RAISE-FS experience brief # 03

Turning youth vision to action: Lessons from the Youth Challenge Fund in Ethiopian agriculture

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The Youth Challenge Fund (YCF), implemented within the SWR Ethiopia RAISE-FS project in collaboration with Shayashone Trading PLC has demonstrated remarkable success in harnessing the creativity and entrepreneurial energy of young people. This brief highlights experience and lesson learned from the program that has showcased the transformative potential of engaging young leaders in addressing pressing societal challenges while driving meaningful and sustainable change.

1. Introduction

The YCF demonstrated that youth are powerful agents of change. By channelling their creativity and entrepreneurial energy, the program empowered young people to address challenges in food security, job creation, and environmental sustainability.

Structured training and coaching significantly enhanced participants' ability to translate ideas into viable businesses. Through entrepreneurship education, personalized coaching, and pitch preparation, YCF equipped youth with practical tools in business planning, financial management, and innovation—closing critical knowledge and experience gaps.

Effective implementation required coordination among universities, government agencies, private sector actors, and technical experts. The experience highlighted the need for stronger public-private partnerships, better alignment with academic calendars, and institutional support to enable youth entrepreneurship at scale.

The 12 winning proposals offer promising solutions to real-world problems, but most are still in early stages. Continued support—financial, technical, and mentorship—is crucial to help these ventures grow. Expanding access to such resources for all participants, not just finalists, would unlock greater impact.

The success of the pilot underscores the value of expanding the YCF approach beyond agriculture to sectors such as education, health, tech, and climate resilience. With appropriate adaptations and policy support, the model can be scaled nationally, offering a pathway to mobilize youth as problem-solvers across Ethiopia.

KEY messages

- **Youth as change agents:** the YCF program demonstrated the transformative potential of young people in addressing critical challenges like food security, job creation, and environmental sustainability.
- **Empowering entrepreneurship:** through structured training, coaching, and education, YCF equipped youth with essential skills in business planning, financial management, and innovation, bridging key knowledge and experience gaps.
- **Collaborative implementation:** effective partnerships among universities, government agencies, private sector actors, and technical experts were vital, emphasizing the need for stronger public-private collaboration and institutional support.
- **Scaling impact:** while the 12 winning proposals show promise, sustained financial, technical, and mentorship support is crucial for growth. Expanding resources to all participants can amplify impact.
- **Broader applicability:** the success of the pilot highlights the potential to adapt and scale the YCF model across sectors like education, health, tech, and climate resilience, mobilizing youth as problem-solvers nationwide.

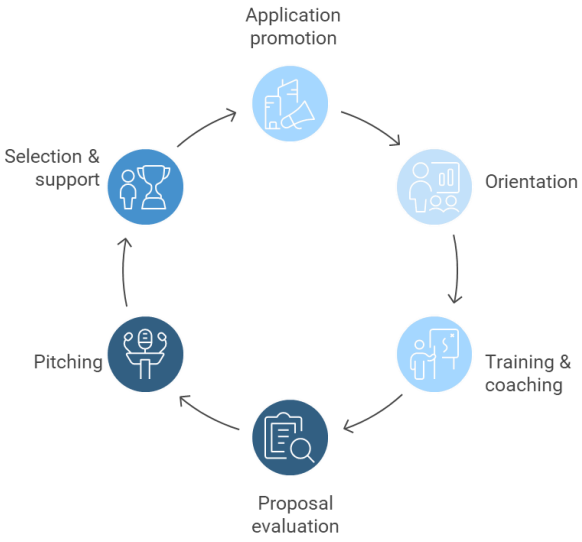
Objectives of YCF

- Encourage youth entrepreneurship by shifting the mindset from job-seeking to business creation.
- Promote innovative business ideas that contribute to food security, local economic development, and improved livelihoods in rural and semi-urban communities.

