



DESIGNING MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH

*YOUTH IN JUST FOOD
SYSTEMS TRANSITIONS*

INCLUDE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Meaningful youth engagement has become an increasingly prominent requirement in research, policy, and development programmes. Yet in many studies, youth participation remains largely procedural, serving as a donor compliance requirement rather than a methodological approach that strengthens research quality. This paper advises that meaningful youth engagement should be understood not simply as participation, but as a deliberate research practice capable of improving the relevance, credibility and analytical depth of food systems research.

Drawing on comparative evidence from five INCLUDE-commissioned case studies in Benin, Ghana, Rwanda, Somalia and South Africa, undertaken through the [*Youth in Just Food Systems Transitions*](#) research programme, the paper examines how meaningful youth engagement was operationalised across diverse political, institutional and socio-economic contexts. It analyses the conditions under which youth participation influences research design, implementation and interpretation, while proposing practical guidance for researchers and institutions seeking to embed meaningful youth engagement throughout the research cycle.

Specifically, the paper addresses three interrelated questions:

- How were youth engaged across different stages of the research process?
- How were youth positioned within research processes and decision-making structures?
- How did youth participation influence problem framing, methodological choices and interpretation of empirical findings?

Across the five case studies, meaningful youth engagement varied considerably in its institutional anchoring, the roles assigned to young people, and the degree of influence they exercised over research processes. For example, in Somalia, youth participation helped reveal how clan-based governance shapes agricultural opportunities. In Ghana, how political patronage influences access to agricultural programmes and in Rwanda, how implementation gaps persist despite strong policy frameworks. The Benin and South Africa cases underscored how structural gender inequalities hinder access to green jobs. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the timing and design of youth engagement significantly shapes its contribution to research quality. Early-stage engagement was more likely to influence research questions, methodological design and analytical framing, whereas engagement introduced later in the research cycle primarily supported validation, contextualisation and refinement of findings.

Based on these findings and the broader literature, this paper defines **meaningful youth engagement** as the *intentional integration of youth into research processes in ways that:*

1. *recognise youth as holders of knowledge and lived experiences;*
2. *provide clarity on roles, decision-making authority and expectations;*
3. *enable youth to influence substantive aspects of the research process;*
4. *are adequately resourced, inclusive, ethically grounded and responsive to the political and socio-economic contexts.*

To operationalise this definition, the paper introduces the **4 I's (*Intentional, Inclusive, Intersectional, Impactful*) Framework**, as a practical framework for designing, assessing and strengthening meaningful youth engagement in food systems research. Rather than prescribing a single model of participation, this framework provides guiding principles for ensuring that youth engagement is purposeful, equitable, responsive to diverse lived experiences and capable of influencing research outcomes. By treating meaningful youth engagement as a methodological approach rather than a symbolic requirement, the framework demonstrates how thoughtfully designed participation can strengthen analytical depth, contextual relevance and credibility, while reducing the risk of tokenistic engagement that reinforces existing power asymmetries.

For researchers, research institutions, policymakers, civil society organisations, development partners and donors, the paper highlights the importance of institutionalising meaningful youth engagement as a core feature of inclusive knowledge production. This requires practical shifts in how research is designed, implemented and evaluated. In particular, institutions should:

- *engage youth early in the research cycle, particularly in problem framing, question development, and methodological design;*
- *establish clear and transparent roles for youth, including decision-making authority, expectations, and feedback mechanisms;*
- *allocate adequate resources for participation, including remuneration, accessibility, safeguarding and capacity strengthening;*
- *promote inclusive representation, ensuring the participation of diverse youth groups across gender, geography, socio-economic status, disability and livelihood contexts; and*
- *embed learning and accountability mechanisms, including reflective practices and indicators to assess the quality and outcomes of youth engagement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why Meaningful Youth Engagement?

Home to the world's youngest population, with more than 70% of Africans under the age of 30, the continent's future food systems will be shaped largely by the opportunities, barriers and innovations experienced by young people (UN DESA, 2026; World Economic Forum, 2023). Agriculture remains the backbone of many African economies, contributing approximately 17% of the continent's gross domestic product and providing livelihoods for more than half of the workforce (ILO, 2025). As producers, traders, transporters, processors, food vendors, agripreneurs, innovators and consumers, youth play indispensable roles in food systems (IFAD, 2019). However, their experiences differ considerably according to gender, geography, socio-economic status, disability and access to productive resources, shaping their opportunities and ability to influence the future direction of food systems.

Additionally, youth remain underrepresented in the research and decision-making processes that shape policies, institutions and investments in food systems (UNDP, 2023). This disconnect has important implications as African food systems undergo transitions aimed at improving productivity, sustainability, resilience and equity. Achieving just food systems transitions will depend on whose knowledge informs research and policy, whose voices influence decision-making, and how existing power relations shape access to resources, institutions and emerging opportunities within food systems (Béné et al., 2019).

Since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, meaningful youth engagement has been institutionalised in global discourse. The United Nations Youth Office, for example, defines meaningful youth engagement as the “*active and sustained involvement of young people in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes that affect them*”, emphasising influence and not presence (UN Youth Office, 2025). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) links youth engagement to sustainability and resilience in food systems because young peoples' lived experiences, innovation practices and adaptive strategies constitute a critical source of evidence for understanding system transformation (FAO, 2025). Meanwhile, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights that youth participation becomes meaningful only when it alters power relations in knowledge production, enabling young people to shape problem definitions, analytical frames and policy recommendations, rather than validating pre-defined agendas (UNDP, 2023).

