YOUTH ACTION FOR 2025:

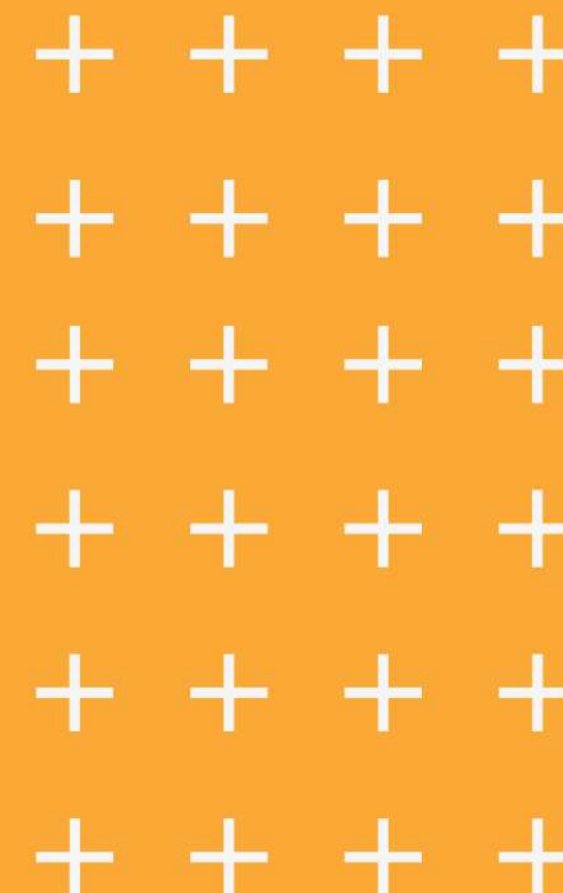## SHAPING PRIORITIES AND FOSTERING DEVELOPMENT

WHITE PAPER

Presented by:

Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations Unit, LEAP Africa

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this white paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of LEAP Africa or or any affiliated institutions of the contributors acknowledged below. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and proper attribution of all sources, the authors accept full responsibility for any errors or omissions and welcome any corrections.

Acknowledgments

Foreword

Africa stands at a defining moment! As all eyes look towards the continent for its great potential to drive solutions that could have a reverberating impact across the world, there has never been a more critical time! One that demands bold, coordinated, multi-dimensional action.

The youth bulge is not a distant challenge or a 'future' opportunity but an immediate and unarguably powerful force for transformation. This white paper serves as both a call to action and a strategic roadmap, urging funders, policymakers, governments, private sector leaders, and youth-led organisations to rethink how we finance, equip, and partner with young Africans in shaping the continent's future.

At LEAP Africa, we are committed to more than dialogue for dialogue's sake; we seek to drive meaningful change. Through the Development Dialogues, we are committed to elevating youth agency and voices, challenging conventional approaches, and fostering the radical collaboration necessary for progress.

This discourse was candid and objective, highlighting the volatility of traditional funding streams, the limitations of existing models, and the critical shift required, from inclusion by invitation to leadership by design.

The strategies outlined in this paper aim to go beyond concepts and offer feasible and actionable solutions. Unlocking Africa's potential requires not just good intentions but sustainable funding mechanisms, future-oriented skills development, and authentic participation.

To funders and development partners: transactional grants must give way to transformational partnerships.

To policymakers and governments: Africa's youth are not a demographic statistic; they are the architects of renewal.

To youth-led organisations: continue building, innovating, and leading remembering that you are the foundation.

To academia, private sector leaders, and diaspora communities: it is time to engage more deliberately and co-create this future.

This paper presents evidence-based, pragmatic, and future-ready approaches. More importantly, it signals a shift in the ecosystem of youth development. One grounded in shared accountability innovative funding models, inclusive networks, and a commitment to sustainability. We invite you not only to read but to act. In partnership and purpose

Diana Amabelle Nwakanma

Table Of Contents

Executive Summary

This white paper synthesizes key insights and strategic priorities emerging from the **Development Dialogue webinar session "Youth Action for 2025: Shaping Priorities and Fostering Development."** The dialogue brought together over 40 stakeholders, including youth leaders, civil society organizations, funders, and development practitioners, to address critical challenges and opportunities for youth-driven development in Africa.

