

# Synopsis: The Changing Demographics in Nigeria's Food Systems and Implications for Future Youth Engagement

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Food systems (FS) are critically important in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where they account for a significant share of the GDP and employment. FS transformation is both strongly influenced by and strongly influences employment and job creation. This study documents FS employment in the past two decades observed in Nigeria, focusing on changes in demographic structure and inclusiveness. Key findings of the study are:

- FS in Nigeria are poised for significant transformation driven by demographic shifts, urbanization, income growth, and a favorable policy environment, while the conflict adversely affects this transformation.
- Agricultural employment declined significantly during the period, while the share of nonfarm agrifood sectors in total employment almost tripled, signaling major structural transformation.
- Employment in food manufacturing expanded rapidly, albeit from a lower base, with women's share among the fastest growing.
- Women's share in nonfarm agrifood system (AFS) employment tripled over the period, while youth participation quadrupled.
- However, Nigeria's youth face persistent barriers. Youth unemployment is double the national rate and their labor force participation is considerably below the average rate.
- The nonfarm AFS employment share in Nigeria far exceeds the continental average, positioning Nigeria ahead in AFS transformation.
- Policy recommendations from the study include providing targeted youth training and financing for nonfarm AFS roles; closing gender gaps through resource access and supportive regulations; investing in marketing infrastructure; prioritizing recovery and job programs in conflict zones; and adopting a holistic FS approach that also engenders the active involvement of women and youth.

## Introduction

Food systems (FS) are critically important in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where they account for a significant share of the gross domestic product (GDP) and provide livelihoods for most of the population (Davis et al. 2023). Furthermore, expansion in nonfarm components of FS provide an opportunity to transition out of agriculture—the dominant sector in SSA. In Nigeria, FS are poised for significant transformation driven by demographic shifts that will fundamentally reshape employment opportunities, particularly for youth. Nigeria’s rapidly growing and urbanizing population, coupled with rising per capita incomes, is driving profound changes in dietary patterns, food demand composition, and processing requirements. These demographic forces are expected to catalyze growth across food system segments, especially in downstream activities such as transportation, storage, processing, and marketing—areas where Nigeria currently faces significant gaps (AGRA 2022). Understanding how these demographic changes intersect with FS transformation is critical for ensuring food security and creating dignified employment opportunities for Nigeria’s youth.

This research note documents the trends in FS employment observed in the past two decades in Nigeria, focusing on changes in the demographic structure of employment and investigating how inclusive these changes were. It addresses four central questions: How did demographic and economic drivers of FS transformation evolve during the 2000–2023 period? What characterizes Nigeria’s labor market by gender and age? How important are FS in total employment? And how do employment patterns within FS differ across demographic groups? Historical evidence from growing economies demonstrates that FS transformation—particularly growth in off-farm segments—provides substantial employment opportunities for women and youth. However, the extent and inclusiveness of this transformation depend critically on investments in infrastructure, workers’ skill development, and supportive policy environments (Dolislager et al. 2021). By analyzing disaggregated employment trends across FS components and demographic groups, this study identifies where gender and age disparities persist within value chains, thereby informing targeted interventions to promote equitable youth engagement.

## Methodology

This study estimates both FS and agrifood system (AFS) employment using a methodology developed by Davis et al. (2023), which relies on two-digit aggregated employment data from ILO’s International Standard Industry Classification (ISIC). In this approach, primary crop, livestock, fishing, and aquaculture production are classified as food production. The manufacture of food products, manufacture of beverages, food and beverage services, and production activities of households are considered as the food manufacturing and services component of FS. In addition to these FS employment components, AFS adds workers in forestry and logging (nonfood production) and manufacture of nonfood agricultural items. Finally, employment associated with the transportation and trade of food and agricultural goods is added to obtain the total estimate.

