



YOUTH DECLARATION

ON COOPERATIVES IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Youth Declaration on Cooperatives in Agrifood Systems

This Declaration is dedicated to the memory of Dalia Abulfotuh, who served as an Economist at the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa. She dedicated her career to transformative youth empowerment. Her commitment and passion for engaging young people in building inclusive and resilient agrifood systems will continue to inspire us.

Youth Declaration on Cooperatives in Agrifood Systems

Acknowledgments

The Youth Declaration on Cooperatives in Agrifood Systems was developed in the context of the renewed Memorandum of Understanding between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA).

The drafting process brought together 32 young cooperators aged 18 to 35, representing 26 countries from all regions of the world.

Participating countries included: Argentina, Armenia, Botswana, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Palestine, South Africa, Sudan, Sweden, Tanzania, The Philippines, Türkiye, Uruguay, and Yemen.

Preamble

We, the youth engaged in cooperatives in agrifood systems, hereby declare our collective position regarding our lived realities and aspirations. This statement is grounded in our firm belief that cooperatives embody a development model rooted in solidarity, participatory democracy, social justice, economic autonomy and the principle of self-help.

Through this declaration, we articulate our shared vision, underscore our meaningful contributions to agrifood systems, and draw attention to the structural barriers that hinder our full and equitable participation. We extend a clear and urgent call to policymakers to engage with us, not merely as a target group or on our behalf, but as active participants and partners in shaping decisions that affect our lives and communities.

We affirm that the inclusion of youth in agricultural cooperatives is not a matter of choice but a strategic imperative for achieving more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable food systems. Through this statement, we reiterate our unwavering commitment to innovation, capacity development, climate action, and the advancement of social justice. We call for our empowerment to assume our rightful role in shaping a fair and secure food future for all.

Challenges faced

- Young people and women face obstacles in accessing land, credit, technology, and infrastructure needed to strengthen their production.
- Youth and women-led cooperatives also face climate shocks, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, yet have limited access to climate finance, carbon markets, and sustainable technologies.
- Many encounter challenges in reaching markets due to high transport costs, reliance on intermediaries, and limited distribution channels.
- Women carry a double burden, balancing productive labor with household and caregiving responsibilities.
- Bureaucratic hurdles remain, with complex cooperative registration procedures and rigid governance structures.
- Youth and women are often perceived as inexperienced or unfit for leadership, reinforcing generational and gender gaps. In addition, their opinions and suggestions are frequently overlooked, especially by managerial levels, creating unhealthy barriers that undermine self-esteem and confidence.
- Youth and women also face cultural differences and generational gaps, with a common viewpoint to youth and women as “inexperienced” or “too young” to start or lead the cooperative.
- Knowledge gaps persist, with limited understanding of the cooperative model, lack of training opportunities, and restricted access to information.
- Agricultural cooperatives are strengthening farmers' capacity for the safe and responsible use of agrochemicals through training, advisory services, shared knowledge, and support systems, particularly in regions with emerging or evolving legal frameworks.
- Traditional knowledge is often overlooked despite its importance for sustainable production.
- Youth-led cooperatives must be enabled to develop blockchain-based traceability systems, AI-powered crop advisory platforms, and digital marketplaces to ensure fair trade, transparency, and sustainability.

Innovations and strategies

- We, the young cooperators, are fostering leadership and representation of youth and women in cooperative governance and political processes, creating spaces for women's integration and mutual support, and re-signifying care work to promote fairness in households and communities.
- We are building digital platforms and agribusiness hubs that connect youth and women to opportunities, while using digitalisation to preserve knowledge, ensure succession, and drive generational renewal in cooperatives.
- Youth cooperatives are building partnerships with NGOs, international organizations, and social movements to co-fund projects, expand opportunities, and strengthen solidarity.
- Young cooperators are opening spaces for dialogue across generations, sectors, and countries, connecting with universities, governments, and enterprises to amplify impact and co-create solutions.
- We are promoting access to land for women and youth through farmer-owner and long-term lease cooperatives, while supporting sustainable and profitable cooperative business models.
- We are transforming collective action from a crisis-response approach into a sustainable culture of cooperation, rooted in advocacy, structured programs, and inclusive decision-making.
- We are introducing cooperative education from primary school onwards, nurturing a new generation that values solidarity and cooperation.
- We are using social media to show that cooperativism is not only a way of producing and working but also a way of living, consuming, and developing as human beings.
- In the Philippines, young people initiated a policy presented to the cooperative governance body to address the lack of youth representation. This led to the creation of youth committees within cooperatives, including a seat on the cooperative's board, thereby guaranteeing a youth voice in cooperative management. In addition, the Philippines already has a "gender and development committee" embedded within the cooperative governance structure.
- Also in the Philippines, challenges include extreme weather conditions and access to resources. Reimagining the future of farming - GPS, drones, farmers can monitor crops and address problems early. Insurance is evolving through technology - face to face inspections, now weather index-based insurance, data from satellites. Young people are tech-savvy and open to innovation. Cooperatives in agrifood systems play a key role in shifting landscape, organising and hosting different events for youth. Last year, the Asian Farming Association event, where young people shared best practices across continents. Together, this is reshaping agriculture in the country, not only for young people, but for women too.

