

Advancing youth priorities in agrifood policy: Key messages from Malawi's 2026/27 youth-focused pre-budget consultations

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Key Messages

- The 2026/27 youth-focused pre-budget consultation was important in ensuring that national budgets reflect credible, investment-ready youth priorities in agrifood systems.
- The consultations recommended the prioritization of youth-led agribusiness incubation, value chain financing, and climate-smart technologies in the national budget.
- The consultations noted that programs such as the Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) can deliver greater impact if supported through integrated financing, structured mentorship, and business development support, and expanded resource allocation.
- To advance inclusive policy making and program design, the government and development partners should institutionalize youth-focused pre-budget consultations as an annual mechanism that enables young people to influence national development priorities, public expenditure decisions, and policy reforms.

Introduction

Strengthening youth voices in national policy processes such as budget consultations is crucial for advancing sustainable development and ensuring food security, particularly in least developed countries where young people represent a significant share of the population. In Malawi, the youth aged 10-35 account for more than 50% of the total population¹, hence the need for their meaningful inclusion in policy processes.

Unfortunately, systematic exclusion from policy processes, including pre-budget consultations, continue to undermine young people's potential to contribute meaningfully to national development. Consequently, youth priorities are often inadequately articulated and insufficiently reflected in the national budgeting allocations.

Evidence shows that meaningful youth participation in the co-design and co-creation of policies and services, alongside government and

other stakeholders, can help address the complex challenges the youth face and meet their needs². Such engagements not only enhance the relevance of policies but also increase the legitimacy and ownership of policy decisions, hold governments accountable to their decisions, enhance youth trust in public institutions, and increase their satisfaction with government policies and service delivery³. However, such engagements require deliberate, well-resourced and structured platforms.

To address this challenge, the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Decentralisation, in collaboration with the National Youth Council of Malawi (NYCOM) and MwAPATA Institute, convened a dedicated youth-focused pre-budget consultation for the 2026/27 national budget. This presented a rare and timely policy window to include youth voices into agrifood debates. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of Malawi's youth sector, including entrepreneurs, innovators, farmers, creatives, students, and youth leaders from both urban and rural areas.

This policy brief synthesises the key messages and priorities of youth that emerged from the 2026/27 national pre-budget consultations and proposes actionable recommendations to strengthen youth inclusion in national budget processes. The consultations involved presentations, official remarks and interactive dialogues.

Key findings, messages and outcomes

Agrifood systems is a priority economic opportunity for youth

The consultation revealed that agrifood is the backbone of Malawi's economy, and that it offers the most immediate and scalable opportunity for youth employment, wealth creation, and national resilience. However, the consultations stressed a shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture, climate-smart production systems, agritech-enabled services, and agro-processing and value addition. Young people were firmly reminded that government resources such as loans, subsidies, and grants should be viewed as investment capital, not handouts intended to catalyse sustainable and profitable agribusinesses. It is therefore important to prioritise budget allocations to youth-led agribusiness incubation, value chain financing, and climate-smart technologies.

Increased allocation for Youth Innovation Fund (YIF)

Access to inclusive and targeted financing could unlock youth engagement in agrifood systems. In responding to this need, the youth were informed that the 2025/26 budget has allocated MK2 billion as part of the YIF. The initiative was appreciated because it can provide critical seed funding, mentorship, and business development services, enabling youth to launch and scale innovative agribusiness ventures. However, there was a unified and strong call for a 100% increase in the

allocation to meet the scale of youth demand for financing. Young agripreneurs require seed capital and growth financing to transform their ideas into viable start-ups.

Youths should be deliberately integrated into flagship agricultural investments

The government has several investment programmes, including the Agriculture Commercialisation (AgCOM) Project, the Shire Valley Transformation Programme, National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF), Mega Farms, and the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP). Such investments can accelerate youth participation in commercial agriculture, strengthen food security, and generate sustainable income and employment outcomes. This can be achieved if deliberate efforts are made and enforced for the youth to access these through youth quotas. The 2023 National Youth Policy established a minimum threshold of 15. The youth specifically urged the government to design and promote blended financing models (e.g. grants, low-interest loans, matching funds) for young agripreneurs, with support tied to the adoption of modern, climate-smart agricultural technologies and practices.

Increase strategic investment in TEVET to drive agri-enterprise development and reduce unemployment among the youths

One of the pressing challenges driving youth unemployment in Malawi is the persistent skills gap and skills mismatch between training and

labour market demands. To address this, youth participants during the consultations urged the government to increase budget allocations to TEVET and community-based skills development programmes to ensure alignment with current and future labour market demands. Expanding access to TEVET can equip young people with practical, market-relevant skills that advance enterprise development and wage employment. Technical colleges should be financially supported to develop cost-effective equipment and technologies tailored to the needs of young Malawian smallholder farmers.

Conclusion

The 2026/27 youth-focused pre-budget consultation has demonstrated that young people in Malawi are not passive beneficiaries of public policy but strategic partners in national development. Young people and the government view the agrifood sector not merely as a source of subsistence but as a dynamic engine of commercial enterprise, innovation, and wealth creation. Thus, the consultations highlighted the need to shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture, leverage climate-smart technologies, and embrace the digital economy to unlock growth opportunities for youth. The youths articulated practical, investment-ready priorities, ranging from increased access to financing and technical skills to the enforcement of inclusion quotas and the expansion of the digital economy. The responsibility now shifts to the government to ensure these articulated priorities are translated into tangible budgetary allocations and policy

actions. Delivering on these commitments will strengthen trust in public institutions and demonstrate that youth participation meaningfully shapes in national budget policy processes. Government and partners should institutionalize youth-focused pre-budget consultations as an annual mechanism for inclusive policy design.

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