

# Candidate Debates Are Centerpiece of Democracy: 1 of 3

Republican presidential nominee Mitt   
Romney answers a question posed by  
moderator Bob Schieffer as President Obama  
listens during the third presidential debate in  
2012.

Debates among competing electoral candidates have become a campaign centerpiece in elections worldwide. More than 60 countries have developed a debate tradition, and civil society groups have been critical in making that happen.

Debates help voters make informed choices and encourage candidates to focus on policy issues, a conviction so widely held that these candidate showdowns have become mainstays of the electoral process in many places.

The National Democratic Institute, a nonprofit, nongovernmental, Washington-based think tank, offers the following guidelines about debates.

## **What Is a Candidate Debate?**

A candidate debate is a neutral, dignified forum where political party leaders or others competing for elected office respond to the same questions, as posed by voters, a moderator or other debaters. Listeners are able to compare the candidates' positions on issues.

Candidates mutually agree on rules, mostly regarding response and speaking time, to ensure fairness. Debates normally include some interaction among candidates through rebuttals or follow-on questions.

## **Goal of Debates**

Debates address issues — not persons, religion or ethnicity. They will promote political tolerance, constructive dialogue and service to the people.

## **Debates Help Candidates Prepare to Campaign, Govern if Elected**

Debates help candidates focus on issues they may not previously have focused on.

“They force us to think ahead.” — Bob Dole, 1996 U.S. presidential candidate for the Republican Party

“I am convinced that the debates I went through ... actually helped me to be a better president.” — Bill Clinton, U.S. president 1993-2001

## **Debates Inform Voters**

Debates are often the only time during a campaign when candidates are together at the same time in

the same place. This gives voters an opportunity to make side-by-side comparisons and gives candidates a chance to say why they are best suited for the elected office.

### **Debates Help Reduce Political Tensions**

In divided election environments or countries emerging from conflict, debates give political rivals a chance to show that, despite their differences, they can treat each other with mutual respect while they disagree on the issues.

Debates also provide a chance for candidates to commit publicly to a peaceful election, including agreeing to accept election results and use nonviolent legal channels to resolve election disputes.

### **Debates Promote Accountability of Elected Officials**

During a debate, a candidate's statements, policy positions and campaign promises become part of the public record. Once winning candidates take office, civic groups and the media can hold them accountable by citing transcripts or press coverage of debates.

### **Debates Highlight the Health of a Democracy**

Debates are increasingly seen as benchmarks of a healthy democracy. Citizens view debates as an indication of an open, transparent election process where all candidates can compete equally.

More on debates is available in "[Organizing and Producing Candidate Debates](#)" on the National Democratic Institute website.

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## **Nigerian YALI Member Stands Up to Violence**

*"I want the light in the life of every YALI Network member to shine so bright that others might, through their light, find their way."*

— Peacemaker Prosper Egeonu

By the time he was 30, Prosper Egeonu had witnessed too much violence in central Nigeria's Plateau state. He didn't want to see any more.

Thousands have died in conflict that has erupted in outbreaks of violence for more than a decade. Indigenous peoples and settlers from other ethnic groups clash over access to land, power and resources.

His youth scarred by the horrific acts of intercommunity violence, Egeonu began to devote his business, civic and personal activities to ending violence.

Prosper Egeonu and other young leaders  participate in a daylong National Youth Leadership Summit in October 2014.

In 2009 Egeonu, a YALI Network member, joined the Jos Crisis Appeal Fund (JCAF) as a volunteer, determined to get more people in the Plateau state capital city to stand up to the horrific acts.

JCAF is a partnership between Christians, Muslims and civil society groups that raises funds to provide financial assistance, medical attention and education to local families affected by conflict. This grass-roots civic group also helps displaced families find stable homes, Egeonu says, and funds organizations that work for peace.

