on information from project staff to describe how young people went about organising and coordinating collective action. The second section discuss emerging themes from the analysis. The third discusses the mutual perceptions between youth leaders and decision makers regarding youth engagement in food systems transformation in Tanzania. The final section outlines barriers that constrain the sustainability of youth-led collective actions.

SCOPE OF THE COLLECTIVE ACTION CAMPAIGNS

In Tanzania, the Youth Voices project sought to provide a mechanism for young people to come together, raise a collective voice towards a common objective, and develop campaigns or community actions that contribute to or influence both national food systems pathways, and global influencing spaces. Information shared by the Youth Voices project team shows that, with targeted financial and technical assistance provided by the project, youth leaders developed collective action campaigns focused on food safety and food waste management in local food markets, school meals, nutrition education, youth inclusion in food systems advocacy. These focus areas aligned with Tanzania's National Food Systems Pathway, particularly its emphasis on access to nutritious, safe and healthy diets, strengthening school feeding programmes, and promoting inclusive and resilient food systems. Youth leaders identified a campaign theme, mobilised peers, and through consultations aligned on shared priorities and key messages. They then designed and organised campaigns to address the identified food system challenge. The youth leaders participated in one or more collective action campaigns across a range of activities. Table 1 outlines the aim and key activities of each campaign implemented by youth leaders in Arusha region, Tanzania.

Table 1. Youth Collective Action Campaigns under the Youth Voices Project in Arusha Region, Tanzania

Campaign	Aim	Activities
Food Safety & Waste Management in Markets	Addressed poor food safety practices and inadequate food waste disposal mechanisms to create cleaner market environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted food safety awareness meetings with market leaders, vendors, community members, agriculture organisations, and local authorities • Collected food waste and provided training on composting processes in Kilombero, Samunge, and Soko Kuu markets • Trained vendors on proper food handling and storage • Conducted market hygiene outreach activities using posters and banners • Provided market clean-up equipment: brooms, dustbins, aprons, gloves
School Meals	Promoted healthy school meals and engaged parents and guardians to address malnutrition among school-aged children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forged partnerships with school leadership and parents to support local school meals programmes • Established school nutrition clubs • Planted fruit trees and vegetable gardens at schools • Organised student dialogues, cooking demonstrations, and field visits • Advocated for nutritious school meal programmes and encouraged parents to support
Nutrition Education	Improved nutrition security and healthy diets for the youth and other community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained young people on eco-friendly farming techniques in urban areas • Planted fruit trees near schools to support local food production and dietary diversity • Conducted advocacy meetings with local stakeholders on agroecological practices • Established community demonstration gardens with fruits and vegetables • Conducted nutrition and food safety awareness campaigns on social media • Distributed cartoon-based nutrition education booklets and provided seedlings to schools
Youth Inclusion in Food System Decision-Making and Policy processes	Supported youth to play an active role in shaping food systems and influencing food systems policy outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organised youth-led dialogues and forums • Held online training sessions on food policy, advocacy, and leadership • Facilitated youth participation in policy platforms and committees • Raised public awareness through national events and stakeholder meetings • Ran social media campaigns to amplify youth voices and stimulate a broader engagement in policy processes

EMERGING THEMES FROM THE ANALYSIS

Through qualitative analysis of participants' responses, four major themes emerged, illustrating how youth leaders leveraged collective action campaigns to transform the

food systems in Tanzania. These interrelated themes capture distinct yet complementary dimensions of youth engagement, as discussed in the sections below.

Building a Collective Identity for Food Systems Transformation

Collective identity formation emerged as a critical theme shaping youth participation and sustained commitment to collective action in food system transformation. Through the Youth Voices project, youth leaders engaged in collective action activities, working in groups to coordinate their efforts toward influencing food system transformation. This engagement was not only a response to local food challenges but also a strategic effort that aligned local issues with the existing government priorities. Interviewee 8 illustrates this collaborative, strategic approach describing how he worked with peers to identify priority challenges that bridged community needs and government priorities.

'I wasn't working on this alone. We had a group of 5 to 6 youth leaders. We chose this because it was one of the challenges that we identified in Arusha. There are many issues, but this was more of a priority also to the government, so we thought it required more effort from the youth as well' (Interviewee 8, male, youth leader).

This strategic approach positioned youth collective campaigns at the intersection of community needs and government priorities. This process shaped the youth leaders' collective identity and fostered a sense of shared purpose, which in turn may have strengthened group cohesion and motivated continued participation and action among youth participants. This enhanced their capacity to support each other, share ideas, and launch projects that would have been challenging to undertake alone. This was highlighted by interviewee 12:

'The youth have created a bond of being together, helping one another, and generating new ideas. ... It is very difficult for young people to initiate things individually, but once that bond has been created and recognised, they develop a good sense of direction' (Interviewee 12, male, government).