Drawing on both the rich dialogue and desk research, this paper outlines alternative funding mechanisms, critical skill requirements for youth in 2025, frameworks for meaningful youth participation, and pathways to sustainable development initiatives against the backdrop of shifting economic realities and funding landscapes, particularly the recent suspension of USAID funding to many African nations. It presents actionable recommendations for policymakers, youth organizations, funders, and young people themselves

Introduction

1.1 Context

The African development landscape is experiencing significant transformation in its approach to sustainable growth. Traditional funding models are evolving from donor- dependent models to more diverse financing mechanisms, digital technologies are reshaping skill requirements, and youth demographics continue to grow rapidly across the continent. With approximately 60% of Africa's population under the age of 25,[1] the imperative for authentic youth inclusion in development processes has never been more urgent.

The suspension of USAID funding globally has significantly impacted several African countries including Nigeria. Uganda, South Africa, Ethiopia, creating immediate challenges for development initiatives [2] but also presenting an opportunity to reimagine funding structures and establish more sustainable, locally-driven approaches to youth development.

Therefore, this white paper aims to provide actionable recommendations for all stakeholder groups by:

● Presenting comprehensive strategies for youth-led organizations to navigate contemporary funding challenges

● Outlining priority skill domains and competencies required for youth effectiveness in 2025 and beyond

● Establishing frameworks for authentic youth inclusion in governance and decision-making

● Articulating pathways to transnational youth solidarity and collaboration

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[1] https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2020-08/international-youth-day-research-brief.pdf
[2] https://www.coface.com/news-economy-and-insights/sub-saharan-africa-the-first-victim-of-the-usaid-reduction

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02

Alternative Funding Models For Youth Development

2.1 Challenges in the Current Funding Landscape

The development financing terrain for youth organizations is undergoing seismic shifts. The recent suspension of USAID funding across several African nations served as both a wake-up call and a stress test, exposing critical vulnerabilities in the traditional donor-dependent model that many youth organizations have relied upon. This disruption, coupled with global economic shifts triggered by events such as the Ukraine crisis and broader financial volatility, has created an urgent need for funding diversification.

Data from regional and global studies paints a sobering picture. More than 75% of African NGOs depend on foreign aid to stay afloat.[3] This monoculture of funding has created a cascade of structural vulnerabilities that have resulted in program discontinuity, staff retention challenges, and mission drift as organizations adjust their priorities in response to shrinking donor support.

For instance, a report by Kenyan civil society groups indicates that at least 150 clinics were forced to close due to US aid cuts, resulting in the loss of over 35,000 health-related jobs.[4] The halt of USAID's Feed the Future programs has left communities in arid zones increasingly exposed to climate shocks, with crop failure expected to rise by 20% in 2025.[5]

These aren't just operational hiccups, they are existential threats to youth-led initiatives. However, one promising avenue lies in domestic resource mobilization, which harnesses indigenous assets and communities' intrinsic strengths.

2.2 Exploring Domestic Resource Mobilization Strategies and Alternative Models

Without the USAID, it has become imperative for African nonprofits to explore alternative funding sources to sustain their operations. Many organizations across the continent are now exploring domestic resource mobilization strategies that leverage untapped local assets and capitalize on emerging economic frameworks. Below is a dive into these funding alternatives, not as silver bullets, but as potential inflection points as the continent explores alternative financial avenues for youth-led initiatives.

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[3] https://trialogueknowledgehub.co.za/how-african-ngos-grow/

[4] https://eastleighvoice.co.ke/trump%20usaid-us%20aid%20cuts-usaid/139749/us-aid-cuts-threaten-youth-development-gains-globally-study-warns

[5] https://climatechange.co.ke/how-the-fall-of-usaid-could-derail-africas-fight-against-climate-change/

2.2.1 Faith-Based Philanthropy

Faith-based philanthropy remains vastly underutilized despite its considerable potential. Estimates indicate that Nigeria's population is nearly evenly split between Christians and Muslims, with a small percentage adhering to other religions.[6] Religious institutions, therefore, command substantial social influence and financial resources. Engaging with established religious groups such as Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and Pentecostals, alongside strategic dialogues within Islamic charitable practices like Zakat and Sadaqah, offers structured pathways to mobilize funds toward youth development. The nature of these religious giving systems provides predictability that counterbalances the volatility of international donor cycles.

