

FOOD AND YOUTH

What I have learned from young people
and their desire to fix the food systems they live in

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Martin J. Forman Memorial Lecture

Thank you for the warm welcome. I am delighted to join you today for this discussion on food systems and youth.

My favourite part of being Executive Director of UNICEF is the opportunity to meet with and hear from children and young people around the world. Over the last four years, I have had the privilege to speak with children and young people, including those living in fragile and humanitarian settings, to hear first-hand about their aspirations for the future.

They have also expressed their concerns about the state of the world we all share and the significant challenges before us – like climate change, conflict, poverty and barriers to education and employment.

Today I will share some reflections with you about what children and young people are saying about food ... about what and how they eat ... the environments

they live in ... and the challenges they face in getting the nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets they want and deserve.

I will also talk about how children and young people are responding to these challenges – and their ideas for transforming our food systems to make the right to food and nutrition a reality for all.

Lastly, I will share what it means to put children at the centre of food systems transformation – today and in the lead up to 2030.

So, what ARE children and young people saying about their food?

This past September, the UN convened a Food Systems Summit. In the two years leading up to the Summit, UNICEF staff across the world and our colleagues at Western Sydney University met with more than 1,500 children and adolescents in 25 countries.

In the context of these Food Systems Dialogues with Children and Adolescents we also facilitated a poll with over 20,000 adolescents and young people.

We wanted to listen to children's life experiences with the food they eat, the food systems they live in, and how they feel those systems could change for the better.

What did we hear?

Children and adolescents tell us that eating together with friends and family provides moments of joy and connection. They see their food as a reflection of their identity and culture – and as a symbol of community and shared humanity.

Children also know that nutritious food provides vital fuel for their growth, development and learning. They tell us that healthy food is important for their physical and mental health, their success at school and their futures.

But they see a disconnect between what they want to eat and what they do eat.

Children and adolescents understand the links between food production and availability in their homes and communities. Through these dialogues, we saw that children and young people have a strong understanding of where and how raw produce is grown, processed, packaged, and transported to different places within their food environments.

They understand that the poor availability, accessibility and affordability of nutritious foods is linked to many factors – like limited stock in markets, long distances from farming areas and problems with food distribution.

They talk about poor infrastructure and road systems, hefty transport costs and how these problems prevent food from reaching their communities – or cause it to spoil before arriving to them.

Children describe how their ability to eat well is constrained by the poor availability and affordability of nutritious and safe foods. And they have sophisticated understanding of what poor food affordability means for their families.

Children explain that when nutritious foods are too costly, they often turn to processed foods. They know that these foods are unhealthy because they are rich in salt, sugar, and fat. Yet such foods are often cheaper and widely available.

Children and young people know that these foods are heavily marketed to them and their families through television, billboards and social media.

Children across the globe are also keenly aware of climate change. They see first-hand the harm it is causing to the food systems around them. In our dialogues, many cited global warming, environmental damage and CO2 pollution as key concerns. They identified how climate change and global warming are causing droughts and how droughts are impacting the growth of food.

They know that unsustainable food production is having a major impact on environmental degradation. The use of pesticides was mentioned often. And they are concerned about how the transportation of food via boats, ships, trains, and planes – especially over large distances – is contributing to air and water pollution.

Children notice how the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened some of these challenges – especially with millions more families struggling to make ends meet.

Children also shared with us the mental health challenges linked to unhealthy food environments – such as body image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and the stigma of living with obesity.

They understand how society unfairly blames people for being overweight – while at the same time creating unhealthy food environments that make it difficult to

maintain a healthy weight. And they notice how advertisers and marketers push unattainable standards of beauty at the same time as children's food environments are flooded with promotions for unhealthy foods and beverages.

Now, I want to share with you **how children and adolescents want to transform their local and global food systems.**

While children are concerned about their broken food systems – they are clear about their expectations and asks.

