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Youth Policy Recommendations for Agrifood Systems Transformation in Europe and Central Asia



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Introduction

Young people across Europe and Central Asia (farmers and pastoralists, fishers and foresters, rural entrepreneurs and urban food advocates, smallholders and cooperative members, students and researchers, women leaders and Indigenous Peoples' representatives, migrants and those living through conflict and displacement) number in the millions. Agrifood systems represent a key entry point into adulthood, employment and meaningful engagement in society for young people across this region (FAO, 2025a). For them, transforming agrifood systems represents a pathway to deliver interconnected benefits across society, the environment, the economy and human health, while promoting equality, sustainability and resilient livelihoods (FAO, 2025b). Across the region, they face shared and interconnected challenges: rapid urbanization, the impacts of climate change, limited access to land and finance, gender inequalities and unequal social norms, and evolving labour markets. These dynamics are reshaping both rural and urban livelihoods, often reducing opportunities in agriculture and food sectors while increasing the need for innovation, resilience and sustainable practices.

Agrifood systems offer significant potential for youth empowerment, entrepreneurship and leadership. They are producers and innovators, advocates and community leaders. However, they often lack access to adequate land, finance and a genuine seat at the table where decisions are made. Across this consultative process, the voices of young women were particularly significant. Young women make up a large share of the agrifood workforce in this region, yet they consistently face compounding disadvantages in access to land, finance, markets and decision-making spaces. The structural recommendations in this statement are specifically designed to address those barriers. Young people with diverse origins and backgrounds across the region, from the fields of the Caucasus and the steppes of Central Asia, from the mountain communities of the Balkans and the agricultural landscapes of Eastern and Western Europe, are united in their commitment to transforming the agrifood systems that sustain them all.

**They seek not only to be heard,
but to be meaningfully listened to.**



Context and methodology

In preparation for the 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe and Central Asia (ERC35), the World Food Forum Youth Assembly conducted a regional consultative process to gather youth perspectives on agrifood systems transformation. The process was coordinated by the WFF Youth Policy Board in collaboration with the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia.

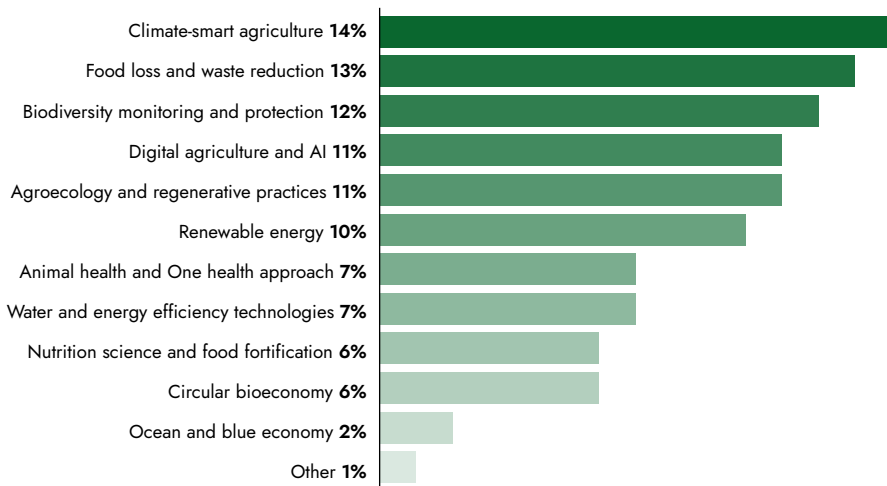
The consultative process combined two components: an online survey and a regional and subregional virtual dialogue. It reached young people from more than 30 countries across Europe and Central Asia. Participants included young people engaged across agrifood systems – including the agricultural inputs sector, primary production, food processing, advisory services, research, entrepreneurship and policy engagement – as well as representatives of rural, urban and peri-urban contexts.

