# ANNEX 2026

# *Emerging Themes and Strategic Lessons from Leading Youth Empowerment Practitioners*

### *Introduction*

The AMEA Youth Empowerment Workstream Position Paper was developed to synthesize a wide range of experiences, evidence, and approaches related to youth empowerment within agrifood systems. Through its review of literature, practitioner experiences, and member initiatives, the paper highlights the diversity of pathways through which young people engage with agriculture, entrepreneurship, employment, and agrifood systems transformation.

Continuing with this process, AMEA conducted interviews with two organizations that have emerged as leading practitioners in youth-focused systems development: AGRA and SNV. Both organizations have accumulated significant experience implementing large-scale youth employment and entrepreneurship programs across Africa and have developed distinctive methodologies for engaging young people within agricultural and market systems.

The objective of these interviews was not to validate the findings of the position paper, but rather to identify emerging lessons, operational innovations, and future directions that may not yet be fully reflected in current practice. The interviews revealed remarkable convergence around several themes that complement and deepen the analysis presented in the main paper.

Three broad observations emerge from these discussions.

First, organizations are increasingly moving beyond generalized notions of youth inclusion toward more sophisticated approaches that seek to understand youth diversity, aspirations, vulnerabilities, and decision-making processes.

Second, there is growing recognition that youth empowerment depends as much on the readiness of surrounding systems and institutions as it does on the capabilities of young people themselves.

Third, practitioners are increasingly questioning short-term project logic and exploring approaches that prioritize systems transformation, sustainability, and long-term wellbeing over immediate outputs alone.

The following sections summarize the perspectives shared by AGRA and SNV and highlight areas where their experiences complement and extend the AMEA Position Paper.

## *Interview with Willis Odhiambo*
## *AGRA Youth in Agriculture Specialist*

### *1. From "Youth Inclusion" to "Youth Intelligence"*

One of the strongest messages emerging from AGRA's recent implementation experience is that many youth programs still begin with assumptions about young people rather than with a deep understanding of who they are, how they live, what they aspire to, and what constraints shape their decisions.

AGRA agrees with AMEA's Youth Empowerment Workstream Position Paper's statement that age alone provides only a limited understanding of youth realities. In AGRA's experience, a young person's opportunities, motivations, and vulnerabilities are also shaped by factors such as geography, education, disability, displacement, climate exposure, gender, family background, and social context.

In this context, youth intelligence refers to the deliberate effort to deeply understand young people **BEFORE** designing interventions intended to support them. Rather than viewing youth as a homogeneous demographic category, AGRA has learned that it is important to recognize the diversity of youth experiences and the need for **DIFFERENTIATED RESPONSES**.

Experiences from the partnership between AGRA and Mastercard Foundation under the Youth Entrepreneurship for the Future of Agriculture (YEFFA) program illustrate the value of this approach. During implementation in countries such as Mali, Mozambique, and Tanzania, the program invested in profiling and segmentation exercises designed to better understand the characteristics and aspirations of different youth populations. These studies explored not only demographic information, but also attitudes toward agriculture, educational experiences, family farming histories, livelihood ambitions, and perceptions of economic opportunity. In Mali, for example, the process identified approximately nine distinct youth profiles, each shaped by different personal histories, social realities, and economic trajectories.

The findings revealed that young people within the same context engage with agriculture in profoundly different ways. Some youth viewed agriculture as a continuation of family identity and tradition, while others associated farming with poverty or social exclusion. Some young people sought entrepreneurial opportunities in value addition, technology, or agribusiness services rather than in primary production itself. Others required entirely different forms of support because they had been affected by conflict, climate shocks, displacement, or disability.

These insights reinforced the importance of differentiated programming. Practitioners noted that interventions designed for one youth segment often fail to resonate with another, even within the same geographic area. A standardized approach may therefore overlook critical realities and unintentionally exclude the very populations programs intend to support.

AGRA's experience in Rwanda further highlighted the risks of mobilizing youth before adequately understanding their needs and aspirations. During early implementation phases, large numbers of youth were mobilized into databases and encouraged to participate in programs before sufficient profiling had taken place. However, implementing partners later discovered that many of the services and interventions available did not align with the expectations, capacities, or interests of those youth populations. This created significant mismatches between youth demand and available opportunities, generating frustration among participants and implementation challenges for program partners.

These experiences suggest that profiling, segmentation, and aspirations mapping should not be treated as optional research activities conducted after program design. Instead, they should be considered foundational components of youth programming itself. Investing time and resources in understanding youth realities at the beginning of a program can significantly improve the relevance, responsiveness, and long-term impact of interventions.

