

WHAT ARE FOOD SYSTEMS?

A primer for young people

ACT4FOOD
ACT4CHANGE



Introduction

Do you ever wonder about the food you eat every day? Is it easy to get? How much does it cost? Where does it come from? What makes you want to eat it? If you throw food away, where does it go?

A closer look into questions like these reveals the hidden workings of our **food systems**. So what are food systems? How do they work for you, and how could they work better for us all?

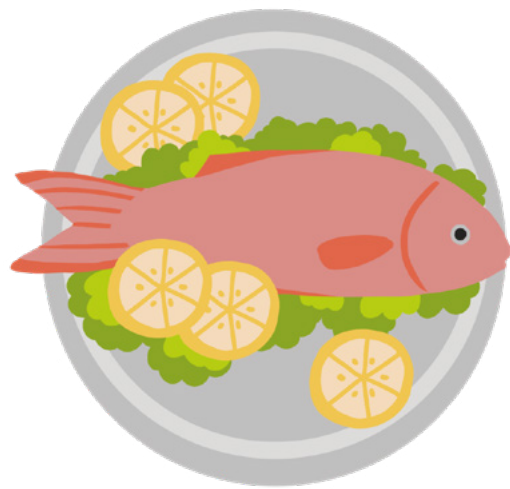
Food systems describe the activities that bring

you your food. Everything from how food is grown, transported, processed, packaged and sold and eaten. All these activities are driven by individuals, governments, businesses and groups of people in society, and are influenced by a range of things like trade relations, culture, technology, environment, politics and economics.

Many people rely on food systems for work, and all of us depend on them for the food we eat. But current food systems are not working as well as they could – 800 million people go to bed

hungry each night, almost 1 in 2 people cannot afford what the UN describes as a healthy diet. Too many people consume food and drinks that are unhealthy, or that harm the planet, for instance through contributing to climate change. We need change!

Food connects us across the globe through the land, water, climate and living creatures it impacts, through trade, culture, work, and health. By fixing our food systems, we can help create a fairer world.





Overview

This pamphlet describes food systems in nine major parts:

- Food systems drivers
- Supply chains
- Food environments
- Individual factors
- Consumer behaviours
- Diets
- Political, programme, & institutional actions
- Nutritional & health outcomes
- Impacts: social, economic, environmental