The consultation identified a set of structural constraints affecting youth participation in agrifood systems. These include limited access to land and finance, low and unstable income opportunities in rural economies, and barriers within value chains that restrict youth engagement in higher-value activities. Structural barriers facing young women were prominently raised across the consultative process: young women described compounding disadvantages in accessing credit, land, markets and leadership roles, as well as greater exposure to informal and unprotected work arrangements. Participants also highlighted the effects of overlapping shocks – including climate impacts, economic instability and regional conflicts – which continue to reduce the viability of agrifood livelihoods for young people.

Governance barriers were consistently highlighted. Youth participation in agrifood policymaking remains limited, with many respondents reporting that engagement is often consultative rather than decision-making in nature. Tokenistic participation and limited feedback mechanisms were identified as key constraints to meaningful engagement.

Figure 1 - Which areas should be prioritized for Europe and Central Asia? (Q 42)

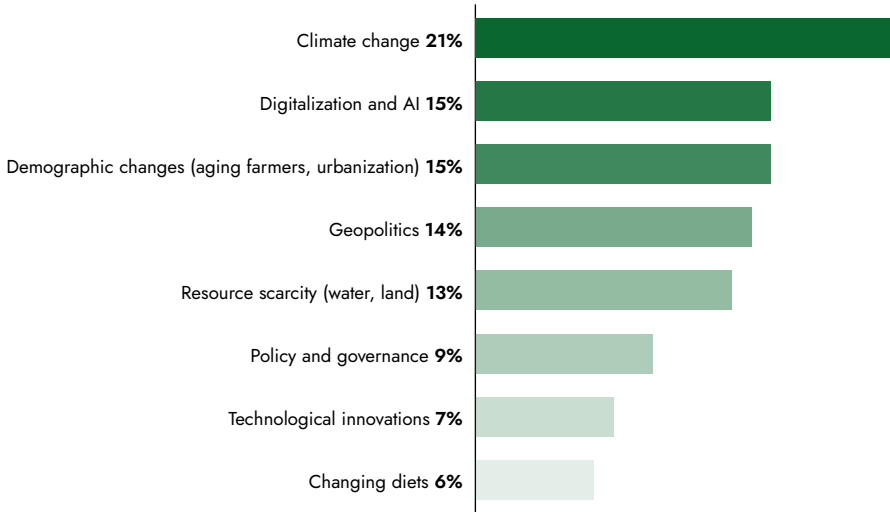
Respondents were asked to select up to 3 options



Youth priorities for Europe and Central Asia highlight actions across ecosystems, food supply chain, and food environments targeting climate-smart agriculture (41%), food loss and waste reduction (38%), and biodiversity monitoring and protection (36%).

Figure 2 - What will most likely shape agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia by 2030?(Q 43)

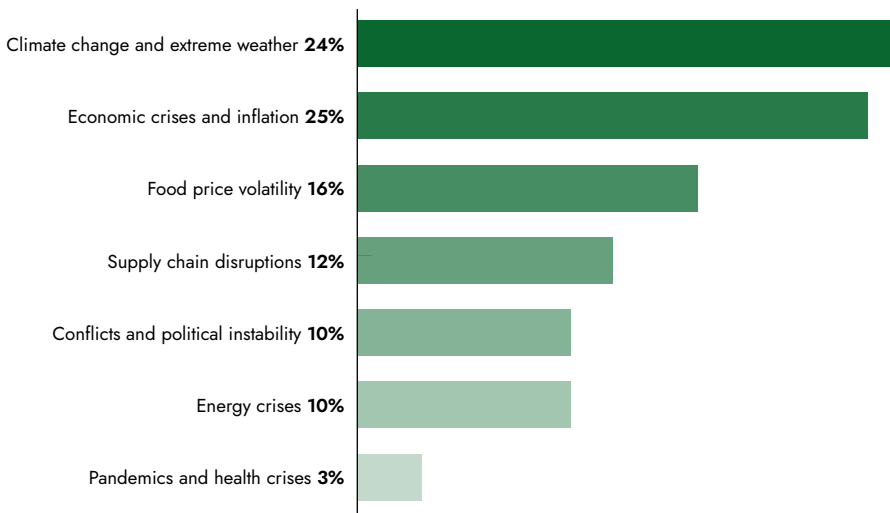
Respondents were asked to select up to 3 options



Climate change remains the main factor that will shape agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia in the next few years based on 59% of respondents.

