

Youth-led Organisations:

The case of Young Professionals for Agricultural Development



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Acknowledgement

This research has been an interesting journey to discover how youth organization as YPARD is organized and can contribute to foster transformation in the food systems. This journey would not be possible without the insightful inputs from three members of the YPARD network. We would like to thank Myriam Perez, Abhishek Khadka and Aimé Kazika for their availability to answer the multiple questions of the research team as well as for their meaningful contribution to this report.

Introduction

The youth population is increasing in low middle income countries. Nearly 60% of the population in developing countries is below the age of 25¹ and 1.8 billion youth live in low-middle income countries. This is a massive amount of people that put under pressure the economics of many developing countries. Experts and policy makers often point out at the need to bring youth in the labour market to improve livelihoods and reduce poverty. It is estimated that in Sub-sahara Africa, there will be a need to create 18 million jobs every year in order to meet the young entering the labour market until 2030². These are massive numbers and the challenges needs to be addressed promptly.

Governments, researchers and policy makers have therefore studied pathways and reform trajectories to enhance job creation, stimulate entrepreneurships and strengthen the linkages between youth and the agricultural sector.

However, youth are often been seen more as passive beneficiaries of top-down designed programs, rather than active actors and game changers. In this research we take this second approach since youth are the most active part of a country's population. They are likely to take some risks, responds to challenges fast and in a pro-active way and develop innovative ways of organize society and food systems. When youth are empowered, their potential to stimulate innovations become concrete.

We look at how youth foster innovation and transform food systems with a 'social innovation lens'. New forms of organization are emerging worldwide. Youth are engaging in movements and initiatives that are concerned with re-thinking the ways we produce and consume food, by balancing economic needs with environmental and societal stakes. The fresh and flexible mind of youth are in the best position to quickly adjust to the new ways to produce and consume food, and are able to better respond to the challenges of a world in constant change. Youth have the capability to look at society in an alternative way and are getting organised their self to challenge the bottlenecks in the food systems and to make their voice heard.

The overall research project aims to explore how youth-led movements, organisations and initiatives foster social innovations, and what their potential is to transform food systems for inclusive, sustainable development. This is done through an exploratory case study based on semi-structured interviews with the director of the network and a few key members in Asian and African countries.

This research constitutes a two-year trajectory, with the main research question being:

How can youth-led organisations, movements and networks contribute to the transformation of food systems for inclusive and sustainable development?

¹ UNDESA (2013) *Cross-national comparisons of internal migration: An update on global patterns and trends*. Population Division Technical Paper No. 2013/1. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; In: Suttie, S. (2015) Youth employment and agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa, INCLUDE. Available at: <http://includeplatform.net/youth-employment-agriculture-sub-saharan-africa/#note-3272-6>. Accessed 18-10-2016.

² FAO (2017) *Dynamic rural-urban linkages for decent rural employment*. Policy brief prepared by Elisenda Estruch and David Schwebel (FAO), and David Suttie and Karim Hussein (IFAD). Available at: www.fao.org/3/a-i6595e.pdf

The cases

The selection of the three youth-led networks to be further explored in a case study was based on the outcome of a web-based scan on youth-focused and youth-led organisations and their characteristics. 115 organisations were initially scanned on the level of youth participation as well as the focus of the organisations in working on youth related issues and challenges related to food systems. Thereafter, 28 organisations were further explored based on working in the food system arena. We especially tried to identify organisations that contribute to system change and disruption within areas related to food systems. The scanning exercise resulted in a selection of five organisations and networks that fulfilled the criteria and especially had a high level of youth participation as being led by youth. From the five, we decided to focus on three organisations which are all organised as networks. This selection was made based on the interest on understanding the organisation, goals and impact of (youth-led) networks in the food system, also seeing their reach beyond national borders and the potential of having high impact in the food system. The selection of three networks also makes it easier to compare and look at both similarities and differences.

Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD) – a global network empowering youth

Background – How is YPARD organised?

YPARD, Young Professionals for Agricultural Development, is an international movement of young professionals, researchers, students and entrepreneurs who are concerned about and willing to contribute to the future of the food systems and agricultural research. It was founded in New Delhi, India in 2006. YPARD operates as a network and, today, the *global coordination unit*, the strategic coordinator body, is hosted by GFAR, at Food and Agriculture Organization, in Rome, Italy. YPARD has multi-level structure: members and supporting members are at the centre of the organization. They are supported by a *steering committee* (SC), *regional coordinators* (RC), *country representatives* (CR) and *local representatives* (LR). In addition, an *advisory group* (AG) and *global coordination unit* (GCU) guide the strategic orientations and trajectories of the network³.