In 2010, Egeonu started [Swagg News Africa](#), a media entertainment group, and Stanperz Conceptz, a roofing business. He combined the outreach efforts of both these enterprises to start the “Stop the Violence” campaign. The campaign aims to promote awareness of peace and to provide a talent showcase for youth from all religions. He partnered with a local radio station to provide youth with the entertainment program Friday Night Dance Party with Joey.

From right Egeonu, the Reverend Father  Blaize Agwom, Chris (no last name given) and Jerry (no last name given). All work at DREP in Jos.

Entertainment is “the latest revolution that captures the visions of the social-economic potential of Nigerian youth,” Egeonu believes, and awareness of that potential is a way to turn young people away from violence.

He went on to partner with the Performing Musicians Employers’ Association of Nigeria to further get the message of peace to music fans. He even recruited young U.S. hip-hop artist Akon and actor J.D. Williams to craft messages to “stop the violence.”

Continuing his pursuit of peace, in 2013 Egeonu joined the national nonprofit [Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace](#) (DREP) as a volunteer trainer. DREP brings together youth, women, and local leaders of various religious and ethnic groups to learn from each other about how they can “resolve issues that would otherwise result in violent confrontation” and create peace.

While Egeonu admits that his efforts to reach his goal can sometimes be frustrating — volunteers become disinterested, illiteracy among some in the target groups limits his ability to get messages through, and financial constraints limit DREP’s peacebuilding efforts from reaching more rural communities - he remains determined. “Responses I get from people I reach have been positive,” he said. He suggests more training in leadership and teambuilding for fellow volunteers in order to help them stay interested.

In front, from left, are a Hausa  community leader, the chief imam of Jos Central Mosque, Egeonu and Berom (no last name given). In back is the Afizere

community leader. The photo was taken after a dialogue and reconciliation consultative meeting at DREP.

Egeonu is active in the YALI Network and especially likes the #YALICHAT discussion forum. He has earned YALI Network certificates for [online courses](#) in civic leadership, business and entrepreneurship, and public management.

“I have learned a lot from YALI resource information,” he says. “It has built me to be a better leader.” He says the highest call of leadership is “unlocking the potential of other people.” And he urges other youth to join YALI and to engage their communities to help solve problems.

“I want the light in the life of every YALI Network member to shine so bright that others might, through their light, find their way,” he says.

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## **[An Equal Stake in the Democratic Process](#)**

A smiling poll worker greeted Zambian voters in January.

Thirteen sub-Saharan African nations hold elections in 2015; Comoros, Lesotho and Nigeria all choose new officials in February alone. These votes will be cast at a time when some international observers express concern that the progress of democracy is slipping in sub-Saharan Africa, that gains over the last 20 years are slowing or reversing.

[YALI.state.gov](#) will devote content to the twin topics of democracy and good governance in February, bringing the YALI Network insights into the current international benchmarks for what democracies do and how they should operate.

Members of the YALI Network also will be sharing their stories with the community, demonstrating how they are acting in their communities to improve democracy, voter participation, good governance and equal opportunity.

A Zambian voter casts a ballot in the January 2015 elections.

*“Government of the people, by the people, for the people.”*

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th U.S. president, made this description of democracy famous at a crucial

time in the nation's history. This definition is still widely quoted today, more than 150 years later.

Though democracy has a long history in the West, recent decades put democracy on the fast track. Fewer than half of the world's nations were democracies in 1991. By 2006, 64 percent were democracies, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development. Just a decade and a half ago, democracy was considered largely a Western model. Fifteen years later, it is the predominant form of government globally, and internationally perceived as the source from which a government must draw its legitimacy.

### **Advancing Democracy**

*The U.S. government supports the growth of freedom, democracy and human dignity in other nations through these objectives:*

- 1) Promote participatory, representative political processes.*
- 2) Foster greater institutional, legal accountability.*
- 3) Protect human rights.*

[Read more about the DRG strategy](#)

The United Nations has set standards for what a democracy is meant to deliver — freedoms of expression, assembly, association, vote and participation in public affairs.

