

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN KENYA

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Food systems incorporate many actors at different intersecting levels and spaces. Young people¹ constitute one of the most significant groups of these actors and contribute significantly to food systems in a variety of ways, from agricultural production and processing to food-related retail services, through formal and informal employment, paid and unpaid labor, and self-employment. In addition to engaging through work and livelihoods, young people are involved in research, conservation, and knowledge acquisition and transmission. They also participate in consumer pressure groups and social movements raising awareness on the need for food system transformation and demanding climate change action. Through all these contributions, young people support achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal targets such as those on food security, economic growth, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability (HLPE 2021; FAO and AUC 2022).

Africa's delayed demographic transition means that the continent will soon become the main source of growth for the world's workforce. By 2100, Africa's youth will be equivalent to twice Europe's entire population and almost one-half of the world's youth (Rocca and Schultes 2020). However, youth employment stands at the crossroads of economic and demographic constraints (Mueller and Thurlow 2019). Despite rapid urbanization in recent years, urban employment growth has been concentrated in the relatively low-value services sector, rather than in higher-value manufacturing jobs (Lukalo and Kiminyei 2019). Meanwhile, the burgeoning youth population is located primarily in rural areas, which means that job creation should occur in rural areas to generate livelihoods for Kenya's youth and reduce the pressures on increasingly crowded urban areas.

1 Article 260 of Kenya's Constitution defines a youth as a person between ages 18 and 34.

In particular, off-farm jobs that add value to agricultural produce (such as processing) are an opportunity to kick-start manufacturing, create jobs in rural areas, and spur structural transformation, as suggested in the Economic Transformation Agenda 2022–2027 of the current Kenyan administration. Further, with an estimated 20 percent absorption into the formal job sector, the informal sector (which includes many agricultural jobs) represents an immediate opportunity to catalyze economic growth and employment for some of the 20 million young people joining the labor market in Africa each year (Mueller and Thurlow 2019).

In Kenya, agriculture employs more than half of the workforce and, crucially, supports the livelihoods of 70 percent of rural households. The sector represents one of the most important platforms for employment, income generation, and poverty reduction in East Africa's largest economy (Afande, Maina, and Maina 2015; World Bank 2019). As such, Kenya's food system could present a large, untapped reservoir for employment and an opportunity to curb the runaway rate of youth unemployment, which stands at 16.9 percent (KNBS 2021).

However, despite youth making up 35 percent of the population, youth engagement and employment in agriculture has been disappointingly low: the sector directly engages less than 10 percent of the youth labor force (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries 2018). Even worse, the elimination of agriculture as an exam subject in primary schools and the reduction of agricultural classes for secondary school students have exacerbated the perception that the sector does not provide intellectually stimulating, economically rewarding, and meaningful careers. The carryover effects can be felt at the tertiary level: a dramatic decline has been logged in the number of students enrolling in agricultural courses, from 24,221 students in 2017 to 18,165 in 2018—a 25 percent drop (KNBS 2018). This neglect of the sector is influencing youth cohorts to avoid it, taking away the opportunity to use youth's unbridled dynamism, energy, innovation, and drive to stimulate agricultural transformation and revitalize Kenya's agrarian systems. By strengthening the appeal of agriculture and food systems among Kenya's youth, the nation could harness the abundant returns from their effective participation and secure the future of its agriculture (Shujaaz 2021).

Nevertheless, even with the obstacles mentioned above, a large number of young people are actively engaged in Kenya's food value chains, as producers and traders of food, as workers, innovators, and entrepreneurs, and as policy actors. Unfortunately, despite their large numbers, their economic, social, and political contribution to food systems is frequently underestimated because of a lack of disaggregated data (FAO 2019). While some sources indicate that the mean age

of farmers in Kenya is 60 years, this perception has yet to be empirically verified (Birch 2018; Yeboah and Jayne 2020). Moreover, it is statistically improbable as only 2.5 percent of the Kenyan population is 65 years and above, and less than half of this age group is economically active or even engaged in farming (Yeboah and Jayne 2020; World Bank 2022). In fact, emerging evidence suggests that, in sub-Saharan Africa, the average age of household heads who farm is 49, and when all individuals who spend some time on their own/family farm are considered, this average age falls to 32 (IFAD 2019). Within these figures, it is estimated that rural youth spend 50 percent or more of their time in farming.

