

# **SUN Business Network Women and Youth Empowerment Strategy**

## About SBN

Since 2010, the SUN Movement has inspired a new way of working collaboratively to end malnutrition, in all its forms. With the governments of 65 SUN Countries in the lead, it unites people – from civil society, the United Nations, donors, businesses and researchers – in a collective effort to improve nutrition. Established in 2012, the SUN Business Network (SBN) is the private sector branch of the SUN Movement and aims to support businesses in growing the role they play in improving nutrition and to support SUN countries in developing national business engagement strategies. SBN is co-convened by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Miriam Shindler, Noora-Lisa Aberman, Christina Nyhus Dhillon, Stella Nordhagen, Ritta Sabbas Shine, Emily Heneghan Kasoma, Hannah Rowlands, Yetunde Olarewaju, Mohammad Hemayet Hossain, Mahmud Hasan, Sok Chea Hak, Maureen Muketha, Thierry Nohasiarivelo, Voahangy Ramaromisa, Hasina Ralay, Lilly Musaya, Linny Msowoya, Catia Manguene, Ivy King-Harry, Tomisin Odunmbaku, Uduak Igbeka, Babajide Oluwase, Ifeoluwa Olatayo, Toyin, Muhammad Usman Ali, Akanksha Hulangamuwa, Gerda Verburg, Poornima Rodrigo, William Zach Knechtel, Renee de Jong, Shea Wickramasingha, Kate Olender, Albertine van Wolfswinkel, Florentine Oberman, Sophie Healy-Thow, Azeez Salawu, Taylor Quinn, Maame Manful, Marijke Hummel, Seble Feleke, Hana Yemane Wodajo and Manasseh Miruka for their helpful feedback in the process of developing this publication.

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**Women and Youth's  
Empowerment Strategy for  
the SUN Business Network (SBN)**

# 1. Introduction

Since 2010, the SUN Movement has inspired a new way of working collaboratively to end malnutrition, in all its forms. With the governments of SUN Countries in the lead, it unites people—from civil society, the United Nations, donors, businesses and researchers—in a collective effort to improve nutrition. The SUN Business Network (SBN) is four global networks of the SUN movement. It is the private sector platform of the SUN movement and is convened by the World Food Program (WFP) and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). As a part of the multi-stakeholder approach to nutrition embraced by SUN Countries, the SUN Business Network (SBN) was established in 2012 to convene and mobilize the private sector to help reduce malnutrition in all its forms. SBN has followed a grassroots model, with countries driving demand for the platform and shaping what it looks like based on their own national contexts. By the end of 2020, 18 country networks were fully established, and more than 26 others were in development. By early 2022, these national networks had over 1400 members, and at the global level, 25 Multi-National Corporations were signed up as global members. The SBN engages with the private sector, government, and relevant stakeholders to work with and support businesses especially — but not limited to small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — to take joint, practical actions that shape sustainable local food systems and accelerate contributions to improved nutrition.

The Global SBN 3.0 strategy emphasizes the need to engage with youth and women to promote their empowerment by unlocking opportunities offered by business and other networks to encourage business growth, employment and skill development that are women and youth-inclusive.

This strategy defines “empowerment” as a strategic process by which vulnerable people have the ability to make life choices, expand their aspirations, and strengthen their voice<sup>1</sup>.

As one of the world’s leading private sector focused nutrition initiatives, the SBN has a significant opportunity to utilize its network, membership and national and multi-national partners to empower youth and women in a more intentional way, including but also beyond entrepreneurship, for greater contribution to the urgent actions needed to transform food systems.

Women and youth remain vulnerable due to unequal access to economic opportunities, health services and nutrition and have additional barriers to increasing their well-being. They are often exposed to socio-cultural barriers that hinder their equitable access to decent

<sup>1</sup> Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment - Kabeer - 1999 - Development and Change - Wiley Online Library

## Box 1: Youth Pledge at the Food Systems Summit 2021

“Young people like me of today’s digital age are perhaps more switched-on and connected than earlier generations, but we also deal with many new challenges; fewer jobs in the market, schooling dropouts, COVID-19, climate change anxiety, mental health issues, and many others. We are also increasingly facing a rising burden of multiple forms of malnutrition—undernutrition, overweight and obesity”.

“We know that we have power over our decisions and are increasingly exercising our ability to influence, particularly in low- to middle-income countries where we make up a good percentage of the population”.

Quotes by Sophie Healy-Thow (GAIN/SBN).

work and job opportunities, especially in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs<sup>2</sup>). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the challenges and disproportionately affected micro and small businesses, and most of these businesses are led by women and young people who have limited capacity and resources to absorb the pandemic shocks<sup>3,4</sup>. These women and older adolescent girls (15-17 years old) are additionally at-risk of malnutrition, particularly if they are pregnant or lactating, which can lead to adverse consequences for their children and perpetuate an inter-generational cycle of malnutrition<sup>5,6</sup>.

