

Engaging Youth in Food Systems for Improved Nutrition Outcomes

Concept Note

Introduction and Purpose

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) acknowledges that investing in young people is critical to address some of the most pressing global challenges. The Agency is a leader in this space, releasing its first Youth in Development Policy in 2012 and an [updated version](#) in 2022. The goal of the 2022 policy is “to increase the meaningful participation of youth within their communities, schools, organizations, economies, peer groups, and families, enhancing their skills, providing opportunities, and fostering healthy relationships so they may build on their collective leadership.”



Engaging young people is critical to success when developing and implementing food system activities to improve diets and nutrition. Photo Credit: Abdifatah Kulane/USAID Somalia GEEL

Researchers and programmers have documented effective methods for increasing young people’s involvement in a variety of development programs. This is particularly true for outcomes like increased youth employment within the agriculture sector. There is less evidence on youth involvement in food systems activities to improve diet and nutrition outcomes, specifically.

Key Messages

- **Young people can be involved** in improving diets through the food system, both as drivers of change from food supply to utilization, and by improving their own diets and nutrition.
- Program design **should more intentionally include learning questions** to understand effective approaches for engaging young people in food systems activities to improve diets and nutrition.
- Considering the different roles young people can play in food systems activities, and the different ways their own diets and nutrition are influenced by food systems, **youth engagement strategies should be more specific** about the sub groups they are engaging and why. Particularly because within age ranges identified as youth, some groups are more vulnerable than others.
- **We need new and innovative ways** of collecting and communicating information to better support young people to participate in research and learning agendas related to food systems activities to improve nutrition.

Youth engagement in food systems activities to improve diet and nutrition outcomes can take place at any point in the food system, from food supply, to food and water utilization. Given this diversity of food systems activities, strategies and goals for engaging young people will vary. This concept note describes evidence and opportunities for programmatic approaches to engage young people—who we define here as individuals between 10-29 years of age—in food systems activities for improved diet and nutrition outcomes. Based on a desk review of existing literature and a short series of key informant interviews, we propose categorization of food systems approaches to engage youth, briefly summarize the state of evidence, and highlight opportunities and knowledge gaps to begin to inform and inspire programming. Finally, we suggest entry points and opportunities for USAID and its partners to continue to contribute to the evidence base supporting effective youth engagement in food systems approaches to improve diet and nutrition outcomes.

