

## WFF Transformative Research Challenge 2026

### Terms and Conditions

#### 1. Background and objectives

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World Food Forum (WFF), the Global Youth Action Initiative (Youth Initiative) harnesses the passion and power of youth and incites positive action for agrifood systems through youth empowerment. It acts as a catalytic movement and driver of youth engagement in agrifood governance, and serves as a knowledge center and innovation lab, fostering and inspiring youth-led solutions. It thus actively contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Youth 2030 Strategy and enhances youth engagement in the follow-up to the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit.

The WFF Youth Initiative is hosted within the Office of Youth and Women (OYW) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which aims to strengthen FAO's capacity to better serve its Members through advocating for youth and women. The WFF Youth Initiative is a core component of OYW's work to engage and empower young people worldwide to drive positive transformation of agrifood systems.

The activities of the WFF Youth Initiative are implemented through a set of thematic programmes that leverage intergenerational and cross-sectoral collaboration, innovation and investment. One of them is the WFF Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation Lab. Within this context, the **WFF Transformative Research Challenge (TRC)** is a [global competition](#) that empowers teams of young researchers to advance applied research toward real-world agrifood solutions. The TRC is designed for projects that have already demonstrated an initial proof of concept, through lab tests, controlled experiments or small-scale validation and that are looking to further strengthen evidence, refine their solution and prepare for real-world piloting.

Semi-finalist teams receive scientific mentorship, practical masterclasses and expert feedback to help move their work from “it works” to “it is ready to pilot”. Teams are supported to produce a Research-to-Impact proposal that documents their progress and outlines a realistic pathway toward piloting through the [Youth Food Lab](#) (YFL) or other innovation pathways.

Finalists are given the unique opportunity to pitch their research during the **WFF flagship event** in October 2026 at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy.

Participants are encouraged to carefully review the terms and conditions outlined below, which detail the eligibility, process and requirements for participation.

## 2. Scope of the challenge:

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The 2025 TRC is conducted under distinct research prize categories:

- **Leveraging Public Data to Fight Hunger** (co-hosted by Tilburg University's Zero Hunger Lab),
- **Forest Monitoring Innovation Prize** (co-hosted FAO Forestry Division),
- **Youth-led Research for Forest Restoration** (co-hosted by FAO Forestry Division, Forest and Landscape Restoration)
- **Unlocking Native Crops for Novel Protein Sources** (Co-hosted by the Bezos Center for Sustainable Protein and the Good Food Institute)
- More information about the prize categories and their specific focus areas can be found on the [WFF Youth Initiative](#) website.

## 3. Eligibility criteria

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To be eligible for the TRC, applicants must meet the following criteria:

### 3.1. Educational background

All applicants must hold at least a **bachelor's degree** in a field related to **agrifood systems**, which includes but is not limited to areas such as agriculture, food science, environmental science, sustainable development or other related disciplines.

### 3.2. Team composition and age requirements

The competition is open to teams of at least **3 and up to 5 individuals** (applicants). All team members must be between the ages of 18 and 35 at the time of submission of their Proof of Concept.

FAO employees and their immediate family members (spouses, parents, children, siblings and their respective spouses, regardless of where they live) or persons living in the same households of such employees, whether related or not, are not eligible to enter the competition. WFF Youth Initiative will determine eligibility at its sole discretion.

Partners or relatives of partner staff of the institutions involved in the launch of the competition and relations of the judging committee are not eligible to compete.

Applicants must confirm their full team composition at the time of initial submission. Changes to team membership will not be permitted after the close of the open call, and the WFF Youth Initiative will not intervene in any related disputes.

### 3.3. Supervisor inclusion

Applicants can include a supervisor from their institute/university. This supervisor is not considered part of the team.

### **3.4. Mentor and reviewer restrictions**

TRC mentors and reviewers are not permitted to be members of their assigned team and are not permitted to participate as authors of the research submitted by their assigned team.

### **3.5. Application requirements**

Applications with any missing personal information including names, ages, gender, emails, the number of team members and educational background are subject to disqualification. Lacking information in applications means that they are subject to disqualification. Any missing answers will lead to disqualification.

