

Empowering youth as agents of change: Gaps and opportunities for meaningful youth engagement (MAYE) for sustainable nutrition, climate and public health programmes

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Abstract

Addressing the intersection of food insecurity, malnutrition and climate change in Sub-Saharan Africa requires meaningful adolescent and youth engagement to drive sustainable change. Drawing on empirical evidence and collective experiences from youth-led initiatives and coalitions, four gaps and opportunities to better involve youth in programmes are discussed, including, the need to: (1) standardise the definition of youth to improve programme design and data harmonisation, (2) provide capacity building and mentorship for youth leadership in health service delivery, (3) foster youth leadership and multisectoral collaboration in food and health systems and (4) enhance capacity development for non-youth actors to support genuine youth participation. This viewpoint underscores the importance of involving African youth in public health nutrition, climate change and food security programmes design and implementation—as drivers of change to addressing hunger and climate crises. By centering youth voices and experiences, programmes and policies can better address African communities' complex challenges, fostering inclusivity, sustainability and resilience in achieving better nutrition and public health programmes and outcomes.

KEYWORDS

capacity building, MAYE, mentorship, youth engagement, youth leadership

1 | BACKGROUND

Nearly 146 million people face acute food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). SSA faces high child mortality, insufficient caloric intake and undernutrition—reflected in SSA's global hunger index score of 27. While limited data exist on the effect of food insecurity on Africa's youth—who comprise 70% of the population—emerging evidence reveals that young people are impacted by the ongoing

hunger crises (International Federation of Red Cross, 2023). Moreover, several studies describe that up to half of youth in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa and Nigeria experienced household food insecurity, indicated by low food consumption scores of fruits, pulses, vegetables and animal-source proteins (Adeyanju et al., 2023; Masa et al., 2020). Poor food choices such as high consumption of ultra-processed foods, that is, candy and soft drinks among young people have been driven by convenience due to unregulated food

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environments in schools and communities and economic constraints (Fleming et al., 2020). These factors contributed to skipping of meals during the coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the climate crises and/or ongoing conflict (Adeyanju et al., 2023; Fleming et al., 2020; Kavle et al., 2023; Masa et al., 2020).

Climate change has contributed to food unavailability and inaccessibility and has increased air pollution, leading to high rates of asthma in SSA—which affects youth (Tiotiu et al., 2020). In South Africa, young people have experienced disruptions in the education systems related to high climatic temperatures, causing missed classes and poor educational performance (Kutywayo et al., 2022). Anecdotal evidence showed that Ugandan youth have inadequate access to essential youth-friendly health care services and nutritious food due to climate change and suffer from erratic weather patterns such as prolonged droughts and flooding. African youth are also experiencing climate-induced mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression and trauma, especially those who have suffered from natural disasters or live in areas with high climate vulnerability (FAO, 2023; Hickman et al., 2021). For example, in Tanzania, data reveal that severe food and water insecurity were associated with higher levels of depression among young people 18–23 years of age (Prencipe et al., 2023). The complex interplay between climate change, rising food insecurity and malnutrition, calls for addressing inequities among youth many of whom are already experiencing the negative impacts of climate change (Arora et al., 2022). Youth leaders have urged for accelerated climate action from their country governments, emphasising the need to meaningfully integrate their voices as a foundational pillar of the planetary health agenda to address these systemic challenges (Arora et al., 2022; Pérez-Escamilla, 2017; Rouabhia, 2024).

The African continent is also grappling with humanitarian crises spurred by conflicts, mass displacements and climate change such as the recent floods in the Horn of Africa, exacerbating the challenges faced by vulnerable communities, especially women, children and the youth (United Nations, & Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2021). To address this, the United Nations (UN) launched the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, emphasizing youth engagement in humanitarian response across five key areas: service delivery, data, resources, participation and local action. Despite these commitments recognising youths as change agents in crises, practical implementation remains lacking. Additionally, the UN's World Programme of Action for Youth frequently portrays young people as victims, describing them as displaced and powerless in climate crises, as well as primary victims in armed conflicts, experiencing abduction, trauma and displacement (UNFPA, 2018). Therefore, bridging the gap between humanitarian aid and sustainable development is crucial, with a focus on empowering youth to mitigate vulnerabilities. This will not only safeguard the immediate wellbeing of young people but also contribute to the long-term resilience necessary for achieving sustainable development thus helping attain a higher human capital (Black et al., 2022). Coupling this with education about public health emergencies combined with topics, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence, food security and mental health issues presents a meaningful way to engage the youth during epidemics and pandemics, while addressing hunger and climate

