

HARNESSING YOUTH POTENTIAL FOR TRANSFORMING BANGLADESH'S FOOD SYSTEMS

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KEY MESSAGES

- Youth in Bangladesh have potential to help reach the country's ambition to achieve a nutrition-sensitive, climate resilient, inclusive food system. Currently, youth are active at the community level but remain largely absent from formal governance.
- This policy brief introduces a practical framework to enable meaningful youth engagement in food systems policymaking and recommends concrete actions to institutionalise youth participation across national and sub-national governance platforms.
- Institutionalise youth participation in food systems and nutrition governance by assigning formal roles in key national and sub-national coordination bodies and involving them in policy mid-term reviews.
- Strengthen cross-ministerial coordination and accountability. Meaningfully engage youth through SUN Youth Network Bangladesh and National Youth Council aligning food systems and nutrition related mandates across ministries, allocate dedicated budgets, and use digital tools to track progress and collect feedback on youth engagement.
- Develop a pipeline of national youth leaders through Food Systems Youth Leadership Training. Extend internship opportunity, integrate food systems into youth programmes and curricula, and expand Department of Youth Development-led capacity building on policy and governance.



BANGLADESH'S PATHWAY TO FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Bangladesh is a land of opportunity with nearly 176 million people¹, of which nearly one-third are under 30 years old. Youth have the potential to aid in advancing economic growth, food and nutrition security and development.

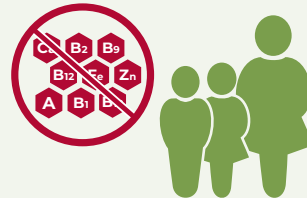
Poverty and hunger have declined significantly, and food production and key nutrition and health indicators have improved^{2,3}. This progress is guided by the country's progressive and ambitious national policies and strategies including the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) 2020 and Plan of Action (PoA) (2021-2030); Country Investment Plans; Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2), National Agriculture Policy 2018, and its plan of Action; various five year plans; and the visionary strategy Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100.

Together, these policies and strategies reflect the government's strong commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030². Central to this ambition is building a food system⁴ that is productive, sustainable, equitable and resilient⁵.

Yet, several complex and interconnected challenges continue to threaten progress^{2,4}.



Diets remain predominantly cereal-based and lack diversity.



Micronutrient deficiencies, especially among women and children, are on a rise.

Significant food losses persist across the value chain, due to limited access to appropriate technologies and inadequate infrastructure. At the same time, rapid urbanisation and climate-related shocks are placing additional strain on food systems, putting both livelihoods and nutrition outcomes at risk.

These challenges and strategies to address them were articulated in Bangladesh's National Food Systems Pathway submitted at the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in 2021. This pathway outlines a bold and forward-looking agenda to build a food system that is nutrition-sensitive, climate-resilient, inclusive and better equipped to serve present and future generations.

Young people are at the heart of this transformation. The UNFSS National Food Systems Pathway recognises this demographic dividend and identifies youth as essential actors in food systems transformation². The Pathway highlights priority actions to support youth, including vocational and skills training, entrepreneurship development, and improved access to finance, technology and markets. It also calls for greater inclusion of youth in cooperatives and producer groups to motivate and strengthen their participation in agri-food value chains.

1 <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/BD>

2 Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Towards Sustainable Food Systems in Bangladesh: National Pathway Document for the UN Food Systems Summit. United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021; 2021

3 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/overview#1>

4 Food systems comprise all the people, institutions, places, and activities that play a part in growing, processing, transporting, selling, marketing, and, ultimately, eating food. Food systems influence diets by determining what kinds of foods are produced, which foods are accessible, both physically and economically, and peoples' food preferences. They are also critical for ensuring food and nutrition security, people's livelihoods, and environmental sustainability

5 Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. High-Level Week of the 76th UNGA: Statement by HE Sheikh Hasina. 2021.

Despite these commitments, youth remain largely excluded from food system governance and decision-making processes. The UNFSS Pathway offers limited guidance, and no formal mechanism currently exists to ensure that youth are engaged in decision making, implementation and/or accountability processes². This gap threatens to hinder the generation that will be most affected by the decisions of today.

Aligned with this, the NFNSP 2020 and its PoA recognise the need for inclusive, multi-sectoral coordination in food systems transformation. However, they do not formally define the role of youth in governance, implementation, or accountability^{6,7}. Similarly, the Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2), which serves as the operational roadmap for the NFNSP across multiple ministries, offers a strong coordination platform but lacks any formal provisions for youth participation within its technical, implementation, or monitoring structures⁸.

