

Derisking Agrifood Systems for Young People: Co-creation and Decent Work



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SPEAKER BIOS

A Webinar by the Thematic Working Group
on Rural Youth Employment



SCENE SETTING: GLOBAL YOUTH AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS ENGAGEMENT TRENDS



Juan Carlos Mendoza

Director, Environment, Climate, Gender and Social Inclusion Division, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Juan Carlos Mendoza is responsible for overseeing IFAD's strategy to increase rural people's resilience to climate change and promote development that champions women, youth and Indigenous Peoples as agents of change. Before joining IFAD, Mendoza worked in multiple international organizations, including as Managing Director of the Global Mechanism of the United Nations Convention on Desertification, and was responsible for coordinating KPMG's work with multilateral development banks and international organizations. Mendoza also spent a decade in the World Bank where, among other roles, he managed the Bank's portfolio in the Pacific Islands and contributed to the resource mobilization processes for the Global Environment Facility. Mendoza holds a Master's in Public Policy from Georgetown University and a Master's in Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



Elisenda Estruch Puertas

Economist/Rural Economy Specialist, Sectoral Policies Branch, International Labour Organization (ILO)

Elisenda Estruch Puertas is a senior economist with over twenty years of experience in international development, strategic policy advisory, partnership-building and programme leadership. She currently serves as a Specialist in the Rural Economy and Related Sectors in the ILO's Sectoral Policies Department, where she leads global policy initiatives, supports country-level implementation, and strengthens collaboration with governments, UN agencies and international financial institutions. Her expertise spans labour markets, rural transformation, women's economic empowerment, and youth employment in rural areas. From a sectoral perspective, she works closely on issues related to construction, the building materials industry, and other key rural economic sectors, including agriculture and forestry, with a focus on linking sectoral policies to decent work outcomes and sustainable development. She has extensive experience in resource mobilization, knowledge leadership and capacity development, and has authored numerous peer-reviewed publications and flagship reports. She previously worked as a labour economist at FAO and holds a PhD in Socio-Economics and Statistics.

Marwan Benali

Social Policy Officer, Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Marwan Benali is a Social Policy Officer in the Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). He previously served as an Economist and Green Jobs Specialist within the same division.

Before (re)joining FAO, he worked as a Postdoctoral Scientist specialized in impact evaluation at the World Vegetable Center's Regional Office for West and Central Africa in Cotonou (Benin). He also held a postdoctoral research position in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at the University of Goettingen (Germany), and earlier worked with FAO's Trade and Markets Division. Marwan holds a PhD in Agricultural Economics from the University of Goettingen and a Master's degree in Economic Development and International Cooperation from the Institute of Political Studies of Toulouse (France).



INNOVATION IN CO-CREATION AND DECENT WORK



Abou Ba

Agricultural Engineer; Youth Sounding Board of the European Union Delegation to Senegal

Abou Ba is a Senegalese Agricultural Engineer and a member of both the Global Youth Sounding Board of the European Commission (DG INTPA) and the Youth Sounding Board of the European Union Delegation to Senegal. His work focuses on strengthening meaningful youth participation in public policy, governance and international development through evidence-based dialogue and co-creation. He has contributed to policy dialogue with public institutions, territorial mapping missions and strategic recommendations to strengthen youth inclusion in development programmes. He is particularly interested in rural development, rural finance and inclusive agrifood systems, and in the role of public policy and governance in fostering more inclusive, resilient and sustainable development.



Swetha Stotra Bhashyam

Youth Affiliate at Synchronicity Earth and Co-Director at Kinship

Swetha Stotra Bhashyam is a movement weaver and partnerships strategist working at the intersection of biodiversity, culture, and systems transformation. Her work seeks to shift narratives of separation and human superiority toward reciprocity and kinship with the more-than-human world, nurturing a pluriverse: a world where many worlds fit. She is part of Kinship's Collective Leadership Team, a Youth Affiliate with Synchronicity Earth, and a Young Elder Advisor to Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN). Swetha played an instrumental role in building the global biodiversity youth movement from the grassroots, supporting the creation of over 65 GYBN chapters and strengthening a coordinated youth movement advancing transformative political and cultural change for a life in harmony with nature.



Izabela Leao

Senior Agribusiness Specialist, World Bank Group

Izabela Leao is a Senior Agribusiness Specialist in the Agriculture and Food Department of the World Bank's Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan Region. She leads the Bank's agriculture portfolio and policy dialogue in Syria and Lebanon and supports regional analytical and operational work on agribusiness development, including AgriConnect, agricultural productivity and markets, jobs and the rural economy, sustainable food systems, innovation, technology, and entrepreneurship. Since joining the World Bank as a Young Professional in 2013, she has worked across Eastern and Southern Africa, South Asia, and Europe and Central Asia. Izabela holds a Ph.D. from the University of Milan, Italy, with a focus on Public Policy and Political Economy.



Aisha Musaazi S. Nakitto

Head, Policy Innovation Unit, and Program Lead, Malabo Montpellier Panel, AKADEMIYA2063

Dr. Aisha Musaazi S. Nakitto is Head of the Policy Innovation Unit and Program Lead for the Malabo Montpellier Panel at AKADEMIYA2063, translating research and evidence related to agrifood systems into actionable policy insights for African governments and development partners.

She holds a double doctorate in Nutritional Sciences from Justus Liebig University Giessen and Makerere University and completed postdoctoral training in Climate, Land, Agriculture and Biodiversity at the University of Pretoria. She trained in Public Policy Economics at the University of Oxford, and in Public Health teaching and research at Heidelberg University, and holds professional certifications in Project Management and Data Analytics.