



Nordregio

POLICY BRIEF 2025:25

Growing food(ies)

Empowering youth in
the Nordic food systems

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Introduction

Food production is important in all Nordic countries, and interesting and important changes are happening due to the green transition. There is a tremendous need and opportunity to develop innovative and green businesses, including food systems, where the natural resources are located, and can create added value. However, there is a declining interest among young people in pursuing careers within food systems. Further, the latest global crises have kicked off more focus on ensuring more robust and resilient food systems. The food systems have undergone major structural changes in terms of farm size (from small to large), employment structure (from family members to hired labour and contractors), technology (from manual labour to mechanisation to digitalisation), global megatrends such as urbanisation and demographic change and sector-specific seasonality as well as inheritance. There are also growing concerns about an ageing workforce, relatively low levels of education or skills mismatch, and low attractiveness of careers in the sector for young, skilled people. Today's institutional structures with many higher educational institutions located in cities imply that career and livelihood choices for young people happen in urban areas.

All of the above are relevant to the decrease in youth participation in food systems. This has led to a need to investigate challenges and potentials for increased youth participation in food systems in a project funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Fisheries, Aquaculture, Agriculture, Food and Forestry in 2024 and 2025.

The following questions have been investigated:

- What challenges do young people face in choosing a career in food systems within different occupational groups (e.g., farmers, chefs, nutrition assistants, veterinarians, food technologists)?
- Which good practices can be found in the Nordic (and Baltic) countries that have the potential to be scaled up in the region?
- How can current and future producers in food systems be supported to make this employment sector more attractive?
- What kind of support mechanisms are needed to encourage innovation and fresh perspectives among new food producers, and how can existing ones be improved?

The project can be seen as a stepping stone to address an important, prevailing trend where much remains to be done. But by combining literature review, workshops, and surveys among youth, anchored by a skilled reference group, the authors hope to bring valuable insights and deliver a clear path for the next steps towards realisation.



Photo: Green prophet/unsplash.com

Overview of research

The study draws upon a range of sources:

- **Desk study** covering the topics: the role of young people as "agents of change", the rural-urban divide, the different types of influences young people experience when choosing a career, and the general future outlook for food systems development.
- **Four reference group meetings** with a reference group of 15 young people and senior experts from the Nordic Region to anchor and qualify the research.
- A Baltic viewpoint from a **workshop in Latvia** as part of the "Entrepreneurship in Vidzeme" project.
- **Two surveys** focusing on youth perceptions of careers in the food systems. A pilot survey was conducted during Green Innovation Week in Skive, Denmark, where young people gather to learn about career prospects in sustainable green businesses. A Nordic survey was conducted in the five Nordic countries among students in lower secondary schools and high school/vocational schools located in both rural and urban contexts, collecting answers from 535 students.

The collected research is compiled into a report set to launch in the second half of 2025, authored by Maija Käle, Jonas Tybring Käckus, Karen Refsgaard, Torfi Johannesson, Eva Mærsk, and Louise Vestergaard, *Growing Food(ies): Youth participation and opportunities in the Nordic food sector*.



Photo: Raychan/unsplash.com

Policy recommendations

The following section outlines conclusions and recommendations that policymakers and stakeholders in the agri-food and educational sectors could use to stimulate more youth participation in food systems. They include:

1. **Education and training:** Timing matters – support education from childhood
2. **Innovation and entrepreneurship:** Highlight food systems' potential for innovation, research, and development
3. **Preparedness and resilience:** Involve young people in strategy formation for resilient food systems
4. **Rural attractiveness and gender:** Highlight opportunities for youth, including women and food systems entrepreneurs, and emphasise coping strategies
5. **Investing in belonging:** Integrate, welcome, and qualify migrant labour force within the agri-food workforce

1. Education and training: Timing matters – support education from childhood

Introduction to food production from kindergarten: There is a great need to introduce food-related skills at an earlier stage, as youth alienation from the agri-food sector can partly be attributed to the late introduction of integral food systems education. In this respect, seeing it as a cultural norm is essential. E.g., activities such as farm visits, school gardens, and food preparation in schools. In general, an overview of learning opportunities may help to evaluate what is effective and how it can be shared. Facilitating good experiences is key for later interest.

