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Empowering Youth in Agrifood Systems

By Fidele Eric Sessou and Aisha Musaazi S. Nakitto

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Editorial

Since its adoption by the African Union (AU) in 2003, the [Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme](#) (CAADP) has been Africa's primary policy framework for agricultural transformation, wealth creation, food security, economic growth, and prosperity. It guides the African Union Commission (AUC), the African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and Member States in driving agricultural transformation toward a self-reliant and productive Africa.

The recently adopted [Kampala CAADP Declaration](#) on *“Building Resilient and Sustainable Agrifood Systems in Africa”* and the associated [CAADP Strategy and Action Plan \(2026-2035\)](#) will build on the success and deepen the progress achieved after two decades of CAADP implementation, during which Africa significantly improved in economic and agricultural growth, poverty reduction, nutrition outcomes, and agricultural trade expansion. The next 10-year cycle of CAADP implementation must further deepen its focus to incorporate lessons while responding to emerging issues to accelerate sustainable food system transformation within a context of climate change and multifaceted stressors and shocks.

The longevity and continued success of CAADP can be attributed to its credibility as a shared framework designed to guide Member States toward agricultural transformation and economic growth. Driven by the CAADP principles and values, with emphasis on African ownership and mutual accountability, alongside review and benchmarking, data and analytics have been central to CAADP's evidence-based planning and implementation approach. As Africa prepares for the implementation phase of the Kampala CAADP Declaration, which comes into force on January 1, 2026, evidence and robust data analysis will continue to remain indispensable to successful implementation on the ground. This is the rationale behind AKADEMIYA2063's *Kampala Policy Brief Series*.

The purpose of the policy briefs is to serve as reference documents for policy analysts and planners across AU Member States as they prepare their programs in response to the Kampala CAADP Declaration. The policy briefs will provide a synthesis of a large body of research tackling topics of strategic relevance to Africa's development agenda in parallel with key issues to be addressed during the new phase of CAADP implementation to provide insights, analyze emerging ideas, review cross-cutting thematic areas, and propose policy recommendations that can be replicated for sustainable impact.

The evidence presented in the Kampala Policy Brief Series is derived from published research and data by AKADEMIYA2063's scientists and collaborators across Africa and outside the continent. These lessons are made accessible to policymakers, non-state actors, and other practitioners at continental, regional, and national levels, as well as development partners, to support the implementation of CAADP 2026-2035. In addition to packaging the lessons and insights into comprehensive yet accessible knowledge products, AKADEMIYA2063 is facilitating policy dialogue through webinars. During these sessions, the findings are presented to a broad range of stakeholders to guide programmatic interventions supporting the implementation of the Kampala CAADP Agenda.



1. Introduction

The Kampala CAADP Declaration and its Strategy and Action Plan (2026–2035) outline a transformative agenda for Africa’s agrifood systems, building on the previous Maputo (2003) and Malabo (2014) Declarations. Commitment 4 focuses on inclusive, equitable access to sustainable livelihoods, emphasizing youth empowerment as key to sustainable growth, resilience, and poverty reduction. The Kampala CAADP aims to empower and engage 30 percent of African youth in agrifood systems transformation by enhancing their access to rural services, productive assets, and tailored social protection (AUC and AUDA-NEPAD 2025). The framework positions economic empowerment of youth as a strategic investment with measurable targets related to inclusiveness in agrifood systems. This focus on inclusion reflects a growing recognition that sustainable economic development in Africa depends on removing structural barriers that limit the full participation of youth in agrifood value chains (AUC and AUDA-NEPAD 2025).

Youth play a vital role in Africa’s agriculture; they constitute the largest proportion of the continent’s labor force, representing approximately 35 percent of the workforce in sub-Saharan Africa and 40 percent in Northern Africa (FAO and UNIDO 2021). This holds significant transformative potential for agrifood systems through enhanced innovation, accelerated technology adoption, and increased entrepreneurial activity. Empowering youth with the skills, agency, and access to decent employment is key to enhancing agricultural productivity, food security, and sustainable economic growth across the continent. To unlock the full economic potential of agrifood systems, young people need to be equipped with the right skills and knowledge that align with the evolving demands of today’s agrifood systems.

Yet, true inclusion goes beyond participation—it requires empowering youth to make their own decisions, share equally in the benefits, and take the lead in transforming agrifood

systems. Policy and development efforts increasingly emphasize equipping youth in agrifood value chains with tools, enabling policies, and supportive regulations to enhance their agency. African countries have committed to this through various regional, continental, and global declarations and frameworks promoting youth empowerment.