Empowering both youth and women aligns with the SBN commitments at the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit (N4G) to engage over 3,000 SMEs by 2024 and identify sustainable support to their businesses . Also, unlocking the potential of youth is timely and builds on the momentum that the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 facilitated by involving over 66,000 young people to deliberate and deliver tangible, transformative changes to food systems<sup>8</sup>. In response, a group of youth

<sup>2</sup> Micro enterprises: comprised of <10 employees; Small <50 employees; and Medium <250 employees

<sup>3</sup> Gender equality and the empowerment of women and youth | UNIDO

<sup>4</sup> Evidence\_review\_of\_women\_led\_small\_and\_medium\_sized\_enterprises\_SMEs\_before\_during\_and\_after\_covid19\_examining\_barriers\_and\_opportunities.pdf (gatesfoundation.org)

<sup>5</sup> Marcoux A. Sex differentials in under-nutrition: a look at survey evidence. Pop Devt Rev 2002; 28(2): 275-84.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition. Maternal nutrition and the intergenerational cycle of growth failure. Chapter 3 in: 6th report on the World Nutrition Situation. Geneva: United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> <https://sunbusinessnetwork.org/sbn-pledges-at-the-tokyo-nutrition-for-growth-summit/>

<sup>8</sup> Act4Food » Young people must have a central role in the transformation of food systems (actions4food.org)

committed to raise awareness for healthy, nutritious and sustainable diets as their number one priority<sup>9</sup>.

This strategy leverages existing national and global SBN structures and their wide range of dynamics in working with the private sector in food systems networks. It aims to support the implementation of SBN activities with flexibility and innovation to create more opportunities and increase the reach to youth and women-led businesses or that drive women and youth employment and/or skill-building. It also aims to do so by extending the reach to the much larger proportion of youth and women working in the informal economy. The development of this strategy was guided and informed by extensive consultations with several national and global SBN coordinators, country teams, multinational members and youth and women entrepreneurs.

As a closing introductory note, most SBN networks are relatively young themselves, and some still very much in development. While some networks are comparatively well established and lever a rich local business ecosystem, others are less developed due to a variety of factors including the relative lack of existing business network density and strength or the severity of compounding crises including covid, climate shocks or political instability. In many cases, SBNs have needed to focus on building a solid footing by initiating activities that often did not, and could not, focus on women and youth-centric approaches per se. This is not to be seen as a limitation, and the timing of this strategy and guides can help build on the existing groundwork and readiness of each country network, adapted to its specific conditions, resources and needs.

## 2. Purpose of this Strategy

### SBN Positioning

The SBN 3.0 strategy highlights the empowerment of women and youth **entrepreneurs** among cross-cutting priority areas needed to effectively implement its strategic approach to reduce malnutrition in all its forms. However, the focus of this strategy goes beyond entrepreneurship to include deliberate strategies to support the creation of equitable employment opportunities for youth and women, along with supporting their development and filling the gaps in their ability to launch and sustain businesses or find non-precarious employment within the agriculture and food sectors, to deliver positive nutrition to communities. The idea is to encourage SBN coordinators and their teams to target women

and youth-led enterprises and the businesses that aim to deliberately hire women and youth. Thoughtful engagement with women and youth (female and male) in an inclusive approach will contribute to sustainable efforts to harness their potential in nutritious food value chains while promoting gender equality. The SBN teams can benefit from guidance on how to tailor their support services to women's and youth's specific needs, challenges and realities on the ground— as well as by adding an explicit focus on the much larger cohort of women and youth **employees**.

A key element of this strategy is to build upon existing processes, structures and knowledge gained throughout the SUN movement over several years. The aim is not to re-invent what has already proven effective, but to leverage and bolt onto what exists - for example by harnessing the energy and knowledge of youth and women leaders across SUN governance structures.

### Percentage of employment in the informal sector in SBN countries

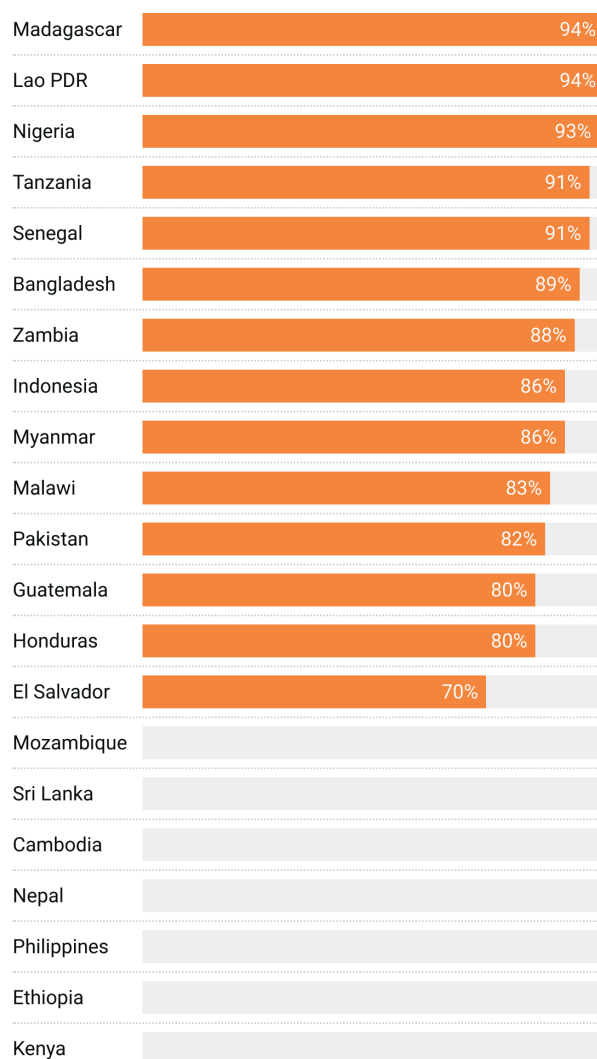


Figure 1: Percentage of employment in the informal sector in SBN countries

<sup>9</sup> Act4Food » Youth Declaration on Food Systems Transformation (actions4food.org)

## Informal sector – should SBNs dive in?

Most employment in SBN countries takes place in the “informal” sector, as shown in the table on the right. This is especially true for the agriculture sector, where it is up to 98% of the workforce. In the agri-processing and selling sector, it is over 80%<sup>10</sup>.