Organizations like Islamic Relief Worldwide [7] exemplify how Islamic charitable principles can be harnessed for development. They have implemented programs that utilize Zakat and Sadaqah to support humanitarian and development initiatives, including in Nigeria. Similarly, the Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN) mobilizes Christian communities for grassroots development, focusing on health, education, and economic empowerment.[8]

However, navigating this landscape requires sophisticated cultural intelligence. Religious funders often demonstrate distinctive funding preferences, favoring safer sectors such as health and education while exhibiting reluctance towards governance reform or political accountability projects due to political and contextual sensitivities. Hence, success in this domain demands a tailored engagement strategy respectful of diverse faith traditions and alignment of programmatic objectives with faith-based values, ultimately transforming religious philanthropy from occasional resource into a cornerstone of sustainable youth development financing reservoir.

2.2.2 Private Philanthropy

Private philanthropy in Africa has evolved significantly beyond traditional charitable giving, emerging as a sophisticated ecosystem capable of driving transformative youth initiatives.[9] Following the strategic frameworks established by institutional pioneers like the MacArthur and Ford Foundations, alongside indigenous philanthropy exemplified by the Tony Elumelu Foundation, this sector increasingly operates at the intersection of social impact and sustainable development.

Image by Sudan Times

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[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria

[7] https://islamic-relief.org/

[8] https://crudan.org/about/

[9] https://www2.fundsforngos.org/articles/a-spotlight-on-local-philanthropy-the-untapped-potential-of-africandonors/#:~:text=Traditionally%2C%20philanthropy%20in%20Africa%20has,changes%20to%20foster%20sustainable%20development.

The distinctive advantage of private philanthropy lies in its operational flexibility and capacity for risk tolerance. Unlike government or multilateral funders constrained by bureaucratic processes, high-net-worth individuals and family foundations can rapidly deploy resources toward experimental approaches and innovative methodologies that might otherwise remain unfunded. This agility enables youth organizations to pilot cutting-edge interventions, scale successful models, and adapt to emerging challenges with unprecedented responsiveness.

Furthermore, sophisticated private philanthropy contributes far more than financial capital. Strategic partnerships with established philanthropic entities provide youth organizations with invaluable social capital, technical expertise, governance strengthening, and access to influential networks thereby creating multiplying effects that extend beyond financial contributions. By cultivating relationships with Africa's growing class of ultra-high-net-worth individuals, youth organizations can develop contextually appropriate funding models that align entrepreneurial vision with social transformation objectives.

2.2.3 Membership-Based Models

Structured membership programs can provide predictable income streams while building community ownership. Membership-based funding structures represent a powerful deviation from traditional donor-recipient dynamics, embedding financial sustainability within community ownership frameworks. By transitioning stakeholders from passive beneficiaries to invested members, organizations create predictable revenue streams while simultaneously strengthening program relevance and accountability mechanisms.

Tiered membership systems with differentiated contribution levels calibrated to economic capacity enable inclusive participation across socioeconomic segments while generating consistent operational funding. Beyond financial contributions, these models activate member skills, networks, and influence as organizational assets, creating multi-dimensional resource mobilization systems that enhance institutional resilience.

The psychological dimension of membership models offers particular strategic value. By fostering ownership psychology among participants, these structures fundamentally transform the relationship between youth organizations and their constituencies, replacing dependence with mutual investment. This reorientation catalyzes increased accountability, strengthens governance structures, and aligns organizational priorities with community needs thus creating a virtuous cycle of enhanced performance and sustained community support.

2.2.4 Social Enterprise Models

The integration of market-based approaches into traditional nonprofit operations represents perhaps the most transformative shift in African youth development financing. By developing hybrid organizational structures that generate revenue while advancing social impact objectives, forward-thinking organizations are transcending the false dichotomy between financial sustainability and mission fulfillment.