AKADEMIYA2063, through the Malabo Montpellier Panel, has revisited the status of young people in Africa's agrifood systems, examined the challenges they face, the opportunities available, and the policy and institutional innovations needed to put them at the center of agrifood systems transformation (Malabo Montpellier Panel 2024).

In this brief, we discuss the challenges African youth face in pursuing meaningful, decent, and profitable opportunities in the agrifood sector. We leverage the *Youth Ahead* report, developed by AKADEMIYA2063 under the Malabo Montpellier Panel (2024), to provide insights into the interventions proposed under Kampala CAADP to advance inclusive agrifood systems, policy, and institutional innovations that put youth at the center of food systems transformation. Finally, we highlighted pathways and effective interventions for inclusive agrifood system transformation, with the aim of generating key lessons and actionable recommendations for policymakers

2. Challenges Faced by African Youth in Seizing Opportunities in the Agrifood Sector

Although Africa's agrifood systems offer significant potential to improve youth employment and livelihoods, young people often face complex challenges in accessing meaningful, decent, and profitable opportunities within these systems. The *Youth Ahead* report (Malabo Montpellier Panel 2024) highlights key barriers that hinder African youth from fully seizing opportunities in the agrifood sector. These include a mismatch between supply and demand for skills, limited access to finance and productive resources, limited access to education and training opportunities, and negative perceptions of youth toward agriculture.

➤ Mismatch between the supply and demand of skills

A growing mismatch between the supply and demand of skills is one of the main factors driving high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment in Africa. There is a clear disconnect between the qualifications and skills that young people possess and what the labor market requires. Most education systems across the continent still fall short in preparing youth for the workforce or equipping them with the skills needed for Africa's development (Obonyo 2022). While school attendance is on the rise, even the most educated often find that their training does not align with the available job opportunities. The skills they acquire often do not align with the needs of a rapidly transforming agricultural sector (OECD and ILO 2018).

➤ Limited access to higher education and training opportunities

Challenges in education and skills development significantly hinder the ability of youth to participate effectively in the modern, evolving agrifood sector. Limited access to higher education and training opportunities remains a major barrier, with access to education typically more restricted in rural areas than in urban areas. Opportunities for skills development beyond formal education, such as incubators, apprenticeships, or vocational training programs and continuing training, are even less accessible to rural youth (AUC and AUDA-NEPAD 2019). In addition, limited access to electricity and internet connectivity further limits young people, especially those from low-income or remote communities, from obtaining information or benefiting from online learning opportunities (Hendricks and Mutongoza 2023).

➤ **Limited access to finance**

Access to targeted financial services is essential for unlocking business opportunities in Africa's food systems, empowering youth to invest, innovate, expand production, and create jobs. Africa's agrifood sector remains critically underfunded, constrained by high interest rates and limited access to collateral stemming from insecure land tenure systems (Suri et al. 2024). These barriers force youth to rely on informal lending sources, restrict their participation in capital-intensive, profitable agribusinesses, and limit their ability to scale up or formalize their operations. Due to low perceived creditworthiness, lack of financial literacy, and fear of failure, many young people self-exclude from formal credit markets (World Bank 2023), further perpetuating the cycle of exclusion and limiting business growth.

➤ **Limited access to land**

Limited access to land and insecure tenure rights represent fundamental barriers for both youth in African agriculture. Secure land tenure comprises access rights, the power to decide its use, and the rights to use it for production, sale, inheritance, collateral, and rent. Many young people are "locked out" of agricultural opportunities due to limited farmland availability, which pushes them out of agriculture and rural areas and/or hinders their autonomy (Chamberlin and Sumberg 2021). Youth's lack of secure land rights translates into lower productivity, perpetuating food insecurity, malnutrition, and poverty.

➤ **Negative perceptions of youth on agriculture**

One of the most persistent and complex challenges to youth engagement in agriculture is the widespread negative perception of the sector. Despite its economic potential, many young Africans continue to view agriculture as outdated, labor-intensive, and unprofitable or lacking social prestige. Agricultural work is often perceived as physically demanding and associated with low educational attainment and rural poverty, leading many youth to migrate to urban areas in pursuit of alternative livelihoods (Girdziute et al. 2022).