Similarly, meaningful youth engagement in research has evolved from viewing young people as research participants towards recognising them as contributors to knowledge production whose lived experiences, perspectives and agency can improve research quality, relevance, legitimacy and accountability (Spajić et al., 2019). This shift aligns with a broader recognition that youth are not only affected populations; they are knowledge holders whose lived experiences can provide important insights into how institutions, markets, policy frameworks and social norms shape food systems transitions. Their perspectives can therefore deepen analysis, challenge dominant assumptions and reveal dimensions of power and inequality that conventional researcher-led approaches may overlook.

For example, participatory action research approaches involving youth have been shown to strengthen problem framing, improve recruitment strategies, increase the contextual validity of instruments and enhance interpretation of findings by incorporating lived experiences that may otherwise remain invisible to researchers (McCabe et al., 2023). When studies more accurately reflect the priorities and lived experiences of young people, they provide a better evidence-base to inform the development of targeted policies and interventions (Fukuda & Zusman, 2024). In food systems research specifically, meaningful youth engagement can reveal dimensions of transitions that are often overlooked in institution-led analyses (Huambachano et al, 2022).

Adopting meaningful youth engagement does not require youth to control all stages of research. In many research programmes, young people are only consulted through focus group discussions, validation workshops or advisory meetings, but have limited influence over research design, methodological choices, interpretation of findings or knowledge translation (Hawke et al., 2018). What meaningful youth engagement requires is clarity about why youth are engaged, where in the research cycle their engagement is most meaningful, and how their contributions will inform analysis and decision-making (Liebenberg, 2017). It also requires recognising that different groups of youth experience food systems differently and therefore possess distinct forms of knowledge that can strengthen research (McCabe et al., 2023). Designing youth engagement with these differences in mind can enable researchers to better understand how gender, governance, institutions and market structures influence food systems transitions.

1.2 Objectives

This paper aims to contribute to a more practical understanding of meaningful youth engagement in food systems research by examining *how* rather than *whether* youth participation strengthens research quality. Specifically, the paper pursues three key objectives:

1. To develop a comparative typology of meaningful youth engagement approaches by analysing how youth participation was operationalised across five INCLUDE case studies in Benin, Ghana, Rwanda, Somalia and South Africa.
2. To examine how different approaches to youth engagement influenced research quality, particularly through their influence on problem framing, methodological design, data collection, interpretation of findings and knowledge production.
3. To provide practical guidance for researchers, research institutions, policymakers and development partners seeking to institutionalise meaningful youth engagement in research and policy processes.

1.3 Analytical approach

This paper adopts a qualitative comparative approach to examine how meaningful youth engagement was operationalised across five INCLUDE-commissioned case studies in [Benin](#), [Ghana](#), [Rwanda](#), [Somalia](#) and [South Africa](#). Rather than evaluating the performance of individual research teams, the analysis sought to understand how different approaches to youth engagement influenced research design, implementation, interpretation and learning within diverse political, institutional and socio-economic contexts.

The analysis drew on three complementary sources of evidence. During the inception phase of the research programme, each research team completed a **Meaningful Youth Engagement in Food Systems Research Checklist** (Annex I), which was developed to support the research teams in designing and strengthening their youth engagement approaches. The checklist is structured around the **'4 I's' Framework** (see Table 1), analysing youth engagement on levels of *Intentionality, Inclusiveness, Intersectionality, and Impactfulness*, providing guiding questions and criteria for reflection, planning, and action. Analysis of the responses provided an overview of how each team conceptualised the 4 I's in practice, and how these dimensions shaped meaningful youth engagement in their studies.

Thereafter, a systematic qualitative review was undertaken of the mid-term research reports. The review examined how youth engagement was implemented in practice, including the sequencing of participation, the roles assigned to young people across different stages of the research process, adaptations made during implementation and emerging lessons regarding the influence of youth engagement on research quality.

Finally, a series of structured online interviews were held with each research team following their field implementation. These discussions provided an opportunity to critically reflect on the rationale behind different approaches, implementation challenges, contextual adaptations and the extent to which meaningful youth engagement influenced research processes and findings. Importantly, these discussions were conducted as reflective learning exercises and not performance assessments in order to encourage open dialogue and critical self-reflection.

Evidence from these three sources was analysed comparatively to identify recurring patterns, contextual differences and methodological lessons across the five case studies. Particular attention was paid to how institutional context, political economy dynamics, gender and the roles assigned to young people shaped the quality of engagement and its contribution to research design, implementation, interpretation and knowledge production.

Table 1. 4 I's Framework for Meaningful Youth Engagement in Food Systems Research

Dimension	Definition	Reflective Questions
Intentional	Youth engagement is purposefully embedded within the research design rather than added as a procedural or donor compliance requirement. Young people are engaged because their perspectives are expected to strengthen the research.	At what stage are young people engaged? Why are they involved? Do they influence research questions, methods and interpretation, or only validate findings?
Inclusive	Engagement deliberately seeks to involve diverse groups of young people, recognising differences in gender, geography, socio-economic status, disability, education, livelihood and other intersecting identities.	Which young people are represented? Who may be excluded? How are barriers to participation addressed?
Intersectional	Youth are recognised as a heterogeneous group whose experiences are shaped by intersecting social, economic, political and cultural factors. Research therefore considers how multiple identities and structural inequalities influence participation and research findings.	How do gender, location, livelihood, disability, ethnicity, education or other characteristics shape young people's experiences? How are these differences reflected in the research process?
Impactful	Youth engagement contributes meaningfully to research quality by influencing problem framing, methodological design, data collection, interpretation of findings, dissemination and knowledge translation.	What decisions changed because of youth engagement? How did participation improve the quality, relevance, credibility or policy value of the research?

2. TYPES OF MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Over the past two decades, meaningful youth engagement has been operationalised through a range of identifiable approaches, each reflecting different assumptions about youth agency, power-sharing and the role of their lived experiences in knowledge production. These approaches are not interchangeable as they vary significantly in the degree of influence afforded to young people and in their capacity to strengthen research quality, relevance and legitimacy.