- In Europe, Cogeca – the umbrella organization for agricultural cooperatives – has advanced the Tarragona Manifesto to promote generational renewal in farming. The manifesto highlights the serious imbalance and shortage of young farmers, noting that in Europe only 11% of farmers are under 40 years old and just 3% are young women. To address this, it puts forward proposals to expand digital training opportunities, provide internships and job placements, and ensure greater access for youth to cooperative governance structures.
- In India, cooperative education has been formally introduced in the school curriculum through a dedicated chapter on cooperatives for Class 6 students in NCERT textbooks. Additionally, a Special Module on Cooperation has been designed for secondary-stage students to deepen their understanding of cooperative values, principles, and the role of cooperatives in nation-building. This ensures that students are familiarized with cooperativism from an early age, nurturing a future generation committed to collective development and social solidarity.
- The National Cooperative Policy 2025 is built around six strategic mission pillars, one of which—“Shaping Young Generation for Cooperative Growth”—specifically focuses on inspiring and equipping youth for active participation in the cooperative movement. This pillar outlines strategies to motivate young people, particularly from rural and semi-urban areas, to pursue careers in cooperatives through experiential learning, skilling, and professional education. Complementing this policy thrust, a nationwide campaign has been launched to build a youth-led cooperative movement, using films, digital outreach, public events such as marathons, and the establishment of a National Cooperative Employment Exchange to connect youth talent with opportunities across the cooperative sector.
- A dedicated fund under, the YUVA SAHAKAR Scheme, has been established by NCDC to support youth-led cooperatives with innovative projects, providing concessional loans and promoting inclusive and modern cooperative development.
- Also in India, innovation has proven a powerful driver of youth engagement in cooperatives. For example, the use of nano-fertilizers, liquid fertilizers applied by drones, shows how digitalisation and new technologies can attract young people to the cooperative movement.
- In Jordan, the National Cooperative Strategy (2021–2025) catalysed youth- and women-led cooperatives and informed the new Cooperatives Law No. 13 of 2025. Led by the Jordan Cooperative Corporation, the law reduced registration fees to JOD 45 for youth and women’s co-ops, allocated three seats on the JCC Board to women, and is being followed by by-laws to safeguard children’s rights and ensure decent work in cooperatives. On 23 July 2025, the first youth cooperative under the new law—the Advanced Irrigation Agricultural Cooperative—was officially established.

- In Nepal, the government has introduced a loan scheme that allows youth to use their educational certificates as collateral. This initiative helps young graduates, especially those without land or property, to access credit for starting agri-based cooperatives, enterprises, or start-ups, thus overcoming one of the greatest barriers to financing. It directly supports youth innovation in agriculture and encourages educated young people to remain in the sector.
- In Nigeria, agri-tech youth cooperatives are emerging* where precision agriculture, digital marketing platforms, and farming apps are drawing young people into cooperative structures. For instance, initiatives actively promote AgriTech adoption, digital skills, and cooperative formation to empower youth and women, fostering an equitable, tech-driven agricultural future and enhancing market access for smallholder farmers, including through digital marketplaces.
- In Tanzania, a coffee cooperative union illustrates generational dynamics: while elders are primarily involved in cultivation, young members have taken the lead in processing and value addition, moving beyond raw commodity trading into marketing and higher-value activities. This is supported by national strategies that emphasize improving coffee quality and value addition through the promotion of better processing technologies and the encouragement of youth participation in the coffee sector's transformation.
- In Colombia, the cooperative TransDigitalCoop (made up of students from the Cooperative University of Colombia) aims to generate youth employment and technological solutions to strengthen organizations within the solidarity economy. This cooperative created the VirtualVent web platform, the country's first digital farmers' market, connecting small rural producers with consumers through a collaborative platform that promotes fair trade, food sovereignty, and the responsible use of technology. Six local producers are already participating.
- In Argentina, the La Emancipación cooperative promotes rural rootedness and supports small-scale producers through fair agreements that share both risks and benefits. The cooperative provides inputs and technical assistance, while producers contribute labor and machinery. The model has reclaimed land, created jobs, and strengthened youth participation in local production. It brings together 40 producers who cultivate 600 hectares under a cooperative model that promotes rural rootedness and has led to a 15% increase in local production.