Informal learning and training can support these conditions: Informal education can be adopted and formalised throughout career learning, career management skills, and career guidance. A better overview of informal education and training opportunities that emerge sporadically in different Nordic countries could facilitate the evaluation of their impact and enable their scaling up at both national and regional levels.

Digital upskilling in districts and integration of food systems in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics): The agri-food sector shows signs of skills mismatch regarding the demand for technology and digital solutions-related knowledge. To address this disparity, digital technology upskilling initiatives must be prioritised in rural areas, while educational programmes in urban areas should incorporate a food systems perspective within STEM curricula. An attempt here could be to explore already existing study programmes for a broader perspective on their contribution to food systems. Career counselling and guides are important for disseminating knowledge on this matter to youth.

2. Innovation and entrepreneurship: Highlight food systems' potential for innovation, research, and development

Potential for innovation and entrepreneurship: The agri-food sector is not commonly associated with innovation due to perceptions that it is conservative or often sees low consumer trust in new foods. This means there is an opportunity to highlight the sector's potential for innovation, research and development, including digitalisation, which is becoming increasingly important with the advancement of the food sector.

Providing a knowledge boost around the opportunities **green innovation and food production** may be of further value. This can imply investigating existing structures, including those in multi-level education. Also, utilising young people's abilities to be creative when focusing on innovation, i.e., involving young people across different disciplines.

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There are different kinds of entrepreneurship at play in food production and education. Training in these may involve:

- Breeding programmes and genetic technology
- Food technology and innovative food processing
- New business models/channels in "established" farms
- Digitalisation of value chains
- Generational renewal and knowledge of buying businesses

Stronger efforts in cities to attract young people: Stronger advocacy in urban areas is needed to attract young people to the sector and enhance its perceived appeal. This would encourage youth to link the agri-food sector with high-level innovations that are important to them, and inspire them to take part.

3. Preparedness and resilience: Involve young people in strategy formation for resilient food systems

A young perspective on the agri-food sector in emergency preparedness: The agriculture and food sector plays a vital role in building comprehensive resilience, especially when viewed through the lens of younger generations. Recognising the sector's strategic importance opens opportunities for synergies between investments in defence and security and the development of a robust agri-food system.

Strengthening short, place-based value chains can enhance resilience and local identity. To be effective, these strategies must actively include young people at all levels — local, regional, and national — ensuring that their voices are not only heard but meaningfully represented.

Fostering a sense of professional pride and purpose in the sector, particularly among youth, can support long-term engagement and commitment.

Continue focus on climate-smart solutions in the food sector: Many young people are passionate about climate change and may regard agriculture and fisheries negatively due to the environmental impact of these sectors. This climate interest can be channelled into innovation, the development of shorter supply chains in conjunction with a focus on climate-smart agriculture and the CO₂ emissions of various food products. It could be worthwhile to undertake a thorough review of national and regional nutritional guidelines, with geopolitical factors being a key consideration. The nutritional guidelines may, e.g., focus more on local opportunities and biodiversity, in order to consider climate-smart alternatives as well as local and robust production schemes.

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Rodrigo Rodrigues/unsplash.com

4. Rural attractiveness and gender: Highlight opportunities and coping strategies for youth, including women and food systems entrepreneurs

Fighting stereotypes and prejudices through mass media, social media, and role models: There are many prejudicial and stereotypical perceptions of the agri-food sector, often related to undervaluing rural areas and the quality of life in these. While combating these prejudices and stereotypes is an ongoing endeavour, it is crucial to emphasise the positive role models who challenge such norms. "Rural attractiveness" is about more than job opportunities – it is about quality of life, freedom, space, access to nature, work-life balance, job opportunities for spouses etc.

Mobilise young people with bootcamps and present them with opportunities: Another strategy is mobilisation through bootcamps where youth meet, exchange ideas and interact across urban and rural areas. Often with input from large industrial actors. Agri-bootcamps for women, e.g, inspired by ITU in Denmark, may be an example to follow up on.

Recognise young people's challenges and highlight effective strategies to deal with them: It is imperative to recognise the challenges confronting young individuals in rural environments. To tackle this issue, it is crucial to emphasize effective strategies for supporting young people to remain in their communities and participate in food systems employment. These strategies encompass the establishment of rural youth communities and the formation of food systems rural mentorship groups that address issues confronting youth, rather than merely those addressed by industry.