2.1 Consultative approaches: Youth Advisory Boards, Youth Sounding Boards and Communities of Practice

One of the most common approaches to meaningful youth engagement in Africa, particularly within donor-funded programmes, is the use of Youth Advisory Boards (YABs), Youth Sounding Boards (YSBs), Youth Advisory Panels (YAPs), Communities of Practice (CoPs) or National Youth Councils (NYCs). In these models, selected young people are invited to provide feedback on research tools, validate findings or advise on implementation strategies. Decision-making authority, however, typically remains with the researchers or implementing institutions.

Empirical research suggests that advisory models can improve the relevance and feasibility of research by enabling young people to review and refine research instruments, ensure that surveys and interview questions reflect locally understood terminology and lived realities, identify culturally appropriate recruitment strategies, and highlight issues that researchers may otherwise overlook (Liebenberg, 2017). For example, youth advisors may recommend replacing technical language with terms more commonly used by young people, adapting questionnaires to reflect locally relevant livelihood categories, identifying appropriate community entry points for participant recruitment, or refining discussion guides to better capture emerging issues affecting youth. Such contributions can enhance the contextual validity and accessibility of research tools, thereby improving participant engagement and data quality.

Recently, Embassies of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and multilateral institutions, such as the European Union (EU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and World Food Forum (WFF), have set up youth advisory bodies with the aim of increasing meaningful youth engagement in their decision-making processes. However, because consultative approaches often engage youth after research priorities have already been established, they do little to challenge existing institutional priorities or dominant policy narratives. As a result, youth contributions can inform consultations and feedback, but have limited influence over the core analytical and methodological decisions that shape outcomes (Teixeira, 2021).

2.2 Tiered engagement approaches: The McCain Model of Youth Engagement

The McCain Model of Youth Engagement, originally developed by the McCain Centre for Child, Youth and Family Mental Health to guide youth participation in mental health research (Heffernan et al., 2017), offers a more differentiated understanding of youth engagement by recognising that participation can occur at multiple levels of intensity throughout the research process. Rather than viewing youth engagement as a binary distinction between participation

and non-participation, the model conceptualises engagement as a continuum ranging from consultation to collaboration and youth leadership (Hawke et al., 2018). The model distinguishes between: 1). High-intensity engagement with a small number of youth involved as ongoing partners; 2). Moderate engagement with a larger group contributing at key stages; 3). Short-term or consultative engagement with broader youth populations.

A defining feature of the McCain Model is its emphasis on transparency, reciprocity, co-learning and the formal recognition of youth contributions, including compensation and co-authorship (Heffernan et al., 2017). Importantly, the model does not assume all youth must be engaged in the same way. It acknowledges that different research activities may require different forms and levels of youth involvement, while emphasising that greater influence over decision-making generally reflects deeper and more meaningful engagement.

From an analytical perspective, this tiered approach is relevant for food systems research, where resource limitations and administrative bottlenecks may limit the feasibility of operationalizing fully youth-led models. Empirical literature suggests that when high-intensity engagement is strategically positioned early in the research cycle, it can meaningfully influence research questions, instruments and analytical frames, even if broader engagement remains consultative (Blakeslee & Walter, 2018).

2.3 Collaborative approaches: Youth-Adult Partnerships

Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) models position young people and adults as co-producers of knowledge, emphasising shared responsibility, mutual learning and negotiated power relations (Zeldin et al., 2013). Unlike advisory boards, Y-AP approaches seek to integrate youth into core research functions, such as co-designing methodologies, conducting data collection or participating in the interpretation and dissemination of findings.

While collaborative approaches can enhance the validity of research by incorporating youth interpretations of context, institutions and lived experiences into the analysis (Liebenberg, 2017), they require addressing power imbalances related to age, expertise and power (Faithfull et al., 2019). In Africa, where cultural norms grant older adults more influence over decision-making, researchers must account for these asymmetries. Without clear mechanisms for influence, collaboration between youth and adults reproduces hierarchies under the guise of participation.

2.4 Youth-led Participatory Action Research (PAR)

At the most inclusive end of the spectrum are youth-led participatory action research (PAR) approaches where young people take a leading role in defining research questions, generating data and translating findings into action (Ozer et al., 2024). These approaches are strongly associated with youth empowerment, skill development and social justice, particularly for marginalised youth in rural areas and urban informal settlements (Kirshner, 2010).

While PAR has been widely applied in education, health and social science research, it is less commonly used in quantitative studies because its iterative and collaborative nature can be difficult to reconcile with fixed timelines, reporting requirements and regulatory approval

(Liebenberg, 2017). Nevertheless, evidence from adolescent HIV research in Africa demonstrates that even when youth exercise only partial leadership in research, their involvement substantially influences research design and outcomes (Denison, 2017). For example, youth co-researchers helped refine research questions to reflect young people's lived experiences, adapted interview guides and survey instruments in local languages, identified recruitment strategies that improved participation among marginalised adolescents, and contributed to interpreting findings in ways that challenged researchers' assumptions about barriers to HIV prevention and treatment.

2.5 Synthesis

The approaches discussed in this chapter illustrate that meaningful youth engagement cannot be reduced to a single model of participation. Rather, they represent different ways of organising relationships between young people and researchers, each characterised by varying degrees of influence over research design, implementation, interpretation, and knowledge translation. While consultative approaches primarily enhance contextual relevance and legitimacy, collaborative and youth-led approaches create greater opportunities for young people to shape research priorities, challenge dominant assumptions, and contribute directly to knowledge production. Tiered approaches occupy an important middle ground by recognising that different stages of the research process may require different forms and levels of engagement. See Table 2 for an overview of the different approaches for meaningful engagement in research.