The percentage of women and youth involved in informal work is at least as high or higher than the average for the overall working population in each country (See figure 1 on the previous page). However, SBN's so far have focused almost exclusively on **formally registered businesses**.

**From an impact perspective, it is thus essential to create a clear policy for engagement with informal sector SBN candidates.** This is clearly a choice that needs to be made and balanced by each SBN in terms

<sup>10</sup> ILO, 2018

### Box 2: Definition of “women”

Women's empowerment in SBNs will target females 18 years and older. This age group (adult females) is in line with the priority target for the SBN's nutritious and safe food programs. Though women entrepreneurs and workers are present at every stage of the food system, they are among the most marginalized groups, including in their vulnerability to malnutrition in all its forms. The existing gender and cultural norms within households, communities, workplaces, and food markets have an impact on the roles and rights around the distribution of resources and responsibilities between men and women.

### Box 3: Definition of “youth”

Youth empowerment in SBN will target males and females between 15 to 28-29 years old, with flexibility for older youth in certain specific contexts. This is to accommodate the different definitions of youth by countries and entities that are beyond the 15-24 years of the age that UN organizations use to define youths. Moreover, UNICEF/The Convention on Rights of the Child recognizes any age up to 18 years as a child. The age group for youth is more fluid than for other fixed age-groups, and different approaches need to be adopted to help empower different youth age brackets. For example, the needs and aspirations of a 17-year-old will be quite different than that of a 27-year-old.

of available resources (including time), and other partners and programs that can be leveraged.

Given that informal businesses are harder to identify and reach than formal businesses, especially in rural areas, a practical idea could be to aim to offer services to a modest target number in the first years, which could grow over time as SBN's gain more experience. From a practical standpoint, membership conditions to be part of SBNs would need to be modified to not only accept but encourage successful informal businesses to join the network. Filtering candidate organizations could be based on years in business, number of employees, profitability and location, working first with urban businesses, then developing an outreach model to rural businesses.

In addition, in countries with a young and growing population, which includes most African countries, most new jobs will continue to be created in the informal sector, thus creating further opportunities to engage with youth.

Informal services within food systems by self-employed people and household enterprises are the fastest growing employment category in Africa today (Fox & Gandhi 2021). These informal businesses include retail trading and selling a broad range of food products and fast foods almost exclusively to households in small kiosks, in market stalls, or by the side of the road.

Most individuals and households start an informal business not because of entrepreneurial drive but because of a shortage of wage jobs in the economy. They face high risks from competitors, who can easily enter the sector, and their businesses are poorly capitalized.

Thereby the difference support from SBN's can make. A counterargument that has been made by SBN's is that informal businesses are by definition riskier and more ephemeral, thus reducing incentives of the SBN to invest time and energy in them. There is no evidence to support this keeping all small businesses in SBN countries profitable and sustainable is equally challenging, whether formal or informal, and coherent and clear evaluation criteria to evaluate applicants remain of primary importance for both formal and informal businesses.

## Deliberate focus

Youth and women are groups that usually have limited access to finance, assets and capital to invest in their businesses or who encounter barriers to obtaining and keeping non-precarious work. They are two separate target groups and often present with varied definitions and age brackets in different contexts. This strategy acknowledges an overlap and similar features when working with people described as “women” and

“youth”. The definitions vary in different contexts, entities, countries and settings. For example, in some societies a female youth is referred to as woman if she is married or becomes pregnant, regardless of age. In the context of this strategy, women and youth are defined in Boxes 2 and 3 beside.

### Value addition

A deliberate shift of SBN support services toward more women and youth-led businesses and businesses that employ them necessitates more targeted investments to empower them and scale their capacity. In line with the SBN's emphasis on a demand-driven, ‘bottom-up’ focus and national ownership, this strategy emphasizes the empowerment of women and youth by leveraging the latent power embedded in existing global and country strategies. This strategy outlines distinct areas of action driven by insights provided by SBN stakeholders.

## 3. Guiding Principles and Strategic Objectives

The SBN has developed principles of engagement<sup>11</sup> that businesses must adhere to in order to be accepted and retain membership. None of these principles specifically mention women or youth, and a question for the country SBN's is whether they should be formalized as Principles. This would allow these crosscutting issues to not only be “good to have” but “must have”, which would increase the chances that they will be seriously adhered to.

Specific to the SBN's Women and Youth Strategy, the following additional Principles are proposed:

1. **Intentional focus** on empowering both women and youth entrepreneurs and employees along the food systems value chain to accelerate transformation

<sup>11</sup> SBN Country Network Principles of Engagement (sunbusinessnetwork.org)

and positive influence on the food environment and supply, and the consumption of safe and healthy diets.

2. Amplifying the **participation** and voice of women and youth in food systems, and advocacy on their critical potential for increased nutrition impact, including using SBN platforms to raise awareness of their needs and possibly formalize their representation in SBN working groups or committees as a set % of members.

3. Convening business networks in an **inclusive** manner, recognizing the wide variation and context-specific situations of youth and women entrepreneurs — as well as employees — to support country nutrition priorities.

