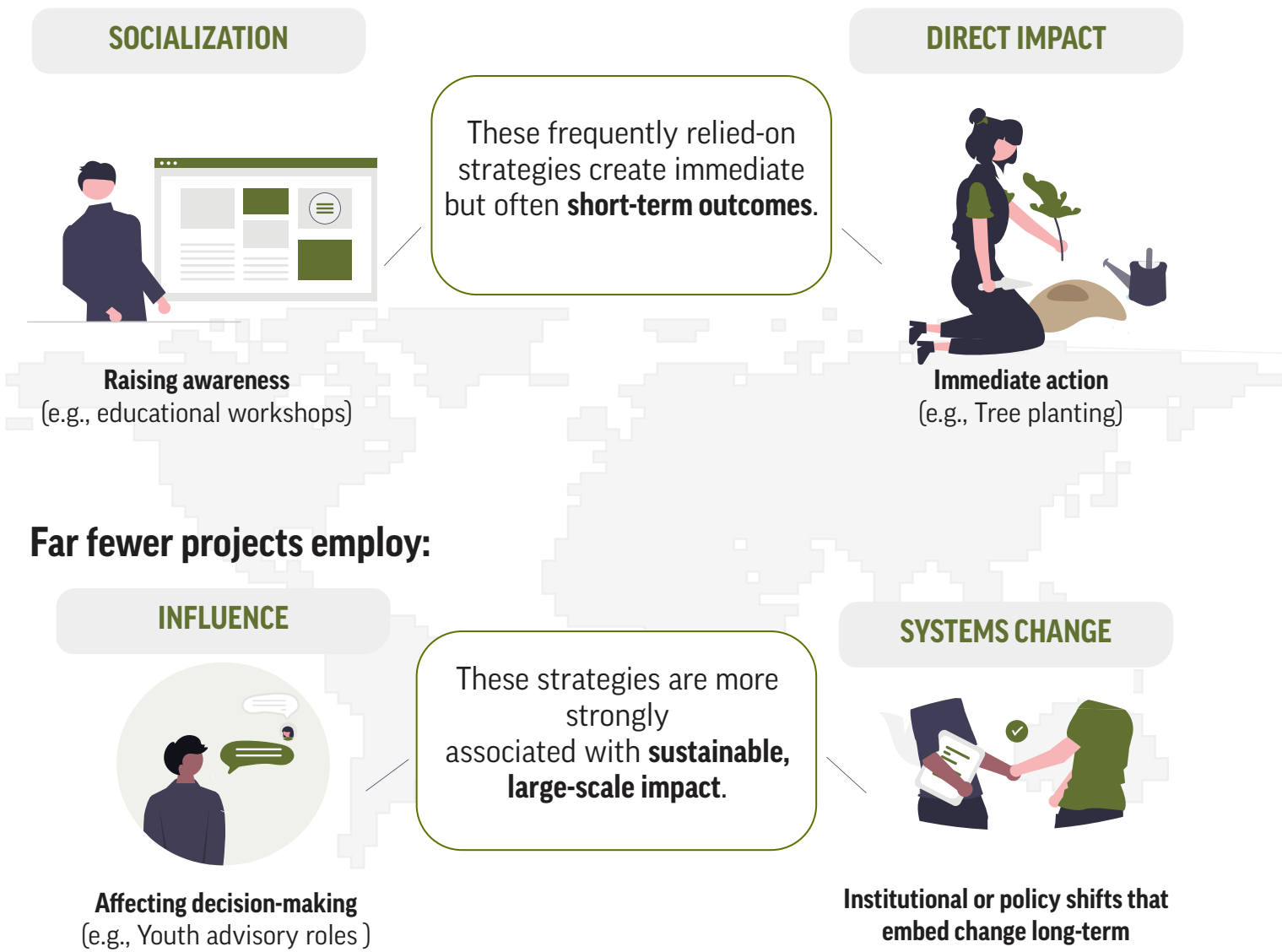## BEYOND MEASURING SKILLS:
HOW CAN YOUTH SERVICE PROGRAMS MEASURE SOCIAL IMPACT ?

