

SKILLING YOUTH FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION



On the occasion of World Youth Skills Day, Dr Mahesh Chander shares his thoughts on why it is important to skill today's youth for making farming remunerative.

BACKGROUND

In December 2019, while walking on the streets of Paro in Bhutan, I read this slogan at the youth training centre 'Get SKILLED and be SOMEBODY'. I liked it instantly, since it effectively conveys that without skills, we are just empty vessels! Over the last several years, I have been writing on issues pertaining to youth, including on youth and skills¹. But most of these thoughts were before the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented event in our living memory. The COVID era has taught us insightful lessons gained from living through it. Youth anywhere in the world were the worst victims of COVID as it caused a lot of uncertainty, anxiety, hopelessness, including worries and depression among them about their future. On this World Youth Skills Day (Box 1), yet again, I have additional thoughts to share.



Source: UNSESCO-UNEVOC

1. <https://ypard.net/resources/blog/world-youth-skills-day-time-for-collective-actions>
2. <https://medium.com/@mchanderivri/youth-want-safe-spaces-can-we-assure-them-a7c7eb1a40cb>
3. <https://ypard.net/resources/blog/make-agriculture>
4. <https://ypard.net/resources/blog/youth-and-social-media-a-leverage-for-agripreneurship>
5. <https://ypard.net/our-work/showcase/12820-the-extension-and-advisory-services-eas-shouldn-t-ignore-youth-anymore>
6. <https://blog.gfar.net/2016/05/26/a-day-out-at-nikkis-farm-a-youth-agripreneur-in-action/>
7. <https://ypard.net/our-work/showcase/12824-mentoring-rural-youth-to-make-agriculture-attractive>

Box 1: World Youth Skills Day

To celebrate the strategic importance of equipping young people with skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship, in 2014 the United Nations General Assembly declared 15 July as World Youth Skills Day. Since then, World Youth Skills Day has provided a unique opportunity for dialogue between young people, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, firms, employers' and workers' organizations, policy-makers and development partners. The upskilling of youth has become increasingly important in light of the world's slow shift to sustainable development. A growing youth population, rising unemployment in many countries, changes in the labour market and in the national economy due to technological developments are just some of the reasons why we must provide future generations with the entrepreneurial skills and mindsets they need to cope with a changing world.

The celebrations of World Youth Skills Day 2022 will highlight the ongoing focus on the Transforming Education Summit (September 2022), and contribute to the work being done under its thematic action track Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development. Every passing World Youth Skills Day is expected to bring skills onto the centre stage of every development effort - the very purpose for which it was introduced in 2014.

You might have noticed small bicycle repair shops along the roads of small towns, where many young boys (hardly any girls) fix problems, including fixing punctured tyres and tubes. They survive because they have the skills to do these jobs. If rural youth don't have similar skills in many areas related to rural livelihoods they will have difficulty in earning their livelihoods. Whatever qualifications one may have, skills in certain areas are always helpful to live a meaningful life. The whole world is progressing towards mechanization, digitalization and automation to replace manpower. This requires new sets of skills to operate these new systems. If youth are not skilled in these areas, the pace of automation and mechanization would get slower. When we talk of smart agriculture or smart food systems, we talk of skillful, efficient, safe and sustainable systems that ensure a comfortable environment. This calls for a high level of skills in those responsible for running and managing the agri-food systems. Much depend on the youth of any country where agri-food systems are to be smart.



Training Rural Youth on Methods of Natural Farming

FOOD SYSTEMS AND YOUTH

The agricultural and food systems, being one of the biggest sectors in any country, offer huge employment opportunities anywhere in the world and more so in developing countries, youth can find even better opportunities where it is a fast emerging sector (Box 2).

Box 2: Opportunities in the Agri-food Sector

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS)¹ acknowledged in its Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPoW) for 2020-2023, that young people are one of the keys to achieving sustainable development, particularly in developing countries, where the vast majority of them reside, often in rural areas. Martin Cole, Chairperson, Steering Committee of the CFS HLPE², remarked:

- Youth are on the front lines to build the food systems of the future, while also bearing significant risks from climate change, social and economic inequities, and political marginalization.
- Food systems provide a wide spectrum of opportunities for the engagement and employment of young people across diverse global contexts, but these jobs do not always provide decent and meaningful work or adequate livelihoods.
- In response, policies and initiatives to protect and strengthen youth engagement and employment in food systems need to be based on the pillars of rights, equity, agency and recognition. The redistribution of resources, knowledge, and opportunities for youth innovation and engagement in the development of context-specific employment and labour policies can not only contribute to creating jobs for youth but can also directly support transitions to sustainable food systems.

