

Youth Innovation Challenge 2017-2022



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Long-term Impact Assessment



Since 2017, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) has hosted an annual Youth Innovation Challenge (YIC)¹ that invites youth from Canada, Mexico and the United States to submit their innovative ideas and solutions for improving both the environment and the economy in North America. The prize includes seed funding for their enterprise and offers networking opportunities. Since 2020, a one-year mentorship program has also been included as part of the prize. Overall, the competition serves as an opportunity to support and highlight innovative solutions.

To participate in the Challenge, innovators and entrepreneurs between the ages of 18 and 30 are asked to submit solutions related to a thematic selected annually by the three governments, and which is linked to innovation, sustainability, and entrepreneurship. Themes between 2017-2022 have focused on issues ranging from environmental justice and social entrepreneurship to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledging the value of the YIC for the CEC's engagement of youth, a long-term impact assessment was carried out to measure the Challenge's impact to date and identify potential opportunities for the future.

The results of the long-term impact assessment highlight that the YIC has proven to be one of CEC's campaigns that has most helped increase the visibility of the CEC, ensure youth engagement and bring media attention. However, several weaknesses and barriers have been identified over the years and the framework under which this program was developed six years ago needs to align better with the format and scope of similar competitions hosted by other organizations in order to be more attractive and yield more impact. The following sections provide more information on the methodology used for the assessment, the main findings and key recommendations.

1. For a complete description of the Youth Innovation Challenge, please visit the CEC website at: <<http://www.cec.org/youth-initiatives/2022-cec-youth-innovation-challenge/>>

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The assessment focused on four central questions: What has been the overall impact of CEC's seed funding under the YIC? How efficient are the processes and structures of the YIC competition? What can we say about the YIC in the context of an increasingly competitive landscape of youth-focused innovation competitions? How can the YIC be strengthened or re-structured?

Answers to these questions were derived through a multifaceted assessment approach unfolding between December 2022 to March 2023 that included five phases:

1. A review of more than 170 internal documents, as well as the public-facing website and social media channels through which the Youth Innovation Challenge is communicated;
2. Interviews with 18 stakeholders, both internal and external to the CEC.
3. Surveys of the 2020-2022 YIC competition applicants, 2017-2022 YIC competition winners and 2020-2022 evaluators of YIC submissions;
4. A comparative analysis of youth-targeted, environmental entrepreneurship and innovation challenges; and
5. The development of recommendations built upon the insights gleaned from the first four phases.

Benefitting North American Communities

Del Puerto al Huerto / Circular Economy: From the Port to the Garden (2022)

In response to the long-term impact survey of winners, this project reports that 25 fishermen and community women are involved in their project, resulting in the transformation of 60kg of waste, which is being converted into enhanced liquid fertilizer and which will be used in May 2023 within the orchard of the Bahía de Kino High School and in an organic production farm. In addition, the project has now been implemented in two communities from different states and regions in Mexico-Sisa, Yucatan and Bahia de Kino, Sonora- demonstrating the scalability and replicability of their approach.



MAIN FINDINGS

Impact

Since 2017, a total of 19 youth innovation projects have been awarded seed funding through the YIC: 6 from Canada, 6 from the United States, and 7 from Mexico. 63% of winning projects were technology focused innovations. The remainder were evenly split among projects focused on consumer products and others centered on programming or community engagement approaches. The winning submissions also tended towards the early stage of the innovation and entrepreneurship process.

The YIC has had an impact on youth that have been attracted to the competition. To date, 878 project ideas have been submitted to the Challenge: 19% from Canada, 67% from Mexico and 14% from the United States.²

Despite notable significant positive impacts, the CEC does not have a systematic strategy to collect impact data or a framework for impact assessment or reporting, nor any public communications strategy to disseminate the impacts being achieved.

Effectiveness and efficiency of operations

Interviews with individuals from across the organization revealed genuine and deep support for the YIC and its energizing influence on the organization from senior level staff to interns.

Given the complexity of the process from the selection of the theme to final project reporting, the long-term impact assessment sought to identify opportunities for streamlining, reducing workloads, and finding efficiencies.

The evaluation found that changing the YIC theme each year has the advantage of allowing the CEC to respond to changing political and social contexts and provides new opportunities for reaching youth whose innovative ideas did not perhaps fit previously with other thematic topics.

However, an annually changing theme can also cause challenges, which was one of the most frequently cited structural bottlenecks mentioned in the stakeholder interview process. The evaluation also called attention to the importance of youth engagement in key CEC document and on its webpage (e.g., under “What We Do” and “About the CEC”).

