

Strengthening S&T capacity in Africa: Engaging women and youth - Strategies, Lessons and Experiences from YPARD and YPARD Africa

Paisley, C. & Cherbonnier, M.

Young Professionals' Platform for Agricultural Research for Development

FAO, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Viale delle Terme di Caracalla,
R00153 Rome, Italy

Corresponding author: courtney.paisley@fao.org

Abstract

Though the African agricultural sector has been growing steadily in the last decade, the contribution of young people to this sector remains limited. The literature points to a considerable decline in interest by African youths in agriculture at all levels from farming to research to extension. Compounding the declining interest, there are also limited efforts to engage youth in these sectors, to target them specifically, understand the specific challenges they face and to undertake concerted efforts to engage and mobilise them to action. Against this background, the Young Professionals' Platform for Agricultural Research for Development (YPARD) was created in response to, among other things, insufficient participation of young professionals in dialogues addressing critical development issues. Over the years, it has worked with several youth and ARD organisations in the process of contributing to greater engagement of young professionals in Agricultural Research for Development (ARD) in Africa and across the globe. YPARD provides a platform for a continental voice for youths in ARD, but also a platform for networking in order to enhance youth's capacity for innovation. This paper reviews the effectiveness of YPARD's strategic activities over the last five years and analyses the unique role that YPARD Africa has played in the African context. A focus of this will be on the use and success of online activities in engaging youth involved in agricultural development including e-discussions, blog series and the provision of information services. It will also explore the outcomes from supporting young professionals to give their views in strategic ARD discussion as well as youth focused capacity development opportunities. This will include an analysis of feedback provided through several surveys and focus groups that have been conducted with the YPARD network over the years. The paper recommends strategic approaches and methods for further solidifying the engagement of African youth in the ARD component of the agricultural sector and engaging them in decisions that affect their future.

Key words: Africa, Agricultural development, ARD, capacity development, strategy, youth, YPARD

Résumé

Bien que le secteur agricole en Afrique n'ait cessé de croître durant la dernière décennie, la contribution des jeunes à ce secteur reste limitée. La littérature fait état d'une baisse considérable de l'intérêt des jeunes Africains dans le secteur agricole à tous les niveaux, de l'agriculture à la recherche de l'extension. Comme pour aggraver le déclin de l'intérêt, il ya aussi des efforts limités pour engager les jeunes dans ces secteurs, afin de les cibler spécifiquement, de comprendre les défis spécifiques auxquels ils sont confrontés et d'entreprendre des efforts concertés pour les engager et les mobiliser à l'action. Dans ce contexte, la Plateforme des jeunes professionnels en recherche agronomique pour le développement (YPARD) a été créée en réponse, entre autres choses, à la participation insuffisante des jeunes professionnels dans les dialogues portant sur des questions cruciales de développement. Au fil des ans, elle a travaillé avec plusieurs jeunes et les organisations de la recherche agronomique pour le développement (ARD) dans le processus de contribuer à une plus grande participation des jeunes professionnels dans la recherche agronomique pour le développement en Afrique et dans le monde. YPARD pourvoit une plate-forme pour une voix continentale des jeunes dans ARD, mais aussi une plate-forme de réseautage dans le but de renforcer les capacités des jeunes en matière d'innovation. Cet article passe en revue l'efficacité des activités stratégiques d'YPARD au cours des cinq dernières années et analyse le rôle unique qu'YPARD en Afrique a joué dans le contexte africain. L'objet de la présente sera mis sur l'utilisation et le succès des activités en ligne dans l'engagement des jeunes impliqués dans le développement agricole, y compris des discussions en ligne, des séries blog et la fourniture de services d'information. Il étudiera également les résultats en soutenant les jeunes professionnels à donner leurs points de vue dans les discussions stratégiques d'ARD ainsi que les opportunités de renforcement des capacités axées sur la jeunesse. Cela comprendra une analyse des commentaires fournis par des groupes de discussion et plusieurs enquêtes qui ont été menées avec le réseau d'YPARD au fil des ans. L'article recommande des approches et des méthodes stratégiques pour consolider davantage l'engagement des jeunes Africains dans la composante de l'ARD du secteur agricole et les impliquer dans les décisions qui affectent leur avenir.