Given this knowledge, farming still represents a significant portion of the jobs held by rural youth, albeit in the informal sector. In 2020, out of 17.4 million individuals employed in Kenya, the informal sector accounted for roughly 14.5 million. Youth made up over 63 percent of such employees, with nearly equal proportions of men and women (Faria 2022; Statista nd). The informality of youth employment in food systems often relegates them to participating as casual laborers on farms; as providers of unpaid labor on family farms; and work in the supply of inputs and other raw materials; in food processing and transportation, including as *boda boda* drivers (motorcycle taxis); in storage as warehouse workers; in preparing and serving meals; in selling food produce and products in formal and informal markets as butchers or grocers, or at kiosks; in disposing of food leftovers; in refuse handling; and in recycling. In all these jobs, education, age, and gender play an important role in determining their level of engagement and employment (Samuel Hall and DFID 2017; Glover and Sumberg 2020). For example, gender stereotypes and cultural perceptions mean that food handling is seen as the role of women; thus, out of necessity, young women make up most of the informal workers in food production, harvesting, processing, and selling of fresh vegetables and fruits, commonly referred to as *mama mboga* (Samuel Hall and DFID 2017).

These young people already working in the agriculture sector are underserved, underfunded, and under-engaged. Their meaningful involvement in the sector is crippled by lack of access to productive resources and assets, including land, knowledge and information, stable and structured markets, credit, supporting institutions, and representation in farmer organizations and unions (YEDF 2020). For the few in farmer-based organizations, including youth-led community organizations, these networks are fragmented, work in silos with no connection to each other, and are largely ineffective because of leadership and capacity gaps, limited access to funding, and inadequate coordination and access to support networks. As such, youth engaged in the agriculture sector do not have a powerful common voice to articulate their aspirations, challenges, and

issues and, as a consequence, their representation during policy formulation and engagement processes is often tokenized and not representative of their participation in Kenya's food systems (Afande, Maina, and Maina 2015; Muiderman 2016; Birch 2018; FAO and AUC 2022).

These combined challenges are exacerbated by the dynamics of a changing climate and the impacts of this on food systems. This is especially important as evidence pits the success and sustainability of efforts to create jobs for young people in the agriculture sector as strongly dependent on the future climate. Moreover, rural youth bear significant risks from climate change. When measuring vulnerability to climate change through the dimensions of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity, rural youth are found to be especially disadvantaged (IFAD 2019). The negative effects of climate change that cause income and livelihood losses serve to reinforce youth's perception of agriculture as a sector unable to provide decent, meaningful jobs and resilient livelihoods.

Again, though, despite the extensive economic, social, and cultural barriers that have essentially dis-incentivized this demographic from seeking opportunities in the agriculture sector, youth are still engaged at different levels within food value chains. There are numerous examples of young people developing innovative and unconventional ideas, approaches, and initiatives that are transforming how the continent produces, adds value, stores, sells, and consumes food (Generation Africa 2019). Some of these youth pioneers reveal an emerging distinct approach to youth participation in agriculture. Understanding their nuanced attitudes, perceptions, and aspirations provides useful pointers on youth-transformative pathways for young men and women's effective engagement and productive employment in food systems. Additionally, knowledge of the current state of food systems and their relationships with young people is required in order to be able to seize opportunities for and better understand youth's various roles in food system transformation.

Using a food systems lens, this chapter highlights the critical roles youth have played and continue to play in food system transformation. It also demonstrates the diversity of youth engagement in Kenyan food systems, and their aspirations and drivers for participation, as well as the enabling policy environment, institutional frameworks, and support ecosystems. Finally, given the complexities of youth engagement in food systems, the chapter highlights the constraints limiting their participation and provides recommendations for improving youth participation in Kenya's food systems.

The changing narrative of youth engagement and employment in food systems in Kenya

As youth engaged in food systems are not homogenous, it is crucial to understand their perspectives, identities, and practices to enable policymakers and other stakeholders to formulate policies, interventions, and programs that meet their needs. Understanding their different points of view provides evidence for youth-adapted and responsive solutions that address the changing context and the nature of their engagement in food value chains.