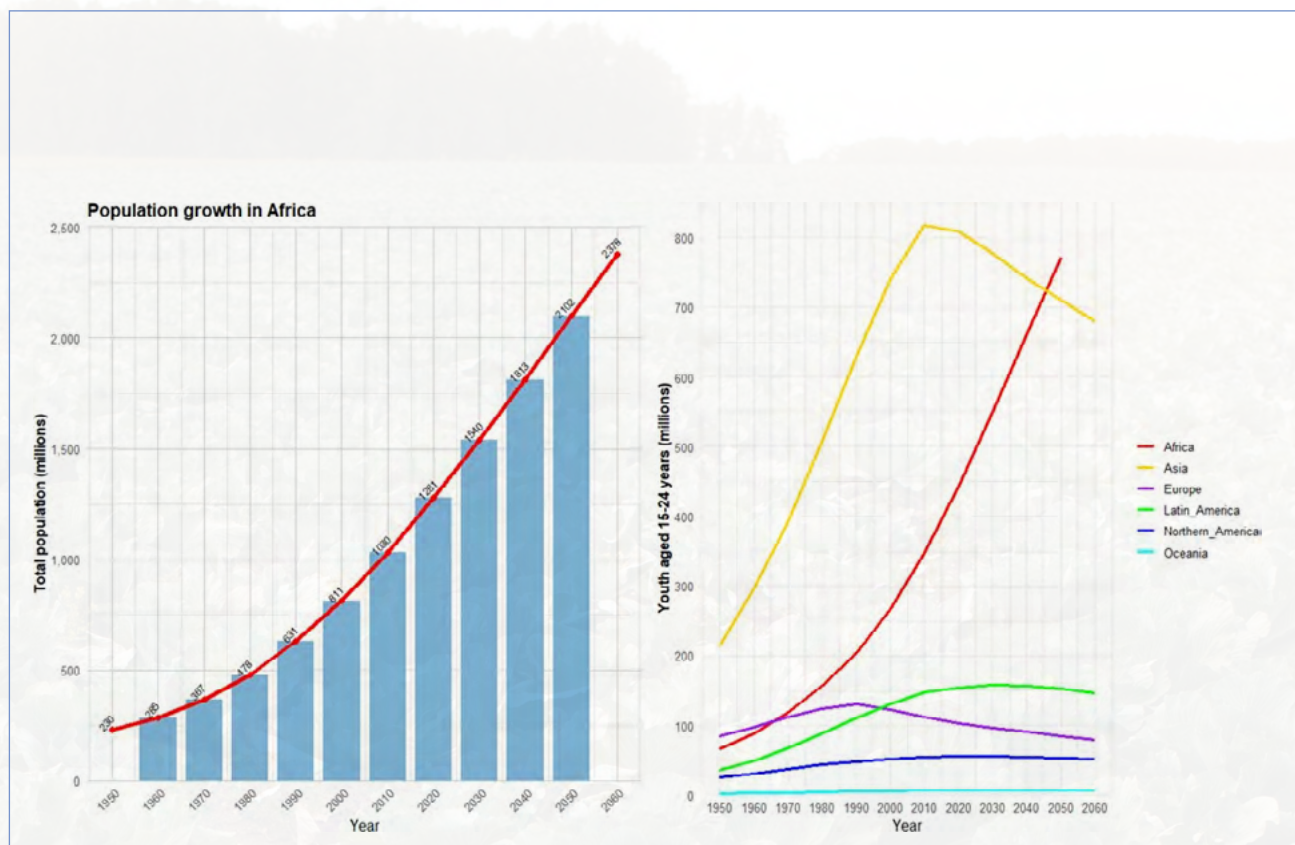
➤ **Limited participation in decision-making processes**

Another critical barrier for youth is their limited involvement in policy formulation and decision-making processes related to agrifood systems. The policy environment often fails to address the specific needs and constraints faced by youth in agrifood systems. The *Youth Ahead* report emphasizes that attracting young people to careers in agrifood systems requires their active involvement in political decision-making, especially in shaping policies that support their productive and profitable engagement in the sector. Yet in practice, youth remain marginalized in policy dialogues, with decisions about agriculture and food systems development pathways typically made without meaningful youth consultation or consideration of youth-specific needs and aspirations. This exclusion perpetuates policy environments that fail to address the unique challenges facing young agripreneurs.

3. Pathways and Effective Actions for Youth Inclusion in Agrifood System Transformation to Achieve Kampala Targets

Young people make up a significant portion of the African population. According to projections by the United Nations, Africa's population is expected to double by 2050, reaching approximately 2.5 billion individuals, as shown in Figure 1 (UN DESA 2019).