Figure 3 - What are the main risks affecting agrifood systems in your region? (Q30)

Respondents were asked to select up to 3 options



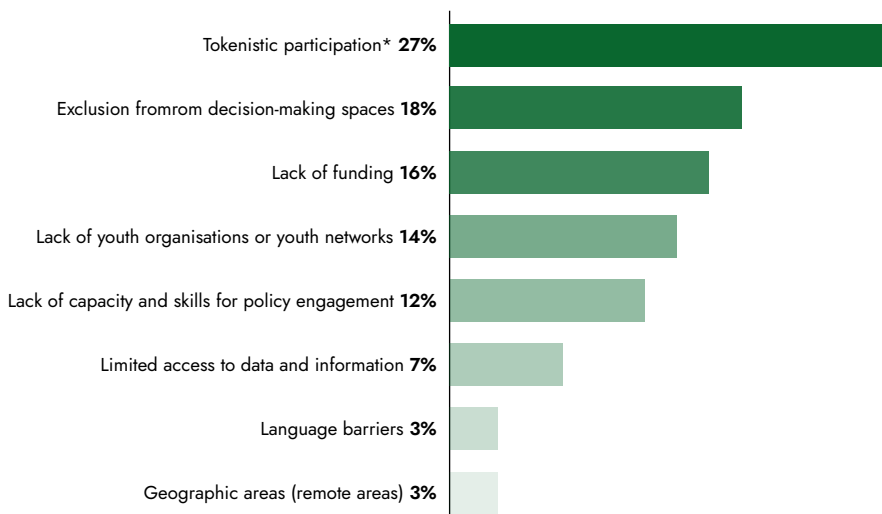
Youth largely recognize economic crises and inflation (72% of respondents), and climate change and extreme weather (68%) as the main risks affecting agrifood systems in the region.

YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ERC35 AND THE 2026–2027 BIENNIUM

Governance and civic space

Governance is the domain in which the gap between rhetoric and reality is most sharply felt by young people across the region. Youth representation within the region’s agrifood policymaking is critically low. The consultation found pervasive tokenism, a near-total absence of accountability mechanisms and the systematic exclusion of young women from governance spaces. The institutional architectures through which agrifood policy is developed across Member States do not, in their current form, generate the conditions for youth perspectives to reach decisions. The problem is not only one of access: even where young people are present, the absence of feedback mechanisms that trace whether their inputs influenced outcomes means that participation frequently produces neither policy change nor the trust required to sustain engagement. The following recommendations call for structural, not symbolic, change.

Figure 4. Barriers to youth participation in policy making



Among many barriers limiting youth participation in policymaking, tokenistic participation was selected by **27%** of respondents, while exclusion from decision-making spaces and lack of funding were mentioned by **18%** and **16%** of youth, respectively.

*for example, youth being invited to a consultation but have limited influence on decisions.

Establish formal youth advisory bodies with binding mandates

Institutional arrangements that provide young people with regular, structured access to decision-makers should be established or strengthened across the region. Youth advisory mechanisms linked to relevant public institutions require clearly defined mandates, transparent selection processes and regular engagement formats with authorities. Clarity on how youth contributions are transmitted, considered and followed up is essential to distinguish these mechanisms from ceremonial consultation.

Multi-stakeholder configurations that link youth to civil society and private sector actors can further strengthen the applicability of youth inputs. Several examples from within the region offer practical models: Türkiye established a Youth Council within its Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in 2022 with a mandate to provide recommendations on sector policy; Azerbaijan's youth agro-entrepreneurship support structures link advisory participation to financing access; and the EU's Young Farmers Scheme under the Common Agricultural Policy – referenced by approximately 30 percent of survey respondents as a positive policy example – demonstrates how institutional commitment to generational renewal can be embedded in binding regional frameworks.