Youth as Catalysts of Community-Led Innovation and Change

A strong theme emerged around how youth leaders employed creative approaches to pursue their collective goals. By leveraging their demographic presence, creativity, and energy, youth leaders were able to mobilise peers, initiate innovative processes, and link community-based interventions to broader systemic change. Across interviews, stakeholders consistently recognised young people as catalysts of change, capable of influencing perceptions, mobilising peers and communities, and introducing new ideas and strategies. As interviewee 21 observed:

'The value I see is that the youth themselves are the catalyst of change, meaning they have a great ability to change perceptions, and they have already demonstrated this capacity' (Interviewee 21, female, local NGO).

Youth leaders facilitated their collective action campaigns through active community engagement, emphasising participation and leading by example. This participatory approach was noticeable in market cleanliness and food safety campaigns, where youth leaders modelled change by doing rather than directing. By leading through action, they set an example that inspired the local community to join. As interviewee 16, a local market leader, explained:

'They are quick to participate, and they lead by example. On market cleaning days, they don't just instruct vendors, they get into the dirty trenches and clean them. This motivates vendors, who see the youth working to improve market cleanliness and are encouraged to participate' (Interviewee 16, male, local market).

In addition to collective mobilisation, the youth leaders worked with community members to develop practical solutions that addressed local food challenges. For example, a youth-led nutrition education initiative introduced practical and context-specific innovations to improve food accessibility challenges in urban areas. The youth trained urban residents to make use of available resources such as wastewater, old car tires, buckets and plastic bags for small-scale urban farming. This approach enabled households to grow vegetables for home consumption using limited space and materials. As interviewee 1 explained:

'We saw that there are many areas being constructed. So together with my fellow youths we saw an opportunity to train the local community to use wastewater for farming. This way, people can produce food more easily, even in the urban areas' (Interviewee 1, male, youth leader).

The demonstrated capacity to mobilise the local community and provide practical, context-specific solutions may have positioned youth leaders as intermediaries between local communities and external development partners. Recognising this value, stakeholders leveraged the established networks through collective action campaigns to effectively reach and engage local populations. Rather than establishing parallel implementation structures, stakeholders adopted a collaborative model that integrated youth networks into formal programme delivery. This approach was exemplified by a UNEP-funded programme on urban and peri-urban agriculture which was implemented through youth leaders' direct engagement in community activities. As interviewee 15 reflected:

'Between September of last year and March of this year, we implemented a UNEP-funded programme on urban and peri-urban agriculture. When we realised there was an active youth leaders' working group, we chose not to duplicate efforts or create parallel structures but instead engaged the youth themselves to implement the project' (Interviewee 15, female, international NGO).

Further, youth groups used digital communication technologies and social media to amplify their voices and expand the reach of their campaigns. Social media platforms facilitated rapid dissemination of messages and established new channels of influence that bridged the gap between community practices and broader policy processes. As interviewee 13 elaborated:

'During tree-planting activities, the youth do live recordings of the various activities. After the event, many of these young people post on social media. By the time the activity ends, everyone shares updates on their social media platforms, and the message spreads widely and rapidly' (Interviewee 13, female, CBO).

Strengthening Youth Voice and Agency in Food Systems Policy

This theme illustrates how youth engagement in localised collective action grew their voice and agency in shaping the food system policy discourse. Participation in the Youth Voices project exposed youth groups to national and regional food systems networks,

expanding their understanding of how local action connects to wider policy processes. This exposure helped youth to recognise that their voices could influence not only community practices and behaviours but also the national-level food systems policy processes. This shift from local action to policy engagement is reflected by interviewee 2, who emphasised how she felt that their collective efforts contributed to policy reforms in nutrition and food waste management policies:

‘Policies on nutrition and health need to be improved. Through the youth voice initiative, we [youth leaders] can help improve these policies. Policies that help educate people on food storage can help reduce food waste’ (Interviewee 2, female youth leader).

Collective action campaigns also created new opportunities for young people to engage directly with decision makers and elevate local food system issues in formal decision-making spaces. Interviewees confirmed that, through the campaigns, young people enhanced their capacity to present proposals, negotiate priorities, and influence policy agendas. As interviewee 15 explained:

‘Youth have been able to discover themselves and become leaders. Some who were once afraid to speak in public can now present proposals on new community interventions directly to officials like the regional commissioner, follow up on its implementation, and actively engage in broader policy discussions’ (Interviewee 15, female, international NGO).

