



YOUTH SOLUTIONS REPORT



Supporting youth-led innovation to achieve the SDGs

SDSN Youth Solutions Report Policy Brief no.1

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly two years since the adoption of *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UNGA 2015a), it is increasingly clear that the challenges facing our societies and economies will need the participation of all stakeholders and demographics. Crucially, this includes young people aged 15-30, who currently represent approximately one quarter of the world's population (US Census Bureau 2016) and constitute a primary source of untapped potential in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Among its repeated references to the importance of partnerships for sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda convincingly embraces this notion, emphasizing the role of children and young peo-

ple as “critical agents for change” (UNGA 2015a: para.51) and encouraging the UN Major Groups (including the UN Major Group on Children and Youth) to participate in the review of, and report on their contribution to the achievement of the SDGs (UNGA 2015a: para.89).

In order to move beyond statements of principles, however, it remains essential to assess the real extent to which young people worldwide are delivering solutions to sustainable development challenges at all levels, as well as to investigate (and learn how to overcome) the barriers preventing young innovators and problem-solvers from implementing their projects and bringing them to scale.

SDSN Youth, the global youth chapter of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), published the first edition of the Youth Solutions Re-

port (or YSR) in January 2017 with this objective in mind. Accordingly, that Report showcased 50 stories of youth solutions from all countries and regions, including startups and social businesses, educational programs, non-profit initiatives, and examples of applied research.

Building on an analysis of the landscape of youth-led innovation on the SDGs contained in the YSR, this policy brief operates on the fundamental assertion that young people should be seen as capable of delivering positive global impact in realization of the 2030 Agenda. The overwhelming findings of existing research corroborate such an assertion, whilst also making it clear that young people’s skills, energy and natural flair for innovation remain hampered by a number of obstacles concerning access to financial and business development services, access to expertise, and visibility.

More importantly, however, the insights drawn from the YSR and expanded in this policy brief suggest concrete opportunities for action that can leverage the contribution of youth-led solutions to sustainable development, and guide stakeholders (including impact investors, policy-makers, universities and societies as large) in supporting young innovators and helping realise their full potential.

ten treated as part of the general adult population. This approach is misguided on a number of levels, because apart from overlooking young people’s specific needs and particular entrepreneurial potential, it also underestimates their critical contribution to economic and social progress.

To give just an example, according to the 2013 survey of the RBS Enterprise Tracker, which reveals quarterly findings on people’s attitudes in starting their own business, ‘compared to the UK adult population, young people are much more likely to want to start their own business or enterprise (54% compared to 36%) and also more likely to consider supporting social causes that they are passionate about (70% compared to 63%) (RBS Group 2013).’

As a result, it is important to identify the specific challenges and opportunities that appear to arise consistently in relation to youth-led innovation for sustainable development, in order to understand how to effectively support these efforts through targeted responses. From this perspective, four aspects should be discussed:

1. the **Motivations** for youth-led innovation for sustainable development;
2. the **Common barriers** that youth solutions face when being implemented or scaled;
3. the **Support needs** of young innovators;
4. the **Key benefits** of youth-led innovation for the SDGs and society at large.

For each of them, important insights can be drawn from existing research on youth engagement in problem-solving at all relevant scales, as well as from the data collected for the realization of the YSR itself. Before looking at these aspects more in depth, however, it is important to briefly explain how this policy brief defines ‘youth-led innovation for the SDGs’.

In this field, the most widely used expression is certainly ‘social entrepreneurship’, and McDowall and Micinski (2010) accordingly define a ‘young social entrepreneur’ as an innovative person aged 16-25 who has led and acted upon a plan to address a social issue. For its part, the YSR goes one step further. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Report looks at the entire range of potential solutions coming from

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



YOUTH-LED INNOVATION FOR THE SDGs: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Whenever we talk about supporting the positive contribution of civil society and the private sector to sustainable development, young people are of-

young people aged 15-30 (that is, not necessarily limiting the analysis to entrepreneurial solutions) whilst also specifically linking them with the 17 Goals and 169 targets enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. In this sense, the Report then considers “youth-led innovation for the SDGs” as every instance of transformative project and endeavour which showcases the innovative approach that youth are taking in solving the multiple challenges of sustainable development.