FOOD SYSTEMS DRIVERS

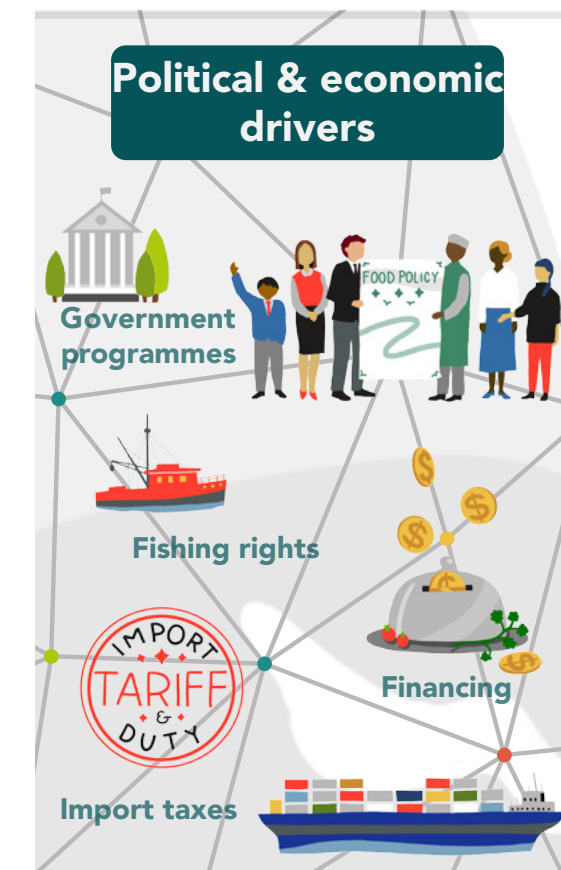
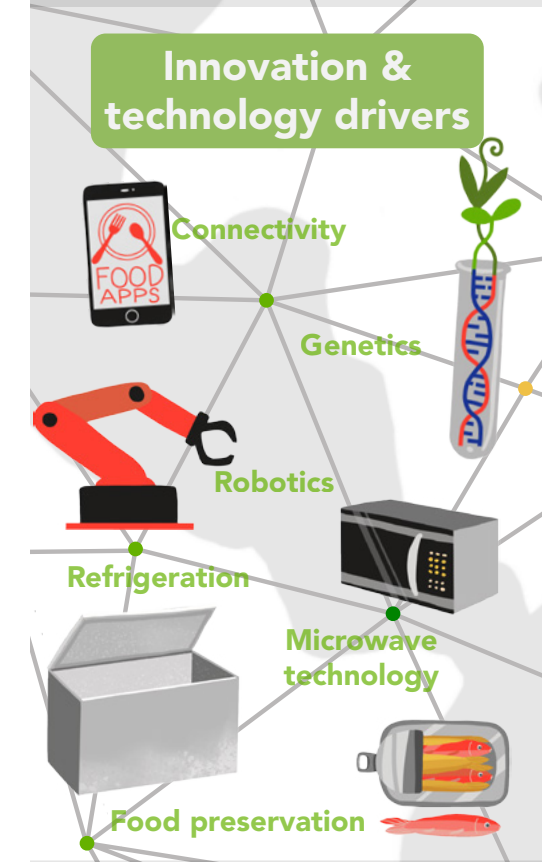
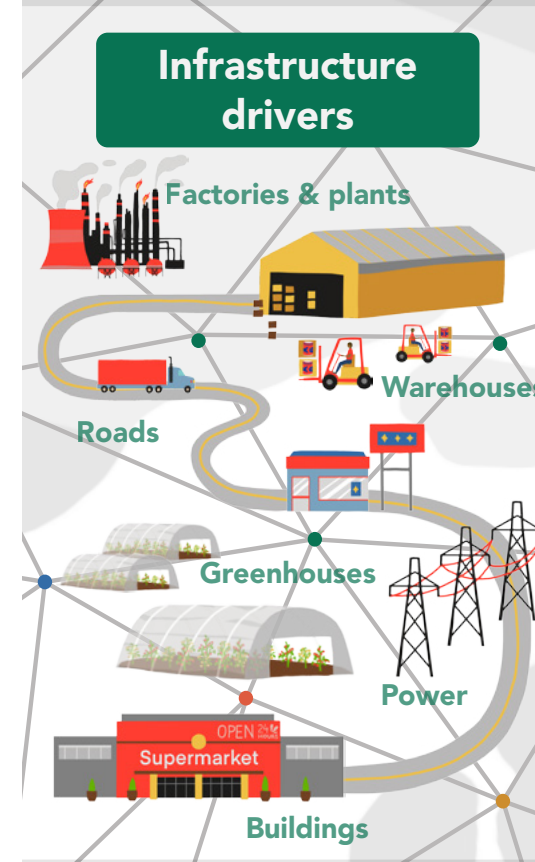
Food systems vary widely – but they do have common features. What determines where different foods can be found, how much they cost, or how much you want them?

Our natural world, including our planet's changing climate, is one of the key **drivers of our food systems**. Culture, religion, and tradition also shape some eating habits, for example how much meat or other animal-sourced foods people eat. Good transportation, such as roads, is also important to move our food around.

War and conflict also drive hunger and food insecurity, while food crises, food insecurity, and hunger can fuel fragility.

The need to secure food for a growing population has meant strong focus on certain crops. A lot of attention and innovation has gone on growing grains – 3 crops maize, wheat and rice provide 60% of all calories consumed, but some believe similar attention should be given to a wider range of foods, such as vegetables, fruits, and pulses.