Linking Community Action to Systemic Food Systems Transformation

Interviewees also highlighted mechanisms through which youth-led collective action campaigns demonstrated their ability to link community-level actions to broader transformation efforts. Youth leaders raised community awareness about food system issues, a concept previously unfamiliar to local communities. Through participatory campaigns youth reframed food systems as integral to health, nutrition, and sustainability, helping community members understand the interconnectedness of food systems, as explained by interviewee 15:

‘I think one major change I have seen is awareness creation about food systems and why we really need to work on transforming our food systems. It's a new topic for many people, and the youth play a very critical role in ensuring that the community understands what food systems all are about’ (Interviewee 15, female, international NGO).

Beyond creating awareness, youth-led collective action campaigns may also have led to some behavioural and dietary changes at community level. Campaigns promoting school meals, urban gardening, and food safety practices encouraged healthier eating habits and diversified diets. For example, school meals initiatives supported by youth leaders led to the establishment of school vegetable gardens, which could have the potential to be used to diversify diets and improve nutrition among school-going children. Interviewee 11, a secondary school headteacher working with youth leaders, felt this potential was already being realised, noting:

‘They contribute with a positive mindset to bring change in food systems. For example, before we didn't have vegetable gardens, but now through their efforts, they have established vegetable gardens. So instead of eating only beans, we now

have access to leafy vegetables and other crops like eggplant. This means additional nutrients are incorporated into our meals, improving both nutrition and overall health' (Interviewee 11, male, secondary school).

In addition, youth-led collective campaigns strengthened partnerships and multi-sectoral collaborations by bringing together government officials, regional leaders, non-governmental organisations, and community institutions. These partnerships facilitated more coordinated approaches to addressing complex food system challenges. As interviewee 21 noted:

'... in Arusha side, it has really contributed to stakeholder engagement, meaning youth has been involved, regional leaders, and participation from government and from non-government actors' (Interviewee 21, female, local NGO).

Creating Pathways for Youth Engagement through Partnership

Youth collective campaigns enhanced partnership development by strategically identified food system issues that aligned with community needs, identifying the right people to work with, and activating spaces for individual and collective action.

First, youth leaders identified food system issue they would address and established collective goals to guide their campaigns. This process provided clear direction while anchoring their efforts in context-specific priorities aligned with the selected campaign topic. Through these campaigns, youth leaders translated these challenges into structured interventions, acting as community trainers and facilitators of knowledge exchange. As interviewee 10 noted:

'Youth leaders trained the local community in Arusha on sustainable urban farming, promoted household gardening, taught market vendors on maintaining cleanliness in markets to promote food safety' (Interviewee 10, female, international NGO).

Second, with clear issues defined, youth leaders identified people they will engage directly and those they sought to influence. This approach created opportunities for youth to engage community members, key decision makers across multiple administrative levels. According to interviewee 12, a government youth development officer, youth leaders working on several collective campaigns topic were linked with local government authorities, thereby gaining access to platforms where food system agendas are set:

'We connected youth with ward executives and municipal officials so they could better recognise and support the activities that needed to be carried out. At the local level, development committees chaired by the district commissioner provided platforms to set a food system agenda' (Interviewee 12, male, government).

Third, youth collective action campaigns created spaces for advocacy, allowing youth leaders to act both individually and collectively across informal and formal setting. This ranges from informal community setting, such as local markets, and community demonstration gardens, to formal policy processes such as ward-level committees, national and regional food systems dialogues. Such spaces became particularly important because, despite the existence of formal government structures for youth participation, opportunities for practical engagement remained limited. Through the Youth Voices project, youth leaders were facilitated to participate in national processes such engaging senior representatives in the Ministry of agriculture during the 2025/26 budget cycle,

enabling them to connect community realities with policy priorities. Following the passage of the national agriculture budget, youth leaders were also supported to participate in a post-budget analysis exercise in which they scrutinised public resource allocation, identified critical funding gaps, and strengthened their capacity to hold decision-makers accountable for delivering change. As interviewee 21 explained:

‘When the national agriculture budget was passed, we organised a post-budget analysis to involve youth directly so they could understand how resources are planned and used, identify gaps, and be part of bringing change’ (Interviewee 21, female, local NGO).

