



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

OVERVIEW

THE STATUS OF

YOUTH IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS



YOUTH
MOVE FOOD
FORWARD

FRONT COVER IMAGE:

© **FAO/HEBA KHAMIS**

A YOUNG WORKER IS
LOADING TOMATOES ONTO
WHOLESALERS' TRUCKS
IN BANGAR EL SOKOR,
NUBARIA, EGYPT.

YOUTH NEED AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS AND AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS NEED YOUTH. AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS ARE THE MAIN SOURCE OF LIVELIHOODS IN LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES, WHERE LARGE SHARES OF RURAL YOUTH WORK IN AGRICULTURE.

In lower-middle-income countries, off-farm segments of agrifood systems provide an additional, wide range of job opportunities. In higher-income countries, where the youth population in rural areas is declining, agrifood systems are key to providing incentives for young people to revitalize rural areas. Ensuring youth-inclusive agrifood systems transformation is important both for enhancing youth welfare and building sustainable and resilient agrifood systems. **This report provides a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of the status of youth in agrifood systems.**

The report focuses on the ability of youth to secure decent jobs, food security, and nutrition and resilience against economic and environmental shocks through their participation in agrifood systems. The report analyses generational and intersectional factors that condition the participation of youth in agrifood systems, the challenges they face, and the interventions, policies and approaches that can effectively promote youth engagement in agrifood systems.

Globally, an estimated 1.3 billion young people are between the ages of 15 and 24. Youth demographic trajectories vary across regions, reflecting differences in economic development, fertility rates and migration patterns. Youth populations remain large and continue to grow in low-income countries of sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, but are smaller and shrinking in higher-income countries. Despite rapid urbanization, rural areas still accommodate 46 percent of the global youth population. While most rural youth live in areas with high agricultural productivity potential and moderate to high market access, some 395 million reside in areas projected to experience a decline in agricultural productivity due to climate change. Migration plays an important role in shaping young men and women's livelihood trajectories. Both men and women are more likely to migrate before they turn 25 years old, indicating a strong association between youth and significant social, economic and spatial transitions.



↑ © FAO/STUART TIBAWESWA A SORGHUM PLANTATION WORKER IN LUWERO, UGANDA.

Improved access to assets and resources, including quality education and training, land, finance and technologies, supports young people in securing a decent wage and self-employment opportunities in agrifood systems. However, young people, and particularly rural youth and young women, frequently face challenges in accessing resources due to generational and gendered power dynamics, as well as structural, economic, social and spatial constraints. Barriers such as delayed inheritance of land, land fragmentation arising from intergenerational subdivision of land, rising land prices and limited access to capital hinder young people from establishing themselves as independent farmers and agripreneurs.

Additionally, rural youth lag behind their urban counterparts in access to social networks, education and training, limiting their wage employment prospects within agrifood systems. Young rural women are particularly disadvantaged. For example, they are more likely not to be in education, employment or training than young rural men, largely due to a higher care burden and early marriage, which contributes to economic disadvantages later in life. In rural areas in particular, digital technologies and information and communication technologies (ICTs) can help youth access and join social networks, education and training, which is critical for participation in agrifood systems. This is possible in part because young people are more connected to the internet than adults.

These constraints and opportunities condition youth participation in, and benefits from, agrifood systems, particularly in countries with traditional or protracted crisis agrifood systems, which are characterized by small-scale and subsistence farming and minimal market integration, with shorter and less complex value chains. Young people rely more on agrifood systems for employment than adults (44 percent versus 38 percent, respectively), while agrifood systems serve as a critical entry point into labour force participation for younger youth aged 15–19. Youth, and especially young women, are more likely to engage in low-skilled, poorly remunerated, precarious work. Finally, while agrifood systems often serve as a refuge in times of crises, jobs are more accessible to adults aged 25 and older than for youth,

and more for young men than for young women during economic downturns.

The period of youth is critical for cognitive growth and development, influenced by changes in nutrient requirements. However, globally, almost one in four youth experience food insecurity, and following the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has increased more rapidly among youth than among adults.

