

## CHALLENGE PAPER

# Creating a better resourced, more equitable and sustainable future for youth-led change

### Introduction

The Unlock the Future coalition brings together the world's most far-reaching youth-focused and youth-led organizations and their partners to:

- Celebrate and champion a platform for diverse young people – with a focus on under-represented groups – to explore, create, lead, and participate in processes most formative to their futures.
- Increase representation for countries with young populations and parts of the world where most future generations will live.
- Cooperate based on pragmatic and practical goals – designed for and by young people – which lead to credible and tangible results.
- Increase accountability to young people at all levels, from the grassroots to the global.

In the [Unlock Declaration](#), launched during the high-level week of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, partners “committed to working collectively to increase funding for child, youth-led, and youth-focused networks and movements and working with funders to make financing more strategic, inclusive, and accessible.”

This challenge paper explores the opportunity to create positive systemic change in how youth civil society and activism are supported and resourced. ***It proposes ten actions that donors can take to more effectively resource young people around the world.*** These recommendations include funding strategies and trusting young people with funding decisions, taking localization seriously and communicating transparently, being flexible in how donors fund and respecting independence, and supporting collaboration between the youth organizations donors support and increasing visibility. Finally, young people must be compensated for their support and advice.

The challenge paper concludes with an ***invitation for funders and partners to take this conversation forward, through a debate with three themes:*** 1) agreeing strategies for improving the quantity, quality, and accessibility of financing for young changemakers; 2) strengthening models that make it easier for funders to reach young changemakers in countries and communities across the world; and 3) developing better ways of including young people as co-creators and decision-makers.

## The Challenge

Youth-led civil society organizations mobilize and connect vast networks of young people who lead change around the world, while agile and smaller groups are based at the heart of communities, closest to the problems and able to design locally-guided solutions.

These networks of young people can help deliver the transformation that we need to achieve sustainable development. However, recent research shows that youth civil society is not thriving - and in many cases not surviving - and one of the biggest challenges facing youth civil society is resourcing.

Funding is most needed in places where the majority of young people live, and for young women and other groups who have historically been excluded. According to the [State of Youth Civil Society](#), much of the funding available has been short-term, restrictive, and inconsistent. The pandemic has made this worse, with 71% of organizations reporting a decrease in income and many saying that donors are actively cutting their grants.

Despite [overwhelming evidence](#) of the influence and impact of feminist movements, young women are especially likely to be starved of resources. The [Young Feminist Manifesto](#) found this led to a cycle of burnout, disengagement, and demotivation, and perpetuated inequality by privileging those who have access to resources, excluding the most marginalized young women, and disadvantaging those who are younger than 18 years old.

Young people do not want to be passive recipients of funding, and are increasingly aware of the [power imbalances](#) that can lead to movement capture. They want to play an active role in shaping financing strategies and making funding decisions. And they are also calling on funders to support their [care and protection](#), especially in emergencies that significantly increase the risks they face.

Some of the frequently cited challenges include:

- Complicated and lengthy application processes that do not acknowledge different language abilities or online access.
- Selection processes that bring youth organizations and groups into competition rather than cooperation.
- Feeling powerless and frustrated when applying to open calls and receiving no feedback.
- Even when applications are successful, extensive paperwork and time consuming reporting requirements take already limited capacity away from delivering projects.
- Ignoring the legal and physical risks a youth group could potentially encounter when trying to register as a non-profit organization.
- Hierarchical relationships with donors who set the agenda, where the relationship and communication is limited to technical and administrative coordination.

## Taking Action

Donors have an opportunity to create meaningful relationships with youth organizations and movements for them to be better resourced, and achieve a more equitable and sustainable future for youth-led change by 2030. Providing financial resources that allow youth organizations and groups to be more agile and creative, and trusting young people to lead, will ultimately deliver better development outcomes.

Drawing on a breadth of research, resources, and recommendations (listed in [Annex 1](#)), we propose ten actions that donors can take to more effectively resource young people around the world. We also spotlight some of the growing number of positive donor-driven initiatives that are transforming financing for young people.