Background: Roles of Young People in Food Systems

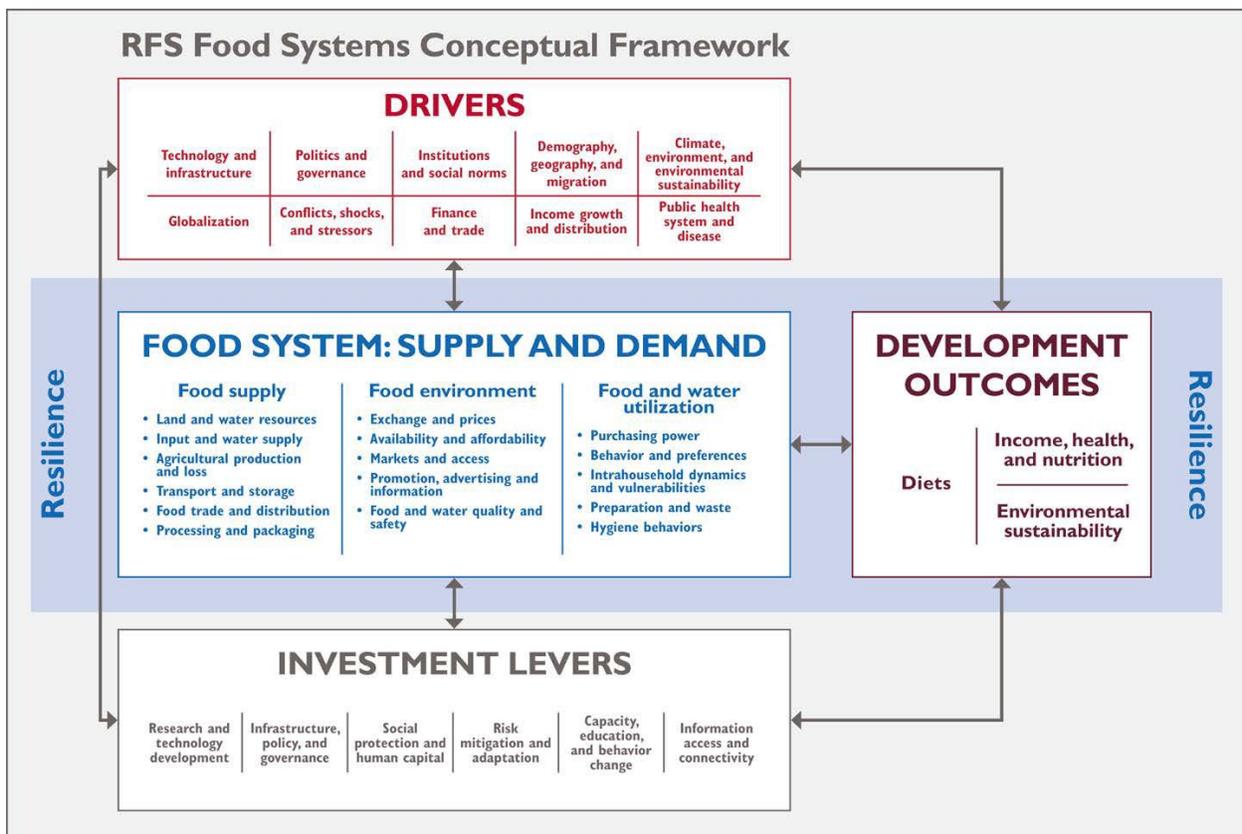
The specific roles of young people in food systems vary widely by age, gender, geographic context, socioeconomic status, and built environment. Young people participate in a range of on- and off-farm food system activities, such as production, processing, transportation, and sale of food in a variety of venues (e.g., streets, corner shops, markets, and food stalls) (Yeboah et al. 2020). Young people are also consumers, purchasing food for not only themselves, but also their families, children, and/or community members.

This concept note uses the USAID Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (RFS) Food System Conceptual Framework (see figure 1) to organize discussion of the roles of young people in food systems as follows:

- **Young people and the food supply** includes food producers (e.g., farmers, pastoralists, and fishers); food storage and trade (e.g., wage earners, entrepreneurs, and drivers); and processing and packaging (e.g., wage earners and entrepreneurs).
- **Young people and the food environment** includes retail and marketing (e.g., restaurant workers, chefs, street vendors, shop workers, entrepreneurs, and influencers).
- **Young people and food and water utilization** includes intra-household dynamics (e.g., children, parents, and caregivers), and purchasers and consumers (e.g., students and parents).

In addition to the three areas above, there are crosscutting activities within food systems that include roles for young people. Examples include current, future, or emerging professionals (e.g., teachers, nutritionists, dietitians, and health care providers), and influencers (e.g., through peer-to-peer, household, community, and social media platforms). In addition, individuals—both young people and anyone advocating for the representation of young people’s perspectives—can contribute important voices to food systems dialogues.

Figure I. RFS Food System Conceptual Framework



Source: U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). 2021. *Bureau for Resilience and Food Security Food Systems Conceptual Framework*. Washington, DC: USAID.

Evidence, Actions, and Opportunities to Engage Youth in Food Systems Activities to Improve Diet and Nutrition Outcomes

This section summarizes the state of evidence, organized by the three categories of “food system: supply and demand” in the RFS Food System Conceptual Framework: (1) young people and the food supply (pre-market); (2) young people and the food environment (markets and retail); and (3) young people and food and water utilization (preparation and preferences). Each category also includes opportunities for further exploration and action by development practitioners, acknowledging that the success of any effective approach to engaging young people depends heavily on the context.