Anchor youth participation at sub-national and community levels

Recognizing the importance of aligning policymaking with local realities, there is scope to further strengthen youth participation at sub-national and community levels. This includes supporting locally anchored participatory approaches – such as local advisory platforms, and youth representation within cooperatives linked to local governance processes. Such mechanisms can contribute to more context-responsive policymaking while enabling young people directly engaged in agrifood systems to inform decisions affecting local production systems and market access.

Improve awareness of and access to participation opportunities

Consultation findings suggest that awareness of existing participation opportunities remains uneven, with many young people accessing such spaces through ad hoc channels. Improving accessibility may involve strengthening communication efforts through existing structures where young people are already engaged – including educational and training institutions, youth organizations, sectoral networks and digital communication channels widely used by young people.

Reserve dedicated seats for rural women, Indigenous Youth and excluded groups

Participatory processes that do not reserve space for the most excluded groups will consistently reproduce existing representation gaps. Dedicated seats for rural young women, youth with disabilities, migrants and refugees, Indigenous Youth and those facing socio-economic barriers are a structural requirement, not a supplementary measure. Participation formats should be adapted to different needs through accessible language, hybrid online and in-person modalities and targeted financial or logistical support to enable meaningful engagement.

Align participation formats with the realities of young people's lives

Participation in governance processes may entail time, financial and logistical constraints, particularly for young people balancing education, employment or agricultural activities. Addressing these structural barriers may support more sustained engagement. This could include alignment of engagement processes with agricultural and academic calendars. Such measures may contribute to enabling more continuous and realistic forms of participation, beyond symbolic engagement.



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Resilience and crisis response

The resilience findings present a region in which the subjective sense of vulnerability is well-founded and the institutional capacity to respond remains inadequate. Economic crises, inflation, climate change and extreme weather represent co-equal systemic risks that are increasingly likely to occur simultaneously rather than in sequence. The gendered dimensions of crisis require explicit attention. Young women in the region are more likely to be engaged in informal agrifood work, meaning they have no insurance and no social protection when shocks occur. During conflict, they frequently take on additional roles to sustain food production while simultaneously facing heightened risk of gender-based violence, loss of mobility and increased unpaid care responsibilities arising from the collapse of childcare and social support structures. Resilience programmes that do not account for these specific vulnerabilities will systematically fail to reach those who need them most.

Advance price stability mechanisms and equitable value distribution across agrifood chains

Address the mismatch between fair producer prices and consumer purchasing power by promoting a more equitable distribution of value along agrifood value chains. This includes exploring mechanisms to improve price transparency and stability, including social protection frameworks that strengthen income security for small-scale producers. Such measures can enhance financial security for farmers and young people, and enable more stable and resilient livelihoods in the face of economic shocks.

Invest in climate-resilient infrastructure and early warning systems

Invest in water-efficient irrigation, climate-smart advisory services and early warning systems as structural resilience tools for youth-led farms and enterprises most exposed to climate shocks. Sub-regional climate vulnerability mapping for youth-led farms should be carried out to ensure that infrastructure investment is directed where exposure to drought, soil degradation and extreme heat is highest.

Enhance agricultural insurance and crisis support for youth-led farms

Enhance financial protection of farmers and young people through concrete crisis-specific instruments, including affordable agricultural insurance products, government subsidies and emergency financial support schemes. These mechanisms should be designed to be accessible without requiring collateral or complex application procedures that disproportionately exclude young and first-time agricultural entrepreneurs.

Strengthen pre-crisis coordination platforms with standing youth representation

Effective crisis response in agrifood systems depends on fast, coordinated action among producers, institutions, distributors and consumers. Existing coordination mechanisms should be reinforced and expanded to ensure that when shocks occur – whether economic, climatic or conflict-driven – responses are timely, institution-backed and do not leave young and small-scale producers without support. Stronger institutional-producer linkages, developed in non-crisis periods, are a precondition for resilience at the moment of disruption.