* Sources: Sanusi, M. S., Mayokun, O. M., Sunmonu, M. O., Yerima, S., Mobolaji, D., & Olaoye, J. O. 2025. Transformative trends: commercial platforms revolutionizing rice farming in Nigeria's agricultural value chain. *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735903.2025.2473757>; Top Agric Tech & Agritech Farm Solutions In Nigeria & LA; The AgriTech Revolution: Empowering Smallholder Farmers with Innovation - fundsforNGOs - Grants and Resources for Sustainability

Needs towards decision makers

1. We call upon governments, international organizations, and cooperative leaders to provide enabling policies, supportive legal frameworks, and accessible funding opportunities – including equal access to land, tailored microfinance schemes for youth- and women-led cooperatives, freedom of land ownership and leasing for women, and national legislation protecting cooperative identity and financial independence.
2. We call for the establishment of green microfinance schemes, youth cooperative venture funds, and impact investment platforms to enable youth-led and women-led cooperatives to scale up climate-smart agribusiness models.
3. We call for spaces where youth and women can meaningfully participate in decision-making processes at all levels, from community to international fora. Cooperatives should serve as vehicles for implementing public policies that promote such inclusion.
4. We call for investment in education and training that empowers youth and women as cooperative leaders and innovators, introducing cooperative education from primary school, creating spaces for women's leadership, communication, and advocacy, and ensuring sustainable training that leads to real managerial inclusion.
5. We urge Governments to support digital and platform cooperatives through modernized laws and affordable infrastructure for Blockchain, IoT, AI, and DLT while ensuring women farmers and workers have universal access to internet and digital tools at affordable rates. Social media should be leveraged to promote cooperativism as an alternative way of living, working, and consuming.
6. We call for cooperatives to promote gender equity and social justice by recognizing and redistributing care work, strengthening women's networks, and involving women farmers and agricultural workers as partners in production relations, not merely as employees, in line with the forthcoming 2026 UN International Year of the Woman Farmer.
7. We call for lifting restrictions that prevent refugees, migrants, and displaced people from forming cooperatives in transit, host, and first-asylum countries, recognizing that women and youth form the majority of these groups.
8. We call for opening new markets and expanding access opportunities for youth and women, including the use of public procurement as a tool for greater participation, seed funding for start-ups, and coop-to-coop exchanges to enhance marketability of products.
9. We urge for strict enforcement of regulations banning internationally prohibited fertilizers and pesticides, to protect the environment, farmers, and communities.

Conclusions

We, the youth engaged in cooperatives in agrifood systems, future young leaders of our respective constituencies, affirm our readiness to actively contribute to building food systems that are more just, inclusive, and sustainable. We are not merely calling for empowerment—we are offering a genuine partnership grounded in innovation, knowledge, collective action, and a steadfast commitment to the principles of sustainable development. Youth cooperatives are essential to achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

We recognize that the challenges we face are not temporary. Yet we firmly believe that cooperatives serve as strategic instruments to overcome these challenges, strengthen the resilience of our communities, and advance a just transformation of agrifood systems. In this spirit, we extend a clear and urgent invitation to governments, international institutions, and cooperative sector stakeholders to engage with us in a shared journey—one that restores the value of youth voices, institutionalizes their participation and inclusion in policymaking, resource allocation, and the co-creation of a fairer and more sustainable food future.

Supporting youth-led cooperatives is not only an investment in the present, it is a guarantee of a future rooted in justice and dignity for all.