Motivations for youth-led innovation for sustainable development

A common trait exists amongst young innovators for the SDGs: they are invariably passionate individuals, with a determined vision to fill unmet needs and deliver positive change for the communities, societies and the world they live in. Additionally, although many young innovators for the SDGs have been able to scale their ventures to reach global audiences, young innovators are, at least initially, overwhelmingly motivated to design and run ventures that address problems which affect them and their communities directly.

The European Learning for Youth in Social Entrepreneurship (ELYSE) final report identifies a number of specific motivations that drive young entrepreneurs to take action for sustainable development. Some of the leading reasons cited (UnLtd 2016) include:

- young entrepreneurs’ desire to improve existing products and services;
- their aspiration to own their own sustainable development venture or work independently;
- their desire to ‘change the world’;
- their desire to solve unmet needs, and
- their aptitude for seizing existing opportunities.

A report published by The Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs (UnLtd) makes a few supplementary points about drivers of youth innovation for the SDGs. With regard to young entrepreneurs, the report emphasises their success in enterprising endeavours regardless of their educational background, further suggesting no direct correlations between interest towards (and achievements in) sustainable business and educational levels (UnLtd 2012).

It therefore follows that young entrepreneurs for sustainable development often ‘learn by doing’ - as the report’s title also suggests - and not necessarily through a formal or didactic approach to entrepreneurship. In this context, however, lack of access to appropriate educational opportunities then plays a major role in preventing these solutions from achieving their full impact. As such, the UnLtd report recommended that opportunities for young people in establishing social enterprises should be increased and nurtured in order to facilitate the on-going development of their skills.

The first edition of the Youth Solutions Report also supplements the discourse on motivation and ‘learning by doing’ approaches displayed by young entrepreneurs by emphasizing the main substantive areas addressed by youth-led solutions. Whilst synergies between different SDGs are common, and the use of integrated approaches appears a significant feature of many youth-led innovations, this year’s Report identifies a major interest in solutions geared towards achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 3 (Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).



Credits: The Educate! Experience

Barriers to Youth-led Innovation for the SDGs

In the face of young people’s enthusiasm towards problem solving for sustainable development, there is a remarkable consensus on the factors that impede youth innovation - perhaps the most obvious of which is a relative lack of financial resources. However, limited networks, market barriers, nega-

tive perceptions of young people and lack of business experience also feature as identifiable and significant challenges that young innovators for the SDGs must overcome. Finally, lack of data to support policy-making on youth-led innovation remains an overarching concern, with significant effects on young people's ability to create and implement solutions for sustainable development.

a) Access to Finance and Human Capital

The ELYSE final report helpfully ranks main obstacles to success as perceived by young innovators themselves, and perhaps unsurprisingly, cites difficulties in access to finance as the leading barrier expressed by its respondents (UnLtd 2016). As addressed by young founders in the Youth Solutions Report (YSR), limitations in capital can have a significant impact on a solutions' structure and overall success. In the early stages, this can be experienced in the initial operating costs needed to register a new nonprofit or social enterprise. Together with growing expenses for on-the-ground resources and staffing budgets, many solutions are relying heavily on donations or volunteers to continue their work - a decision met with additional challenges and inconsistencies due to high turnovers and time lost in retraining. For solutions looking to grow their impact in other areas, increased access to funding presents a unique opportunity for SDG progress.

Innovation grants, prizes, and policy initiatives on the part of private investors and governments can assist to address many of these gaps. By working closer with young people, whether through public programs, or incubator or accelerator hubs, youth-led solutions can be better equipped - and included - in contributing to specific SDG targets, particularly at the local level.

b) Capacity-building and Mentorship Support

Respondents of the ELYSE final report identified prohibitively legal and complex regulatory frameworks as the next most significant barrier to success, with a lack of business experience and difficulties in building up a team also widely recognised as hindering factors. For highly technical youth solutions featured in the YSR, including scientific or engineering projects for the SDGs, a similar need was expressed for the pairing of academic mentors and

partners to help guide young solutions across technical areas.