### **3.6. Submission modifications**

Applicants are advised that any changes to the content of their application as specified in the first submission of the Proof of Concept shall result in disqualification from the competition. This rule extends to any section within the Proof of Concept, including, but not limited to, the title, team members, research methodology, and problem statement. It is imperative that the research submission remains cohesive with the Proof of Concept throughout the entirety of the competition process.

### **3.7. Notification of semi-finalists, finalists and winners**

All finalists and winners will be notified by email once the judging process is complete. To confirm your shortlisting, you must reply to the email within seven working days. If no response is received, WFF Youth Initiative reserves the right to offer the prize to another team.

## **4. Selection process**

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### **Evaluation process**

The TRC follows a multi-stage evaluation process to identify the most promising applied research solutions and ensure alignment with the programme's focus on prototype validation and real-world applicability.

## **Phase 1: Eligibility and screening**

The process begins with an open call for applications. All submitted applications undergo an initial screening to ensure they meet the basic eligibility and scope requirements of the TRC.

During this phase, applications are assessed for:

- completeness of submission
- alignment with the selected prize theme
- relevance to agrifood systems
- stage of development (proof of concept / early prototype – TRL 3–5)

Applications that do not meet these criteria are not advanced to the next stage.

## **Phase 2: Technical evaluation round 1: Proof of Concept review**

Eligible applications are reviewed by a pool of expert evaluators from FAO, academia, and partner organizations.

Each Proof of Concept is assessed using a standardized evaluation rubric, focusing on:

- Clarity of the problem and applied innovation;
- Scientific rigor and methodology;
- Strength of proof of concept and validation evidence;
- Feasibility and technical soundness; and
- Potential for real-world application.

Based on the scoring, a shortlist of semifinalists teams is selected.

## **Phase 3: Capacity development**

Semi-finalist teams participate in a one-month capacity development programme combining scientific mentorship, masterclasses and technical guidance.

During this phase, teams:

- Refine and improve their prototypes;
- Strengthen validation and evidence;
- Address technical gaps and uncertainties; and
- Develop a clear research-to-impact pathway.

## **Phase 4: Evaluation round 2: Research proposal review**

At the end of the capacity development phase, teams submit an updated **Research-to-Impact Proposal (or Dossier)** reflecting their progress.

Proposals are evaluated by technical experts based on:

- progress achieved during the programme
- robustness and credibility of validation evidence
- feasibility and readiness for real-world testing
- clarity of the research-to-impact pathway

Based on this evaluation, top teams are selected as **TRC finalists** and invited to present their work at the TRC finals.

### Phase 5: Final pitch and award

Selected finalist teams nominate one team member to represent them at the TRC Finals during the WFF flagship event.

During this stage:

- Teams present their **final research outputs and validation results** through a live pitch;
- Presentations are delivered in front of a high-level jury and global audience; and
- The jury evaluates both the **technical strength of the work** and the **clarity and effectiveness of communication**.

## 5. Prizes and benefits

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5.1 All shortlisted teams will receive:

- **Capacity development:** Shortlisted teams will receive expert guidance through virtual masterclasses and dedicated office hours with experts in the field to help refine and develop their Proof of Concepts into research proposals.
- **Networking opportunities:** Shortlisted teams will have the opportunity to connect with a global network of young leaders, agrifood experts and representatives from the public and private sectors, as well as the United Nations.
- **Visibility:** The WFF Youth Initiative provides a platform for young innovators to showcase their innovative research ideas and approaches to a global audience.

5.2. Finalist teams will receive:

- **Presentation training:** Each team will be supported with training to effectively present their research proposals at the WFF flagship event in October 2026, taking place at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy.
- **Funded participation:** Two finalist teams will be selected per prize category. Each team must nominate one representative to attend the flagship event in Rome, with travel and accommodation covered.
- TRC certificate of achievement.
- **Visibility:** Finalist teams will be featured on the WFF Youth Initiative website and social media channels.

- Publication of research finding on the WFF Youth Initiative website.
- Opportunity to apply for the WFF [Youth Food Lab](#) incubator programme.