Promote direct producer-consumer linkages and local food procurement

Support the development of systems that enable consumers to purchase directly from producers. Strengthening these direct linkages contributes to improved food security, greater access to nutritious food and increased transparency within the food system, while supporting local economies and youth participation across the value chain.

Invest in adaptive value chains through production incentives and food loss reduction

Building resilience in agrifood systems requires active investment in the operational capacity of value chains to absorb and recover from shocks. This includes incentivizing domestic production to reduce structural import dependency, improving logistics and storage infrastructure to maintain supply continuity during crises, and reducing food loss and waste across the value chain. These investments not only strengthen crisis responsiveness but create tangible opportunities for youth-led businesses in processing, logistics and circular economy solutions.

Apply true-cost accounting to make hidden industrial subsidies visible

Apply true-cost accounting frameworks to agrifood production systems to make visible the hidden subsidies to industrial food production that currently distort competition, disadvantage local and small-scale producers and enable cheaper imports from lower-compliance contexts to undercut regional producers. The results should inform agricultural subsidy reform and support the redirection of public investment toward climate-compatible, locally produced food. Territorial and local food market development should be pursued in parallel as a structural complement to pricing reform.

Guarantee targeted support for youth in conflict-affected and fragile contexts

Invest in targeted support for young people in regions affected by political instability and conflict, where agrifood systems are severely disrupted. This includes safeguarding livelihoods, ensuring access to food and productive resources and maintaining opportunities for youth participation and development. Strengthening locally adapted and resilient agrifood systems is essential to mitigating the impacts of such disruptions and supporting long-term recovery and sustainability.

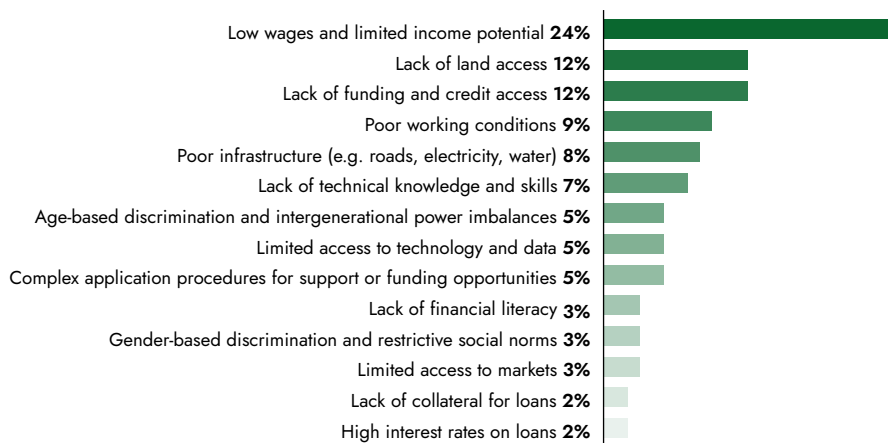


Value chains

The value chain findings present a structural problem rather than a skills or motivation deficit. Low wages and limited income potential – cited by approximately 63 percent of respondents as one of the three biggest barriers to working in agriculture – reflect the pricing power distribution within agrifood value chains: primary production, the entry point most accessible to young people with limited capital, is systematically the least remunerated segment. Structural imbalances, including the pricing power of large intermediaries, concentration in processing and retail, and the absence of direct producer-consumer linkages at scale, confine young people to the low-value end of systems they are capable of transforming. Gender inequalities compound these structural barriers throughout the value chain. While young women constitute a substantial share of the agrifood workforce in this region – often concentrated in the most labour-intensive and least-remunerated segments – they face additional constraints in accessing productive resources, market information and leadership roles in cooperatives and producer organizations. Policy frameworks, investment instruments and cooperative governance structures must carry clear and measurable targets for facilitating young women’s participation across the full value chain.

Figure 5. What are the 3 biggest barriers to youth working in agriculture or agricultural value chains? (Q 15)

Respondents were asked to select up to 3 options



Low wages and limited income potential was the biggest barrier for **63%** of respondents, followed by land of land access, and lack of funding and credit access, both selected by one third of the respondents.