### *2. Ecosystem Readiness Matters*

A second major lesson emerging from AGRA's experience is that understanding youth needs is only one side of the equation. Even when organizations successfully identify youth aspirations and vulnerabilities, they often discover that the surrounding ecosystem lacks the capacity, coordination, or institutional readiness required to respond effectively.

As programs gained deeper insights into youth realities, AGRA realized that existing implementing partners were not always equipped to deliver the specialized or differentiated support required by diverse youth populations. In some cases, local organizations lacked technical expertise or operational scale. In others, financial institutions remained reluctant to engage with young entrepreneurs because of perceived risks, limited collateral, or institutional biases against youth-led enterprises.

This challenge became particularly evident during implementation in Rwanda. As AGRA and its partners deepened their understanding of youth profiles, they realized that many implementing organizations were unable to adequately respond to the diversity of youth needs that had emerged through profiling exercises. Some organizations were designed to deliver standardized interventions rather than adaptive, youth-responsive programming. Others lacked sufficient presence, technical capacity, or operational flexibility.

Initially, efforts had focused heavily on partnering with smaller local organizations in order to strengthen local ownership and build local ecosystem capacity, which was considered an excellent second impact or byproduct of the program. While this objective remained strategically important, AGRA acknowledged that achieving both rapid implementation and long-term institutional strengthening simultaneously proved difficult within the realities of donor timelines and performance expectations.

As a result, implementation approaches evolved. Programs increasingly adopted hybrid partnership models involving larger international organizations working alongside local institutions, government agencies, financial service providers, and private-sector actors. Rather than relying on a single category of partner, programs sought to build **INTERCONNECTED ECOSYSTEMS CAPABLE OF DELIVERING COMPLEMENTARY SERVICES TO YOUNG PEOPLE**.

The Rwanda experience also highlighted the importance of coordination as a systems function. Under the YEFA program, AGRA played an important role connecting financial institutions, implementing organizations, ministries, and youth-focused actors. Partnerships involving Equity Bank Rwanda, local microfinance institutions, and government ministries demonstrated that youth financial inclusion becomes more effective when institutions operate in alignment rather than isolation.

This **COLLABORATIVE APPROACH** helped improve access to finance for youth entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas. However, AGRA also recognized that these efforts represented only partial progress. While targeted investments can support specific program beneficiaries, broader systems transformation requires coordination mechanisms that extend beyond individual donor-funded projects.

These experiences suggest that future youth programming should place greater emphasis on ecosystem readiness assessments, institutional mapping, and coordination mechanisms. Youth empowerment cannot be sustained through isolated interventions alone. It depends on the strength and responsiveness of the broader ecosystem surrounding young people.

### *3. Beyond Short-Term Outputs*

A third theme emerging strongly from AGRA reflections concerns the limitations of short-term programming cycles and output-driven approaches to youth empowerment. AGRA consistently emphasized that meaningful transformation within agrifood systems requires time, experimentation, adaptation, and long-term institutional investment. However, many development programs continue to operate within relatively short funding cycles that prioritize rapid outputs over deeper systems change.

This creates a fundamental **STRUCTURAL TENSION WITHIN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING**. Effective youth programming often requires sequential and iterative processes, beginning with understanding youth realities and ecosystem dynamics before progressing toward pilot interventions, institutional strengthening, scaling strategies, and long-term sustainability. Yet many programs are expected to demonstrate significant numerical results within only a few years.

In practice, these objectives can compete with one another. Building strong local ecosystems requires patience, mentorship, institutional strengthening, and iterative learning, all of which take time. Yet many programs operate under pressure to produce immediate outputs and measurable short-term results.

AGRA noted that while metrics such as numbers of youth trained, mobilized, or financed remain important, they do not necessarily capture systemic transformation. Programs may achieve impressive short-term outputs while failing to strengthen the underlying systems required for long-term success. In some cases, youth enterprises supported during a project period may struggle to survive once funding ends because the surrounding ecosystem remains weak or fragmented.

This concern prompts several organizations to adopt dual-track approaches. On one hand, they continue delivering the outputs required by funding partners. On the other hand, they invest in smaller pilot initiatives designed to test more systemic and sustainable approaches. These pilots often focus on ecosystem coordination, differentiated support models, financial innovation, or institutional strengthening. Although smaller in scale, they provide valuable opportunities for learning, experimentation, and evidence generation.