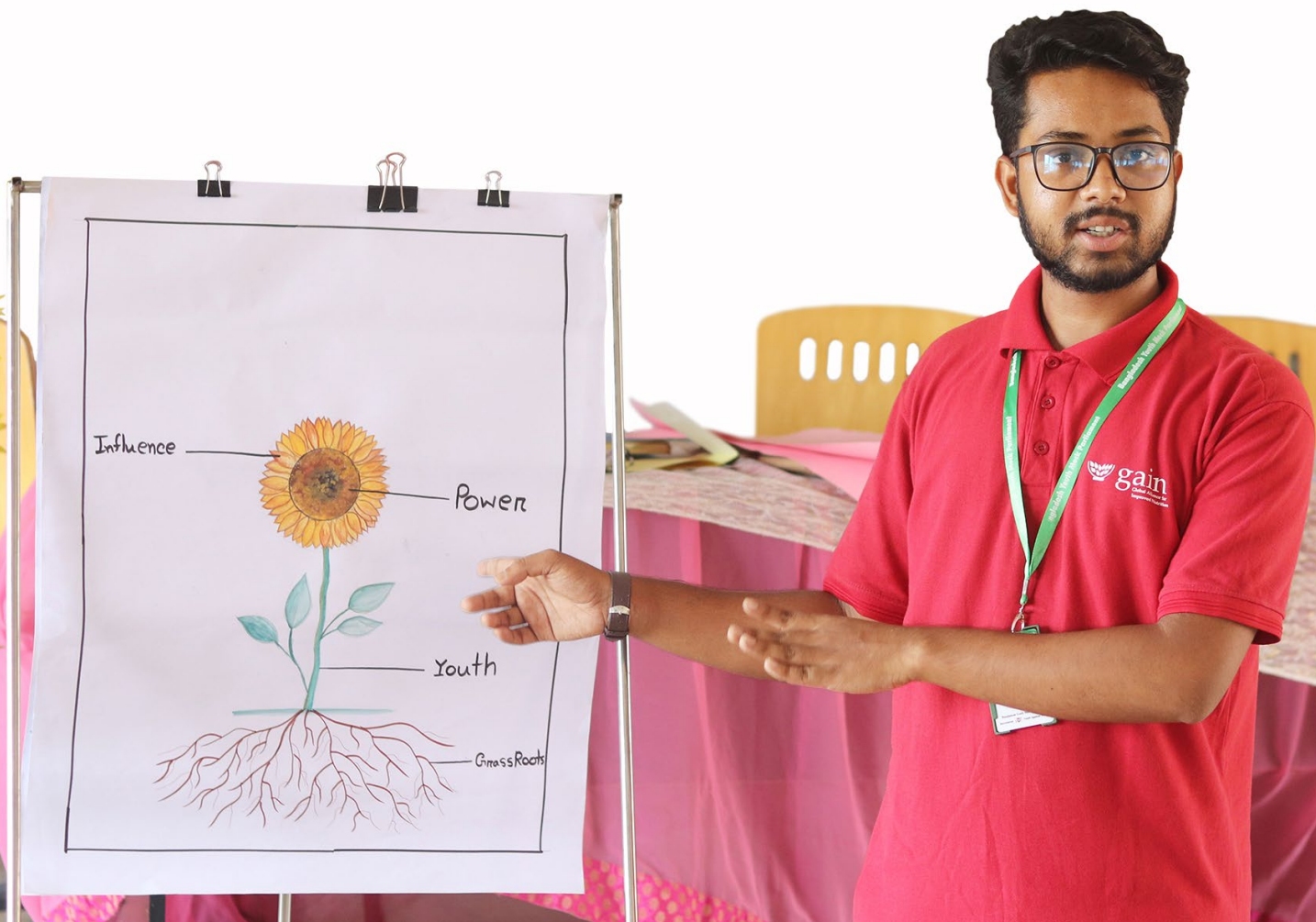
In follow up to Bangladesh participation at the 2025 UNFSS+4 stocktake and in preparation for mid-term reviews of key national strategies, this is a timely opportunity to structurally integrate youth engagement in policy processes. This policy brief aims to support national stakeholders in identifying clear entry points for action and present a practical framework for enabling meaningful youth participation⁹ for Bangladesh's food systems transformation.