Finally, a more effective communications strategy could be developed that speaks directly to youth in a language that is appealing to them and aligns more closely to their values.

Comparative landscape

There are several initiatives that are emerging as frontrunners in attracting young environmental innovators and entrepreneurs. The assessment considered ten initiatives implemented by other organizations as comparatives to extract the lessons that can benefit the CEC’s YIC. The assessment found four ways in which the YIC can stand apart from other environmental innovation competitions:

1. Highlight the unique nature of the trilateral environmental cooperation taking place under the CEC.
2. Use the YIC as an opportunity to broaden knowledge about the challenges facing the North American environment and the solution-making that is unfolding.
3. Be inclusive in the conceptualization of solution-making and community-impacting innovation.
4. Bring together international sectors of action on the environment.

2. The analysis noted however a decline since 2020 in the engagement of Mexican youth and a doubling of participation by Canadian youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In total, seven key areas for action are recommended in response to the foregoing analysis of the impact of YIC on North American youth, the North American environment and on supporting greening the economies of Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Within each action area are specific recommendations designed to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the YIC.

Expand the space for youth-led innovating and community focused impact-making

- Enhance awareness of the CEC's commitment to youth and the YIC program.
- Tap the energized potential of youth by developing enhanced capacity building of youth.

Maximize Opportunities presented by a trilateral niche

- Build awareness of shared North American environmental challenges.
- Enhance the unique opportunity of Council and environmental experts' engagement.
- Seize the opportunity for scalability and transferability of projects.

Redesign the mentorship model

- Mentor the many, not the few by extending mentorship beyond YIC winning project leaders.
- Grow innovation, solution-ideation, and resiliency skillsets of youth.
- Establish a formal network for customized project advising.

Grow roots and extend pathways for engagement: Build a youth impact innovation ecosystem

- Design for permanence, thematic continuity and impact by making the YIC a permanent, ongoing grant program with a dedicated delivery team.
- Build a youth impact innovation ecosystem comprised of multiple actors and a capacity building resource library.

Capture, aggregate and celebrate impacts

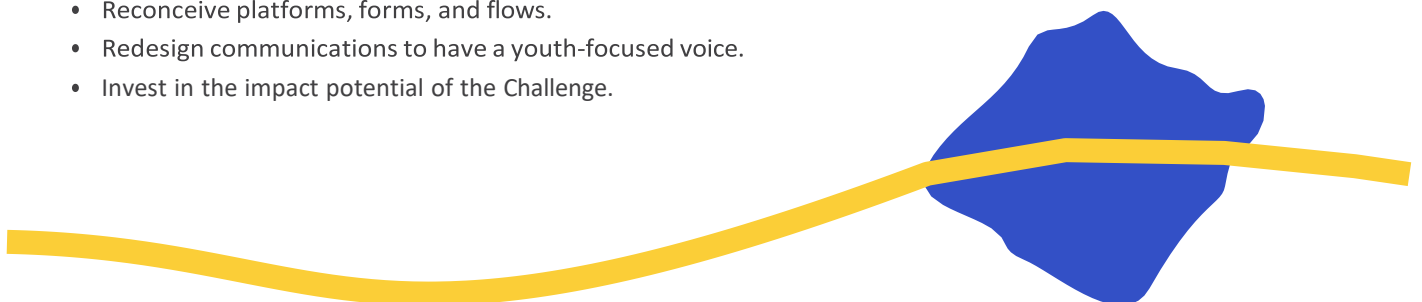
- Build systematic structures for capturing and measuring impact.
- Better communicate and celebrate impacts.

Harness learning to lessen capacity needs, share stories and grow skills

- Develop the impact story-telling skills of winners as part of the mentorship program and require a final reporting requirement.

Seize opportunities for overall impact and operational efficiency

- Reconceive platforms, forms, and flows.
- Redesign communications to have a youth-focused voice.
- Invest in the impact potential of the Challenge.





CONCLUSION

The CEC's Youth Innovation Challenge is an important vehicle for inspiring North American youth to become innovators and solution-makers to address our collective environmental challenges.

The conclusions of the long-term impact assessment are clear. The program is absolutely having a demonstrable impact on youth whose projects are selected as winners. It is, without a doubt, contributing to the development of new solutions and approaches to conserve, protect and enhance the environmental aspects of North America. The program is potentially helping to grow the green economies of North America. However, it is partially achieving its goal to engage North American youth and, as such, it could be strengthened. The program also presents opportunities to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Overall, the Youth Innovation Challenge has the potential to be a showpiece for what can be realized uniquely by trilateral cooperation for the benefit of future generations. It is hoped that the recommendations will assist the CEC realize this potential.



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