2. Process

During the 8-month long support, the following steps were implemented:

- Concept note submission and evaluation
- Needs assessment; business development and entrepreneurship training
- Coaching
- Proposal development, submission and evaluation
- Pitch competition and evaluation
- Additional business development services



2.1. Concept note submission and evaluation

- In late May 2024, an open call invited youth aged 18–35 from the four RAISE-FS partner universities —Bahir Dar, Haramaya, Hawassa, and Mekelle—to submit concept notes for innovative agribusiness ideas. Innovation was defined broadly to include new or improved products, services, technologies, or models that create value. While replicating a service in a new region of Ethiopia was not considered innovative, introducing a solution from abroad was.
- Eligible applicants included final-year undergraduates and current postgraduate students. Proposed ideas were required to address challenges in specific agricultural subsectors such as poultry, pulses, spices, oilseeds, potatoes, vegetables, and fruits (excluding dairy, which is covered by another project). Concepts had to create value through food security, sustainable production, export potential, agro-processing, or technology transfer, while benefiting farmers, processors, consumers, and promoting youth and women's empowerment.
- Out of 164 submissions, 127 met eligibility criteria related to age, academic status, institutional affiliation, and thematic relevance. These were grouped into five categories—Animal Production, Crop Production, Animal Technology, Crop Technology, and Others—to match evaluators' expertise.

Table 1 Number of eligible applications at the university level

University Name	Number of Eligible Applications
Bahir Dar	59
Haramaya	18
Hawassa	23
Mekelle	27

Each application was reviewed by a panel of three evaluators to ensure fairness and quality. The panel included representatives from partner universities (excluding their own applicants), RAISE-FS, and Shayashone PLC (SYS), with expertise in agriculture, technology, and business. Final scores were consolidated through virtual discussions, with a cutoff set at 67.

Evaluation criteria were:

- Problem Identification (20%)
- Objectives (15%)
- Innovation (30%)
- Business Model (20%)
- Feasibility & Impact (15%)

In total, 47 applicants advanced to the next stage: 24 from Bahir Dar, 11 from Hawassa, 8 from Mekelle, and 4 from Haramaya. Of these, 36% were graduating undergraduates, 34% MSc students, and 30% PhD candidates. Out of the 47 applicants, 18 were women.

2.2. Needs assessment; business development and entrepreneurship training

In early July 2024, all applicants were notified of the selection results, ensuring transparency and setting the stage for the training phase.

A pre-training needs assessment was conducted to tailor the content to participant backgrounds and expectations. The survey revealed that 64% of selected participants had no prior business experience, while the remaining 36% had been involved in small- to medium-scale ventures

across sectors like poultry, architecture, agro-machinery, and cosmetics. Most had not received formal entrepreneurship training, and those who had cited limited programs such as "Design Your Venture" (Entrepreneurship Development Institute (EDI), GIZ courses, or online resources like Awaqi.

Participants expressed a strong desire to gain practical skills in business planning, proposal writing, pitching, financial management, and networking. They also emphasized the importance of learning through real-world examples and interactive sessions.

In response, YCF developed a comprehensive training package—including modules on Business Development and Entrepreneurship and a participant handbook—designed to address identified gaps. Materials developed by RAISE-FS were integrated to enhance content quality and relevance, ensuring participants were equipped to transform their ideas into viable businesses.

To ensure effective training delivery, a lead facilitator from SYS and co-facilitators from RAISE-FS were prepared and equipped with necessary materials. Logistical arrangements—including travel, accommodation, training supplies, and printed materials—were organized following the announcement of training dates.

The schedule was aligned with university calendars and participant distribution. Due to the large number of participants from Bahir Dar University, two separate five-day sessions were held: one in Bahir Dar for local students, and another in Addis Ababa for those from Haramaya, Hawassa, and Mekelle universities.

Each training included four interactive modules:

1. Basics of Entrepreneurship and Personal Competencies
2. Design Thinking
3. Business Planning and the Business Model Canvas
4. Pitching

The program concluded with participants receiving digital certificates and being encouraged to apply their new skills in developing their businesses.

2.3. Coaching

The coaching component of the YCF program was designed to strengthen participants' business proposals by providing tailored support that addressed both technical and business development needs. The objective was to help participants refine their ideas into feasible, well-structured, and impactful ventures while enhancing their ability to communicate them effectively.

Coaching focused on three main areas: technical guidance, business support, and pitching preparation. For the technical component, participants were paired with agricultural experts—specializing in either crops or livestock—who helped ensure that the proposals were technically sound and aligned with industry standards. Those with technology-driven ideas received additional support from professionals with relevant tech expertise. On the business side, coaches assisted participants in improving the execution and sustainability of their business models. Furthermore, participants received targeted coaching to improve their pitching skills, enabling them to confidently present their ideas in front of evaluators.