Youth inclusion in agrifood systems is a fundamental aspect of “leaving no one behind” and is critical for helping young people meet their aspirations and achieve their goals. Achieving youth-inclusive and more sustainable agrifood systems requires the expansion of economic opportunities in the broader economy while implementing youth-targeted strategies that equip young people with the skills, agency and resources needed to thrive. In lower-income countries seeking to benefit from the demographic dividend of a **large youth population**, broad-based productivity growth and an increased youth skills base, as well as access to productive resources, will be key to enhancing the economic prospects of young people and transforming agrifood systems. Higher-income countries, or those experiencing **labour scarcity with lower shares of rural youth**, will have to invest in motivating young women and men to engage in agrifood systems. In such contexts, economic incentives alone are not sufficient to attract youth to agrifood systems. Rather, policies must address economic, social, psychological and institutional factors that impede generational renewal, and be attentive to competing interests and trade-offs that exist across generations and between urban and rural populations.

WHERE DO YOUTH LIVE?

Nearly 85 percent of the world’s 1.3 billion youth live in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Sub-Saharan Africa has a youth share higher than the global average of 15.8 percent and expects a 65 percent increase in its youth population by 2050, reaching 400 million. In North Africa, Southeast Asia, Western and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, youth represent one in six people. Conversely, in East Asia, Europe and North America, youth populations represent less than one in ten people. These divergent trends present both

opportunities and challenges and will shape the transformation of agrifood systems. A growing youth population can drive economic transformation and innovation. However, if constraints and structural barriers are not addressed, high levels of youth unemployment are likely to lead rural out-migration, frustration and even social unrest. Furthermore, as young generations drive social change, diversity and creativity, a decline in their numbers threatens the social, cultural and economic vitality of rural areas.

Despite rapid urbanization, rural areas still accommodate 46 percent of the youth population. Almost 60 percent of rural youth globally live in peri-urban areas, located outside of city limits but within an hour’s travel to urban centres. These areas represent a blending of urban and rural life, influenced by urban expansion driven by population growth and migration, and also serve as a crucial bridge between urban demand and rural production. A lower proportion of rural youth – just over one-third – live in peri-rural areas, followed by rural hinterlands (6 percent).

The role of youth in shaping agrifood systems evolves as agrifood systems transition and the youth population declines, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Youth shares in rural populations are highest in countries with traditional (18.4 percent) or protracted crisis agrifood systems (19.4 percent). In these countries, agriculture is often the primary livelihood defined by labour-intensive practices, limited adoption of modern technologies and limited market integration. These hurdles, compounded by low wages and poor working conditions, often deter young people from pursuing careers in agrifood systems. In protracted crisis settings, political instability, conflict and environmental vulnerability exacerbate these constraints. As agrifood systems diversify, formalize and industrialize, the share of youth in the rural population further reduces (11.4 percent in industrialized agrifood systems), as increased urbanization and the shift toward off-farm employment provide new opportunities for youth to engage in higher-value agribusiness activities and technological innovations. However, if agrifood systems are not competitive, rural youth may choose to migrate permanently to urban areas or other sectors, posing a threat to the viability of rural economies.

Most rural youth live and work in areas with high agricultural productivity potential¹ and moderate to high market access.

In these areas, lack of connectivity represents a more binding constraint than lack of agricultural potential. Although a majority of young people live in locations with high agricultural productivity potential, only around one-third reside in areas classified as having high connectivity, defined by robust market access, infrastructure and services. This opportunity space is unequally distributed: in protracted crisis agrifood systems, only 2 percent of rural youth live in areas with the highest agricultural potential and market accessibility, compared to over half of rural youth in industrial agrifood systems. Twenty percent of youth in countries in protracted crisis agrifood systems face severe challenges in terms of opportunity space, far higher than in other types of agrifood systems.

Agri-food systems are highly susceptible to environmental degradation and the multifaceted impacts of climate change. **An estimated 395 million rural youth, representing 69 percent of the global rural youth population, currently reside in areas projected to experience declines in agricultural productivity potential due to adverse effects from climate change.** Among them, 111 million live in areas expected to have the poorest land quality. The impact of declining land productivity is unevenly distributed, with sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia bearing the brunt of this challenge due to their large rural youth populations. Youth living in Europe, North America and parts of East Asia face the least impact.

Youth are highly mobile, with higher rates of migration than adults. Migration of youth is connected to other key life transitions, including entry into employment, pursuit of higher education, and marriage (particularly for young women), especially since better education and employment opportunities are often located in urban areas. Multiple temporary and seasonal migrations are common among rural youth in low- and middle-income countries, with some youth returning to rural areas and engaging in farming as adults. Internal

migration often serves as a complement, rather than a replacement, for agricultural livelihoods.