¹*The Committee on World Food Security is, at the global level, the foremost inclusive and evidence-based international and intergovernmental platform for food security and nutrition.*

²*HLPE. 2021. Promoting youth engagement and employment in agriculture and food systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.*

Why Skilling Youth Matters?

Food systems are the largest employer of young people, particularly in the developing countries, yet the work they do is often not wholesome and meaningful, and very often not even adequate for their livelihood. Frequently it does not maintain a balance between the needs and rights of different generations. Since agriculture and food systems are no longer confined to farm fields, but are inclusive of post-harvest, processing, value adding, marketing and trade, skills are needed in various aspects of agricultural production and supply chains. This is where the huge opportunities lie – when agriculture is not just a matter of primary production but of the entire value chain that includes processing, value addition and marketing. If we look at agricultural value chains and food systems there are a number of jobs requiring specific skills, which we currently find many youths are not skilled in. For instance, processing milk into many value added products such as ice-cream, flavoured milk, etc. Even clean milk production requires skills in which many youths are not skilled currently.

What type of support does youth need?

Youth require support, including redistributive and mediated market policies, to access land, water, forests, labour, knowledge, information, agricultural extension, finance, credit, markets, technology and supporting institutions for sustainable food systems transformation. The land titles are often not in the names of these youths, they are not able to seek loans from the financial institutions for want of collaterals. This is one serious barrier impacting youth participation in innovative ventures. Efforts are on to overcome this by introducing several schemes. But this require a bit more attention if youth participation is to be speeded up.

The Government of India recognises that the current youth glut is an abundant asset and offers immense leverage in terms of skilled labour, entrepreneurship, innovation and knowledge to accelerate the developmental needs of the country. Investments have been made on multiple fronts to generate employment, develop skills and foster entrepreneurship. In India, schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushal Yojana (DDU-GKY) and Skills India campaign have been expanded for better reach. New programmes such as the Entrepreneurship and Skill Development Programme, Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) and Start-up India are expected to support the entrepreneurship ecosystem, and the National Career Service matches job seekers with employers.



Capacity building training for youth in production of rooted pepper cuttings under ICAR-ARYA programme

The Government of India (GoI) has initiated efforts to engage youth through technology and has organised youth parliaments, youth conventions and festivals. Special programmes such as Youth for Development, National Youth Advisory Council, and the National Programme for Youth and Adolescent Development (NPYAD) have been launched to increase youth volunteering, motivate the youth and enable them to be strong leaders. Special programmes to skill youth in agriculture has also been initiated (Box 3). Often these well-intentioned programmes do not reach the targeted stakeholders, so for better outcome from these efforts it is necessary to popularize them.

Box 3: Skilling Youth on Agriculture in India: Current Opportunities

Currently GoI is giving high priority to natural and organic farming, considering its export potential, especially for certified organic products, besides the growing interest of domestic consumers in high quality, safe and nutritious food products. These food systems are highly dependent on certain practices involving skills, for instance, making vermicompost, jeevamrit, beejamrit, biopesticides, biofertilizers, herbal animal health products, etc. It may be helpful if rural boys and girls are given skills in these areas of high priority in the national interest. Often the older generations don't show interest in learning new skills, while it could be rewarding to skill youth, as they will be the future farmers.

Agriculture Skill Council of India (ASCI), a not-for-profit concern, working under the aegis of Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) works towards capacity building in emerging areas of agriculture by bridging gaps and upgrading skills of farmers, wage workers, self-employed and extension workers engaged in organized / unorganized segments of Agriculture & Allied Sectors. The Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) are other important institutions responsible for skilling youths in emerging areas of farm production. The spirit of collaboration, coordination, collective wisdom will go a long way in skilling youths in the emerging areas of smart agri-food systems.

Role of Policies

Context-specific employment and labour market policies at global, national and local levels not only can contribute to creating jobs for youth but can also directly support transitions to sustainable food systems by restoring the natural resource base, strengthening the social and physical infrastructure, and contributing to territorial markets and food security.

The GoI has prepared [a new draft National Youth Policy \(NYP\)](#) after reviewing the existing draft of [National Youth Policy, 2014](#). The new draft NYP envisages a ten-year vision for youth development that India seeks to achieve by 2030. The new draft National Youth Policy (NYP) is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and serves to 'unlock the potential of the youth to advance India'. The new draft NYP seeks to catalyze widespread action on youth development across five priority areas, viz., education; employment & entrepreneurship; youth leadership & development; health, fitness & sports; and social justice. The Department of Youth Affairs had sought the comments/views/suggestions on the draft NYP from all stakeholders by 13 June 2022. Hopefully many youths have responded to this call for comments/suggestions and views so that the policy can become more meaningful. Often, the real stakeholders do not get information at the right time or many are reluctant to give suggestions, even if it concerns their own good.