Defining democracy is one thing, but making it work — day-to-day, for one and all — is a moving target.

In fact, distinguished Yale University political scientist Robert A. Dahl has suggested five criteria that a nation should achieve if a government wants to be known as a democracy:

1. **Effective participation:** Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to form their preference, place questions on the public agenda and express reasons for one outcome over the other.
2. **Voting equality at the decisive stage:** Each citizen must be assured his or her judgments will be counted as equal in weight to the judgments of others.
3. **Enlightened understanding:** Citizens must enjoy ample and equal opportunities for discovering and affirming what choice would best serve their interests.
4. **Control of the agenda:** People must have the opportunity to decide what political matters actually are of importance to them, and what should be brought up for deliberation.
5. **Inclusiveness:** Equality must extend to all citizens within the state. Everyone has a legitimate stake within the political process.

In a 2014 obituary, the New York Times described Robert A. Dahl as “his profession's most distinguished student of democratic government.” His most notable works are the books *Who Governs*, *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, and *Democracy and Its Critics*.

How strong are democracies in your region? The nongovernmental organization Freedom House conducts an annual survey, [Freedom in the World](#).

Further resources on the topic are [here](#).

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## [Nigerian Catfish Farmer Believes in “African Dream”](#)

More and more young Africans are discovering that they can make farming a profitable career.

Enayon Anthony pours feed into his  catfish pond.

Enayon Anthony is from a rural part of Delta state in Nigeria. Anthony loved the catfish his mother raised and cooked for family meals throughout his youth. He even enjoyed feeding the fish. Eventually, he determined that fish could provide him with a livelihood.

“You can be a farmer and still make a good and honest living from it,” says the successful fish farmer and YALI Network member.

Anthony, 28, raises his stock with care. He buys fingerlings from a friend at a good price, feeds them nutritious commercial feed and regularly checks the quality of the water in his pond, which is connected to a river. If he determines that the pond’s water quality has declined or that the fish are not eating, he drains the pond and refills it with fresh water, which he treats to control bacteria.

“I have to check my fish every day,” he says.

It takes six months for fingerlings to grow to the size where they can be harvested and sold. “We sell the fish we harvest right on the farm,” Anthony says, adding that sales are good. His primary customers are local women fishmongers, who sell the catfish in local markets.

“It is profitable selling catfish compared to other farm products,” he says, adding that farm-grown fish are less expensive than river fish. His goal is to expand his catfish farm to become one of the largest in West Africa.

“A lot of youth are coming into catfish farming,” he says. “The future of catfish is very bright.”

He wants other YALI Network members to understand that agriculture “is one sector that can move Africa to the next level” by providing both income and employment opportunities.

Anthony prepares to harvest  mature fish.

On a larger scale, Anthony says, “the agriculture sector is big. ... Let’s feed Africa and beyond.”

Anthony praises the YALI Network for “really opening my eyes and mind to dreaming” and “meeting people of like minds who have the same dream about Africa.”

“I call it the #AfricanDream,” he says.

“I am personally committed to an Africa that works fairly for Africans of all ethnic and religious backgrounds,” he continues.

“Thanks for YALI.”

Other young Africans have been sharing their experiences in agricultural expansion. Read more:

[Namibian Family Farm Group Strives to Expand](#)

[Benin Gardeners Tap Land and Water to Create a Small Business](#)

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## **Advances in Crop Technology Benefit Africa’s Smallholder Farmers**

Smallholder farmers in Africa are starting to reap the rewards of steady advances in crop technology.

One of the most promising advances for farmers is agricultural biotechnology. With nearly 3 million hectares planted in maize, soybeans and cotton from seeds derived from biotechnology, South Africa ranks as the leading sub-Saharan country to grow biotech crops, according to a new report from the nonprofit International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications, the world’s leading network of agricultural research centers. South Africa grows three biotech crops: maize, soybean and cotton.

In 2014, 18 million farmers, 90 percent of them smallholders, planted biotech crops in 28 countries around the world, says the report from the group, also known as ISAAA.