For food systems research, the choice of engagement approach has implications that extend beyond participation itself. Food systems transitions are fundamentally shaped by political economy dynamics, including unequal access to land, labour, finance, markets, natural resources, governance institutions, and decision-making processes. These structural conditions are experienced differently by young women and men and are further mediated by geography, socio-economic status, disability and other intersecting dimensions of inequality. Consequently, meaningful youth engagement should not simply seek to increase youth participation, but should enable researchers to better understand how these interacting power relations shape young people's experiences, opportunities, and constraints within food systems. Moreover, no single engagement approach is inherently superior. Rather, it depends on the research objectives, institutional context, available resources and the degree to which researchers address questions of equity, inclusion, and justice. The challenge is therefore not to identify a universal model of meaningful youth engagement, but design processes that are inclusive and responsive and generate rigorous, credible and policy-relevant evidence.

The following chapter builds on these conceptual insights by examining how the five INCLUDE country studies operationalised meaningful youth engagement in practice. Through a comparative analysis of the approaches adopted in Benin, Ghana, Rwanda, Somalia, and South Africa, it explores how different engagement strategies influenced research processes, analytical quality, and revealed political economy and justice dimensions of food systems transitions that may otherwise have remained overlooked

Table 2. Common Meaningful Youth Engagement approaches used in research and their defining features

Youth engagement approach	Mechanisms	Defining features	What it can(not) enable	Conditions for meaningful inclusion
Consultative & Collaborative Approaches	Youth Advisory Boards (YABs), Youth Sounding Boards (YSBs), Communities of Practice (CoPs), National Youth Councils (NYCs); Youth-Adult Partnerships (YAPs).	Youth are engaged periodically to provide data as respondents or advise research teams.	Enables breadth and descriptive insights but rarely shifts research questions and has limited influence if advisory role is symbolic. May also privilege elite youth or those already connected with institutional actors.	When youth have defined mandate, feedback loops and authority on specific components (e.g., tools, interpretation, dissemination). When youth perspectives are systematically integrated into analysis (not treated as “quotes”) and triangulated with other evidence.
Tiered Engagement (McCain Model of Youth Engagement)	Youth included as beneficiaries, partners, or leaders.	Differentiates depth of youth engagement and roles youth undertake.	Useful for planning and accountability. Risk of box-ticking if tiers are not tied to power-sharing.	When tiers are linked to concrete decision points across the research cycle (problem framing, tool design, analysis and dissemination).
Youth-led Participatory Action Research Approach	Joint development of questions, instruments and research outputs.	Youth are co-researchers, co-analysts and shape the research design and interpretation.	Enables inclusion and power-shifting. Stronger influence on framing and analytical depth but may face institutional constraints and ethical dilemmas.	When roles, responsibilities and decision rights are negotiated and transparent.

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF APPLIED YOUTH ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES

3.1 Rationale for the analytical lens

To examine how meaningful youth engagement was operationalised across the five case studies, this paper compares findings around three interrelated dimensions:

1. Institutional anchoring: the institutional pathways through which young people are identified and engaged.
2. Primary role of youth: the functions young people perform within the research process.
3. Power and influence the extent to which young people shape research decisions.

These dimensions are not presented as a hierarchy of engagement or a universal typology of best practice. Instead, they provide an analytical framework for examining how different institutional and political contexts shape the nature of youth participation and its contribution to research quality. Across the five case studies, these dimensions consistently emerged as the principal factors influencing whether youth engagement just supported data collection or fundamentally strengthened problem framing, methodological design, interpretation of findings and understanding of just food systems transitions.

Table 3. Overview of Meaningful Youth Engagement in the case studies

Country	Institutional anchoring	Primary youth role	Degree of influence	Illustrative contribution
Somalia	Community and livelihood networks	Co-researchers and interpreters	High	Revealed insecurity, clan governance, land access and structural exclusion as key food system transition barriers.
Ghana	Civil society organisations and youth movements	Interpreters of political economy	High	Exposed implementation gaps, political clientelism and informal financing pathways adopted by youth in food systems.
Rwanda	National Youth Council and state structures	Data generators and validators	Moderate	Strengthened empirical credibility and contextualised findings within national policy processes.

Benin	International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC), youth networks	Methodological contributors	Moderate	Improved survey design, language, gender strategies and understanding of geographic inequalities.
South Africa	Universities and civil society organisations	Co-researchers	High	Strengthened instrument design, interpretation of findings and justice dimension analysis.

3.2 Institutional anchoring

The institutional pathways through which youth were engaged, shaped not only who participated, but also the kinds of knowledge that informed the research and the opportunities available for translating evidence into policy and practice.

Each of the five case studies adopted markedly different institutional arrangements. In Rwanda, the researchers relied primarily on a state-anchored model, working closely with the Rwanda National Youth Council and drawing key informant interviewees from state institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources and the Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board. This enabled the team to coordinate data collection across multiple districts, facilitated the participation of young women through established institutional networks, and created direct pathways for policy uptake. However, close collaboration with state institutions also meant that youth engagement operated within existing institutional procedures, potentially limiting opportunities for more critical interrogation of government policies.

By contrast, the Somalia research team represented the opposite end of the spectrum. Instead of relying on youth representative structures, researchers went to the ground to meet young people in their day-to-day socioeconomic livelihoods as farmers, greenhouse operators, agripreneurs and market traders. This approach reflected Somalia's fragile political environment, where weak state presence and high levels of informality made grassroots engagement both necessary and appropriate. While the approach generated rich insights into youth's lived experiences of insecurity, land access, displacement and informal trade barriers, it also offered fewer institutional pathways for translating those insights into policy.