LifeBank,[10] a Nigerian health-tech startup, illustrates this model by digitizing the supply chain for healthcare facilities, ensuring timely delivery of essential medical supplies like blood and oxygen.

Their innovative approach not only addresses critical healthcare challenges but also generates revenue, ensuring operational sustainability Social enterprise models span diverse operational approaches, from fee-for-service consulting that monetizes organizational expertise to product development that addresses market gaps while creating social value. The strategic advantage of this approach extends beyond financial diversification; by aligning revenue generation with core competencies, organizations strengthen rather than dilute their mission focus while building resilience against funding fluctuations.

Successful implementation requires sophisticated calibration between social impact and financial return metrics, demanding rigorous business planning, market analysis, and internal capacity development. Organizations must navigate complex questions of cross-subsidization, profit allocation, and organizational identity while addressing potential stakeholder concerns about mission drift. Despite these challenges, social enterprise represents the frontier of sustainable youth development financing capable of creating the possibility of perpetual impact unconstrained by donor timelines or changing funding priorities.

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[10] https://empowerafrica.com/bridging-the-gap-how-lifebank-is-transforming-medical-supply-chains-in-nigeria-and-beyond

2.3 Leveraging External Resources Strategically

While building local funding is essential, smartly using external resources remains important for African youth organizations wanting to grow their impact. The goal isn't to avoid outside funding completely, but to approach it thoughtfully and keep organizational independence. This section explores promising external funding options that maintain organizational freedom while providing substantial financial support.

2.3.1 Diaspora Engagement

The African diaspora represents a significant potential funding source. In 2023, remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa reached $54 billion, with Nigeria accounting for $19.5 billion, approximately 35% of the region's total.[11] This massive flow of money exceeds traditional aid significantly, yet remains largely unused for organized development work because of scattered engagement efforts and trust issues.

Unlike traditional international donors, people in the diaspora bring special advantages to youth development funding: they understand the culture deeply, have lasting commitment to their home regions, and are motivated by personal connections rather than project timelines.

Image by Hassan Isilow and
Felix Tih

However, turning individual money transfers into strategic development funding requires thoughtful approaches that address diaspora concerns about transparency, seeing real results, and proper management.

Diaspora members want to know their contributions are making a difference. Creating dedicated online platforms that show clear, easy-to-follow impact reporting helps build trust. These platforms should let contributors see how their money is being used in real time while keeping transaction costs low so more of their contribution creates actual impact.

Another powerful approach involves creating matching programs that use diaspora contributions to attract additional resources from local governments, businesses, and community groups. These partnerships multiply impact while spreading risk and making projects more sustainable through diverse stakeholder involvement.

Beyond financial contributions, diaspora engagement should tap into knowledge and connections. Comprehensive programs that combine diaspora financial resources with their professional expertise, networks, and market access create value far beyond what money alone can provide. This approach recognizes diaspora members as partners bringing valuable skills and connections crucial for organizational growth.

[11] https://allafrica.com/stories/202407010180.html

Some forward-thinking organizations like the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD-UK) are pioneering efforts to channel diaspora resources into structured development initiatives. Their Diaspora Finance program seeks to maximize the impact of diaspora financial and skills investment into Africa, delivering new investment and financial instruments to support wealth and job creation.[12] The benefits of diaspora engagement go beyond just funding to include enhanced legitimacy, credibility, and international partnerships thereby positioning youth organizations to access additional resources previously out of reach.

2.3.2 Blended Finance Approaches

Combining multiple funding sources creates resilience against single-source dependency while leveraging the strengths of different capital types. Blended finance offers a smart approach to development funding by thoughtfully combining different money sources with varying risk levels, return expectations, and impact goals. This approach creates stronger, more adaptable funding systems that can weather economic storms better than single-source funding. Rather than viewing donor funding and commercial investment as completely separate categories, blended finance builds creative funding structures designed for complex development challenges.

The real value of blended finance for youth organizations lies in protecting their mission while improving long-term sustainability. By bringing together multiple funding sources including grants, patient capital, impact investments, and commercial financing—organizations can maintain focus on high-impact activities that might not be financially profitable while developing income-generating components that ensure they can keep operating for years to come.