To organize and track the process, a detailed coaching matrix was developed. This matrix mapped out the phases of coaching and matched each participant with two coaches—one in agriculture and one in business development—based on their concept note evaluation. Coaches were drawn from universities, Shayashone PLC (SYS), and the RAISE-FS project team, bringing a diverse range of experience and perspectives to the program. For pitching preparation, care was taken to simulate real pitching conditions by engaging jury members unfamiliar with the participants' ideas, offering objective feedback and fresh insights.

Before coaching began, a virtual orientation session was held for all coaches to introduce the process and set expectations. Each coach was provided with relevant background materials, including participants' concept notes, proposal submission forms, and contact information via the coaching matrix. Progress tracking templates were also shared to support documentation and follow-up. To facilitate ongoing coordination, a dedicated WhatsApp group was created for the coaching team.

The coaching process followed a structured sequence of activities. It included the following key activities:

- Rapport building: an initial session that allowed participants to discuss their business ideas with both technical and business coaches, establishing a foundation for constructive feedback
- Technical review: engagement with an agricultural coach to refine draft proposals based on technical aspects
- Business review: the business coach reviewed the proposals, focusing on business viability and strategy
- Final proposal review: both coaches collaboratively reviewed the participant's final proposal
- Pitching practice: a simulation with a three-member jury panel to prepare for their actual pitching sessions

Through this dual-track, hands-on approach, the coaching program ensured that participants received personalized, practical guidance to advance their ideas from early-stage concepts to implementable business proposals.

2.4. Proposal submission and evaluation

In mid-September 2024, 37 participants submitted their business proposals for evaluation. A structured and transparent evaluation process was implemented to ensure fairness and quality assessment of the proposals.

Four groups of evaluators, each consisting of three members, were formed based on specific thematic categories:

1. Crop Production and Others
2. Crop Technology 1
3. Crop Technology 2
4. Animal Production and Technology

The evaluators represented a mix of technical and business expertise and were drawn from prominent institutions, including the EDI, the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR), the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), and Wageningen Research University (WUR).

To maintain objectivity, all proposals were anonymized by removing the names of participants and their universities before sharing them with the evaluators.
The proposal evaluation followed a two-step approach:

1. **Individual evaluation:** Each evaluator independently reviewed and scored the proposals assigned to their group.
2. **Group evaluation:** After individual assessments, evaluators within each group virtually met to consolidate their scores and discuss the proposals collectively. Each group evaluated a maximum of 10 proposals.

The cutoff score for advancing to the next stage was set at 67%. Of the 37 submissions, 29 participants scored above this threshold. Successful Candidates received a congratulatory email, feedback on their proposal, and a detailed pitching guideline including instructions regarding the pitching timeline, slide format (including page limits and font requirements), and relevant logistical details.

Table 2 Proposal stage finalist list summary

Proposal stage finalist list summary			
	University	**Number of participants**	**Male / Female**
1	Bahir Dar	14	12/2
2	Haramaya	3	3/0
3	Hawassa	6	2/4
4	Mekelle	6	6/0
	Business category	**Number of participants**	
1	Animal Production	5	5/0
2	Animal Technology	3	2/1
3	Crop Production	6	3/3
4	Crop Technology	12	11/1
5	Others	3	3/1
	Education level	**Number of participants**	
1	BSc	10	6/4
2	MSc	9	7/2
3	PhD	10	10/0

2.5. Pitch competition

The YCF Pitch Day took place on November 27, 2024, followed by the Award Ceremony on November 28 at Nexus Hotel, Addis Ababa. Two judging panels, each consisting of three experts in agribusiness, entrepreneurship, and agricultural technologies, were assembled. Panel 1 reviewed pitches in the Animal and Crop Tech categories, while Panel 2 evaluated proposals in Crop and Animal Production and other areas. Judges received proposals and evaluation materials in advance, while participants were guided on pitch structure, content, and time management.

Each participant had 7 minutes to present, followed by a 13-minute Q&A, during which judges assessed problem identification, solution viability, market potential, business model, and overall presentation quality. Judges first scored pitches individually using a standard rubric, then consolidated scores through discussion. The top 12 pitches were selected based on final scores.