In addition, a 2009 report by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), largely confirmed in the data gathered in the preparation of the YSR, suggests that practical constraints, such as legal age restrictions on banking, setting up companies and applying for patents can act as barriers for youth innovation.

Finally, as also highlighted by several youth solutions included in the YSR, in many regions there is often a lack of access to skilled personnel, such as volunteers or paid staff with the right training and technical background to assist in the operation of specialized tasks.

By assisting young innovators in the development of their business strategies, as well as educating them on best practices for data collection, monitoring, and grant writing, for example, young innovators believe they can be better equipped to overcome initial learning curves and become self-sustaining.

c) Limited Visibility and Access to Networks

Lack of visibility and access to networks manifests itself at multiple scales. At the local level, proper exposure is often one of the largest hurdles when initiating a new project or initiative in a community. Raising public awareness to young innovators' causes, while gaining understanding for their work amidst social and cultural barriers, are some of the most important issues youth solutions face. At the regional level, effective communication about youth-led projects also poses a unique challenge. Due to widespread regional differences in factors like literacy levels and internet access, different media sources are more applicable than others and decisions on a successful approach can take youth crucial time to build. Finally, at the international level, with a growing number of solutions interested in working across borders, developing communication strategies that account for cultural context is something young people often can't do alone.

The 2009 NESTA report mentioned above agrees with, and builds upon, the inhibiting factors already

presented. On the one hand, the report identifies negative attitudes towards young people, and a debilitating lack of networks as essential factors for consideration. On the other, the report also puts forward the idea that social inequalities and rural isolation can have a part to play in restricting youth-led innovation. This is an important consideration for the role of youth in the 2030 Agenda, since restrictions on young people's access to information and social networks could significantly reduce their ability to develop innovative ideas into action.

d) Regional disparities and knowledge gaps

Whilst maintaining a global perspective, it is essential to recognise the knowledge gaps relating to the specific geographical contexts in which youth-led innovation occurs. In general, there has been a notable lack of specificities on country-to-country variance, young people's access to innovation support networks, or the impact of various SDG intersections, for example, on goals such as gender equality (SDG 5), reduced inequality (SDG 10), and no poverty (SDG 1). This may well be attributed to the lack of available data on these social groups who are often disenfranchised by their very nature, or blocked from full and equal social, economic and political participation.

Pertinent findings from reports by multilateral stakeholders, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which discuss the general landscape of youth entrepreneurship and innovation through an international lens, confirm the wide variance of entrepreneurial framework conditions from country-to-country as an important factor to consider when assessing the different barriers young people face in starting businesses (ILO 2006).

As a result of this general lack of contextual awareness and appreciation, insufficient research has been undertaken so far in developing the most effective strategic approaches for supporting youth-led innovation in the Global South. To avoid falling into the trap of viewing youth communities worldwide as the expression of a homogeneous constituency affected by the same needs and problem, increased efforts should be directed at exploring the

effects of different local conditions, and learn how a support strategy should be adapted to best fit these altering contexts.

Developing effective mapping tools, as highlighted in the YSR, is one opportunity for connecting solutions with established organizations or institutions in their areas. The value of this inherently lies in assisting solutions to expand their network whilst simultaneously learning and avoiding what can often be costly duplications of work. At the same time, however, mapping is also essential for all other stakeholders, and particularly policy-makers, in that it can increase their understanding of youth-led innovation occurring in a specific region, fill knowledge gaps and consequently help these actors design more context-appropriate interventions.

Support needs for young innovators

Every identified barrier to youth innovation for the SDGs corresponds directly to support the needs of young innovators for the SDGs. The existing research offers a great degree of unanimity in this respect, with key themes emerging such as the need to provide financial and business support, as well as the requirement to cultivate an environment that actively champions youth innovation. It is equally true that young innovators for sustainable development have largely supported similar needs as more experienced professionals or entrepreneurs, but often with more intensity.