The food sector can be challenged in relation to established social norms: Food systems represent an area with potential for increased gender diversity, as the present is characterised by long-standing social norms regarding inheritance, upbringing, job division, and other aspects. Attempts to improve this situation include better access to maternity leave and time off, a focus on insurance structures, school systems, and work-life balance.

Invest in framework conditions for women entrepreneurs to increase interest among young women: Investing in the development of rural areas to make them more attractive for female entrepreneurs can be a smart strategy to pursue, given the rarity of such investments and the generally limited interests of female students in establishing their own businesses. For example, financial support programmes for women who want to start their own businesses can be a good option.

5. Investing in belonging: Integrate, welcome, and qualify migrant labour force within the agri-food workforce

Considering the seasonal nature of employment in the agri-food sectors and the increasing reliance on migrant labour, enhanced **integration of migrant labour** (whether seasonal workers or migrants in the agri-food workforce) can be considered a useful strategy. Such a measure would foster a stronger sense of belonging among migrant workers to both rural communities and the agri-food ecosystem in general.

Invest in migrants' attachment to districts: In general, ensure that the countries are attractive as working places and employers, for both migrants and their families. Within this, investments in better working conditions for seasonal workers are important.

Invest in the upskilling of migrants: Strengthen qualification programmes useful for the agricultural sector. One example is to develop exchange programmes aimed specifically at agricultural students in other countries. In general, ensuring possibilities for education and career development while at work.

Lastly, another area for work integration is the development of **professionalised cross-cultural leadership** among farmers.



Photo: Curated lifestyle/unsplash.com

Who and how?

With the help of our reference group, we have identified several stakeholders and target groups that should be aware of these recommendations. These include institutions, associations, events, and specific stakeholder groups. Below, we have summarised relevant actors and activities proposed to ensure effective dissemination and take-up of the five recommendations.

Key actors

- **Educators in the food sector and current curricula:** Important target groups are teachers in food subjects and career counsellors, as they have a great influence on young people.
- **Ministries of education and agencies** responsible for education and curricula at the multilevel. This should also include programmes tailored for women to work in primary production.
- **Ministries of agriculture and agencies** involved in structural strategies for food systems and food production-related schools.
- **Social ministries and agencies** offering a common platform and special services directed to migrants, for more information on career opportunities and entrepreneurship opportunities within the food systems sector.

- **Rural municipalities and regions:** These actors can facilitate and highlight agriculture and the food sector. i.e., plan and provide resources for lower-grade education in food systems. They can share best practices and help map success stories.
- **Farmers' organisations** (NLF, NBL, Landbrug og Fødevarer, LRF, etc.). They can contribute to changing attitudes and mobilisation for young people in decision-making and strategy formation spaces. They can aid in showing talents and good examples. Further development of bootcamps and hackathons for diverse urban and rural participation could be organised with their help, as well as farmers' courses on cross-sectoral leadership.
- **Higher education and research institutions:** These actors can be relevant in looking into curricula and conferences, as well as student organisations. This includes highlighting the opportunities for innovation in the whole food system sectors.
- **Funding and funders:** In developing the evaluation of criteria for research funding.

Key activities

- **Surveys** among young people regarding their preferences, attitudes, and choices related to food systems
- Followed by **interviews** in order to get a thorough understanding of how to attract modern youth to modern food systems.
- A mapping of **exemplary cases** from around the Nordic countries with success in recruitment, career development, etc. in food systems. Sharing cases, benchmarking, and positive stories.
- Development of relevant **courses** on cross-sectoral issues for farmers and immigrants.

Bootcamps and hackathons aimed at young people curious about food systems and entrepreneurship.

- **"Road-trip"** in the Nordics to key nodes for curricula development in both educational institutions and food-related institutions and associations.

About this publication

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A reference group consisting of representatives from relevant Nordic youth organisations in the food systems sector has ensured involvement, validation, and anchorage of the project analyses and results.

This policy brief is based on a larger report written by Maija Kāle, Jonas Kačkus Tybjerg, Karen Refsgaard, Torfi Johannesson, Eva Mærsk and Louise Vestergaard, set to launch in the second half of 2025, *Growing Food(ies): Youth participation and opportunities in the Nordic food sector*.

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