



POSITION PAPER

Empowering Youth in Agriculture Through Inclusive Farmer Organizations and Forward-Thinking Partnerships

Youth Empowerment Workstream





Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	03
INTRODUCTION	04
REFRAMING YOUTH <i>Beyond Age, Toward Opportunity</i>	05
Early Youth	05
Transitional Youth	08
Established Youth	10
Cross Cutting Themes	12
Inclusive Agribusiness Models	13
Inclusive Agribusiness Models	13
Case Studies	13
Conclusion: Youth Inclusion as Agricultural Transformation	14
CALL TO ACTION <i>AMEA Youth Empowerment Workstream</i>	15
What can AMEA members do?	15
What can FO/Coops do?	15
How do we engage youth and incorporate their opinions in this paper?	15

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, youth engagement in agrifood systems has become a growing priority for governments, private sector actors, and international development agencies. Millions of young people in low- and middle-income countries continue to face persistent structural barriers, including unequal access to quality education, vocational training, land, and financial services—particularly in rural areas. These constraints are compounded by external shocks and stressors, such as conflict, climate change, and economic and financial instability, which elevate food insecurity, thereby pushing youth toward negative coping strategies.^{1,2,3}

This lack of social and economic integration not only stifles individual potential and stagnates local economies but also fuels broader challenges such as irregular migration, youth disenfranchisement, and vulnerability to exploitation. If left unaddressed, these challenges undermine the goals of AMEA.

Recognizing the untapped potential of youth, particularly in agrifood systems, combined with effective support systems and opportunities, is crucial to empowering youth to become powerful drivers and contributors of innovation, productivity, and resilience in global food systems.

As part of its mission to strengthen farmer organizations and agricultural enterprises globally, Agribusiness Market Ecosystem Alliance (AMEA) recognizes that meaningful youth inclusion is essential for long-term sustainability and innovation. The AMEA Youth Empowerment Workstream was established to address this need, bring together diverse stakeholders to explore practical strategies, share evidence-based approaches, and promote policy and institutional reforms. The workstream comprises experts drawn from AMEA's diverse network, including practitioners and leaders with extensive experience in designing and delivering youth-focused empowerment projects. This ensures that the lessons and recommendations reflect real-world practice and innovation across regions and sectors.

This position paper is the result of a collective effort to examine the barriers young people face in engaging with agriculture and agrifood systems and to reframe the definition of “youth” within this context. It presents case studies and lessons learned on how targeted interventions can positively impact distinct youth segments, while highlighting industry best practices and proposing solutions to unlock youth potential through inclusive farmer organizations, early engagement strategies, and youth-responsive services.

Investment in youth programming is a relatively new focus of international agricultural programs, with most meaningful developments initiated within the last decade. This paper is therefore a work in progress and is expected to be updated, based on dialogue and input over the coming years.



1. FAO, 2025, [The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems](#).

2. USAID, 2024, [Youth Shocks and Stressors Report](#).

3. IFAD, 2022, [Creating Opportunities for Rural Youth: Lessons from Agricultural Development](#).

REFRAMING YOUTH: Beyond Age, Toward Opportunity

Youth are commonly defined by age brackets (e.g., 18–35 years⁴), but this is overly simplistic. Youthhood is a dynamic life stage influenced by education, socio-economic status, gender, geography, and culture. Furthermore, the experience of being young can look very different depending on context; for example, the opportunities and challenges facing youth in rural areas often differ significantly from those in urban settings, even within the same country.

The AMEA Youth Empowerment Workstream asserts that youth engagement in agriculture must begin earlier, be more inclusive, and be backed by meaningful support mechanisms that reflect young people's realities and aspirations.

To fully harness youth potential in agriculture, this paper advocates for a more nuanced, life-stage approach, categorizing youth as:

Youth Category	Age ⁵	Professional Milestones
Early Youth	12 - 18 years	Formative years for secondary education/career/professional identity
Transitional Youth	18-25 years	Entry into tertiary education or economic/labour life
Established Youth	25-35 years	Graduating from tertiary education. Seeking professional and economic stability and leadership roles

In the sections that follow, we aim to outline best practices/approaches for each life stage. These best practices have been identified through a review of key documents. A separate document is available upon request, which enables readers to track the links from best practices to key documents and provides practitioners with a deeper understanding of how to apply these approaches in their programming. We want to convert learning into action!