### Overall Strategic Objectives

Building on the high-level objectives outlined in the SBN 3.0 Strategy, and weighing and synthesizing feedback received from a wide array of key informants, this strategy establishes three objectives to guide country SBN teams (see Table 1 on the next page):

1. **SO1: Increase the participation of youth and women in advocacy** – to support platforms and forums that promote and increase the voice of youth and women in relaying constraints they face in nutritious food systems and supporting them to actively participate in developing solutions
2. **SO2: Learn from implementing context-specific empowerment approaches for youth and women-led businesses and workers** – to use practical guides on how to increase youth and women membership, and nurture and leverage linkages with relevant partners for nutrition impact and business solutions.
3. **SO3: Deliberate engagement with youth and women entrepreneurs and employees** – to increase participation and opportunities for youth and women entrepreneurs who are passionate to invest in nutritious food systems and/or businesses that believe it worthy to invest in youth and women staff. In addition, efforts to reach out to and attract qualified informal businesses is key to expanding scope and impact to reach the 90% of women and youth who work in this sector.





## Empowering women and youth in nutritious food value chains to achieve SBN 3.0 Strategic Objectives

	S01	S02	S03
Strategic Objectives	<p>To support platforms and forums that promote and increase the voice of youth and women in nutritious food systems.</p> <p><b>SBN Strategic Objective 1:</b></p> <p>Supportive SUN country governments lead, integrate, facilitate and enable private sector action to support attainment of national nutritional goals, including the creation of a supportive policy.</p>	<p>To use practical guides on how to increase youth and women memberships, and nurture and leverage linkages with relevant partners for nutrition impact and business solutions.</p> <p><b>SBN Strategic Objective 2(Linked to SUN SO4):</b></p> <p>National, collaborative mechanisms connect and support businesses networks, to support businesses, collaborate and to define and track together practical action for nutrition, with all relevant business and non-business stakeholders.</p>	<p>To increase participation and opportunities for youth and women entrepreneurs who are passionate to invest in nutritious food systems.</p> <p><b>SBN Strategic Objective 3:</b></p> <p>Empowered private sector becomes a long-term sustainable development partner in nutrition, and are willing and able to invest in products &amp; practices that contribute to ending malnutrition.</p>
Priority Actions  (See specific separate sections for Women and Youth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence and engagement on policy decisions and reviews;</li> <li>• Fostering increased opportunities, platforms to share good practices empowerment and experiences;</li> <li>• Partnerships to provide more nutrition friendly workplaces;</li> <li>• Opportunities and exposure to learn from peers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt context-specific instruments, approach and communication channels to engage and link more women and youth entrepreneurs and employees to SBN networks.</li> <li>• Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to map existing constraints and needs to leverage and support business performance and nutrition.</li> <li>• Track and monitor the outcomes and progress on the support services provided.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted investments or service supports to entrepreneurs and employees on finance, market linkage, technical and job aids, mentorship.</li> <li>• Deliberate programs target minimum of 50-80% women and youth 50/50 (girls and boys) as aspirational/gold standard.</li> <li>• Focus on context-specific situations to expand membership to informal and small-scale businesses.</li> </ul>

	S01	S02	S03
Outcomes	Increased and promoted advocacy on empowerment of youth and women entrepreneurs as well as employees in nutritious value chains.	Networking and convening that reflects increased participation and engagement of youth and women-led businesses and employees.	Increased share of youth and women supported on business registration and their commitments towards local food systems; youth and women entrepreneurs receiving resources and opportunities in growing their businesses.
Metrics	<p><b>Business performance</b> i.e., # of advocacy opportunities or services provided to support businesses on workplace nutrition.</p> <p><b>Nutrition impact</b> i.e., % of women and youth led- businesses making verified progress on their commitments towards contributions to local food systems.</p> <p><b>Enabling environment</b> i.e., share of women and youth led- businesses accessing financial, technical, emotional and managerial supports; % of network members that are women/youth entrepreneurs; % of network members that represent youth/women entrepreneurs; number of advocacy and experience sharing events; etc.</p>		
Partnerships	Synergies with strategic partners— government, large companies, donors, academia, research, civil societies, regional and community organizations — to deliver support services on financing, skill acquisition, technical assistance, technology, motivational trainings and mentorship as well as cross-learnings on empowering women and youth in food systems.		

Table 1: Strategic Framework for Women and Youth Empowerment with the SBNs

## 4. Specifics for a Women's Empowerment Strategy

### Women Entrepreneurs

According to research and documented program experiences of business networks, women entrepreneurs and women-owned and women-led businesses encounter multiple barriers and challenges in their business<sup>12,13,14,15,16,17</sup>. This is summarized in Figure 2 below:

#### Gender norms and biases

- Gender inequality, biases, cultural and social norms often results in contexts that are favoring men and/or boys over women and/or girls. The biases are associated to different cultural attitudes, discrimination and disadvantage treatments to women and girls.
- Time constraints to effectively participate in business networks (formal and informal). Women often engage in traditional household chores and care giving jobs which limit their availability and time to fully engage in the business network opportunities and outcomes.

#### Limited access to financing

- Generally, women have less access to formal finance. Only about 14-19 per cent of International Finance Corporation (IFC) loans are issued to women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)<sup>18</sup>.
- In certain contexts, women have restricted access to collateral to obtain financial services and products that respond to their specific business needs due to existing gender inequality and cultural norms. In some context, rights to land and property are often registered to the household or men.

