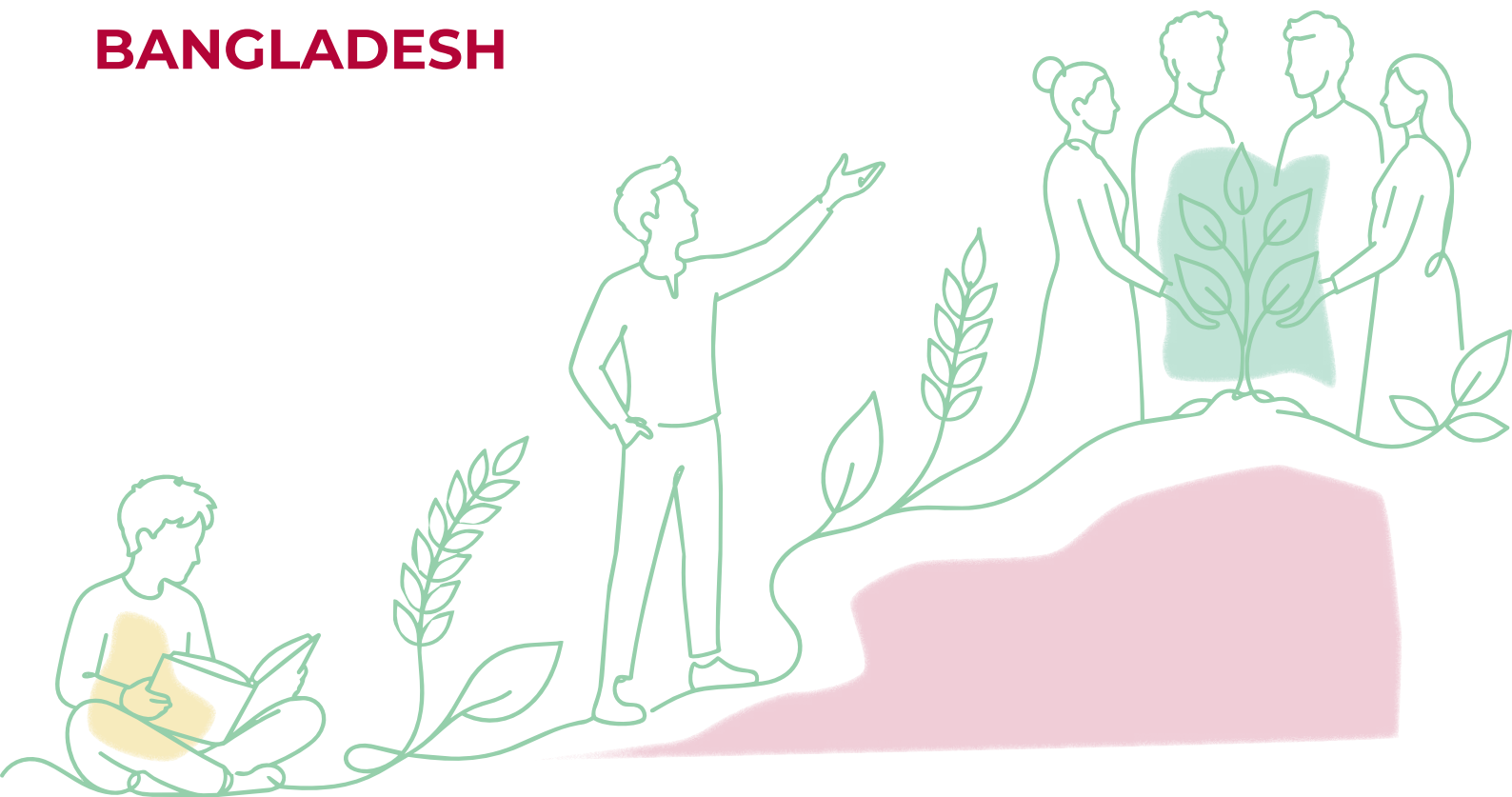




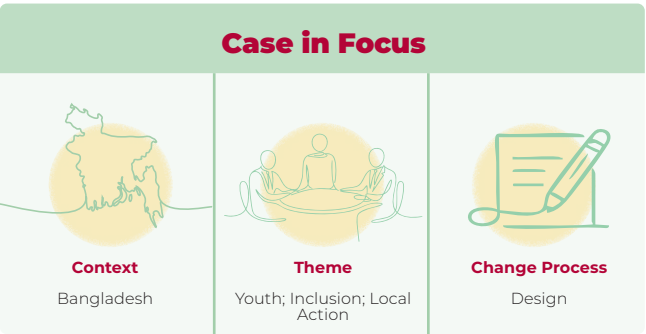
FROM TRAINING TO TRANSFORMATION: LESSONS ON BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION IN BANGLADESH