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: DECISION MAKERS AND YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

The analysis also considered perspectives of decision-makers and youth regarding youth engagement in food system policy processes. While both groups recognised increasing youth participation, they also noted improvements in four areas: the ease with which youth could access decision-makers; the extent to which their contributions were recognised; the degree to which decision-makers responded to their inputs; and sustainability of youth involvement in decision-making. Decision makers underscored the demographic importance of young people, describing them as a central force for both present and future governance. As interviewee 12 noted:

‘When youth participate in the food system, they bring great value. Since the majority of Tanzania’s population is youth, empowering them today creates a better society for both the present and future generations’ (Interviewee 12, male, government).

Beyond the demographic significance, stakeholders emphasised the importance of youth connections with decision makers. They noted that strong networks among youth themselves and across institutional actors enhanced their collective influence in decision-making spaces, as illustrated by interviewee 19:

‘They are very connected among themselves and with different stakeholders involved in food systems’ (Interviewee 19, male, international NGO)

Youth, in turn, confirmed that applying the skills and knowledge acquired through the Youth Voice project within collective action redefined their role in food system policy processes by changing how decision makers perceived them. Whereas youth are often regarded as passive recipients of decisions, collective action initiatives enabled them to demonstrate their expertise and credibility. This shifted decision makers’ perceptions, positioning youth as active change agents towards food system transformation. As pointed out by interviewee 3:

‘But now they [policymakers] see that we can influence them and support them. Through the program they also saw that we can advise them too and bring change in food systems.’ (interviewee 3, female youth leader).

Both groups reported positive interactions characterised by openness and mutual responsiveness. Youth emphasised that government leaders were receptive to their contributions, as interviewee 8 noted:

‘There were many leaders that we worked with in Arusha. Every time we had the chance to interact with these leaders from the government, we saw that they were very receptive’ (Interviewee 8, male youth leader)

Stakeholders echoed this view, describing youth as highly accessible and reliable collaborators who readily engage in local food system initiatives. For example, interviewee 18, a senior programme officer for the Youth Hub³, emphasised that the consistency with which youth responded to calls for action reflected both their commitment and their reliability as partners in driving change:

‘They have been a great impact to us. Whenever we call them, they show up. If they weren’t committed to change, they wouldn’t be showing up.’ (Interviewee 18, female, Youth hub)

BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE YOUTH COLLECTIVE ACTION

The findings also reveal a set of interconnected barriers that limit the sustainability and effectiveness of youth collective action in driving food system transformation. These challenges manifest across multiple dimensions, including formalisation, operational capacity, youth engagement and retention, and the dynamics of multi-sectoral collaboration. Each of these factors is discussed in detail below.

Operational and Institutional Challenges

Many youth-led collectives operated within informal structures that lacked official recognition and institutional frameworks. While the Youth Voices project intentionally supported youth-led initiatives operating informally, offering flexibility to work outside rigid institutional structures, it was evident from the stakeholders that such informality might undermine both the long-term engagement of youth with relevant policymaking stakeholders, and affect the effectiveness of their campaigns, as interviewee 20 observed:

‘Those youth have sufficient knowledge on leadership and the capacity to carry out these activities. However, the groups need to be given more formal structure. They operate informally without official recognition or institutional frameworks’
(Interviewee 20, male, local NGO).

Planning and Logistical Coordination Challenges

Beyond formalisation, interviewees noted that inadequate planning and logistical coordination occasionally challenged campaign delivery, particularly in resource mobilisation and sequencing of activities. While the Youth Voices project provided capacity-building support, findings suggest that this was not always sufficient to address the operational planning gaps. Interviewees reported that youth-led groups often lacked coordinated, hands-on guidance from adult stakeholders, which limited the effectiveness of campaign implementation. As interviewee 13 explained:

‘The youth lack early preparation. For example, they may arrive at a school for an activity and only then start figuring out how to get transport or materials. If they planned well in advance, the activities would flow much better’ (Interviewee 13, female, CBO).

³ The Youth Hub is a youth space in Arusha supported by MS TCDC to mobilise, capacitate, and influence young people to lead collectively for community transformation. <https://mstcdc.or.tz/youth-hub-arusha>

Challenges Related to Youth Engagement and Retention

Youth mobility emerged as a major barrier to partnership continuity and long-term project delivery. Owing to their age and career stage, many young people were relocating for education or employment, thereby creating disruptions in ongoing initiatives and affecting both individual capacity building and collective action sustainability. As interviewee 17 noted:

‘One thing I’ve noticed is that youth are more mobile. So sometimes they lack concentration. If you look at their age, they are still more mobile chasing after other opportunities’ (Interviewee 17, male, local farmer organisation).

Additionally, participants highlighted that programme-driven initiatives often did not align with personal aspirations or interests of all youth members. While a core group of committed youth leaders remained engaged, others withdrew when activities failed to resonate with their priorities. This inconsistency weakened collective cohesion and slowed implementation progress. As interviewee 15 explained:

‘When we called meetings to review plans, only the active members would show up. The others wouldn’t attend, which slowed down implementation’ (Interviewee 15, female, international NGO).