Approaches and policies to strengthen youth engagement and employment in food systems need to be based on the pillars of rights, equity, agency and recognition. The GoI has implemented various measures to strengthen social justice and reinforce the principle of unity in diversity. These steps have been taken to ensure equity, enhance the justice system, and increase knowledge and awareness among youth. Furthermore, legal literacy clubs have been set up in schools to raise legal awareness, and digital programmes were implemented to improve access to legal aid, such as Tele-law and Nyaya Bandhu. Social audits have been held in various states to elicit youth response on key topics, and six lakh youths have participated in neighborhood youth parliaments. One Stop Centres have been set up for women, and special helplines for the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities.

Supporting Youth-Centred Innovation for Sustainable Food Systems

The startup eco-system in recent times has been supported in a big way by the government. Many institutions are now regularly inviting proposals under various schemes where youth have ample

opportunities to participate and benefit with their creative and innovative ideas to develop agri-food systems. Schemes such as [Rastriya Krishi Vikas Yojana \(RKVY\)](#) are running in several institutions, viz., SAUs, ICAR institutes, MANAGE, etc. For instance, at ICAR-Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izatnagar, we are implementing [Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana - Remunerative Approaches For Agriculture and Allied Sector Rejuvenation \(RKVY-RAFTAAR\)](#). This is an initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Govt. of India, to give thrust to Agripreneurship and startups. In a broader way, the scheme is implemented with the objectives of making farming a remunerative economic activity by strengthening farmers' efforts, risk mitigation and promoting innovation. Under this programme, NAVODAYA is an Agripreneurship Orientation Programme (AOP) of RKVY-RAFTAAR Agribusiness Incubation Scheme aimed at providing mentorship and funding opportunity to students, youth, Smart Farmers, women or anyone interested in venturing into agriculture and allied areas for transforming their innovative ideas to prototype/product. Likewise, many different Ministries and Departments concerned with agri-food systems are running schemes to develop and promote youth-centered innovations for food systems.



Participant from “Mentoring Rural Youth on Agricultural Entrepreneurship” organized by ICAR-IVRI

Youth centred innovations for sustainable food systems involves developing groups of old and new systems of knowledge and practice, with more democratic and inclusive governance and organizational models. Digital technologies have the potential to ‘expand knowledge democracy’, but ongoing digital divides must be overcome so that these benefits are not concentrated on only those youth with access to high levels of financial capital.

In February 2022, [I visited three counties](#), viz., [Sumter](#), [Alachua](#) and [Osceola in Florida, USA](#), to get acquainted with field extension activities being undertaken by the extension agents in these counties (Box 4).

Box 4: Youth Training in USA

It was fascinating to know the innovative work being done by the counties to create awareness, impart knowledge and skilling of the local communities. Programs, such as landscape gardening, management of water resources, Master Gardner program, and use of drones in agriculture, were some of the unique ones I learnt about during my visits to these counties. When interacting with county agents, I found that 4-H is a very effective program for shaping the life of youth for national development. On my visits to agricultural fairs there, I saw many school children enthusiastically participating in 4-H activities, such as handicrafts, raising crops and livestock rearing, caring competitions, etc. 4-H used to be an integral part of the Land Grant patterned Agricultural Universities in the initial years to engage youth in innovative, skill-oriented agricultural activities, but we do not hear much about them now. I strongly believe that this is one good concept which we should revive to inculcate interest in agriculture among the younger generations of India. I was highly impressed to see the work the UF/IFAS Extension faculty was doing to improve the lives of Florida's residents.

We can draw parallels among UF/IFAS Extension and [Krishi Vigyan Kendras \(KVKs\)](#). I believe KVKs can get inspired from the work of extension agents working with counties in terms of activities, infrastructure and innovative approaches used to engage youth in particular. Likewise, we can get inspired and act locally from the experiences from various countries and institutions to meaningfully, creatively and productively engage youths in countries in the region, including India.



