



# REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

## Young Change Makers Spread Their Wings

By Sheila Kinkade

**A decade after IYF launched *YouthActionNet*®—its global program for young social innovators—alumni reflect on its unique value add.**

Passion. Purpose. Perseverance. These are the hallmarks of today's young social innovators. Yet passion alone doesn't pay the bills or help a fledgling organization get recognized in a crowded marketplace; nor does it satisfy a young leader's need for essential skills and connections to people and institutions that can support his or her efforts.

Over the past decade, *YouthActionNet* has created an expansive network of 550 young change-makers in 60-plus countries—providing them with invaluable skill-building, networking, and advocacy opportunities. To honor the program's 10-year anniversary, we asked three alumni to share their successes—and how *YouthActionNet* played a part.

If their stories are any indication, imagine—in just a few short years—the difference we can make when we're reaching three times as many young visionaries. This is why we're as committed as ever to expanding *YouthActionNet* around the globe.

### NNAEMEKA IKEGWUONU

#### Recognition Results in Long-term Dividends

Twenty-nine-year-old Nnaemeka Ikegwuonu's CV reads like a *Who's Who* of social entrepreneurship prizes and awards. Over the past two years, Nnaemeka's work to boost the productivity and incomes of small farmers in Nigeria has earned him accolades and support from Rolex, the Clinton Global Initiative, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Ashoka, and others.

But it wasn't always that way.

Nnaemeka spent four years pitching the mission of the Smallholders Foundation, an organization he founded to accelerate agricultural development on small farms, to donors inside and outside the country. Over those four years, nearly all of his funding entreaties were rejected. For a young Nigerian working on issues of rural poverty, it was hard to get noticed—and gain the trust of donors.

In 2008, Nnaemeka was honored with a *YouthActionNet* Fellowship for his use of radio technology to help hard-to-reach farmers access vital information. "It was my first break into the consciousness of the global community," says Nnaemeka of his recognition through the program.

Looking back, Nnaemeka credits his *YouthActionNet* training with strengthening his ability to communicate his organization's work. With a revamped mission and set of objectives, he began to witness an upsurge in donor interest. While the Smallholders Foundation had only three donors when Nnaemeka was selected for his

Fellowship, today it boasts over 20 national and international funding partners, including The World Bank, UNDP, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the African Women Development Fund.

With the Foundation's core operations covered, Nnaemeka was free to explore creative ideas for expanding its work. In 2010, he received a Starbucks grant through IYF to train 430 female students in sustainable agriculture and environmental management.

While in early 2011, Smallholders' rural radio broadcasts reached over 250,000 listeners, Nnaemeka expects to increase this number to 3.5 million by 2012, with the help of recent supporters.

### DINA BUCHBINDER


#### Going to Scale with Public Sector Support

For Dina Buchbinder Auron in Mexico, play isn't just about having fun. It's about teaching disadvantaged children about critical global issues and equipping them with essential life skills such as fairplay, teamwork, and respect for others.

Dina co-founded *Deportes para Compartir* (DpC), or Sports to Share, in 2007 to educate children and youth, ages 6 to 14, about the Millennium Development Goals through engaging them in sporting activities. Teaching children about serious health threats like malaria or HIV/AIDS, for example, might start with a health lesson,

*Background: Nnaemeka Ikegwuonu interviews farmers in a crowded marketplace in Nigeria.*



A photograph of a man in a red patterned shirt and large headphones, holding a smartphone. He is surrounded by a group of people, including women and children, in an outdoor community setting. Some women are wearing colorful headwraps. Bicycles are parked in the background.

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followed by a game where the goal is for players to avoid being hit by a ball symbolizing the disease. Through such learning-through-play activities, DpC has provided more than 32,500 children in 18 Mexican states with a greater understanding of critical issues facing their local and global community—and their role in addressing them.

Since receiving her *YouthActionNet* Fellowship in 2009, Dina has built on the knowledge, networks, and exposure she gained through the program. A new partnership with the Ministry of Education and UNDP in Mexico is poised to dramatically increase DpC's reach

and impact. While currently DpC benefits up to 6,000 young people per semester, expanding through the school system will allow it to reach three times that many.

Dina credits DpC's success to its staff of 25 and focus on results. "We have high professional standards," she says. "The agencies we work with trust us and it shows." Recognition through *YouthActionNet* and the UVM Prize for Social Development—the local *YouthActionNet* initiative in Mexico—also contributed to DpC's good standing and media appeal.

Together, these factors played a critical role in DpC's growth, strengthening its legitimacy and revenue base. Also helpful was receiving a Starbucks grant through IYF, which allowed DpC to support youth-led volunteer activities and validated its approach in the eyes of other potential corporate sponsors.

Asked about *YouthActionNet*'s long-term significance to her life and work, Dina emphasizes the importance of time away from the pressures of running an organization. "The Fellowship gave me perspective and the chance to think about DpC's long-term strategy. It was a turning point," says Dina, who continues to benefit from her relationship with other Fellows. "This work is titanic. It can be very tiring and very fulfilling. With *YouthActionNet*, I realized I wasn't alone and continue to feel supported."

## TAL DEHTIAR

### Made in Africa: An Entrepreneur Reinvents Himself

"Business can do amazing things," has long served as Tal Dehtiar's mantra. Tal was awarded a *YouthActionNet* Fellowship in 2007 for his work in launching MBAs Without Borders (MWB). A business school graduate himself, Tal started MWB to link young business professionals to volunteer assignments in emerging markets.

"I wasn't craving a power suit or to climb a corporate ladder," says Tal of his decision to found MWB in 2004.

After leading the organization through a successful start-up phase, in 2008 Tal sold the rights and work of MWB to an international NGO well-positioned to take its work to the next level. With MWB's future secure, Tal was free to pursue his next entrepreneurial venture: Oliberté, a company he started with the goal of producing premium casual footwear for the global market—made in Africa.

"I was tired of everyone looking at Africa as a charity case," says Tal of his motivation for launching Oliberté. "Africa doesn't need people giving things to it—especially shoes—when it has all the resources needed to make its own products."

Starting with one Canadian customer in late 2009, Oliberté is now selling across North America, Europe, Oman, and Japan. Stores carrying its products include ALDO, Town Shoes, Urban Outfitters, and Step Japan. In addition to the 5,000 customers it attracted in 2010,

celebrities wearing Oliberté include Edward Norton, Snoop Dog, Kristen Stewart, and K'NAAN.

Being a *YouthActionNet* Fellow continues to offer a "stamp of approval," says Tal as he approaches potential investors and supporters. "When I mention that I'm a Fellow of the International Youth Foundation, it reinforces our credibility as a company and my own credibility as an entrepreneur."

Oliberté is now poised for a new chapter of growth as it expands its product line to include accessories and footwear for women and infants. In 2012, the company expects to open its first factory—a critical step in reaching its goal of creating one million jobs in Africa by 2035 and becoming the largest exporter of footwear made in Africa.

An ambitious goal? Not to Tal, a forward-thinking visionary whose feet, clad in Oliberté, remain firmly planted on the ground. **Y**



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