The Ghana and South Africa research teams adopted intermediary approaches centred on partnerships with local civil society organizations. In Ghana, youth engagement involved reaching out to youth-led movements and farmer networks, such as the Ghana Food Movement and Urbanet, allowing researchers to access diverse perspectives on policy implementation and food systems governance. In South Africa, the research team collaborated with local community-based organizations across the Eastern Cape and Gauteng provinces, enabling comparison between predominantly rural food systems characterised by smallholder farming and informal livelihoods (Eastern Cape) and urban–peri-urban food systems with more advanced value chains and stronger institutional linkages (Gauteng). Researchers in Benin similarly relied on established farmer networks through the International Fertilizer Development

Council (IFDC)-Benin, providing structured access to youth while ensuring alignment with ongoing donor-funded agricultural development initiatives.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that institutional anchoring is not simply an operational consideration but a methodological one. Collaboration with state institutions tended to facilitate scale, coordination and policy influence, whereas community and civil society engagement models created greater opportunities for critical reflection and locally grounded knowledge. Each model therefore generated different forms of evidence and different pathways through which research could influence just food systems transition.

3.3 Primary role of youth

The INCLUDE case studies also differed significantly in the primary role assigned to youth within the research process. In South Africa, youth were engaged as co-researchers across multiple stages in the research process. Youth contributed to instrument design, pilot testing, interpretation of findings, and review of the qualitative and quantitative results, including composite indices related to food system justice and gender equity. This role positioned youth as contributors instead of respondents, enabling their lived experiences to inform methodological approaches and data analysis.

In Ghana, the research team positioned youth as interpreters of political economy dynamics. Youth were encouraged to identify implementation gaps between national policies and local realities. This led researchers to better understand informal financing arrangements that youth employ in Ghana and drew attention to issues, such as food waste and political patronage which determines who gets access to opportunities, that were not fully reflected in the original conceptualisation of the study. In Benin, researchers adopted a more methodological support role, with youth contributing primarily during the early stages of the research process. Their participation improved survey design, age classifications, language choices and gender-sensitive data collection strategies, thereby strengthening the validity and inclusiveness of the quantitative research instruments.

In Rwanda, youth participation centred largely on data generation and validation. While young people contributed substantially to strengthening the credibility and contextual relevance of the findings, they exercised comparatively less influence over the original conceptual framing of the research. Meanwhile, the approach by researchers in Somalia to go to the grassroots and engage youth informally blurred the boundary between research “participant” and “collaborator” as young people’s daily livelihood activities informed how problems were understood and interpreted.

These role distinctions matter because they influence what kinds of knowledge enter the analytical core of the research. Roles that position youth primarily as respondents or validators tend to reinforce existing conceptual frames, whereas roles that support youth to interpret, question or contextualise findings create space for alternative explanations and deeper analytical insights. This aligns with participatory action research literature, which emphasises that meaningful engagement depends not on the presence of youth per se, but on the functions they are supported to perform within knowledge production (Ozer et al., 2024).

3.4 Power and influence

The most significant differences across the case studies concerned the degree of influence young people exercised over substantive research decisions. Youth influence was greatest where participation extended beyond consultation to include problem framing, methodological refinement and interpretation of findings. In Somalia, youth engagement shifted the analytical focus from assumptions about limited youth interest in agriculture towards structural barriers such as insecurity, access to land and capital, and cultural factors. Similarly, in Ghana, youth challenged dominant narratives by demonstrating how political clientelism, traditional land governance systems and policy implementation failures at the local level influence youth participation in food systems more profoundly than individual motivations alone.

The South African case study demonstrated a different form of influence. Because the research was already explicitly youth-centred, youth participation did not fundamentally redefine the research questions. Instead, it strengthened methodological implementation by refining research methods, contextualising quantitative findings and validating composite measures of justice and gender equity. The approach also helped explain why digital access alone does not translate into improved green employment opportunities within the socio-economic contexts in South Africa.

The Benin case study occupied an intermediate position. Youth substantially improved methodological quality through refinement of research methods and sampling strategies, while also highlighting territorial inequalities and gender disparities affecting access to green jobs. In Rwanda, youth participation primarily strengthened the credibility and contextualisation of findings, although the broader analytical framework remained largely unchanged.

Across all five studies, greater influence over research decisions consistently produced richer and more nuanced evidence. Where youth exercised influence, they challenged dominant assumptions, surfaced hidden political economy dynamics and revealed structural inequalities that conventional researcher-led approaches might have overlooked. Where youth engagement was largely consultative or limited to validation, youth engagement improved credibility but had less capacity to reshape conceptual understandings or expand analytical explanations.

3.5 Alignment with existing models of Meaningful Youth Engagement

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the case studies did not adopt a single, standardised model of youth engagement. Instead, each study operationalised engagement through approaches that reflected its research objectives, institutional arrangements and socio-political context. While the engagement strategies exhibited varying degrees of alignment with the consultative, tiered, collaborative and participatory models discussed in Chapter 2, none conformed to a single approach. Instead, they combined elements from multiple models, illustrating that meaningful youth engagement in food systems research is not a single established best practice.

Table 4. Alignment with existing models of Meaningful Youth Engagement

Country	Engagement Model	Characteristics of Engagement	Contribution to Research
Rwanda	Consultative	Institutional engagement through the Rwanda National Youth Council. Youth participated in data collection, validation and dissemination.	Enhanced contextual validity, legitimacy and policy uptake.
Benin	Tiered Engagement	Youth participated at different stages of the research cycle, including instrument design, piloting and validation.	Strengthened methodological quality, inclusiveness and application of justice dimensions.
Somalia	Youth–Adult Partnership	Collaboration with grassroots youth throughout the research process.	Revealed structural barriers such as insecurity, clan governance and unequal access to land and capital.
Ghana	Youth–Adult Partnership	Collaboration through youth movements and civil society organisations across multiple research stages.	Identified implementation gaps, political clientelism and governance barriers affecting youth in food systems.
South Africa	Youth–Adult Partnership	Youth served as co-researchers throughout research design, implementation and interpretation.	Strengthened research instruments, interpretation of findings and analysis of justice and gender dimensions.