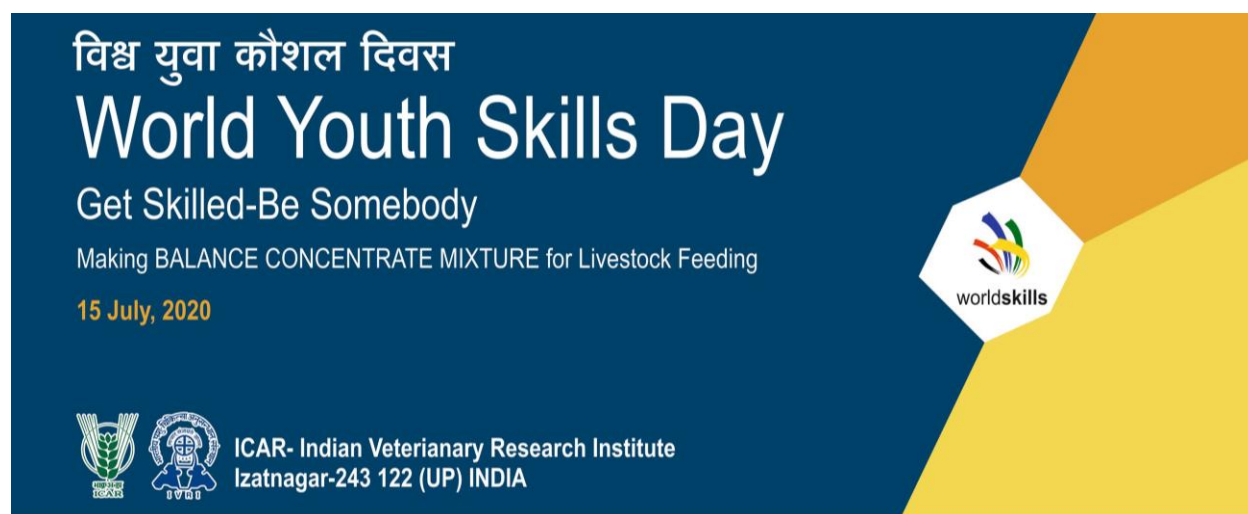
Training on Mushroom Waste Utilization and Income Generation for rural youth at ICAR-KVK Thrissur

END NOTE

The world is changing in significant ways, and here lies the opportunity for India's youth to make the most of it. For this to happen, action needs to be catalysed if we are to address the barriers to youth development and prepare the youth for a world that is changing in significant ways. The onset of COVID-19, especially, has further accelerated automation, fast-tracked e-commerce, increased remote work, and reduced business travel with the integration of technology in our everyday lives. However, the pandemic also highlighted the need for stronger protection for all youth, particularly the millions of young Indians

who migrate from rural to urban areas to pursue better opportunities. Large-scale migration adversely affects the rural economy and imposes a resource burden on urban towns and cities. The policies and programmes which can help rural youth find meaningful occupations, in rural areas itself, would go a long way in productive youth engagement. Programmes, such as Attracting and Retaining Youth in Agriculture (ARYA), need strengthening if they are to be impactful.

KVKs have been functioning as Knowledge and Resource Centres of agricultural technology supporting initiatives of public, private and voluntary sector for improving the agricultural economy of the district, and are linking the NAES with extension system and farmers. One, among the several activities of KVKs, happens to be capacity development of farmers and extension personnel to update their knowledge and skills on modern agricultural technologies. As such, it is expected that KVKs will play a proactive role in skilling the youth with respect to modernizing agri-food sector. Much depends on the performance of KVKs, especially in terms capacities of KVK staff to train youth in emerging areas. COVID-19 gave us an opportunity to use distance modes and online activities to train youths on skills. For instance, we organized a Facebook live programme for making balance ration for livestock.



विश्व युवा कौशल दिवस
World Youth Skills Day
Get Skilled-Be Somebody
Making BALANCE CONCENTRATE MIXTURE for Livestock Feeding
15 July, 2020

ICAR- Indian Veterinary Research Institute
Izatnagar-243 122 (UP) INDIA

worldskills

In certain areas, capacity building is urgently needed and it is gratifying to know that the Government of India is [encouraging and facilitating use of drones](#) for the convenience of the farmers, reducing the cost and increasing the income. For promoting use of Kisan Drones, the government is providing 50% or maximum Rs. 5 lakh subsidy to SC-ST, small and marginal, women and farmers of northeastern states to buy drones. For other farmers, financial assistance is to be given up to 40 percent or maximum Rs.4 lakh. Accordingly, the ICAR has asked all the KVKs to organize training on applications of Drones in agriculture and popularize their uses among the farmers. Appreciably, the National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE) is also taking note of such emerging needs like organizing trainings on use of Drones in Agriculture.

Dr Mahesh Chander, Joint Director (Extension Education), ICAR-Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izatnagar, Uttar Pradesh, India. He can be contacted at drmahesh.chander@gmail.com

**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP),
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India
www.aesanetwork.org Email: aesanetwork@gmail.com**