

Proceeding Paper

Youth Non-Profit and For-Profit Solutions toward Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Russia: Practices, Challenges and Trends [†]

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Abstract: This research discusses the results of the Russian Youth Solutions Report 2021 that demonstrates Russian youth-led non-profit and pro-profit solutions working within the SDGs arena. It aims to investigate the challenges, practices, and trends of youth-led initiatives toward tackling critical issues under the SDG umbrella in Russia. Solutions included in the Report are based on the following criteria: youth-led/youth-focused solution, alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and publicly expressed commitment toward achieving SDGs in Russia.

Keywords: sustainable development; SDGs; youth-led solutions; youth entrepreneurship; youth NGOs; Russia



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1. Introduction

In the remainder of 2020–2030, or the so-called “Decade of Action”, young people will be an essential driving force behind the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It appears that there are more and more youth movements in universities and schools and youth sustainable entrepreneurial and non-profit initiatives contributing locally to the achievement of the SDGs [1] (p. 15). In Russia, such youth for-profit and non-profit solutions are especially important to investigate for two main reasons. First, because of the lack of state-wide support of young initiatives towards SDGs, local small and medium-sized enterprises are more likely to contribute to the SDGs at local and regional levels in Russia. Secondly, the SDGs have received much attention in the last several years. However, despite this interest, no-one, as far as we know, has studied youth initiatives regarding SDGs before. The Russian Youth Solutions Report 2021 (herein, the Report) is the first attempt to collect and examine youth SDG-oriented initiatives, common practices, challenges, and trends in relation to Russia. The Report seeks to present a comprehensive analysis of Russian non-profit and pro-profit solutions working within the SDGs arena. Additionally, the Report provides an analytical assessment of the solutions and calls for attention to youth initiatives in the SDGs arena in an effort to gain support from stakeholders and promote sustainable development among young people in Russia. This paper introduces the main results of the Report and discusses the practices, challenges, and trends that youth solutions in Russia encounter.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper discusses the results of the Russian Youth Solutions Report 2021. To compile the Russian report, the SDSN Youth Russia team used the methodology for selecting and

classifying youth solutions from the Youth Solutions Report 2020. The Russian report's originality consists in applying an international methodology for collecting, classifying and analyzing youth initiatives and implementing the methodology in the Russian context.

In the first SDSN report, "youth solutions" were defined as "transformative projects and endeavours, ranging from entrepreneurial ventures to educational programs, including research activities, charity initiatives and others" [1] (p. 15). The report showed the innovative approaches that youth are taking in solving the multiple challenges of sustainable development. Accordingly, this definition was taken as the basis for the Russian report.

Youth solutions were collected simultaneously through a non-automatic search using the "snowball" method and an open call initiated by SDSN Youth Russia media channels, accessible for four months from March 2021 to June 2021. As a result, we received details of 70 youth initiatives. Overall, after review, 37 youth solutions were included in the Report, 16 (43.2%) of which were identified as "non-profit", while 21 (56.8%) turned out to be "for-profit".

Afterwards, the collected solutions were selected following the methodology of the SDSN Youth Solutions Program. The first stage was the exclusion of all solutions that fitted at least one veto factor: not youth-led/youth-focused, no SDGs focus, activity for at least three months, and expression of radical views (political, religious, others). According to the first stage results, 28 organizations that did not pass the veto factors were excluded. The second stage in selecting solutions was their more detailed study and analysis by SDSN Youth Russia volunteers. The SDSN Youth experts paid particular attention to commercial organizations to exclude the possibility of greenwashing and self-promotion at the expense of the Report. As a result of the second stage of the selection, six more organizations were removed from the list, of which four were commercial, and two were social movements that had not engaged in the activity for at least three months and did not meet the SDGs focus criteria.

The next stage of the Report was the analysis and description of the selected Russian youth solutions. The main criteria for the Youth Solutions Report 2020 analysis included location, model of operation (for/non-profit), youth-led or youth-focused, SDGs addressed, gender, and budget. The international analysis criteria were supplemented with original criteria developed by the SDSN Youth Russia team for better adaptation to the Russian context. The new criteria included challenges and needs, affiliation (university, public company, government) and the scale of contribution (federal/regional/local). As sources of information, open databases, websites of companies, social networks, and SDSN Youth Russia provided closed information on companies in a unique Google form.

