

Youth Inclusion and Engagement Enabling Sustainable Livelihood for Young People in Rural Communities



Photo: Auditya Sari / Kalimajari Foundation

INTRODUCTION

For all individuals, that crucial transition period between childhood dependence and adult independence has a cascading impact on their entire future—not only shaping the course of their lives, but also those of their families and the communities to which they belong. A successful youth transition produces an adult who has the knowledge, resources, and skills to create thriving—and more sustainable—livelihood opportunities in their community. In rural areas especially, supporting youth through this transition is key to ensuring prosperous communities and healthy landscapes.

Today, the world's youth comprises 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24. An estimated 1 billion live in developing economies, with about 70 percent of those young people living in rural areas.¹ One-fifth of global youth are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), creating a skills gap, and hindering a successful transition to adulthood. This skills gap means young people entering the labor market are three times more likely than adults to be unemployed. The issue is compounded by gender inequality: Globally, young women are twice as likely as young men to have NEET status.

Young people from rural communities can face specific barriers when navigating their transition to adulthood.



Carmelina Martínez, a young woman from Campeche, Mexico, and participant in "Our Forest, Our Future", a Rainforest Alliance initiative designed to reverse the trend of urban migration and cultivate the next generation of conservationists.

¹ <https://www.fao.org/3/ca8209en/CA8209EN.pdf>

<https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/2019-rural-development-report>

Social expectations can restrict their opportunities for education, employment, and influence in decision-making in the household or community. Access to education, technical training, land, trees, financing, and market connections are often restricted—or completely lacking—for rural youth, all of which are necessary to create prosperous and sustainable livelihoods in a healthy landscape.

Even in situations where rural youth can participate in school or work, these opportunities are often limiting. The education or training they receive may not cater to their needs, or the needs of the job market, for example. When they do find work, many young people struggle to earn living incomes in decent conditions. Work is likely to be either on the family farm, or informal, poorly paid, insecure, and hazardous. A third of employed youth in developing economies live below the poverty line, with 17.7 percent of them living in extreme poverty and earning less than US\$1.25 per day.² The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially difficult for young people in remote communities, who lack the equipment and connectivity for remote schooling. They also often need to quit school to care for the sick or to work to contribute to the family income.

A dearth of higher education and employment opportunities often leads youth to migrate in search of work. This leaves rural communities without the leadership, innovation, education, and ambition of their most promising young residents. This leaves agricultural and forest communities facing a potential sustainability and well-being crisis as producers and community leaders age. In many rural landscapes, youth outmigration represents lost opportunities for future generations to prosper and innovate locally. It is time to challenge that trend.

The Rainforest Alliance is committed to creating a more sustainable world where people and nature thrive in har-

mony. We partner with diverse allies—rural producers, companies, NGOs, and governments—around the world to drive positive change across global supply chains and in many of the world’s most critically important landscapes. Future generations play a key role in protecting these landscapes. Together with their communities, businesses, and educators, we aim to improve youth employment opportunities and support rural communities’ sustainable development.

To achieve this, the Rainforest Alliance conducts holistic interventions tackling barriers to youth inclusion and engagement. This means taking collaborative measures with producers, NGOs, companies, and governments to enable the full participation of young people in rural production, markets, and decision-making.



Students in their classroom at Colegio de Bachilleres Plantel in Puerto Morelos, Quintana Roo, Mexico, as part of a project on sustainable tourism education. Photo: Michael Toolan

What age category is “youth”?

The UN statistical definition of “youth” is people between the ages of 15 and 24.

This means “youth” includes children (under the age of 18) and young adults (18+) who are over the “age of majority”.

What is “youth”?

“Youth” is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood, to the independence of adulthood. As a category it can vary by country, but typically it defines a person between the stages of leaving compulsory education and finding their first job.

Reference: United Nations, 2013, Definition of Youth Factsheet³

What is NEET?