Key messages

- Standardization of the definition of youth is critical to generate, accurate and harmonized data to inform on youth program design, implementation, and policy frameworks.
- Investment in youth capacity building, mentorship and leadership development is essential for strengthening health service delivery and addressing climate change and food insecurity.
- Youth leadership and multisectoral collaboration are key to driving change in food and health systems by actively involving young people in decision-making and community engagement programmes.
- Sensitisation of nonyouth actors on the importance of meaningful adolescent and youth engagement (MAYE) is crucial for fostering inclusive collaboration and combating youth tokenism.

change (UNFPA, 2021). For example, in 2013, the Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa which affected Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone was one of the largest outbreaks in history, causing 11,300 deaths and 28,000 confirmed cases. In Sierra Leone, vulnerable communities recovering from war suffered the most, with 14,124 infections, 3955 deaths and significant economic losses due to the severe outbreak. Amid these challenges, local youths in Sierra Leone played a crucial role in containing the disease, stepping up as capable responders when many nongovernmental organizations ceased operations (Apollo & Mbah, 2022).

2 | WHY INVOLVE AFRICAN YOUTH AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN NUTRITION, CLIMATE CHANGE AND PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES?

To address the hunger and climate crisis, young people should be centred as drivers of change and included in the design, implementation and monitoring of health, nutrition and climate resilience programmes. Young people are viewed as central to the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 which aims to achieve inclusive and sustainable development through 'a people-driven movement focusing on women and youth' (AU, 2013). The AU Youth Charter also aims to 'strengthen, reinforce and consolidate efforts to empower young people through meaningful youth participation and equal partnership in driving Africa's development agenda' (AU, 2006). This collective call to action seeks to reduce inequalities, foster youth empowerment and facilitate young people's participation in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national development. The two AU policies also advocate for recognising the right of young people to be free from hunger through meaningful adolescent and youth

engagement (MAYE). MAYE is a universal term used in the global health community to gauge youth involvement and is defined as ‘an active, empowered, and intentional partnership with adolescents and youth as stakeholders, problem solvers, and change agents in their communities’ (PMNCH, 2020). Implementation of MAYE in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Guinea Bisau, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, Senegal, Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has demonstrated positive impacts on health promotion, community engagement and social mobilisation - inclusive of disrupting community transmission during Ebola outbreaks and COVID-19, implementing peer-to-peer support for prevention efforts targeting sexually transmitted infection and mental health promotion interventions, according to several systematic reviews of clinical trials (Barry et al., 2013; Phiri et al., 2024; Rose-Clarke et al., 2019; UNFPA, 2021). Yet, gaps still exist in MAYE programming (UNFPA, 2021).

Despite some progress, SSA youth are often not actively and intentionally engaged in decision-making, programme design and implementation due to several challenges that limit their role in

transforming the food system and health service delivery programmes and policies. Our collective experience, through leading Africa-based youth coalitions and youth-led initiatives, shows that young people often experience disenfranchisement due to the unrecognition of their voices and opinions—which can demotivate youth. Lack of mentorship and structured capacity building hamper the development of young people's knowledge and skills necessary to affect change. This viewpoint highlights four gaps and opportunities for actively involving African youth to effectively empower them as local change agents for nutrition, climate change and public health initiatives. Furthermore, we provide local insights for MAYE in SSA, which can inform global programming (Figure 1).

2.1 | Is there a need to standardise the definition of youth?