To map the engagement of Kenya's young men and women in food systems—including who, in what form, and where—Mercy Corps (2019) attempts to classify young men and women along four youth “personas” based on demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal criteria. Consequently, youth are categorized as determined builders, opportunistic movers, static planners, or rootless climbers.

To start with, determined builders reveal high levels of digital capability and experimentation with new ideas and technologies. They have an aspiration for larger-scale farming and agribusiness with bigger returns and make intentional and progressive steps toward agribusiness growth and accumulation of assets. They wish to attain the status of community focal point on agribusiness matters and use ICT tools including social media to publicize their agribusiness activities. This means they are most likely to participate in policy processes and in the representation of youth interests in different forums. Their engagement in food systems is motivated by self-reliance and the freedom of being self-employed.

Opportunistic movers have many characteristics similar to determined builders but are differentiated from them based on their greater appetite for risk. Opportunistic movers engage in high-risk agribusiness ventures and seek opportunistic and quick wins from low-period investments. They have a good appreciation for agricultural technologies and use ICTs to build their information and knowledge. Occasionally, their high-risk ventures fail but, based on their high-risk tolerance, they will pivot to other agribusiness ventures to build back to generate new on-farm income streams.

Static planners encounter barriers to effective engagement, shaped by gender inequities, limited digital capabilities, and lack of financial independence to own productive assets. As such, they are reliant on their spouses and their engagement in the agriculture sector is a means to meet their family's dietary needs and to aid them in attaining their ambitions of financial independence. Although they are mostly risk-averse and do not want to put their productive assets at risk, they use village savings and loans associations and *chamas* (informal social

groups) to save their limited funds and to create a social safety net for themselves and their families. As they have a limited financial arsenal to expand their farming enterprises, they tend to be conventional in their agricultural practices.

Rootless climbers, on the other hand, have low levels of education and very limited exposure to different value chains, and as a result adopt conventional agricultural practices. They often see limited employment prospects in agriculture and partake in other off-farm activities to supplement their income. Their ambition in engaging in agriculture is to obtain a means to venture into other income-generating activities. Often, they struggle to attain their growth ambition in agriculture as a result of limited access to finance.

Yet, within these four personas, there is a changing narrative of youth aspirations that reveals new and emerging approaches to youth engagement in food systems in Kenya. Understanding these alternative psychological models and distinct approaches will be crucial in mapping a route that builds youth agency into optimally contributing to the ambitious transformation of Kenya's food system.

These distinct approaches are described below.

Agriculture vs. agribusiness: The lure of agricultural entrepreneurship

Driven by a business mindset and an entrepreneurial spirit, there is an emerging preference among Kenyan youth to engage in agricultural entrepreneurship (“agripreneurship”) rather than conventional agriculture. While agriculture typically evokes the image of an old man standing under the scorching sun next to a grass-thatched hut, holding a garden hoe, agripreneurship is viewed as an aspirational undertaking that enables the formation, growth, and scaling of livelihood-sustaining enterprises and the exploration of business opportunities along the food value chain.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries, and Irrigation defined agripreneurship as “the application of entrepreneurial principles to identify, develop, and manage viable agricultural enterprises for profit and improved livelihoods” (Kenya, Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Irrigation 2018).

In fact, many young people's prevailing perceptions of agriculture are that it is the preserve of an older generation, which is menial and backbreaking and with little opportunity for the application of technology, and a means of transfer of generational poverty. Meanwhile, agripreneurship feeds youth's aspirations of becoming business owners, sometimes in a tech-enabled environment and following an avenue that has the inherent potential for them to apply their

talents, imagination, and business acumen as innovators, disruptors, and entrepreneurs. In this, they prefer shorter-season, high-value farm enterprises such as horticulture, poultry, beekeeping, and rabbit rearing (Mercy Corps 2019).

Yet, within agripreneurship, there are various regimes of participation, based on the size and formality of the agribusiness, digital skills, risk tolerance, gender inequalities, and access to capital and support networks. The cadres include:

- **Livelihood-sustaining enterprises:** These are opportunity-driven, highly local businesses designed to maintain a source of income for an individual family.
- **Dynamic enterprises:** These are agribusinesses operating in more basic industries, deploying existing products through proven business models, seeking incremental growth.
- **Niche ventures:** These are agripreneurship ventures creating innovative products and services that target particular market segments, and that incorporate goals other than profit and scale.
- **High-growth ventures:** With disruptive business models and significant growth and scale potential, these agribusinesses are led by ambitious entrepreneurs with high-risk tolerance (Generation Africa 2019).

