

Book Review

Beyond the Exodus

A Critical Review of "The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems"

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Introduction

This review examines the book *The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems* published by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2025). The book shifts the common narrative that portrays youth as leaving agriculture toward a more nuanced perspective that highlights young people who actively participate in agrifood systems but face structural constraints. Rather than attributing declining youth engagement to lack of interest, the book emphasizes systemic barriers such as limited land access, financial constraints, labor market conditions, and institutional policies. This framing situates youth not as a problem but as strategic actors in sustainable agrifood transformation.

The book cover reinforces this central message. It features a young farmer in Egypt holding tomatoes under the phrase "Youth Move Food Forward." This visual representation symbolically positions youth as drivers of food system sustainability and innovation. By foregrounding youth agency, the cover complements the book's argument that young people are essential contributors to resilient and inclusive agrifood systems rather than passive observers or reluctant participants (FAO, 2025).

Within the broader context of sustainable development, the book adopts an empirical and narrative-based approach drawing on experiences of 378 young farmers across Canada, China, India, and Indonesia. This approach highlights how structural factors—including technological change, climate variability, and market transformation—shape youth participation in agriculture. The discussion is particularly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), as youth involvement in small-

ARTICLE INFO

Received: August 13, 2025

Received in revised form:

December 16, 2025

Accepted: April 30, 2026

doi: [10.46456/jisdep.v7i1.938](https://doi.org/10.46456/jisdep.v7i1.938)



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THE JOURNAL OF INDONESIA SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Published by Centre for Planners' Development, Education, and Training (Pusbindiklatren), Ministry of National Development Planning/National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas), Republic of Indonesia

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Supported by Indonesian Development Planners Association (PPPI)

Please cite this article in APA Style as:

Ariyanto. (2026). Beyond the Exodus A Critical Review of "The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems". *The Journal of Indonesia Sustainable Development Planning*, Vol 7(1), 209-214.

<https://doi.org/10.46456/jisdep.v7i1.938>

scale family farming is linked to food security and sustainable production. The report also underscores that approximately 1.3 billion young people globally face diverse livelihood challenges, with many experiencing food insecurity, further strengthening the urgency of youth-inclusive agrifood policies (FAO, 2025).

The relevance of this book extends to Indonesia, where agrifood systems are undergoing rapid transformation. Structural shifts in consumption patterns, urbanization, and diversification of agricultural markets create both opportunities and constraints for rural youth. While public discourse often frames youth either as reluctant farmers or as technology-driven entrepreneurs, the book provides a more balanced interpretation by emphasizing structural determinants shaping youth engagement. In this regard, the book offers useful insights for aligning agrifood transformation with inclusive and sustainable development strategies.

This review is written for academic purposes within the field of sustainable development planning. All quotations from *The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems* are used selectively and briefly to support critical interpretation. The cited materials are summarized and discussed to provide analytical insight rather than to reproduce substantial portions of the original text. This ensures compliance with academic fair-use principles and maintains respect for the intellectual property of the original publication.

Indonesia Context and Structural Constraints

The book is particularly relevant for examining Indonesia's rapidly transforming agrifood system. The report emphasizes that youth engagement is shaped by broader structural changes in food systems rather than by individual preferences alone. As noted in the FAO report, youth participation in agrifood systems must be understood within the context of ongoing demographic, economic, and dietary transformations. This perspective resonates with Indonesia's structural transformation, in which urbanization and dietary diversification are reshaping labor demand in agriculture. Reardon, Stringer, Timmer, Minot, & Daryanto (2015) highlight that Indonesia is experiencing shifts from staple-based diets toward fruits, vegetables, and animal products, creating both opportunities and uncertainties for young workers. Therefore, youth engagement emerges as part of systemic economic change rather than purely individual motivation.