## Data

The study covers the 2000–2023 period. Multiple economywide and sector-level secondary datasets are drawn from World Bank (2025) and ILO (2024) along with household-level data from the Nigeria Living Standards Survey (NLSS 2003) and the Harmonized Living Standards Survey (HNLSS 2009), conducted by Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Details of these datasets, the methodology, and results from this study are available in Bachewe, F., Andam, K., Mawia, H., Popoola, O. 2025. *The Changing Demographics in Nigeria’s Food Systems and Implications for Future Youth Engagement*. SFS4YOUTH Working Paper #8. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/177513>

## Results

### *Drivers of AFS employment in Nigeria*

#### **Economy**

Nigeria's economy expanded nearly threefold between 2000 and 2023, rising from \$178 billion to \$550.6 billion (constant 2015 US dollars), with average annual growth of 4.5 percent. Growth was particularly strong in the first half of the period (2000–2007) at 7.7 percent, compared to 1.5 percent from 2015 to 2023. Per capita GDP increased at 1.8 percent per year, from \$1,462 in 2000 to \$2,460 in 2023, exceeding SSA's 1 percent annual per capita growth. This economic expansion drove significant poverty reduction, with the share of Nigerians living below the \$2.15 per day poverty line falling from 42 percent in 2003 to 31 percent by 2018, while working poverty declined from 43.5 percent in 2004 to 27.4 percent in 2022. Agricultural growth averaged 6 percent annually, 12 percent in the first half and 2.6 percent in the second half of the period. The services sector matched this performance with 6 percent average growth. However, Nigeria's industrial sector stagnated, particularly in the second half, indicating limited economic diversification. Despite sectoral growth, Nigeria's economic structure remained largely unchanged, with agriculture's GDP share averaging 27 percent in the first half and 22 percent in the second half. Notably, agricultural value added per worker surged 193 percent between 2000 and 2022, while industrial value added per worker declined, suggesting agriculture's continued importance for employment absorption.

#### **Population**

Understanding the relationship among population growth, demographic transitions, and FS employment is essential for analyzing labor market evolution and shifts in quantity and types of food demand. Nigeria's population surged by 82 percent from 123 million (2000) to 224 million (2023), growing at 2.6 percent annually (mirroring SSA's 2.7 percent average) but, as Africa's most populous nation, creating greater pressure on FS. Significant demographic shifts occurred during the period: the share of youth under 15 fell by 2.3 percent, while the working-age population (15–64) grew by the same percentage. The total population surged nearly 90 percent, from 67.3 million to 126.4 million, with slightly more increase in men than women (United Nations 2024). Health improvements were substantial: crude death rates decreased by 29 percent, and life expectancy increased by 14 percent. These advances enhance labor productivity and shift priorities toward nutrition and dietary diversity. Nigeria's rapidly growing youth (ages 15–24 years) population, which increased by 83 percent during the period, presents both opportunity and risk. With agricultural jobs declining, expanding nonfarm agrifood sectors (processing, trade, logistics) offer critical employment pathways. However, without inclusive policies and real job creation, the country risks deepening youth unemployment and social unrest, underscoring that FS must become key engines for dignified, equitable youth employment.

#### **Urbanization**

Urbanization drives fundamental shifts in food environments, dietary patterns, and demand composition. Urban populations increasingly favor protein- and nutrient-rich, processed, and ready-to-eat foods, driving demand for packaging and processing. Higher urban population density necessitates robust infrastructure, reshaping market linkages among food system actors. Urbanization also expands employment in food logistics, processing, marketing, and services, while agricultural jobs become more competitive and remunerative despite declining in relative importance.

Nigeria urbanized at 4.4 percent annually between 2000 and 2023, exceeding SSA's 4.1 percent average (World Bank 2024). The share of Nigeria's urban population rose from 35 percent in 2000 to 54 percent in 2023, averaging 45 percent, which is well above SSA's average of 37 percent. Unlike many African countries, where large cities dominate, Nigeria's urban population is more evenly distributed, with Lagos accounting for only 13 percent of urban residents in 2023—far below the 27 percent average share of a

largest city in SSA. Nigeria's disbursed urbanization pattern presents significant opportunities for integrating food production with market systems while fostering job creation in urban and peri-urban areas. Substantial improvements in urban access to essential services occurred during 2000–2023 period, and Nigeria surpassed SSA averages in access to basic sanitation, drinking water, and cooking fuel by 2023.