Young People and the Food Supply (Pre-market)

Evidence and Actions

The bulk of evidence around engaging young people in food systems programming for improved diets includes young people as food producers; however, there is limited research making explicit connections between food systems actions and improved diet and nutrition outcomes of young people. There is little evidence on youth roles in food storage or trade related to nutrition outcomes, or on youth in other food systems activities such as processing and packaging. Young people may face distinct challenges in producer roles. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (2019) highlight challenges young people face as food producers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) including limited access to knowledge, information, and education, and land and financial services. A recent global study (Dolislager 2021) found that a substantial percentage of

agri-food sector employees in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are rural youth (21 percent, 21 percent, and 23 percent, respectively). The agricultural and economic geographies in which young people live determine the livelihood opportunities available to them. Additional determinants include access to productive assets and resources, particularly land, but also capital and technology (Glover 2020). In many cultures, food systems jobs for young people may differ between young men and young women. For example, it is common to divide agricultural tasks into types of work that are traditionally considered suitable for men or for women (Glover 2020). Additionally, young people in peri-urban areas are more likely than those in rural areas to work in agri-food and non-food sectors (Dolislager 2021).

The experiences of development practitioners point to promising models and best practices for engaging young people in food systems activities. For example, activities can address the challenge of access to productive resources by including young people in roles as technical service providers. Examples of specific roles for young people include village-based agricultural advisors or livestock care providers. A noteworthy project example is the [Feed the Future Bangladesh Livestock Production for Improved Nutrition Activity](#), which recruited youth as livestock advisors. Designs where young people are paid are more sustainable than volunteer-based scenarios. The [Feed the Future Tanzania NAFKA project](#) is one such example where young people worked as agriculture advisors and were paid as extension agents. These two examples involve working in response to existing need and demand. It is important to avoid scenarios where youth are positioned in roles outside of existing markets or in roles that are completely dependent on a short-term project. Helping to facilitate access to more permanent jobs will contribute to sustainability and lasting impact beyond the life of a project. Additionally, facilitating access to more permanent employment may also help increase income among young people, improving their ability to access a healthy diet.

Opportunities

- Consider innovations already happening in food production, such as new value chains (e.g., chia seeds and chilies in Rwanda). Implementing partner observations suggest that new, high value commodities may present opportunities for young people due to less competition with more established producers. Such entry points may present opportunities to work towards diet-related outcomes like increased availability of healthy foods; at the same time, additional income for young people can increase affordability of and access to a healthy diet.
- Consider roles for young people in food processing activities. Food processing activities can increase access to, and availability and desirability of, healthy foods while also potentially increasing young people's income.

Young People and the Food Environment (Markets and Retail)

Evidence and Actions

Evidence on young people's interaction with the food environment is inadequate, given its potential as an entry point for food systems programming. Additional evidence is needed on how food environments shape the food preferences and food-related behaviors of young people and affect their food security and diet quality (Micha et al., 2018). Youth working in off-farm food-system jobs as waged workers is quite common. This type of work typically consists of street vendors, retail shops, foodservice, and food-related entrepreneurship; this range demonstrates that young people participate in food environments in many different ways. There is very little evidence on engaging retailers and marketers in activities designed to improve diets generally, let alone for young people specifically. Similarly, little evidence exists related to improving young people's diet and nutrition outcomes via food environment activities.

Case Study: Learning from Fijian Youth Entrepreneurs as Potential Food Systems Participants

Evidence from qualitative interviews of four Fijian youth entrepreneurs (juice, fruit/vegetable, seafood, and ice pop vendors) who engaged with food systems to promote better health identified three key themes related to improving nutrition outcomes within their specific context. They are food and health, family and tradition, and social enterprise. The young entrepreneurs suggested the need to shift the way food is perceived, and that good food and health, and family and tradition should be the focus of conversation around healthy diets. The participating young people also described significant barriers to developing their businesses, including bureaucracy, and a lack of networking, promotional, training, and investment opportunities. Because of these barriers, young people often deferred starting their business until financially viable. Additionally, youth entrepreneurs often worked alone, resulting in social isolation as a common issue. A key driver of the Fijian young people's business development goals was the desire to be a role model for others, their children, and the next generation, and to support other youth entrepreneurs.