Karembu continues her research,  examining a young plant in an ISAAA greenhouse.

“Developing countries [20], not just in Africa, grew more biotech crops than developed countries [8],” Margaret Karembu said in a 2014 video available on [YouTube](#). Karembu is director of the ISAAA AfriCenter in Nairobi and holds a doctorate in environmental science education from Kenyatta University. She is the author of “Biotech Crops in Africa: The Final Frontier” (2009) and

“The Adventures of Mandy and Fanny in Africa,” a cartoon booklet on biotechnology (2012).

Agricultural biotechnology encompasses a range of tools, including traditional breeding techniques, that alter living organisms, or parts of organisms, to make or modify products; improve plants or animals; or develop microorganisms for specific agricultural uses. Modern biotechnology includes tools of genetic engineering.

First commercialized in 1996, crops bioengineered through biotechnology with traits to enhance disease resistance, repel insects or increase harvests are being raised in other sub-Saharan African nations. Burkina Faso and Sudan — with 500,000 and 100,000 hectares, respectively — grow biotech-improved varieties of cotton, an important fiber and cash crop in Africa.

Karembu highlighted the continued annual growth of biotech hectareage in South Africa, Burkina Faso and Sudan.

“We can see that African countries are picking up very fast. Farmers are opting to continuously grow biotech crops. The hectareage is increasing by the year. Africa is quickly picking out those technologies that are relevant to their situation,” Karembu said.

Field trials on biotech rice, maize, wheat sorghum, banana, cassava and sweet potato are underway in Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda, preparing those crops for commercialization, ISAAA says.

A variety of wheat that can both withstand drought and control insects will be cultivated in another field trial to begin in South Africa in 2017. ISAAA reports that other field trials are being planned.

The crops in trials “are very important for Africa from a food-security perspective,” Karembu said, noting that the countries hosting the trials “are distributed in all four of the sub-regions of Africa.”

As the fastest adopted crop technology in recent times, biotech crops are part of the solution to the challenges of food security and climate change, according to their supporters. Both consumers and farmers must prepare to face those challenges, ISAAA says. It notes, however, that biotech crops are not a “panacea.” Crop rotation, pesticide management and other good farming practices are also critical for biotech crops, just as they are for conventional crops.

Karembu continues her research,  examining a young plant in an ISAAA greenhouse.

Biotech crops contribute to food, feed and fiber security by making crops more affordable and by raising farmers’ incomes through greater productivity, ISAAA adds. These enhanced crops also help conserve biodiversity and control deforestation by making greater harvests possible on the same amount of arable land used to grow less-productive conventional crops. And they reduce agriculture’s environmental impact by reducing the need for chemicals to protect against pests and disease.

Karembu noted that farmers in countries neighboring those with field trials are learning from the example of Burkina Faso. “They are asking: ‘Why can’t our governments allow us to grow a crop

[cotton] that we have already seen with our eyes is already making good progress and is making significant changes in the lives of Burkinabe farmers?”

Links to [highlights](#) of the report and a [video](#) released January 28 featuring Karembu are available on the ISAAA web site.

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## [Planting Grains Expands Poultry Production](#)

YALI Network members have been reaching out this month, describing their efforts to increase their farm production and scale up agricultural enterprises. Thobile Dlamini, a Network member in the Lubombo region of Swaziland, decided to make her poultry enterprise more self-sustaining by cultivating field crops to use as chicken feed.

**Dlamini:** I am no longer buying chicken feed from shops. I use what I harvest since I also farm corn and sunflower to feed the chickens. I have about five hectares planted in yellow corn and sunflower, which provide feed for about 600 chickens. I raise the poultry to sell for meat.

**Q:** How does that one action boost your overall agricultural business?

**Dlamini:** It Increases employment opportunities for the community as some are employed to raise chickens whilst others are employed in the crop production. This further promotes unity and collaboration in the community.

Workers till crops that  support a poultry-raising operation in Swaziland.