#### Limited scale of business operation

- Existing gender inequality, discouraging social and cultural attitudes are often associated to the smaller scale and informal nature of women's entrepreneurship. Small scale of businesses often hinders the capacity to meet the formal requirements of large partners and networks. In developing countries, most of these small businesses are owned or led by women.
- Women and girls often engage in home-based businesses due to the increased responsibilities for domestic care giving. The locations of home-based businesses are often far from input markets and limits opportunities for networking.

#### Limited access to information

- Women entrepreneurs are disadvantaged or discriminated in accessing context-specific information that suits their contexts and situations through formal business networks.
- Women entrepreneurs in remote and rural areas often have challenges with internet access and limitation of online business information.

#### Limited participation and resources

- Women are more excluded or disadvantaged than men to access and participate in formal business networks. The constraints to engage in formal networks hinder timely access to information, business solutions, opportunities to acquire skills for income growth and nutrition impact.
- Women often go into self-employment to better manage their work-life balance. The networks of women entrepreneurs are generally smaller and less diverse than those of their male counterparts. This means they benefit less from the sharing of information and resources.

#### Emergency and pandemic situations

- Women experienced compounded challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The impact was greater on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) mostly owned and led by women. The SMEs have less capacity to absorb the disruption to supply chain and to economic crisis.
- The challenges are more pronounced in certain business contexts such as self-employed women, informal small, micro-businesses and women entrepreneurs in food agri-value chain. Women bear the brunt of increased pressures of emergency situations at home.

Figure 2: key constraints encountered by women entrepreneurs

<sup>12</sup> GAIN Research and Recommendations-integrating-gender-equity-into-business-networks-for-nutrition.pdf

<sup>13</sup> UN Women: Empowering women through public procurement and enabling inclusive growth | Publications | UN Women – Head-quarters

<sup>14</sup> IFC (2014). Women-Owned SMEs: A Business Opportunity for Financial Institutions. [www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/44b004b2-ed46-48fc-8adeaa0f485069a1/WomenOwnedSMEs+Report-Final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kiiZZDZ](http://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/44b004b2-ed46-48fc-8adeaa0f485069a1/WomenOwnedSMEs+Report-Final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kiiZZDZ)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/smes/Policy-Brief-on-Women-s-Entrepreneurship.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> UN Women Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs): SMEs-f.pdf

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/regional-programme/Strengthening\\_Womens\\_Entrepreneurship\\_ASEAN.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/regional-programme/Strengthening_Womens_Entrepreneurship_ASEAN.pdf)

## Priority actions for women's empowerment

Based on the SBN 3.0 Strategic priorities, the overall strategic objectives outlined in table 1 and feedback from SBN's and other key informants, priority actions for women are recommended below.

Women's empowerment needs to dwell on specific approaches to address identified key issues such as gender norms, access to finance, dynamics around work-life balance, perception of taking risks and confidence building in both business, work and life.

Actions to address existing gender barriers and to unlock the potential of women as entrepreneurs, employees, consumers and actors in the food systems for both income growth and nutrition impact can be enabled through networks and partnerships. It is assumed that if women have equal access, rights and opportunities, their contribution towards nutritious food value chains will increase nutrition impact to themselves, their families and to the wider community.

## Actions by network members

As a call to action to SBN membership, national SBN teams should task its members as follows:

1. Businesses and entrepreneurs should adopt woman and youth-sensitive or friendly hiring policies and practices (guided by SBNs). **Example:** encouraging women and youth to apply during recruitments.
2. Businesses should implement workforce and workplace nutrition initiatives that safeguard the nutritional needs of women. **Example:** promoting breastfeeding-friendly workplace policies; implementation of safe water, sanitation and hygiene practices at workplaces and marketplaces.
3. All members should focus on youth and women in developing commitments, adapted to their current resources and structures. This includes developing SMART membership commitments that support women / youth empowerment. **Example:** Sensitization of members on existing gender issues and women's rights during onboarding to inform their commitments on nutrition.



## Actions through networks

In line with the strategic objectives and to address the existing constraints and challenges that women encounter, national SBNs should focus on the following actions:

1. Deliberate targeted investments or services to support women in business. This action will aim at increasing their participation and commitments in food systems. **Examples:** program interventions targeting minimum of 50-80% women; women-only events or activities within the network; women sub-national committees, local chapters.
2. Create awareness on gender issues and women rights to the SBN team especially during onboarding of members. To ensure accountability, the SBN country team should be gender compliance in its recruitment policy. **Example:** Gender balance in staff structure; gender expert among SBN team members.
3. Intentionally increase opportunities and platforms to engage with more women and to share good practices and experiences. Explore the roles of community members and civil society organization for women's empowerment and how they can contribute. **Examples:** Specific pitch competition for women; motivational trainings or events with women/gender friendly themes or focus.
4. Adopt good practices on how to expand membership to informal and small-scale businesses. This requires risk management plans, and flexibility on existing structures to accommodate active engagement with women-led businesses (micro and small) in informal settings. **Examples:** Lessons learned from female small-holder farmers in agri-food business; learnings from home-grown school meal programs; in some contexts, value added product developments is an effective entry point for engaging women in business.
5. Adopt context-specific instruments, approach and communication channels to engage with women. **Examples:** Mixed communication channels including social media, combined scouting methods to expand the reach to women.
6. Create opportunities for women to learn from peers and motivational trainings. **Examples:** Mentorship programs or trainings organized in close collaboration with female champions or gender focal points.
7. Connect with input and output market actors and explore sessions with male household heads to discuss and create awareness on gender issues.
8. Knowledge management — track and monitor the outcomes and progress on support services provided to benefit women as entrepreneurs, employees and consumers of nutritious products. Also, capture members' age as key data during onboarding for tracking disaggregated monitoring metrics. **Examples:** Document baseline information during the membership onboarding process as benchmark for monitoring progress; integrate immediate feedback and lessons learned into ongoing programs and design of new programs; generate lessons learned or knowledge products from the implementation experiences of women-led businesses in SBN networks.

