

**RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT**

Building Back Differently

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To survive and thrive amid shrinking aid, youth-led organisations must embrace alternatives that reflect their values and realities.



Introduction

Youth civil society is a vital driver of social transformation, gender justice, climate action, sexual and reproductive health, education, mental health, civic participation, and economic empowerment. Youth-led organisations play a crucial role in reaching underserved communities, including women and girls, rural populations, and young people themselves. Yet, a shrinking and increasingly politicised global aid landscape has pushed youth-led civil society to the margins.

Official Development Assistance (ODA) cuts from traditional donors like the UK, US, Germany, and the Netherlands have disproportionately affected youth-led organisations in the Majority World, particularly in sectors where they are most active. In the UK alone, funding for gender and adolescent programming was reduced by 33% far higher than the overall 21% aid budget cut (ODI Global, 2023), undermining sectors such as education, sexual and reproductive health, and humanitarian support where youth-led groups are most active. The Netherlands has agreed to structural development-aid cuts of €2.4 billion annually from 2027 while Germany's 2025 draft budget further reduces ODA-relevant envelopes, including a €941 million cut to BMZ (-8% vs 2024) and a €743 million cut to the Foreign Office (AA, -11%) (OECD, 2023; Devonald et al, 2023; Bundesregierung, 2024).

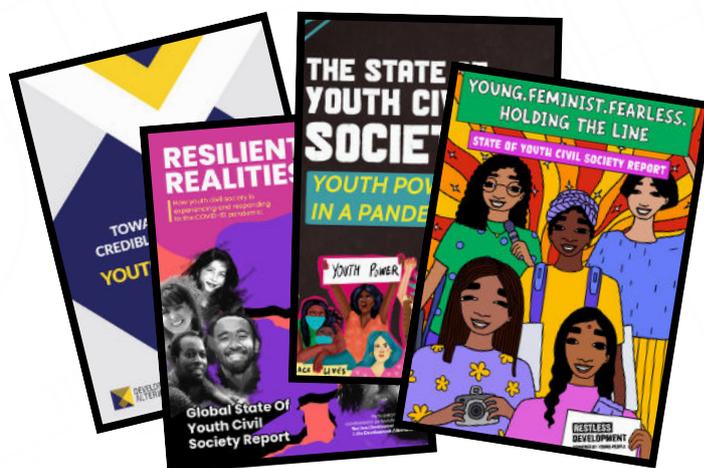
Traditional donor models, characterised by short-term, restricted, and top-down funding, often undermine local ownership. Meanwhile, youth movements have demonstrated extraordinary agility and impact, especially during COVID-19, often without institutional support. In Sierra Leone, youth leaders reached over 247,000 people through door-to-door COVID-19 awareness campaigns while in Tanzania, young volunteers pivoted to serve health needs in inventive ways such as establishment of small enterprises to manufacture and distribute face masks. In Zimbabwe, young people raised their hands through door-to-door campaigns, raising awareness about COVID-19 prevention and helping communities contain its spread (Restless Development, 2020).

Building back differently calls for a shift from compliance-driven funding to trust-based, decentralised, and sustainable resourcing models such as community philanthropy, mutual aid, participatory grantmaking, and social enterprise.

This chapter explores how youth civil society can be sustainably resourced not just to survive funding contractions but to thrive, centring equity, autonomy, and collective power.

The Human Cost: How Youth Civil Society Is Disproportionately Impacted by Aid Cuts

Youth-led organisations, especially those working in SRHR, civic engagement, gender justice, and climate action, often operate at the fringes of the formal funding ecosystem. They are agile, embedded in communities, and responsive to context. But their position as “non-traditional actors” renders them especially vulnerable to funding volatility.



Restless Development's State of Youth Civil Society reports (2019–2024) document a stark pattern: short-term, project-based grants are the norm; compliance and auditing processes are excessively burdensome; and the expertise of youth leaders is routinely undervalued in policy circles (Restless Development, 2023). In a 2022 survey of youth-led groups in 27 countries, over 70% had annual budgets under \$10,000 and cited funding insecurity as their top barrier to impact (Restless Development, 2023).