6 National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) (2020) [Internet]. Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU). Ministry of Food. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; 2020. Available from: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/BGD214295.pdf>

7 National Food and Nutrition Security Policy: Plan of Action (2021-2030) [Internet]. Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU). Ministry of Food. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; 2021. Available from: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/BGD214404.pdf>

8 Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2) (2016-2025). Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; 2017. Available from: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/bgd206820.pdf>

9 Meaningful Youth Participation is an inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries and globally (USAID).countries and globally (USAID).



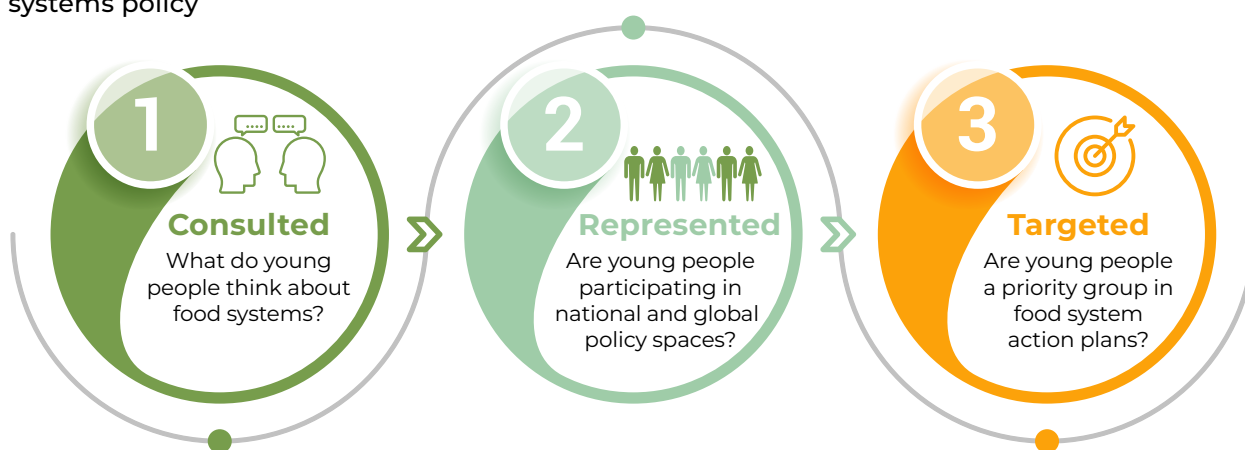
FRAMEWORK FOR MEANINGFULLY ENGAGING YOUTH IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY

Achieving sustainable, equitable, resilient and inclusive food system can only be possible through meaningful engagement of youth. Recognising this, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) has embedded Youth Voices as one of the core pillars in its Nourishing Food Pathways¹⁰ programme, which is supporting the design and delivery of national food systems pathways in 11 countries, including Bangladesh. Drawing on established models, a cross-country Youth Voices team had developed a practical and adaptable framework to support governments and other actors in engaging youth actively and effectively in food systems governance that is briefly described below¹¹.

Three progressive levels of engagement and what it looks like in practice

The framework (**Figure 1**) outlines three progressive and interconnected levels of engaging young people into decision-making processes:

Figure 1: GAIN framework describing levels at which government can engage youth in food systems policy



- 1. Consulted:** Youth are engaged as contributors whose perspectives, needs and priorities help inform food policy. This requires inclusive, participatory mechanisms such as intergenerational dialogues, workshops and digital platforms that reach youth across geographies, gender and socioeconomic backgrounds. To be meaningful, youth consultations must also include feedback loops, where youth are informed about how their inputs contributed to shaping decisions.
- 2. Represented:** Youth move beyond consultation to serve as formally represented actors with decision-making roles. This includes participation in governance structures as members of youth advisory groups, technical committees, national councils and/or multi-stakeholder platforms. To be effective, these roles must be backed by institutional mandates, clear terms of reference and capacity-building support to ensure meaningful influence.
- 3. Targeted:** Youth are recognised as targeted beneficiaries and co-architects of food systems transformation. This includes policies and investments that address youth's immediate needs and long-term aspirations, such as access to land, finance, training, technology, and market opportunities, as well as programmes that support innovation, entrepreneurship, and employment in the agri-food sector. Realising this level of engagement requires cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial coordination to ensure that efforts are coherent, scalable and rooted in long-term systems change.

¹⁰ <https://www.gainhealth.org/impact/nourishing-food-pathways>.