How fast populations are changing influences how much food is available per person. Money, too, is critical – how much money food businesses have to develop and market their products, and how much money people have to spend on food.





SUPPLY CHAINS

Where does your food come from? Does it change with the seasons? Food usually goes on a long journey before it reaches our bowls and bellies – even if it doesn't always travel very far.

Supply chains are simply how we get food from farm to fork (or to hand or chopstick!). Let's use the example of bread to see a supply chain in action. It begins with a wheat seed, planted in a field. Once the plant has grown, it is harvested and then milled into flour. Flour can then be fortified with essential vitamins and minerals, before being made into dough. Dough must be cooked (using heat, created from fuel) before bread can be enjoyed. Supply chains chart the journey food takes from its origins, through its transport and transformations, to being sold in markets and reaching your table. Unfortunately, too much food is also lost along the supply chain – especially if it's fragile, like eggs and fruit, or isn't easy to preserve like meat.

FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

How does food feature in your everyday life? Do you see advertisements for it while you scroll and browse? Where do you buy food? Who do you eat with? What sorts of foods are available in the shops around your school or home? The **food environment** refers to the places where people and food overlap. What foods are easy to get, or affordable compared to other foods? Do they look tasty? Can you easily cook them?

Your food environment includes what happens in markets, shops and canteens, ranging from promotions – from buy-one-get-one-free in the local shop, to billboards displaying enormous pictures, or what market traders recommend to you. It includes whether there are labels on your food to say what's inside it or properly labelled menus in the places you eat. Food environments can also determine how safe your food is. They have a strong influence on the types of food you end up eating.





INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Each one of our **individual situations** will shape the foods we eat. How much money do we or our families have to spend on food? How much do we know about how to eat well, or how to cook or store foods? What are our hopes and dreams, our values and the things we like? Some people, for instance, choose not to eat or buy certain foods for ethical or religious reasons.

Other important factors include where we live, where we work or go to school – whether we can travel by bus or car, how much time we have to shop for food or to cook it, whether we have a stove or a fridge. For families, this includes how food is shared among different family members.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Do you buy any of your own food? What foods do you prepare yourself? Who usually cooks your meals? Where do you keep food? What keeps it clean and safe? Do you sometimes end up wasting food? Who do you share your meals with? These are all elements of **consumer behaviour**. Many people buy their food from markets, though many others grow, raise, forage, or capture their own food.

For very young children, most food decisions are made by their parents. As they grow older, they often have growing freedom to make decisions about what and when to eat, even if many choices are still shaped by parents and schools.

Food waste is food that reaches the person purchasing the food but isn't eaten. This is harmful for the planet. It wastes resources and effort put into the food, as well as contributing to climate change.





DIETS

What makes up your diet? Many people associate the word diet with losing weight – but more generally, your diet means the foods and drinks you usually eat and drink. **Nutritious diets** include a wide range of foods – such as fruits and vegetables, foods from animals (like dairy, eggs, fish or meat), legumes like peas or beans, mushrooms, nuts, seeds and whole grains.

Diets that give us the nutrients we need, keep us healthy and protect against disease are called **healthy diets**. They include low amounts of things that are bad for health, like refined sugar. A healthy diet is also safe: free from harmful contaminants like bad bacteria. For healthy diets to be sustainable, they must promote health and wellbeing for current and future generations, have low environmental impact, and be equitable.

POLITICAL, PROGRAMME, INSTITUTIONAL ACTIONS

Many **organisations and institutions** work within food systems to shape them. These include research institutions, United Nations organisations, governments, non-governmental organisations, civil society groups, and business networks.

They might work to make food production have less impact on the environment, for example. They might aim to make healthy diets more appealing to people. They might work to shape government policy to ensure nutritious foods that are produced in a socially and environmentally friendly way become affordable to people who don't have much money.