Early Youth

Critically, the early youth populations and programs that serve them continue to be ignored. Research indicated in 2014 that by age 14–15, youth already have entrenched perceptions of agricultural livelihoods as either viable or outdated.⁶ Moreover, many elderly farmers view young farmers as inexperienced or disrespectful of tradition; therefore, addressing this generational gap is essential.



⁵. The age brackets here are as well a suggestion and should be considered in the specific context of the intervention.

⁶. FAO/WFP, 2008, [Sharing Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools experiences, challenges and innovations](#).

SOLUTIONS AND BEST PRACTICES TO ENGAGE WITH EARLY YOUTH

Partnering with schools:

- 1 Integrate practical agriculture and sustainability modules into curricula through public-private partnerships.^{7,8}
- 2 Promote school garden projects linked to local cooperatives for inputs and market exposure.
- 3 Establish Ag Day programs that showcase various agricultural careers and opportunities, engage guest speakers, and provide demonstrations that excite and interest young people.⁹
- 4 Support student-run enterprises (e.g. snack bars, mini-farms) that teach agribusiness basics.¹⁰
- 5 Utilize programs such as 4H that employ leadership, ownership, hands-on learning, and social engagement within the agriculture sector.¹¹

Building Youth-Led Agritech Curiosity

- 1 Organize workshops introducing drones, hydroponics, and robotics applied to agriculture.
- 2 Host tech-innovation fairs in rural areas that highlight real-world agri-technology.
- 3 Partner with STEM organizations to offer agriculture-themed hackathons or coding clubs.

Encouraging Intergenerational Engagement

- 1 Conduct dialogue sessions between elders and youth to share knowledge and discuss future agriculture visions.
- 2 Celebrate local “youth agrichampions” who bridge traditional and modern methods.
- 3 Develop storytelling/video campaigns that highlight youth learning from elder farmers.



7. University of Waterloo Canada, 2022, [Knowledge networks to support youth engagement in sustainable food systems](#)

8. Rikolto, 2022, [Good Food at School: Linking Schools with Local Farmers in Senegal](#). Rikolto International.

9. Advanced Nutrition, 2020, [Farm to School Activities and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review](#)

10. Agricorps, 4-H Liberia, and IPA Liberia, 2024, [Can School-Based Agricultural Extension Improve Technology Diffusion and Rural Education](#)

11. Science Direct, 2020, [Evaluating the evidence for youth outcomes in 4-H: A scoping review](#).

CASE STUDIES: EARLY YOUTH

Example	Key Learning
<p>ACDI/VOCA’s Agriculture for Children’s Empowerment (ACE project Liberia). Using agriculture as a platform for reducing child labor and strengthening household resilience through income and learning. Read more</p>	<p>Central to its approach was the introduction of adult-learning methods like simulation games and "Farming as a Business" training, helping to drive changes in community behaviors and investments in child welfare.</p>
<p>FAO’s Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS). Child-centered, school-based agriculture and life skills training can shift community perceptions and spark early youth engagement. Read more</p>	<p>The JFFLS case study illustrates how integrated curriculum delivery—combining agriculture, entrepreneurship, and life skills using locally relevant content and child-centered methodologies in schools (such as games, role play, and fieldwork)—can effectively promote early youth engagement in agriculture. It also contributes to shifting community perceptions about the roles and capacities of young people.</p>
<p>Rikolto’s School Garden Program – Vietnam. Every year, about 5,000 students visit the Tuy Loan Cooperative’s organic farm near Đà Nẵng to learn about safe food production, agroecology, and entrepreneurship. By hosting youth, the cooperative diversified its income through agri-tourism while also building community trust and future consumer bases. Read more</p>	<p>This model demonstrates how farmer organizations can partner with schools to cultivate youth interest in agriculture, strengthen nutrition education, and inspire the next generation of agri-entrepreneurs.</p>

Transitional Youth

By their late teens and early twenties, youth often gain experience in both farming and agribusiness. Yet, despite having an entrepreneurial drive, many struggle to scale their ventures due to systemic barriers, such as insufficient start-up capital, limited access to land, and unattractive loan conditions, including stringent collateral requirements and rigid repayment terms. These constraints limit their ability to lead within cooperative or SME structures—even though evidence shows that when institutional support is available, youthful adaptability and innovation can create stronger, more resilient value chains.¹²

Youth have often grown up using new technology. They are well-positioned to act as bridges between traditional methods and modern innovations. However, youth often lack the necessary assets or capital (financial, land, etc.) to start a business. In addition, their potential contributions to cooperatives and SMEs are often undervalued due to high barriers to entry, as outlined in the governing statutes (e.g., access to land, value of shares, etc.).