With regard to an overall ecosystem of support, both practitioners and young innovators interviewed for the ELYSE report emphasised the need for more active collaboration between support organisations, ranging from large multi-lateral organisations, to central governments, local authorities, businesses and intermediaries. This sentiment was echoed by the UnLtd 2012 report, which recommended engaging young people in learning-by-doing activities, equipping the new generation of impact catalysts with the necessary skills and knowledge from a young age.

In the ELYSE report, at least for young SDG innovators in Europe, 65% said financial support was the most crucial type of support that could be offered, but that assistance was also required

in other areas, namely legal support and overall business support – 56% and 52% respectively. Furthermore, in the data collection leading to the first edition of the Youth Solutions Report, the main support needs resulting from existing barriers were, respectively:

- enhanced exposure and visibility of youth talent to help scale-up innovations;
- increased networking opportunities for collaboration between different stakeholders and access to investors;
- improved access to volunteers working on the ground to support the field level implementation of innovations.

Finally, despite its UK-specific focus, NESTA's 2009 report also offers some practical suggestions on how best to support youth innovation for the SDGs with consideration for different contexts and barriers that affect youth innovation around the world. Firstly, the report suggests that the leveraging of the media in encouraging and promoting positive images of youth-led innovation. And second, it recommends establishing networks to support young innovators for the SDGs, such as providing 'spaces' as well as 'places' to support young people's innovation. Lastly, and in line with the Youth Solutions Report platform, NESTA's report advocates the recognition, celebration and rewarding of youth-led innovation, in addition to providing organisational support for solutions.

Key benefits of youth-led innovation for the SDGs

Much of the existing research on youth innovation for the SDGs begins with the premise that encouraging youth-led social enterprise is beneficial for its dual purpose of finding solutions to the world's problems, while also solving the worldwide youth unemployment crisis, which currently stands at double the rate of adult unemployment (ILO 2016). Indeed, much of the existing research has been prompted by a reaction to this endemic crisis, seeking ways to overcome the lag and strain this creates on the global economy.

The ILO estimates that halving the youth unemployment rate would add 4.4% - 7% to the global GDP – a statistic that is difficult to ignore. But, in addition to direct economic gains, we would also see a reduction in expenditure to counter risky behaviour,

violence and crime, as well as realising social benefits of reduced vulnerability and exclusion of young people. Existing research has therefore reached a consensus in this respect, acknowledging that promoting youth-led innovation stimulates a shift in young people from social dependence to self-sufficiency, thus enabling them to escape poverty and marginalisation and regain agency of their lives.

Beyond filling gaps in the global labour force, there is of course the added benefit of the social aspect, which according to research to date, gives young people a sense of meaning and belonging, while creating a more engaged and sustainably-conscious global citizenry. What's more, research also suggests that promoting an environment that fosters young people's innovation can generate a longer-term interest in sustainable development action amongst young people.

Therefore, by engaging more young people in finding solutions that can contribute the SDGs, we effectively galvanise the younger generation in spearheading sustainable change. This idea is particularly pertinent with respect to solutions focused on improving access to education, in that these projects often lead to young people working with children and therefore create bridges that can promote a common, intergenerational understanding of the challenges and opportunities of sustainable development.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

What SDSN Youth tried to embark on with its Youth Solutions platform, namely, a thorough analysis of the impact achieved by young problem-solvers on the SDGs, has two main objectives. On the one hand, understanding the landscape of youth-led innovation for sustainable development makes a compelling argument for increasing support to these solutions and their founders. On the other, as emphasized in this policy brief, it also allows for a more robust identification of the challenges to progress that currently hold young people back. In other words, such an exercise has a crucial role in enabling policymakers and investors alike to look

critically at the factors that hamper intended outcomes, recognise common threads, and develop adequate structures for support.