Globally, a standardised definition of ‘youth’ is lacking to guide country programmes design and implementation. Various policy

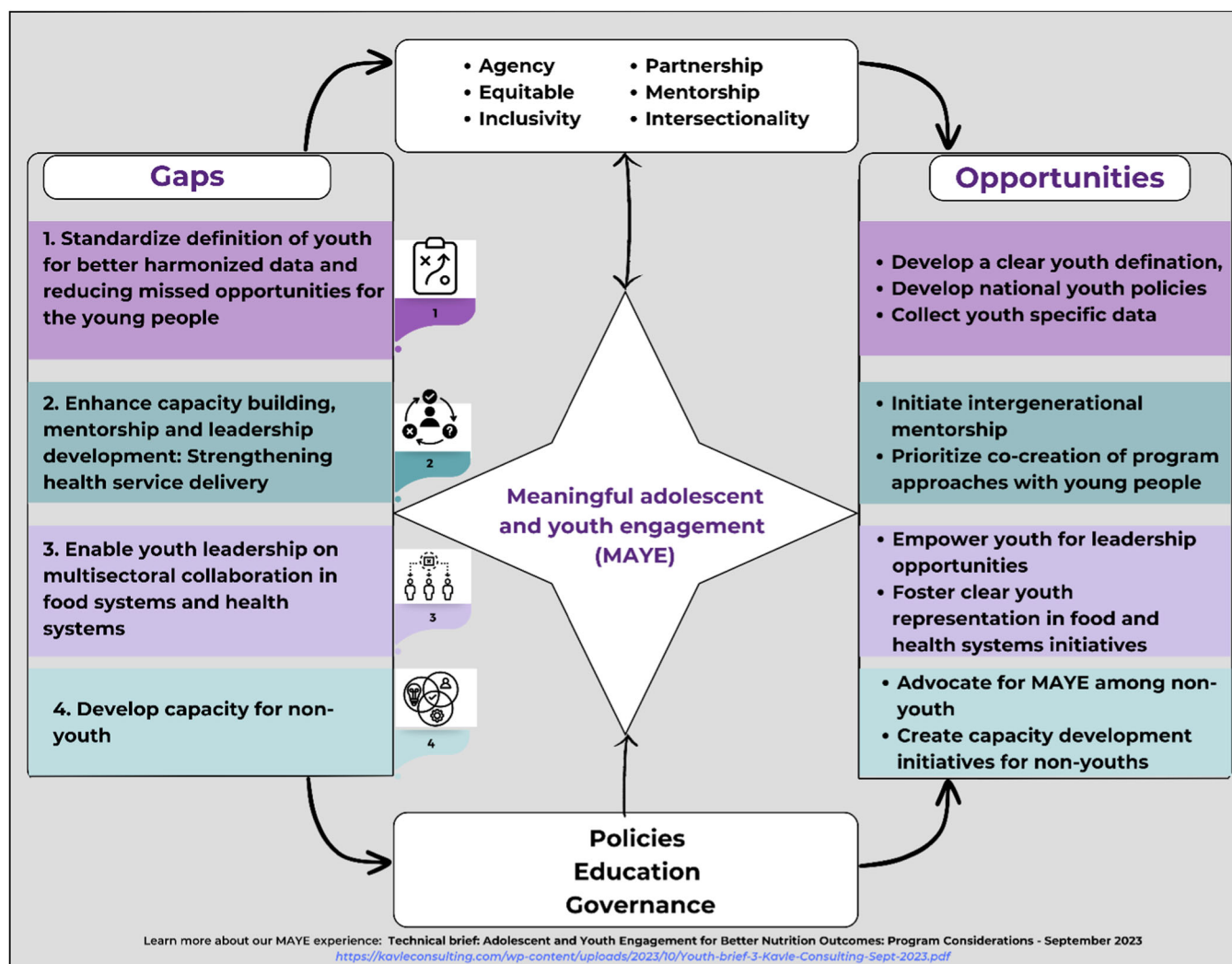


FIGURE 1 Framework for achieving meaningful adolescent and youth engagement.