Most recently, one of the drivers of the emergence of agripreneurship has been the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing containment measures. In this, different incentives and motivations buoyed the upsurge of agri-based microbusinesses among youth. Some youth felt the wrenching effects of lost income during the period, whereas others were keen to milk the opportunity of increased time on their hands caused by movement restrictions. Others took advantage of the market gap caused by the high demand for some types of vegetables and fruits, spawned by the realization that optimal nutrition was crucial in boosting immunity against the virus (Mugo 2020). All in all, the greatest motivation was to obtain extra income, in a sector with low barriers to entry, that would allow these young farmers and their families to get by during a time of instability. In essence, working in the agribusiness economy provided a higher level of financial security for youth: evidence shows that young people who engaged in the agriculture sector in 2020 earned on average \$12 per month more than their counterparts engaged in other sectors (Shujaaz 2021).

Nevertheless, these agripreneurs can thrive only where they find supportive ecosystems; as such, it will be crucial to complement the upsurge of agripreneurship with prioritized mentorship, financial access, and training and capacity

building. Otherwise, the attraction of youth into agriculture, which blossomed during the COVID-19 pandemic, may be lost (Generation Africa 2019; Mugo 2020; Shujaaz 2021).

Beyond the farm: Youth clamor for opportunities along the value chain

Closely related to the lure of agripreneurship, Kenyan youth's approach to engagement in food systems demonstrates an urge to seek opportunities beyond the farm but along the agricultural value chain. While agripreneurship also entails transformation of the orientation of on-farm activities into a business, this distinct approach reveals the ambition of Kenya's young men and women to engage in other aspects of the value chain as agrodealers and extension agents, in agritech and digital services, in processing, in packaging and storage, in transportation and logistics, as trade and market facilitators, as food and produce retailers, as financial service providers, as food bloggers, and in agri-media, and so on.

This distinct approach is a move in the right direction, as the effective participation of youth in upstream and downstream nonfarm segments creates space for innovation, entrepreneurship, access to markets, and increased productivity and efficiency (International Youth Foundation 2014). Furthermore, youth engagement in value chains is estimated to have higher ripple effects in terms of creating more jobs and is predicted to have higher growth rates than the on-farm production segment (HLPE 2021). For example, in Tanzania, Nigeria, and Rwanda, the off-farm food system contributed 40, 16, and 11 percent of all new jobs, respectively (Yeboah and Thomas 2018).

A knack for digital agriculture: A new generation leveraging technology

Digital technologies are particularly impactful in revolutionizing Kenya's agriculture sector as they reduce the drudgery of agriculture and make value chains more productive, efficient, profitable, and resilient to climate change. Meanwhile, there has never been a more digitally capable generation in Kenya's history than the current youth generation. This is reflected by the fact that 90 percent of young farmers ages 18–35 already have high levels of engagement with digital technologies and are frequent users of social media (Mercy Corps 2019). These technologies can help demonstrate to youth that agriculture can be a viable and profitable business opportunity, thereby increasing the desirability of agriculture-related career paths. Yet young rural farmers indicate that they would further embrace technology if these digital agriculture services were

affordable, were better designed to fit local environments, and met their needs as value chain actors (Malabo Montpellier Panel 2019; Heifer International 2021). To reap the benefits of the digitalization of agri-value chains, rural youth, young women, and other marginalized youth cohorts also need to be better served, as Kenya faces a significant digital divide, with 44 percent of the urban population having access to the internet compared with 17 percent in rural areas (World Bank 2019).

Ambition for climate smartness and resilience: Youth-led climate action

The motivation for youth to explore climate resilience in their agricultural activities is tied to the immense benefits gained and the losses averted as a result of their adoption of climate-friendly solutions. With the impacts of climate change posing multiple constraints and dictating youth's ability to make a livelihood from their engagement in agriculture, the capacity of climate-smart agriculture to sustainably increase productivity and thereby improve livelihoods is particularly attractive for them. Meanwhile, with climate change impacts disproportionately affecting youth, given their higher vulnerability compared with the rest of the population, the ability of climate-smart agriculture to enhance their resilience and adaptive capacity strengthens their resolve to adopt sustainable agriculture practices (Bullock et al. 2020; Kosciulek 2020).