Importantly, AGRA emphasized the need to **DOCUMENT NOT ONLY SUCCESSES BUT ALSO FAILURES**. The field of youth empowerment in agriculture remains relatively young, and many organizations are still experimenting with models and methodologies. Capturing lessons from unsuccessful interventions is therefore essential for collective sector learning and continuous improvement. Sharing operational challenges, ecosystem mismatches, and implementation failures can help other organizations avoid repeating similar mistakes and accelerate the development of more effective approaches.

AGRA also stressed the importance of leaving behind stronger systems rather than temporary project outputs. Sustainable youth empowerment requires investments that continue generating impact beyond the lifespan of individual projects. This includes strengthening institutions, improving coordination mechanisms, influencing policy environments, reforming cooperative structures, and expanding access to long-term financial services.

Ultimately, these reflections point toward the need for more patient, adaptive, and systems-oriented investment models. Youth empowerment should not be understood simply as a short-term development target, but rather as a long-term process of transforming agrifood systems to become more inclusive, resilient, and responsive to future generations.

## *Interview with Jean Muthamia-Mwenda*
## *SNV Global Lead Youth Entrepreneurship & Employment*

### *1. Integrating the Voice of Young People into System Design*

One of the strongest themes emerging from SNV's experience is the importance of intentionally integrating the voice of young people into the design, implementation, and governance of youth employment and entrepreneurship programs. While many youth-focused initiatives acknowledge participation as an important principle, SNV has increasingly sought to operationalize youth participation through structured mechanisms that influence decision-making throughout the project cycle.

SNV's Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship (YEE) Global Strategy 2030 approaches youth programming as a market-led and systems-oriented process that places young people at the center of ecosystem development. Rather than designing interventions based solely on institutional assumptions or donor priorities, SNV emphasizes the need to understand how young people themselves perceive opportunities, barriers, and aspirations within the markets where programs operate.

This process begins with what SNV describes as youth-informed "**MARKET SCANS**" that include labor market assessments. These assessments serve as the foundation of youth employment programming and aim to identify both systemic barriers and emerging opportunities across sectors and value chains. Importantly, the process incorporates direct engagement with young people through focus group discussions and consultations designed to validate assumptions and capture youth perspectives regarding employment pathways, entrepreneurship opportunities, and livelihood ambitions.

SNV noted that one of the most important functions of these consultations is understanding what young people themselves aspire to become. SNV emphasized that youth cannot simply be "placed into boxes" or directed toward predefined activities. Instead, programming must recognize that young people have different ambitions, motivations, and economic trajectories. Some may pursue entrepreneurship pathways, while others seek wage employment, technical specialization, or hybrid livelihood strategies that combine multiple income sources.

This emphasis on aspirations aligns closely with SNV's broader philosophy of "catching youth early," particularly before perceptions toward agriculture and agribusiness become fixed. Similar to AMEA, SNV recognizes that by late adolescence many young people have already formed strong opinions about agriculture as either a viable economic opportunity or a sector associated with hardship and limited prospects. Early engagement is therefore considered essential not only for introducing agricultural opportunities, but also for reframing agriculture as a business-oriented, innovative, and technology-driven sector.

SNV has also institutionalized youth participation through additional governance and advisory mechanisms. In Rwanda, for example, **YOUTH ADVISORY PANELS** were established as part of project governance structures under Mastercard Foundation-supported Youth Entrepreneurship in Agriculture (YEA-Rwanda) programming. These advisory bodies allow young people to contribute directly to implementation discussions, provide feedback regarding what is working or failing within programs, and influence broader strategic decisions. **MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PLATFORMS** similarly provide spaces where young people engage alongside government actors, private-sector institutions, and implementing partners in discussions about systems challenges and emerging opportunities.

To seek young people's participation, SNV relies on self-selection mechanisms at the project entry level, which allow young people to choose when and where to participate in a meaningful way aligned with their interests and ambitions. Once market scans identify sectors with growth potential and accessible entry points, participants are invited to determine where they wish to engage, whether in horticulture, poultry, agribusiness services, or other value chains. SNV observed that young people are often attracted to opportunities characterized by lower entry barriers, shorter income cycles, and visible market demand.

Beyond self-selection, SNV has also developed what it describes as a **"YOUTH CHAMPION MODEL."** Initially piloted in Tanzania and later institutionalized across several programs, this approach identifies young entrepreneurs and agripreneurs who have already established themselves within particular value chains and who demonstrate confidence, leadership capacity, and market engagement experience. These youth champions are then integrated into advisory panels and governance structures, where they contribute practical insights and influence project implementation. Their farms are also utilized as "learning centers or model farms" by other upcoming cohorts. Youth champions play a crucial role in project sustainability and scalability.