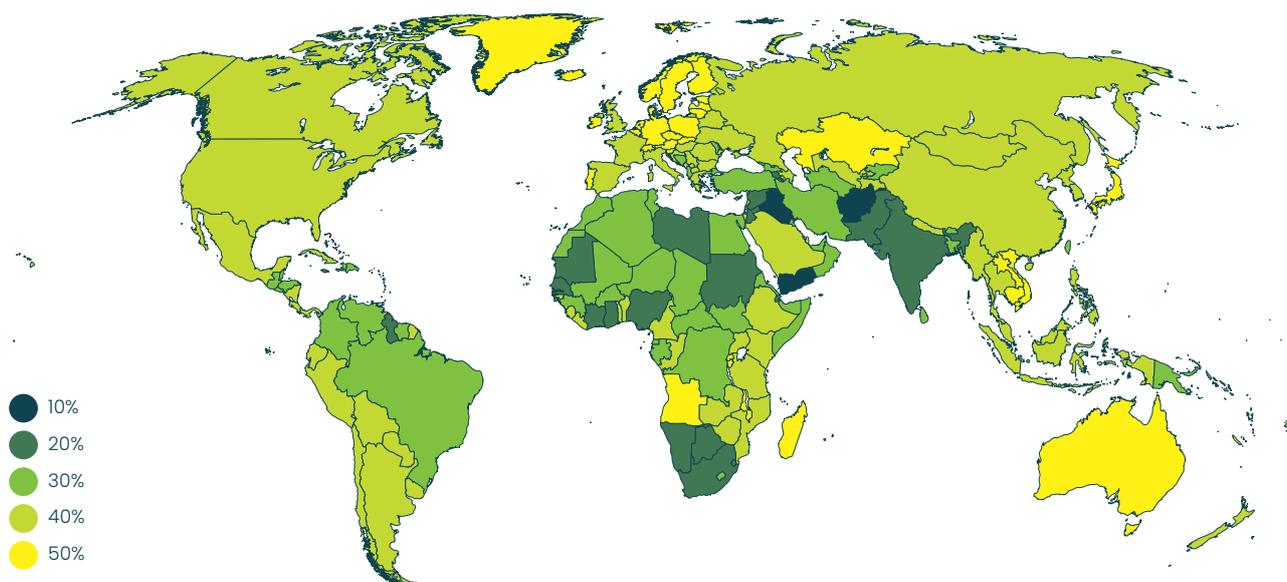
The status of not being in employment, education, or training is known as NEET. This indicator provides a measure of youth who are outside the educational system, not in training and not in employment, and serves as a broader measure of the youth labor market than youth unemployment. ([ILO](#))

² <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/hunger-poverty/>

³ UN, 2013, Definition of Youth Factsheet. Available at <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>

High shares of youth NEET around the world

Share of youth aged 15–24 not in employment, education or training (NEET), modeled estimates for 2018



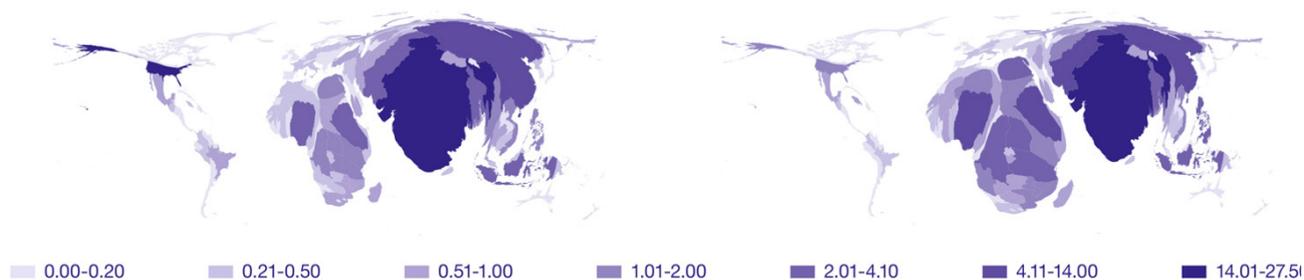
How do we define meaningful youth engagement?

According to the [YouthPower Learning community](#), meaningful youth engagement is “an inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people’s ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms, and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries, and globally.”

MAP A A disproportionate share of rural youth today are in Asia, but Africa's share is projected to rise rapidly

Percentage share of global rural youth 2015

Percentage share of global rural youth 2050



Note: This map is an equal-area cartogram (also known as a density-equalizing map) of the share of global rural youth, by country. The cartogram resizes each country according to its share of the global rural youth population. The seven different colours shown on the map differentiate the various categories of countries according to their shares. The projected increase in Africa's share of rural youth by 2050 is represented by the larger size of that continent relative to the others.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Gastner-Newman method (2004) based on spatially disaggregated population data for 2015 and projections for 2050 from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The rural youth projections are created by applying the projected share of the rural population to the total projected youth population. This is based on the assumption that age structures in rural and urban areas will remain the same. Potential deviations from this assumption are not expected to have a noticeable effect on overall trends in rural youth populations across regions.

THE CHALLENGES

Through strategic interventions, the Rainforest Alliance and our partners work together to tackle common challenges facing youth inclusion and engagement. These issues include:

Rural poverty

Young people working on family farms, in forestry, or as hired laborers can experience rural livelihoods as insecure poverty traps, without opportunity. When they migrate to seek alternative livelihoods, poverty in the community they leave behind is further entrenched: the remaining workforce reduces, ages, and lacks replenishment with new skills and ideas.