### 5.3 Research funding for the winners:

- During the TRC finals at WFF finalists will receive up to USD 10 000 per the prize category. The overall TRC winner will receive an additional USD 10 000.

## 6. Data protection and privacy

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In participating in the competition, entrants consent to the collection and use of their personal information, including their name and country, for the purposes of the competition, WFF Youth Initiative activities, and as outlined in these terms and conditions.

FAO respects your concerns about data protection and privacy. FAO will process your personal data you provide for the purposes of:

- Registering your interest of participation
- Evaluating your submission
- Communicating application outcomes
- Coordinating Program logistics
- Enhancing Program planning and communications
- Analyzing participation trends
- Informing future outreach and programming
- Communication and promotion of FAO activities

To that effect, the personal data FAO will process is your full name, title, organization, email address, phone number, photographs and/or video recordings taken during the program. Your data will be securely handled and accessible only to authorized personnel. Your data will not be shared with any person or organization outside FAO without your specific consent, except with select third parties (i.e. duly authorized partners or service providers) supporting FAO or collaborating with FAO. Your data may be shared with and processed by the WFF Youth Initiative for purposes consistent with this notice. Your data will be retained only as long as necessary to fulfil the purposes stated above. It will be securely deleted once it is no longer needed for these purposes. You may request access, correction, or deletion of the personal data FAO holds of you. Any such requests, questions, or concerns you may have regarding how FAO processes your personal data, should be communicated through FAO's ServiceNow at <https://fao.service-now.com/csp>. Once you have registered an account, select the "Data Privacy" catalog to submit your query.

For further information on how FAO processes your personal data, please consult FAO's Data Protection and Privacy Notice at <https://www.fao.org/contact-us/data-protection-and-privacy/en/>.

## **7. Prize category allocation**

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Applicants are required to select the prize category that best aligns with their innovation at the time of submission. However, the TRC organizers reserve the right to recommend the reassignment of an application to a different category if it is determined that the proof of concept more closely aligns with the objectives, scope, or evaluation criteria of another category.

In such cases, applicants will be informed of the proposed reallocation and will have the right to accept or decline the reassignment. If an applicant declines the proposed reallocation, the application will remain in the originally selected category.

## **8. Ownership and rights of the applicant**

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The WFF respects your rights and does not claim ownership or copyright for works you submit to this Competition.

8.1. You will retain full ownership and copyright to each entry. In addition, your moral rights are respected. Whenever your work is published by the WFF and its partners, you will be credited. Failure to publish a credit due to error or oversight shall not be deemed a breach of this condition.

8.2. By submitting works to the TRC, the applicant confirms that for each work submitted:

- a. The applicant is the author of the application and that it constitutes original work. To the best of the applicant's knowledge, no third party holds or may claim rights to the submitted work.
- b. The applicant is the sole copyright holder.
- c. The applicant has not licensed any rights in the work that conflict with the usage of rights required by the WFF Youth Initiative.
- d. That it does not include trademarks, contract rights, or any other intellectual property rights of any other third person or entity.

- e. The applicant shall be responsible for any claim made by any third party in respect of the submitted entry and shall fully indemnify the WFF, its sponsors and its partners in respect of all royalties, fees and any other monies owed to any person or entity as a result of a breach of any of the foregoing representations.

8.3 The WFF Youth Initiative reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to disqualify any entry that is incomplete, not relevant to the theme, or does not comply with any of the Terms and Conditions and the WFF's values and guiding principles, even after the entry is submitted.

## **9. Unacceptable content**

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The WFF reserves the right, in its sole discretion and upon written notice, to disqualify any applicant for content or behavior:

- a. That is disrespectful of the impartiality and independence of the United Nations, reflects adversely on the WFF Youth Initiative, is incompatible with the aims and objectives of the WFF Youth Initiative and is derogatory to any persons;
- b. That is or could be construed as threatening, false, misleading, abusive, harassing, libelous, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, scandalous, inflammatory or profane; and
- c. That could constitute or encourage conduct which would be considered a criminal offence, give rise to civil liability or otherwise violate any law.