Mots clés: Afrique, Développement agricole, ARD, développement des capacités, stratégie, jeunesse, YPARD

Background

With an expected population of 9 billion by 2050 and declining interest of youth worldwide to remain in rural areas and take up agriculture, who will feed this growing population? Youth make up about one fifth of developing and emerging economies. While unemployment of adults in LDC countries has hovered around 4% for the past decade, unemployment among youth has consistently exceeded 10%¹. The number of young people of working age is increasing while this same group faces unemployment rates well above those of their older counterparts.

Increased investment in agriculture and rural development and an increased effort to attract youth to this sector could serve to create employment for youth and spur growth in an ageing sector. The large numbers of youth provide an opportunity for economic growth through agriculture and poverty reduction, yet they are often ignored and undervalued when developing priorities in the agricultural sector. A new approach is needed for engaging with young people, to use their insight to contribute to new and innovative approaches to problems. Young people need to contribute to the creation of their own future, buy-in to it and be instrumental in making it happen.

In response to these challenges, the Young Professionals' Platform for Agricultural Research for Development (YPARD) was created among other things, to reverse the decreasing trends and interests of young professionals' participation in dialogues addressing critical agricultural development issues. YPARD is an international movement / network by young professionals for young professionals (YPs). The YPARD global coordinating unit is hosted by the Global Forum for Agricultural Research (GFAR) Secretariat at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy.

This paper introduces YPARD, some of its strategic activities over the last five years with a focus on online activities from 2011. It also recommends the strategic approaches and methods for further Strengthening S&T capacity in Africa by engaging youth and young women in ARD and engaging them in decisions that affect their future.

¹ ILO (2011) Growth, Employment and Decent Work in the Least Developed Countries report. Fourth UN Conference on Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Istanbul, 9-13 May 2011.

A Brief Conceptual Framework: The Definition of Youth and its Contextualisation within YPARD-Africa

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Definitions of youth vary between different organisations, changing according to circumstances and context. Leavy and Smith (2010) further point out that these definitions can change even within the same region/location and even household. However, in order to deal with this issue on a more practical level, YPARD chose an age limit. For YPARD's purposes, it was found that having an age limit is a practical and useful method for trying to advocate for youth, to provide guidelines, as well as managing a large membership base. YPARD has faced some criticism for having what is considered a high age limit for youth – up to the age of 39. This high age was chosen because many of YPARD's members are engaged in agricultural research, which may require them to obtain a PhD before starting their career. This may result in the postponement of the start of their careers comparatively later than some other fields. Additionally, this age was chosen because Young women who start a family often face further delays in their career development. They often take some time off to have children and are further delayed in starting their careers.

Requests from one member in Cote d'Ivoire have further asked that the membership age be raised to 45, as they felt that due to periods of conflict in the country many young people were forced to take breaks in their education or careers, which further postponed their age of entry level into the workforce and thus, in the development of their careers.

YPARD's Strategies and Activities

YPARD Africa. YPARD-Africa and the regional coordinator is hosted by the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) - <http://fara-africa.org/> where YPARD activities in various African countries and sub-regions are coordinated and managed. Other key elements of the coordinating structure are: country representatives, those who display an active commitment to YPARD and undertake the responsibility of coordinating activities around working groups at country level, and reporting to the regional coordinator. The heart of YPARD is its members, which are young people who give their ideas and input and initiate activities on a local level in accordance with the needs and priorities of the youth at the local level.

YPARD Africa members have demonstrated a high level of eagerness and motivation to start activities in their area. When YPARD sent out a call for the submission of activities from country representatives and members in the creation of the 2012 YPARD-Africa plan, the response was overwhelming. The

submissions for the 2012 activity plan for YPARD Africa were fifteen times what the regional budget is able to support. The majority of the interest is largely to conduct capacity development projects. Young people want to both gain experience in conducting activities and also want to empower the youth in their communities with whom they relate.

YPARD-Africa seeks to increase the opportunities for its members through an online platform for the exchange of information on ARD opportunities, knowledge sharing and broadening opportunities for YPs; giving opportunities to raise the youth voice in policy debates; promoting agriculture among YPs; and giving access to capacity building opportunities targeted towards the needs of youths in Agriculture.

YPARD online. The YPARD presence online enables information sharing, reaching out to young people and getting the youth in ARD heard as individuals and as a community to address specific needs of the youth. The primary methods of achieving this is through the development of the YPARD Website, YPARD presence on social networks including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and more, but also partnership with others communities including e_agriculture, ARDYIS etc.