In essence, these motivations build upon some key youth behavioral characteristics and exhibited attitudes. For instance, global youth are considered fundamentally more environmentally and climate-conscious, having demonstrated key awareness and understanding of climate change, including how it affects them and how it represents an acute threat to their livelihoods and an existential threat to future generations (Mungai et al. 2018). Coupled with their adaptive mindset, which is a precept for the adoption of new ideas (new climate-smart innovations and management practices), and a knack for technologies (including the use of climate-smart technologies), these attitudes can form a basis for the wide-scale adoption of climate-smart and resilient practices.

However, this ambition to adopt climate-resilient technologies, innovations, and management practices in agricultural activities is hampered by low levels of awareness of green jobs and opportunities for climate-smart agriculture in the different food value chains. Moreover, youth (especially rural youth and young women) lack the resources, including the information and capital, to adopt climate-smart agriculture (Kenya, Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries 2017).

To alleviate this, investments targeting rural youth need to incorporate a climate lens while financing for climate adaptation needs to integrate and intentionally target youth (IFAD 2019).

Catalyzing meaningful participation of youth in food systems

Drivers of youth participation and engagement in food systems

Globalization, rapid urbanization, rising incomes, shifting diets, a growing population, and digitalization are causing fundamental changes in Africa's food systems (AGRA 2019). In particular, population growth and urbanization across the continent have contributed not only to changed diets and consumption patterns but also to a widespread increase in the consumption of refined or highly processed foods. This has led to the emergence of food processing and the creation of more employment and growth opportunities for young people in agribusiness, farm services, value addition, retail, and food services. Similarly, rapid urbanization has altered the supply of and demand for food and contributed to the expansion of the food industry and the globalization of food trade. Higher food demands and nutritional and employment needs create an opportunity for youth employment in developing countries with their burgeoning youth populations (AGRA 2017; Abdelradi et al. 2021; Babu et al. 2021). With the increasing policy focus on youth roles in food system transformation, improving skills, knowledge, and capacities is becoming an increasingly significant driver of participation.

Youth interact within numerous activities and functions of a food system in a variety of ways. Therefore, it may be challenging to define their individual participation and motivation for engagement in terms of only a few factors (Glover and Sumberg 2020). However, the numerous competing definitions of youth based on their social, cultural, political, and economic environments may have an impact on their food environment, interactions, habits, and diets. Thus, the factors that influence youth participation and engagement in food systems are frequently interconnected and reinforce one another, while intersecting with other youth characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, education, and class. In addition, they may intersect with larger systemic and structural dynamics, including those that privilege particular types of knowledge. These disparities often lead to disadvantages, especially for marginalized youth cohorts such as rural youth and young women, in engagement in food systems.

Key challenges curtailing meaningful youth participation

Youth involvement in food systems is unique, yet in many respects their issues are similar to those facing non-youth, particularly because food production is inherently risky as a result of its sensitivity and susceptibility to external shocks. The monotony of on-farm tasks, variable input prices, delayed returns, and production inefficiencies, among other factors, contribute to youth apathy and low participation in food value chains (Kising'u 2016; Muthomi 2017). Although food systems are a viable livelihood option for many young people, this group is still disadvantaged by lack of access to land, education, training, information, financial services (credit and loans), markets, and participation in policy dialogue and decision-making processes.

According to the literature, sociocultural norms and practices strongly established in customary land tenure systems heavily discourage youth access to land. Practices such as the transfer of land to male descendants only when they marry or when their fathers die means that many young men will have to wait a long time to obtain their own land rights, while subsequent male generations will inherit smaller and less valued parcels of farmland (AGRA 2015). For young women, it is even more difficult to obtain land. In some cultures, they are not allowed to inherit land or still have to rely on their male relatives to obtain land, despite Kenyan legislation that grants women equal rights to land and prohibiting gender discrimination in land law, customs, and practices. Even though land laws protect women's inheritance, succession, and matrimonial property, women still hold only about 5 percent of all land deeds (AGRA 2015). As a result, they have limited control and decision-making authority over the land they use for agricultural and food production. This also prevents them from accessing financial services that require land as collateral.