## Actions through partnerships

Based on SBN's operational approach involving multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral approaches, national SBN teams can leverage synergies with relevant partners to support women and youth empowerment by:

1. Fostering collaboration with relevant stakeholders such as large companies, government, regional, national, sub-national and community organizations networks to promote more nutrition friendly workplace for employees. **Examples:** Advocacy to promote and protect breastfeeding rights of women in the workplace; healthy eating at work; workplace wellness and nutrition friendly environments including safe water, sanitation and hygiene practices.
2. Influence and engagement on policy decisions and reviews to promote women's empowerment in food systems and advocate for a seat at the table for rural women given their majority representation in informal businesses including agriculture. **Examples:** Collaboration with SUN donors, UN agencies, National Nutrition Councils or associations; Engagement with Banks and lending institutions to support collateral-free loans or reduced interest rates; Collaboration with the Government on its finance facilities to support new women-led businesses; engagement with Chambers of Commerce at country level.
3. Identify and collaborate with existing and new partners at national and sub-national levels to map existing constraints and needs to support women's nutrition as well as their businesses and as employees. **Examples:** SUN civil society networks, NGOs, women associations, community and religious groups; large companies that produce or market fortified and micronutrient rich food products.
4. Other relevant partners including Departments of Women and Child Affairs; Investors and Donors; Researchers and Academia and gender/women employment-focused business platforms.

5. Leverage the projects that SBN multi-national corporation (MNC) partners (e.g. DSM, Cargill, etc) are already working on to harness and support women's potential as business leaders or employees by teaming up with them on specific areas in the food systems value chain. This can also be leveraged indirectly via male-led household enterprises with which the MNC's have built relationships with, to advocate for their female household members' empowerment within the business.

## 5. Specifics for a Youth's Empowerment Strategy

### Not so NEET

Worldwide, there are 1.2 billion youths (15-24 years) accounting for 16% of the global population<sup>18</sup>, but they are a significant and growing proportion of the working-age population. The proportion of youth is projected to remain stable in most regions of the world until 2030, however Africa has been and continues to be a driver of a "youth bulge" with the attendant challenges, and opportunities, this entails.

Among the world's youth, 21% are currently not in employment, education or training (referred to as "NEET"<sup>19</sup>). The cohort of youth who are NEET are a particularly vulnerable group as they are generally operating at a much lower level than their innate potential, which further reduces their chances of finding stable long-term work. The blended average also obscures the fact that young women are more than twice as likely as young men to be jobless and not in the educational system (over 30 % of young women are NEET, compared to 13 % of young men), meaning that they are also doubly challenged, both as women, and as youth.

Figure 3 lists several SBN countries and their equivalent NEET rates. Again, note that the female rate is more than twice the male rate on average. This is important since NEET youth are particularly challenging to effectively reach with messaging and support unless they are specifically targeted, but in some countries, female NEET youth rates can be as high as 60% of all female youth (e.g., Zambia). Countries with relatively lower NEET rates such as Ethiopia may appear to be relatively youth-friendly environments, but in many cases most youth in employment are significantly under-employed or are expected to remain at home to take on domestic duties, and will not be recognized as

NEET, even if they are far from making a living, or any wage.

### Current SBN experience and approach to Youth Empowerment

Although the SUN movement includes several dynamic youth initiatives that aim to increase their voice, leadership and participation, the SBN's have very little experience at leveraging and/or empowering youth per se, although indirectly all country SBN's highlighted the "pitch competitions" as being effective platforms for integrating youth into programming. This however reaches a very limited number of youth entrepreneurs and is focused on "winners" rather than the ecosystem as a whole. Ways to expand the model to many more youth should thus be a goal, for example by using inexpensive and readily available technological tools and processes.