Young people consistently express a desire to make a meaningful, lasting difference. They want their service to create change beyond skill-building, improving communities and environments for future generations. Yet youth programs often measure confidence, leadership, and skills over real social or environmental impact, leaving young people viewed as beneficiaries rather than agents of change.
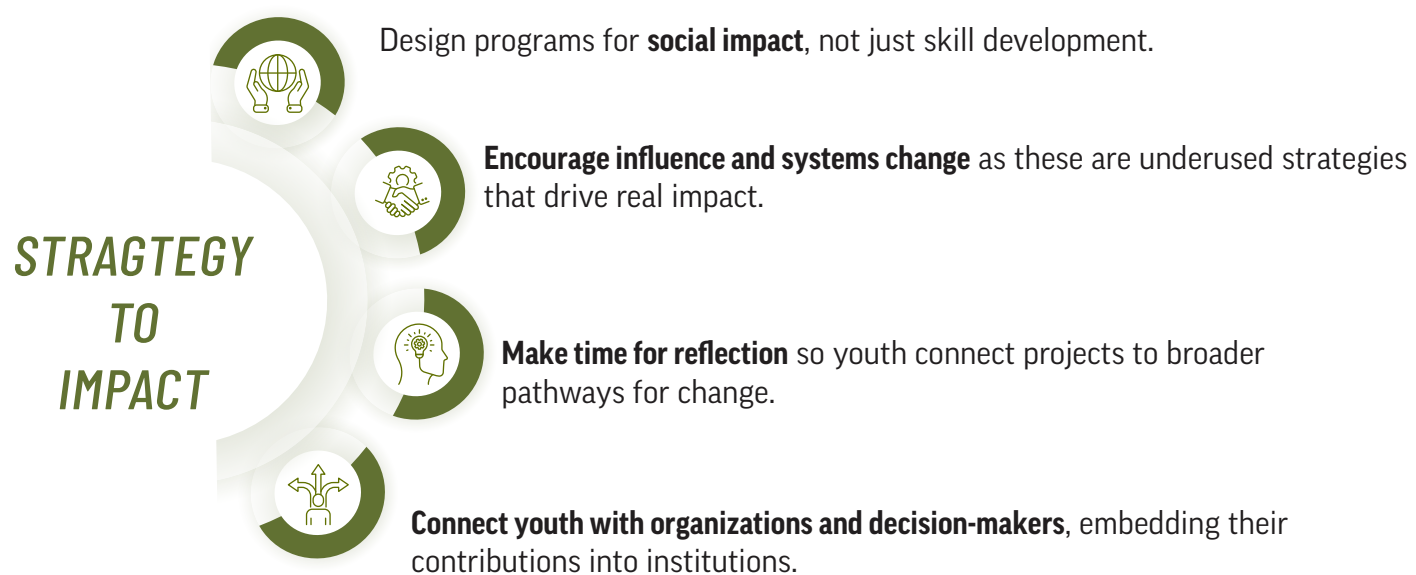
ARE YOUTH SERVICE PROGRAMS MEASURING THE RIGHT OUTCOMES?

Our research shows youth projects frequently rely on:

SOCIALIZATION

These frequently relied-on strategies create immediate but often **short-term outcomes**.

Raising awareness
(e.g., educational workshops)

DIRECT IMPACT

Immediate action
(e.g., Tree planting)

Far fewer projects employ:

INFLUENCE

These strategies are more strongly associated with **sustainable, large-scale impact**.

Affecting decision-making
(e.g., Youth advisory roles)

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Institutional or policy shifts that embed change long-term

HOW CAN WE MAKE THE SHIFT?

To better align with young people's aspirations and to maximize program outcomes:

STRAGTEGY TO IMPACT

Design programs for **social impact**, not just skill development.

Encourage influence and systems change as these are underused strategies that drive real impact.

Make time for reflection so youth connect projects to broader pathways for change.

Connect youth with organizations and decision-makers, embedding their contributions into institutions.

By helping youth move beyond awareness to sustained action, youth programs create lasting community and ecosystem benefits, recognizing young people as active agents of change.

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO | YOUTH & INNOVATION PROJECT