The report also challenges simplified narratives about youth disengagement by showing that young people remain involved in agrifood systems but operate under significant structural constraints. Rather than reflecting a lack of interest, limited participation is shaped by restricted land access, inadequate capital, and weak institutional support. This argument contrasts with Indonesian public discourse, where youth are often portrayed either as reluctant agricultural workers or as innovative entrepreneurs. As shown by Toumbourou et al. (2023), such representations obscure deeper structural barriers, including high land prices, land fragmentation due to inheritance division, and patriarchal customary laws that limit young women's access to productive assets. Capital constraints are reinforced by financial exclusion, as youth are 33% more likely to lack a bank account than adults, while extension services frequently overlook them because programs prioritize senior household heads. By shifting attention to systemic barriers, the report calls for "Include More" and "Invest More" reforms.

Furthermore, the report stresses that enabling youth participation requires coordinated policy support across institutions (FAO, 2025). This emphasis is particularly relevant for Indonesia, where agrifood transformation is uneven and access to resources remains unequal. Strengthening institutional coordination becomes essential to ensure that youth can benefit from structural changes in the agrifood sector.

Youth involvement is influenced by changes in food demand and job markets. Reardon, Stringer, Timmer, Minot, & Daryanto (2015) notes that in Indonesia, more varied diets and urban growth are changing job options in food systems. This change moves job opportunities for young people from farming to other areas like processing, transport, and marketing. These areas are growing as food systems become more industrial. To help young people join these new job areas, policies should use their strong internet use—81% of young people use the internet compared to 68% of adults. This can help them access new farming technologies, online markets, and market information. Also, investments are needed in modern infrastructure, skills training that matches local markets, and special land and credit programs for young

people. This will help make food systems good and stable career options, even with economic and climate challenges.

Public discourse further influences how youth participation is understood in agriculture. [Toumbourou et al. \(2023\)](#) show that youth are often framed either as disengaged from farming or as entrepreneurial innovators. Such narratives risk oversimplifying structural barriers, making it important to design inclusive governance mechanisms that address unequal access to resources. The narrative of “disengagement” is reflected in global data showing a decline in youth participation in agrifood systems from 54% in 2005 to 44% today. On the other hand, the image of youth as “entrepreneurial innovators” is supported by the fact that young people are far more digitally connected than adults, with 81% of youth using the internet, enabling them to access precision agriculture technologies and e-commerce.

The Narrative of Opportunity vs. The Reality of Structural Barriers

Understanding the challenges and opportunities facing youth in food systems is crucial for designing inclusive and sustainable development pathways. The Food and Agriculture Organization emphasizes that transforming food systems to actively engage young people is not merely beneficial but essential for resilience and long-term sustainability. Such transformation can create employment, foster innovation, and strengthen local food networks. However, global policy frameworks often prioritize scalable, politically acceptable, and technocratic solutions, which may overlook structural inequalities. As argued by [Glover & Sumberg \(2020\)](#), generational power imbalances limit youth agency, particularly due to restricted access to land and productive assets. Consequently, youth inclusion must go beyond symbolic participation. It requires redistributing power, reforming tenure systems, and expanding decision-making roles. For young people, gaining access is an active negotiation process, navigating entrenched social hierarchies and resource control dominated by older generations.

The FAO report is positive about economic growth. It says that in lower-middle-income countries, jobs in agrifood systems are increasing. Modernization is seen as a key factor in creating these jobs. While this is mostly true, it might not match real-life experiences. In Indonesia, for example, [Toumbourou et al. \(2023\)](#) note that the focus is on encouraging young people to think like entrepreneurs. This idea is part of a larger trend that blames individuals for big problems. It shifts the blame for issues like unfair market power, insecure land ownership, and poor market rules onto young people. It turns their struggles into a chance to be resilient entrepreneurs. For many, these “opportunities” do not lead to adulthood but to a long period of waiting, where becoming financially independent is hard.

The FAO report stresses the need to involve young people in changing food systems. However, it misses some big challenges that researchers like [Glover & Sumberg \(2020\)](#) say are important for young people. These challenges are real. Policies in places like Indonesia keep these barriers in place. So, it's not just about creating opportunities. We need to remove the barriers that stop young people from accessing them. This means focusing on political changes, not just technical solutions.