Youth consistently show higher aspirations to migrate internationally than adults. In countries with traditional or protracted crisis agrifood systems, male youth are more likely than female youth to aspire to migrate; however, relatively few have plans or made preparations to migrate in the next 12 months. Both male and female youth aspirations to migrate were higher in 2023 than they were in 2015 across all types of agrifood systems. Unemployment and food insecurity are leading factors in the international migration of youth. The probability of internal migration is higher among young women than among young men, often for reasons linked to marriage and family.



↑ © FAO/TAMIRU LEGESSE IN THE AMHARA REGION OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA, YOUNG PEOPLE RUN VEGETABLE GARDENS WITH THE SUPPORT OF FAO, CREATING LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES AND REDUCING THE NEED TO MIGRATE.

“**YOUTH INCLUSION IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS IS A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF ‘LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND’ AND IS CRITICAL FOR HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE MEET THEIR ASPIRATIONS.**”

¹ Agricultural potential is defined through a measure of land productivity potential derived from FAO's Global Agro-Ecological Zones (GAEZ) data. It represents the maximum possible yield for specific crops under certain agroclimatic, soil and terrain conditions, as well as specific management assumptions.



© FAO/GIULIO NAPOLITANO
IN MALE, MALDIVES, A
YOUNG WOMAN PROCESSES
STEAMED SKIPJACK TUNA
AT THE ENSIS CANNERY.

YOUTH ACCESS TO PRODUCTIVE ASSETS AND RESOURCES

Young people face structural, economic, social, legal, and spatial challenges in accessing assets and resources essential for securing decent work in agrifood systems. Despite improvements in education globally over the last several decades, **rural youth continue to have lower access to quality formal education compared with their urban peers:** across all types of agrifood systems, 74 percent of rural young people compared with 85 percent of urban young people complete lower-secondary education. Only 20.5 percent of rural girls in protracted-crisis agrifood systems complete lower-secondary education, compared with over 50 percent of their male and female peers in urban areas, and 98 percent of girls in industrial agrifood systems. In many low- and middle-income countries, students who attend schools often leave without the skills required for better remunerated on- and off-farm jobs, creating a disconnect between education and local labour market demand. Globally, only 13.6 percent of youth have completed vocational education intended to address skills gaps. Young men and women are also disadvantaged in access to agricultural extension and advisory services, which tend to target the household head, typically an older man.

Over 20 percent of young people globally were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in 2023, with young women accounting for two-thirds of youth in NEET. Greater unpaid and domestic care responsibilities

keep young women in NEET, with young migrant women the most likely to fall into that category. For young women, being in NEET during youth often results in cumulative disadvantages throughout their lives, reducing their likelihood of decent employment in later years.

Young people who want to farm face constraints in accessing land. High land prices, limited savings and inadequate access to credit make land ownership unattainable for many young people. In many contexts, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, fewer young people are inheriting land or are inheriting smaller plots of land due to increasing land scarcity and fragmentation. Those who do inherit often receive land later in life, since aging farmers – with little access to pensions or social assistance – may hold onto their land until they are no longer able to work it. Patriarchal customs and inheritance laws disproportionately favour men, further restricting young women's access to land.

Youth are more likely to be unbanked than older generations, especially in rural areas of low- and middle-income countries. In 2021, only 66 percent of youth had a formal financial account, compared to 79 percent of adults aged 25 and over. Mobile money provides an alternative for youth to access financial services, yet significant gaps remain between mobile money account ownership and actual usage.



↑ ©FAO/NIKOS ECONOMOPOULOS/MAGNUM PH IN NEFZA, TUNISIA, YOUTH ARE RUNNING A 20-HIVE BEEKEEPING ENTERPRISE ON LAND THAT WAS EVACUATED AFTER THE CREATION OF AN ARTIFICIAL LAKE. THE ACTIVITY IS PART OF AN INITIATIVE BACKED BY FAO TO PROMOTE RURAL DIVERSIFICATION, YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND FOOD SECURITY.

Young farmers aspire to engage in modern agriculture that relies on improved technology, including machines and digital technologies. Digital technologies not only have broad appeal among young people but also facilitate youth access to finance and markets and help to reshape their perception of agriculture. Globally, youth are more digitally connected than older populations: around 81 percent of young people aged 15–24 use the internet, compared with 68 percent of adults aged 25–74. Digital technologies not only facilitate access to information but also revolutionize agricultural practices, allowing young farmers and agripreneurs to engage in contract farming, direct marketing, logistics coordination and networking, and to access funding opportunities, thereby incentivizing generational renewal in agrifood systems with declining youth populations.