- 1. Start with values and principles** - Establishing values and principles can lay important foundations for a more open, collaborative, and equitable relationship between donors and grantees from the beginning. Values help build trust in the funding process and establish more transparent partnerships.



*The [FRIDA Fund](#) recognizes inclusivity as a core value, which gets integrated across their practices, for example translating their application forms into seven languages.*

- 2. Co-create funding strategies** - Young people are experts on their own realities. When designing grants to resource youth action, this creates an important opportunity to consider co-creating with the groups of young people who you want to fund. Participatory grantmaking processes can help sense-check applicants are truly doing the best work on the ground, and not just being the best at writing a funding proposal. Consider hiring staff that have experience supporting meaningful youth participation who can help establish a process to identify and include young people with lived experiences in the design and roll out of the grant.



*The [Youth Action Lab](#) co-design process recruited a team of nine diverse grassroots activists under 30 from the global south to create a prototype that is supporting activists who share the same identity and environmental challenges.*

- 3. Trust young people** - Many young grantees have reported their experiences with inequitable partnerships and systemic inequalities, feeling doubted for no reason other than the fact that they are young. When young people are trusted to lead and a donor is prepared to hand over the decision making power towards how money should be spent to those closest to the issues at hand, the results will be better for young people and results will be more impactful.



*The [National Lottery Community Fund](#) engages young people in their Lead Advisory Group who have the power to decide what grants are most needed by young people in the UK, with the aim of steering significant and positive change in communities.*

- 4. Take localization seriously** - investing directly in locally youth-led initiatives is the best way to ensure relevance, legitimacy, ownership and durability of any solution. If donors want funding

to go directly to these initiatives, rather than through intermediaries, they need to design grants that are more accessible. Targeted outreach or seeking support from sub-granting bodies can help to ease procurement burdens, making it easier to effectively access and resource unregistered or smaller youth organizations. Offering funding to youth organizations to develop proposals can ensure accessibility to opportunities.



*The Global Youth Mobilization was created by the world's largest global youth organizations, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Foundation to finance youth-led solutions and youth engagement programs across the world. It has shown that, even in a global emergency, it is possible to get money directly to young people, informal groups and youth-led and focused organizations.*

- 5. Communicate clearly** - Young people often highlight how much the quality and transparency of communication matters to them in fostering strong and equitable relationships with their donors. Avoiding jargon, creating simple guidance on terminologies, or fostering a safe space for young people to ask questions will ensure that channels of communication are open and consistent.



*The Roddenberry Foundation participated in a [Donor Dialogue event](#) with more than 60 youth civil society organizations to talk about the Foundation's values based grants and processes, and to answer questions from youth participants interested in securing funding from them in the future.*

- 6. Respect independence** - Donors must support youth organizations to maintain their independence, agency, and autonomy. Donors should avoid grantmaking practices that force youth civil society to formalize - for example by funding only registered groups - or pursue donor priorities that lack strategic relevance to their communities or movements. Instead, donors could provide support for young people to test and create innovative business models that better leverage their strengths, are context specific, and can deliver financial independence in the long-term.



*The [Youth Innovation Fund](#) by the World Bank Group provides small grants to young staff members to design, implement, and evaluate development projects in line with WBG priority areas.*

- 7. Be flexible** - We live in unpredictable times where communities are exposed to multiple threats and crises. Donors should allow room for grantees to respond to uncertain environments, their changing responsibilities as they transition through life or their changing community needs. Listening to communities, adapting, and re-strategizing will ultimately lead to better impacts. Often this will mean taking greater risks and finding ways to balance them across a broad portfolio of investments.



*The [Global Fund for Children](#) launched a COVID-19 Emergency Response & Recovery Fund to issue immediate grants to community-based organizations and grantees to keep them safe. Similar efforts were made by the Global Resilience Fund.*

- 8. Support collaboration** - Create spaces and opportunities where young grantees can interact and learn together with peers, helping to strengthen their knowledge and skills. As a donor, investing time to learn about the visions, aspirations, and challenges of the young people funded through your grants will strengthen relationships and the outcomes from any program designed to support the work of youth organizations.