3. Results

This section introduces the overall results of the analysis of the 37 youth solutions included in the Report. The results of the analysis revealed the following patterns: most of the solutions were commercial projects (51.3%), the majority of which were managed by young people under the age of 35 (72.9%) and were located in Moscow (35%) or St. Petersburg (24.3%). According to the data provided, 14 organizations were led by women (78%). In terms of duration, most initiatives had been operating for less than three years (48%) and had up to 100 employees/volunteers (83.7%). Among the 12 companies that provided data, 33% reported a budget up to \$5000 (33%) and 41% from \$25,000 to \$100,000 (41%).

A total of 48.6% of the solutions were non-profit, 21.6% were aimed at young people, 21% conducted their activities in several cities of Russia, 10.8% were situated online, and 10.8% were based in other cities and regions of Russia. It is important to note that due to COVID-19, some solutions transformed their operational model to an online space.

3.1. The Addressed SDGs

Regarding the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 12 was the most common goal; a total of 16 of the solutions (43.2%) acted directly on its implementation and one solution

acted indirectly for the selected youth solutions' achievement. Next, for SDG 17—seven, or 18.7%, of solutions worked directly on its implementation and one indirectly; for SDG 4—four, or 10.8%, of solutions worked directly on this and three indirectly; SDG 8 was indirectly implemented by four solutions; for SDG 3—three organizations worked on this. SDGs 1, 2, 6, 14 were not represented at all in the Report. The least represented SDGs were SDG 5, SDG 7, SDG 9, SDG 11, SDG 13, SDG 15 and SDG 10 and, indirectly, SDG 16—with one organization for each of these remaining Goals.

3.1.1. The Main SDGs Addressed

As noted above, the most popular SDGs in Russia among the commercial and non-profit youth organizations were SDG 12, SDG 17, SDG 4 and SDG 3.

The popularity of SDG 12 among youth organizations is quite remarkable. In Russia, SDG 12 is mainly associated with the issue of garbage and waste recycling. The popularity of this Goal occurred primarily due to the Russian context—since 2019, the situation in the waste recycling sector has been classified as catastrophic [2] (p. 6). Currently, 93% of garbage is sent to landfills, and only 7% is recycled [3] (p. 12). It is also important to note that the current capacity of Russian landfills at full load will be enough for only the next four years [2] (p. 6). For this reason, the waste recycling sector in Russia was and is primarily comprised of civil society, non-profit and commercial organizations.

The state took up the problem of waste recycling only in 2018, launching the federal “Integrated Solid Municipal Waste Management System (MSW)” within the framework of the national project “Ecology”, in which sorting and recycling of waste had already become mandatory for the regions of Russia [4].

Thus, the popularity of this particular SDG is explained by the catastrophic situation in the garbage sector in Russia and the great public demand for the development of the system of waste recycling and the concept of responsible consumption in the future, as well as the extensive participation of NGOs and social movements in this area.

The second most targeted Goal was SDG 17—“Partnerships for Sustainable Development”. In the country context, the popularity of this goal among youth NGOs and primarily commercial organizations was not unexpected; however, from an international perspective, there are several barriers to achieving it, including the political isolation of Russia from Western Europe and the United States, the lack of state programs of additional education of theory and practice in sustainable development for specialists, managers and officials, and a low level of qualification for international cooperation [5] (p. 134).

In the report, SDG 17 is addressed mainly by youth consulting companies that advise businesses and NGOs on the transition to more sustainable practices. These companies are young, have been established for less than three years, and are small, having less than 100 employees.

The popularity of such new consulting companies indicates a demand for a transition to the concept of sustainable development among small and medium-sized business corporations and NGOs in Russia. In addition, young people interested in the sustainable development agenda can realize their entrepreneurial abilities in a relatively new area for Russia. SDG 4 was represented by four non-profit youth-led organizations, which is considered insufficient compared to the two goals mentioned above. These organizations were mainly focused on teaching new disciplines, such as programming, computer science, robotics and, in particular, modernizing school education, especially in the regions of Russia. According to the SDG Progress Report 2021, all indicators of SDG 4 have been fully achieved [6] (p. 380). However, the Civil Society Review states that, currently, there are many issues in the field of education, the main one being the lack of modern educational approaches and technologies, since the entire education system is based on old standards of the industrial era [5] (p. 49).