- Lack of market access, training in sustainable forestry skills, and infrastructure to enable product diversification are key barriers to a living income in forest communities.
- Low productivity, low yields, and volatile crop prices can prevent family farms from providing a living income, which in turn means they are less able to reinvest in the farm.
- Agricultural labor does not provide a living income for most young workers; Wages are very low, and work is seasonal. Young workers are also more vulnerable to labor exploitation and may suffer long-term harm from doing under-age, hazardous work.

Lack of access to land

It can be difficult for young people in rural communities to acquire or rent agricultural or forest land. Without it, they lack economic independence. This in turn limits their ability to try different farming techniques to improve productivity and sustainability, or to diversify forest livelihoods away from exclusively timber products.

- Land access is typically inherited, and where estates are sub-divided among all beneficiaries, youth can be left with small or fragmented land parcels insufficient for subsistence—or no land at all.
- In community-managed forests, young people may never inherit land parcels due to tenure structure management.
- Young women are unlikely to control land, even if they inherit: Their land rights will traditionally pass to their husband or male relatives.

Intergenerational tensions

It is common for tensions to arise between older and younger generations in rural communities. As a result, youth tend to be excluded from opportunities and decision-making. The resulting frustration encourages their search for alternative livelihoods and can drive outmigration.

- Older generations typically share a mistrust and misunderstanding of the motivation, capacity, and skills of the youth in their communities.
- A lack of dialogue deters adults from offering opportunities to young people or engaging with them about, for example, new techniques to supplement traditional farming or forestry.

Lack of financing

Young people are unlikely to have access to the financial credit necessary to finance land acquisition or rental, or to invest in farms.

- Rural youth lack the financial literacy to apply for credit, and to manage budgets.
- They lack capital (land, trees) to apply for credit.
- Financial services have a limited presence in rural areas and do not see youth as a reliable investment.



A group of young people in Calakmul, Mexico participate in a Rainforest Alliance workshop.

Lack of access to markets

It can be difficult for young people—especially young women—to access local markets because of distance, safety, or social expectations. Access to global markets and supply chains is even more complex.

- Existing frameworks encouraging business start-ups are unlikely to incorporate measures to support youth entrepreneurs (for example, support with financing and training).
- Young people may be less able to understand and navigate a competitive marketplace, especially in countries where rule of law is weak.

Lack of access to education and training

Young people growing up in rural communities may not have access to a school—or if they do, the quality of teaching may be poor. Despite their importance to rural youth, sustainable agricultural, forestry, and business skills are not yet the norm in school or vocational training—or may simply be too far away to access. This creates a skills gap (or mismatch), leaving rural youth unable to modernize and manage prosperous farms, or to develop more sustainable timber and non-timber livelihoods in forests.

Skills needed include:

- **Foundational skills:** literacy and numeracy
- **Technical and vocational skills:** vary according to market demand and youth interest
- **Transferable skills:** business and entrepreneurship skills, financial literacy and capability, employability skills
- **Soft skills:** job searching, networking, comportment at job and interviews, teamwork, communication, customer relations, leadership
- **Life skills:** positive behavior, cognitive skills for analyzing and using information, personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself, and interpersonal skills for communicating and interacting with others
- **Technology skills:** use of technical software, GIS systems, drone technology, website management, etc.

Lack of inclusive policy frameworks

Too often, policies affecting youth are created without input from the young people they impact. Rural youth have little voice and influence in their households and communities, and as a result, their needs and interests are not incorporated in community assessments, programs, or local planning. This can end up reinforcing young people's sense of exclusion or alienation. In addition, youth often lack the understanding of how local decisions are made, as well as how government agencies and policies function. Without this understanding, young people may struggle to see the roles they can play, and how they can effectively articulate their positions.



The Sustainable Action and Advocacy in Kakao (SUB-AK) program works to increase awareness among youth about the cocoa value chain in Jemberana, Indonesia. Photo: Auditya Sari / Kalimajari Foundation

Cross-cutting issues: Climate change and gender inequality

Both climate change and gender inequality are contributing factors to all the above issues, exacerbating the barriers preventing young people from having profitable rural livelihoods.