They want governments and policymakers to be more accountable for creating and fostering food systems that protect children's right to nutrition, making nutritious, safe affordable and sustainable diets a reality for children everywhere.

They believe that governments should build the capacities of communities and support food producers to produce nutritious foods.

For children – rebuilding food systems must start with the most vulnerable children, families and communities. They want special considerations for children, families and groups that experience the most insecurity and marginalization.

During our dialogues, children made five key recommendations on what needs to be done to fix food systems and protect the planet:

First, invest – children and young people want their governments to use targeted investment to improve access to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable foods for everyone – especially for the most marginalized children, families and communities.

Second, regulate – children and young people have had enough of misleading marketing and health and nutrition claims on processed foods. They want their governments to adopt and enforce laws and policies that protect them, their families and communities from harmful food marketing practices, chemicals and preservatives and environmental destruction.

Third, reduce – children and young people are deeply concerned about our planet. They want governments, private sector, civil society and their peers to take seriously the harmful impact of current food systems on the environment – and prioritize sustainability, reduce overuse and curb environmentally destructive practices.

Fourth, educate – children and young people are calling for better education about food, nutrition, climate change, environmental protection, recycling and food systems. They want us to raise awareness about food poverty and nutrition inequalities, the benefits of nutritious foods, and sustainable food practices.

Lastly, engage – children and young people want opportunities to share their views and participate in developing solutions. They want us to support them to take action in their local communities and beyond.

This last point on engagement is key because only through engagement can we put children at the center of food systems transformation. Children and young people should be empowered as change agents, fully capable of identifying and contributing to solutions.

We asked children and young people how best we can engage them in contributing to food systems transformation ... to ensure their insights and perspectives are heard, acknowledged and actioned. This is what they said ...

Where possible, children and young people want to engage through social media, including through spaces on platforms dedicated for children's voices.

They want us to help establish and fund child-led bodies, such as student councils and youth parliaments.

They want mechanisms to ensure their direct contribution to governments' and parliaments' deliberations and decision-making. And they are calling for their governments and institutions to have dedicated staff assigned to listen to children and young people. They are also asking government leaders and policymakers to come to them in schools and other settings.

Children and young people want to participate in workshops, open fora, panels, drawing competitions, and other venues that capture their needs, rights, ideas and aspirations.

The infrastructure we create to support these recommendations is critical.

Children need platforms, spaces and channels to express their views. They also need opportunities for direct contact with the people who can make their ideas a reality – those in power – whether through child-led bodies, participation in parliament or open fora.

Many of us here represent organizations and agencies dedicated to nutrition – we too must promote meaningful participation by placing children and young people at the heart of policy formulation, and programme design, implementation and monitoring.

The participation of children and youth in the UN Food Systems Summit last September has showcased the challenges – and most importantly, the rewards – of engaging children, adolescents and young people as creators, partners and collaborators: a vital force for food systems transformation. We must continue these efforts.

As we work to support the outcomes of the Food Systems Summit and the commitments of the Nutrition for Growth Summit, we must hold tight to our pledge to bring children’s voices to the forefront of the decision-making process.

At the same time, we need partnership and leadership from the private sector. The private sector is uniquely placed to develop innovative solutions to strengthen food systems ... to help build a world where nutritious and safe foods are available and affordable for every child — no matter who they are or where they live.

Today, broken food systems are undermining children's right to nutrition and a viable planet. And fixing them – particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – may prove to be the greatest challenge of this generation.

As we move forward, UNICEF we will pay particular attention to four critical action areas where food systems must deliver for children; these are:

Improving children's foods through actions in public policy, guidelines and standards, and food supply chains – including fortified foods, food supplements and therapeutic foods.

Improving children's food environments where children live, learn, and meet through actions in public sector policies and programmes and in private sector practices and products.

Improving children's food practices through policies, strategies and programmes that promote positive individual behaviors, caregiver practices and social norms.