Source: Conn 2021

Opportunities

- Young people may encounter multiple food environments in one day, including home, school, the workplace, and formal and informal markets. Therefore, consider where young people have the most influence to evoke positive change, or where they themselves are the most influenced.
- Pay attention to emerging sectors and look for new opportunities. For example, app-based food vendors or delivery services may create unique positions for young people to shape the food environments in which they participate.

Young People and Food and Water Utilization (Preparation and Preferences)

Evidence and Actions

Family and household dynamics play a significant role in developing young people's dietary habits, particularly when they are adolescents, which includes early adolescence from age 10 to 14 and adolescence from age 15 to 19 (USAID 2022). There is little information on the extent to which young people in LMICs have a voice in household decision-making processes or how heads of households take their needs into account. Nutrition is also very important for adolescents during these critical development years. For example, "Adolescence is the time of transition from primary dependence on caregivers to increasingly diverse roles and responsibilities related to food acquisition, preparation, and consumption, presenting a unique opportunity to foster healthy eating" (Neufeld et al. 2021).

Opportunities

- Engaging youth as students is a promising area, but levels of evidence and opportunity vary. Consider conducting additional research and reviews to understand the full breadth of evidence supporting engaging youth as students (in schools) to improve diet and nutrition outcomes.
- We need more evidence on programming for the "second window of opportunity," which refers to adolescence as a critical development stage in the life cycle. Nutritional effects on adolescent development extend beyond musculoskeletal growth, to cardiorespiratory fitness, neurodevelopment, and immunity (Norris et al. 2021). This suggests another critical window for intervention to prevent growth faltering and ensure full potential for physical and cognitive development, as well as productivity potential. Addressing specific adolescent nutrition needs requires more focused age ranges than the wide ones often used to define youth, i.e., 10-29 years.

- Young people often play important roles as caregivers in their households and may be parents themselves. We need more evidence to understand such roles and how their own nutrition behaviors influence diets and nutrition behaviors in the household.

Contributing to the Evidence Base

Building Learning Questions into Programming

Many development practitioners introduce new approaches to engage young people in food systems activities, but do not document the learnings in a systematic way. Not all programmatic interventions are structured like research projects, but are still important learning opportunities. Ideally, a development practitioner would identify a learning question early, and think through ways to collect data that identify how and why changes may have occurred. While projects may be bound to certain progress indicators, there is almost always room to define custom indicators, even if only for internal learning. Collecting qualitative data is also useful for development practitioners to document learnings and contribute to the evidence base on involving youth specifically to improve diet and nutrition outcomes. Additionally, impact evaluations in situations where a theory of change included youth engagement approaches for improved nutrition can result in valuable findings.

Partners might consider different types of mixed-methods approaches to generate evidence on effective youth engagement strategies:

- **Technical learning** additions to the knowledge base can include the program implications of research, and learning from developing and implementing guidance, designing and implementing research, implementation approaches (e.g., capacity strengthening), and effective programming.
- **Operational learning** can include lessons on effective collaboration methods, tools, and processes that have been useful to streamline and organize activities, and program implementation adaptations.

Involving Young People in Learning Agendas

Another way to contribute to the evidence base supporting youth engagement in food systems programming for improved diet and nutrition outcomes is to engage young people actively in research and learning activities. To do so, it is important to acknowledge differences in communication styles and methods. Research projects and agendas often maintain high degrees of formality, but such structure and language may exclude young people without a research background. Alternative methods of collecting and sharing information might include short videos for TikTok or Instagram, longer YouTube videos or series, and casual, easy-to-access information sharing platforms.

Conclusion

USAID joins global thought leaders in recognizing the importance of increasing attention to, and investment in, the involvement of young people in food systems for improving diet and nutrition outcomes. Recent resources of note include the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition [Promoting Youth Engagement and Employment in Agriculture and Food Systems \(HLPE 2021\)](#) and the [2021 Lancet Series on adolescent nutrition](#). [Youth Power](#) is a USAID investment designed to support young people to participate in strengthening systems in their communities to achieve sustainable outcomes in health and education as well as political and economic empowerment. [Act4Food](#) [Act4Change](#) is a global movement working to build and support youth leaders and advocates and continue action and dialogue from the UN Food Systems Summit, which placed an emphasis on youth involvement in food systems transformation. As understanding of youth engagement in food systems programming for improved diets and nutrition advances improves, it is important to document and share experiences and evidence, leverage investments toward such engagement, and involve young people wherever possible.