Myriam Perez, the YPARD director (until October 2018), emphasises that YPARD originated from the idea that young researchers in agriculture development had the right to make their voice heard and get involved in discussions that will orientate the policy makers. The network targeted primarily researchers in their early stage and less effort was made to include young people outside the academic world. In 2012, she continues, the network wanted to expand. It was realised that in order to contribute to the development of the agricultural sector, not only researchers but also young farmers, extension officers, engineers entrepreneurs should be connected. Since then, the network works to reach out to young professionals who work in public and private sector as well as civil society.

YPARD has over 15,000 registered members and Twitter, the social media channel where the network has the greatest coverage, counts up to 21,000 followers. YPARD has a growing online community, with 61.8% of new visitors in 2017 and an increase of 15% of newsletter subscriptions as compared to 2016⁴. YPARD

³ YPARD external review 2017. Available at: <https://ypard.net/resources/ypard-external-review-2017>

⁴ 2017 Annual Report – YPARD's year in review. Available at: <https://ypard.net/resources/ypard-2017-annual-report>

members come from all over the world. The network is represented in 71 countries in Asia and Pacific, Africa and Europe. There is difference between members in terms of their activeness in the network, some are just registered as members on the website while others such as the country representatives are active in developing activities, strategies and in networking. In DRC, the country representative Aimé mentioned that more young people are interested to be actively involved and he is pushing members to organise their own activities depending on their field of interest.

Objectives and activities: What does YPARD do?

Information and knowledge brokerage

Today, YPARD's vision is to create a 'food secure world without poverty where young people are able to fully contribute'⁵. To achieve this vision, YPARD intends to 'enable and empower young agricultural leaders to shape sustainable food systems' (idem).

In practice, the network is actively working on the goal of creating awareness among young people on matters related to the agricultural sector. By the use of social media, YPARD shares information from different sources and make them available to young people in order to facilitate discussions, engaging youth in debates and stimulate reactions. YPARD's members and country representatives contribute to feed the discussions by writing blogs, commenting papers, reacting on magazine's articles and writing on journals. YPARD make primarily use of the website and social media to convey the messages to youth. YPARD believes that the young people are particularly appealed at the use of new technology, thus anybody who intend to engage youth, has to be present and visible on social media. YPARD has an official website and accounts on the most popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus and LinkedIn.

From a scan of the blogs on the YPARD website, it appears clear that the topics addressed and discussed by YAPRD's members are very diverse in nature and that bloggers are free to make their own editorials choices. As the former YPARD director, Myriam Perez observes that it is challenging to have a complete overview of all the activities and topics within a large network. However, among the most popular topics, it can be mentioned the linkages between agriculture and food security, entrepreneurship in agriculture, climate smart agriculture, rural policies, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and, broadly speaking, innovative technologies applied in the agricultural sector.

Agribusiness is another topic that has great appeal among YPARD's members Abhishek Khadka, country representative from Nepal, points out that in the Nepalese local YPARD network many young people are especially interested in getting to know more on marketing of agricultural commodities. In developing countries, he continues, there is a lot of attention on addressing what are the bottlenecks that hamper agricultural production and livestock farming, to look for solutions that make agriculture a sustainable livelihood for local farmers.

⁵ YPARD Strategic plan 2018 – 2021. Available at <https://ypard.net/resources/ypard-strategic-directions-2018-2021>

Contests

YPARD is active in a wide range of activities. They organize online events such as series of blog posts, e-discussions, pictures and video contests. Contests are among the most important activities for YPARD. It is common practice that country representatives promote innovation contests to engage with youth within their national borders, also taking advantage of the funding often made available by foundations and international organization. In 2016, the Nepalese local network organized a storytelling contest for young entrepreneurs, where entrepreneurs were represented by 43 stories and 3 photo books. Through the contest, young entrepreneurs were invited to share their challenges and successes in sustainable farming. The aim of the contest was twofold: to show youth examples of (new) technologies applied to agriculture, such as greenhouses and agri-mechanised farms; to challenge the stereotyped youth's perspective of agriculture as a conservative sector with low innovation. 'It was a big program and we got big recognition since then' Abhishek says.

Participating in and influencing policy debates

Since of its foundation, YPARD has worked to get young people heard by (high level) stakeholders to make sure that young people's ideas, work and perspectives are included in science and policy. This continues to be an important objective for YPARD and there are several actions taken in the last years. In 2017, the network provided inputs to elaborate youth inclusive stakeholder strategies in a number of arenas. Among others, YPARD provided suggestions and recommendations to stakeholders at national level such as ministries (Kenya), international level initiatives such as Leads Feed the Future - DRC and international summits (Akwa Ibom State Agricultural Policy and Food Sufficiency Strategy Summit) (2017 Annual report⁶).