“**YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN ARE DISADVANTAGED IN ACCESS TO AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES, WHICH TEND TO TARGET THE HOUSEHOLD HEAD, TYPICALLY AN OLDER MAN.**”



© FAO/SANJA KNEŽEVIĆ
ISIDORA ČOSIĆ, A YOUNG
FARMER, FEEDS HER COWS AT
HER FAMILY FARM IN
MIONICA, SERBIA.



©FAO/VEEJAY VILAFRANCA
FAO AND THE PHILIPPINE
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
USED DRONES TO SURVEY
DAMAGED RICE CROPS
IN PAMPANGA.

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND WORK IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Agrifood systems are a key source of livelihoods for youth, especially in less formalized agrifood systems. Globally, 44 percent of working youth and 38 percent of working adults were employed in agrifood systems in 2021. The share of working youth in agrifood system employment declines as agrifood systems transition, ranging from 82 percent in protracted-crisis agrifood systems to 23 percent in industrial agrifood systems. Since 2005, the global shares of working youth and adults in agrifood-systems employment have decreased by about 10 percentage points, driven mainly by decreases in agricultural employment. Across different types of agrifood systems, employed youth and adults exit agriculture at a similar pace.

Agrifood systems are a larger source of employment for young women than for young men, across all types of agrifood systems. The share of young women engaged in agriculture is larger than their male counterparts for most age cohorts and types of agrifood systems. As agrifood systems transition, off-farm agrifood-system employment becomes increasingly more important for young women compared to young men.

Agrifood systems are key entry points to the labour market for younger youth. Approximately 76 percent

of young men and 66 percent of young women aged 15–19 work in agrifood systems in protracted crisis, compared with 66 percent of young men and 63 percent of young women aged 20–24. Similarly, in industrial agrifood systems, 25 percent of young working men and 29 percent of young working women aged 15–19 work in agrifood systems, compared with 13 percent of young working men and 11 percent of young working women aged 20–24. As agrifood systems transition, the entry point shifts from agriculture to off-farm agrifood-systems employment.

Youth, and especially younger youth, are less likely to have another economic activity outside agrifood systems. As they grow older, youth diversify and/or eventually exit agrifood system employment. Intergenerational economic mobility outside of agriculture is more likely, particularly for young men, in contexts of higher agricultural labour productivity growth.

Youth, and especially young women, engage in more precarious work in agrifood systems than adults. Young women are less likely to work full time, especially in less transformed agrifood systems. Across most types of agrifood systems, young women are more likely than young men to remain outside the labour force and not in school, in part because they allocate almost three times more time than young men to unpaid and domestic work.



© FAO/LUIS TATO
IN SIAYA COUNTY, KENYA,
CELESTINE ACHIENG
AND A FRIEND FEED
CHICKENS AT THEIR
HOME POULTRY FARM.

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Youth is a pivotal stage of growth, demanding high dietary energy and nutrients due to rapid physical and cognitive development, lifestyle shifts and increased activity. During this time, the brain continues to mature, bone mass peaks and autonomy over food choices expands. Youth access to diverse, nutritious foods and education on healthy diets not only shapes healthy eating habits but also enhances cognitive development, work readiness, economic stability and contributions to agrifood systems development.

Yet, food insecurity and malnutrition are common among youth and are rising globally. Data from 97 countries show that youth food insecurity increased from 16.7 percent (2014–2016) to 24.4 percent (2021–2023), with Africa experiencing the highest levels (42.7 percent) and Asia and the Pacific seeing the sharpest rise.

Rural youth, particularly in traditional and protracted-crisis agrifood systems, face greater food insecurity. Young females are more vulnerable, especially in emerging and diversifying agrifood systems. Urban youth generally have better access to diverse, nutrient-rich diets than their rural counterparts. Youth dietary patterns are also generally poor, marked by low fruit and vegetable intake and high consumption of soft drinks and fast food, leading to nutrient deficiencies, particularly in iron, zinc, calcium and iodine. Many youth struggle to translate healthy eating intentions into action due not only to affordability, but also impulsivity and susceptibility to marketing strategies that reinforce

an unhealthy eating culture. The full extent of youth nutrient deficiencies is unknown due to substantial data gaps.