Arguably, social norms and practices can shape and affect the roles of young men and women, as well as their access to and control over resources that drive output, income, and participation. With changing discourses on youth engagement in food systems and the emergence of new opportunities in agriculture and food systems, youth employment strategies must consider gender dynamics, particularly in relation to young women (Njeru and Mwangi 2017), in order to provide them with the tools they need to navigate an already complex agriculture and food system environment. Young women still lack basic market skills, which prevents them from accessing productive resources, economic possibilities, and participation in decision-making processes, among other things (AGRA 2015). As a result, young women find it particularly challenging to rely on food production and related activities as a source of income. Lack of access to

financial resources locks them out from buying or leasing, and many therefore end up migrating to urban areas seeking alternative sources of income. Low levels of literacy and lack of knowledge of their land rights impede land tenure security (ibid.).

Broader education and training are critical to develop highly trained youth capable of driving agricultural growth and food system transformation (Amwata 2020). However, young people lack the core entrepreneurial and financial literacy skills required for employment and entrepreneurship and have limited access to technical and vocational education and training. Current education and training is frequently not adapted to meet changing labor market demands, leaving youth without the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the workforce and provide new solutions to a struggling food system. (Afande, Maina, and Maina 2015; Kising'u 2016). This translates to insufficient knowledge, skills, and capacities to tap into ready markets, and therefore low revenues and incomes.

Beyond technical capacities, access to agricultural finance and insurance to enable youth to enhance their productivity is still limited. Young women face additional constraints owing to non-economic roles and responsibilities that limit their action and time. Conversely, broader analysis of the food sector market suggests that having access to markets could be more sustainable and critical than just having access to capital (Sudarkasa 2019). Poor access to markets has been linked with poor participation and exclusion of youth in food systems owing to poor profitability of products. For this reason, more and more stakeholders are enhancing youth participation in food systems by focusing on a market systems approach through agriculture sector incubation and acceleration programs.

Many challenges limiting youth participation in food systems are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, including individual conditions and vulnerabilities like physical and mental health, poverty, and disability.

Institutional and policy frameworks

EXPLORING THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN KENYA'S FOOD SYSTEM

At the level of global goals, Kenya has committed to reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training by 2030 under Sustainable Development Goal 8 (“Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all”). Kenya has also committed to enhancing impact and expanding action to address the

needs, build the agency, and advance the rights of young people through the United Nations Youth Strategy. At the regional level, the African Union's 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods recognizes youth as key players in halving poverty by 2025 and commits Kenya to creating jobs in agricultural value chains for at least 30 percent of youth. At the national level, the Kenyan Constitution commits to take whatever measures necessary, including affirmative action programs, to ensure youth have access to various resources, including employment opportunities, and participate in development processes. Kenya's Vision 2030, the Big Four Agenda, and other development strategies and programs identify youth as critical to achieving the country's targeted annual economic growth of 10 percent. Correspondingly, they emphasize gender equality, women, and youth in the design and implementation of various interventions aimed at addressing emerging social, cultural, economic, and political issues affecting youth participation in development initiatives. Such interventions include the establishment of funds (for example, Uwezo Fund,² the Youth Enterprise Development Fund,³ and the Women Enterprise Fund⁴) all of which aim to improve financial access and expand business and enterprise opportunities for youth.

Specific youth policies, plans, strategies, and legislative and institutional mechanisms formulated since independence include the National Youth Service Act 1964, National Youth Policy 2007, National Youth Council Act 2009, Kenya National Development Youth Policy 2018, and Kenya Youth Agribusiness Strategy 2018–2022. The last establishes a coordinated national response to obstacles to the effective participation of youth and provides new opportunities for youth in agriculture and its value chains. Its framework will allow for the more coordinated implementation of existing and future initiatives and unique opportunities for youth, under a long-term vision to achieve sustainable growth of the agricultural economy. However, its implementation mandate ends in 2022, which means it is crucial to formulate a new youth strategy that takes into consideration the new electoral and governance cycle and new evidence and data as well as changing youth aspirations and emerging approaches to their engagement in food systems.