Figure 1. Population growth in Africa



Source: Adapted from UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 2019.

Demonstrating ambition and proposing actions to engage youth and vulnerable groups in transforming Africa's agrifood systems is a vital step toward inclusive, sustainable, and resilient economic and social development. However, even more critical is the effective implementation of these ambitions and actions through innovative initiatives. To help countries learn from successful initiatives, this section draws on lessons learned from case studies from four African nations — Ghana, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe — in the Malabo Montpellier Panel's *Youth Ahead* report, which explores how government initiatives can play a pivotal role in creating a supportive and enabling environment for youth engagement and empowerment within Africa's agrifood systems. These countries provide tangible examples of how targeted policy interventions and strategic investments can unlock the potential of young people, positioning them as drivers of innovation, productivity, and transformation in the sector.

➤ Strengthen Inclusive Financial Access for Youth in Agrifood Systems

To unlock the economic potential of youth in agriculture, African governments should establish or expand inclusive financial institutions and instruments that offer tailored products to these often-excluded groups. When paired with entrepreneurship support, such access enables sustainable agribusiness development and greater resilience. Examples of successful models include:

- **Zimbabwe's EmpowerBank:** A youth-focused microfinance institution offering accessible financial products to support youth-led agribusinesses. EmpowerBank is a government-owned institution that differs from commercial banks by targeting youth through specially designed products. These include microloans with little to no collateral requirements and business training tailored to address the specific challenges faced by young clients (YETT 2018). The bank offers loans ranging from US\$100 to US\$ 5,000. Interest rates are set at 10 percent per month for short-term loans and 8.5 percent per month for other loan types. As of January 2022, EmpowerBank had disbursed loans to over 3,000 beneficiaries and provided financial literacy training to 65,000 young people through its programs (Malabo Montpellier Panel 2024).
- **Zambia's Youth Development Fund and Uganda's Youth Livelihood Program:** Both provide grants or low-interest loans, enabling young people to start and grow agricultural enterprises. The Youth Development Fund aims to promote youth participation in economic development by supporting income-generating projects, youth-owned businesses, and rural development initiatives. It offers business services and loans to young entrepreneurs across sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, health, education, and tourism. In 2014, around 1,300 young people received financial support through the fund. The Youth Livelihood Program (YLP) in Uganda empowers young people by boosting self-employment and income through three components: livelihood support, skills development, and institutional support. With a five-year budget of US\$ 100 million, it funds youth-led projects, mainly in the agrifood sector, across all 112 districts. A key pillar of YLP is leveraging private resources to ease pressure on public funds by using revolving funds for youth groups, enabling broader access to financing and promoting long-term sustainability. Challenges such as poor loan repayment and local-level corruption have been addressed in the subsequent phase, which ran until 2024, through improved repayment systems and stricter accountability measures. By mid-2024, approximately 264,000 youth benefited from more than 23,000 projects, with more than 1.3 million indirect jobs created (Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development 2024; Uganda, Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development 2019, 2025; Makumbi 2018).

These initiatives show that inclusive financial access is a proven enabler of rural entrepreneurship, food system resilience, and poverty reduction. Governments across Africa are encouraged to adopt or adapt these models to ensure that youth have the capital they need to meaningfully participate in and benefit from agrifood value chains.

➤ **Develop and Scale Initiatives to Reduce Youth Unemployment**

To address persistently high youth unemployment and fulfill the CAADP objectives of inclusive agricultural transformation, African governments should adopt integrated strategies that create sustainable employment opportunities for young people within agrifood systems. Practical models from Uganda and Ghana demonstrate how national frameworks and institutions can be structured to stimulate job creation, enhance productivity, and build human capital across the agrifood value chain.

- **Uganda's National Strategy for Youth Employment in Agriculture (NSYEA)** provides a strong example of a comprehensive, sector-specific approach. NSYEA economically empowers youth by facilitating their engagement in agriculture through targeted support across production, processing, distribution, and retail. The strategy focuses on job creation while simultaneously promoting agricultural modernization—resulting in higher productivity, reduced postharvest losses, and increased value addition. The strategy implementation follows five themes: (i) Ensuring an enabling environment for youth employment in agriculture, (ii) Supporting youth-oriented agricultural extension, (iii) Improving youth education and learning, (iv) Supporting youth entrepreneurship, and (v) Adaptation to

and mitigation of agribusiness risk and uncertainties (Malabo Montpellier Panel 2024). This model shows how investing in youth employment in agriculture contributes to both economic growth and food system resilience. Many new government programs are aligned with NSYEA.