Young people can play a powerful role in shaping food systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where they make up a large share of the population, but their voices are still largely missing from policy and decision-making processes. This case study examines how programmes designed to build youth leadership can deepen young people's grasp of food systems, sharpen their leadership and advocacy abilities, foster collaboration among peers, and equip them to engage productively with stakeholders at every level towards food systems transformation. It examines how youth leadership can support lasting change—but only where the right enabling structural conditions are also in place.

Motivation

The global food system is experiencing growing pressures driven by climate change, geopolitical conflicts, shifting dietary patterns and widening inequities in access to healthy and nutritious food. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires not only policy reform but also individuals who understand how food systems function and are equipped to act within them. Young people are increasingly recognised as important contributors to healthier and more sustainable food systems. Youth-led movements have demonstrated creativity and urgency in responding to issues such as climate change and social justice. However, recognition alone does not always translate into meaningful engagement. In many settings, young people are visible in consultations and public forums, yet their contributions do not consistently shape decisions. At the same time, young people must also develop the confidence, systems awareness, policy literacy, and organisational capacity needed to engage effectively in complex governance environments. The challenge is therefore twofold: institutions must create space for youth engagement, and youth must be supported to participate with readiness and credibility.



Bangladesh illustrates this dynamic clearly. It is home to one of the world’s largest youth populations, with nearly 30% of its citizens between 18 and 35 years of age. This demographic reality presents both significant opportunity and important challenges for strengthening youth leadership in food system transformation. While national policies increasingly recognise youth as development partners and recent political shifts have expanded youth visibility in governance, structured opportunities for building food-system leadership and policy engagement capacity remain limited.

Case Study Context

This case study is focused on the ‘Youth Voices’ initiative implemented by GAIN under the Nourishing Food Pathways programme. Youth Voices is comprised of four components: community building, capacity building, collective action, and policy culture. In Bangladesh, the initiative the community and capacity building components of the project were delivered through the Food Systems Youth Leadership (FoSYL) Training, in collaboration with the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) Unit of the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Department of Youth Development of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network Bangladesh. The programme targeted youth aged 18–25 and aimed to strengthen youth leadership in food systems transformation by deepening food systems understanding and supporting community-driven actions through collective action campaigns, enabling participants to apply experiential learning in real-world contexts and build the confidence and capacities required for engagement in policy and decision-making spaces.

This case study explores how the training contributed to the development of youth leadership and advocacy capacities through community engagement and identifies the enablers and barriers shaping youth engagement in food system transformation.

Data for this case study were collected in three phases between June 2024 and July 2025, corresponding to different stages of programme implementation and follow-up. A total of 20 individual interviews were conducted with youth leaders and local stakeholders who had engaged with the youth leaders through collective action activities. In addition, one focus group discussion was held with six youth leaders to explore their experiences, perceived impacts of the training, and reflections on their collective action initiatives. All interviews were conducted in Bangla, translated into English, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis.

This case study was developed as part of the ‘Exemplars of Food System Change’ project of the Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which seeks to document examples of food system transformation in action and explore what enables and holds back change. You can access the full report for this case study at <https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.72>, and all the case studies here: <https://www.gainhealth.org/exemplars>

Emerging Awareness of Food Systems, Translated into Community-based Actions

In the study results, participants described how food systems learning, systems thinking, and leadership development became closely interconnected throughout the training, enabling them to identify local challenges and design contextually relevant responses. Most youth entered the programme with limited understanding of the concept of a food system. Through participatory sessions and field visits, they began to see how production, distribution, consumption, community, and culture are interconnected. As one participant explained,



We had many sessions where we learned about the components of the food system, and where we each fit within it. We explored how community and culture connect to food systems, discussed policy, advocacy, and safeguarding, and reflected on our own leadership journeys. Through field visits to markets, households, and farms, we saw how different parts of the food system operate in practice. These activities helped us understand the full picture of the food system and our role within it.