¹¹ <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/gain-discussion-paper-ndeg19-unsung-heroes-global-food-system>

These three levels are cumulative and interdependent, each offering recommendations and an opportunity to strengthen youth leadership across policymaking, implementation and accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, youth should be consulted, represented and targeted through policy simultaneously to ensure engagement is meaningful, sustained and embedded across food systems governance processes.

WHERE YOUTH FEATURE IN BANGLADESH'S POLICY SPACES

Across Bangladesh, youth are actively reshaping food systems at local levels¹² through grassroots action, digital advocacy, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. They are active in all three major components of the food systems pathway: food value chain, food environment and influencing consumer behaviour. Initiatives like *Bhalo Khabo Bhalo Thakbo (Eat Well, Live Well)*, led by adolescents and youth with support from GAIN, have built peer networks to challenge unhealthy food habits and raise awareness on the benefits of nutritious diets. The campaign has reached more than 1 million of adolescents through schools and social media, highlighting the potential of youth-led advocacy in shifting behaviours at scale. Another example is through Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network Bangladesh. Youth organizations and platforms are mobilising youth to tackle food waste, reduce food insecurity, improve sustainable agricultural practices and environmental degradation with a focus on climate change induced challenges. Their work illustrates the capacity of young people to deliver locally tailored, community-relevant solutions.

Young people are recognised as agents of change. The existing Bangladesh's National Youth Policy calls for their active participation in governance and decision-making processes. It envisions youth as partners in achieving national development goals, including those related to agriculture, food security, and health. Public institutions like the Department of Youth Development (DYD) and the National Youth Council (NYC) have mandates aligned with this vision. DYD, under the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MoYS), provides training in agriculture, entrepreneurship, digital literacy and skills development¹³. With an institutional presence across all 64 districts, DYD may offer a valuable platform for strengthening youth engagement in food systems governance.



12 Md. Ruhul Amin. Institute of Nutrition and Food Science. University of Dhaka. Landscape Analysis on Youth Engagement in the Food System in Bangladesh. 2024; Bangladesh.

13 Activities of the Department of Youth Development 2023 [Internet]. 2023.

In parallel, development organisations and multistakeholder platforms are investing in training youth to engage in policy spaces⁹. Initiatives such as the Bangladesh Youth Mock Parliament, Youth Policy Forum, Youth Co: Lab, and the SUN Youth Network Bangladesh (linked with SUN Business Network (SBN) and SUN Civil Society Network Bangladesh) are building the capacity of young leaders in policy processes and advocating for change. In addition to developing individual skills, these platforms represent structured youth networks capable of contributing meaningfully to policy dialogues and processes.

“One-third of Bangladesh’s population comprises youth, making their involvement crucial for progress. This demographic is equipped to keep pace with the times and understand timely actions. Therefore, prioritizing their participation in the food system is paramount.”

FGD-3, youth participant working with Bangladesh Mock Parliament

A positive shift in the national discourse is underway. Youth are increasingly being invited to national food systems dialogues. Their participation in high-level processes such as the UNFSS in 2021, Bangladesh’s Nutrition for Growth (N4G) commitment generating process, the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP), the ongoing Bangladesh Plan of Action (PoA) on Pathway Document, and UNFSS+4 stocktake signals a growing recognition of their role. In both national and sub-national workshops, youth have contributed insights on nutrition, climate resilience, and entrepreneurship. Platforms like the SUN Youth Network Bangladesh have helped mobilise diverse youth voices in over 25 districts, reflecting a welcome recognition of youth as contributors to food systems transformation.

Despite this growing momentum, meaningful engagement of youth in formal policy structures still needs strengthening to ensure their voices are integrated.⁹ National Youth Policy must incorporate measures and mechanisms to involve youth in the food system. Youth representation in key national bodies such as the Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC), and/or the technical and implementation committees of the NFNSP and NPAN2 requires attention. At the sub-national and local level, underrepresentation of youth from District or Upazila Nutrition Coordination Committees (DNCCs/UNCCs), despite youth-led action visibly contributing to food systems, must be addressed by better including youth in these forums. The SUN Youth Network Bangladesh, with its formal linkage to the SUN Multi-Sectoral Platform (MSP) and the NYC under DYD, present promising entry points and must be strategically leveraged to structurally and meaningfully include youth in food systems governance.

Including youth in formal policy structures is essential to motivate youth and support their transition into leadership roles within governance systems. Active youth engagement is also critical in shaping the national curriculum on food systems, policy design, analysis and accountability mechanisms as well as in giving experience to the next generation of food system leaders.



