POLICY BRIEF

EMBEDDING YOUTH IN URBAN FOOD GOVERNANCE PLATFORMS

AfriFOODlinks

TARGETED AUDIENCE:

- City, regional and county governments
- Officials convening multi-stakeholder food platforms, food parliaments and consultation forums
- National and regional bodies shaping food governance policy
- Programme coordinators designing youth engagement mechanisms

THE POLICY LANDSCAPE:

Global and regional policy has moved decisively in favour of involving young people in food systems governance. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition calls for youth voice and leadership to be recognised, facilitated and legitimised rather than simply managed (HLPE, 2021); the UNFSS+4 Youth Declaration goes further, calling for youth voting rights, leadership roles and the removal of the barriers that keep young people out of governance (UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, 2025); and the 2025 World Food Forum concluded that intergenerational cooperation and institutionalised networks are essential for lasting impact (FAO and WFF, 2026). The commitment, in other words, is now firmly in place.

This brief sets out what still stands between that commitment and its delivery at city level, and what city and regional governments can do about it.

01 Statement of problem

Only 2.8 percent of parliamentarians worldwide are under thirty, and the youth share falls further to 2.3 percent in Africa (FAO, 2025). Commitments to involve young people in governance mechanisms have not yet translated into consistent practice at city level. In practice, participation rarely moves beyond the symbolic for several reasons. Officials engage sporadically and municipalities are often reluctant to partner with an individual who lacked formal organisational backing. Drawing on insights from the AfriFOODlinks Ambassadorship Programme, the case below illustrates how co-creation differs from one local government to another. The problem therefore lies less in whether young people are invited than in how participation is designed, and above all in whether it carries any real capacity to influence decisions.

Case box:

In one city, an ambassador was drawn repeatedly into co-creation workshops with county officials on market and fish-handling infrastructure, and described her voice as heard 'to a great extent'. In contrast, the youth ambassador in another city met the city's representative in person only once in two years, and then at a consortium meeting held in Cape Town rather than in their own city. With so little direct contact, they had few opportunities to shape decisions, and described their role in local governance spaces as largely symbolic.

Both ambassadors performed comparable work. What differed was how far each city chose to fold them into decisions already under way.

02 Lessons learnt and insights from AfriFOODlinks

The roles ambassadors performed best during the programme, namely community connection, knowledge translation and cultural animation, sit largely outside formal decision-making, whereas policy advocacy and inclusive economic influence, the roles that require institutions to concede access, are where tokenism is most often reported (Nakalila and Piprek, 2026). Backing need not be costly to be decisive. Youth state how a letter of support, a named departmental contact or access to a meeting room raised their legitimacy (Piprek and Nakalila, 2026). Access depends on the city council. Whether a young person got onto these governance platforms tracked how proactively city and county partners chose to fold them into work already under way, rather than anything within the youth's own control (Piprek and Nakalila, 2026).

Co-production is the dividing line. Where young people were merely consulted, brought in to comment on decisions already largely made, the experience reads as symbolic. Where they were treated instead as co-producers, as in the Lusaka and Kisumu case, it reads as structural governance (ICLEI Africa and FAO, 2025c; Nakalila and Piprek, 2026). Civic literacy compounds every other condition. Ambassadors who understood how local government worked engaged more confidently and effectively once access was granted (Piprek and Nakalila, 2026).