This challenge was further compounded by concerns related to discipline and patience, with some youth perceived as seeking immediate results rather than committing to the lengthy processes required for systemic change. As interviewee 16 explained:

‘The challenge is the issue of discipline and respect. So sometimes they don’t see the bigger picture. They want results quickly, and if they don’t see them, they can withdraw.’ (Interviewee 16, male, local market).

Challenges in Multi-Sectoral Collaboration

The analysis further revealed that the targeted financial support provided by the project to youth collective action groups, while instrumental in enabling its activities, at times may have undermined youth autonomy and inclusivity in engaging with a broader range of stakeholders. This dependency created participation bias among the youth, limiting collaboration with other organisations and weakening the intended purpose of youth platforms as inclusive and coordinating spaces for food system transformation. Interviewee 21 cautioned that such dynamics could result in youth engagement driven more by organisational attachment and benefits than by the collective action goals.

‘Youth leaders can sometimes become overly dependent on specific organisations. This dependency often arises from the incentives provided or the way particular programs are structured. When other organisations with different approaches attempt to engage them, there’s often reluctance or bias, as the youth prefer to work within the established framework of the organisation or program that they are accustomed to.’ (Interviewee 21, female, local NGO).

Youth leaders spearheading collective action campaigns at times appeared to prioritise visibility over substantive engagement. While youth visibility and voice were valued, some decision-makers felt that youth occasionally focused more on recognition than on the sustained effort needed to influence change. This perception may have risked undermining community support and partnerships, as communities and stakeholders felt

that their interests were not adequately considered by the youth. As interviewee 15 observed:

‘Sometimes they get carried away and forget why they're doing these activities. Locals may disengage from working with youth when it seems more about visibility than creating actual change’ (Interviewee 15, female, international NGO).

DISCUSSION

The study has highlighted the potential for youth collective action to act as a catalyst for food system transformation, considering the case of the GAIN Youth Voices project in Arusha, Tanzania. Despite facing significant barriers, young people participating in collective action campaigns engaged in innovative practices and interacted with stakeholders, aiming to bring about changes; insights from the study suggest their efforts have contributed to community awareness and may have had some policy influence.

The case study found that youth leaders demonstrated their ability to rally peers and communities, pooling individual efforts into collective power. Through collective action, youth not only identified and addressed food system challenges but also built trust, solidarity, and a shared identity. This aligns with collective action theory, which emphasises the importance of organised group efforts in amplifying marginalised voices and building social capital (11). Further, youth participating in the collective action campaigns showed an ability to reframe challenges as opportunities. For example, they promoted urban agriculture using available resources such as wastewater and old car tires to grow vegetables, showcasing their ability to generate locally relevant innovations, which are critical drivers of food system transformation.

Additionally, collective action provided platforms for youth leaders to raise awareness about food systems, a concept previously unfamiliar in many community settings. By using participatory approaches in their campaigns, youth may have been able to increase community members' nutrition knowledge or influence their dietary practices. For example, by integrating vegetable gardens into school meal programmes, youth-led action had immediate (if likely modest) nutritional benefits and may have contributed to instilling long-term shifts in food practices. These interventions illustrate how youth collective action connects community-level awareness to systemic change in food system transformation (10).

Collective action may have also helped youth engagement in food systems expand from grassroots mobilisation to also include structured involvement with local and national decision-makers. By working closely with regional commissioners, participating in ward development committees, and contributing to policy discussions on nutrition and food waste, youth leaders demonstrated their ability to navigate governance spaces that were previously inaccessible. This illustrates how youth collectives act as intermediaries, translating community concerns into policy agendas and gaining institutional recognition of youth as active participants in food system governance. However, decision makers perceived youth as impatient, unlikely to remain engaged long-term, or merely seeking visibility, which could hamper their ability to meaningfully influence policy processes.

Youth campaigns also helped foster multi-sectoral partnerships, which may prove valuable in driving further systemic change. By engaging with government bodies, NGOs, and CBOs, youth leaders expanded their networks of influence. These partnerships may offer access to resources and decision-making platforms or help to establish more

ongoing youth participation in governance processes. Youth leaders' engagement in these partnerships helped to shape the collaborative agenda, ensuring young people's priorities were reflected. However, the sustainability of these partnerships was undermined by persistent challenges, including reliance on specific stakeholder incentives, high levels of youth mobility, and inconsistent participation.