Building on the recommendations that were already included in the YSR, a wide variety of tools and initiatives can be designed to support youth-led solutions on the SDGs at all levels. Here, these instruments are grouped around three main areas, namely access to funding, access to expertise and networks, and increased visibility.

Increase funding through investments and policy initiatives

Improving funding availability for solutions is a critical intervention point for supporting young people's contribution to the 2030 Agenda, an intervention that can be implemented through a variety of initiatives calling upon stakeholders beyond the private sector.

- **Create more investment opportunities in youth solutions:** the creation of more venture capital investment opportunities is an important means of aligning investors with solutions. In addition, when these opportunities are linked with acceleration or investment readiness programs, they simultaneously provide solutions with the expertise and resources needed to scale as well as to present a more solid case for investors.

- **Establish innovation grants, awards and prizes:** increasing the availability of innovation grants and prizes is also another opportunity area which can be addressed by governments, companies, and academic institutions to directly support the work of youth for the SDGs. In many cases, such support is the first, decisive step to help kickstart a youth-led solution and allow it to cross the valley of death of innovation.

- **Develop other policy initiatives to support innovators' access to funding:** Support by local governments offers great potential for harnessing youth skills in a more creative way. Designing task forces and environments where young people can present their solutions to local stakeholders and supporters is a cost-effective way of improving ac-

cess to financing of youth projects. Government employment schemes that incorporate young innovators in tackling specific topics can also serve as a more direct approach to achieving SDG targets at the local level.

- **Develop national and regional funds for youth-led innovation:** The development of full-fledged funds or funding programmes specifically linked to supporting youth-led innovation for the SDGs is another action that governments, philanthropic donors, multilateral development agencies, and other multi-stakeholder partnerships should consider. The use of such funds is not new, and is vigorously endorsed by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development agreed in 2015 (UNGA 2015b). However, it would be important to specifically design them in ways which specifically ensure that support is directed at youth-led, SDG-oriented projects.

Take advantage of existing and emerging capacity-building and education tools.

The concept of education for sustainable development has now become widely used in academia and among young people. In this context, internet access constitutes the main vehicle for online learning and access to educational content for many communities in developing countries and developed countries alike. At the same time, however, other stakeholders have often failed to realize the potential of a broader uptake of the opportunities linked with better education for sustainable development, and specifically of its use as a capacity-building tool for young innovators and entrepreneurs.

- **Develop effective innovation incubators and acceleration programs:** The concentration of young innovators within academic institutions could benefit strongly from the increased creation of innovation hubs and mentorship programs that steer students towards practical applications that address SDG targets. Similarly, collaboration across student and faculties would create the kind of hybrid model needed to address the interconnected nature of the SDGs. Even beyond universities, however, the role of innovation incubators and accelerators specifically focused on young people and the SDGs should

be promoted by all stakeholders, including NGOs, firms, and business experts.

- **Ensure widespread uptake and dissemination of online learning tools:** online learning tools have helped to overcome many of the barriers associated with access to leading experts, high quality education, and specialized knowledge. A first step is ensuring the widespread uptake of already existing learning platforms and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), such as those currently run by SDSN's SDG Academy. These platforms provide young innovators with the opportunity to improve their skills in a particular field while connecting them with practitioners and academics alike, and can be disseminated easily across regions and countries. Secondly, developing more context- and country-specific programmes, thereby helping young people to localize the challenges and opportunities of sustainable development, would also be important in building awareness about local, national and regional problems and creating the expertise and mindset needed to solve them. Finally, designing more courses on entrepreneurship for sustainable development would represent a crucial step in equipping future innovators and entrepreneurs with the skills needed to transform business practices and align their strategies with the SDGs.

