FOOD AND YOUTH

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

Henrietta H. Fore
UNICEF Executive Director, 2018–2021
2021 Martin J. Forman Memorial Lecture
The Forman Lecture is a distinguished annual event that aims to elevate nutrition policy on the international agenda.

The lecture series is held in honor of Martin J. Forman, who headed the Office of Nutrition at USAID for more than 20 years and made a significant impact on international nutrition. The annual lecturer is selected for his or her outstanding contributions in addressing global nutrition issues and is invited to present personal, often unconventional, views about major issues related to the field of international nutrition.

In the 2021 Martin J. Forman Memorial lecture, Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore reflected on the voices and actions of the children and young people who inspired her during her tenure with UNICEF (2018–2021). She recounted their struggles with the food choices they have, the food choices they make and the food environments in which they make these choices. Executive Director Fore offered concrete next steps on how to ensure that children and young people are at the center of discussions and actions on food systems transformation locally and globally.
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 United Nations 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 policy-makers 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 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 we heard:

- 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 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 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.

Henrietta H. Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, 2018–2021
Victor Mugo, young entrepreneur and a food-systems advocate from Kenya
Mending the crack in our sky

Victor Mugo highlighted the great disconnect between children and youth and our food systems. He also described how food systems are disconnected from good nutrition and a healthy environment. In his remarks, he expressed his concerns about how food systems are failing to ensure children’s and population’s right to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets.

As a young agriculturist, he indicated that the first step to transforming the food systems is 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 nutritious food.

He urged young people to engage in food systems transformation and co-create solutions that will improve access to healthy diets and good nutrition. He emphasized the following points:

- **Urgency** – 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 urgency.
- **Scale** – We need a “sea” of action. We need to take to scale proven and evidence-based initiatives that work to reduce the triple burden of malnutrition around the globe.
- **Partnerships** – The United Nations Food Systems Summit process has taught us that no one alone can solve the challenge of good nutrition for all. We need each other – and we need youth too!

Victor called for collective action to revamp failing food systems. In his words: “There is a crack in our sky and the global village should not rest until everyone, everywhere has access to a healthy, nutritious, sufficient and affordable diet.”

Pauline Mapfumo, young nutritionist and innovator from Zimbabwe
The roadblocks to healthy diets for young people – and how to transform the food systems

Pauline Mapfumo highlighted the challenges faced by young people in accessing healthy diets and the havoc created by COVID-19-related lockdowns, which have constrained people’s access to nutritious and safe foods. She spotlighted five main issues hindering the consumption of a nutritious and safe diet: knowledge, affordability, accessibility, availability and preference.

Pauline explained that affordability was a key barrier limiting her access to nutritious and safe diets. She expressed her dissatisfaction with advertising and endorsements that promote the consumption of unhealthy and ultra-processed foods and beverages, and she proposed the following actions to restore failing food systems:

- Innovating along the food value chain to provide safe, affordable and diverse foods
- Using technologies to bring healthy food closer to home, making it locally available so that food does not add to the carbon footprint by traveling long distances
- Ensuring nutrition education across all sectors, especially in schools, to allow children to learn about the benefits of good nutrition as they grow
- Improving school food environments and giving youth a voice to advocate for safer, healthier, food environments
- Supporting innovative solutions by young people
- Adopting policies on the marketing of foods to children and food legislative actions, such as improving front-of-pack labelling

Pauline emphasized that society and nations need young people with healthy bodies and nourished minds, which is only possible when food systems respond to the needs of young people and ensure access to food that is nutritious, safe, affordable and promotes planetary health.

For the lecture, ED Fore invited two youth advocates to share their personal experiences and thoughts on food systems transformation.