Actions of society, both as individuals and through organised campaigns, can help to shape food systems. To progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, set to be achieved by 2030, different actors in our food systems need to come together to speed up positive changes.





NUTRITIONAL AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

Your nutrition and health are directly affected by your diet, and you need a healthy diet to thrive and be well. Healthy diets help you to grow and are necessary to keep your mind and body working well. **Nutrition** is how our bodies use food to grow, develop and fight disease. It impacts **health**.

People who aren't well-nourished can develop different forms of malnutrition. These include poor growth and development in children, becoming too thin, becoming overweight or obese, or becoming deficient in vitamins or minerals. Unhealthy diets also cause diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some forms of cancer.

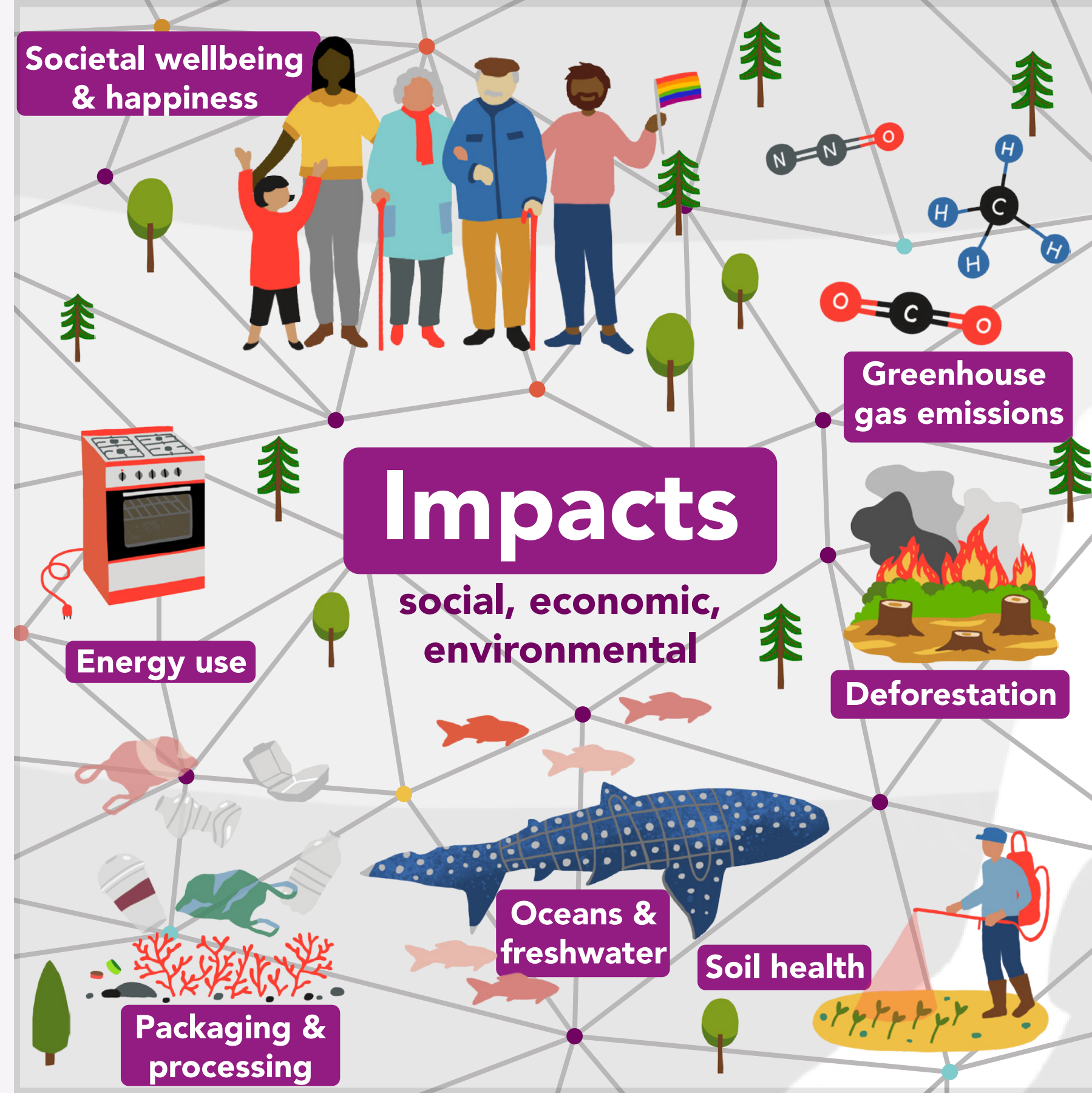
Diets that include foods that are not safe are not healthy. They can cause foodborne illnesses.