- Youth in agricultural and forest communities are more likely to be affected by climate change because they live in poorer countries, dependent on agriculture or forestry, and with less capacity to invest in adaptation. Without climate-smart training and farming techniques, they are also less resilient to drought, flooding, and temperature changes. This makes rural youth more likely to migrate to survive, and to engage in precarious work.
- Gender inequality results in rural girls being less resilient than rural boys to youth exclusion barriers. Girls have less access to knowledge, training, and job opportunities, and are more likely to be in precarious work, with lower pay, and less voice. They are also more exposed to the risks of early or forced marriage, and physical and sexual violence.

Investing in sustainable farming and forest management means investing in the next generation of leaders, community members, and technicians. It requires programs that eliminate or reduce the barriers preventing youth from accessing the skills, resources and influence necessary to create prosperous farming or forest businesses in healthy landscapes. It also means programs that tackle contributing factors such as climate change and gender inequality, giving all youth the same opportunities and resilience to adapt to climate challenges.

STRATEGIC PATHWAYS TOWARDS YOUTH INCLUSION IN RURAL ECONOMIES

I. Landscape and community programs

II. Certification

III. Supply chain services

IV. Advocacy



Through our four strategic interventions, the Rainforest Alliance aims to achieve the following outcomes:

Youth participants and teacher leaders learn about the forestry value chain as part of "Our Forest, Our Future" workshops in Calakmul, Mexico.

| Target group | Outcome |
|--|---|
| Youth | Gain the knowledge, skills, resources, opportunities, and influence to create prosperous rural livelihoods and protect landscapes. |
| Girls and boys | Access the same opportunities, knowledge, skills, resources, and influence, and recognize the benefits of gender equality to the household and community. |
| Academic institutions and teachers | Ensure education opportunities offered meet the needs of youth and local labor market. |
| Civil society, local government, and communities | Engage in strategic interventions to support youth inclusion, giving youth a seat at the table and amplifying their voices, as well as training on climate-smart farming, and programs to tackle gender inequality. |
| Management, farmers, foresters, and workers | Understand the barriers to, and benefits of, youth inclusion, and how to motivate and support young people to take a leading role in the rural economy. |
| Auditors, inspectors, and trainers | Have the knowledge and resources to evaluate efforts promoting the participation and development of young people in farming. |
| Companies | Support youth inclusion by promoting sustainable, inclusive, and profitable supply chains. |



Youth leaders learn about the cocoa value chain in Jembrana, Indonesia. Photo: Auditya Sari / Kalimajari Foundation.

THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE APPROACH

The Rainforest Alliance works to understand, reduce, and eliminate barriers to youth inclusion and engagement in agricultural and forest communities. Our goal? To create an environment where youth—especially from rural areas—can successfully transition to an independent adulthood, with all the skills, resources, and opportunities necessary to have productive and sustainable livelihoods.

We use four complementary strategic interventions to promote this goal: landscape and community programs, certification, supply chain programs, and advocacy.

In **landscape-level** projects, the Rainforest Alliance collaborates with local communities, academic institutions, NGOs, companies, and governments. **Certification** is a tool that we apply at the local level, working in collaboration with certificate holding producers (farmers and foresters, for example) to implement our approach. We support producers to connect with businesses, who play a valuable role in establishing more sustainable, inclusive, and profitable **supply chains**. Finally, we **advocate** for youth inclusion and engagement while working to support conditions that will enable their future success. These interventions provide innovative solutions that build youth capacity and help to stem the outmigration of young people by ensuring land can be used to generate a sustainable income for farmers and workers.

Landscape and community programs

Rainforest Alliance landscape and community programs bring together a wide variety of stakeholders to regenerate landscapes and improve livelihoods. We are therefore well-positioned to both convene and help sustain youth initiatives. We work to build the capacity of youth—and their educators— by partnering with local academic institutions, supporting young entrepreneurs and youth-led businesses, and engaging with local leaders to under-



Two participants in the “Our Forest, Our Future” initiative have received full scholarships to EARTH University in Costa Rica to study careers in Agricultural Sciences.

stand how young people can help their community to innovate and thrive.

- In Calakmul, Mexico, the Rainforest Alliance has been working with local youth and partners to deliver capacity-building courses on forestry, socio-emotional skills, and group development.⁴ We are supporting the development of two new educational degrees to ensure these educational offerings meet the needs of local job markets. We also worked with community leaders to develop experiential learning programs for young people, providing practical training, a chance to use and improve skills learned in school, and to get to know possible employment avenues. Such programs bridge communication gaps in the community, fostering trust-based relationships through youth inclusion. Our objective is to prepare young people for a meaningful and financially viable future within their forest communities, thus supporting the long-term success of sustainable forestry in this unique landscape.
- In Guatemala, the Rainforest Alliance’s Climate, Nature, and Communities of Guatemala program (CNCG) has partnered with the Federation of Cooperatives of the Verapaces (FEDECOVERA).⁵ FEDECOVERA is a cooperative of 25,000 agricultural families which has helped to establish of a youth cooperative in this area. To equip these young people with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed, our program supported youth cooperative members with structured business guidance, connections with mentors from a nearby university, training in socioemotional skills, and seed funding to develop business prototypes based on local agricultural resources.