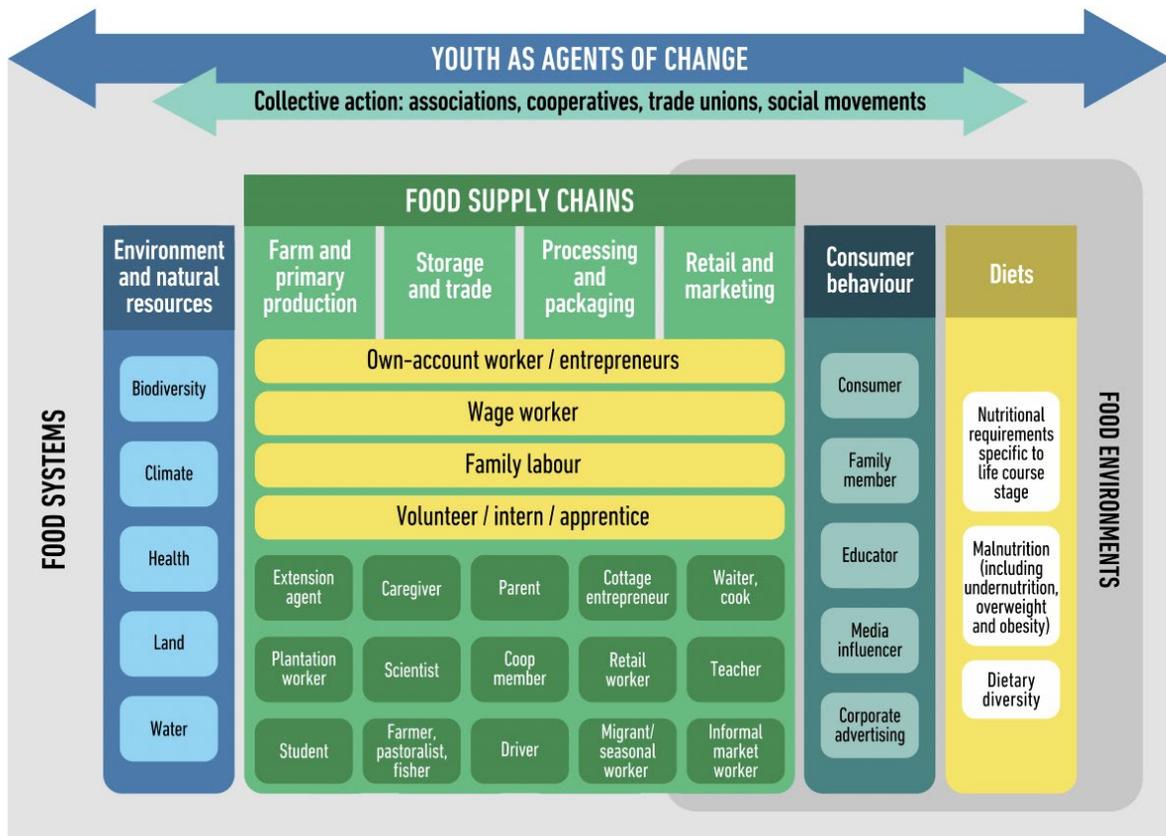
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Annex

The 2017 HLPE framework was recently adapted (HLPE 2021) to incorporate youth as change agents in the transformation of food systems (see figure 2). This framework illustrates impacts the food system has on young people, and those that young people have on the food system in their many diverse roles and capacities.

Figure 2. Roles of Youth Using a Food Systems Framework



Source: High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE). 2021. *Promoting youth engagement and employment in agriculture and food systems*. Rome: High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.



USAID ADVANCING NUTRITION

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