Youth-inclusive agrifood systems transformation can lay the foundation for healthier diets and reduced food insecurity. This requires a rights-based approach that ensures access to healthy diets, prioritizes youth nutritional needs and ensures affordable access to nutritious foods.



YOUTH IS A PIVOTAL STAGE OF GROWTH, DEMANDING HIGH DIETARY ENERGY AND NUTRIENTS DUE TO RAPID PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT, LIFESTYLE SHIFTS AND INCREASED ACTIVITY.



© FAO/LUIS TATO
A YOUNG FARMER
OBSERVES HIS CROPS
FROM A TRACTOR NEAR
NYAHURURU, KENYA.

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION TO SHOCKS

The effects of economic downturns and climate stressors on youth employment in agrifood systems differ in important ways from adults, highlighting both their resilience and vulnerabilities.

Economic downturns are shown to more adversely affect youth employment in agrifood systems than adult employment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, youth employment in agrifood systems declined by 2 percent, driven by a decline in employment for young women, but increased by 3 percent among adults. Climate stressors impact the ability of youth to access employment in ways that are also distinct from adults, with differences observed across the types of climate stresses they experience. For example, extreme heat events increase the likelihood that rural youth will work, often to compensate for a reduction in adult labor. Conversely, youth are more likely to exit employment following extreme precipitation events, while employment increases among adults.

Young women play a critical role in sustaining agrifood systems in the face of shocks and stresses, but also face significant challenges. During droughts and extreme precipitation events, young rural women are more likely to be employed, mostly in agricultural employment, than young men. Similarly, when exposed

to armed conflicts, the likelihood of young women working increases, working longer hours in agriculture than young men, due to the temporary absence or permanent loss of male breadwinners. However, their employment in agrifood systems tends to be more precarious than that of young men. For example, during the COVID-19 economic downturn, young women's employment in agrifood systems declined by 7 percent, while employment of young men remained unchanged.

In protracted crises, youth have greater belief in their capacities to adapt, transform and absorb shocks and stressors than adults. Life in protracted crises takes a severe toll on people's economic and psychological well-being. Yet, evidence from Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen shows that despite these challenges, youth maintain a higher level of subjective resilience – a measure of their beliefs in their own capacities to deal with shocks and stressors focusing on their adaptive, transformative, absorptive and anticipatory capacities – than older people. This resilience is driven by a belief in their ability to bounce back from shocks, diversify their incomes to respond to future challenges and learn from past experiences. Harnessing the flexibility and optimism of youth is key to improving the lives and livelihoods of people living in protracted crises.



© FAO/HEBA KHAMIS
IN EGYPT'S SHARQIA
REGION, RETAIL
TRADER OM WALEED
SOURCES HER GOODS
FROM THE BELBEIS
WHOLESALE MARKET.

MAKING AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS WORK FOR YOUTH

Youth-inclusive agrifood systems are essential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The participation of youth in agrifood systems benefits youth, but is also key for the sustainability and resilience of agrifood systems. Agrifood systems transformation is strongly interlinked with broader rural and structural transformation processes in which youth participate through their labour, advocacy and consumption patterns.

Youth-inclusive agrifood system transformation requires a mix of policies and programmes that support broad-based transformation as well as a more specific focus on youth empowerment. Broad-based transformation of agrifood systems is needed to advance three critical outcomes: expanding the supply of decent jobs, improving the food security and nutrition of youth, and strengthening their resilience to shocks. Where empowerment is concerned, three types of interventions are needed: initiatives that help youth to experience greater voice and agency, to access training and improve their skills, and to acquire improved access to resources.

On- and off-farm productivity growth is key to making agrifood systems work for youth, raising incomes and creating quality jobs across the wider economy. Achieving productivity growth requires dedicated investments in research and development to create innovations and technologies that are adapted to local contexts and resilient to shocks, robust extension services, and physical and digital infrastructure.

Evidence also suggests that youth employment in agrifood systems increases most quickly when the broader enabling environment for agriculture improves, and that firm-level interventions supporting established agribusinesses with high-growth potential may generate more sustained employment for youth than those supporting specific youth-led enterprises.