Collectively, these experiences suggest that meaningful youth participation requires more than consultation alone. It requires deliberate structures, methodologies, and governance mechanisms that recognize young people not merely as beneficiaries, but as co-creators and active contributors to systems transformation.

### *2. Designing for Scale and Sustainability from the Beginning*

A second major lesson emerging from SNV's experience concerns the importance of embedding scalability and sustainability considerations into program design from the very beginning of implementation. Rather than treating scale-up as a later-stage activity that occurs once a project demonstrates success, SNV increasingly approaches scalability as a design principle that shapes partnerships, institutional arrangements, and implementation strategies from the outset.

According to SNV, one of the foundations of scalability is consistent **PROJECT QUALITY** and implementation credibility. Programs that demonstrate strong delivery, measurable impact, and value for money are more likely to attract continued donor support and transition into second or third implementation phases. This continuity has been evident in SNV programs operating in countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, where strong implementation performance has resulted in long-term partnerships extending close to a decade.

However, SNV emphasized that sustainability cannot rely solely on donor continuation. Instead, programs are increasingly designed with explicit **EXIT STRATEGIES AND TRANSITION PATHWAYS FROM THE VERY BEGINNING**. SNV noted that one of the central questions asked during project design is: who will eventually take ownership of these interventions once the original program concludes?

This systems-oriented thinking has influenced how partnerships are structured and how implementation responsibilities evolve over time. In several contexts, SNV described a gradual transition away from direct implementation toward facilitation roles, with increasing responsibility transferred to local institutions, government agencies, training centers, cooperatives, and private-sector actors. The intention is not only to deliver short-term project outputs, but to strengthen local systems capable of sustaining and scaling interventions independently over time.

The LIWAY program in Ethiopia provides one example of this approach. Designed as a market systems development initiative, the program seeks to pilot interventions within labor systems, skills, small enterprise, medium and large enterprise systems while simultaneously identifying scalable models that other actors can adopt and expand. Rather than attempting to control long-term implementation directly, the strategy encourages other organizations, institutions, and market actors to “crowd in” around successful approaches, thereby accelerating scale through broader ecosystem participation. SNV also highlighted the importance of **LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS** across programs and donors to avoid duplication and improve resource efficiency. In Ethiopia, for example, efforts are underway to strengthen coordination and learning exchange between different Mastercard Foundation-supported initiatives and other complementary programs operating within the same ecosystem. The objective is to consolidate learning, harmonize partnerships, and create synergies that expand reach and reduce fragmentation.

**GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT** was identified as another critical factor influencing scalability and sustainability. SNV emphasized that national regional and local governments often play decisive roles in institutionalizing successful models and integrating them into existing systems. In Zambia, for instance, technical and vocational education institutions working through the Ministry of Education expressed interest in integrating SNV-supported curricula into formal TVET systems. Although institutional integration processes can be slow and bureaucratic, such partnerships create opportunities for long-term sustainability and large-scale replication beyond the lifespan of individual donor-funded projects.

These experiences reinforce the idea that scaling successful youth interventions requires intentional design choices from the earliest stages of programming. Scalability is not simply a matter of expanding activities geographically or increasing participant numbers. It depends on building systems ownership, institutional alignment, partnership ecosystems, and implementation models capable of surviving beyond individual projects and funding cycles.

### 3. *Measuring Long-Term Transformation Beyond Jobs Created*

A third major reflection emerging from SNV’s experience concerns the challenge of measuring meaningful and sustainable impact in youth employment and entrepreneurship programming. While traditional indicators such as jobs created, businesses established, or income increases remain important, practitioners increasingly recognize that these metrics alone provide only a partial understanding of long-term transformation.

SNV currently utilizes global harmonized indicators across its Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship portfolio, including frameworks aligned with the International Labour Organization’s decent jobs standards. These indicators help track employment outcomes, enterprise creation, income generation, and broader economic participation across programs.

However, SNV also acknowledged that youth empowerment extends beyond immediate labor-market outcomes. As programs mature and long-term impact assessments become possible, practitioners are increasingly interested in understanding how youth trajectories evolve years after project participation.

