

ARE WE SPEAKING IN THE SAME VOICE? Youth Declarations: Kenya and Addis Ababa

On April 8–9, 2025, the Kenya National Food Systems Summit was convened at the Safari Park Hotel in Nairobi, bringing together a diverse constellation of stakeholders from policymakers, youth leaders, women champions, private sector actors, farmers, and civil society organizations. The summit was more than a routine convening; it was a moment of reflection and renewal, a chance to evaluate Kenya's progress under its five national pathways for food systems transformation.

One of these important themes was the 'Inclusion of youth and women in food systems governance'. The conversations emphasized the transformative potential of technology, data, research, and capacity building, but more importantly, they spotlighted the urgency of recognizing youth and women not just as beneficiaries, but as architects of change.

Kenyan youth seized this moment with clarity and conviction. They came together under one voice, declaring their readiness to take a seat at the table—not as observers, but as decision-makers. Their declaration, crafted with ambition and rooted in lived experience, called for institutionalized youth representation, climate-resilient agriculture, inclusive financing, and dignified livelihoods. It was a bold assertion of agency, a signal that Kenya's youth are claiming their space.

Just three months later, in July 2025, young people from across the globe gathered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for the United Nations Food Systems Summit +4 (UNFSS+4). This global convening was the culmination of a dynamic, youth-led consultative process that spanned regions and continents. Over 1,200 youth participated in shaping the Global Youth Declaration, a sweeping document that called for urgent, systemic transformation of food systems worldwide.

Reading both declarations side by side—Kenya's national youth declaration and the UNFSS+4 global youth declaration, one is struck by the resonance between them. The language may differ, the contexts may vary, but the heartbeat is the same. Youth everywhere are demanding equity, sustainability, and justice. They are calling for food systems that nourish both people and planet, that uphold human dignity, and that center the voices of those historically marginalized.

Both declarations emphasize the need for institutionalized youth leadership. In Kenya, youth are calling for dedicated seats in national food systems committees and technical working groups. Globally, youth are demanding voting rights and co-governance mechanisms that reflect their priorities. The message is clear: youth are no longer content with symbolic inclusion—they want to have a voice on decision-making tables that are shaping their lives and experiences.

Kenyan youth advocate for climate-smart agriculture that integrates Indigenous knowledge and modern technologies. The global declaration echoes this, calling for investments in regenerative agriculture, ecosystem restoration, and biodiversity protection. Across both documents, there is a deep respect for ancestral knowledge and a recognition that sustainability must be rooted in community stewardship.

Gender equity runs through both declarations like a golden thread. Kenyan youth highlight the need for gender-responsive financing, capacity building for young women, and inclusive governance structures. The global declaration goes further, demanding the dismantling of structural inequalities and the protection of marginalized communities.

Yet, there are also differences—differences that reflect the unique realities of each context. Kenya’s declaration is deeply grounded in national policy frameworks and local governance structures. It speaks to the need for digital tools to track youth-led initiatives, youth-specific financial structures, and localized emergency preparedness. The global declaration, on the other hand, expands the lens to transnational issues: corporate concentration in food systems, the weaponization of hunger, and the need for global accountability.

These differences are not contradictions; they are complementary. The Kenyan declaration is a regional heartbeat in a global rhythm. It directly contributes to the broader narrative of youth-led transformation. However, it also raises an important question: Are global institutions truly listening to these local voices? Are youth declarations being translated into policy, budget lines, and institutional reform?

Declarations are powerful. They articulate vision, demand accountability, and galvanize action. But their true power lies in what comes next. As Kenya moves forward with its national pathways, and as the world reflects on the outcomes of UNFSS+4, youth must move from speaking to steering. Their voices have been heard. Now, they must be heeded.

This is not just a policy imperative—it is a moral obligation. A matter of justice, survival, and shared responsibility. The youth have spoken. The question is: who is ready to act with them?