The case study found that collective action campaigns may also have influenced decision makers' perceptions of youth engagement in food system transformation. Whereas youth were initially seen as passive beneficiaries, their collective action initiatives repositioned them as active protagonists in shaping food system change. By identifying priority food system challenges, setting clear goals, and mobilising collective efforts, youth leaders in Tanzania began to build influence within governance spaces. Decision makers acknowledged the reliability, accessibility, and creativity of youth collectives, while youth mentioned that the policy makers were receptive to them, supporting their ideas and contributions. However, challenges remained, as some decision makers questioned the patience and depth of youth engagement. These mixed perceptions show that, despite progress, stakeholders need to understand the lived experiences of youth and be intentional about integrating youth into formal decision-making structures that shape food system transformation. Moreover, it is early days for this type of youth engagement: while strong initial steps have been taken and good intentions exist on both sides, there is not yet concrete evidence of youth engagement directly contributing to policy change.

KEY LESSON LEARNED

Youth collective action can be a powerful driver of food system transformation.

Individually, young people tend to work on multiple food system issues at the same time, thereby spreading their efforts too thin. Consequently, their actions may not be aligned towards a common goal. The collective action approach used in the Youth Voices project addressed this gap by encouraging young people to work together on selected campaign topics aligned with national food systems pathways, while also mobilising their peers and communities. Through collective action youth-led initiatives remained organic while also building collaboration, trust and solidarity among participants. These collective efforts contributed to generating locally relevant solutions to food system challenges. In addition, participatory campaigns raised awareness, influenced community behaviours, and helped connect grassroots action to broader policy and governance spaces.

Engaging youth in multi-sectoral partnerships and structured decision-making enhances their influence and agency. By establishing strong collaboration between youth groups, government, NGOs, and CBOs, young people gained access to platforms and ensured that youth priorities are considered in food system governance. Through these efforts, youth could shift perceptions of themselves among decision-makers, moving from being seen as passive beneficiaries to recognised agents of change.

Ensuring sustainability and impact of youth collective action campaigns requires deliberate strategies. While youth collective action showed promise, challenges such as dependency on incentives, inconsistent participation, and limited evidence of direct policy impact highlight the need for intentional integration of youth into formal decision-making structures to maintain long-term engagement and influence. Youth leadership programmes should support the establishment of formal structures for youth groups engaged in collective campaigns, providing training on governance, group registration,

resource mobilisation, and management, as well as guidance on planning and implementing their activities effectively.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This case study had potential limitations that should be acknowledged. The Youth Voices project was designed to integrate youth voices in food policy processes, including the national pathways for sustainable food systems transformation in Tanzania (18). However, the case study draws on data from collective action campaigns in Arusha region, which focused on four main areas of intervention. While these findings provide insights into the role of collective action campaigns in shaping food systems transformation, they cannot be generalised to the broader national food system transformation pathways, which encompass additional domains and processes not captured in this study. The findings should therefore be interpreted within the programmatic and thematic interventions areas context of the Youth Voices project in Arusha.

Second, this study relied on cross-sectional data collected during a project evaluation exercise. The findings cannot provide insights on changes in formation, coordination, and contribution of youth collective action campaigns in food systems transformation. Future studies should use a longitudinal study design that follows campaigns across multiple phases to capture how youth collective action campaigns evolve, how relationships between youth leaders and stakeholders develop, and whether early policy gains lead to sustained influence in food systems governance.

Third, data collection for this case study took place alongside the project's external evaluation, which presents some limitations. Participants may have shaped their responses to emphasise successes rather than openly discussing the processes on how collective action operated. In addition, the evaluator's approach may have restricted the depth of inquiry and excluded views outside the project scope. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect the complexity of youth collective action in food systems or be easily generalised beyond programme-supported initiatives.

Lastly, data collection coincided with the national electoral preparation period in Tanzania. As a result, most of the targeted state actors were unavailable due to political commitments. This is a significant limitation given that government officials are the primary targets of youth advocacy and key decision-makers in food policy processes. Consequently, the findings reflect mainly perspectives of youth and local decision makers, while the government's perspectives on youth collective action's influence on food policy remains under-explored. Future research on youth movements could explore how policymakers support and perceive youth collective action, whether they consider youth-identified issues as national policy priorities, and what factors influence their responsiveness to youth advocacy.

CONCLUSION

Youth collective action has been suggested as a powerful mechanism for advancing food system transformation. To support the implementation of Tanzania's national roadmap and action plan for sustainable food systems transformation, the Youth Voices project was established to integrate youth voices in policy processes. This study investigated how this initiative, through its collective action campaigns, shaped youth engagement and influenced policy change within Tanzania's food systems.