One powerful approach involves creating interest-generating reserves or endowment funds during periods when funding is abundant. Smart organizations set aside portions of large grants or successful fundraising campaigns to build permanent financial foundations. These reserves generate predictable income that continues flowing regardless of donor cycles or economic downturns, enabling long-term planning and stability that many youth organizations have never experienced.

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[12] https://afford-uk.org/afford-diaspora-finance
https://donate-ng.com/

Youth-led agricultural businesses provide excellent examples of how blended finance works in practice. These ventures combine revenue from selling products with targeted small investments from local communities and strategic support from financial institutions. When a youth farming cooperative sells vegetables to local markets while also receiving small investments from community members who believe in their work, they create multiple income streams that reinforce each other. The business success attracts more community investment while the community support provides stability during difficult market periods.

Digital crowdfunding platforms designed specifically for African social development initiatives represent another growing opportunity. Unlike generic crowdfunding sites that may not understand local contexts, these specialized platforms incorporate cultural considerations, local payment methods, and impact verification approaches that make sense for African communities. For instance, platforms like Donate-ng[13] have enabled Nigerians to raise funds for various causes, leveraging mobile money and local networks to facilitate donations.

Creating partnerships between youth organizations and local small businesses or social enterprises opens up entirely new funding possibilities. These relationships go beyond simple monetary transactions to include technical assistance, market access, and operational support that youth organizations desperately need. For example, a youth organization focused on environmental protection might partner with a local eco-tourism company, receiving both funding and practical training in sustainable business practices while helping the company demonstrate its environmental commitment. An investor might fund a youth education program with repayment tied to graduation rates or job placement success rather than traditional financial returns.

Successfully using blended finance approaches requires developing solid financial management skills and partnership-building abilities. Organizations need people who can track multiple funding streams, manage different reporting requirements, and maintain relationships with diverse stakeholders who may have very different motivations and expectations.

[13] https://donate-ng.com/

2.4 Digital Tools for Resource Mobilization

Digital platforms present unprecedented opportunities for youth organizations to bypass traditional funding gatekeepers and connect directly with supporters. The digital revolution has fundamentally changed how organizations raise funds, giving youth organizations powerful new ways to overcome geographical limitations, bypass traditional funding gatekeepers, and connect directly with supporters worldwide. Beyond simply adopting new technology, effective digital fundraising represents a strategic shift that makes development financing more accessible while improving transparency and accountability between organizations and their supporters.

Creating compelling multimedia content that tells the story of organizational impact in accessible ways helps attract and retain supporters. Modern donors want to see and understand the difference their contributions make, not just read about it in formal reports. Organizations that master impact storytelling through videos, photos, infographics, and interactive content can emotionally connect with potential supporters while providing solid evidence of their effectiveness.

Image by Confidence Nzewi on Alamy

A youth organization working on water access might share before-and-after videos of communities gaining clean water, interviews with beneficiaries explaining how their lives have changed, and clear data showing health improvements in the areas they serve.

Community-based digital fundraising that takes advantage of widespread mobile money adoption across Africa opens up entirely new possibilities for resource mobilization. With mobile money usage emerging in many African markets, organizations can now collect contributions from people who have never had traditional bank accounts.[14] This democratizes giving by enabling small-contribution models that were previously impossible under conventional banking systems. A youth organization might run a campaign where community members contribute small amounts via mobile money, with contributions as low as the equivalent of $1 making meaningful collective impact.

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[14] https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/gsma_resources/state-of-the-industry-report-on-mobile-money-2023/

Using blockchain technology to create transparent, verifiable records of how funds are used and what impact is achieved helps address the trust issues that often undermine fundraising efforts. These systems allow supporters to track their contributions in real-time and see exactly how money is being spent, while reducing the administrative burden on organizations that previously had to prepare multiple reports for different funders. When a supporter can see their contribution being used to purchase school supplies and then track the educational outcomes in the schools receiving those supplies, trust builds naturally.

Advanced data analysis tools enable personalized, targeted engagement with potential supporters based on their behavior patterns, contribution history, and impact preferences. Organizations can tailor their communications to different supporter segments, improving response rates while building sustained relationships that go beyond one-time transactions. Rather than sending the same appeal to everyone, organizations can customize messages for supporters who care most about education versus those most interested in environmental issues.