## **Conflict**

Conflict has been a critical driver of FS changes and stagnation in Nigeria since at least 2009. The Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria displaced more than 2 million people in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states, hindering labor market participation. The conflict has spilled into northern Nigeria, particularly the northwest, where banditry and kidnapping have resulted in movement restrictions and forced displacements. Northern Nigeria, once the country's "breadbasket," no longer provides the employment opportunities youth seek, exacerbating rural–urban migration away from agricultural employment into the urban service sector.

## **Policy Environment**

Nigeria's FS policy environment has evolved significantly since 2010. Successive initiatives—the National Agricultural Investment Plan (2011–2014), Agricultural Transformation Agenda (2011–2015), and Agricultural Promotion Policy (2016–2020)—promoted value chain development and market access, aiming to shift subsistence agriculture to business-oriented agriculture. Since 2023, the government has declared a state of emergency on food security and established the Presidential Food Systems Coordinating Unit to coordinate policies for food security, exports, and job creation. Youth-focused initiatives include the National Youth Employment Action Plan (2021–2024), which identifies agriculture and food value chains as key employment sectors, and the National Youth Policy (2019–2023), which prioritizes access to land, finance, and training. Staple crop processing zones and programs like Kaduna State's Food Africa initiative have shown success in training farmers and empowering youth (82 percent women and youth). However, challenges persist, including weak policy coordination, overlapping mandates, limited institutional capacity, and underfunded climate adaptation, which undermine effectiveness. Vulnerable groups face limited resource access. Critically, declining agricultural employment has shifted workers primarily to urban services rather than productive manufacturing.

## **Labor Force Participation and Unemployment**

Nigeria's labor force participation rate averaged 60 percent between 2000 and 2023, below SSA's 68 percent average. Gender disparities are notable: men's participation (64 percent) exceeds women's (55 percent), with the gap widening over time due to sociocultural norms, disproportionate household responsibilities, legal barriers, and wage disparities. Youth face even larger participation gaps—with their employment rate at least 30 percent below the national average, with gap between mature workers and youth averaging 41 percent. Contributing factors include prolonged education enrollment, high youth unemployment, structural labor market constraints, macroeconomic instability, and weak labor policies—particularly affecting young women. However, the labor force participation gap between people with and without disability narrowed from 32 percent in 2011 to 21 percent 2022.

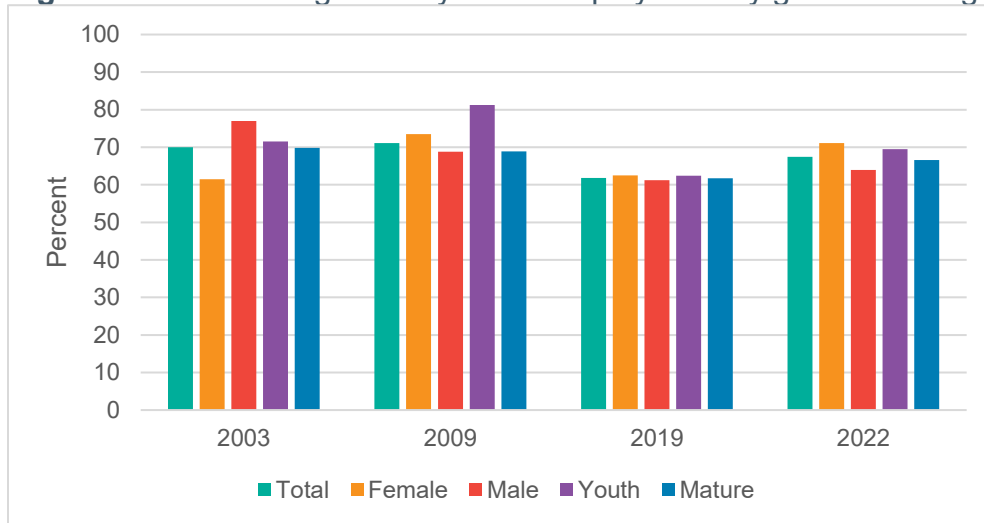
Nigeria's overall unemployment rate averaged 4.2 percent—below the SSA average of 6 percent—but rose from 3.7 percent (2000–2011) to 4.6 percent (2012–2023). Women's unemployment (4.3 percent) slightly exceeded men's (4.1 percent). Furthermore, critical disparities exist in employment quality: vulnerable employment affects 80 percent of women versus 54 percent of men, with women concentrated in informal work and facing less financial inclusion and limited entrepreneurship opportunities. Youth unemployment averaged 10 percent—significantly higher than the general population. The share of youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET rate) declined by more than half between 2011 and 2022, though the decline was faster among young men, indicating persistent gender disparities.