Cuts to ODA are not abstract – they ripple across the lives of young people in tangible ways. Reductions in youth-focused ODA have led to school closures, cuts to SRHR services, and reduced mental health support, especially for adolescent girls and LGBTQ+ youth (RC Publications Repository, 2024). In Zambia, these reductions have led to the closure of schools and the collapse of educational programs, depriving young people of their right to education. The United Nations reported that funding cuts forced schools in regions like Monze and Katete to close, leaving students without access to education and increasing the risk of early marriages and child labour (UN Zambia, 2025).

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services have also been severely impacted. The United States' withdrawal of funding for global health programs in early 2025 led to the suspension of family planning services, HIV prevention programs, and support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Zambia (TIKO, 2025). These cuts have left young people without essential healthcare, putting them at risk of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

Mental health services, already scarce, have been further diminished due to ODA cuts. In Zambia, the reduction in funding led to the closure of counselling centres and the loss of trained mental health professionals, leaving young people without the support they need to cope with trauma and stress (Global Mental Health Action Network, 2025).

CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, a leading youth-led organisation, is facing existential threats due to funding cuts. In 2024 and 2025, the world's largest ODA providers announced significant reductions in their aid budgets, severely impacting CHOICE's ability to operate. Without adequate funding, CHOICE is struggling to maintain its programs and advocacy efforts, jeopardising the future of youth-led movements globally (CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, 2025).

Youth without safety nets, especially those with disabilities, living in poverty, or in conflict-affected zones, are most at risk of violence, exploitation, and

and political radicalisation. In Zambia, the reduction in ODA led to the suspension of social protection programs and the withdrawal of humanitarian aid, leaving vulnerable youth without support and increasing their exposure to harm (SWP Berlin, 2025).

From Crisis to Opportunity: Reimagining the Funding Model

The contraction in aid can be viewed as a rupture but also a moment of reconstitution. It opens the door to fundamentally rethink the language, logic, and practice of funding youth civil society. Youth-led organisations interviewed expressed that traditional aid models are often very rigid and have requirements that grassroots organisations frequently struggle to meet, which puts youth-led organisations at a disadvantage. A representative from Dzuka Cholinga, a youth-led organisation in Lusaka, expressed:

“Traditional donor funding is very restrictive, and often we struggle to comply with the requirements, issues of previous audits by big, expensive firms that we cannot afford as well as restrictions on how funding should be spent with no flexibility make it difficult sometimes to conduct our community work effectively, it is difficult to adapt the funding to community needs.”

Restless Development's #FundYouthPower initiative argues that the aid system must be recast on four pillars: flexible funding, trust-based partnerships, intersectional inclusion, and youth-defined impact (Restless Development, 2024). These principles respond directly to the structural critiques raised by youth actors themselves and are grounded in practical, field-tested alternatives.

“The traditional aid system makes no room for trust. It often feels more like a performance than a partnership. With the collapse of ODA and how deeply it’s affected us, we urgently need a new way to fund and sustain the change we want to see in our communities.”

Open Net 4 All Zambia, Choma (2025)

With the growing momentum for aid localisation, calls to decolonise development, and the reality of a shrinking ODA landscape, youth-led organisations must rethink how they resource their work. The moment demands a bold shift away from dependency on traditional donor-driven models, and toward funding approaches that are sustainable, community-rooted, and driven by lived experience. Here’s how youth-led organisations can begin to build back differently:

1. Community Philanthropy

What it is:

Community philanthropy empowers local people to lead in solving local challenges by pooling their resources, time, knowledge, and social capital. It focuses on relationships, trust, and community-defined priorities rather than donor-led agendas.

Where it has worked:

The Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF) has provided unrestricted grants to grassroots organisations while embedding learning and mutual accountability. Their approach prioritises long-term partnership and capacity strengthening (ZGF, 2022). In Zambia’s Nyankanga community, ZGF partnered with Plan International Zambia to pilot a powerful shift in power: the reverse proposal model.

Rather than asking local organisations to respond to predefined calls for proposals, Plan and ZGF flipped the script, inviting communities to set the agenda and lead on project design. The Nyankanga-based CBO proposed a community-led solution to address early marriage and school dropout among adolescent girls. Plan

International responded to this “reverse call,” underwent community-led due diligence, and co-created the intervention with local actors.