SOLUTIONS AND BEST PRACTICES TO ENGAGE WITH TRANSITIONAL YOUTH

Strengthening Youth Roles in Agri-Service Delivery

- 1 Train and support youth as local providers of services like drone spraying, soil testing, and digital marketing.
- 2 Facilitate creation of youth-led service cooperatives offering input distribution, extension, and logistics.
- 3 Establish certification programs for youth as agri-service technicians through TVET centers.
- 4 Support SMEs to incorporate youth's skillsets and assets (e.g., technology natives) as a means to solve business challenges and capitalize on opportunities.

Cooperative and Farmer Organization Reform

- 1 Amend bylaws to create youth share classes or reduced equity thresholds for membership.
- 2 Create youth departments within cooperatives focused on ICT, marketing, and innovation.
- 3 Mandate minimum youth representation on cooperative boards and committees.

¹² Molema et al., 2021 [Barriers and Opportunities for Youth](#) ; Kakamega Study, 2020, [A case study of youth participation in agricultural value chains](#)

Leveraging Digital Platforms and Peer Learning

- 1 Support the development of youth-led content on agriculture for TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp groups.¹³
- 2 Establish mobile-based “agri knowledge hubs” accessible to rural youth via SMS or app.¹⁴
- 3 Train youth as digital extension agents in partnership with Ministries of Agriculture or NGOs.¹⁵

CASE STUDIES: TRANSITIONAL YOUTH

Example	Key Learning
<p>Cordaid / EKN’s Skilling in Agripeneurship for Youth (SAY). Through its innovative “Earn as You Learn” has supported thousands of young people to combine hands-on agribusiness training with income-earning opportunities. Youth engaged in practical farm enterprises, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship skills development while receiving mentorship and market linkages. Read more</p>	<p>This approach demonstrates how tailored, experiential learning pathways can help transitional youth enter agribusiness with confidence, generate income from the start, and establish long-term enterprises that strengthen rural economies.</p>
<p>FAO’s Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS). Child-centered, school-based agriculture and life skills training can shift community perceptions and spark early youth engagement. Read more</p>	<p>The JFFLS case study illustrates how integrated curriculum delivery—combining agriculture, entrepreneurship, and life skills using locally relevant content and child-centered methodologies in schools (such as games, role play, and fieldwork)—can effectively promote early youth engagement in agriculture. It also contributes to shifting community perceptions about the roles and capacities of young people.</p>
<p>NCBA CLUSA / Mastercard’s Youth Empowerment Through Agriculture (YETA). Equipped over 65,000 young people with technical and business skills through youth associations linked to value chains. By integrating Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), mentoring, and agribusiness training, YETA enabled youth to access finance, start enterprises, and build leadership capacity in their communities. Read more</p>	<p>This model demonstrates how farmer organizations and cooperatives can integrate youth-led savings and mentorship mechanisms to unlock financial inclusion, strengthen peer support, and create viable agribusiness opportunities.</p>

13. FAO, 2025, [Redefining Agriculture for a Digital Generation](#).

14. FAO, 2025, [Strengthening programming and policymaking for inclusive youth agripeneurship](#)
S4YE, 2020, [Digital Solutions for Youth Agripeneurs](#)

15. Youth Co: Lab, 2023, [Digital Innovation for Youth in Agriculture](#).

Established Youth

By their late twenties and early thirties, many young people have gained experience in farming, agribusiness start-ups, or cooperative participation, setting them up for a path to leadership. Yet, financing remains a significant barrier, as traditional lenders often require collateral and apply risk-averse criteria that exclude young entrepreneurs, despite their adaptability and innovative potential. These obstacles limit youth from scaling their enterprises or assuming leadership roles in cooperatives or other farmer-based organizations. However, when empowered, established youth bring renewed energy and entrepreneurial vision that can revitalize agri-value chains.¹⁶



SOLUTIONS AND BEST PRACTICES TO ENGAGE WITH TRANSITIONAL YOUTH

Unlocking Access to Finance Through Innovation

- 1 Use digital records and mobile money to build alternative credit profiles for young agripreneurs.¹⁷
- 2 Support financial institutions to establish youth-friendly products that require lower levels of collateral and/or flexible repayment terms.
- 3 Develop youth-targeted challenge funds and blended finance (small project funded grants + low-interest loans).¹⁸

Expanding Roles in Value Chain Leadership

- 1 Support youth-owned enterprises in post-harvest processing, packaging, transporting and exporting.
- 2 Promote cooperative leadership pathways, with mentorship and board training for youth.
- 3 Partner with youth to scale up agri-tourism, climate-smart consulting, or regenerative certification services.