Impact assessment conducted on earlier regional programs implemented in Rwanda, Tanzania, and Mozambique have provided important insights into these longer-term dynamics. These assessments suggest that while not all participants ultimately establish large-scale enterprises or remain within the same economic pathways, many continue applying the technical, entrepreneurial, and life skills acquired during program participation. Technical training and business development support were identified as particularly valuable because participants continued utilizing these competencies in multiple dimensions of their lives, including household financial management, business operations, employment transitions, and community engagement:

Beyond individual economic outcomes, SNV also observed broader forms of systems influence emerging among program participants over time. Some young people became more engaged in policy discussions, local leadership processes, or advocacy efforts related to land access, enterprise development, and youth participation within their communities. Others contributed to shifts in social norms and perceptions regarding youth entrepreneurship and agribusiness opportunities.

These observations have encouraged SNV to explore broader measurement frameworks that capture dimensions such as resilience, agency, confidence, decision-making power, financial wellbeing, and long-term livelihood sustainability. SNV emphasized that while economic indicators can fluctuate due to external market conditions or political changes, capabilities such as agency, confidence, and adaptive capacity often remain with participants long after projects conclude.

SNV therefore increasingly views youth empowerment not simply as a short-term employment challenge, but as a longer-term process of strengthening young people's ability to navigate economic systems, influence their environments, and build resilient livelihoods over time.

This evolving perspective also reinforces the importance of long-term investments, learning and impact assessment. As more youth programs mature and participants move into adulthood, organizations are beginning to gain deeper insights into how interventions shape long-term economic trajectories, leadership roles, and systems transformation processes. These learnings are likely to become increasingly important as the sector continues refining approaches to youth employment and entrepreneurship within agrifood systems and beyond.

## Conclusions and Implications for the Youth Empowerment Agenda

Although AGRA and SNV operate through different institutional models and implementation strategies, their reflections reveal a striking convergence around several emerging principles that may help shape the next generation of youth empowerment programming.

The first principle is that youth are not a homogeneous group. Both organizations emphasized the importance of moving beyond demographic categories and investing in a deeper understanding of youth aspirations, motivations, constraints, and opportunities. Whether through AGRA's profiling and segmentation work or SNV's market scans and participatory diagnostics, both organizations argue that successful programming begins with understanding young people before designing interventions for them.

The second principle is that youth empowerment is fundamentally a systems challenge. Both interviews highlighted the limitations of approaches that focus exclusively on building youth skills or supporting individual enterprises. Sustainable outcomes require functioning ecosystems that include financial institutions, market actors, government agencies, service providers, educational institutions, and community structures capable of responding to youth needs. Building these systems requires intentional coordination, partnership development, and institutional strengthening.

The third principle is that sustainability and scale must be designed from the beginning rather than treated as end-stage considerations. Both organizations stressed the importance of thinking early about ownership, institutionalization, government engagement, and pathways for replication. Successful scale-up depends less on expanding project activities and more on creating conditions that allow other actors to adopt, adapt, and sustain successful approaches.

Finally, both interviews point toward a broader shift in how success is understood. While employment, enterprise creation, and income generation remain important objectives, practitioners are increasingly interested in measuring resilience, agency, leadership, confidence, participation, and long-term livelihood trajectories. These dimensions may ultimately provide a more complete picture of youth empowerment than short-term output indicators alone.

Taken together, these reflections reinforce the central argument of the AMEA Position Paper: youth empowerment is not a single intervention, program model, or pathway. It is an ongoing process of enabling young people to identify opportunities, exercise agency, build livelihoods, and contribute meaningfully to the transformation of agrifood systems. The lessons emerging from AGRA and SNV suggest that future progress will depend not only on expanding existing approaches, but also on deepening our understanding of youth, strengthening surrounding ecosystems, and embracing longer-term perspectives on change.

PANEL THEME 1

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## Theme 1: Understanding Youth Better

### AGRA

- Youth Intelligence
- Profiling & Segmentation
- Aspirations Mapping
- Different Youth Profiles

### SNV

- Voice of Young People
- Market Scans
- Focus Groups
- Youth Advisory Panels

PANEL THEME 2

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## Theme 2: Systems Matter

### AGRA

- Ecosystem Readiness
- Institutional Capacity
- Coordination Functions
- Ecosystem Mapping

### SNV

- Design for Scale
- Exit Strategies
- Crowding-In
- Government Integration

PANEL THEME 3

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## Theme 3: Looking Beyond Outputs

### AGRA

- Beyond Short-Term Outputs
- Learning from Failure
- Systems Transformation
- Institutional Strengthening

### SNV

- Beyond Jobs Created
- Long-Term Impact Assessment
- Agency & Resilience
- Leadership & Influence