

# WORKING BETTER TOGETHER

## Recommendations for Strengthening Partnerships between Donors and Youth Civil Society

In consultation with 7 donors and 17 youth civil society organisations (CSOs) and through an extensive literature review, the Development Alternative found that collaborative, trusted and open partnerships between donors and youth CSOs can accelerate the power shift and unleash youth-led change. These practical recommendations for donors and youth CSOs aim to provide actionable steps to amplify youth leadership in development and create stronger partnerships that better serve communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS.

### • Foster and fund collaborations between youth CSOs:

Collaboration and connection between youth CSOs is highly valued and rewarding, but cannot be pursued enough because funding ecosystems are rarely supportive of investments for building relationships and exploring new partnerships. But donors working with a wide range of youth-led organisations have a unique opportunity to bring together different partners from across the world by convening learning events or skills sharing workshops. Fostering better and more innovative collaborations between youth CSOs is an emerging area of work that needs to be better researched, explored and funded.

### • Support youth CSOs to become independent from donor funding:

There is clear interest among youth CSOs to explore alternative strategies to fund and deliver their work, yet most have not progressed in this direction because of lack of skills, resources, experience, confidence and/or over-reliance on donor funding. Youth CSOs should be supported to test and create new business development models that better leverage their strengths, are context specific and can deliver more sustainability and financial independence.

### • Strengthen relationships with youth grantees:

Invest time to learn about the visions, aspirations and challenges of the young people funded through donor programmes; create space for mutual learning, rather than one-directional support, which in the long term will strengthen the relationship and ultimately the outcomes from any programme designed to support the work of youth CSOs. By hiring young people to manage youth-focused grants, donors might find it easier to build more open dialogues with partners. This said, being a young person does not automatically make you an ally with youth-led groups: ensure that those managing relationships with grantees are genuine allies to youth civil society.

### • Prioritise responsive and caring communications:

The quality of communication is an important consideration when engaging with youth CSO partners. If donors do not have the capacity to maintain responsive and caring communication with youth grantee partners, consider using an intermediary, such as a youth-led organisation, to manage communications and the relationships more closely.

### • Trust that youth CSOs are experts on their own realities:

Although youth CSOs value the opportunity to strengthen their capacities, and resources should be integrated into funding mechanisms to address capacity gaps, it is important to trust that young people are experts on their own realities, and therefore know best what skills and type of training they need and where to get it from. Donors should be committed in supporting youth CSOs to maintain their independence and autonomy, and encourage youth CSOs to see themselves as credible and trustworthy partners.

### • Localise your funding agenda through more flexibility:

Ensure that specific grants are accessible to local youth CSOs, for example by accounting for different levels of administrative capacity. To do this, donors might want to partner with sub-granting bodies which ease the procurement burden and make it possible to fund youth CSOs that are unregistered or with low administrative capacity. Localisation can also get undermined by the presence of country offices of international non-government organisations (NGO), which often make the funding demand more competitive for smaller youth CSOs and grassroots.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH CSOS.

## • Invest in and fairly compensate youth expertise:

It is important to fairly compensate and value the knowledge and expertise of the young people engaged in programmes. It is a common practice for international organisations to invite young people to programmes and 'pick their brains' under the banner of 'youth participation', without adequately recognising their time and expertise.

## • Gain visibility by applying for opportunities:

Submitting an application is a way to get visibility and start a relationship with a donor, even if the grant is not awarded. It can be helpful for youth CSOs to start applying for small funds that can be easier to manage, which generate important experience for accessing and coordinating larger funds in the future. Youth CSOs should invest in building relationships and support networks, which can strengthen their capacities to navigate funding ecosystems, access new ideas and formulate creative strategies to deliver and sustain their work.

## • Don't be afraid to explore different connections and partnerships:

Explore connections with young entrepreneurs and youth-led social start-ups, which despite not identifying as youth CSOs, they are likely to have different experiences and approaches to offer to youth CSOs seeking new delivery practices, and independent and sustainable funding.

## • Create new and innovative ways of working that better serve your organisation's needs:

To harness the potential for change and innovation, youth CSOs should consider discarding traditional organisational structures (typically seen in larger NGOs) and instead adopt new and different leadership styles, strategies and communications tools that give greater flexibility, can be tailored to their specific contexts and accelerate processes like innovation.

## • Be upfront about your strengths, challenges and opportunities:

Be open and honest about ideas, priorities and concerns with donors and other partners. Being clear and specific about the types of support youth CSOs need and the partnerships they would like to establish creates both more meaningful and effective collaboration, and leads to better outcomes. Despite the power dynamics in place, youth CSOs will benefit from trusting that they are experts on their own reality, remaining open about their challenges and also opportunities to jointly create solutions. To this end, youth CSOs would benefit from strengthening capacities and approaches, for example in storytelling, to clearly and powerfully tell their own story.

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**The Development Alternative** aims to radically shift how development works by putting young people first and supporting them to unleash their individual and collective power to make real, sustainable changes. The Development Alternative convenes the Youth Collective, a space that brings together youth-led and youth-serving civil society organisations to co-create tools that address common challenges, like resourcing, leadership, coordination and negative perceptions of young people.

In this space, development partners and donors will be connected to the Youth Collective members and together create joined-up approach to tackling big development challenges.

You can find out more or join the Youth Collective at:  
[www.youth-collective.org](http://www.youth-collective.org)