Pathways to Progress: Technocratic Modernization or Systemic Reform?

The FAO report suggests making policies based on evidence, but what counts as “evidence” is important. In Indonesia, research by [Toumbourou et al. \(2023\)](#) shows that policies are mostly seen as technical and need a lot of money. They aim to attract “millennial farmers” with machines and digital tools. This focus on technology often ignores tough topics like social justice, land reform, and secure land rights. The positive tone of the FAO report might unintentionally support these costly and often unfair policies at the national level. It raises the question of whether an “evidence-based” approach that focuses on measurable actions can really address the deep political and economic problems that stop fair youth involvement.

The report also highlights youth innovation as a driver of agrifood transformation. While recognizing youth potential, [Glover & Sumberg \(2020\)](#) caution against assuming that young people are inherently more innovative. This perspective challenges techno-optimistic narratives and suggests that innovation depends on enabling environments rather than age. The FAO report partially acknowledges this but continues to emphasize youth-led innovation, which may shift attention away from systemic reforms.

This dual role creates a conceptual tension in which [Reardon et al. \(2015\)](#) show that urban youth in Indonesia drive dietary diversification influencing market demand, reinforced by the fact that 54% of youth globally live in urban areas bridging urban demand and rural production. As youth undergo rapid development, they gain autonomy over food choices, making consumption patterns influential in agrifood system transformation through labor linkages, advocacy, and market trends. Their preferences encourage value-chain adjustments toward convenience, safety, and nutrition. This influence is strengthened by digital advantages, where 81% of youth are connected to the internet, enabling them to mobilize consumer power through social media and e-commerce to shape food quality and nutrition standards. However, despite their role as demand drivers, youth face vulnerabilities, with global food insecurity rising from 16.7% to 24.4%, highlighting the need to align consumption aspirations with strengthened capacity as transformation agents.

At the same time, [Glover & Sumberg \(2020\)](#) highlight nutritional vulnerabilities among young populations, reflected in global data showing that youth food insecurity increased from 16.7% in the 2014–2016 period to 24.4% in 2021–2023. These vulnerabilities underscore that youth are not only actors in food production—considering that 44% of employed youth globally are involved in agrifood systems—but also a group facing specific dietary risks during a life stage characterized by rapid physical and cognitive development requiring high energy and nutrient intake. Although young people increasingly exercise autonomy over their food choices, structural constraints such as limited access to affordable nutritious foods and pervasive marketing of ultra-processed products hinder healthy decision-making. Consequently, consumption patterns often show low fruit and vegetable intake and high fast-food consumption, contributing to micronutrient deficiencies. Therefore, youth should be viewed as a dual entity—both producers and consumers—shaping food systems and requiring integrated, youth-centered policy responses.

Conclusions

The book "The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems" argues that young people in agriculture are influenced more by external factors than by their own motivation. These factors include access to land, money, and support from institutions. The report shares stories of young farmers from different places, showing that they are still involved in agriculture despite facing many challenges. It suggests that young people are not uninterested but are working within changing agricultural systems affected by population changes, market trends, and new technology.

The discussion suggests that modernization offers opportunities like digital technologies, diverse value chains, and entrepreneurship. However, there are still challenges such as unequal land access, power differences between generations, and biases in institutions. These challenges can affect how young people turn opportunities into lasting jobs. The book shows that these opportunities and challenges are part of a bigger change where young people's actions and these limitations exist together.