Moreover, YPARD works to promote the youth representation in management roles, by ensuring YPARD representatives sit in national agri-business related organizations, national associations for the development of the agricultural sector, national unions of agricultural workers as well as research centres focused on innovations in agriculture (Annual Report 2017).

Mentoring programs and skills development program for young professional in agricultural development

Mentoring programs and professional skills development program are another important piece of work carried out by YPARD. They are especially designed for master and PhD students in their earlier stage of their career. As for many network's activities, also career development programs are co-financed and organised with support of partners. Abhishek shared that YPARD Nepal is collaborating with educational institutes to develop a course to teach college students the use of statistical software such as SPSS and R to be applied for nutrition related projects. Grant writing is another example of mentoring program which is popular among young professionals in Nepal. Sometimes mentoring programs result as a follow up of a contest. Myriam gave an example from 2016 when a competition aiming at rewarding innovative rural entrepreneurs with seed funds was held and 6 projects were selected. YPARD supported the 6 projects for one year and guided the development of their ideas. Mentoring and career development programs are

attractive to the YPARD members and this is what the network is known and appreciated for among young professionals.

Challenges and opportunities for the YPARD network

One of the challenge mentioned by Myriam was that of being an informal network. She expressed that in a formal context you don't exist as a legal entity, which can result in that YPARD is not always recognise as a serious or established organization. Related to this is the challenge that YPARD as a network does not claim to represent youth as a homogenous group with a uniquely defined views and values. The network, because of the diverse members, is a set of different ideas and values. It is not the role of the leaders of the network to consolidate this variety into one vision. These two challenges combined makes it difficult in certain situations to address and advocate for the interest of youth effectively.

Access to funding is for the country representatives a challenges and they are all working with the network on a voluntary basis. Another challenge for the country representatives is the image that many youth (not member of the network) have about agriculture. It is therefore in the interest of the network to show different sides of agriculture and the emphasis have been on entrepreneurship and business, something which is not adequately taught at the universities. In Nepal, the YAPRD network is working with and is connected to the university while in DRC this connection has been a challenge.

An opportunity in DRC is that agriculture has become a policy priority and the network has now managed to get a meeting with the ministry of agriculture to discuss support and actions. The minster have indicated that they want to learn from members of the network on how to improve the use of ICT in agriculture.

The YPARD network now has a 10 year track record, and there are new members joining every day and week. This gives motivation to the active members and the country representatives see that more young people find opportunities to travel and learn abroad which result in new knowledge and ideas. Internet has made it possible to connect beyond borders and to mobilise people, this is something that is highly used in inviting more members to the network and to share experiences.

Advantage of being organised as a network and the social innovation

There are a number of advantages in being organized as a network, and especially an informal network. The network is very flexible because the members together with the coordinators can decide together on what and how to operate. The network also easily cooperates with other organisations and build up good relationships based on trust. The mission of YPARD is to empower the members to connect and develop their ideas and personal networks. That is also where they show impact. When young people are mobilised around themes, global youth are contributing and working together on innovations. The transfer of knowledge and new ideas happens in the network and it is adaptive to the local needs and contexts. Myriam was a country representative before starting as the YPARD director and she has worked across continents and countries with other members on new ideas. The ideas were often adapted to fit the local context. Abhishek also emphasises the knowledge exchange as very important for young people. Through sharing experiences and ideas they can try-out and develop new practices.

In DRC, Aimé, the country representative has seen increase in various African countries regarding inclusion of youth in the start of new agricultural programmes and also in evaluations. That is also something he

really wants to advocate for. For him, the key social innovation is the YPARD network itself. He is the first country representative and it is the first youth network in DRC.

The three representatives see the role in the YPARD network as a facilitator and connector. Myriam, for example, explains that there are increasingly more opportunities and resources available for youth and that YPARD and the coordination unit should be the one that facilitate the access to these resources. Also Abhishek, points out that what the network tries to achieve is reaching a large audience of young people interested in agriculture and engage them in a dialogue across borders about the challenges and the possible solutions in farming. They want the network to grow and continue to be inclusive of various perspectives and approaches from youth in food systems. In this way the many problems in agriculture can be tackled and youth can have a key role in new agricultural developments.