The studies also highlight **important limitations** of existing engagement models. Much of the existing literature categorises meaningful youth engagement according to levels or forms of participation but provides relatively limited guidance on the conditions under which different approaches improve research quality. Across the five case studies, the effectiveness of youth engagement depended less on the model adopted than on how participation was designed, when young people were engaged, the roles they performed, the degree of influence they exercised over research decisions, and the extent to which engagement responded to existing inequalities and power relations. These observations suggest that existing participation models provide a valuable starting point for understanding youth engagement but are less effective as practical frameworks for designing meaningful youth engagement in food systems research.

3.6 Cross-cutting lessons

The analysis reveals several cross-cutting lessons regarding the conditions under which meaningful youth engagement strengthens food systems research. Although the institutional pathways and engagement strategies differed considerably across the five case studies, common patterns emerged concerning the timing of engagement, the roles assigned to youth, the distribution of decision-making authority, and the influence of broader political and socio-economic contexts.

First, the timing of youth engagement significantly influences the extent to which youth are able to shape research outcomes. Research teams that engaged youth during the inception phase were more likely to benefit from youth contributions to problem framing, methodological design and the development of research instruments. Early engagement enabled youth to identify relevant research priorities, challenge researcher assumptions and ensure that research questions reflected lived realities. Where engagement occurred primarily during data collection or validation, youth participation strengthened contextual interpretation and credibility but exercised comparatively limited influence over the conceptual direction of the research.

Second, the quality of youth engagement relies more on the degree of influence youth exercise than on the number of youth involved. Across the five case studies, youth engagement produced the greatest methodological and analytical benefits when young people were positioned as contributors to knowledge production rather than as respondents or interviewees. In Somalia, Ghana, and South Africa, collaborative engagement enabled researchers to identify governance challenges, informal labour dynamics, institutional barriers, and policy implementation gaps that might otherwise have remained overlooked. In contrast, studies where youth engagement was primarily consultative strengthened the contextual validity and legitimacy of the findings without substantially altering the underlying analytical framework.

Third, institutional pathways shape both the opportunities and barriers associated with meaningful youth engagement. Engagement through government institutions may facilitate closer coordination, broader representation and clearer pathways for policy uptake, but it may also hinder opportunities for critical reflection on policy implementation and budgeting. Community-based and civil society-led approaches create greater space for grassroots voices to inform findings, although research teams who utilize this approach may face challenges in influencing policy processes. These findings suggest that no single institutional arrangement is inherently superior but depends on its alignment with the research objectives, political environment and intended pathways to generate impact.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that **meaningful youth engagement strengthens understanding of the political economy** dimensions of food systems transitions in Africa. Across the case studies, youth identified structural barriers that extended beyond technical or productivity-related challenges. These included governance failures, unequal access to land and finance, political clientelism, institutional fragmentation, geographical divides, gendered barriers to participation and the uneven distribution of opportunities in the transition. Rather than simply contributing additional perspectives, youth engagement enabled researchers to develop

more nuanced explanations of how power, institutions, markets and social norms shape young people's experiences within food systems transitions in Africa. This finding reinforces the key message of this paper that meaningful youth engagement should be understood not only as a mechanism for improving participation, but also as a methodological approach capable of strengthening the analytical quality, contextual relevance and policy value of food systems research.

4. INTEGRATING THE 4 I's FRAMEWORK IN RESEARCH

To advance meaningful youth engagement in food systems research, this paper puts forward the 4 I's Framework as a structured analytical and reflective tool to support the case studies in designing, implementing and assessing youth engagement across the research process. The framework is based on four interrelated engagement principles: **Intentional, Inclusive, Intersectional, Impactful** and responds to recurring blind spots identified in the comparative analysis of youth engagement approaches.

4.1 Intentional: aligning engagement with purpose

Across the case studies, youth engagement was most influential when it was designed with a clear purpose in the early stages. Engagement during conceptualisation and research design enabled youth to contribute to problem framing, refine research methods, inform methodological choices and challenge researchers' initial assumptions. Where intent was less clear, youth engagement tended to occur during data collection or validation, providing some operational benefits such as building trust and legitimacy, but with limited influence over outcomes. These findings reinforce insights from participatory action research literature that intentionality is not about whether youth are engaged, but about clarity on why engagement occurs at a given stage and what kind of knowledge contribution is expected (Zeldin et al., 2013).

Researchers should therefore treat youth engagement decisions with the same rigor as other methodological choices like sampling techniques or tool selection. Engagement plans should specify the intended function of youth participation, whether it is to inform problem definition, improve measurements, contextualise findings or support policy uptake and align their methods, timing and resources accordingly.

4.2 Inclusive: deliberate on who participates, under what conditions

Across the studies, inclusion was not uniform and was highly contingent on research design choices. While all research teams engaged "youth", participation patterns were shaped by gender, geographic location, opportunity costs, security conditions and institutional approval processes. For example, in Rwanda, researchers deliberately organised women-only focus groups to address gendered barriers to participation, while in Somalia and Ghana, inclusion required meeting youth within their livelihood spaces at the grassroots level.

Inclusion also varied by stage of the research process. Engagement during data collection tended to be broader, in the sense that it involved larger and more diverse groups of youth as respondents or enumerators. On the other hand, participation in analysis, interpretation, and synthesis stages was more restricted, typically limited to a smaller subset of youth with prior research exposure or organisational affiliation. This pattern reflects hierarchies in knowledge production in Africa that often privilege technical expertise over lived experiences (Keet, 2014).