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The case study confirmed the potential for youth collective action campaigns to serve as catalysts for food system transformation by linking grassroots innovation with structural change. Youth were able to come together to lead collective action, as well as to mobilise peers, other community members and organisations to join their causes. They developed innovative solutions to contextual constraints, and their role was recognised and appreciated by other stakeholders. However, individual, structural, and institutional challenges did place some limits on the depth and sustainability of youth engagement in collective action initiatives. Addressing these barriers – or choosing approaches where actions can succeed despite them – can help to leverage the potential of young people to shape their food systems in line with their needs and preferences.

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

THE EXEMPLARS OF FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

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

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

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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

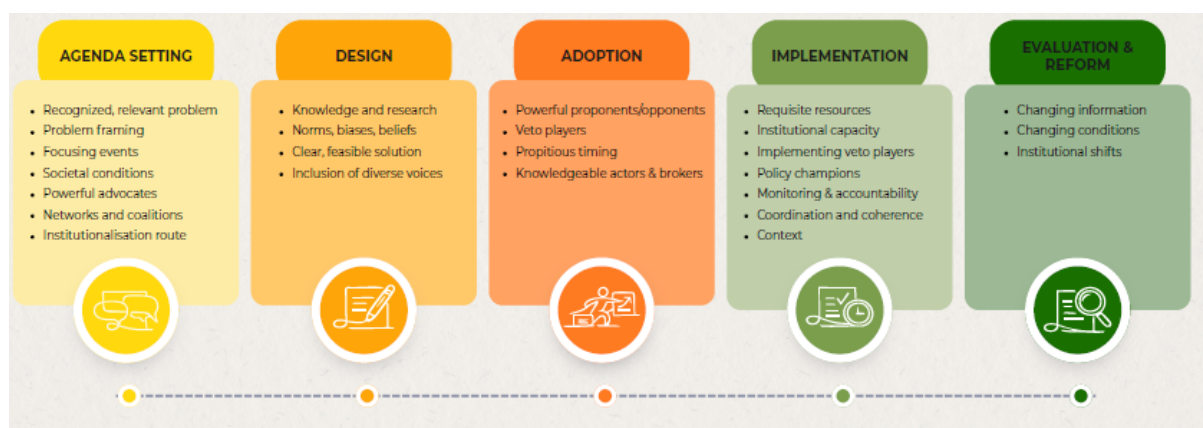


Figure A1. Exemplars Framework for Analysing Change Processes

The exemplars framework specifies a set of research questions that connect to each phase and can be applied to individual cases where relevant. The framework is meant to be a flexible tool, which can be adopted to context but should provide structure for viewing the cases jointly.

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

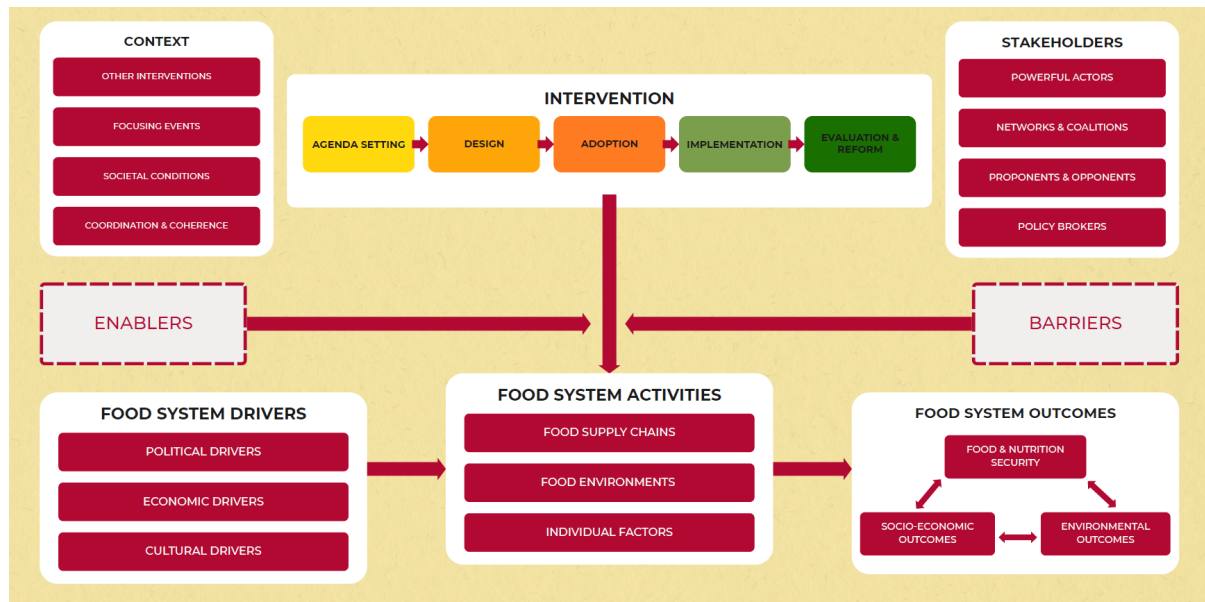


Figure A2. Exemplars Framework for Understand Change Processes within Context

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

How does this case fit within the Exemplars?