Decent jobs for youth require specific actions. While adopting international labour standards is often costly and difficult in highly informal agrifood systems, awareness-raising initiatives and monitoring mechanisms that include youth stakeholders have proven successful. Voluntary standards from the private sector, such as third-party certification programmes, can also contribute to the creation of decent jobs with adequate enforcement to ensure compliance. More broadly, the formalization of agrifood systems – achieved through methods such as streamlining regulations, reducing costs and registration burdens, or linking governmental incentives to formalization – enhances enforcement of labour laws and can contribute to an increase in decent jobs for youth.

Supporting youth nutrition and healthy diets requires policies and approaches adapted to their age group. Programmes that target children – such as nutrition education and school meals – can prepare youth to make better choices about food later in life. Integrated programmes that combine education and tailored messaging with changes in the food environment, including improved access to nutritious food and

restrictions on advertisements promoting unhealthy food culture, tend to yield positive nutritional outcomes. Social media is an effective tool for engaging youth in health and nutrition education, but there is also a need for policies that target specific nutrition challenges facing youth in different types of agrifood systems (e.g. young women's micronutrient deficiencies or youth obesity).

Supporting youth resilience is critical given the differentiated ways in which youth respond to shocks. Training programmes and access to greater information through ICTs and digital platforms can support the ability of youth to withstand shocks. Social protection is critical for youth due to their limited access to more traditional forms of finance. Access to decent off-farm jobs and safe migration opportunities – both permanent and seasonal – is critical for resilience. Finally, social networks, community organizations and cooperatives can support youth resilience.

Increasing youth agency and voice allows for an accurate reflection of their needs and realities in the transformation of agrifood systems. This is particularly important for rural and marginalized youth, including young women, who tend to be excluded from institutional platforms. Collective action – including formal producers' organizations, cooperatives and community organizations – can help young people pool their resources, expand their influence and navigate power relations more easily. Youth agency can also be positively impacted by acquiring human and social capital: for example, intergenerational collaboration through mentoring can add to their skills and networks while also facilitating the transfer of knowledge and experience across generations.

Many youth interventions in agrifood systems focus on skills and training. Those that have proven to be most successful provide integrated support, emphasize hands-on learning or focus on practical experiences, are tailored to the local context and market conditions, and address intersectional factors like gender and socioeconomic background. Rural advisory services and agribusiness training, as well as integration of ICTs, have proven critical in many countries. Long-term investment in education and technical and vocational education is a prerequisite for productive youth inclusion in agrifood systems and skills acquisition.

Access to assets and resources is often best achieved through combined interventions comprising, for example, training, finance and agricultural inputs. Access to land shapes youth engagement in farming and agrifood system livelihoods, while also influencing their decisions to pursue off-farm employment locally or in distant places. Policies should facilitate youth access to land, including through youth-targeted land and credit schemes that enable young agripreneurs to purchase or rent land at affordable prices. Governments can also allocate land to youth agricultural enterprises by implementing schemes such as land banks that allow unused or underutilized land to be leased to young farmers. However, such initiatives should be complemented with other support services, including extension and advisory services, enhanced access to finance, and connections to markets to effectively deliver meaningful engagement and sufficient decent employment for youth.

Addressing barriers to youth engagement in agrifood systems and incentivizing youth entry are essential to foster generational renewal in countries with declining and ageing rural populations. Older farmers are often unwilling to cede control over their farms to younger generations due to financial uncertainty and/or a perceived loss of identity and standing in their communities. At the same time, land prices and administrative obstacles to acquiring agricultural land in these contexts represent major constraints. Economic incentives for young farmers to access land and for older farmers to cede land are not sufficient to foster generational renewal. They must be integrated with complementary interventions aimed at facilitating the integration of young farmers into farm business management, promoting positive perceptions of farming as an occupation and strengthening the integration of young people into rural communities.

More empirical evidence and age- and gender-disaggregated data are needed to capture the realities of youth in agrifood systems, and to better assess the effectiveness and impacts of programmes on youth productive engagement, food and nutrition security, and resilience. Enhanced knowledge of the status of youth in agrifood systems can shed more light on both systemic barriers and emerging opportunities for youth, as well as factors affecting their engagement in agrifood systems. Evidence-based policies and targeted

investments can improve youth welfare and harness their potential for inclusive, equitable and sustainable agrifood systems transformation worldwide.

This report demonstrates that a youth-inclusive agrifood system, one that provides decent jobs, healthy diets and food security while bolstering both youth and agrifood systems resilience, is both

achievable and vital to addressing the challenges faced by today's young people. Realizing this vision, however, demands robust commitments from diverse stakeholders, and a multifaceted approach to supporting youth empowerment and the broader structural change that improves economic prospects. Doing so is beneficial both for youth and for agrifood systems.