Improving children's participation in food systems transformation – by fostering opportunities for children from all walks of life to raise their voices, engage with decision-makers and hold them accountable.

It is time to work with children and young people to transform the way the world produces, consumes and thinks about food. Our children's nutrition and well-being – and the future of our planet – are at stake. There is no time to waste.

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Youth Speech (Pauline Mapfumo)

As a young person, if I am asked how many times, I eat a full healthy meal in a day; once a day would be the most accurate answer and this probably true is for the majority of the young people/youth worldwide. Challenges faced by young people in accessing healthy diets are becoming more apparent. This was more pronounced during the lockdowns.

In my personal experience, key challenges I, my family and my peers face to have a nutritious and safe diet can be broadly summarised into five main issues such as; knowledge, affordability, accessibility, availability and preference.

Most young people don't know what is healthy and how to make a healthy plate and, in most cases, they cannot afford the healthy food, or they have to go through a lot to access it. This is true for even those young people that may have adequate nutrition knowledge. Take me for example, I am a nutritionist by profession and yet, I still struggle to eat healthy because the unaffordable costs of the healthy foods. With food decisions by young people being driven by factors such as preference, nutrition knowledge and cost, more could be done to educate young people on better nutrition choices. Nutrition education, especially the chapters we are taught during school years does not really build our capacities to eat healthily, distinguishing between

false information and facts. We are not given the tools to understand which foods are not healthy.

The billboards and advertisements that surround us popularise and glamourize consumption of over-processed and unhealthy foods and drinks. In addition, there are these celebrities and icons endorsing certain foods, especially ultra-processed foods and beverages. This unregulated marketing of unhealthy foods often makes young people perceive unhealthy food as cool thus shaping their preferences. Given how preferences, and I mean both taste and visual preferences, play a large role in the decision making of young people, this kind of environment only adds to the creation of bad eating habits amongst the adolescents and youths.

Everyone talks about the demographic dividend that a young population yields, how they contribute to a nation's growth. But, for all this to happen, the society and nations at large need generations with healthy bodies and nourished minds. And for this to happen, we need food system that respond to the needs of people, young people, that ensure that we have access to nutritious and safe food which is affordable and promotes planetary health.

As a young nutrition advocate who is passionate about improving the nutrition, health and wellness of my fellow young peers, I speak for all young people when I

say we want change that can help better our failing food system. This can be done through:

- Innovations along the food value chain to provide safe, affordable and diverse foods. To elaborate, the food basket should be broadened instead of using the same methods and focusing on the already existing notion that there is but one way to produce healthy foods. Use of a multisectoral approach is necessary in the creation of foods that cater to the diverse needs and preferences of the various cultures and groups in our population.
- The use of science as a central point of innovation; assisting in technologies to have healthy food closer to home, making it locally available so that food does not add to the carbon footprint by travelling long distances. Make healthy foods, tastier and visually, options which can be preferred by young people. Young people should be at the forefront of such innovations as well.
- Provision of nutrition education to all sectors, especially in schools to allow children to learn as they grow about the benefits of good nutrition
- Programming that helps improve school food environments and gives youth a voice to advocate for safer healthier food environments.
- Supporting innovative solutions by young people, for example the YOLO4Health digital app which educates young people on nutrition; that my friends and I created during a nutrition hackathon commissioned by UNICEF.

- Policies on marketing of foods to children and food legislative actions that other countries have taken like improving front of the pack labelling.

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Youth Speech - Victor Mugo

“Mending the crack in our sky”

Good Morning, Good Afternoon to all of you. It is indeed a great pleasure to be here, and a dream come true to be speaking to all of you.

First, I would wish to begin by stating how refreshing it is for young person's such as Pauline and me to get the opportunity to speak in such a global event. I just want to appreciate IFPRI & UNICEF for being so purposeful in prioritizing children's and youth voices and meaningful youth engagement. Indeed, it is time to see young people as equal partners and co-creators of solutions especially on matters that involve them. On behalf of all youth, I just want to register our appreciation and sincerely thank you.