#### SBN countries and their equivalent NEET rates

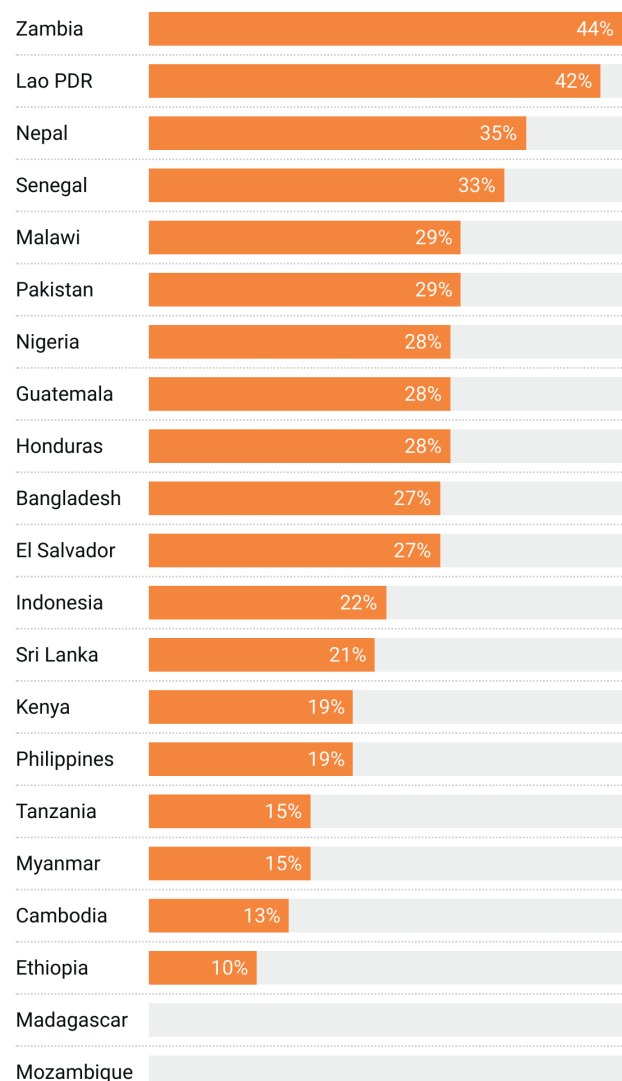


Figure 3: SBN countries and their equivalent NEET rates

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, World Population Prospects 2017, available from <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>.

<sup>19</sup> Labour market access - a persistent challenge for youth around the world (ilo.org)

## What we heard

Table 2 below presents insights gleaned from interviews with selected country SBN teams, youth focal points and partners on issues related to youth empowerment and engagement within the SBN.

In summary, the SBN team reported that:

- Others, such as government and NGOs, were often involved in youth empowerment programs – albeit mainly for training - and should be leveraged.
- The definition of “youth” does not always align with government definitions, thus could create targeting issues and
- SBN’s had not develop youth-specific programming.

**Table 2: Insights on youth empowerment in SBN countries**

### Kenya

- Youth empowerment means providing choices via making the industry more attractive, funding for start-ups
- No formal SBN membership focus on youth

### Malawi

- Youth defined as up to 35 years
- Youth biggest challenge to business is no collateral so they need support for access to finance
- NGOs and government are already providing a lot of trainings and capacity building, so SBN should go beyond this to include supports on financing and market linkages

### Mozambique

- No direct programs or activities for youth
- No focus on age in providing service supports to SBN members

### Cambodia

- Legal definition is up to 35 years, but believes focus on 15-24 years is right
- Youth have higher levels of education than prior generations, so they may have different expectations in business

### Bangladesh

- Ministry of Industries runs the SBN, so good link for youth-focused jobs

### Nigeria

- Members are densely located in Lagos, mainly SMEs, no clear youth focus, nor age limit for SBN membership
- Mentorship from “people who have been there” and have the experience is invaluable to youth and should be promoted by SBN

### Pakistan

- Government provides some finance program for university graduates to start their own business. So SBN could piggy-back on this
- There is deliberate youth representation in SBN events
- Youth internships is viewed as an opportunity to gain experience

### Sri Lanka

- Youth have very limited interest in foods systems careers. The SBN can provide support to promote and create awareness.

### Madagascar

- The recently developed SBN 3.0 5-year strategy had no specific youth component. The SBN team should explore opportunities within the strategy to support youth.

## How to “pitch” Youth Empowerment to the SBNs?

SBN coordinators and their teams often reported that businesses perceive youth as being too inexperienced and undependable to bother specifically targeting them as staff since it would be unprofitable.

As potential entrepreneurs, youth themselves often identified their lack of experience, contacts and financing to fund their ideas as major barriers to launching a business. In addition, the perception of established businesses may sometimes be that youth-led businesses are less stable, so why invest in a long-term relationship for sourcing goods or services from them?

The dilemma is thus – youth could greatly benefit from SBN services, but SBN members are not particularly motivated to either hire youth or support their businesses.

Layered on this is the fact that most employed youth work in the informal sector, which the SBN has also not targeted specifically.

A two-pronged approach is thus needed to help close the circle on this:

a) Advocate to SBN members, and businesses at large, that hiring and/or supporting youth-led businesses is a sound business decision because they learn quickly, are innovative, are generally better educated than the prior generation, are highly adaptable, are future consumers of SBN member business products or services, they are not more likely to go out of business vs other businesses and several other context and county-specific factors that specific SBNs can add.

b) Partnering with existing organizations that focus on youth employment and/or entrepreneurship in country, such as the ILO, government agencies and NGOs.

## What about Girls and Female Youth?

15–17-year-old females are considered “girls” in most contexts, while 18–27 or 28-year-olds are considered both “women” and “female youth” in others. It’s not necessarily productive or insightful to focus on age as a defining feature of a youth, however these terms were used interchangeably in all conversations, which can make measurement and tracking of progress challenging. We suggest keeping the terminology of «female youth” as 15–28-year-olds.

At the same time, it became clear in conversations with SBN teams that as limited as experience and tools to empower youth were, there was even less for female youth, even though the positive impact SBN’s can have on this cohort is disproportionate to any given action for any other group, since female youths are in general starting from a much more vulnerable base position. Deliberately aiming to reach and support female youths

should thus be a goal of SBN's, which would have the added benefit of helping build a knowledge base that is woefully inadequate in the "development" space.