Youth Leader (YL) 11, Male Participant, Phase 1



This experiential approach helped participants situate themselves within the broader system and reflect on how leadership and advocacy relate to food systems change. For some, the training provided the structure and specialisation that had been missing from earlier community work. One youth leader noted,



Initially, I didn't have much knowledge about the food system. But since I have been involved in social work, I always wanted to work on food security. Through our organisation, we started distributing climate-resilient seeds in several locations. From this experience, I realised that since I wanted to work in this field, I needed specialisation.... After the training, engaging stakeholders and utilising available privileges—whether from the government or elsewhere—helped my work and made a significant impact.

Youth Leader (YL) 1, Female Participant, Phase 3





Youth leaders conducting training at local government offices

This reflects how prior activities, such as seed distribution or social work, were reframed through a more strategic and systems-oriented lens.

A central component of the training was developing Collective Action Campaigns, which served as a bridge between learning and practice. Participants worked in teams to identify local food-system issues aligned to the national Food Systems Pathway, including food insecurity, limited dietary diversity, food waste, and environmental constraints, and design feasible community-based initiatives. These included school-based food and nutrition initiatives, nutrition awareness campaigns, food loss and waste awareness initiatives, and climate-smart agriculture initiatives such as homestead or rooftop gardening projects.

Through this process, youth translated conceptual knowledge into practical action. As one participant shared,



The training 'helped turn ideas into reality' by providing structure, mentorship, and peer support. Another youth leader reflected that, as someone already leading a community organisation, the training enabled them to 'do better things for my area

Youth Leader (YL) 10, Male, Phase 1



These perspectives of the participants illustrate how experiential learning strengthened systems awareness and enabled youth to move from understanding food systems to acting within them.

Leadership and Advocacy Capacity Enhanced Through Experiential Learning

Participants emphasised that experiential learning through hands-on activities, mentoring, and project implementation strengthened their leadership confidence and capacity to engage in advocacy. Many highlighted the importance of combining theoretical knowledge with practical application. As one focus group participant noted, 'Gaining theoretical knowledge is important, but applying that knowledge practically is equally important.'

Beyond technical content on food systems, participants valued the development of 'soft skills' such as communication, resilience, and facilitation. Leadership was not described as a passive outcome of training, but as a continuous process requiring persistence and effort particularly when engaging policymakers. One participant reflected,



The first challenge is reaching policymakers whether they listen or not comes later. But to even reach them, youth must go through multiple levels, chase opportunities, and spend significant time and effort. For this, strong mental resilience and knowledge are crucial.

Youth Leader (YL) 2, Male Participant, Phase 1



The Training of Trainers component was frequently described as transformative. Experiential methods such as role-play, group design challenges, and facilitation practice enabled participants to move from trainees to facilitators. Several youth independently organised community trainings, developed selection processes, and mentored new groups, reflecting increased confidence and ownership.

Together, these viewpoints of the participants show how experiential learning supported youth to build leadership and advocacy capacity, strengthening their transition from participants to facilitators and community advocates.



A youth-led campaign on food diversity and nutrition knowledge for an indigenous community

Enablers for Youth Engagement in Food System Transformation

A number of factors enabled youth participants to sustain their engagement in food system transformation. Participants' reflections suggest that leadership development and collective action were shaped not only by individual motivation and skills, but also by programme-level support, including sustained mentorship and post-training support, peer networks, and broader social and institutional factors operating alongside the FoSYL training.

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of continued mentorship and organisational guidance after the formal training ended. Unlike conventional training programmes, where engagement often concludes once sessions are completed, youth described ongoing communication, encouragement, and monitoring from facilitators and organisers. As one focus group participant noted,



In a conventional training, once the training is completed, there is no connection after that. But in this training, they are still providing guidance... and monitoring our implementation.

Focus group Participant, Phase 3



This continued support was seen as critical for navigating practical challenges during project implementation and for sustaining youth-led initiatives beyond the training period.

Furthermore, networking and peer exchange also emerged as key enablers of engagement. Participants described how connections with other youth leaders helped them access opportunities, share ideas, and coordinate collective action. One participant explained, 'Through my networks, I came to know about the training... and that's how the journey started.' Peer networks not only facilitated entry into the programme but also supported collaboration and knowledge sharing during implementation.