Digital platforms that facilitate cost-effective knowledge exchange and collaborative problem-solving across geographical boundaries give organizations access to valuable expertise that would be prohibitively expensive through traditional consulting arrangements. Youth organizations can connect with mentors, technical experts, and peer organizations worldwide, sharing challenges and solutions in ways that strengthen everyone involved.

Successfully integrating these digital tools requires more than just implementing new technology. Organizations need comprehensive adaptation that includes cultural change, skills development, and process improvement. Staff must develop digital capabilities alongside traditional fundraising skills, and organizational culture must embrace transparency and engagement in new ways.

03

Priority Skills And Competence For You in 2025

As traditional jobs become scarce and digital transformation speeds up, young Africans need specific skills to address local challenges while remaining globally competitive. The particular skill areas identified in this paper are based on three converging realities unique to Africa: the continent's accelerating digital transformation despite infrastructure challenges; the complex, interconnected nature of Africa's development problems; and the growing youth population alongside limited formal employment opportunities. These realities make the following skills especially important for African youth to thrive.

3.1 Beyond Digital Literacy: Advancing Digital Intelligence

Africa's digital landscape is changing rapidly, with mobile internet expected to reach 50% of the population by 2025,[15] yet this growth is deeply uneven. Rural communities, women, and low-income groups continue to be left behind. In this fragmented terrain, basic digital literacy is no longer enough. To participate meaningfully in the digital economy, young Africans must develop comprehensive digital intelligence: the ability not just to use tools, but to shape, adapt, and innovate with them.

This shift is critical to closing the persistent digital divide between Africa and more advanced economies. Without it, there is a risk of reproducing a new kind of technological dependency where African youth are passive consumers of imported technologies, rather than architects of locally relevant solutions.

Digital intelligence in Africa must be rooted in practicality and resilience. It should equip young people to adapt global technologies to local challenges, to design what works here and now, not just what dazzles elsewhere. For instance, artificial intelligence training should prioritize its application in contexts like precision farming, expanding healthcare access in remote regions, or enhancing public education.

Blockchain technology is another frontier with transformative potential. In regions grappling with institutional mistrust and financial exclusion, blockchain offers a pathway to build transparent systems, curb corruption, and democratize financial access. African nations already leading in digital financial services can further accelerate progress by investing in youth fluency with blockchain.

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[15] https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx, https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/wp content/uploads/2020/09/GSMA_MobileEconomy2020_SSA_Eng.pdf

Equally vital are data skills, the ability to collect, analyze, and interpret information to drive smarter decisions. From responsive governance to targeted business strategies, data-literate youth can help steer more efficient and inclusive development.

Meanwhile, cybersecurity awareness is no longer optional. As Africa digitizes, its vulnerabilities grow. Youth must be empowered to secure digital systems that underpin banking, government, education, and healthcare, safeguarding not only information but entire communities.

Finally, digital content creation offers young Africans the tools to reclaim and redefine narratives. Through multimedia storytelling, they can amplify authentic local voices, preserve cultural heritage, and create economic value within the booming creative economy.

3.2 Systems Thinking for Complex Problem-Solving

Youth development programming often focuses on isolated skill domains while neglecting the interconnected nature of contemporary challenges. Systems thinking enables young people to perceive relationships between seemingly discrete issues and design holistic interventions.

Systems thinking gives African youth essential mental frameworks to navigate this complexity. By understanding relationships between seemingly separate issues, young people can design holistic solutions that address root causes rather than symptoms. This approach is particularly crucial in Africa, where limited resources demand highly efficient interventions with maximum impact.

When young people understand complex cause-and-effect relationships in social systems, they can anticipate unintended consequences and design more sustainable solutions. For example, a youth-led farming initiative might consider not only growing techniques but also market access, transportation infrastructure, climate resilience, and gender dynamics to create truly effective interventions.

The ability to identify leverage points for maximum impact within complex systems is especially valuable when resources are limited. Rather than trying to address all aspects of a challenge at once, systems-thinking youth can target specific intervention points that create cascading positive effects throughout the system.

