

Fix my food: Children's views on transforming food systems

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GLOBAL

What this article is about: This report presents findings on youth insights, perspectives and lived experiences of food systems. Qualitative data was collected via participatory workshops with children and adolescents from 18 countries and was complemented by quantitative data collected using the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) U-Report poll.

Key messages:

- Children and adolescents described availability and access to healthy foods as key weaknesses within food systems.
- Youth were concerned about the link between poor food quality and environmental degradation, water pollution, chemical fertilizers and unhygienic markets.
- Recommended actions to improve global food systems should focus on: 1) improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of nutritious foods; and 2) reducing the impact of food systems on environmental degradation and climate change.

Background

Poor diet quality is driving malnutrition among adolescents globally (Aguayo & Morris, 2020). Many adolescents are unable to access the diverse and quality diets necessary for them to grow and thrive. Globally, as few as one quarter of adolescents (10-19 years) in low-income countries consume enough fruit and vegetables (Kupka et al 2020). At the same time, in the same settings, adolescents often readily access cheap, nutrient-poor foods (Aguayo & Morris, 2020).

Additionally, climate change is exerting unprecedented and devastating pressure on food systems, which will only worsen if not stopped. Sustainable food systems are critical to ensuring that all children and adolescents can access nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable foods

(Fox & Timmer, 2020). However, current food systems are failing children and adolescents.

Methods

In 2021, UNICEF partnered with the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University to conduct participatory workshops with children and adolescents in 18 countries around the world. Over 700 children and adolescents 10-19 years of age from diverse backgrounds participated in workshops to document their insights, perspectives and lived experiences of food systems. UNICEF also gathered information using the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) U-Report poll, a quantitative poll launched from the U-Report global and country-specific platform with 22,561 respondents 14-24 years of age.

Key Findings

Workshop findings clearly highlighted that for children and adolescents, food is life, growth, development and health, but also joy and happiness. When it comes to food choices, taste, smell, "healthiness" and affordability drive their food choices. Peer influence also plays an important role, with U-Report data indicating that 37% of children commonly consume unhealthy foods when meeting with friends.

Across participating countries some children and adolescents could choose the food they eat but most children and adolescents could not. Children and adolescents discussed having knowledge about the nutritious foods they would like to eat but availability and cost of such foods were prohibitive. In U-Report polls 39% of children and youth reported that they do not have access to healthy foods, which they believe is due to distance from farming areas, food distribution problems, low stocks in markets, disruption to food production, food seasonality and natural disasters.

Children and adolescents are concerned about the link between poor food quality and environmental degradation. Another predominant concern for children and adolescents is the poor quality of food due to water pollution, chemical fertilizers and unhygienic markets.

Recommendations

Children and adolescents see an urgent need to transform food systems and to reduce their negative impact on people and the environment. Their recommendations pivot around two broad themes: 1) actions to transform food systems and improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of nutritious foods; and 2) actions to reduce the impact of food systems on environmental degradation and climate change.

Conclusion

In the workshops, children and adolescents were bold in raising their voices and demanding change. Children and adolescents called on political leaders and public and private-sector stakeholders to work across all levels of society to strengthen food systems; from implementing effective regulation of food industries to promoting individual and community behaviour change. This is not an easy mission. Yet the health, nourishment and flourishing of future generations depend on it.

The Fix my Food report was launched virtually in September 2021, during which authors presented the key findings and discussed these with a panel of youth representatives from across the globe.

The recording of the virtual launch event is available at: <https://vimeo.com/616824363>

References

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Box 1 Recommendations from children to improve food systems

More specifically, the report highlights five key recommendations that children have put forward to transform global and national food systems:

EDUCATE

Educate children, families, educators, farmers, leaders and decision-makers about nutritious and safe foods, good nutrition, food systems, climate change, recycling and sustainable development.

ENGAGE

Listen to children, organise youth forums, elect youth representatives and use online tools to connect children and young people into debates and action to transform their food systems.

REGULATE

Enforce policies to ensure food quality, safety and security; regulate food prices; safeguard children from harmful food marketing practices; control the use of chemicals and preservatives; promote natural, organic and minimally-processed foods; and penalise and disincentivise companies that produce, package or distribute food in environmentally-destructive ways.

INVEST

Invest in sustainable foods for all children by securing access to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable food and safe drinking water; improving food waste management; incentivising local production of nutritious foods and support the rights and practices of indigenous peoples; enhancing food facilities (e.g. markets) and infrastructure (e.g. roads); and supporting social safety nets – food, vouchers or cash – that ensure access to nutritious foods for children living in poverty.

REDUCE

Reduce the impact of food systems on the environment by empowering communities to grow their own produce and learn more about sustainability; reducing plastics over-use, deforestation and environmentally destructive methods of food production; promoting and supporting sustainable farming as a vocation for young people through education, investments and financial incentives; and favouring local food production and accessible farms and markets (i.e. "from far away to being close") to secure enough local, affordable and nutritious food for all children and their families.