### Priority actions for Youth empowerment

Considering what we have highlighted and factored in regarding NEET factors, what we heard in interviews, and resistance from SBN members regarding engagement with youth in general and senior staff regarding female youth in particular, here are recommended priority actions:

#### 1. SO1: Increase advocacy and equal opportunity for youth in and to businesses

- Advocate to SBN members, and businesses at large, that hiring and/or supporting youth-led businesses is a sound business decision because they learn quickly, are highly adaptable, you are forming future consumers, are not more likely to go out of business vs other businesses and several other context and county-specific factors that specific SBNs can add.
- Advocacy strategies can also be co-developed with existing partners such as ILO, other UN Agencies and national governments depending on the specific country SBN structure. The aim is to use existing platforms or programs that have been developed either with key target groups (such as new graduates), and in key industries related to food systems and nutrition for which other organizations already have youth engagement experience.

#### 2. SO2: Context-specific empowerment approaches for youth-led businesses and workers

- Adopt context-specific instruments, approaches and communication channels to engage more youth entrepreneurs and employees.
- To better adapt to the needs identified by youth, they need to be canvassed and engaged in an earnest discussion, in partnership and at the same time as businesses, and/or other entities devoted to youth, such as UN or government-led agencies.
- Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to map existing constraints and needs to leverage and support business performance and nutrition. This includes tailored TA for youth, along with identified capacity-building actions (such as mentoring) using available technologies. SBN will also explore opportunities to invite advisory group members to mentor, matching their skills, knowledge and experience effectively.
- Leverage the projects that SBN multi-national corporation (MNC) partners (e.g., DSM, Cargill, etc) are already working on to harness and support youth's potential as business leaders or employees by teaming

up with them on specific areas in the food systems value chain or to help deliver mentorship programs. This can also be leveraged indirectly via adult-led household enterprises with which the MNCs have built relationships with, to advocate for their youth household members' empowerment – with a particular focus on female youth - within the business.

- Track and monitor the outcomes and progress on the support services provided.

#### 3. SO3: Deliberate engagement with youth entrepreneurs and employees

- SBN's need to understand the challenges that youth face in both obtaining work, especially a first job, and/or starting a business. SBN's should internally coordinate with other SUN bodies (such as CSS) and create rapid surveys to create a full picture of specific challenges and opportunities for youth.
- Most employed youth work in the informal sector, and methodologies should be developed to attract, assess, onboard and nurture these businesses are key to developing an inclusive, and effective, country-led SBN.
- Gender-balanced youth targeting should be set, meaning a 50-50% female-male ratio approach when feasible and practical.

## 6. Common to both Women's and Youth's Empowerment

### Expected Outcomes

Leveraging synergies with strategic partnerships and the use of suggested monitoring metrics, SBN country team should track the anticipated economic and nutrition outcomes of empowering women and youth in their work. The successful implementation of this strategy is underpinned by these expected outcomes:

1. SBN country teams have increased and promoted advocacy towards the empowerment of youth and women entrepreneurs as well as employees in nutritious value chains.
2. SBN teams have increased the share of youth and women receiving resources and opportunities in growing their businesses as contributions to increased nutrition.
3. SBN country teams are sharing and adopting context-specific guidance and good practices where resources allow to empower youth and women-led businesses and employees.



## Monitoring Metrics

Aligning with the SBN 3.0 logic model and results framework, SBN country teams should generate learnings on empowering women and youth in their networks through documentation of baseline information and monitoring progress on the expected outcomes. The three key monitoring metrics are:

1. **Business performance:** For example, number of advocacy opportunities or support services provided to businesses on workplace nutrition to benefit their employee (women and youth).
2. **Nutrition & Food Systems impact:** For example, % of women and youth led- businesses making verified progress on their commitments towards contributions to local food systems.
3. **Enabling environment:** For example, share of women and youth led- businesses accessing financial, technical, emotional and managerial support; % of network members that are women/youth entrepreneurs; % of network members that represent youth/women entrepreneurs; number of advocacy and experience sharing events; etc.

## Enablers

The following enablers aim to facilitate the successful implementation of this strategy:

### Advocacy and communication

- The Global team should support national SBN's to plan and launch this strategy at national and sub-national level chapters.
- Some SBN Countries have already developed or will soon be launching their own SBN "Strategies 3.0" and should plan on how to incorporate youth and women empowerment into their existing strategies or in the development of new ones.

### Expand membership

- SBN countries should consider establishing dedicated sub-chapters for women and youth at national and

sub-national levels.

- SBN teams should use characteristics such as informal, urban/rural, size of enterprise, age group as a set of "filters" to design the most effective activities and reach.
- Nutrition in the workplace could be an approach to "empower" more women, youth and expand support services beyond entrepreneurs to "intrapreneurs" – i.e., empowered staff who work for member businesses. For example, advocating to business that hiring women and youth can help them grow and thrive in the long run.

### Practical and adaptable

- SBN teams should adapt the implementation of this strategy to each country context and socio-cultural dynamics.
- Focus on practical actions that align with what county nutrition/business ecosystems—including government, development partners and other NGOs—are doing in the women and/or youth empowerment and entrepreneurship space.
- Flexibility and cognizance of the governance structure at SBN country level—GAIN and WFP have different operating approaches and mandates— should also be taken into account for the implementation of this strategy.

### Focus on Sustainability

- A resource mobilization strategy at country level should be built into this strategy to support the continuous and expanding delivery of effective support services to an increasing share of women and youth.

### Partnerships

- SBN team should explore developing new partnerships that rally behind strategic priority areas as a means of leveraging additional support and resources. For example, "Action for food change" for youth.
- Continue engaging with existing partners to foster collaboration on issues such as cross-learning initiatives for women and youth empowerment.





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