WHAT IS NEEDED TO ENABLE YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN FOOD SYSTEMS POLICY

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal moment. Young people are driving food systems actions at the local level and are increasingly being included in national dialogues. This shift is encouraging but not sufficient. The next step, to achieve the SDGs, is to establish the mechanisms and infrastructure needed to fully embed youth in governance and nurture their meaningful leadership.

To achieve this, Bangladesh should implement a focused set of actions across local, institutional, programmatic, and national levels. The recommendations below build on existing opportunities and offer practical steps and ways for government ministries and partners to include youth in food systems policy work:

Create formal roles for youth in policy and coordination platforms

Embed youth in the formal governance architecture of Bangladesh's food system at both, national and sub-national levels to ensure their contributions are recognised, sustained, and linked to accountability.

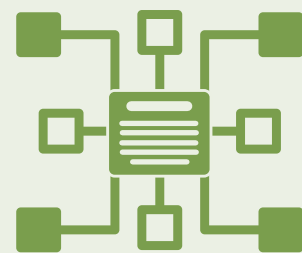
- Assign youth seats in national and sub-national committees (e.g. BNNC, DNCCs/UNCCs, NPAN committees, and SUN MSP).
- Involve youth as co-developer/ writer in the UNFSS national stocktake and the mid-term review of key food and nutrition policies including COP, N4G consultation process.
- Clarify roles of youth networks and establish meaningful youth engagement (e.g. SUN Youth Network Bangladesh, and National Youth Council) through formal Terms of Reference.



Strengthen systems-wide coordination and resourcing for youth engagement

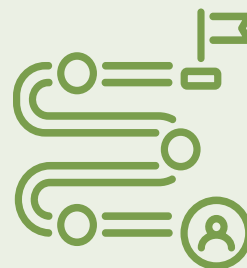
Ensure sustained engagement through coherent inter-ministerial coordination and resource allocation.

- Engage youth through SUN Youth Network Bangladesh and National Youth Council (NYC), jointly led by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, MoYS and Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU), with participation from key ministries and youth networks.
- Strengthen NYC and inter-ministerial coordination plan defining roles, responsibilities, and accountability for youth engagement across relevant ministries and departments.
- Incorporate youth into national frameworks for food systems and nutrition with a formal reporting mandate and periodic review mechanism.
- Allocate dedicated budgets in key ministries for youth-led consultations, capacity-building for Food Systems Youth Leadership, collective action implementation and operational continuity.



Build youth capacity and expand participation pathways

Transform youth motivation and intent into leadership through targeted capacity building, hands-on policy exposure and digital engagement across all levels.



- Introduce food systems and governance courses through university or tertiary level education.
- Expand DYD programmes to support policy design, implementation cycles, and cross-sectoral coordination.
- Extend support by creating internship opportunities that place young leaders in relevant ministries, departments and private sectors to gain direct experience in policy discussions, processes, and implementation related to food systems and nutrition.
- Use digital tools for youth consultations and establish feedback loops whereby youth are involved of their impact of their contribution.
- Track engagement through a “Youth engagement scorecard” integrated within the national monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

CALL TO ACTION

Bangladesh is at a pivotal moment. With nearly one-third of the population made up of young people, the country has a unique opportunity to harness its demographic dividend to accelerate food systems transformation. Encouragingly, youth participation in consultations is growing, but to fully realize Vision 2041, these contributions must evolve into systematic and sustained engagement at all levels of governance.

To unlock the full potential of Bangladesh’s youth and secure a nutrition-sensitive, climate-resilient, and inclusive food system, three decisive shifts should happen immediately:

- **Institutionalize youth participation.** Assign clear and formal roles for youth in national and sub-national food systems platforms, technical committees, and review mechanisms. Their voices should be recognized not only in consultations but also in decision-making and accountability structures. **Invest in youth leadership development.** Establish structured pathways, including national curricula, fellowships, internships, and mentorships, to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities needed to contribute effectively to policy and governance. **Strengthen coordination and resourcing.** Build coherence across ministries, youth networks, and multi-sectoral platforms, ensuring that youth engagement is supported by dedicated resources, formal accountability mechanisms, and sustained inter-ministerial collaboration.

Bangladesh’s vision of a nutrition-sensitive, climate-resilient, and inclusive food system will be realized more effectively by enabling youth to act as partners and leaders in this journey. Decisions made today will shape the food systems that future generations inherit. By embedding youth meaningfully in governance now, Bangladesh can strengthen its progress towards sustainable development and ensure a resilient food system for all.

Healthier Diets. For all.

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