Consequently, the same pattern was observed that has been discovered recently with other SDGs—non-profit and for-profit youth-led solutions responding to society's demands that are not currently being addressed by state political will.

The next SDG in terms of representation was SDG 3, which has a similar specificity. The Report refers to three organizations that focused on different areas of health care: assistance to children with rare diseases, psychological well-being, and new technologies in rehabilitation after surgery. All these areas are not fully addressed by state policy in one way or another or do not have adequate funding [5] (p. 43).

3.1.2. The Underrepresented SDGs in the Report

The least represented SDGs were SDG 5, SDG 7, SDG 9, SDG 11, SDG 13, SDG 15, SDG 10 and SDG 16. SDGs 1, 2, 6, 14 were not presented at all in the Report.

The SDGs underrepresented in the Report were primarily addressed to the following areas: gender equality, renewable energy, reducing inequality, sustainable cities and human settlements, climate action, conservation of terrestrial ecosystems and justice. For each of these SDGs, the Report identifies one solution. In our view, this suggests that young people are just beginning to make efforts to work on these goals, as they are either difficult to achieve through the activities of youth organizations, or they are at an initial stage of development in Russia itself. Such areas as the fight against poverty and hunger, clean water and sanitation, and the preservation of marine ecosystems are not represented at all. Perhaps this is because there is not such a high public demand for them as for other areas, or larger organizations are already addressing them.

3.2. The SDGs and Operational Model

Table 1 shows the distribution of the implemented SDGs between commercial and non-profit organizations. As can be seen from Table 1, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 7 and SDG 13 were implemented mainly by non-profit organizations. These areas are health and well-being, high-quality education, sustainable development, gender equality, clean and affordable energy, and the fight against climate change. SDG 3—"Good Health and Well-being", is represented in the Report not only by charitable organizations, but also by an online project on psychological health, and by a commercial organization engaged in developing new technologies for rehabilitation after complex operations.

Table 1. Percentage of non-profit and for-profit solutions in terms of SDGs.

Sustainable Development Goals	For-Profit	Non-Profit
SDG 3	5.20%	11.10%
SDG 4	-	27.70%
SDG 5	-	5.50%
SDG 7	-	5.50%
SDG 9	5.20%	-
SDG 11	5.20%	-
SDG 12	57.80%	27.70%
SDG 13	-	5.50%
SDG 17	26.30%	11.10%
Overall:	19 solutions	18 solutions

SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 12 and SDG 17 were implemented mainly by commercial youth organizations. Accordingly, commercial initiatives work primarily in industrialization and new technologies, responsible consumption and waste recycling, and partnerships to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. It is important to note that SDG 8 was implemented by commercial youth organizations, not directly but indirectly, both in individual projects and related activities.

3.2.1. Non-Profit Youth Solutions: Best Practices

Exclusively non-profit organizations implemented initiatives in providing quality education in the regions of Russia, in gender equality, renewable energy and climate policy. All these organizations were not affiliated with state institutions. Only two of the NGOs had affiliations with any foundations or an international public movement (i.e., Fridays for Future). This trend is noteworthy since all the above areas do not have broad state support and are just at the beginning of attracting the attention of the public sector. According to the Civil Review on the implementation of the SDGs in Russia, SDG 5 accounts for one of the lowest percentages of coverage of the SDG tasks by national projects of the Russian Federation—only 22%, while SDG 13 and SDG 14 are not covered by them at all, according to the Russian civil community [5] (p. 29). The distribution of state programs of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the SDGs also serve as evidence: SDG 4 and SDG 13 account for the minimum number of programs—only two for each [7] (p. 26).

The characteristic features of youth NGOs contributing to the achievement of SDG 4 in Russia are their focus on youth, local contribution and their small size (up to 100 employees/volunteers).

The best practices of implementing SDG 4 by youth NGOs were:

- educational projects aimed at improving the quality and versatility of school education in the regions of Russia (e.g., the “Circle” project);
- professional development of young teachers (e.g., “Teacher for Russia”);
- projects for the socialization of vulnerable groups of young people (e.g., “Uppsala Circus”);
- educational projects for young people on new topics, such as gender equality and tolerance of appearance.

For other SDGs, namely 5, 7 and 13, there were a small number of projects—one for each. For this reason, it is difficult to identify the best practices for their execution.

