

Youth-Led Innovation for the Transformation of the Sahel through Water: The Sahel Young Water Champions Movement

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ABSTRACT

The Sahel faces multifaceted challenges linked to water insecurity, climate variability, food systems fragility and socio-economic instability. In response to these challenges, the Sahel Young Water Champions (SYWC) Movement has emerged as a youth-led, entrepreneurial and apolitical initiative, working towards a green, prosperous and peaceful Sahel through water and innovation. Its vision is a resilient, secure and productive Sahel capable of becoming a true agricultural breadbasket for the entire African continent, where water becomes a driver of jobs, prosperity, regional cooperation and unity. This summary presents the Movement's vision, methodological approach and initial achievements, highlighting its contribution to promoting integrated and inclusive water solutions.

The main objective of the SYWC is to catalyse the emergence of a new generation of leaders and entrepreneurs capable of using water as a driver of resilience, peace and prosperity. The Movement adopts a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together young professionals from various fields such as hydrology, agriculture, engineering, economics and public policy, supported by experienced experts and mentors.

Methodologically, the Movement's actions are structured around three complementary strategic pillars: (i) information, awareness-raising and training, to build young people's capacities and raise the voice of the Sahel and its youth on the international scene ; (ii) the development of a structured entrepreneurial ecosystem through a regional confederation of start-ups and SMEs operating within the water-energy-food-ecosystems (WEFE) nexus; and (iii) the establishment of national focal structures to drive change, by designing and rolling out pilot initiatives tailored to local contexts. The SYWC roadmap envisages a gradual ramp-up, from the incubation phase in 2025 to large-scale transformation by 2050.

Since its creation in mid-2025, following a field mission in the Fouta-Djallon Massif – the water tower of West Africa and the Sahel – the Movement has actively participated in international forums, whilst developing South-South partnerships. In October 2025, the SYWC presented their Movement, organized workshops and forged partnerships at the International Association of Hydrological Sciences (IAHS2025) Assembly at IIT Roorkee, India. They also engaged in diplomatic dialogue, meeting several Ambassadors of Sahel countries. In November 2025, they presented a proposal for an innovative South-South partnership at the first India-Africa Symposium in Burkina Faso. In early 2026 the SYWC organised a side event to the UN Water Conference preparatory meeting in Dakar and carried out field missions in Chad and Guinea where they contributed to a new initiative for the Fouta-Djallon.

These initiatives have generated significant interest from institutional stakeholders and technical partners, laying the foundations for the scaling up of innovative solutions led by young people. Initial findings suggest that fostering young people's engagement in entrepreneurship and regional cooperation is a powerful driver for improving integrated water resource management and stimulating endogenous development.

In conclusion, the SYWC Movement represents a promising model at the intersection of science, innovation and youth leadership for tackling the complex water challenges facing the Sahel. Its participation in the International Conference on African Rivers 2026 will help to enrich the debate on the sustainable and inclusive management of river basins.

Keywords: Sahel; Youth; Innovation; Entrepreneurship; WEFE Nexus