documents and intergovernmental organisations define youth based on different age ranges; for example UN uses 15–24 years of age while the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the AU utilise 10–29 years of age, and 15–35 years of age, respectively (UN Youth, 2013; USAID, 2014, 2022). In South Sudan, people 12–45 years of age are still considered youth due to the lack of an official definition and a national policy on MAYE (Tumutegereize et al., 2018). There are challenges in developing youth-focused policies and programmes as data on how hunger affects young people are not routinely collected by government agencies. Data is often fragmented and lack harmonisation due to these varying age definitions (UN, 2019). The paucity of reliable, timely and/or accurate data on how food insecurity, health service delivery and use of youth-friendly health services affect young people is also an obstacle to designing programmes (Concern Worldwide, & Welthungerhilfe, 2023). In addition, country governments, programme implementers and policymakers may not have a clear understanding of how the current crisis affects young people for programming due to gaps in metrics for youth (Adeyanju et al., 2023; Arora et al., 2022; Concern Worldwide, & Welthungerhilfe, 2023; Kwabena & Kimenyi, 2013; UN, 2018).

2.2 | How do we develop the capacity of youth to strengthen health service delivery?

Youth are often perceived as inexperienced, potentially undermining their contribution when addressing complex issues like the impact of climate change, food insecurity and hunger facing Africa. In South Sudan, our experience demonstrates that while youth face high unemployment, disease burden and inadequate access to health and nutrition services and often hold potential solutions, they have limited participation in decision-making as they are often systematically excluded due to the lack of recognition of them as a 'legitimate' demographic group. Yet, it is critical that the next generation of public health practitioners drive change through national and subnational youth-led movements—such as leveraging the recently launched Scaling Up Nutrition, also known as SUN, Youth Network in Kenya, the Coalition for Youth Organisations in South Sudan and Youth Alive Uganda in Uganda. Furthermore, given the imminent health workforce shortage of 10 million personnel by 2030, shaping and strengthening youths' capacities to actively lead the design, implementation and monitoring of multisectoral nutrition programmes is crucial (Kavle Consulting, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).

An example of a model for the future is USAID's Maternal and Child Survival Programme (MCSP), which reached 3 million children under 5 years of age in Nampula and Sofala, northern Mozambique. MCSP Mozambique implemented a package of preventative and curative nutrition interventions over a 3-year period targeting maternal, infant and child health. A team of 35 recent nutrition university graduates was equipped with mentorship, problem-solving skills and training updates. This led to the scale-up of maternal and child nutrition-specific interventions in 814 communities and 111 facilities working alongside local

government bodies (Picolo et al., 2019). USAID's MCSP allowed space for youth leadership, decision-making and depth of community engagement working with community health workers and local health facilities. The project enabled diversified perspectives and intergenerational learning, paving the way for greater representation of young nutrition professionals in the public health workforce in Africa and elsewhere (Wong et al., 2021).

2.3 | How does youth leadership impact multisectoral collaboration in food systems and health systems?

Some youth-led coalitions are fragmented and/or lack clear representation, which may make it difficult for these groups to foster a collective voice and effectively advocate for themselves (Development & Alternative, 2019). Empowering young people to engage and lead in food and health systems programming is important in creating initiatives that reflect their concerns and commitments, given that the complexities of addressing malnutrition and hunger require concerted efforts from all community members (Hawkes et al., 2020). Young people have expressed interest in improving their dietary habits and nutritional status despite barriers related to the cost and availability of healthy foods (Fleming et al., 2020). Youth are key agents of change who use a whole-of-community approach to improving healthy eating, from taking individual responsibility to change daily eating behaviours to encouraging peers to choose healthier foods (Fleming et al., 2020).