A small percentage of youth NGOs also implemented SDG 12 and SDG 17. Non-profit initiatives under SDG 12 were aimed at:

- organizing the collection of recyclable materials from the population;
- educational events concerning the importance of sorting and recycling of waste;
- sharing second-hand items (‘reuse’).

Two youth NGOs were engaged in developing a partnership for sustainable development (SDG 17) by implementing an educational initiative for young international specialists (the Academy of Youth Diplomacy) and volunteer programs aimed at implementing various SDGs.

3.2.2. For-Profit Solutions: Best Practices

The Sustainable Development Goals that were implemented mainly by commercial companies, were SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 12 and SDG 17. It is worth noting that SDG 8, “Decent Work and Economic Growth”, was implemented not directly but indirectly as separate projects of organizations. With respect to SDG 9, “Industrialization, Innovation and Infrastructure”, this was implemented by only one youth-led company, which was engaged in developing and producing a new cleaning powder technology to minimize environmental damage in the industrial sector. Most of the commercial initiatives were represented by SDG 12 and SDG 17.

Youth commercial initiatives under SDG 12 involved a wide variety of forms of solution:

- production and sale of products from recyclable materials;
- enterprises that adhered to the waste-free provision of services (e.g., beauty salons, shops);
- sharing initiatives (e.g., reusable glasses for drinks in cafes, an application for selling left-over food from restaurants at a discount).

Youth for-profit solutions that operate with an SDG 17 focused on “green” consulting and seeking to make sustainable businesses one united system.

The best practices of for-profit solutions in the field of SDG 17 in Russia were:

- consulting for businesses and NGOs on the transition to eco-friendly operating models;
- conducting business seminars on the implementation of the SDGs in operational activities;
- holding forums among commercial companies that have implemented the SDGs in their operational activities;
- combining eco-businesses into one consumer-friendly system.

3.3. Challenges Faced by Youth Organisations in Russia

Based on a survey conducted by SDSN Youth Russia among the initiatives and solutions in the Report, the main problems for SDG-oriented solutions were the following:

- particular solutions struggled with finding and establishing long-term partnerships (both experts and related organizations);
- more than half of the respondents mentioned finding professionals with IT skills was “not easy”, especially people who could “professionally” use technologies and online tools;
- public and private financing was one of the most common issues that respondents highlighted in the survey as well—overall, 44.4% of initiatives identified these two as necessary.

We also discovered that these issues were similar to common problems that youth initiatives face in various countries on a global scale. The following challenges have been worsened by the COVID-19 and its impact on the progress in SDGs.

Firstly, unpredictability, which is defined in the Report as the lack of capacity to get access to relevant and reliable information on SDG implementation and technologies due to the fragmentation or lack of essential elements of support for SDG-oriented initiatives in the social field. Secondly, implementation, as some initiatives go beyond the context of socio-political life in the regions of Russia (such as, for example, projects to maintain gender equality or environmental projects). Thirdly, governance, which relates to the difficulty of financing SDG-directed projects through grants or direct support.

4. Discussion

The results obtained from the analysis of youth initiatives provide a meaningful foundation for future discussion on youth solutions in Russia. The most represented youth solutions were for those SDGs for which there is a vibrant and relevant social demand and an urgent issue that is not yet addressed by the state apparatus to one degree or another. Such solutions are also characterized by the fact that they operate where large scale organizational activity is not required; however, they arise where it is feasible to make a local or regional contribution to solving an urgent issue.

The most common practices of the SDGs implementation among youth non-profit organizations were various educational events and lessons, projects for the socialization of vulnerable groups of young people, and 3R projects (reduce, reuse, recycle). Commercial youth enterprises worked mainly in the b2b sector to provide sustainable business solutions, sell or produce environmentally friendly goods or to develop new, more sustainable technologies for various economic sectors.

Thus, the social demands expressed in the concept of the Sustainable Development Goals have created new areas of activity for both for-profit and non-profit youth organizations in Russia. Commercial initiatives are the most promising, as they have greater coverage and work in unoccupied areas of the Russian market. This fact suggests the growing potential for the development of SDG-focused youth entrepreneurship in Russia.

Youth non-profit organizations act first as a specific response to the very social request formulated by the Sustainable Development Goals, in relation to which they undertake specific tasks and have mechanisms for solving urgent problems locally.

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