The Award Ceremony the following day celebrated youth innovation, drawing attendees from partner universities, government ministries (Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Education), international organizations (e.g., FAO, African Agribusiness Academy (AAA)), and private sector actors including banks, startups, and investment groups. The event featured a presentation on the YCF program's achievements, lessons learned, and future potential. A plenary discussion emphasized the importance of agricultural entrepreneurship and cross-sector collaboration to empower young innovators.

A booklet showcasing the top business ideas was shared with attendees, and networking sessions fostered new partnerships and support opportunities. The ceremony concluded with the announcement of 12 winning finalists, each receiving financial awards and access to continued business development support from YCF. All participants received certificates—Winners' Certificates for the top 12 and Certificates of Participation for the rest—recognizing their efforts and progress.

The youth challenge fund finalists

Table 3 List of the top 12 finalists

Bahir Dar University Top Finalists				
1	RAY Cosmetics: Production of Skin and Hair Care Products from Agro-waste Fish Skin and Scales	Thermal Engineering	MSc	Female
2	Establishing Improved Fish Handling and Processing at Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)	Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences	BSc	Male
3	Rearing Earth Worms for Cost-effective Chicken feed, Chicken egg, and Vermin-compost Production from Organic Wastes	Animal Nutrition	PhD	Male
Haramaya University Top Finalists				
1	Portable Potato Harvester Development	Agricultural Machinery Engineering	PhD	Male
2	Multipowered Home-Made Poultry Egg Incubator and Day-old Chick Production	Tropical Animal Production	PhD	Male
3	Integrated Rice Threshing, Cleaning and Dehulling Innovation: Transforming Agriculture for a Brighter Future	Agricultural Engineering	BSc	Male
Hawassa University Top Finalists				
1	Geen Glow Briquettes (G2B): Sustainable Charcoal Briquette Production from Biomass and Municipal Waste in Wondo Genet, Sidama Region, Ethiopia	Environmental Science	BSc	Female
2	VermiGrow: Empowering Agriculture Through Sustainable Vermicomposting	Horticultural Science	BSc	Female
3	Bioplastic Production from Banana Pseudo-stem	Chemical engineering	MSc	Male
Mekelle University Top Finalists				
1	Poultry Feed Production from Fish By-product and Establish Poultry Farm in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia	Aquatic and Fish Ecology	PhD	Male
2	Production of Plant-based RUTF & Nutritious food paste	Electrical and Computer Engineering	BSc	Male
3	Vermiworm and Vermicompost Production using TOP Effective Microorganism Organic Facilitator	Horticulture	MSc	Male

3. Challenges faced

Despite its successes, YCF faced logistical and operational hurdles. Time constraints linked to the RAISE-FS timeline limited flexibility across stages. Early outreach plans, including in-person awareness campaigns at universities, were dropped due to scheduling conflicts. Submission deadlines also overlapped with academic commitments like exams and thesis defences, affecting the quality and number of applications.

Coordination across institutions proved difficult due to misaligned academic calendars. Unequal participant distribution required multiple training rounds, which created a perception of unequal preparation time. Communication through email and WhatsApp was hampered by inconsistent internet access, affecting timely interactions between coaches and participants.

Additionally, many youths faced resource constraints, limiting their ability to move from idea to execution. These challenges highlight the importance of enhanced planning, resource allocation, and stronger public-private partnerships to support future cohorts more effectively.

4. Lessons learned

Business Development and Entrepreneurship Training

Post-training survey responses reflected a strong endorsement of the program's success, with participants affirming that the training met its objectives and significantly boosted their confidence in entrepreneurial skills. Many could clearly identify specific knowledge and tools gained, particularly in business planning and development, indicating the program's practical value.

The training content was widely praised for its clarity, relevance, and alignment with participants' needs. Trainers were commended for their expertise and engaging delivery, creating an interactive and responsive learning environment. Hands-on exercises, real-world case studies, and scenario-based learning stood out as key strengths, helping bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Participants appreciated the overall organization and logistics, noting that the well-managed venue and scheduling created a conducive learning atmosphere. Exposure to tools like the business model canvas, design thinking, and solution identification helped refine business ideas and improve pitching skills. Many highlighted the confidence gained in articulating and presenting their concepts as one of the most valuable takeaways.

Suggestions for improvement included extending the duration of practical sessions, particularly around pitching and financial planning. Participants also recommended inviting successful entrepreneurs for motivational talks and offering more in-depth financial training. Supplementary resources like articles and online learning materials were suggested to support continued development.