Understanding stakeholder relationships and power dynamics helps young people navigate complex institutional landscapes and build effective coalitions for change. In contexts where formal governance structures may be weak but informal power networks strong, this skill becomes essential for driving meaningful change.

Designing interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms allows youth to create sustainable solutions rather than temporary fixes. This orientation toward systemic change represents a critical shift from traditional development approaches that often treat symptoms rather than underlying conditions.

3.3 Entrepreneurial Agility

The formal job sector across Africa is expected to absorb only 25 percent of new workforce entrants through 2025.[16] This reality leaves a widening gap between the number of young people entering the labor market and the number of available jobs, creating an urgent need for alternative economic pathways. In this context, entrepreneurial thinking is no longer optional; it is fast becoming a survival skill. Whether youth are starting ventures from scratch or applying entrepreneurial mindsets within organizations, the ability to think independently and act boldly is critical.

But entrepreneurship in Africa is not just about launching startups or pitching to investors. It is a way of seeing and responding to the world - a mindset rooted in resourcefulness, adaptability, and the courage to take initiative despite uncertainty. This kind of thinking allows young people to navigate unstable economies, shifting policy environments, and infrastructure gaps while still finding ways to create value.

One of the most powerful aspects of this mindset is the ability to see opportunity in what others might dismiss as limitation. From informal settlements to rural towns, young Africans are reimagining scarcity as a source of innovation. The rise of mobile money, which bypassed traditional banking infrastructure and brought financial services to millions, is one clear example of this homegrown ingenuity.

To keep pace with fast changing needs, many young entrepreneurs are adopting rapid prototyping and iterative development methods. Instead of waiting for perfect plans or big capital, they test small ideas, gather feedback, and improve continuously. It is a smart, cost effective approach that fits well with Africa's lean realities and allows solutions to evolve in real time with the communities they serve.

Image by Media Lens King on Istock

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[16] https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/13-work-jobs/

However, even the best ideas need fuel. In many African markets where access to capital remains limited, knowing how to manage finances creatively is just as important as the big vision. Youth must learn how to bootstrap, mix funding streams, and stretch resources without compromising their mission all while building sustainable models that can withstand local and global shocks.

Lastly, risk in Africa often looks different and heavier than in other regions. From political instability to inconsistent regulations, entrepreneurs must navigate a complex landscape where unpredictability is part of the terrain. But those who develop strong risk management skills, not by avoiding challenges but by anticipating and working through them, are the ones who turn adversity into strategy.

3.4 Leadership Development with Purpose

Africa's governance challenges demand a new generation of ethical, capable leaders who can drive transformation across every sector. Despite having the youngest population in the world, the continent often sees some of the oldest leadership in power, creating a disconnect between those who make decisions and the vibrant, youthful majority they serve. Bridging this gap requires leadership development that goes beyond titles or technical prowess, it must also shape values, character, and courage

Leadership in Africa cannot be reduced to mastering policy or procedure. It must be adaptive, resilient, and visionary-rooted in the reality that young people today are inheriting fragile systems in a rapidly shifting global landscape. They are not simply tasked with running existing structures but with reimagining them altogether.

Adaptive leadership skills equip young Africans to lead through complexity, uncertainty, and disruption. In volatile environments where conditions change without warning, the ability to make timely decisions with limited information, to pivot in response to emerging realities, and to hold steady under pressure becomes invaluable.

3.5 Shared Responsibility for Skill Development

Building youth capacity at the necessary scale requires coordinated action across multiple stakeholders, each playing distinct but complementary roles in a comprehensive ecosystem of skill development.

Government institutions need to create supportive policy environments and educational frameworks that respond to emerging skill demands.

This includes updating national curricula to incorporate digital intelligence, systems thinking, entrepreneurship, and leadership development-moving beyond outdated educational models focused primarily on memorization and theoretical knowledge. Governments can also encourage private sector participation through tax benefits for youth training programs and create regulatory frameworks that support innovation.

The private sector provides essential hands-on learning opportunities through internships, apprenticeships, and skills partnerships. Companies benefit from developing talent pipelines while youth gain real-world experience and industry-specific skills. Beyond traditional approaches, innovative models like reverse mentorship programs allow digitally savvy youth to share technological knowledge with experienced professionals in exchange for industry guidance.