Our certification program

The Rainforest Alliance’s certification approach towards youth inclusion is set out in Chapter 1.7 of our 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Standard: “Young Farmers and Workers”. This is a self-selected smart meter, which means it is an optional part of the standard for certificate holders. Chapter 1.7 is designed to briefly introduce youth inclusion to certificate holders.

The measures include:

- Management that promotes the participation and development of youth in farming by motivating them to get involved and by supporting their skills development, training participation, and decision-making.
- Management that monitors progress by collecting gender-disaggregated data on youth inclusion, such as the number of young people participating in training, or the number of young persons in various functions.

⁴ <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/youth-calakmul-mexico.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/in-the-field/indigenous-youth-become-entrepreneurs-video/>

In the Rainforest Alliance standard, the term “young persons” covers everyone under the age of 35. We chose this broader definition, rather than the UN’s definition of “youth” as mentioned above, to encourage Rainforest Alliance certificate holders to consider the entire course of a young person’s trajectory, from dependent youth to a professionally developed and independent adult.

Supply chain services: Encouraging corporate leadership

Promoting youth engagement in agriculture and forestry is essential to the long-term security of global supply chains. By providing young people with opportunities to gain relevant skills and training, or including youth in decision-making, businesses can support Rainforest Alliance programs that work to build sustainable livelihoods in these sectors. In Bukomansimbi, Uganda, for example, we are currently partnering with Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) and Kyagalanyi Coffee Limited to support vocational training for youth involved in coffee farming. We aim to help develop the skills they need diversify their income in addition to coffee—in some cases, youth participants are already saving funds to invest in their own future enterprises.

Businesses are in a unique position to make rural livelihoods more profitable for young people; They can use their purchasing power to create opportunities for decent work, for example. By paying fair prices that cover production costs and provide a living wage for workers, businesses can help to foster the conditions that allow for decent work for young people—and for everyone.

Advocacy: Influencing government policies

Governments have a key role to play in supporting diverse rural economies to flourish. They must work to ensure youth can develop independence, earn an income, are protected from exploitation, and contribute to the well-being of their community and environment. For example, governments can ensure school curriculums are suitably designed to teach young people the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in profitable and more sustainable agriculture.

As previously stated, government policies about—and affecting—youth are usually created without input from young people. It is critical that youth actively participate in policy platforms at national, regional, and community levels. For that, they need lobbying and advocacy skills to understand how these platforms function, what role youth can play, and how they can effectively articulate their positions. Simultaneously, public authorities and existing decision-making spaces must understand the need for the next generation to participate, allowing and encouraging youth to present their position, skills, and aspirations.

- In Indonesia, the Rainforest Alliance has been working with the Kalimajari Foundation to lower the barriers for youth engagement in cocoa farming, and to make them aware of the potential for careers in this sector.⁶ The project has included awareness-raising measures, student training, and engagement of students in research on cocoa. One of the cooperatives involved in this intervention has now changed its regulations to allow young people and women (including single women) to apply for membership.



Student in Calakmul, Mexico learning about beekeeping through one of the diverse degrees offered by our partner CBTF 07.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring inclusion and engagement of youth in rural communities requires strategic interventions tackling the barriers preventing young people from continuing their education, influencing decision-making, finding meaningful employment, and achieving their aspirations. Inter-generational dialogue at local, regional, and national levels is needed to build trust and understanding between the generations.

By reducing and eliminating the barriers that deter youth from working on farms and in forests, and by improving productivity and sustainability, we will create the right conditions for young people to have thriving livelihoods in healthy landscapes.

It is critical work: In the landscapes where the Rainforest Alliance works, the long-term future of forest and farming communities cannot be addressed without considering who will be responsible for leading them in a more sustainable direction. To succeed, youth inclusion and engagement in these sectors must be integrated within broader efforts to improve sustainability, productivity, profitability, and climate-resilience.

Young people in rural communities have a critical role to play in all our futures. By creating a diverse, inclusive, and engaging environment, they can develop the skills that will sustain their communities now and in the future.

⁶ <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/youth-capacity-building-jembrana-indonesia.pdf>



The Rainforest Alliance is creating a more sustainable world by using social and market forces to protect nature and improve the lives of farmers and forest communities.

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Photo: Michael Toolan