IMPACTS: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL

Food systems are a **source of jobs** – a way for countless people around the world, from fishers to grocers, to earn a living. Working conditions in food systems and the wages and profits of workers have a deep impact on poverty, equality, and on the quality of many people's lives.

What you eat influences your **health and wellbeing**, as well as your personal life. It affects your ability to learn in school or to work at home or in a workplace. Your nutritional status is linked in this way to your development, your relationships, your potential to make money, and your happiness. Food can also offer a way to share experiences, explore different cultures and express one's identity.

What you eat also **impacts the environment** – through the energy, land, soil, water, and other things used to produce food, and to get it from its origins to your snack, meal, or bin. Sadly, food systems are a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, which drive climate change. They change how land and water are used. They drive pollution, as well as losses of wildlife. But they can be better shaped to avoid these sorts of damaging impacts.



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is a global youth-led movement, launched May 2021, facilitated by the [Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition \(GAIN\)](#), the [Food Foundation \(FF\)](#), and the [UN Food Systems Summit](#).



Pledge to take action for food systems change.



Pledge to urge governments, businesses, and others to act as well.

Together we can imagine, build, and live in a world with food systems that work for all.

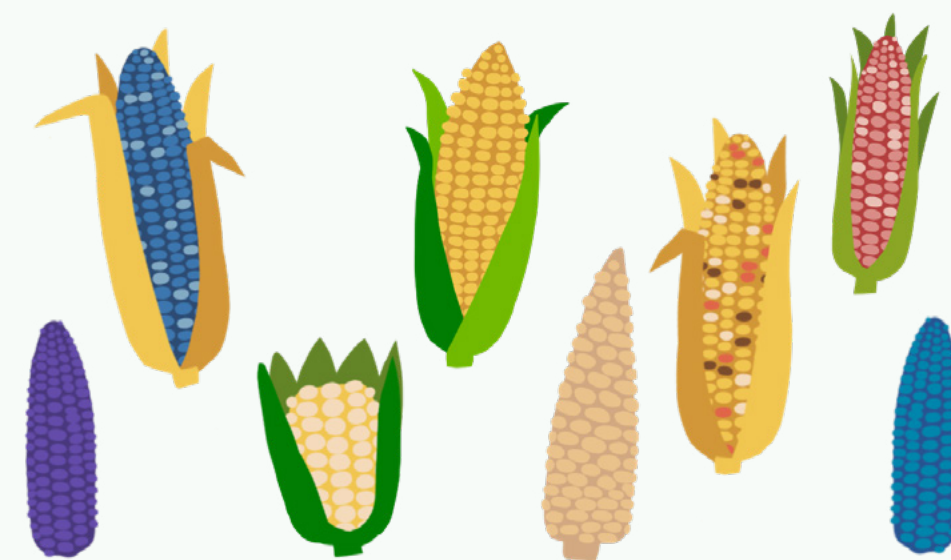
A youth pledge **#Act4Food** **#Act4Change** in support of **#GoodFood4All**

www.actions4food.org



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