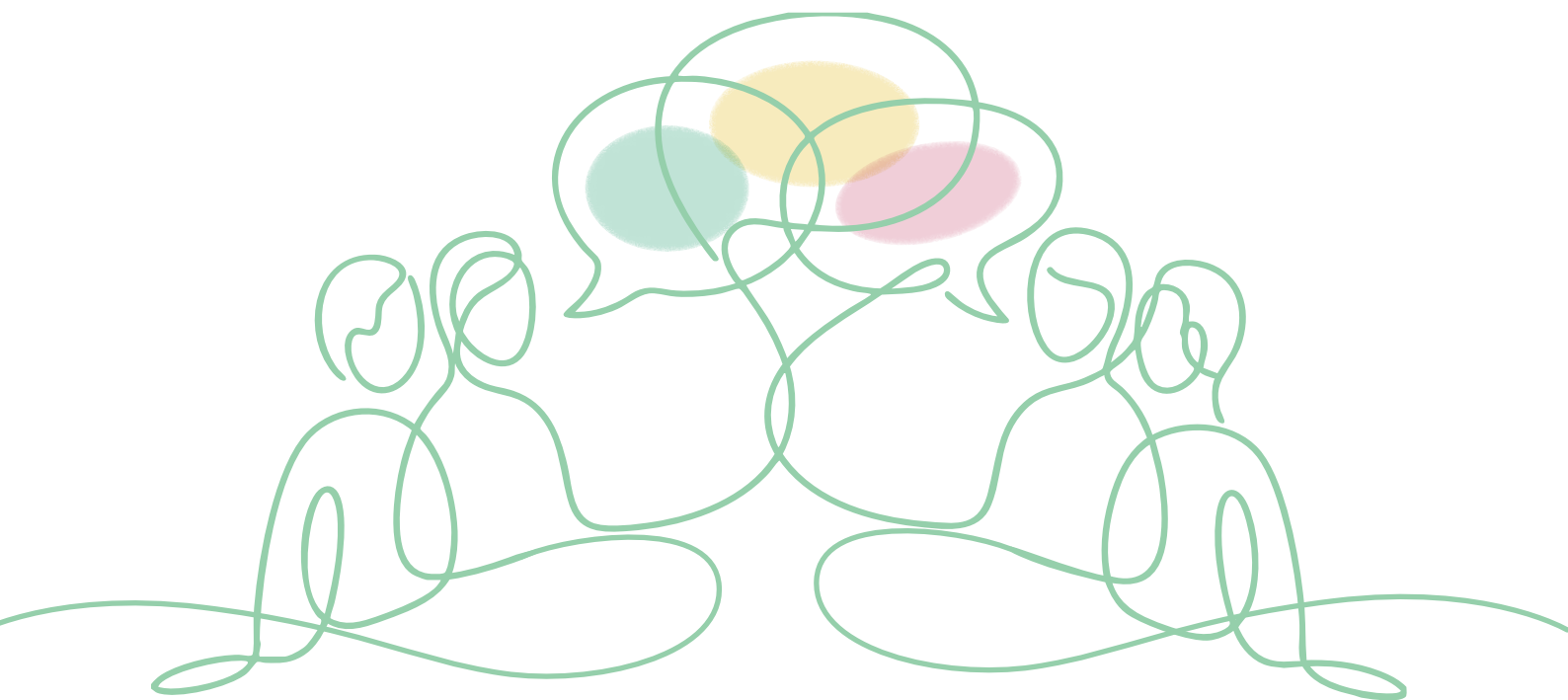




LEVERAGING YOUTH VOICES: STRENGTHENING YOUTH-POLICY ENGAGEMENT IN BANGLADESH'S FOOD SYSTEM GOVERNANCE



Including the perspectives of young people—who will inherit the future food system—is essential for ensuring equitable food system transformation. This is particularly true in low- and middle-income countries such as Bangladesh, where they make up a large share of the population. However, youth voices are still largely missing from food policy-making processes. This case study examines how youth can be supported to engage in policy-shaping processes, and how their engagement may be able to translate into more equitable, and substantive, food systems transformation. It examines how youth engagement in policy processes is becoming more visible and structured—but how the depth of youth influence continues to depend on institutional practices and decision-making processes.