- **Ghana's National Youth Employment Agency (YEA)**, established by the government to enhance young people's participation in agrifood systems, demonstrates how coordinated public-sector efforts can tackle youth unemployment. YEA offers internships and job placement services, connecting youth to employment opportunities in sectors such as agribusiness, ICT, and technical trades, and providing skills training. In 2018, the President of Ghana announced that over 100,000 young people were engaged in the various modules run by YEA. The agency is publicly funded through national taxes and levies, underscoring the importance of sustained government commitment to youth employment (Malabo Montpellier Panel 2024).

Drawing on these successful models, other African countries are encouraged to develop dedicated national youth employment strategies that target agrifood systems and align with broader CAADP objectives; Invest in vocational training and agribusiness education to equip youth with market-relevant skills across the value chain; Facilitate internships and on-the-job training to support the transition from education to employment and Mobilize public funding and private sector partnerships to scale youth employment programs and enhance sustainability.

➤ **Expand and Strengthen Youth Skills Development for Agrifood Systems**

African countries need to expand and strengthen youth-focused skills development explicitly tailored to the needs of agrifood systems. With youth unemployment remaining a major challenge across the continent, investing in technical and vocational education and training (TVET)—aligned with the agrifood value chain—offers a strategic pathway to unlock the economic potential of Africa's growing youth population.

Evidence from the Malabo Montpellier Panel (2024) highlights that a multi-dimensional approach combining targeted skills development with access to finance, innovation, and mentorship can empower youth not only to secure decent employment but also to launch and grow agribusiness ventures. For instance:

- **Zambia's Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises Development** supports youth in agrifood through training, financial access, mentorship, and market linkages. Key interventions include business incubation, the promotion of innovative technologies, and policy advocacy in favor of youth-led enterprises. The ministry also strengthens value chains and encourages entrepreneurship through skills building and access to local and international markets. These efforts boost job creation, food security, and economic diversification in Zambia.
- **Uganda and Zimbabwe have established innovation hubs** that provide hands-on training in modern farm management, agro-processing, digital agribusiness tools, and entrepreneurship. These hubs help youth shift from job seekers to job creators by providing startup support and facilitating market access. In Uganda, NARO established a youth incubation hub at Mukono ZARDI to transform youth ideas into marketable products, leading to the creation of processing industries that utilise crops such as groundnuts, avocado seeds, cassava, and sweet potatoes. In Zimbabwe, the government, through the TVET Policy, established innovation hubs at higher education institutions to enhance technical skills, support research-driven solutions, and help students develop and incubate entrepreneurial ventures.

To replicate and scale such successes, other African countries are encouraged to adopt an integrated model that aligns with their National Agricultural Investment Plans (NAIPs) under CAADP. This includes establishing youth-led agribusiness hubs, fostering public-private partnerships, and embedding skills development within broader rural development and food systems strategies. By doing so, governments can create enabling environments that enhance youth engagement in agriculture, drive innovation, and contribute to CAADP's overarching goals of inclusive, resilient, and sustainable agricultural transformation.

➤ **Establish Innovative Funding Mechanisms for Skills Training**

African governments are also encouraged to establish **sustainable, innovative financing mechanisms** to support skills development tailored to agrifood systems.

- **Zambia offers an effective model—the Skills Development Levy**, established under the **Skills Development Levy Act of 2016**, which mandates a 0.5 percent levy on gross employee emoluments. Collected by the Zambia Revenue Authority, these funds are directed toward building and equipping training institutions, supporting pre-employment and employer-based training, and offering vocational training for the informal sector and SMEs—sectors where youth and women are often most active. Between 2017 and 2019, over ZMW 180 million (US\$ 7.8 million) was released to the Skill Development Fund from the proceeds of the Skill Development Levy (Zambia, Ministry of Higher Education 2020). The funds are used to cover costs related to infrastructure and equipment for TEVET institutions, pre-employment training, employer-based training, and informal sector and small- and medium-sized enterprise training (UNESCO 2022).

Other African countries are encouraged to adopt similar levies or alternative domestic resource mobilization strategies to fund technical and vocational education programs that meet the demands of modern agrifood value chains. This approach not only ensures consistent funding but also promotes public-private cooperation in workforce development. Institutionalizing such funding mechanisms will help build a skilled labor force equipped to drive agrifood systems transformation, support entrepreneurship, and reduce youth unemployment—key priorities under CAADP.