Similarly, policy and legal frameworks for agricultural investment (the Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy 2019–2029, Kenya Climate Smart Agriculture Strategy 2017–2026, and Kenya Climate Smart

2 www.uwezo.go.ke/

3 www.youthfund.go.ke/

4 <https://vision2030.go.ke/project/women-enterprise-fund/>

Implementation Framework 2018–2027) cover a broad range of areas and address youth as a cross-cutting issue. Each of them integrates, aligns, or links to either or all four of the components that enable young people to participate in food systems: youth integration, engagement, participation, and employment. Additional related policies, plans, and strategies include the Kenya Agri-Nutrition Strategy 2020–2024, Youth Enterprise Development Fund Strategy 2020–2024, Women Enterprise Development Fund 2013–2017, National Policy on Gender and Development 2019, National Employment Authority Act 2016, Medium and Small Enterprise Act 2012, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act 2013, and National Government Affirmative Action Fund (Public Finance Management Act 2012). Policy coordination and implementation are overseen by the ministry in charge of youth affairs in collaboration with relevant government ministries, departments, and agencies; the private sector; youth networks, platforms, and institutions; and all other stakeholders (national, international) involved in youth affairs.

ANALYZING THE EFFICACY OF POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND IDENTIFYING GAPS

Youth look to policymakers and institutions, both public and private, to fulfill their aspirations for decent, stable jobs as well as the opportunity to meaningfully participate in and contribute to development initiatives. Yet, as a variety of the aforementioned policy frameworks and initiatives demonstrate, youth are often considered in a generalized and oversimplified way because of an absence of evidence on their heterogeneity. This results in broad, multisectoral national youth development policies and programs that serve as the foundation for inequitable and poorly coordinated distribution of resources and public investments. Worse still, the portrayal of youth as both objects and subjects of development, as innovators eager to develop new technologies or as development actors incapable of identifying and comprehending their own needs (Glover and Sumberg 2020) creates shifting youth narratives that contribute to youth exclusion from policymaking processes. As a result, their involvement in development activities becomes limited or passive (FAO 2014). Regrettably, rural and impoverished youth bear an outsized burden, as the majority of public consultations tend to take place in urban areas. Young women are also often excluded because of their non-economic activities and responsibilities, which restrict their mobility and time to participate in such policy processes (Huyer et al. 2021). This results in a lack of specific incentives to empower rural youth and women agripreneurs operating along the value chain, which limits the overall effect.

Not all the policies developed or adopted are implemented fully. Some of them, like the Kenya Youth Agribusiness Strategy, are on target but fall short of the mark, owing to the paucity of research and evidence to support the proposed strategies for youth integration or involvement in agriculture value chains. Others are overconfident in their ability to achieve immediate results in a short period. Lastly, several of the policies lack the institutional capacity and accountability, impact evaluations, resources, and coherence to achieve their stated objectives. Aside from these limitations, policy implementation is also affected by shifting enabling environments, such as evolving global policy debates and political factors.

Synthesis and outlook: Recommendations for improving youth participation in food systems

Enhance structures of support for youth in agribusiness

With the knowledge that young farmers and agripreneurs can thrive where they find supportive ecosystems, it is crucial that policymakers and other stakeholders enhance the ecosystem of support for Kenyan youth engaged in food systems. As the Kenya Youth Agribusiness Strategy identifies, it will be crucial to extend a lending hand to equip these youths with appropriate agribusiness skills, knowledge, and information and to enhance their access to affordable and youth-friendly growth capital that can enable them to scale promising agribusiness ventures.

In unlocking capital for youth-led farming and agripreneurship ventures, it will be especially necessary to develop and implement de-risking measures and the use of catalytic capital from public and philanthropic sources to mobilize private sector finance for onward lending to youth agripreneurs. This is critical since, across East Africa, risk in agribusiness lending is at least twice as high and the returns 4–5 percent lower than in lending to other sectors (ACELI Africa 2020). With this, expanding the scale and improving the efficiency of affirmative funds such as the Youth Fund and the Women Enterprise Fund is advised. Moreover, the development of easily accessible and affordable credit schemes such as the Hustler Fund⁵ will provide additional opportunities for financial inclusion and resourcing for youth engaged in agriculture.