©FAO/ALEX WEBB/MAGNUM PH IN NUEVA SONORA, CHIAPAS, MEXICO, LUIS GUSTAVO HELPS RUN HIS FAMILY'S FAO-SUPPORTED FARM USING COMPOST, IRRIGATION, CHICKENS, AND SHEEP TO BOOST INCOME, ELIMINATE DEBT AND FUND HIS UNIVERSITY STUDIES.



NUMERICAL HIGHLIGHTS

1. Nearly **85 percent** of the global youth population aged 15–24 reside in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

3. About **395 million** rural youth live in areas expected to experience declines in agricultural productivity potential due to climate change.

5. International migration among youth grew over recent decades from **22.1 million** migrants aged 15–24 in 1990 to **31.7 million** migrants in 2020. Youth account for **16.2 percent** of migrants in sub-Saharan Africa, and **15.2 percent** in Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, most youth migration takes place within national borders, with rural-to-rural migration particularly prevalent in lower-income countries.

2. As agrifood systems transition, the share of the rural population under the age of 25 decreases. In countries with protracted-crisis agrifood systems, rural children and youth under the age of 25 represent **47 percent** of the population, compared to **5 percent** in countries with industrial agrifood systems.

4. Most rural youth live and work in areas with high agricultural productivity potential and moderate to high market access. Opportunities, however, are very unequal: only **2 percent** of youth in countries with protracted crises live in areas of greatest opportunity compared to **over half** in industrial agrifood systems.

6. Globally, over **20 percent** of youth were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in 2023, with young women accounting for **two-thirds** of youth in NEET. Greater unpaid and domestic care responsibilities contribute to keeping young women in NEET.

Rural youth, and young women in particular, have lower access to formal education compared with their urban peers. Only **20.5 percent** of rural girls in countries with protracted-crisis agrifood systems complete lower-secondary education, compared to over **50 percent** of their male and female peers in urban areas, and **98 percent** of girls in countries with industrial agrifood systems.

7. Globally, youth are more digitally connected than adults, but disparities persist. **Eighty-one percent** of youth use the internet, compared to **68 percent** of adults. This gap decreases as agrifood systems transition from traditional to industrial systems.

Digital access varies widely by agrifood system. In industrial agrifood systems, **98 percent** of youth use the internet compared to **34 percent** in traditional agrifood systems.

8. Agrifood systems are a major employer of both youth and adults. Globally, **44 percent** of working youth and **38 percent** of adults are employed in agrifood systems. For both youth and adults, this represents a decline of about **10 percentage points** from 2005 to 2021, driven almost exclusively by a reduction in employment in primary agricultural production.

Agrifood systems represent a key entry point for youth employment. Across almost all types of agrifood system, youth aged 15–19 have the highest share of participation. **Seventy-six percent** of young men and **66 percent** of young women aged 15–19 in countries with protracted-crisis agrifood systems, and **25 percent** of young men and **29 percent** of young women aged 15–19 in countries with industrial agrifood systems, work in agrifood systems. Entry point shifts from agriculture to off-farm agrifood-system employment as agrifood systems transition.

10. Globally, food insecurity of youth increased from **16.7 percent** (2014–2016) to **24.4 percent** (2021–2023), with Africa experiencing the highest level (**42.7 percent** in 2021–2023), compared to **9.7 percent** in Europe and North America over the same period.

9. The share of working youth in agrifood-system employment declines as agrifood systems transition, ranging from **82 percent** in protracted crisis to **23 percent** in industrial agrifood systems. As agrifood systems transition, off-farm agrifood-system employment becomes progressively more important for working youth compared to adults. **Twenty-one percent** of youth versus **8 percent** of adults work in off-farm agrifood system employment in countries with industrial agrifood systems.

11. Economic downturns affect youth employment in agrifood systems more adversely than adult employment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth employment in agrifood systems declined by **2 percent**, but increased by **3 percent** among adults. This decline was driven by young women, whose employment declined by **7 percent**.

12. Eliminating youth unemployment and providing employment opportunities for youth aged 20–24 years old who are currently NEET would increase global GDP by **1.4 percent**, or **USD 1.5 trillion**. Agrifood-systems employment, providing additional 87 million jobs to unemployed and NEET youth, would contribute about **45 percent** of this estimated increase, corresponding to **USD 680 billion**.

POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

1. Achieving youth-inclusive agrifood systems requires **expanding economic opportunities** in the broader economy while implementing **targeted strategies** that equip young people with the necessary skills, agency and resources.
2. **Investments** in modernization, infrastructure and value chain development are essential to making agrifood systems a more attractive and sustainable career path for youth.
3. **Access to quality education** and skills development in rural areas remains crucial for improving labour productivity and enabling youth to seize economic opportunities. Targeted education, skills and training are also needed to prepare youth for careers in agrifood systems.
4. Policies that facilitate **youth access to productive resources**, including youth-targeted land and credit schemes that enable young farmers and agripreneurs to purchase or rent land at affordable prices, are needed to enhance youth engagement in agrifood systems.
5. **Youth migration** can contribute to inclusive agrifood system transitions by addressing labour shortages and fostering innovation. Realizing this potential, however, requires investment in safe, orderly and youth-responsive migration pathways that meet young people's specific needs and challenges.



ACCESS TO LAND SHAPES YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN FARMING AND AGRIFOOD SYSTEM LIVELIHOODS, WHILE INFLUENCING THEIR DECISIONS TO PURSUE OFF-FARM EMPLOYMENT.



©FAO/GMB AKASH ANOWAR COLLECTS GREEN MUSSELS FROM THE SEA IN KHORUSKUL, BANGLADESH.

6. **Youth agency** and visibility in policymaking spaces can be strengthened through participation in youth-led organizations and networks. Intergenerational relational approaches within local communities, like mentorship, can facilitate the transfer of resources, knowledge, skills and networks, and help to build youth resilience to shocks and stressors.
7. **Addressing existing barriers to agency, education and resource access for more disadvantaged, vulnerable or marginalized groups of youth**, including poor and rural youth, young women, youth with disabilities, Indigenous youth, and young migrants and refugees, is critical to foster equitable participation opportunities in agrifood systems.
8. **Aligning training with local market conditions** and combining it with access to resources and services, has positive impacts on youth employment outcomes in agrifood systems. Training programmes should emphasize hands-on, practical activities and reflect young people's preferences, circumstances and evolving needs.

9. **Improving working conditions for youth in agrifood systems** requires broader reforms that promote the progressive formalization of economies, address widespread labour rights violations, including child and forced labour, enhance workplace safety, increase youth awareness of their rights and strengthen social protection systems for all.
10. **A stronger enabling environment** for agrifood systems leads to higher returns to agricultural labour and lower poverty rates for rural youth. Supporting established high-potential agribusinesses, through access to credit, training and infrastructure, can further boost youth job opportunities and promote economic stability.
11. Social media and mass media campaigns can mobilize the **political and consumer power of youth to spread nutrition messages** and improve diet quality and the eating habits of young people.
12. While nutrition policies often focus on infants and younger children, there are gains to be made in focusing on **youth-specific nutrition policies**. Policies that support youth involvement in food-related decisions, such as food acquisition and preparation, may foster better dietary choices and health outcomes.

↓ © FAO/LUIS TATO YOUNG TRAINER AT A HERBS AND SPICES FARM IN KAMBURU, KENYA.



“ DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES CAN HELP RURAL YOUTH ACCESS SOCIAL NETWORKS, EDUCATION AND TRAINING CRITICAL FOR PARTICIPATION IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS.”

13. Targeting youth with **anticipatory social protection programmes** is critical for building their **resilience to shocks**, protecting assets, and sustaining consumption and productive activities. In low-income and youth-abundant countries, social protection can help young people to cope with economic and climatic shocks. In youth-scarce countries, social protection can encourage young people to remain in agriculture and rural areas.
14. **Expanding access to and usage of digital technologies** promotes the modernization of agricultural practices and provides young farmers and agripreneurs with greater access to markets, information, finance and networking opportunities.
15. Significant age and sex-disaggregated **evidence and data gaps** remain regarding access to productive assets and services, climate change adaptation and resilience, and nutrition. Age-disaggregated data that also captures other characteristics – such as disability, ethnicity or other vulnerabilities – is also scarce.

YOUTH MOVE FOOD FORWARD

Contact information:

Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division
Economic and Social Development Stream
www.fao.org/economic/social-policies-rural-institutions/en/

**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, Italy**

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this information product do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concerning the legal or development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.



Some rights reserved. This work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution - 4.0 International licence ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).