

What impact can we measure from a youth network?

By Marina Cherbonnier, Global Coordination Unit, YPARD: young professionals for agricultural development. Catalyst's contribution in theme 2: measuring impact, at the 3rd Global Conference for Agricultural Research for Development, Johannesburg ([GCARD3](#)), South Africa, April 2016

So, you are a NETWORK? And what do you do, CONCRETELY? Plus, as a GLOBAL network, how do you impact RURAL youth? How do you keep things going on a good pace as a VOLUNTEER-based initiative?

That's the type of questions I get when I present YPARD, our youth-led international network for young professionals in agricultural development. And indeed, **YPARD has a challenging structure**. Imagine: we have 12 500 international members, 60 volunteering as national representatives, and only 2 full-time employees. But it is worth it: because a network is the core of sustainable development. As the African proverb says: *'If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.'* And that's precisely what I am focusing on here: LONG-TERM impact.

Understanding the dynamics of a network, in fact, is understanding the dynamics of a **collective action**. And building a cohesive action is what we are here for: we are to write a common statement and decide on how we will carry on this journey together.

There are **3 messages** I'd like to share with you:

1. Networks are not an attractive investment; still, a network is necessary towards sustainable impact
2. There is no magic method and tool: building a network and measuring its impact takes time
3. YPARD 10 years show why it is worth it investing in networks – particularly in a YOUTH network. Because there is no sustainable impact without involving the young generation fully.

Our network is a COMMUNITY; our members are at the heart of our raison d'être. We build our activities based on the need our members express and we thus make sure that the **community itself is positively impacted**. As a global network, it means embracing our diversity and fighting against a one size fits all prescription. Sometimes, it would be much easier and faster to tell our young people what to do but how could we tell such a **heterogeneous group** what is good for them?

YPARD's business plan does keep our team on the same vision and objectives and it provides guidance on possible activities, but it is made in a way that it leaves a lot of **space for creativity**. Indeed, there is **NO Innovation** without a space for new ideas. Even more, our national teams need this flexibility to identify what THEIR priorities are, based on THEIR own context and how THEY will be able to tackle these.

That way, we further help our members to grow as **owners and leaders of their own development**. We help them to think critically and take responsibility; we help them to stand individually and collectively, and to be the liaison with the most rural youth. Our national teams organize "YPARD

Cafés” (a concept that came from a national chapter itself) to get members to talk about their issues and agree on concrete activities to tackle these.

Now, how do we assess our impact? Our Business Plan defines our indicators and we have further guidelines to help our teams to report on their results. Particularly, people’s testimonials, as qualitative data, is key to understand how we concretely impact our members. *Dorian Šiljan, young farmer and NGO director, after an event expressed: “Thanks to YPARD I got the opportunity to meet such a large number of young people who share great passion for agriculture, exchange experiences and knowledge. This was eye opening event and I truly believe in youth power now.”* Besides, our outreach numbers online and through our national chapters show the massive scale we are working on.

Yet, It is hard to systematically get feedback from our volunteers – communicating takes time and reporting is a real job which requires a set of skills. We strive to make our process more effective for our representatives and more impact oriented. As for now, we sometimes end up discovering, after some months, all the great things that happened during the year. That’s what happened with Croatia. Zrinka, our country representative, is a young mum of 26 years old; she has just finished her studies. She lives in the countryside and her husband often leaves on mission. We don’t hear a lot from Zrinka during the year. So when I read her annual report some weeks ago, I was just amazed. YPARD Croatia had been taking part in the 1st Croatian Rural Parliament. Their insights for stronger support for the youth were included in the final Parliament’s Manifesto. Also, one of the team members - Toni - is now trainee in the Croatian Cabinet of the European Commission thanks to the contacts he made at the workshop....Besides this, the team built a partnership around a local mentoring program liaising senior professionals to 70 young people who built their practical farming skills (from growing vegetables, viticulture, wine production to medicinal herbs)....For all their activities, YPARD Croatia ensures wide local coverage through articles on newspapers, radio and TV programs so that it inspires a positive image of agriculture in the society. When sending her report, Zrinka confessed: “I wasn’t even aware that we had done so many things during the year, until it was actually written down. Now, I’m excited. Thanks for pushing us to do that!” Yet, Zrinka’s story is ONE example among others.

From our experience, there is a **difference between showing results and demonstrating impact**; you could do something without having a real impact or you may have an outstanding impact while missing the skills to prove evidence of it. At the end, we do need to provide evidence and show returns on investment; it is just necessary to attract more investment. That’s what we try to nail in 2016, now that we can look back and celebrate 10 years of achievements. It requires strong **indicators** of impact, **collective ownership** of the action, a **culture of sharing outcomes**, a good **coordination of efforts**, outstanding **communications to showcase** impact. It most importantly requires that our supporters and ourselves accept that some results need time to happen – changing perceptions on agriculture being the strongest example of this.

And indeed, would you assess a bread by the way it looks and taste right after the dough is worked on? It progressively grows as the yeast multiplies and creates the enzymes we need. It takes hours in a warm cocoon before it is ready to be baked, and to be served to eat. YPARD as a youth network,

prepares those young people, individually and collectively, to fully take part and shape agricultural development, for a hunger-free and environmentally healthy world.

There is one key impact to remember about YPARD: we have a growing community of capable young people in agriculture and their supporters prepare themselves and their peers, they tackle targeted local and global challenges, they build their own initiatives, they are having a voice in policy debates and they promote agriculture among youth by inspiring and showing the range of opportunities that exist in the broad spectrum of agricultural professions, including farming.

As for our supporters? They understand better why and how they gain from involving youth. Have you read the Dryland Systems CRP's youth strategy and have you heard about the study on youth aspirations in Morocco derived from it? The study helps to understand youth perspectives better and to collect evidence that will further document new targeted designs of projects with and for youth. It ultimately benefits both the youth and their supporters.

What I would like to see in the GCARD3 global event's statement is youth included as a stakeholder. I would like to see their vision contribute to shaping OUR common vision, as we commit to work together and to support each other on a same boat. But also, I'd like to see us take a step beyond a statement: I'd like to see a set of strategic actions with concrete indicators identified collectively, including financial plans to make it happen. Some of these activities would target the youth as beneficiaries, some would involve them fully as agents of change – so that youth empowerment and youth participation directly impacts agricultural innovation and sustainable development. That's the type of impact we want to keep generating as a youth network, with you as partners.