## **10. Use of works**

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10.1. By participating in this Competition, the applicant agrees that any work submitted may be used free of charge by the WFF Youth Initiative and its partners for non-commercial marketing and promotional purposes. These uses may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a. Displaying application content on the WFF website (and possibly websites of partners) and social media networks and for the shortlisted teams and winner(s), featuring team profiles using the information of applicants submitted and associated materials including any recordings of presentations and pitches provided or recorded during online events the TRC finals at WFF and any other events.
- b. Displaying the entries in any media for non-commercial use to promote the work of the WFF Youth Initiative.

- c. Extracting, reproducing any component of the work as necessary to promote the work of the WFF Youth Initiative and its partners.
- d. Sub-licensing the entries to the press and partners for reproduction in connection with the Competition and the WFF Youth Initiative and any related media releases issued by the WFF Youth Initiative and its partners with a non-commercial, promotional purpose.

10.2. The applicant grants the WFF Youth Initiative and its partners a non-exclusive, irrevocable and free license throughout the world for as long as reasonably necessary for the non-commercial, promotional uses described in 10.1 above, for each entry submitted.

10.3. The applicant acknowledges responsibility for protecting the submitted entry against misuse by third parties. The WFF Youth Initiative and its partners assume no responsibility and shall not be liable for any misuse of submitted works.

## **11. Miscellaneous**

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11.1. The WFF Youth Initiative reserves the right to cancel, modify, suspend or delay the Competition in the event of unforeseen circumstances beyond their reasonable control. It also reserves the right to change, amend, delete or add to these Terms and Conditions at any time.

11.2. WFF Youth Initiative and its staff shall not be responsible or liable for any claims, demands, losses and liabilities of any kind or nature arising out of or in connection with the applicant's participation in this Competition or the acceptance or use of the prizes awarded.

11.2.1. WFF Youth Initiative shall not be responsible or liable for:

- a. Any problem, loss or damage, misdirected or illegible entries, delay and/or failure in receiving and sending the entry as a result of any network, communication or system interruption or error; or
- b. Any error, interruption, deletion, defect, delay in operation or transmission, site failure or unauthorized access to entries.

11.3. WFF Youth Initiative does not represent or endorse the accuracy or reliability of any data, information or other material provided by any applicant. It explicitly disclaims any responsibility for the content of any data, information and materials provided by the applicants in the context of the Competition.

11.4. By submitting an application to the Competition, the applicant agrees to indemnify, defend, and hold and save harmless, the WFF Youth Initiative, FAO and its partners against all suits, proceedings, claims, demands, losses and liabilities of any kind or nature brought by any third party against the WFF Youth Initiative, including, but not limited to, all litigation costs and expenses, attorney's fees, settlement payments and damages, based on, arising from, or relating to the WFF Youth Initiative's use of the applications strictly in accordance with the Competition's terms and solely for noncommercial purposes, without any transfer or assumption of intellectual property rights from the applicant. The obligations under this section do not lapse upon closure of the Competition.

11.5. Nothing in these Terms and Conditions or in any rules related to the Competition, nor any acts performed or statements made in relation to the Competition, shall be deemed a waiver, express or implied, of any of the privileges and immunities of WFF Youth Initiative and FAO. Any dispute arising out of or relating to the interpretation or implementation of the Competition or these Terms and Conditions shall be settled amicably through consultations and negotiations. If the dispute is not resolved through negotiation, it shall be submitted to conciliation in accordance with the UNCITRAL Conciliation Rules, as in force. Any dispute not resolved through conciliation shall be finally settled by arbitration in accordance with the UNCITRAL Arbitration Rules, as in force. The arbitration proceedings shall be conducted in English and the place of arbitration shall be Rome, Italy. The decision of the arbitral tribunal shall be final and binding, and the arbitral tribunal shall have no authority to award punitive damages.

## **12. Acceptance**

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By submitting entries, the applicant confirms that the Terms and Conditions for this Competition, as set out above, have been read, understood and agreed to by the applicant.