In sum, the training was impactful in equipping participants with practical entrepreneurial skills, while participant feedback offers valuable insights to further strengthen future programs.

Coaching

Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the coaching sessions, praising the engaging delivery, clear communication, and well-organized scheduling. The regular frequency of meetings supported their learning and contributed to steady progress. Content was considered highly relevant, helping refine business proposals and prepare effectively for pitch presentations.

Coaching sessions deepened participants' understanding of key proposal components, including problem definition, solution design, resource identification, and value proposition development. They also learned to incorporate customer relationship strategies, distribution plans, and financial elements into their proposals. In some cases, project titles were revised based on feedback, and by the end of the program, participants had finalized their proposals using the official submission format.

Feedback from coaches

Coaching sessions provided participants with in-depth, tailored support that significantly strengthened their business proposals and pitching readiness. According to progress tracking forms submitted after each session, coaches focused on both technical and structural improvements to ensure proposals were practical, innovative, and aligned with the RAISE-FS project's goals.

The process began with identifying strengths and weaknesses in participants' concept notes, guiding them to shift from academic or research-oriented ideas to actionable business models. Coaches emphasized real-world application, sustainability, and innovation. Participants were encouraged to include multi-year financial projections, explore diversified revenue streams, and clearly distinguish their ideas from standard practices by evaluating competitors and highlighting unique selling points.

Technical reviews covered budgeting, methodologies, and business models. Coaches stressed the importance of involving technical experts in proposed ventures to enhance execution and feasibility. Legal, market, and operational

aspects were also addressed, including how to manage regulatory requirements, identify resources, and build collaborations.

Structurally, coaches advised participants on following templates, ensuring clarity in titles, and improving overall formatting for readability and focus. Proposal content was streamlined to remove redundancy and maintain a strong business orientation.

Pitching preparation was another key area. Participants received guidance on designing clear, professional presentation slides, managing time during pitches, and practicing delivery to improve confidence and impact.

In summary, coaching sessions provided comprehensive support, equipping participants with the knowledge and tools to refine their proposals, strengthen their technical understanding, and deliver compelling pitches that align with the objectives of the RAISE-FS project.

The YCF initiative demonstrated that youth, when supported, can drive innovative and impactful solutions. Participants showed strong creativity and commitment, but many lacked the technical and entrepreneurial experience to turn ideas into viable businesses. The program's training and coaching components helped close these gaps, equipping participants with skills in business planning, proposal writing, and pitching.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Wider stakeholder engagement is crucial

The process also revealed the need for deeper stakeholder engagement. Greater involvement from government, private sector actors, and sectoral associations would enhance mentorship, visibility, and access to resources. Moreover, expanding into other sectors like tech and education would broaden impact. Early entrepreneurial education is essential—embedding innovation into school curricula and continuing it through higher education would better prepare youth for such initiatives.

Strategic partnerships with organizations like Ministry of Innovation and Technology , Ministry of Labour and Skills, and media platforms are also vital for scaling efforts and raising awareness. Universities should support student innovation through structured ystems, quality assurance, and pathways to intellectual property protection. Collaboration between academia and industry will bridge the gap between research and market needs.

Highlighting the progress of the top 12 finalists will be key to building stakeholder confidence and encouraging investment in youth-led ventures.

Significant potential for upscaling

The program has revealed significant potential for scaling and diversification. With appropriate adaptations, the YCF model could expand beyond agriculture into sectors like education, health, technology, and climate action, empowering youth to solve a broader range of societal challenges. Tailoring technical support and mentorship to each sector would enhance the program's effectiveness.

Scaling nationally could also be achieved through policy support and by establishing dedicated structures at federal and regional levels. Expanding access through free online training would allow greater participation, especially from underserved regions.

Potential for leveraging existing resources

The program can also leverage existing resources, including growing youth-focused initiatives, university innovation hubs, and the support of national institutions like the Ministry of Innovation and Technology. Strengthening collaboration among public and private actors, universities, and NGOs will help create a robust innovation ecosystem and ensure sustainability. The enthusiasm and creativity shown by participants, coupled with stakeholder collaboration, underscores the model's readiness for scale.