Redirect public investment toward mid- and downstream value chain segments

Redirecting public investment toward mid- and downstream value chain segments offers a strategic pathway for youth participation in agrifood systems. Young people possess strong digital skills and entrepreneurial ambition, yet face persistent barriers: low and unstable income levels, a historically conservative sector, limited access to finance and insufficient institutional support to transform ideas into viable businesses. Prioritizing youth-led innovation across mid- and downstream segments – including digital marketplaces, logistics, food processing, value addition and cooperative distribution models – can improve access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food. Supported by targeted finance, improved data availability and strengthened rural infrastructure, these investments can enable a shift from low-value production toward more stable, market-integrated roles for young people.

Strengthen youth access to production through inclusive policies and targeted support

Address structural barriers to entry in agrifood value chains, particularly access to land and financial viability, which remain among the most significant and consistently reported constraints for youth participation. Governments should implement targeted incentives – such as tax reductions, subsidies and accessible land schemes – to make entry into the sector more accessible for young people. Policy frameworks should prioritize youth-led producers over large corporate actors, enabling more equitable participation in production, distribution and entrepreneurship.

Promote youth-led engagement in food processing

Promote youth-led engagement in food processing, including in high-growth sectors such as alternative proteins and plant-based products that are aligned with shifting regional consumer demand. Support young people to establish local processing facilities and develop value addition enterprises through targeted investment, technical assistance and enabling policy environments. These efforts should enable young people to transition from primary production into higher-value, market-oriented segments of the value chain and support income diversification.

Expand cooperative and direct-linkage distribution models for youth producers

Young people can play a key role in transforming food distribution systems by improving access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food, while strengthening direct links between producers and consumers. Cooperative models – including cooperative supermarkets and community-based distribution systems – offer significant opportunities for youth engagement. Revising cooperative registration requirements to reduce minimum capital barriers and mandating meaningful youth representation, with specific targets for young women's participation in cooperative governance structures are practical steps that can accelerate youth-led participation in distribution across the region.

Enable youth participation across all value chain stages through coordinated support

Enable young people to contribute across all stages of agrifood value chains – including production, processing, distribution and innovation – by ensuring that systems actively support their participation, creativity and autonomy. This requires integrated approaches that combine access to finance, skills development, infrastructure and supportive policy environments, ensuring that young people are not confined to low-value segments but can fully engage in transforming agrifood systems.

Reform tax frameworks to remove structural advantages of large corporate actors

Reform tax and regulatory frameworks to remove structural advantages currently accruing to large corporate agrifood actors at the expense of youth-led and small-scale producers. Concrete measures should include preferential tax treatment for small-scale producers and youth-led agro-enterprises in their early years of operation, anti-monopoly provisions that require impact assessments prior to acquisitions of small agrifood businesses and mandatory annual disclosure of supply chain margin distribution between producers, processors and retailers.



Land and finance access

The finance barriers facing young people in agrifood systems across the region are layered in a way that makes any single-instrument response inadequate. High interest rates, lack of financial literacy, complex application procedures and limited availability of youth-targeted financial products form a compound barrier structure that no individual loan facility or training programme can dismantle alone. Critically, gender-based discrimination adds a further dimension: respondents cited age- or gender-based discrimination as a financial barrier, and 67 percent of those respondents were women. A young woman attempting to access agricultural lending markets in much of the region faces institutional systems that were not designed with her in mind and that continue to disadvantage her at the point of application. Addressing these gendered barriers requires dedicated action. Integrated support programmes should include gender-responsive financial products with simplified procedures and reduced collateral requirements. Women-only credit lines, group lending mechanisms and women-led cooperative financing models have demonstrated effectiveness in comparable regional contexts and should be adapted and scaled. Beyond financial products, young women require targeted mentorship, peer networks and land rights support to navigate systems that remain structurally biased against them.