A recent study commissioned by YPARD on the skills and competencies required by the new young professionals in ARD identified internet skills and social media as having a high level of importance for successful young professionals in ARD. Some of the activities of YPARD are highlighted in the following section, within the frame of YPARD's strategy for engaging youth. More importantly, these are the online activities identified by YPARD as being important to its members.

How can YPARD Online Activities Strengthen S&T Capacity by Engaging women and youth?

What our members say. An external review commissioned by the Swiss agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) found that the highest rated reasons to join YPARD among members were to increase networking possibilities (70%), to receive information on ARD related events (49%) and to gain access to funding opportunities (43%). Other reasons were to receive information about job opportunities (23%), to follow the development of YPARD (21%), and to support the idea of YPARD (3%) (Crole-Rees and Kruijssen, 2009)

YPARD Priorities

Access to information and opportunities. YPARD provides information related to news, events, funding, jobs opportunities

and call for papers related to ARD through the website and social networks. Monthly newsletters and a Funding News Bulletin are also disseminated to members directly by email. By providing a centralized service of news and opportunities targeted specifically to young professionals active in ARD, youth are able to see the wealth of opportunities that are available in the agricultural sector. This provides greater indication that this is a field with opportunity for young people to have interesting and challenging careers.

YPARD is moreover a multistakeholder and inclusive platform where members can post information for youth in ARD, share news, write a blog, submit a question at info@ypard.net and post ideas on the forum for discussion. A number of people testified of the opportunities that opened to them thanks to information that they received from YPARD. Three recent examples include: Julius, from Nigeria who received a scholarship in Canada, Peter, from Uganda, who enrolled in a PhD program in Germany, Maxwell, from Malawi who was sponsored to attend an event in his field of expertise.

Testimonial by Julius. *Inside the YPARD website, I saw astounding things-gamut of links to opportunities for research fellowships, conferences, workshops, trainings, publications and possible networking partners and opportunities in the field of ARD. Example, from the site, I was linked to a call for applications for 2011/2012 ACU Titular Research Fellowship (University of Manitoba Fellowship) which I applied for and was awarded the fellowship to carry out research on a neglected bean, Senna spps, at the Department of Biosystems Engineering, University of Manitoba, Canada. <http://ypard.net/node/20119>*

Testimonial by Erina. “I am adventurous and like participating in activities that make a difference in society. In two months of joining YPARD, I got to achieve some of my aspirations. This was in capacity as one of the 12 YPARD representatives at the CGIAR Science Forum in Beijing. In Beijing, I got to meet and exchange ideas with friends from a variety of nations, interact with delegates within and beyond the organizations of CGIAR and experience the adventure of travelling overseas and witnessing a little of the beautiful Chinese culture. YPARD is playing a key role in youth capacity building amidst the various

global competitive youth pressures of suppression like, unemployment and resource scarcity. So, go YPARD!”
<http://ypard.net/node/12474>

This targeted information, accessible easily through different channels enables youth to learn about and access opportunities for S&T strengthening.

Networking

Growth development requires getting people together. The potential for innovation increases with information and experience sharing. Networking is therefore a critical factor, particularly for youth and young women who often do not have as many networking opportunities and require extra support from their peers and from experts, to find their place in the workforce.

Networking plays strongly in YPARD's activities, where members who have developed personal profiles on the website are encouraged to interact with other YPARD members from different parts of the world to expand their own professional networks. An extension of this is the planned YPARD online mentoring programme (currently under development) designed to link YPARD members with senior mentors in ARD as well as connect YPARD members with each other to engage in peer to peer networking. YPARD is looking to promote a two-way mentoring process which benefits both junior and senior parties. YPARD wants to emphasize the benefits that the senior mentor also gains from the junior mentee, which include new and fresh ideas on their work, new tools and technologies (eg. social networking) and a link to the wider YPARD network, through the active participation of the mentee. A YPARD consultant, undertook an assessment to create a mentoring programme to meet the needs of YPARD members. A preliminary survey indicated that 93.5% of respondents were interested in joining a mentoring programme. Further fundraising efforts will focus on establishing mentoring as a permanent and sustainable programme.