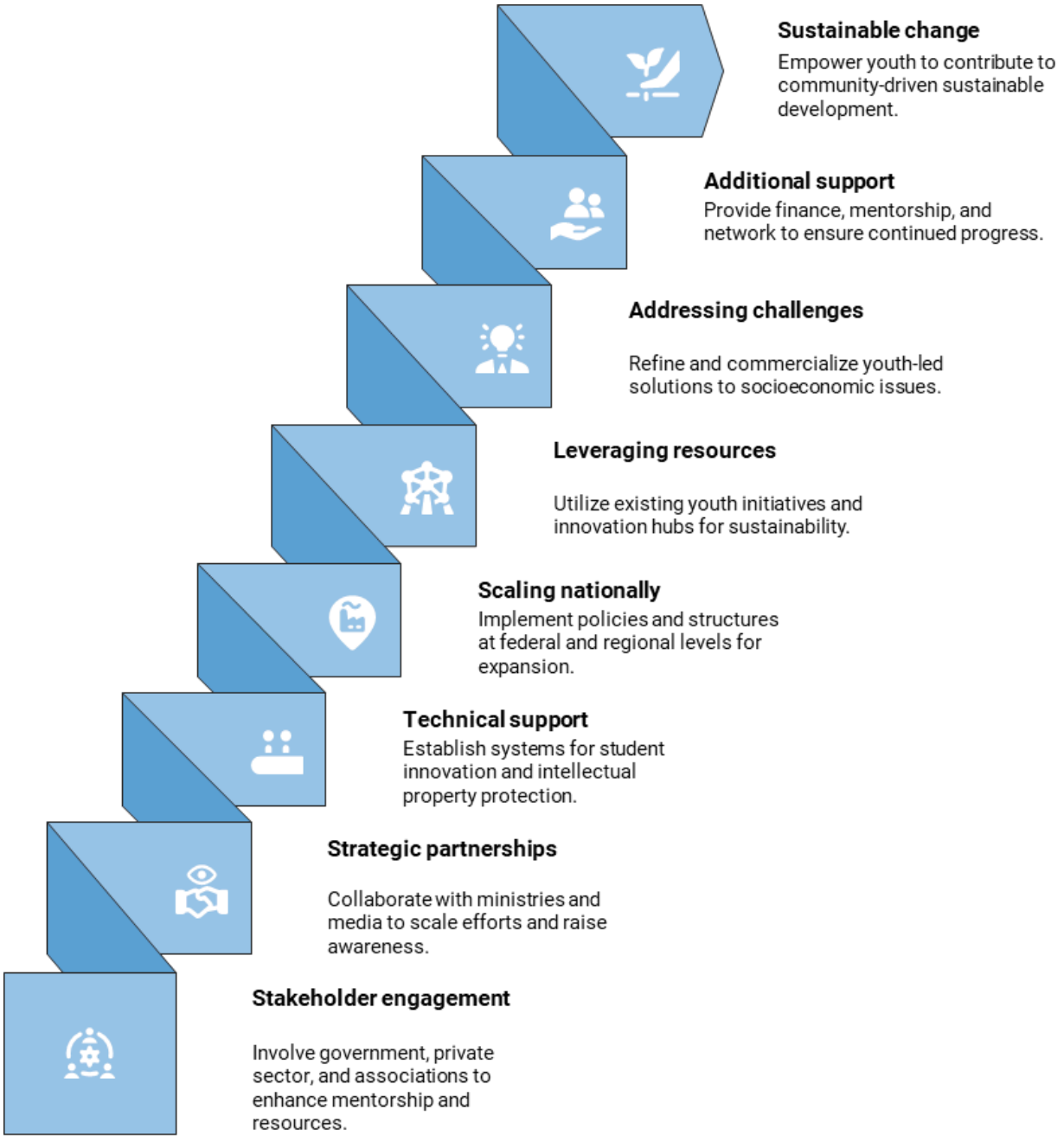
Offered solutions to real world problems still in early stages

The top 12 finalists represent impactful solutions to socioeconomic challenges, including employment and local development. However, many remain in early stages, requiring further refinement, testing, and commercialization. Stronger partnerships with public institutions, the private sector, and sectoral associations are essential to create enabling environments for these businesses to grow.

Access to additional support remains crucial

Additional support is needed for those unable to advance due to resource limitations—not due to lack of potential. Expanding access to finance, mentorship, and business networks is key to ensuring continued progress. Establishing systems for rigorous idea testing and targeted training will improve success rates.

Scaling youth innovation



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