The sequence of engagement therefore matters. When inclusion is confined to early stages, youth voices may inform data generation but not its interpretation or application. Conversely, when inclusion extends into analytical phases, youth perspectives are more likely to influence

policy recommendations and outcomes. These patterns demonstrate that inclusion is not only about who is invited, but about where and how participation is enabled.

Inclusive youth engagement requires attention to accessibility (language, timing, location), fair compensation, safeguarding and clear role definition across research stages (Teixeira, 2021). It also requires deliberate targeting strategies to avoid repeatedly engaging the same subset of highly connected youth, which risks reproducing existing inequalities within youth populations.

4.3 Intersectional: challenging dominant narratives and knowledge hierarchies

The analysis shows that youth engagement has the greatest transformative potential when it addresses power relations in knowledge production instead of focusing only on demographic inclusion. Intersectionality, understood here as attention to how age intersects with gender, class, geography, political affiliation and socio-economic status (Spajic et al., 2019), emerged as a key mechanism through which youth engagement generated new insights.

In Somalia, researchers meeting youth informally at the grassroots level, challenged dominant gendered assumptions about the roles women play in agrifood systems. In Ghana, youth engagement revealed how political affiliation and historical marginalisation shape access to capital and infrastructure in the northern regions, dimensions largely absent from ordinary policy discussions.

However, the analysis also illustrates that applying an intersectional approach is not automatic. In more institutionalised settings, particularly where engagement was mediated through youth representative bodies, youth participation tended to consolidate existing frames rather than disrupt them. This does not diminish its value, but it highlights that transformative insights emerge only when research designs create space for youth to question how problems are defined, not merely to comment on proposed solutions.

Intersectional engagement therefore requires deliberate methodological choices, including using separate group discussions for diverse youth constituencies (like in the case of Rwanda where the research team conducted women-only FGDs), participatory methods and informal grassroots conversations that provide opportunities to marginalised youth to share perspectives that might otherwise be filtered when engagement is conducted through youth advisory bodies (Teixeira, 2021).

4.4 Impactful: closing the loop between participation and outcomes

Across the case studies, youth engagement was most visible during data collection and validation stages, but less consistently linked to tangible outcomes for the youth participants. While validation workshops enhanced the legitimacy of findings, this form of engagement did not provide sustained pathways for youth involvement beyond the project lifecycle.

This gap matters because it shapes how youth perceive the credibility and worthiness of their engagement. When young people contribute to research without seeing how their input informs conclusions, policy dialogues or future opportunities, participation risks being perceived as extractive or tokenistic (Fleming, 2011). Conversely, when youth are involved in dissemination,

advocacy or policy engagements, participation reinforces trust and increases the likelihood of uptake (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Impactful engagement therefore requires closing the loop across the research process. This means transparent feedback is offered to youth on how their contributions will be used, recognition of their role in outputs, and where feasible, links to policy formulations, dialogues or future research initiatives. This does not require long-term commitments in every project, but it does require clarity about the limits and possibilities of engagement from the outset.

5. PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR EMBEDDING MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH

As demonstrated in the analysis, meaningful youth engagement is not a uniform or single “best practice”, but the result of deliberate design choices made under specific political and socio-economic conditions within the specific study context. This guidance is intended to support researchers, research institutions, policymakers, donors and programme managers embed youth engagement as a core research practice rather than a procedural obligation.

5.1 Choosing youth engagement approaches

The analytical value of youth engagement depends on the alignment between research objectives, the role youth are expected to play and the contextual conditions within the study area. Approaches that enable youth to shape problem framing and interpretation are more influential in studies where these functions are central. In other contexts, consultative or collaborative approaches are more appropriate and effective. Researchers should therefore begin by clarifying the primary function of youth engagement within their projects. For example:

- Where the objective is to surface lived experiences, challenge dominant narratives or interrogate political economy dynamics, early-stage engagement through collaborative approaches may be most appropriate. Meeting youth within their settings and in the context of their informal livelihood activities can reduce power asymmetries that are often reproduced when engagement is confined to hotel workshops or boardrooms.
- Where the objective is to enhance legitimacy, validate findings or support policy uptake, engagement during later stages such as validation workshops or dissemination dialogues may be more effective.

The key design question is not whether youth are engaged, but for what purpose, at which stage, and through which method.

5.2 Designing for power-sharing

Across the studies, the quality of youth engagement was closely tied to how power was distributed within the research. Youth presence alone did not guarantee influence. Meaningful engagement depended on whether young people had opportunities to shape research questions, contest interpretations or influence analytical and strategic decisions taken by research teams.

Power-sharing is therefore not an abstract principle but a concrete design issue that must be addressed when developing the proposal or at the inception stage of the research process. Researchers should critically examine where decision-making authority lies at each stage and whether youth engagement can be designed to influence those decisions.

Key guiding questions to consider include:

- Are youth engaged before key parameters (research questions, conceptual framing, indicators, data collection instruments) are finalised?
- Are youth contributions documented and visibly reflected in analysis and outputs?

- Which mechanisms exist to address disagreements between youth and senior researchers?

Transparency regarding non-negotiable factors such as donor requirements, regulatory standards, timelines or compensation is equally important to avoid creating false expectations. Designing for power-sharing does not require equal control across all stages of the research. Instead, it requires intentional allocation of influence to stages where the lived experiences of youth can add the greatest value, combined with clarity about roles and limits of engagement. When such clarity exists, youth engagement will likely be perceived as credible, respectful and meaningful.

5.3 Budgeting and planning for Meaningful Youth Engagement

One key finding across all the studies is that underinvesting in youth engagement undermines inclusion. Meaningful youth engagement requires ample time, facilitation, compensation and support structures, particularly when young people face care responsibilities, accessibility barriers, economic difficulties, or historical exclusion from decision-making processes based on their ethnicity or geographical location.