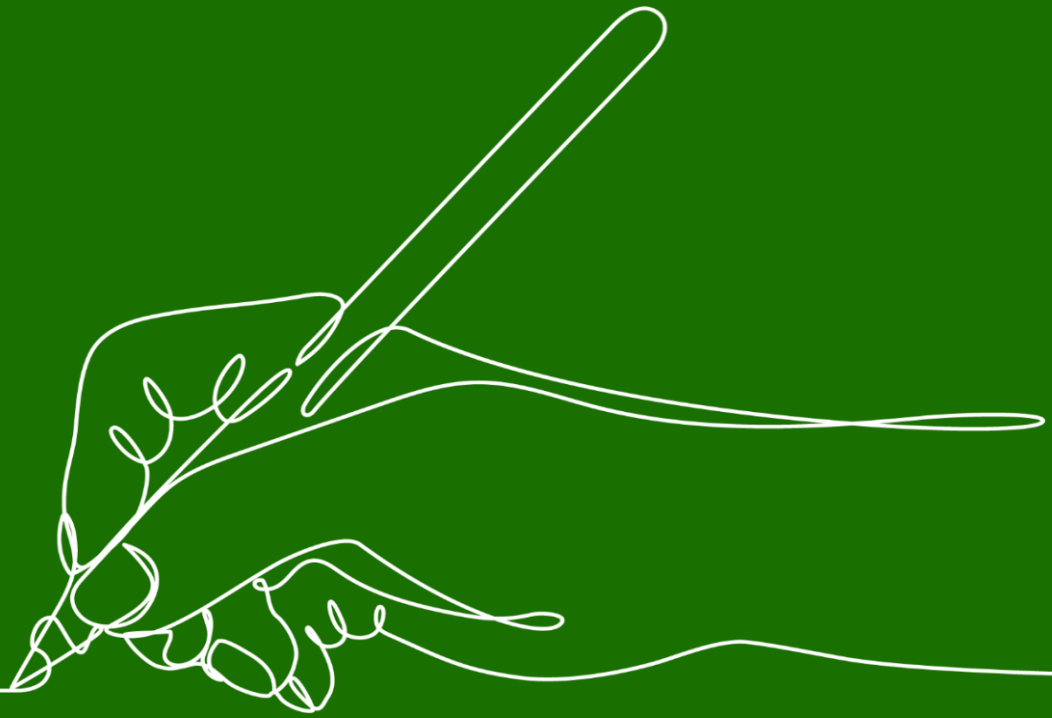
This case focuses on a key element of achieving equitable and inclusive food systems transformation: including a diversity of voices in the process. Including diverse voices may make it more likely that the priorities chosen for transformation reflect those of all of society, with no groups excluded or having their interests unrepresented, and that the approaches used to advance those priorities are equitable and inclusive. Inclusion of diverse voices can also make it more likely that the chosen 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 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 A1), this case focuses on the background mechanisms that shape those change processes. Specifically, it considers how young people can be effective actors in food systems transformation. This ties to the 'Inclusion of diverse voices' element in the 'Design' portion of the Exemplars framework (Figure A1). While a companion case study (GAIN Working Paper 67) focuses on how young people can be prepared to participate indirectly by sharing their opinions and advocating for change, the present case focuses on how youth can directly act to make change themselves through collective action.

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Youth collective action, where effective, could affect many other parts of the change process shown in Figure A1. In particular, it could wholly shift the agenda for what are considered the relevant food systems challenges and how to address them; it could lead to innovative designs for interventions or policies; and it could foster their adoption and strengthen their implementation. Youth-led collective action can thus be powerful catalyst, driver, or accelerant of food system transformation processes. This case also shows how deliberate interventions can help to encourage more youth to engage in collective action.

Within the broader food system framework (Figure A2), youth-led collective action can not only lead to specific interventions for change but also, over time, shape the societal conditions and political and social drivers that set the context for food systems transformation – in this way, perhaps expanding the boundaries of what kinds of transformation are possible.



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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