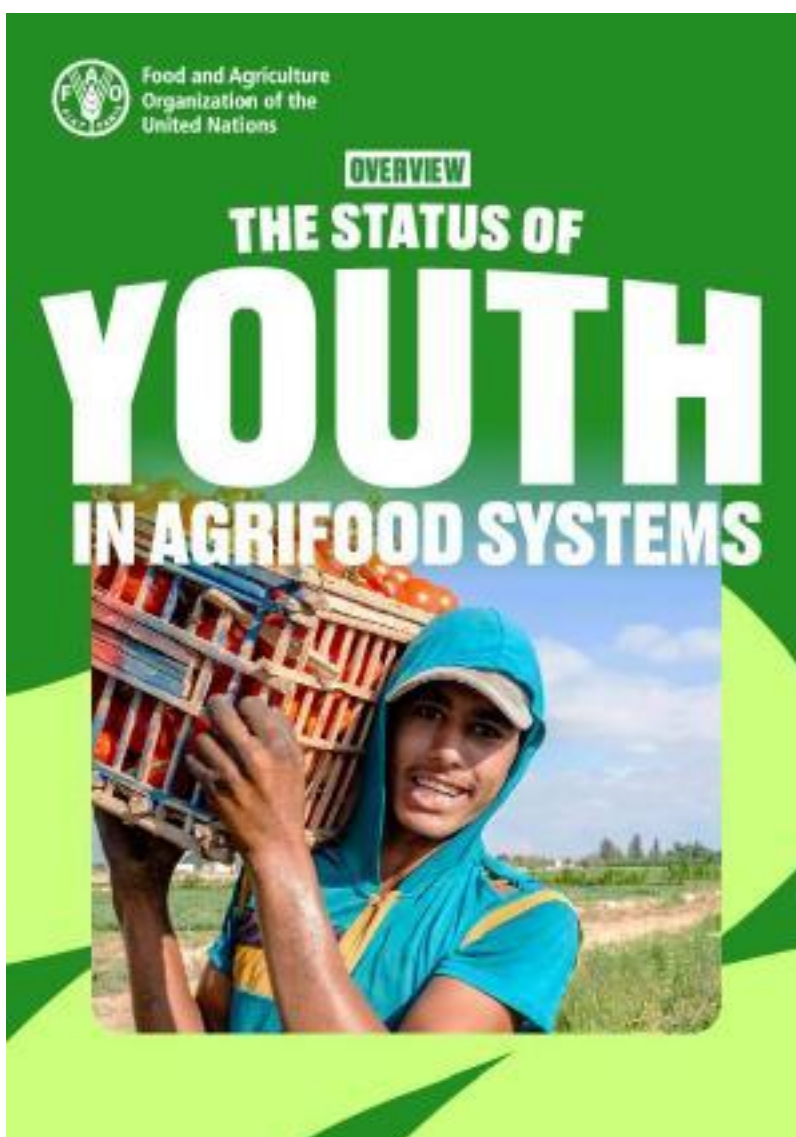
In Indonesia, changes in the food and farming sector offer new chances for young people but also keep some unfairness in sharing resources. Innovation and modernization are important, but there are also issues like small land sizes, lack of money, and poor policy coordination. This means that young people getting involved in food systems need both new technology and good support from institutions to access opportunities.

The book looks at young people as important players in changing food systems worldwide. It also asks how big-picture factors affect the success of modern farming methods. In a larger social and economic view, the report gives ideas that help with talks about fair food development and lasting job options for young people.

Rate the Book

This book is important because it challenges the idea that young people don't care about farming and food systems. It shows that there are real barriers stopping young people from helping with global food systems. The book is rated 4 out of 5 stars and does a great job of collecting and explaining data from around the world. It makes youth involvement in agriculture a key topic in global development talks. Written with the support of the FAO, the book argues that getting young people involved is not just necessary because of their numbers, but also crucial for global food security and achieving Sustainable Development Goals. The book is strong in showing the big challenges like population growth, food insecurity, and the need for good jobs. But it also has weaknesses. It focuses too much on modern solutions and doesn't address the deep political and economic issues that limit young people's power, especially locally. Problems like unfair land ownership, unequal market power, and generational exclusion are not given enough attention. So, while the policy suggestions are helpful, they might not lead to big changes because they don't focus on changing the system. Overall, the book is a good starting point for understanding the role of young people in global food systems, but it also points out areas where more research and policy work is needed to truly help the most disadvantaged young people.

The Cover book



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