I believe that one of the fundamental things that bring us here today is the recognition that our food systems are failing. Our food systems are failing for our health, are failing for our environment, are failing for our livelihoods, and are failing for our children and youth. As it is bold to say this, from my experience and that of other young people, let me evidence this is what I call the great disconnect.

First, I believe that there is a great disconnect between children and youth and our food systems. From our end, we became so clear about this when the Climate Smart

Agriculture Youth Network undertook a behavioral study to understand youth's perceptions of agriculture and food systems at primary school, a secondary school, and a university. We asked them to paint the first thing that comes to mind once the word agriculture is mentioned. After we collated the paintings and drawings, we were astounded by what we could deduce from the drawings. They drew

- A very old man showing that agriculture is not for the young and women although play a big role is not visualized as the face of agriculture
- The old man was holding a garden hoe, showing little space for innovation, mechanization and digitalization in agriculture
- The old man was standing next to a grass-thatched hut which in the Africa setting is a symbol of poverty.
- And standing under the scorching sun showing that agriculture is difficult is menial and backbreaking.

When we asked them to paint or draw, what first comes to mind when food is mentioned, all the drew was what we consider unhealthy food.

From this, I believe that the first step to transforming our food systems should be to change the narrative about agriculture and help children and youth appreciate their food, the process of growing food, the people who grow the food, and the need to consume healthy food.

2. There is also a great disconnect between agriculture and the environment, our food systems, and nature. For me in East Africa, climate change is not something that I hear on the radio, see on TV or read on the papers, it is something we experience every day. At the moment, East Africa and Madagascar are facing a climate-induced drought leaving millions vulnerable. Our neighbours on the south experience tropical cyclones, devastating floods, and we still haven't fully recovered from the locust crisis. We know at the time of crisis, it is children, youth, and women who are disproportionately affected and are most vulnerable. So, in improving children's food environments and in a bid to nourish the world, climate change should be a top priority.

3. And lastly, the greatest disconnect that youth see is the disconnect between our food systems and nutrition. In the process of the UN FSS, as the co-chair of the youth liaisons group, we collated views from over 100,000 youth and while other priorities were changing, their top priority was that everyone everywhere should have access to a healthy and affordable diet. So, we need not only feed the world, but we also need to nourish the world. We need to not only achieve zero hunger; we also need to fight hidden hunger.

And as the youth, we are not spectators in our failing food systems. Through our program on Nutri-schools, we plant and avail bean varieties that are high in iron and zinc to schools so that adolescent girls need not face iron deficiency that causes

anaemia. Food is medicine, food is critical for education and children can't focus in schools if they are hungry. We already know how school feeding can be a crucial way to enabling vulnerable populations to achieve proper nutrition. By pairing this with nutrition education & working with parents to grow and consume these beans, we can take accelerated steps of progress in fighting micronutrient deficiencies. With such gains, that is why we cannot continue to pay lip service to the agriculture and food sector and its connection with nutrition.

And with these great disconnects, how can we bridge these gaps? I take inspiration from Martin J. Forman's work in which he called for

1. Urgency – the issues that we have discussed here including malnutrition and climate change are an emergency. We are not on track to solve them and so they should be treated with a heightened sense of emergency.
2. Scale – I am of the opinion that we have too many pilots. What we continue to do is to create islands of brilliance while what we need is a sea of action. We need to take to scale proven and evidence-based initiatives that work to reduce the triple burden of malnutrition in the globe.
3. Partnerships – if there is anything that we have learned from the UNFSS process is that no one alone can solve the complex issues in nutrition. We need each other and I dare say, we need the youth too!

I am encouraged by the African proverb that says that ‘when a village comes together, they can even mend a crack in the sky.

There is a crack in our sky and the global village should not rest until we can everyone, everywhere van have access to a healthy, nutritious, sufficient, and affordable diet.

Thank you.