“Having recognized potential role of the youth in contributing to agricultural revolution in Ghana, it becomes imperative to develop long term comprehensive programmes that would attract and inspire the youth to actively participate in agriculture as a career. Such programmes may include mentoring the youth, agricultural ambassador and entrepreneurial components that would bring out the talents of innovation and initiatives in the

**YPARD Members,
Bosompem,
Acheampong and
Osei, 2011**

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youth. Mentoring programmes would identify successful young agriculturist to share their experiences with the aim to inspire the youth, and guide them.”

Bringing out the voice of the youth. YPARD provides a platform for the youth to express their ideas and opinions on key ARD issues which are often fed into wider policy discussions.

Online, this is facilitated by e-discussions and blog posts. Online discussions addressing different topics are organised in a way that outcomes can be used for further actions, such as pre-consultation for an event or developing youth statements or communiqués to feed into the wider discussion or development of policy. For example, in late 2011 an e-discussion was held on the YPARD forum on the challenges facing youth in extension, which was discussed further by those attending the international extension conference of Nairobi.

Darlington testimonial. My long term benefits as YPARD member? First and for most I have created a link with other agricultural extension experts through YPARD e-discussions. This will help me continue interacting with them even after the e-discussions. I will also bring out some of the issues that will be highlighted as being challenges and opportunities for young people and agriculture extension service and discuss with management at my workplace and see how best such issues can be handled by policy makers in Zambia, so as to make agricultural extension more attractive for young people. This may be a long term undertaking. It might not bring results immediately, but will one day be done.” <http://ypard.net/node/12476>

Getting the youth inspired. For one to perform, one needs to be inspired. This is particularly true in the agricultural sector, which suffers from an image problem and not a highly valued career route among today’s youth. Documenting and disseminating testimonials of successful young professionals in ARD is one way to show young people the range of career possibilities available in ARD.

YPARD launched a YP Showcase which is a dedicated page on the website with stories and portraits of young professionals telling their story in the field of agriculture. YPARD particularly focuses on encouraging young women to share their stories

and some success can be seen, including Nawsheen (Mauritius), Erina (Uganda), Machteld (The Netherlands) and Aracelly (Honduras)

“A number of youth are more interested in white collar jobs as opposed to agriculture due to the mentality that agriculture is meant for the rural poor. Therefore, documentation and dissemination of testimonies of youth that have made achievements by carrying out agriculture can act as an incentive for others to join”

YPARD member Erina Nabafu. From Mkondiwa *et al.* (2011)

Remaining active on social networks allows YPARD to continually connect and re-connect with a growing number of youths in ARD who choose this medium to express themselves, gain information and learn about their field. The process of interacting with active members on a weekly or sometimes daily basis creates a stronger relationship with members, and better understand their needs and interests. It also helps to link discussions on agriculture with those on ICTs, bringing agriculture into a digital age and seeing how today’s well-connected youth can tackle the issues with a new set of tools.

Language issues, connecting with West Africa. A lack of capacity and resources has meant that the YPARD website, communications and activities have traditionally been undertaken in English (except at local level). YPARD is making further efforts to expand the language base to French, to include West Africa and parts of the Caribbean and Spanish to engage with Latin America. Some of the online discussions have had portions of discussion in French, predominantly by French, West African members and were moderated by the web and communications officer who is a French national. Language is a key component for YPARD to have a more comprehensive continental strategy and provide its francophone members equal opportunity to be a part of the network and be heard.

Responding to a need: the need of M&E. It is important for YPARD to ensure it strengthens the capacity of youth and women. Feedback from members is the most significant means of assessing the impact of YPARD activities.

The increasing numbers of members on ypard.net (currently more than 2 200 members), and followers and friends on social networks, has already provided some measure of success where

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

YPARD meets the needs of today's youth in ARD. Achievements and impacts are visible from the experiences and testimonials voiced by YPARD members, some of which were presented in quotes previously in the document.

Increased investment in agriculture and rural development and an increased effort to attract youth to the agricultural sector could serve to create employment for youth and spur growth in an ageing sector. The large numbers of youth provide an opportunity for economic growth through agriculture and poverty reduction, yet they are often ignored and undervalued when developing priorities in the agricultural sector. A new approach is needed for engaging with young people, to use their insight to contribute to new and innovative approaches to problems. Strategic policy directions for further strengthening S&T capacity in Africa can only be successful by engaging women and youth in decisions that affect their future.

YPARD provides one solution by working with the youth, ensuring that their voice is heard and building their capacity, but it is important that organisations in ARD are open to listening to what the youth have to say and work with them to work towards a more youth-inclusive ARD.

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