Research budgets should therefore treat youth engagement as a core methodological component by allocating sufficient resources for:

- facilitation and coordination
- translation and interpretation
- transport and accessibility needs
- fair compensation

Research timelines should also account for trust-building, iteration and adaptation, especially in rural environments, conflict zones and urban informal settlements where youth are historically excluded from such processes. Compressed or last-minute participation is unlikely to generate substantive insights and may contribute to tokenism.

5.4 Monitoring and reflective learning

Youth engagement is most effective when treated as a continuous learning process. However, monitoring and evaluation practices applied in academic research often focus on quantitative indicators such as numbers of youth engaged instead of the quality, influence or consequences of such engagement. Future research programmes would benefit from integrating simple, qualitative reflection tools, such as the **4 I's Framework**, that capture how youth engagement influences research processes and outcomes. Such reflections might examine:

- when and how engagement occurred;
- whose perspective shaped analysis;
- how disagreements were handled;
- whether youth contributions altered interpretations, priorities or conclusions.

Reflections should be iterative and, where feasible, participatory, engaging both research teams and youth participants. At the institutional level, organisations commissioning research are well

positioned to aggregate these reflections across projects, transforming individual experiences into programme learning and improving future practices.

5.5 Inclusive youth engagement

Youth is not a homogenous group. Engagement strategies that fail to account for gender, disability, geography, education level, ethnicity/race and occupational status risk reproducing inequalities they seek to address. Different groups require different design choices. For example:

- Facilitating young women's participation may require women-only spaces, flexible timing, adequate compensation and sensitivity to care responsibilities and social norms.
- Rural youth may face barriers related to language, internet connectivity and economic status that require adapted methods.
- Youth with disabilities or low literacy levels require accessible formats and facilitation approaches that recognise diverse forms of knowledge and expression.

Engagement conducted exclusively in technical jargon limits youth participation and expression. Therefore, researchers should try to break down their research questions into simple formats that youth can easily understand. Inclusive engagement also requires investment in translation and facilitation methods that recognise diverse forms of knowledge and expression. Engagement strategies should explicitly identify which youth are likely to be excluded by default and what measures are needed to enable their meaningful participation.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the five case studies of INCLUDE's research programme [*Youth in Just Food Systems Transitions*](#) demonstrate that meaningful youth engagement can significantly enhance the analytical depth, relevance and legitimacy of research when it is intentional, adequately supported and aligned with clear objectives. At the same time, it cautions against approaches that treat participation as symbolic or procedural, which risk reproducing existing power asymmetries and weakening outcomes.

This paper emphasises that meaningful youth engagement does not require uniform models or maximal control by youth across all research stages. Rather, it requires deliberate decisions about **when, how and for what purpose** youth are engaged, informed by the regulatory environment and budgetary resources available.

For policymakers, research institutions and donors, the central challenge going forward is not to standardise youth engagement, but to institutionalize learning about it, creating spaces for reflection, adaptation and improvement across research programmes. Instead of asking whether youth should participate in research, future food systems research projects should ask whether youth participation meaningfully reshapes the production of knowledge. In doing so, youth engagement can move beyond symbolism to become a meaningful contributor to high-quality and inclusive knowledge production in Africa and beyond.

About the Author

Brian Kithinji is a policy and governance specialist with expertise in participatory action research, policy development and project management on food systems, youth inclusion and governance in Africa. He is the Founder and Executive Director of [Policy Action Initiative](#) and currently serves as a consultant to the INCLUDE Platform, contributing to practical frameworks on meaningful youth engagement in food systems research. Brian has authored publications on food systems, climate adaptation, governance and youth participation, and is a member of the EU Youth Sounding Board and a Rotary Peace Fellow at Makerere University.

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Annex

Meaningful Youth Engagement in Research Checklist

This checklist is designed to help researchers ensure meaningful youth engagement occurs in all phases of research, and avoid common blind spots.

Based on the **4 I's Framework** (Intentional, Inclusive, Intersectional, and Impactful), it provides guiding questions and criteria for reflection, planning, and action.

1. Intentional – Is youth engagement designed with purpose?

Key Considerations	Yes	No
Youth are involved from the research design phase in setting up research questions and objectives.		
There are clear and defined roles for youth throughout the research cycle.		
Youth considerations have shaped the research questions or focus.		
Youth will be trained as research assistants or facilitators.		
Expectations and outcomes for youth involvement are mutually defined.		

2. Inclusive – Are diverse youth represented and supported?

Key Considerations	Yes	No
Youth from different geographical regions, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds are included in the research process.		
Participation is accessible (considering language, literacy, disability, digital access).		
Youth collaborators are fairly compensated or supported with non-financial incentives.		
Ethical considerations for youth engagement (safeguarding and consent) are in place.		
Youth have autonomy in expressing their ideas and concerns during data collection.		

3. Intersectional – Does youth engagement go beyond challenging existing narratives and status quo?

Key Considerations	Yes	No
The research challenges dominant narratives and power dynamics in knowledge production.		

The research elevates underrepresented youth voices that are often excluded or stereotyped.		
The research disrupts extractive research models by centering co-creation and mutual benefit.		
Youth are engaged in reframing how issues are defined, not just consulted on solutions.		
The research creates space for new forms of knowledge and lived experience to shape discourse.		

4. Impactful – Will youth see the results of their involvement?

Key Considerations	Yes	No
Youth are involved in analyzing results and drawing conclusions.		
Findings are curated in accessible and interactive formats.		
The research has clear application to youth policy, programs, or local advocacy strategies.		
Youth are credited or cited where relevant in reports or publications.		
A process exists for youth to follow up or lead future phases.		

How to use this checklist

1. Use at the start of your research project to shape engagement plans.
2. Revisit it midway through implementation as a reflection tool.
3. Share it with all members of your team and youth partners for co-assessment.

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