Institutional Partnerships for Professional Growth

- 1 Partner with education institutions and universities to embed internships in agribusinesses.^{19, 20}
- 2 Link youth to farmer organizations as embedded BDS or marketing specialists.
- 3 Design franchised agri-enterprise models (e.g. branded input supply kiosks) for youth to run.

16. IFAD 2014, [Lessons learned Youth access to rural finance](#),

FAO, 2023, [Promoting youth employment and engagement in agriculture and food systems](#)

17. World Bank Group, 2020, [FarmDrive Artificial Intelligence Innovation in Financial Services](#)

18. FAO, 2022 [Promoting access to agricultural finance for youth in developing countries](#)

19. TVET, 2020, [Agricultural TVET in developing economies: Challenges and possibilities](#)

20. Root Capital, 2022, [Investing in the Next Generation: Talent Partnerships Annual Report](#).

CASE STUDIES: ESTABLISHED YOUTH

Example	Key Learning
<p>NCBA CLUSA / Mastercard’s Young Africa Works, Ethiopia. Supports thousands of youth in Ethiopia by linking them to financial services, training, and agribusiness opportunities. The program promotes youth-led enterprises, cooperative membership, and mentorship, with a strong gender inclusion lens. Read more</p>	<p>This example illustrates how farmer organizations and financial institutions can partner to unlock youth potential, expand access to credit, and enable inclusive agribusiness growth.</p>
<p>Root Capital’s Women in Agriculture Initiative (WAI). Launched in 2012, WAI provides capital and training to women- and youth-inclusive agricultural enterprises in Latin America and Africa. By targeting businesses that engage large numbers of young farmers, Root Capital expands access to markets and builds organizational resilience. Read more</p>	<p>This example highlights the role of gender- and youth-lens investment in empowering young farmers, while also strengthening farmer organizations as platforms for inclusive growth.</p>
<p>One Acre Fund’s – Advanced Youth Farmer Programs. Integrates youth into its service model by providing farm input loans, training, and market facilitation across multiple countries in East Africa. Recent pilots have focused on advanced youth programs, where young farmers receive tailored business coaching, digital extension, and leadership pathways in farmer groups. Read more</p>	<p>This example shows how scaling models can adapt to youth by combining financial access with leadership development, ensuring youth retention and progression within farmer organizations.</p>

Cross cutting themes

EVALUATING COST-EFFECTIVENESS AND SCALABILITY

Benchmarking the trajectory of transitional youth entrepreneurs is important to understand both sustainability and scalability of youth-focused interventions. Evidence from youth cooperative studies²¹ highlights the need to track how long it takes for youth to establish enterprises or cooperatives, the challenges they face in maintaining operations, and whether these initiatives remain active after several years. Such benchmarking helps identify structural bottlenecks and the types of support - finance, mentorship, or governance reform - that increase the likelihood of long-term survival.

In addition, creating youth representation within farmer organizations and cooperatives is critical for embedding their perspectives into governance and supporting the renewal of the membership base. Youth-specific mechanisms, such as dedicated youth sections or focal points, can serve as a platform to strengthen young people’s input and leadership. A youth focal point - typically elected from within the cooperative - can liaise directly with the management committee to ensure youth priorities are addressed, bridging the generational gap while avoiding exclusion caused by restrictive membership statutes.²² Governments also play a role by enabling scalability, offering financial and non-financial incentives for private sector partnerships, and for expanding successful school-based agricultural innovation programs.



CASE STUDIES

Example	Key Learning
<p>NCBA CLUSA / Mastercard’s Young Africa Works, Ethiopia. Supports thousands of youth in Ethiopia by linking them to financial services, training, and agribusiness opportunities. The program promotes youth-led enterprises, cooperative membership, and mentorship, with a strong gender inclusion lens. Read more</p>	<p>This example illustrates how farmer organizations and financial institutions can partner to unlock youth potential, expand access to credit, and enable inclusive agribusiness growth.</p>
<p>FAO’s Digital Advisory Services for Youth Engagement, Digital Green – Participatory Video. Digital Green’s participatory video model has been tested across several countries, enabling smallholder farmers to learn from peers through locally produced training videos. Its scaling pathway shows that once the initial investment in technology and capacity building is made, the model becomes cost-effective by reducing per-farmer training costs while increasing outreach. Read more</p>	<p>Evidence demonstrates that peer-to-peer methods not only scale but also maintain learning quality, offering a replicable and resource-efficient approach to agricultural extension.</p>