Ever since the project started, crime has been reduced in the area and people are learning to be self-sustainable. Many are now trying to do similar projects and others are opening new ventures which promotes community networking and responsibility.

The funds generated from the project are used to uplift lives of the members and employees of the project and further used to expand the base of the business.

**Q:** How has raising your own chicken feed provided a gain for the enterprise?

**Dlamini:** Since we started ploughing and planting the chicken feed ourselves, we have seen a drop in costs, and instead those funds are now used to expand the project. This project is also interesting because I am not buying manure for fertilizer. I took the chickens' waste, and it works as good as

manure for ploughed chicken feed.

**Q:** How do you hope to further expand?

**Dlamini:** I have 5 more hectares of land in which I could expand, but I'm reliant on rainfall now. Attempting to cultivate the additional land could put me at a high risk in case of drought. My dream is to drill a borehole for a stable water supply. With that, I then might hope to increase production to at least 1,000 chickens per week, providing me greater capital to buy further equipment to distribute to some of the big stores we have in Swaziland.

I want to build the capacity to steadily supply these stores with chicken portions labeled as my own brand. Then I'd be at a breakthrough point to provide job opportunities for more of the people in my community.

I bring this philosophy to my business plan: Business originates from love, ideas, knowledge and sharing the needs of the people and the community. Bonding with your business makes you come up with ideas on how to find the funds to keep it going and growing.

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## [A Productive Cooperative Depends on Organization](#)

*Aaron Moritz traveled from his home in Delavan, Wisconsin, to Guinea in 2012, serving with the U.S. Peace Corps. With prior training in agriculture and forestry, Aaron aimed to help the villagers he met increase their agricultural output and transition from subsistence to commercial farming. Aaron shared his story on how he and the villagers made that transition by establishing a gardening cooperative.*

When I arrived in Lafou, I found some cooperative enterprises in place, but just barely. There was a soap-making co-op that didn't know how to make soap. A beekeeping co-op that had never kept bees. And of the seven gardening cooperatives I met with, not one of them had maintained any sort of cashbox, to keep account of expenses and income.

### **What is a co-op?**

*The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) defines a cooperative as having "voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member-economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for*

*communities.” (Wanyama - PDF)*

In short, these cooperatives were poorly organized. In the following blog, I'll focus on how a disorganized cooperative may become better organized to move forward for the benefit of all contributing members.

Two principal criteria must be in place for a cooperative to become functional. First, members who are serious about making the cooperative work should set stringent rules and standard meeting times and identify ways to generate a revenue flow. Second, members must have a clear vision on what they'll gain by being active and contributing to the group effort. They should have consensus in how that goal will be reached.

Seen here spreading compost and  manure on the garden, members of Lafou's gardening cooperative established rules of shared labor to keep the group functioning.

### **Enforcing Rules and Generating Income**

I found that establishing rules and getting people to respect meeting times was a gradual but necessary process. In some ways, it is the most important aspect of managing a cooperative well, because rules and membership fees can weed out uncommitted members. Having a large membership is not an advantage if some members are half-hearted about their participation. A smaller dedicated membership is easier to manage, and it allots greater shares of the output to those who have made a true commitment.

The rules you enact should continue to evolve, and they should be enforced. For the first year of operation, most of our revenue came from monthly cooperative dues and late fees. This gave us investment capital to start various projects, including two cooperatively run gardens.

In addition to those gardens, the cooperative invested in nonperishables like bulk amounts of soap and dried hot peppers. We also made jam from squash and mangoes, which we marketed in the city. Once we had generated around \$300 USD, we started providing microloans to members who proposed feasible projects. This program helped the cooperative by generating loan interest fees, and it also helped members by providing them low-interest loans for other business ideas they wanted to pursue.

This mutually supportive lending arrangement brought the cooperative to a turning point. Members started to see returns on their monthly investments and felt empowered by the success of the group. Many members saw a 100 percent return on their original loan amount, profits far exceeding the dues they'd paid to the cooperative up until that point.