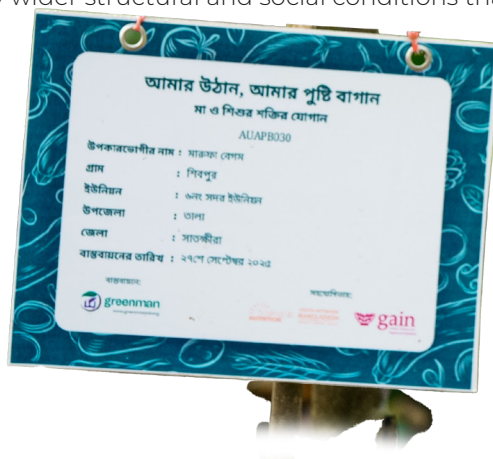
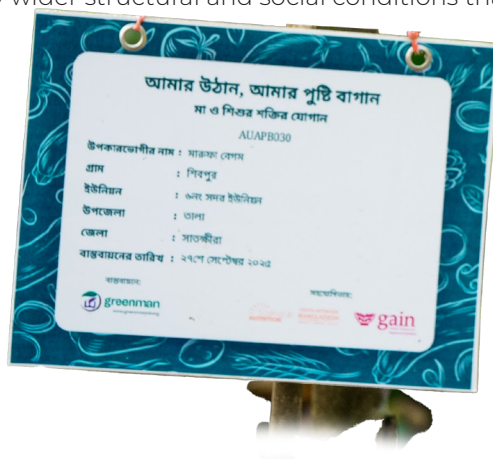


Barriers for Youth Involvement in Food System Transformation

Participants identified several structural, institutional, and social constraints that limited their ability to sustain or scale youth-led food system initiatives. While they valued their participation in the FoSYL training, many emphasised that similar leadership and training opportunities remain limited in Bangladesh. As one participant noted, ‘We have resources, but we lack opportunities... such training is rare in Bangladesh’ (Youth Leader (YL) 2, Phase 3).

These reflections point to broader gaps in the youth leadership ecosystem beyond the programme itself. Financial and logistical challenges were also consistently mentioned. Participants explained that motivation and leadership skills alone were insufficient to maintain or expand community initiatives without continued funding and organisational support. Limited resources often shaped the scope, frequency, and sustainability of their activities. Besides, engagement with government institutions, though necessary for implementation, was sometimes hindered by bureaucratic processes and inconsistent cooperation. Even where approval was granted, administrative delays slowed progress and reduced momentum. Moreover, female participants described additional gender-related constraints, including family permission, mobility limitations, and social expectations, which affected both participation and sustained engagement.

These barriers together demonstrate that youth involvement in food system transformation is influenced not only by individual capacity and programme design, but also by wider structural and social conditions that shape opportunities for sustained action.



THE KEY ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION	
ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Individual motivation and skills.	Limited leadership development and training opportunities.
Training support, including post-training support.	Lack of financial and organisational support.
Sustained mentorship.	Lengthy bureaucratic process and inconsistent cooperation.
Peer Networks.	Gendered barriers to engagement and participation such as required family permission, mobility restrictions and social expectations experienced by female participants.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that youth can act as food system change actors, not merely beneficiaries, when leadership initiatives combine systems awareness, experiential learning, mentorship, and structured support. Through collective action campaigns, participants moved beyond theoretical understanding to engage directly with community-level food challenges. Systems thinking, leadership development, and hands-on implementation were closely connected, enabling youth to identify locally relevant problems and design context-appropriate responses.

The findings suggest that experiential learning plays a central role in strengthening confidence, advocacy capacity, and collaborative skills. Peer networks and continued mentorship further enabled youth to translate training into sustained action. However, the study also highlights structural constraints including limited access to similar opportunities, financial and logistical barriers, bureaucratic challenges, and gender norms that influence the scale and continuity of youth-led initiatives.

Overall, these experiences indicate that youth-driven food system transformation is possible. Community-level engagement provides an important foundation, yet equitable scaling requires enabling policies, funding mechanisms, and institutional environments that explicitly support inclusive youth participation. Strengthening youth leadership therefore involves not only building individual capacity but also addressing the structural conditions that determine whether youth can meaningfully contribute to food system change.



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The findings, ideas, and conclusions presented in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of GAIN or any of the agencies mentioned above.

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