5 The Hustler Fund is a financial inclusion fund set up by the Government of Kenya in 2023 to address unemployment and the lack of opportunities for low-income earners through affordable credit.

Other structures of support that can be extended include innovation support, business development services, market and distribution links, mentorship, and connection to peer networks (Generation Africa 2019). With a critical mass of skilled young Kenyans with access to finance and the knowhow to drive productivity growth in farming and related value chains, the country can harness the power of its youth in catalyzing agricultural transformation (Yeboah and Thomas 2018).

Operationalize school-based agricultural education: 4K clubs

The relaunch of the 4K⁶ clubs provides an opportune momentum to scale up school-based agricultural education. With the aim of inculcating a positive mindset regarding agriculture among young students and nurturing, preparing, and building future leaders of the agriculture sector, the 4K clubs use a graduated approach to cultivate the next generation of leaders who are passionate and invested in transforming food systems (Mcknight 2021). Prioritizing and investing in the 4K clubs program will support its integration, adoption, and operationalization within different contexts to the benefit of school-going youth and the country at large.

Build youth-led professional networks: Facilitate the formation of a national youth-in-agriculture association

As documented, youth-led and youth-serving associations and networks connect with young farmers and agripreneurs better than many other stakeholders, organizations, or institutions can. With the ability to build youth agency through learning by doing, a national youth in agriculture association would have the power to provide young farmers with a more powerful voice, to break silos and foster coordination of youth action in the sector, to facilitate inclusive representation of youth interests and perspectives in policymaking processes, and to attract additional public and private sector funding for significant investments in youth development and engagement in the sector.

Improve the evidence base for youth engagement in food systems

Despite extensive evidence that supports the idea of direct farm employment as a critical form of youth engagement in food systems, there is limited quantitative and qualitative data on young people's participation in food systems at various levels (for example, rural or urban) and stages (including production, processing,

6 4K stands for Kuungana, Kufanya, Kusaidia Kenya, which is loosely translated as “Coming together, to act, in order to help Kenya.”

retailing, and consumption), or their needs and issues in engaging in food systems and the barriers to their participation. This knowledge gap makes it difficult to determine the scope of young people's involvement in food systems and to guide policies to increase youth involvement. Additional evidence on youth participation in food systems is needed in four key areas to strengthen youth engagement in agriculture and food systems:

- Labor monitoring and statistics on the employment and wage patterns of young people
- Various forms of youth participation in food systems
- Youth-targeted policies for food system education, engagement, and employment
- Share of agriculture and food systems related funds targeted for youth engagement

As a result, investment in research and development activities will inform new types of engagement that take into account the diversity of the youth demographic. This will make it possible to transcend youth stereotypes and establish equitable policies based on empirically supported methods that accommodate their specific constraints and preferences (Glover and Sumberg 2020).

Strengthen youth-led policymaking

Policymakers must involve youth in policymaking processes in order to align youth skills and interests with the demand trends of the food system. They also need to distinguish between long- and short-term approaches as well as between demand- and supply-side solutions, each tailored to the local contexts and stakeholders of youth's food systems. This will enable opportunities for greater youth inclusion and participation. In the short term, it will be crucial to develop a new youth-in-agribusiness strategy to update and scale up development priorities for youth engagement and employment in food systems in Kenya.

Additionally, interventions should be promoted in tandem with existing supportive programs and institutional and legislative frameworks to provide organized support and boost youth engagement in food systems. For example, Kenya's Vision 2030 plans to disburse KSh 2.27 billion by 2022 through the Youth Enterprise Development Fund and the Women Enterprise Fund to improve work possibilities for youth through entrepreneurship (YEDF 2020). While this is not all channeled to agriculture-related activities, it presents an opportunity to enhance youth engagement in different parts of the food system.

Finally, at all levels of development, remove geographical, economic, social, legal, policy, and programmatic barriers to youth engagement in decision-making, planning, and implementation. This is currently demonstrated through the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities program, which aims to make it easier for youth, women, and people with disabilities to engage in government procurement by ensuring that 30 percent of government procurement opportunities are set aside particularly for these businesses. Other strategies could include tax reductions and levies for youth-owned small and medium enterprises to give them a chance for growth and survival.

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