➤ **Advance Youth Inclusion in Agrifood Policy to Drive Systemic Change**

In alignment with CAADP's core objectives of inclusive agricultural transformation, African countries are strongly encouraged to promote the meaningful participation of youth in the formulation and implementation of agrifood policies. Youth face systemic challenges—including limited access to land, capital, decision-making spaces, and misalignment between skills training and labor-market demands—that undermine their full participation in agrifood systems. Addressing these challenges requires inclusive, participatory policy frameworks that elevate them as key stakeholders rather than merely beneficiaries. To address these challenges, governments should actively integrate youth into agricultural policy processes. This includes establishing structured mechanisms for participation and ensuring that national strategies reflect their unique priorities and capacities. Several countries offer strong examples.

- In Ghana, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, the implementation of National Youth Policies has fostered youth involvement in productive sectors, including agriculture, education, and entrepreneurship. These policies have created pathways for young people to gain skills, access employment opportunities, and engage in decision-making processes—helping transform them from job seekers into job creators and agrifood system leaders. When youth contribute directly to policy formulation, the outcomes are more responsive and effective in supporting their roles as agrifood entrepreneurs, leaders, and system innovators.

By institutionalizing youth inclusion in agrifood governance—through national investment plans, advisory councils, and inclusive policy frameworks—African governments can fulfill CAADP’s commitments to equity, resilience, and inclusive growth. Such efforts are critical for building a future-oriented food system that is not only productive and sustainable, but also just and representative of all stakeholders.

Therefore, to ensure the meaningful inclusion of young people in Africa’s agrifood system transformation, governments should integrate their participation into CAADP-aligned NAIPs. This involves embedding youth-specific priorities and interventions within agricultural policy frameworks and investment strategies. Establishing youth advisory panels within agricultural ministries and CAADP implementation structures will further institutionalize their involvement, ensuring that their voices are heard in decision-making processes. Finally, governments are encouraged to track and report on youth engagement through the CAADP Biennial Review mechanisms, using clear indicators to monitor progress and accountability in achieving inclusive agricultural development.

4. Conclusions

To support the achievement of continental goals related to food systems transformation and intra-African trade, it is essential to place strong emphasis on unlocking and expanding income-generating opportunities for youth, particularly in post-production activities. This is especially important for high-value food products that not only drive economic gains but also significantly improve nutrition outcomes. In this context, greater investments should be directed toward supporting young people in designing, developing, and deploying technologies that enhance both the quantity and quality of food produced and distributed. Equally important is the expansion of training programs and facilities that enable youth to acquire strategic, in-demand skills. These skills are critical for fostering innovation capacity across the agrifood value chains, ultimately contributing to sustainable and inclusive economic development across the continent.

The findings from the Malabo Montpellier Panel’s *Youth Ahead* report underscore the importance of a comprehensive Action Agenda for governments and stakeholders to maximize youth contributions to agrifood systems. This agenda includes the following key elements: (1) Diversify education and training programs for youth entrepreneurship, (2) Design and implement dedicated processes to include youth in policy- and decision-making, (3) Address trade barriers coupled with technology infrastructure for jobs.

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ABOUT AKADEMIYA2063

AKADEMIYA2063 is a pan-African non-profit research organization with headquarters in Kigali, Rwanda, and a regional office in Dakar, Senegal.

Inspired by the ambitions of Agenda 2063 and grounded in the recognition of the central importance of strong knowledge and evidence systems, the vision of AKADEMIYA2063 is an Africa with the expertise we need for the Africa we want. This expertise must be responsive to the continent's needs for data and analysis to ensure high-quality policy design and execution. Inclusive, evidence-informed policymaking is key to meeting the continent's development aspirations, creating wealth, and changing livelihoods for the better.

AKADEMIYA2063's overall mission is to create, across Africa and led from its headquarters in Rwanda, state-of-the-art technical capacities to support the efforts by the Member States of the African Union to achieve the key goals of the African Union's Agenda 2063 of transforming national economies to boost growth and prosperity.

Following from its vision and mission, the main goal of AKADEMIYA2063 is to help meet Africa's needs at the continental, regional and national levels in terms of data, analytics, and mutual learning for the effective implementation of Agenda 2063 and the realization of its outcomes by a critical mass of countries. AKADEMIYA2063 strives to meet its goals through programs organized under five strategic areas—policy intelligence, knowledge systems, data intelligence and governance—as well as partnerships and communication and outreach activities. For more information, visit www.akademiya2063.org.



Building Resilient and Sustainable Agrifood Systems in Africa



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