21. KIT, 2018, *Youth in Agricultural Cooperatives*
 FAO & IFAD, 2021, *Youth and Agricultural Cooperatives: Enabling Policies and Practices*
 22. KIT, 2018, *Youth in Agricultural Cooperatives*

Inclusive Agribusiness Models

In agricultural programming, “inclusion” is too often measured simply by the number of smallholder farmers reached. This narrow view is problematic, as such figures are not always measured accurately and fail to capture the deeper dimensions of inclusion. True inclusion requires addressing the barriers that prevent different groups from fully participating—especially youth at different life stages, young women, persons with disabilities, and displaced populations such as IDPs and refugees. Programs must therefore be intentional in designing interventions that allow marginalized groups to benefit equitably.

Addressing youth shocks and stressors within food systems

Importantly, youth are disproportionately exposed to shocks and stressors—including conflict, climate variability, health crises, and economic disruptions—that undermine their resilience and long-term aspirations. Such shocks can contribute to psychological stress, food insecurity, school dropout, and premature or risky migration, particularly among early youth with limited assets or safety nets. Tackling these vulnerabilities is essential to enabling youth to contribute productively to rural economies and community resilience efforts. Promising approaches include:

Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support: Mentorship programs, peer networks, and counselling services that strengthen mental health resilience and decision-making capacity.

Relief programming and safety nets

Youth-sensitive emergency employment, cash transfers, and humanitarian interventions that provide immediate protection during crises.

Education and skills reintegration

Programs that help out-of-school youth return to education or vocational training, equipping them with skills for diversified livelihoods.

Enabling environments

Policy frameworks and financial products that encourage youth income diversification and investment in climate-smart agriculture.



Case Studies

Example	Key Learning
<p>Heifer International & Mastercard’s East Africa Youth Inclusion Program (EAYIP), Uganda. Supported more than 25,000 youth in Uganda and Tanzania to access dignified work in the agri-food system. Youth were integrated into producer organizations, trained in entrepreneurship, and linked to financial services. Read more</p>	<p>The program demonstrated how mentorship, microfinance, and cooperative structures can create resilient youth-led agribusinesses, even during crises such as COVID-19.</p>
<p>FAO’s Digital Advisory Services for Youth Engagement. Digital extension models are increasingly used to reach youth and strengthen farmer organizations. These approaches highlight the role of digital tools in lowering entry barriers for young farmers and bridging traditional and modern practices. Read more</p>	<p>FAO’s 2021 report shows how participatory video, mobile apps, and ICT-based services help scale agricultural innovations, improve adoption rates, and create new opportunities for youth as local service providers.</p>

Conclusion

YOUTH INCLUSION AS AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Youth are not a problem to be solved; they are a solution to the successes and challenges facing food systems. Farmer organizations, cooperatives, and inclusive partnerships can be the foundation of youth-driven transformation in agriculture. To unlock this potential, governments, cooperatives, donors, and development agencies must act intentionally, boldly, and creatively.

Finally, youth are not only navigating systemic barriers to education, employment, and finance, but also increasingly facing external shocks and stressors such as conflict, climate change, and health crises. These compounded vulnerabilities can have long-term effects on their resilience and agency. Addressing these issues requires tailored, youth-sensitive responses - ranging from psychosocial support and livelihood diversification to enabling youth leadership in crisis response. By embedding resilience considerations into youth programming, AMEA members can better support young people as agents of change in building more resilient and inclusive agricultural systems.



AMEA Youth Empowerment Workstream Call to Action

WHAT CAN AMEA MEMEBERS DO?

- Launch youth co-creation workshops, ensuring inclusivity across different gender, people with disabilities, and socio-economic backgrounds.
- Promote inclusive policies and investments that enable youth to access finance, training, and have more influence in organizational decision-making.

WHAT CAN FO/COOPS DO?

- Promote innovative cooperative models that lower barriers for youth membership and leadership.
- Ensure accessibility through digital platforms and hybrid engagement methods that reach rural and marginalized youth.

HOW DO WE ENGAGE YOUTH AND INCORPORATE THEIR OPINIONS IN THIS PAPER?

- Include youth-led organizations as reviewers of paper updates.
- Invite youth-led organizations and networks to review updates of this paper.
- Ensure engagement methods are youth-friendly, inclusive, and accessible (including shared via digital tools).
- Integrate direct youth feedback into revisions so that solutions reflect their lived experiences and priorities.