In addition to generating revenue and getting people to honor meeting times, rules served to trump social hierarchies. For example, with 30 predominantly female members, two men routinely failed to come to meetings. One was an imam, the other the co-op president's uncle. Culturally, it was impolite to evict these two members, but because there were rules in place, the president was able

to say, “We are not choosing to evict you; you have chosen to evict yourself.”

## **Creating Interest and Incentives**

Generating the initial show of interest in potential members can be challenging. In the beginning, you don't have much working capital. Initially, I had to convince members that even though they wouldn't receive benefits immediately, they would eventually profit from co-op membership.

We were fortunate in that the World Food Programme (WFP) gave us the opportunity to participate in a trial program. They were looking for gardening cooperatives to provide fresh vegetables to local schools for children's lunches. In exchange, the WFP offered the cooperative beans, rice, salt, oil and other staple foods. The members saw the advantages of the agreement and were anxious to begin the partnership.

The distribution of these staples offered the new members their first insight into the potential of cooperative organization. The value of membership was further reinforced when former members who had failed to show up to meetings were denied portions.

Caption: Members of the cooperative  build a fence around the garden.

All active members received equal shares regardless of their individual roles in the cooperative. A new democratic era had begun, and this renewed some members' faith in the president.

## **Conclusion**

If you form a cooperative of devoted members with a specific goal in mind, the cooperative will succeed. You can isolate the devoted members from the freeloaders through stringent rules and fees. In general, the more money and effort people contribute to a project, the more committed they'll feel, and these contributions will give them an overall greater sense of ownership toward the enterprise. As for generating income, this can be done in a multitude of ways. Be creative! YALI has a series of inspiring blogs on topics like [Agriculture](#) and [Business & Entrepreneurship](#).

Cooperatives are not necessarily the right choice for every individual or every community. Still, they are a good way to build the skills and know-how of individual members. This group organization also mitigates the risks associated with starting a new business.

Building this skill base in a cooperative can help an individual become confident in developing his or her own business strategy and starting his or her own new enterprise. And fellow co-op members might even lend the money to begin.

If there are any questions, please feel free to [comment on Facebook](#), and I will do my best to respond.

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# Namibian Family Farm Group Strives to Expand

Making the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture is a giant step forward that many African farmers want to make. Rachel Kalipi, a member of the YALI Network, describes how she's attempting to make this transition, as she, family members and neighbors pool their labor to work a 40-hectare (almost 100-acre) plot in northern Namibia.

Rachel is seen here in a  millet field on her family plot in Namibia.

Rachel described the crops currently cultivated.

**Kalipi:** We grow varieties of things during the cultivation season (six months in a year), i.e., millet, sorghum, melons, pumpkins, maize, groundnuts and beans. We also keep animals at the plot — chickens, cattle, goats, pigs and donkeys.

**Question:** Who does the work, and who shares in the harvest?

**Kalipi:** This started as a family subsistence farm and it has grown where we produce sufficient yields for [our] own consumption and a surplus we sell in the market.

The work is mainly done by the employees — three full-time employees at the plot — who stay at the plot throughout the year. During the cultivation season, additional labour is sourced from the community on a part-time and ad hoc basis. Up to 20 people work at the plot at peak periods. The harvest is split about 60 percent for consumption and 40 percent is sold in the market.

**Q:** What are your aspirations for the business, and how do you hope to achieve them?

**Kalipi:** The long-term objective is to turn the farm into a commercial business, to cultivate throughout the year and grow a huge variety of crops using innovative farming technologies. Virgin land is available where we could expand and increase our output.

The key challenges to achieving that are access to funds and the lack of necessary skills to do the transformation. I continue to seek funding from various sources, which will enable me to acquire the required equipment and seek the service of experts in agriculture to assist with transformation.