Plans and actions for the future

The writing and formulation of position papers is an idea for the future which YPARD did not engage with yet. This idea is included in the YPARD's strategic strategy 2018 – 2021, where it is written that 'YPARD will publish, on an annual basis, two papers with clear messages on emerging trends related to young people and food systems [...]'. According to Myriam, a possible way to implement this is to gather YPARD members who work on a certain topic, and make them identify what are the critical points in the topic and how can youth led initiatives contribute to the topic. Although it is perceived as crucial by many in the network, this work is still to be developed.

The local YPARD network in DRC hopes to have reached 1000 members in the coming years and to strengthen the African network, and also to have local representatives in several districts in DRC.

Conclusions

Thanks to the conversations with Myriam, Abhiskek and Aimé, a number of conclusions can be drawn on how YPARD contribute to transform food systems for inclusive and sustainable development.

The interest of young people in being connected across the globe is growing as seen in the case of YPARD. The number of YPARD's followers on different social media, such as Twitter, Facebook page, Facebook group and LinkedIn, show that youth are willing to get involved in international level debates and global dialogues. This trend is confirmed by YPARD's great success in bringing members to international arenas.

YPARD fosters innovation in the food systems by embracing multiple perspectives and promoting pluralism.

According to the three representatives, YPARD's biggest strength is pluralism. Bloggers are free to choose the topics to address in their blogs and members are free to express opinions, promote their point of view on fora and social media with minimum interference by the network's moderators. As a result, a great deal of viewpoints emerges. By exchanging ideas, thoughts and reflections, young people learn to think out of the box and to go beyond the business as usual logic. Their innovative ideas are shared and adapted to local conditions which may, to various degrees, contribute to transform food systems.

The downside is that it is hard work to point at what is a shared vision on the food systems and which values and propositions YPARD's members intend to stand for. This poses a challenge especially to operationalise and incorporate the innovations promoted by youth into strategic action plans at a global level. Therefore, there is a need to find a balance between leaving room to embrace multiple perspectives and developing shared vision and values among young people about the future of the agriculture

The network itself is seen as the main social innovation, both at local and global level. The YPARD network is innovative as it is run by youth for youth all working or studying in the field of agriculture and food. In a country such as DRC, it was especially mentioned to be a new thing that youth are active and organised in this way. It is a very inclusive network which is organised by the motivation of youth to contribute their time, ideas and experiences.

YPARD's way to contribute to the transformation of food systems is through promoting the development of motivated young professionals who can become leaders now and in the future.

In this regard, the development of youth's personal and professional skills remains YPARD's priority. YPARD is a youth-for-youth community. This was clear in the words of the three representatives who all mentioned the value of the work of YPARD with regard to the personal and professional development of youth. This can be seen also in the multitude of activities carried out by the network, which, beside the mentoring programs and career development, always aimed at including an element of personal growth. In every meeting, contest, international conference, members are encouraged to report back to the network community by including not only the mere narration of facts and figures but also personal take-out and plans for the future.

By equipping young professionals with advanced communication and presentation skills to be used in high level context and international settings, YPARD contributes to develop a generation of empowered, educated and experienced professionals. This will turn the young of today into adults with stronger opinions

and confidence who will be in a better position to translate their ideas and innovations into action for change.

Reflections and Research limitations

Problems in establishing contact

In the summer of 2018 we contacted the three networks selected for the exploratory case study to be part of the Foodathon, an event organised by students at Wageningen University for the SDG conference. The idea was to invite members of the networks and mentor them during the Foodathon to be able to conduct interviews and get to know their ways of solving food system problems, After many emails back and forward none of the network members signed up to the event. Thereafter we decided to conduct interviews with the leader of the network and a few members. With YPARD, the connection was easy and the members responded quickly. However, with the other two networks it has been a difficult process. We have had positive responses and then difficulties in planning the interviews and that the appointments have not been followed up on.

Too ambitions objective and research question

Both the former scan and this case study have a very open and explorative function and structure. There is not much written about youth networks on both global and local level in low and middle-income countries. Especially not regarding agriculture and food systems. The aim was therefore to understand the networks and their impact from the perspective of the network themselves. It is however difficult to make bold statements about their contribution to transform food systems through interviews. That would require other methods.

New insights and new connections

The YPARD case study has given us new insights about the way the network is organised and the positive impact is seem to have on young professionals in low and middle income countries. The global and local connection and the insight that the network itself is a social innovation. The connections established with the members and the promotion of networks as partners in projects will continue as a result of the study.

Annex I - YPARD members interviewed

Myriam Perez, YPARD director April – October 2018

Abhishek Khadka: YPARD Nepal country representative

Aimé Kazika: YPARD DRC country representative