## Agrifood System Employment Trends

Between 2003 and 2022, agriculture dominated Nigeria's employment, averaging 44.7 percent of total employment. Employment patterns varied significantly across demographic groups. Agriculture accounted for 52.6 percent of men's employment and 51 percent of youth employment—the highest shares—compared to only 35.5 percent for women and 43.4 percent for mature workers. Agriculture's employment share declined by 40 percent during the period, from 58 percent in 2003 to 34.7 percent in 2022. Women experienced the steepest decline, followed by mature and youth workers, while men recorded the smallest decline. This shift reflects structural transformation: in 2003, agriculture employed twice as many workers as non-AFS sectors, but by 2022, employment had equalized. For women, non-AFS participation surpassed agricultural employment by 2022.

Food manufacturing and services, on average, accounted for 5.8 percent of total employment during the period. However, this sector expanded dramatically, from less than 1 percent in 2003 to over 9 percent in 2022. Growth was most pronounced among women, whose employment share in food manufacturing grew by over 11-fold. Nonfood agricultural manufacturing (tobacco, leather, wood) grew from 1.0 percent to 4.3 percent, accounting for 6.4 percent of youth employment and 5.5 percent of women's employment by 2022, underscoring the growing significance of nonfarm AFS employment for these groups. Trade accounted for nearly 13 percent of total employment, and its share grew by 90 percent over the period. Trade employment is twice as important for women than for men. Similarly, trade is more important for mature than young people; however, this age gap is relatively small. Transportation employment doubled in importance to 2 percent of total employment, driven partly by youth's access to affordable motorbikes—reflecting a broad African trend.

**Figure 1.** Trends in Agrifood systems employment by gender and age (%)



**Source:** Authors' analyses using NISR (2023) and ILO (2024) data.

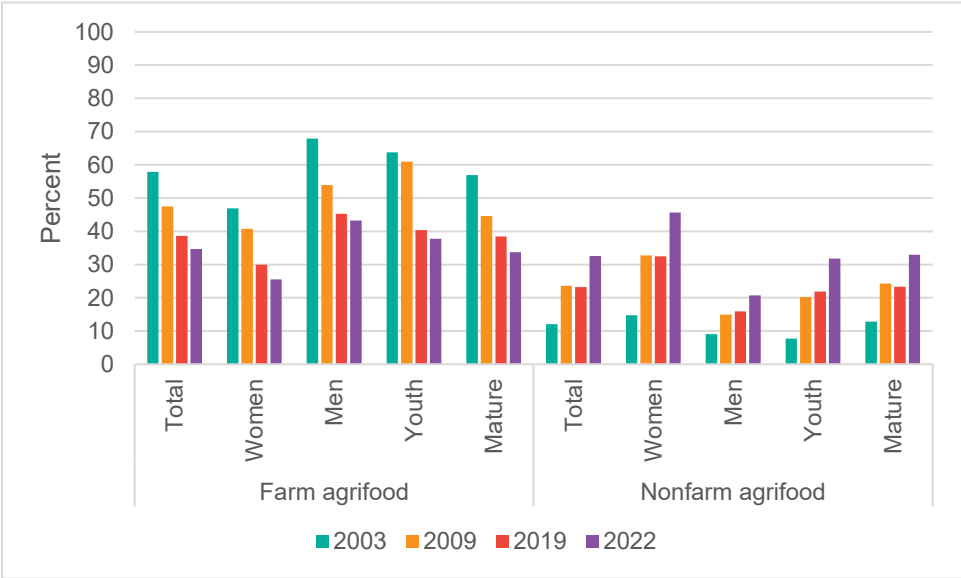
The nonfarm AFS subsector—comprising food manufacturing and services, nonfood agricultural manufacturing, trade, and transportation—gained increasing importance for employment, growing from 12 percent in 2003 to 32.6 percent in 2022 (170 percent growth between 2022 and 2003). Women's employment showed a faster growth (190 percent), while youth employment grew the fastest, by over 310 percent. Men had the lowest participation rate (15 percent on average) and slowest growth (109 percent).