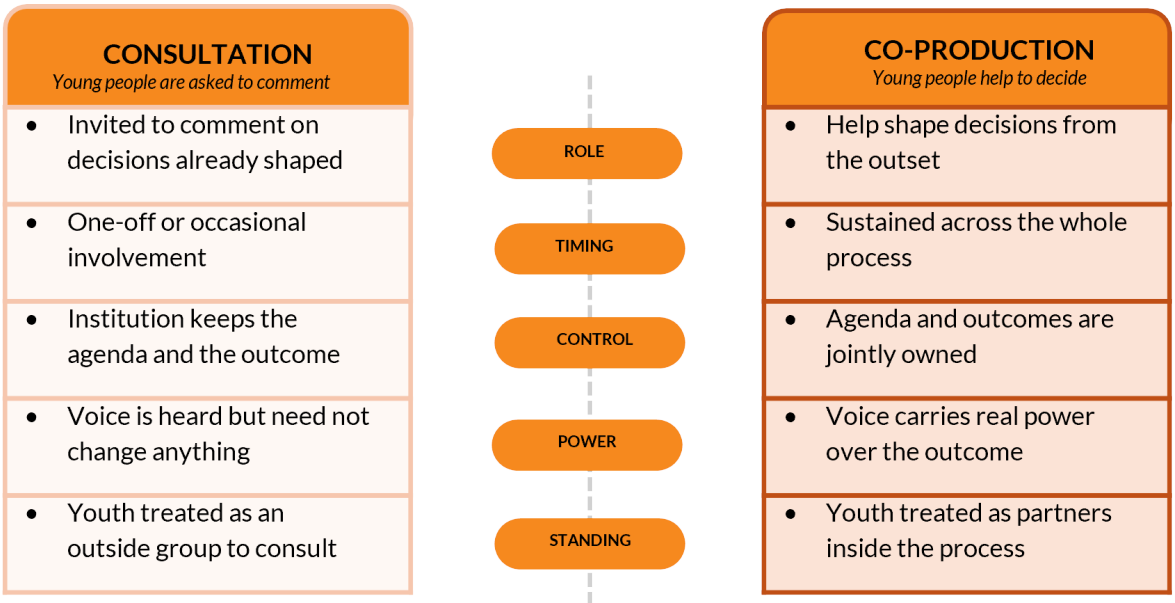

Figure 1. Two ways institutions can involve young people, adapted from the consultation and co-production distinction in Watson (2014).

03 Current policy or process gap

Multi-stakeholder platforms, food parliaments and municipal consultation forums are increasingly common features of urban food governance in Africa. These forums are well placed to include youth voice, yet the way most of them currently operate creates three specific gaps.

- A mandate gap. Few platforms held a formal, written mandate to include youth across every stage of decision-making, from agenda-setting to budgeting and monitoring. (Piprek and Nakalila, 2026).
- A follow-through gap. Youth describe contributing their views with little to no feedback about whether or how their input was used.
- A literacy gap. Even where access exists, some youth lack the civic knowledge to use it well, such as how budget cycles work or what a given department's mandate covers. (Nakalila and Piprek, 2026).

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

ACTION N° 1: WRITE YOUTH INCLUSION INTO PLATFORM MANDATES

Give multi-stakeholder platforms, food parliaments and equivalent forums a formal, written mandate that names youth representation at every stage of decision-making, including agenda-setting, budgeting and monitoring, rather than at the consultation stage alone.

ACTION N° 2: MOVE FROM CONSULTATION TO CO-PRODUCTION

Where a platform or process affects young people directly, build in a mechanism for genuine co-production rather than one-off consultation. In practice this means formal voting rights, or an equivalent form of decision input, for youth representatives, together with the integration of agreed priorities into departmental budgets and workplans.

ACTION N° 3: PROVIDE LIGHT-TOUCH INSTITUTIONAL BACKING AS STANDARD PRACTICE

Make a named departmental contact, a letter of support and access to meeting space a standard part of how cities work with youth representatives.

ACTION N° 4: COMMIT TO MULTI-YEAR ENGAGEMENT

Align youth governance roles with multi-year rather than annual programme cycles, to allow representatives time to build the institutional relationships and trust that a single year rarely allows.

ACTION N° 5: CLOSE THE LOOP

Build in a mechanism for reporting back to youth participants on how their input was used, or on why it was not.

ACTION N° 6: BUILD CIVIC LITERACY INTO ENGAGEMENT

Provide young people with basic orientation on how local government and food systems governance work before they take part in formal platforms, covering how departments are structured, how budget and consultation cycles run, and what rights they hold as citizens, so that access, once granted, can be used with confidence.

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