- **Promote education on SDG-oriented impact assessment:** A particularly important area of action for mentors and experts is the education of young entrepreneurs, innovators and leaders on the value of metrics. If implemented early on in their design phase, youth solutions stand to benefit from lessons in method collection, efficiency, and accessible data sets to present to potential investors and partners. Local organizations already working with youth solutions can also be a valuable resource in the collection process, especially for those solutions working across multiple regions. In addition, building capacity for impact assessment could help youth organizations and social businesses become key contributors to broader data collection efforts under the SDG indicator framework, thereby actively participating in the monitoring of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Improve visibility of youth solutions and access to networks

The heightened awareness of governments and other stakeholders on the presence and value of youth-led innovation for the SDGs can lead to new opportunities for these solutions to grow and scale-up. Although usually overlooked, increased opportunities for visibility and more effective means of connecting young innovators with potential partners is often essential in determining the success of new solutions.

- **Develop functioning mapping tools to connect innovators and partners:** Knowing which stakeholders to partner with in a particular area can help youth solutions discover relevant and supportive connections. In turn, ensuring that investors, experts or other supporters have a readily available instrument to decide where to direct their funds or other forms of support can overcome the persistent lack of visibility for young innovators. Through the use of mapping tools, such as online platforms and mobile applications providing the relevant information and details on support needs, youth solutions and supporters can benefit by mutually reaching out, avoiding duplications of work, share best practices, and collaborate on common challenges.

- **Encourage cooperation with community groups, NGOs and other local stakeholders:** the scaling of youth solutions often starts with the creation of meaningful partnerships at the local level. In particular, local nonprofits with similar focal interests, community groups and other stakeholders operating in local contexts (and especially in rural or remote areas) should seek all opportunities to partner with young innovators and thereby unlock the existing resources and networking benefits needed to help their projects grow.

- **Take advantage of the opportunities of media campaigns and public showcasing:** online and offline media campaigns, opportunities for the public showcasing of solutions (such as side-events and sessions at international, regional and national conferences), shark-tank sessions, and innovation fairs are just some examples of existing collaborations that can be strengthened. As access to net-

works and supporters is often crucially determined by these opportunities for solutions to be presented and included in the conversation, proper funding for the participation of innovators from developing countries should be ensured, in order to avoid limiting exposure to solutions already advantaged for geographical reasons.

In the future, additional research and editions of the YSR will continue to address trends in youth-led innovation for the SDGs and the development of adequate support mechanisms. At the same time, the YSR platform will continue to identify the gaps between the expectations of these solutions within the SDG framework and their actual impact, formulating recommendations for all stakeholders to ensure a full and productive participation of young innovators and problem-solvers in the realization of the 2030 Agenda.



Credits: Bruna Arcangelo/Liter of Light

CONCLUSION

All research examined for this policy brief points to the significantly positive effect of developing young people's innovative capacities for the SDGs. Young innovators are challenging traditional approaches to sustainable development and it seems clear that encouraging and facilitating youth-led innovation can have major economic, cultural and social impacts, that can be felt by all members of society. However, the spirit and innovative capacities of youth are not immune to external challenges. As evidenced in the previous sections, adequate support from all stakeholders, public and private, can increase the impact that young innovators have

on the world. Public policies, universities' strategic plans, private investment opportunities and other public-private initiatives should provide enabling environments to increase financing, improving legal and regulatory frameworks, and ensuring proper training and research which allow young innovators and their solutions to thrive. In turn, this will help overcome the barriers that are currently preventing skilled and innovative young people from contributing to the fullest towards achieving the SDGs.



YOUTH SOLUTIONS REPORT

This policy brief was prepared by the Solutions initiatives team of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network - Youth (SDSN Youth) and by The Social Investment Consultancy (TSIC). It is part of the Youth Solutions Report platform, a project by SDSN Youth.

For more information, visit <http://www.youthsolutions.report>

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About SDSN Youth

SDSN Youth is the global youth chapter of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, directed by Prof. Jeffrey D. Sachs. It educates young people about the challenges of sustainable development and creates opportunities for them to use their creativity and knowledge to pioneer innovative solutions for the SDGs.

Follow SDSN Youth on Twitter: @SDSNYouth or visit their website: www.sdsn-youth.org/ for more information about their initiatives.



About The Social Investment Consultancy (TSIC)

TSIC is a social change strategy consultancy. It enables its clients and the wider sector to rethink and evolve their approaches to delivering social impact.

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