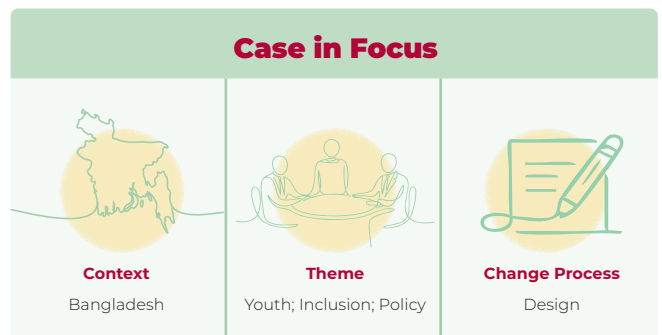
Motivation

Food systems around the world are facing increasing pressures from climate change, shifting dietary patterns, and widening inequalities in access to nutritious food. Addressing these challenges requires governance systems that are inclusive and responsive to the perspectives of diverse actors. In recent years, young people have increasingly been recognised as important contributors to food system transformation. Global initiatives such as the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) have emphasised the need for stronger intergenerational collaboration and have called for greater inclusion of youth voices in policy discussions related to food, nutrition, and sustainability.

However, in many countries youth participation in policy processes remains limited. Young people often take part in consultations, advocacy campaigns, and public dialogues, yet opportunities to influence policy decisions are still uneven. Strengthening pathways for youth engagement in policy development is therefore increasingly recognised as an important step toward more inclusive food system governance.

In Bangladesh, these global challenges take on particular significance. Bangladesh is home to one of the world's largest youth populations, with nearly 30% of citizens between the ages of 18 and 35. National policy frameworks increasingly recognise the importance of youth participation in development processes. The National Youth Policy 2017 highlights youth leadership and participation in decision-making as national priorities, while Bangladesh's UNFSS National Pathway identifies youth engagement as a key pillar for accelerating food system transformation.

At the same time, recent political developments have highlighted the growing visibility and agency of young people in national debates on governance. Youth mobilisation, particularly through student-led movements, has demonstrated the organisational capacity and influence of young people in shaping public discussions. While these developments have raised expectations for greater youth participation in formal decision-making processes, the extent to which youth voices are systematically integrated into policy, including on food systems, remains uncertain.



Case Study Context

This case study was conducted in Bangladesh under the Youth Voices initiative, implemented by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) as part of the Nourishing Food Pathways programme. The initiative seeks to strengthen youth leadership, knowledge, and engagement in food system transformation by building young people's capacity to understand food systems, engage in advocacy, and contribute to policy discussions.

The case study examines how youth leaders and policymakers interact around food system issues in Bangladesh. It explores how both groups perceive opportunities for engagement, the factors that support collaboration, and the challenges that shape youth participation in policy discussions. By examining these experiences, the case study highlights emerging pathways for youth-policy dialogue and identifies opportunities to strengthen youth voice in food system governance.

Data for this case study were collected in four phases between June 2024 and December 2025. A total of 27 in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 19 youth participants of GAIN's Food Systems Youth Leadership training and 8 policymakers from relevant ministries and agencies involved in youth development, nutrition, and food governance. 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.73>, and all the case studies here: <https://www.gainhealth.org/exemplars>

The study results indicate that youth engagement in food system policy processes in Bangladesh is evolving. Respondents described increasing opportunities for interaction between youth and policymakers, although practical and structural challenges remain. Participants reflected on changing attitudes toward youth participation, how youth and policymakers perceive each other's roles, factors enabling collaboration, and barriers that limit meaningful influence.

Increasing Youth-policy Engagement

Participants across interviews described youth participation in food system discussions as becoming more visible at both local and national levels. Consultation meetings, youth forums, collective action initiatives, and informal dialogues were commonly mentioned spaces where youth interact with policymakers. Policymakers noted growing openness toward youth engagement:



“

Currently they are also working as part of the government... Earlier their words may not have been given so much importance, but now they are giving importance.

(Policymaker 3)

”

Several respondents observed that youth are increasingly participating in decision-making discussions and policy processes. Youth participants also reported attending consultation meetings related to food systems and youth initiatives. For many, these engagements provided their first exposure to policy development processes and institutional decision-making.



Perceptions of Youth Access to Policy Space, Engagement, and Influence

Both youth leaders and policymakers described the relationship as generally supportive, though shaped by differences in experience and authority. Policymakers acknowledged youth creativity and innovative thinking while emphasising the need for guidance and mentoring within formal policy processes. Youth participants explained that effective engagement required preparation and credible information. Presenting evidence gathered from their community experiences helped them communicate more confidently with policymakers. However, accessibility to policy discussions was often influenced by existing networks, introductions from organisations or teachers, and participation in youth platforms. While some policymakers were described as approachable, formal procedures and limited discussion time sometimes restricted how much youth could contribute during consultations.