We use a basic tractor to plough the field, but we are still using traditional methods. The biggest portion of cultivation is still done manually. I am keen to learn more about tilling farming methodology as this is something that will benefit us greatly to improve our crop yield and shorten the period of soil preparation.

Namibia is a very dry country and cannot support full-year cultivation for a farm dependent on

rainwater. The government has increased its investments in building dams to support agricultural projects and store water, so that has long-term potential.

In the near term, adequate rainfall is a continual problem. We frequently experience droughts whereby the country receives minimal rainfall. Timing becomes very important to ensure that the whole harvest is not lost.

**Q:** What can other members of the YALI Network learn from the way this agricultural enterprise has grown?

**Kalipi:** If there is anything I learnt from this venture, you don't have to wait for perfect conditions to start something. My family started this project as a small subsistence farm to supplement our daily needs. We faced a big challenge to clear this piece of land — given minimum resources we had at our disposal — and turn it into a productive farming unit.

Today, we are producing enough food for the family, a surplus to sell and food to distribute to the people who help us on the farm. Our ideal is to get an irrigation system and set up greenhouses to start growing crops throughout the year.

**Q:** What are some of the obstacles your group contends with?

**Kalipi:** There are several:

- Soil degradation. We have to continually put fertilizer on the soil to increase crop yield.
- Erratic rainfall.
- Some years, our fields are attacked by outbreak of insects and birds that destroy the crops.
- Lack of modern technology and skills to transform the current farming methodology to modern and efficient methods and systems.

Rachel Kalipi says her family has worked this plot in Namibia for 25 years, though the land has lain fallow for several seasons because of inadequate rainfall. The latest improvement on the land is to enclose it with fencing to protect the crops from animals. The next improvement Rachel and the family plan is to provide some form of irrigation to a section of the land so vegetables can be raised year-round.

In a related story, a family farm operation in the U.S. state of Wisconsin employed some nontraditional methods to scale their farm into a larger commercial operation, and they [shared their story](#) with the YALI Network.

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## [Family Farming Matters](#)

*“Joining the YALI Network helped me access online courses. And discussions by members give me a vista of ideas and actions for social entrepreneurship in Africa.”*

— Ariel Djomakon

Ariel Djomakon, a blogger and entrepreneur from Cotonou, Benin, believes that “family farming matters.” This YALI Network member wants to convince other young Africans he’s right.

In 2014, Djomakon and some friends created the blog “[Let’s Be a Farmer](#),” encouraging African youth to learn more about farming. “The goal is to enhance the image of the African farmer whose daily job is about feeding others, but who happens to be the poorest and least recognized in our societies,” he writes in his blog.

“To do that, we wanted to create a Web-based community platform which would help connect, virtually and physically, two different social groups — farming communities and aspiring young entrepreneurs. ... It would also help farmer organizations to promote their daily work and to share their challenges and innovations,” Djomakon says. Establishing a line of communication between these two groups also “will provide youth with useful tools that may allow them to explore job opportunities in the agri-rural sector,” the blogger writes.

Let’s Be a Farmer also promotes agricultural entrepreneurship and the empowerment of rural women, Djomakon says.

To help youth learn to appreciate family farmers, Let’s Be a Farmer recruited 120 nonfarm Beninese youth to go to rural areas and visit with men and women farmers, ranchers and agriprocessors. The farmers taught the youth different agricultural production techniques, then had them try their hands at ploughing, weeding, milking cows and even preparing akassa, a fermented maize dough.

Ariel Djomakon



The training, which Djomakon says had the support of the U.S. Embassy in Cotonou and several local youth-education nonprofit organizations, ended with a short instructional course on agricultural entrepreneurship.

Djomakon says he and his peers are working to scale up the project and offer youth practical training in agrirural entrepreneurship and resources to help them launch rural enterprises. So far, he says the blog has hundreds of regular readers from 80 countries.

He says agriculture and rural services “offer the best opportunities to move out of poverty and build satisfying lives” for young Africans.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which designated 2014 as the International Year of Family Farming, family and small-scale farms are important because they do these things:

- Contribute to global food security.
- Preserve traditional food products while contributing to a balanced diet.