Establish integrated agro-entrepreneurship programmes combining land, finance and mentorship

Establish comprehensive and integrated support programmes for young agro-entrepreneurs that respond to the multiple barriers limiting youth entry into the agrifood sector – including low income potential, limited access to land and finance and insufficient institutional support. These programmes should combine access to finance with financial literacy training, simplified application procedures, mentorship, business development support, market access facilitation and relevant public support measures that reduce the cost of entry. By moving beyond isolated or fragmented interventions, they can help young people establish viable agrifood enterprises, reduce entry risks and strengthen their long-term participation in agrifood systems.

Create transparent land access pathways through leasing and cooperative models

Create practical and transparent pathways that facilitate youth access to land as they enter the agrifood sector. This should include context-appropriate mechanisms – such as public land leasing schemes, cooperative land ownership models and structured intergenerational land transfer arrangements – while recognizing that land access reform remains structurally complex in many national contexts. These efforts should be accompanied by youth-responsive financial products, risk-sharing mechanisms with transparent allocation criteria and accessible application procedures, ensuring that support reaches young people equitably and effectively.

Integrate financial literacy into agricultural education and training

Integrate financial literacy – including business planning, loan navigation and risk management – into agricultural education and training programmes. The consultation identified lack of financial knowledge as the barrier most consistently reported by young people in accessing agrifood finance, making its integration into formal and non-formal agricultural education a structural priority rather than an optional supplement.



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Digital transformation

The findings on digital transformation reveal a result whose implications extend well beyond the digital domain. Eighty-eight percent of respondents agreed that youth inclusion in decision-making is the single strongest predictor of digital participation in agrifood systems, placing it ahead of connectivity, funding and skills training. The governance failures described in the previous sections are therefore reproduced in the digital domain: tools built without youth involvement fail to meet youth needs and therefore go unused. The productivity gains that digital transformation promises remain largely unrealized in rural and remote contexts – not primarily because the technology is unavailable, but because the social and institutional conditions for its adoption have not been created. Ensuring youth are included in the design and governance of digital agrifood programmes is accordingly the single most effective entry point for digital transformation identified by this consultation.

Strengthen rural digital infrastructure and connectivity for agrifood systems

Invest in rural digital infrastructure, ensuring reliable connectivity, accessible platforms and enabling services across rural areas. Special attention should be given to the development of language-inclusive and locally adapted digital solutions that allow young people to use technology strategically across food value chains, with priority for Central Asian and remote Eastern European contexts where connectivity gaps are most acute.

Build digital skills and offline-compatible tools for rural and remote youth

Prioritize investment in offline-compatible, SMS-based and low-cost digital tools – including mobile farm management applications, voice-based advisory services and community digital hubs – that function without high-speed internet and can serve young people in remote and rural areas across the region. Address the fragmentation of agrifood-specific digital knowledge by embedding practical, value chain-oriented digital skills into education and training systems. Young people require not only basic digital literacy but also applied competencies in agri-tech, data tools and digital platforms relevant to production, processing and market access.

Adopt regional frameworks for ethical AI use and digital data governance

Develop clear and accessible frameworks for ethical artificial intelligence (AI) use and digital data governance in agrifood systems, ensuring that young people are included in the design of these frameworks and that the intellectual property rights of small-scale producers and Indigenous communities are protected as agrifood data becomes increasingly monetized. The gender digital divide in this region requires a dedicated response. Young women in rural and remote areas face compounded barriers to digital access – not only infrastructure and cost constraints, but also restrictive social norms that limit their use of mobile devices and digital platforms. Digital transformation programmes that do not explicitly address these barriers will deepen existing inequalities rather than resolve them. Regional frameworks for digital governance should therefore include gender-disaggregated access targets, community-based digital literacy programmes designed for and with young women, and safeguards ensuring that data governance protects rather than further exposes the most vulnerable users.