Why it matters:

Reverse proposals challenge traditional donor power dynamics by putting communities in the driver’s seat. This model encourages local ownership, supports asset-based community development, and ensures that projects are not only relevant but sustainable. It builds a foundation of mutual trust and respect, where INGOs are accountable to communities, not just the other way around.

“Reverse proposals helped us stop chasing funding that didn’t fit. Now, we define what matters, and donors come alongside us.”

Nyankanga CBO Youth Leader

2. Mutual Aid

What it is:

Mutual aid is a practice where communities self-organise to meet their own needs through reciprocity and solidarity. Unlike charity, it is based on shared responsibility, care, and collective survival.

Where it has worked:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth in East Jerusalem formed emergency committees that distributed food, delivered medical supplies, and provided accurate information—all without external funding (AI-Monitor, 2021).

Why it matters:

Mutual aid promotes community care, reduces dependence on external donors, and challenges top-down models. It is agile and adaptable in crisis contexts.

3. Social Enterprise

What it is:

Social enterprises are mission-driven ventures that generate revenue while advancing a social or environmental cause. They combine entrepreneurial strategies with social impact goals.

Where it has worked:

BongoHive Zambia supports youth entrepreneurs to build tech-based solutions to local challenges. They offer business incubation, mentorship, and access to funding to youth-led startups (UNDP, 2023).

Why it matters:

Social enterprise offers a path to financial independence and helps youth organisations become less reliant on donor cycles. It also creates employment and drives innovation.

4. Participatory Grantmaking (PGM)

What it is:

PGM is a funding model where the people most affected by issues actively participate in decisions about where and how resources are allocated.

Where it has worked:

Restless Development is putting this model into practice in several initiatives, among them is the Young Gamechangers Fund in the UK, a £4.5 million initiative co-created with a youth steering group that gives young people aged 10–25 real decision-making power over branding, strategy, and grant distribution (Co-op Foundation & Restless Development, 2023–2025).

In Zambia, participatory principles have been embedded in the Localised Strategy 2022–2030, which strengthens youth leadership and community accountability through the “Youth Collective.” This ensures that young Zambians are not just consulted but actively shape priorities, funding decisions, and the implementation of development solutions in their own communities (Restless Development Zambia, 2023).

Why it matters:

PGM fosters trust, relevance, and community ownership. It addresses power imbalances in philanthropy and makes youth more than just beneficiaries.

A compelling example is the participatory grantmaking model tested by Plan International in 2022. Young activists across 11 countries, including Kenya and Colombia, were given decision-making power to allocate funds towards their community-led priorities. Youth-led groups reported feeling more trusted and said the process strengthened their leadership and sustainability (Plan International, 2023).

Redefining Accountability and Impact

Traditional metrics like KPIs and logframes often fail to capture the depth of youth-led work. In contrast, youth-led accountability emphasises storytelling, relational metrics, and learning. In Tanzania, young feminists created participatory scorecards to track SRHR service delivery and hold officials accountable for tools that were both evaluative and transformative (Restless Development, 2023).

What Young People Need to Know...

1. Why Build Back Differently?

To survive and thrive amid shrinking aid, youth-led organisations must embrace alternatives that reflect their values and realities. Asking difficult questions, such as Why do we need to build back differently? Who are we building for? And what exactly are we building? Change starts with understanding what hasn't worked and envisioning new pathways.

2. What Works for You?

There is no universal solution. Organisations should evaluate what aligns with their mission, context, and community's strengths. For some, a single model might work, but others may require a hybrid of multiple models that may offer the best fit.

3. What Are the Legal Implications?

Understanding national laws around compliance, registration, and taxation is crucial. This ensures resilience and legality, especially when implementing hybrid models that include social enterprises. It also provides a unique opportunity for advocacy towards reform of national laws around compliance.

Conclusion: Building Our Own Tables

We are no longer asking for inclusion in systems that exclude us. Youth civil society is already building new tables rooted in equity, care, and community power.

Building back differently means:

1. Centring trust and relationships over reports
2. Embracing sustainability over survival
3. Choosing community-defined impact over donor-defined metrics

This is our opportunity to reimagine what funding justice looks like from the ground up.