- Safeguard the world's agro-biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources.
- Boost local economies.

A graduate in international relations from the University of Paris-Sud, Djomakon worked four years as head of sustainable agriculture at the local nonprofit YPA Development, or Youth Partnership and Agricultural Development. He then co-founded RurAg Services, a group venture that delivers services to and invests in rural areas, with the goal of connecting farming communities with "aspiring young agri-rural entrepreneurs."

"Joining the YALI Network helped me [access online courses](#). And discussions by members give me a vista of ideas and actions for social entrepreneurship in Africa," he says.

The Let's Be a Farmer blog echoes recommendations from other knowledgeable people in African agriculture about the opportunities available in the future of agriculture. Business expansion expert Madison Ayer of Honey Care Africa held a recent [Facebook chat](#) with the YALI Network to explain the promising business opportunities that agricultural enterprises can offer.

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## **Benin Gardeners Tap Land and Water to Create a Small Business**

*YALI has "opened me to a way to dream. ... With YALI I'm living again, hopeful and ever determined."*

— Benin gardener Gabin Covo

When YALI Network member Gabin Covo moved from the village of Samionta to the city of Bohicon in Benin in 2012, "it was not possible to farm due to the lack of water resources," he says. Then "one day, a friend informed me about a fountain flowing freely in another village about 24 kilometers from Bohicon. Excited, we rushed there to see whether it were possible to install a garden nearby. To our great surprise, we were granted a plot" by local officials.

The 33-year-old and two older friends started to turn the 1,200-square-meter plot into a thriving garden. They formed seedbeds, then bought two water pipes. They connected one end of a narrow pipe to the fountain faucet and joined the other end to a wider pipe. The combination reached their plot, and they installed taps to which they connected garden hoses to carry water directly to the plants. Finally, they buried the pipes in shallow soil to protect them from rust and breakage.

Once they could bring water to the seedbeds, they planted eggplant, known locally as gboma, cucumbers, pawpaw and peppers. "Our choice of products went to local vegetables [that are] easy to cultivate and easy to sell," he says.

Gabin Covo stands  near the garden he and friends brought to life by piping water to it.

Overall, the garden materials and piping cost \$150, which they borrowed from friends. “A one-time investment,” Covo says. The new gardeners have been able to pay back half of the loan and expect to pay off the rest after their second harvest.

The pipes also have benefited plants outside the garden. “Within some weeks, the big bush near the fountain became green and flourishing, to the great surprise of the villagers,” he says.

About three months after starting the garden, Covo and his friends were selling their crops in Bohicon and making money. Villagers also come directly to the garden to buy their food. “That is how we are enjoying a good experience, by raising a small business in a region where water resources are limited,” he says.

The friends also learned that gardening for profit has its challenges. “The distance between the village and the city, for instance,” Govo notes, is an obstacle to transporting their product to market. But they knew that was a circumstance they needed to accept.

The success of the first garden plot provided a springboard to expansion. Town officials granted the friends a second plot, doubling the size of the land they could cultivate. To diversify their product line, they are digging ponds so they can raise fish. They want to grow moringa oleifera, “a vegetable well-known for its virtues as food complement,” Covo notes.

“I don’t own land, but I know how to create riches with it,” Covo says. “For fellows that are considering agriculture as a career, to succeed you need to make sure you have water steadily. This is the most important resource.”

“You also need to study your environment to prevent any attack that will affect your production,” he says. He recommends studying the soil’s health to determine the best crops to plant and knowing which insects and diseases may be present in the soil or in the area to know how to protect crops from them.

Covo’s experience of starting small, reinvesting and understanding supply needs follows the advice of a business expansion expert who held a recent [Facebook chat](#) with the YALI Network. Madison Ayer of Honey Care Africa offers a step-by-step plan on how small growers can transform a subsistence farm into a commercial business.

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