*[MamaCash](#) supports grantee-partners to obtain, improve, and retain the skills, knowledge, tools, equipment, and other resources needed to fulfil their missions. They provide information about funding opportunities and introductions to donors, and supporting activists in donor spaces; facilitating convenings amongst grantee-partners to network and strategize; and coordinating issue-specific projects with cohorts of self-selected partners.*

- 9. Increase visibility** - The reach and networks donors can leverage to promote the work of their youth grantees through social media and websites can have an incredible impact in raising the profile, legitimacy, and visibility of a youth organization, and potentially helping them to seek funding from other donors in the future and ensure better advocacy outcomes. Funders can also play an important role in helping young people get the platform they need at summits and other major global events, and in making sure their 'asks' are visible.



*The Gates Foundation regularly celebrates and promotes the youth organizations and initiatives it both currently and has previously funded through the [Goalkeeper Accelerators](#).*

- 10. Compensate young people** - Whenever an organization or institution seeks the expertise or advice from young people - for example, in a steering group or advisory board - these young people should receive compensation for their contributions. This should include a financial contribution towards their time, along with potential professional development opportunities to avoid an extractive process.



*[Maximising Benefits: A Recommended Framework for Volunteerism and Compensation of Young People](#) from Restless Development and CIVICUS provides practical considerations for how to compensate young people in different roles and collaborations.*

## Taking the Challenge Forward

Many funders are engaged in a debate about strategies for funding young people, [exploring](#) how to implement alternative funding models that are more flexible and agile and which reach geographies and types of groups that are often not covered by mainstream funding models.

To take this conversation forward, we propose three topics for further discussion between funders and partners.

**1. Explore strategies for improving the quantity, quality, and accessibility of financing for young changemakers.**

How can we provide young changemakers with resources that are commensurate with the scale of the challenges they are tackling? How can we implement best practice in providing young people with quality funding? How can we substantially increase the proportion of resources reaching countries where the majority of young people live? And increase financing for marginalized and excluded groups?

**2. Strengthen models that make it easier for funders to reach young changemakers in countries and communities across the world.**

What platforms can reach young changemakers in ways that are effective, cost-effective, and limit the risks that funders face? How can we resource unregistered youth organizations, networks or movements? Can platforms help partners deliver collective impact that adds significant value to individual grants?

**3. Develop better ways of including young people as co-creators and decision-makers.**

How can a diversity of young people be involved in co-creating funding strategies? What can we learn from models where young people play an active role in making funding decisions? How can young people be compensated for their expertise and advice?

This challenge paper has been developed by the Unlock the Future [Action Group](#) on Resourcing Youth Action, which is coordinated by [Restless Development](#) and the [CIVICUS Youth Action Team](#). For further information please contact: [freya@restlessdevelopment.org](mailto:freya@restlessdevelopment.org) and [elisa.novoa@civicus.org](mailto:elisa.novoa@civicus.org)

## ANNEX 1

### Relevant Resources and Initiatives

1. [Maximising Benefits: A Recommended Framework for Volunteerism and Compensation of Young People](#) (Restless Development and CIVICUS)
2. [Resourcing Youth-Led Groups and Movements - A Reflective Playbook for Donors and Youth Organisers](#) (CIVICUS)
3. [Funders' Toolkit for Child and Youth Participation](#) (Elevate Children Funders Group)
4. [We Trust You\(th\) Recommended Actions](#)
5. [Making Funding Work for Young People](#) (Restless Development)
6. [Resourcing Youth-Led Groups and Movements: Landscape and Trends Analysis](#) (CIVICUS)
7. [Powering Change: Young People Leading the COVID-19 Response and Recovery – Interim Report](#) (Global Youth Mobilization)
8. [Moving More Money to the Drivers of Change: How bilateral and multilateral funders can resource feminist movements](#) (AWID and Mama Cash)