Nigeria's AFS employed an average of 67.6 percent of the workforce from 2003 to 2022. This share declined modestly, by 2.6 percentage points (from 70 percent in 2003 to 67.4 percent in 2022). The shift reflects a sharp 23.2 percentage point drop in agricultural employment, partially offset by a 20.6 percentage point rise in Nigeria's nonfarm AFS sectors—far outpacing nonfarm AFS growth in countries like

Rwanda and Ghana. The transformation signals a pivot toward off-farm opportunities, consistent with patterns in evolving economies. Demographic patterns vary moderately. AFS accounts for over 67 percent of women’s jobs, nearly 68 percent for men, 71 percent for youth, and 66.7 percent for mature workers. Women saw the strongest gains, with AFS employment rising 9.6 percentage points. Youth experienced a mild 2 percentage point dip, and mature workers declined by 3 percentage points, while men faced the steepest fall, 13 percentage points, as nonfarm gains failed to counter agricultural exits.

Overall, women and youth are driving the growth in trade, processing, and food services employment, while men and older workers remain anchored in farming. Nigeria’s nonfarm AFS share (23 percent) and its rapid expansion dwarf Africa’s average (5.3 percent; Davis et al. 2023) and contrast with Rwanda’s agriculture-heavy AFS, in which nonfarm AFS on average accounted for only 11 percent of total employment (Bachewe et al., 2024). These trends highlight Nigeria’s accelerating structural shift and the rising centrality of nonfarm AFS in shaping inclusive labor markets.

**Figure 2.** Farm/non-farm agrifood systems employment by gender and age (%)



**Source:** Authors’ analyses using NISR (2023) and ILO (2024) data.

### Conclusions

Nigeria’s AFS has undergone a rapid transformation over the past two decades, driven by demographic shifts, urbanization, changing food demand, and a favorable policy environment. While agriculture remains the main source of employment, especially in rural areas, its share is declining. However, this is offset by rapid growth in nonfarm sectors such as trade and processing. These dynamic segments are increasingly inclusive entry points for women and youth, aligning with global trends in which value addition and services lead job creation. Despite progress, the transition is uneven. Youth unemployment persists as a result of barriers to finance and skills, while northern regions face conflict-driven displacement and limited access to employment in AFS. Institutional fragmentation and infrastructure gaps further hinder potential job creation. Key recommendations include: (1) providing targeted youth training and financing for nonfarm AFS roles; (2) closing gender gaps through resource access and supportive regulations; (3) investing in infrastructure, including cold chains, transport, and digital markets; (4) prioritizing recovery and job programs in conflict zones; (5) strengthening cross-ministerial coordination and monitoring; and (6) adopting a holistic FS approach that integrates production, equity, sustainability, and resilience, with active involvement of women and youth. This systemic shift is vital to position AFS as a driver of inclusive, dignified employment and shared prosperity.

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