Perceived Enablers of Meaningful Dialogue and Collaboration

Participants identified several factors that supported youth–policy collaboration. These included leadership training, mentorship, youth networks, and institutional platforms that facilitate dialogue. Training programmes were frequently highlighted as important for building knowledge and confidence among youth participants.



Organizations like GAIN are conducting various programs to strengthen youth capacity... familiarizing them with policy-making processes will empower them to participate more actively.

(Policymaker 4)

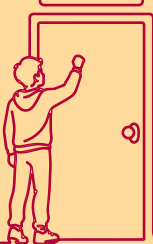


Youth participants also described how leadership training helped them better understand policymaking and communicate with decision-makers using evidence from community initiatives. Networks and institutional platforms also played an important role. Initiatives such as the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network and the Bangladesh Youth Mock Parliament were described as established spaces where youth could engage with policymakers and contribute to consultations.

Barriers to Meaningful Engagement and Collaboration

Despite increasing opportunities for participation, respondents described several challenges affecting the depth of youth influence. Some youth participants felt that invitations to consultations did not always translate into meaningful involvement in decision-making. One noted,

FUTURE



Youth engagement in policymaking is mostly confined to the theoretical stage... policymakers say youth are the future, but real engagement is postponed.

(Cohort 1, Youth Leader (YL) 2)



Limited speaking time during meetings was also reported as a practical constraint: ‘Policymakers give us very little time to talk... the challenge is how we can express our thoughts effectively.’ (Cohort 1, Youth Leader (YL) 3) Access to policy discussions sometimes depended on networks or introductions, making it difficult for some youth to communicate directly with decision-makers. ‘If we do not have a point of contact, we are not able to communicate...’ one youth participant noted, ‘we need a platform for it.’ (Cohort 1, Youth Leader (YL) 8)

Policymakers acknowledged that youth may face barriers related to experience and institutional practices when trying to participate in policy shaping, although several emphasised that with guidance and mentorship youth could contribute effectively to policy discussions.



Opportunities to strengthen youth-policy engagement

Participants suggested several ways to strengthen youth-policy collaboration. These included expanding training programmes, strengthening mentorship, and supporting youth networks that connect community initiatives with national policy discussions. Examples of collaboration were also reported at local levels, where youth leaders described regular interactions with administrative actors to discuss community initiatives.

Overall, participants agreed that youth engagement in policy processes is becoming more visible and structured, supported by training programmes and youth platforms, although the depth of youth influence continues to depend on institutional practices and decision-making processes.

THE KEY ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY SPACE OF FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Recognition of the importance of youth in policy frameworks. Recent events highlighting youth power as a mobilising force.	Participation often limited to consultation reflecting persistent tokenism in meaningful youth engagement.
Leadership and policy training programmes.	
Mentorship from policymakers and organisations.	Limited speaking time in policy meetings.
Existing youth networks and structured platforms that connect the youth with policy makers.	Access to policy makers depends on existing personal networks.
Growing institutional openness to youth participations	Lack of formal participatory mechanism
Increasing opportunities to attend policy level consultations and dialogues	Perceptions of youth as inexperienced
Evidence-based youth advocacy from community work	Bureaucratic and procedural constraints

Conclusion

Youth–policy engagement in Bangladesh's food system governance is becoming more visible, with growing recognition of the role young people can play in policy discussions. Participants described increasing opportunities for dialogue and more positive attitudes toward youth leadership. Although being invited into policy spaces does not guarantee real influence, many respondents viewed these opportunities as an important starting point for stronger engagement.

The findings suggest that strengthening youth participation will require clearer and more consistent pathways for young people to engage in policy processes, alongside continued investment in leadership development, policy learning, and mentorship. Building trust and sustained dialogue between youth and policymakers will also be essential.

Moving forward, supporting youth participation should be seen not only as symbolic inclusion but as a strategic investment in more inclusive and responsive food system governance. While this study focuses on Bangladesh, the insights may also be relevant for other low- and middle-income countries where youth participation in policy discussions is expanding but still evolving.



This case study was produced by Samprita Chakma, Stella Nordhagen, Miriam Shindler, and Mehedi Hasan Bappy; we thank Elizabeth Russaitis, Wendy Gonzalez and Zawad Alam for their contributions to the work. The full case study can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.73>. This work was produced through GAIN's Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which is jointly funded by



Co-funded by
the European Union



Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**

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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