Food environments and nutrition

The food environment findings from the consultation reveal a constituency that is analytically clear about the drivers of poor diet yet practically constrained by the affordability dynamics those same drivers produce. Cost and affordability of food received the highest significance rating across all food environment factors, reflecting a lived reality that nutritional education alone cannot resolve if the foods being promoted are not accessible at prices available to young people. The top-rated policy priorities were regulatory rather than educational: regulation of ultra-processed foods and stronger food safety controls ranked above nutritional awareness campaigns, reflecting that young people understand the structural character of the problem and are calling for governance, not only information.

Invest in food systems education for youth across the full food value chain

Invest in comprehensive education and capacity-building programmes that provide young people with a holistic and systemic understanding of food systems. This should include an understanding of food value chains, consumer behaviour and the policy environments that influence the availability, affordability, quality and sustainability of diets and nutritional outcomes.

Introduce binding restrictions on ultra-processed food marketing practices

Introduce legally binding restrictions on the marketing of ultra-processed and high-fat, salt and sugar foods, with particular focus on digital channels and content directed at consumers under 25. Strengthen the alignment between food safety, public health and information systems to ensure that consumers have access to accurate, transparent and evidence-based nutrition information. Equip young people to critically navigate food trends and commercial messaging through dedicated food literacy resources.

Support youth-led initiatives that promote local and sustainable food environments

Support policies and youth-led initiatives that encourage the production and consumption of locally sourced and high-quality foods, while strengthening regulatory frameworks for food safety, quality and sustainability. Young people should be positioned as key agents of change in promoting healthier food environments, including through awareness campaigns, community-based initiatives and entrepreneurship in sustainable food systems.





CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented in this statement are grounded in a structured, participatory process that reflects perspectives from across Europe and Central Asia, including voices that remain underrepresented in agrifood policymaking. They build on lived experiences across diverse contexts, from those actively engaged in agrifood systems to those facing persistent barriers to entry and participation. Across all six thematic areas, a consistent message emerges: young people are already contributing to the transformation of agrifood systems as producers, innovators and community actors, but those contributions are not yet systematically reflected in the structures and processes through which decisions are made.

They honour the work that preceded them, and the pathways opened by those who came before. Building on this legacy, they present concrete proposals for action. Not aspirations. Proposals grounded in evidence, in lived experience and in a structured participatory process. They issue a strong call for joint action to FAO, to its Members, to civil society and to the international cooperation community. The recommendations presented today build on a single consistent finding across all six thematic areas: young people are already contributing to agrifood systems, but those contributions are not yet reflected in the structures where decisions are made.

As the regional agenda and priorities for the 2026–2027 biennium are defined, these recommendations are put forward to inform more inclusive and effective agrifood policies. The presentation of the youth statement at the Thirty-fifth Session of the **FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ERC35)** marks a promising first step; however, this is only a starting point, not an outcome, as meaningful inclusion requires embedding youth voices into every stage of the process. Because without meaningful youth participation in shaping these systems, their long-term sustainability will remain out of reach. The decisions made in this biennium will shape the agrifood systems of the region for a generation.

Acknowledgements

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The Youth Assembly of the World Food Forum

Connecting Youth Voices to Policy

The Youth Assembly of the World Food Forum (WFF) is a youth-led platform and the cornerstone of the WFF's approach to institutionalized youth engagement in agrifood systems governance. Driven by young people through a Youth Policy Board, with the FAO Office of Youth and Women (OYW) hosting the Secretariat, the Assembly works in close collaboration with FAO technical divisions to ensure that youth engagement is evidence-based, policy-relevant and technically sound.

The Assembly provides structured and sustained opportunities for young people to engage in global, regional and thematic policy dialogue through consultations, intergenerational exchanges and youth-led research and recommendations, bringing together a diverse spectrum of youth stakeholders across regions, backgrounds and areas of expertise – moving beyond tokenistic representation towards genuine inclusion.

By linking youth perspectives with FAO's technical expertise, the Assembly strengthens young people's capacity to contribute meaningfully to decision-making while serving as a sounding board for FAO on emerging priorities and implementation challenges. This two-way engagement supports young people in moving from consultation to action and embeds their contributions within FAO's institutional processes and broader intergovernmental spaces.



Learn more about the
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