When actively involved in community health promotion and prevention activities, programmes can tap into youth to provide valuable leadership opportunities to address health challenges, champion health promotion and mobilise their peers to serve as role models and educators. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the AU engaged and trained youth—known as 'Bingwa,' Swahili for 'champion'—in community mobilisations for COVID-19 vaccinations—across the 55 AU member states (Africa CDC, 2022). In 2022, this initiative reached over 5,100 people via community events and 13.3 million+ people via social media, resulting in 350,000+ people being vaccinated against COVID-19 (Alsayed, 2023; Giz, 2022). Youth also offer unique perspectives on the long-term future of their communities by encouraging health promotion, challenging discriminatory practices and advocating for social justice to foster inclusivity and community development (JCI, 2023; Ricker & Adames, 2020). For example, a local grassroots youth-led initiative called 'Tule Vyema', which is Swahili for 'Let's Eat Right' raises awareness of proper feeding practices in the community through nutrition health talks, training young unemployed women to cultivate indigenous vegetables in vertical gardens and deworming children in Kajiado, Kenya. Since 2017, the initiative has increased food security among 1000 households by creating kitchen gardens for growing indigenous crops to boost their families' food security and selling surplus to earn their income and has dewormed 1200 children (Global Change Makers, 2023).

Youth leadership can be harnessed by investing in and advocating for youth-led groups. For example, Initiative Y-Peer targets young African people 18–28 years of age and focuses on SRHR, human immunodeficiency viruses/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome prevention, gender equality and MAYE. Y-Peer engages 33,000 youth advocates from 59 countries across the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific region and Eastern and Northern Africa to contribute to awareness campaigns to increase access to information and services about adolescent SRHR. In Africa, the initiative has focused on advocating for an increase in the availability and use of youth-friendly services. Additionally, the programme has led to the development of national youth strategies, educational methodologies, toolkits and guidelines focusing on youth advocacy. Second, Act4-Food Act4Change, a global youth-led movement, mobilizes young people to advocate for a fair and sustainable global food system that provides access to safe, affordable and nutritious food for all, while addressing climate change and human rights (Act4Food Act4Change, 2021; Gupta et al., 2024). Since May 2021, 160,579 young people have joined the Act4Food pledge calling for accountability and action on the ongoing health, climate and food system crises for governments and businesses. African youth prioritised pledges focusing on participation in decision-making, employment and local knowledge and urged governments, institutions and community leaders to actively develop policies and infrastructures that support optimal nutrition for young people (Fleming et al., 2020; Huyer et al., 2023). These types of youth-led initiatives can increase youth inclusivity in public health programs by highlighting young peoples' needs and contributions to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the Africa 2063 agenda, 'towards a prosperous and peaceful Africa' (PMNCH, 2023).

2.4 | How can capacity development for non-youth be enhanced?

Sensitising non-youth actors—individuals who have reached adulthood and are not considered part of the youth demographic—on the importance of MAYE entails challenging and rectifying unequal power dynamics and fostering collaboration. Without such capacity development, there is a risk that youth voices may be marginalised or tokenized, hindering the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing youth issues. Advocacy and building youth capacity with non-youth actors are strategies for promoting meaningful youth participation (UN, 2019). As an example, the first-ever African youth leaders learning session, led by Kavle Consulting and Organisation of African Youth Kenya, was presented at the 2023 Micronutrient Forum in the Hague, Netherlands (Micronutrient Forum, 2023). The session shared learnings and experiences from African youth nutrition leaders from Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique. The youth and non-youth participants discussed youth inclusivity, capacity building, equity, tokenism and methods to address these challenges to foster MAYE and sharing power. Moreover, supporting non-youth actors in establishing their own youth representation mechanisms and

engaging in joint activities with young people can further bridge the gap and empower them to actively contribute to decision-making processes. Through ongoing capacity development, both youth and non-youth actors can develop a deeper appreciation and understanding for each other's roles and potential to effectively work together.

3 | CONCLUSION

To ensure meaningful youth engagement, balancing empowerment and activity ownership is crucial. Capacity development through effective mentorship can cultivate young people's leadership and life skills and foster their inclusion in programmes. The sustainability of organisational engagement with young people relies on ongoing support and efforts through programmes, projects and policy initiatives that value young people's lived experiences. These efforts should enhance their knowledge and skills to co-create approaches that foster intergenerational exchange and improve health, nutrition and climate change initiatives.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Joseph Gaithuma and Justine A. Kavle designed, conceptualised, drafted and contributed to the paper. All authors contributed to the paper and approved the final manuscript.

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The authors have nothing to report.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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