Young people themselves must take initiative for continuous learning and skills application rather than passively receiving training. This active ownership of personal development includes peer-to-peer learning, self-directed exploration of digital resources, and practical application of skills through community projects. Youth-led skills development creates powerful multiplier effects as knowledge spreads through peer networks

International partners can support this ecosystem by providing technical assistance, funding innovative skill development approaches, and facilitating knowledge exchange across regions. However, their role should complement rather than replace local ownership and direction of skill development priorities.

The most effective skill development initiatives combine contributions from multiple stakeholders in integrated approaches that connect formal education, supplementary training, practical application, and ongoing mentorship. These comprehensive ecosystems create reinforcing feedback loops that accelerate skill acquisition and application while ensuring relevance to both local and global demands.

Image by Confidence Nzewi on Alamy

04

Frameworks For Meaningful Youth Participation

4.1 Moving Beyond Tokenism to Authentic Inclusion

Youth participation often remains superficial, with young people present in decision-making
spaces without genuine influence. Authentic inclusion requires structural changes to how participation is designed and implemented. The rhetoric of youth participation far exceeds its reality across Africa. While conferences, policy documents, and development programs routinely celebrate youth engagement, the lived experience of most young Africans reveals participation that remains largely symbolic. Young people find themselves invited to meetings where their voices carry little weight, consulted on decisions already made, or included in processes designed by adults with little understanding of youth realities. This gap between participation rhetoric and practice undermines both youth development and broader democratic governance across the continent.

Creating meaningful youth participation requires fundamental shifts in how organizations, governments, and development actors approach youth engagement. Rather than treating participation as an optic to existing processes, authentic inclusion demands structural changes that redistribute power and create space for youth voices to genuinely influence outcomes.

This transformation challenges entrenched assumptions about age, expertise, and decision-making authority while opening pathways to more responsive, effective governance.

4.2 Bridging Urban-Rural and Digital Divides

Access to participation opportunities has never been equal, with persistent barriers disproportionately affecting rural youth, young women, youth with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Urban youth often dominate participation opportunities due to proximity to decision-making centers, better connectivity, and stronger networks. Meanwhile, rural youth face transportation barriers, limited digital access, and cultural constraints that prevent meaningful engagement with formal participation processes. Addressing these divides requires deliberate strategies that meet youth where they are rather than expecting them to overcome structural barriers to access distant opportunities. Effective approaches recognize that meaningful participation must be accessible to all youth, not just those with existing advantages.

Taking participation opportunities directly to youth communities rather than expecting them to travel to urban centers removes significant barriers. This might involve holding consultations in rural communities, using mobile technology to reach remote areas, or creating local participation hubs that connect to broader decision-making processes. When participation comes to youth rather than requiring them to come to participation, engagement becomes more representative and inclusive.

Using local languages and culturally relevant engagement tools ensures that participation processes are accessible to youth regardless of their formal education levels or linguistic backgrounds. Many participation mechanisms rely heavily on official languages, written communication, and formal meeting structures that exclude youth more comfortable with local languages or oral communication traditions. Culturally relevant approaches adapt participation methods to local contexts rather than imposing standardized approaches.

Developing offline access mechanisms alongside digital platforms ensures that participation isn't limited to youth with reliable internet connectivity. While digital tools offer powerful engagement opportunities, they can also deepen existing inequalities if not complemented by accessible alternatives. Simple mobile technology like USSD-based civic engagement allows youth with basic phones to participate in consultations, voting, and feedback processes without requiring smartphones or internet access.

Creating context-specific safety protocols that address unique barriers faced by marginalized groups acknowledges that participation risks vary significantly across different communities and identities. Young women may face family restrictions on public participation, while youth with disabilities might encounter accessibility barriers that prevent engagement. Effective participation frameworks identify these specific constraints and develop targeted solutions rather than assuming one-size-fits-all approaches.

4.3 Accountability Mechanisms for Youth Inclusion

Ensuring that youth participation translates into real influence requires robust accountability frameworks that track whether youth input actually shapes outcomes. Without accountability mechanisms, participation can become an endless cycle of consultation without implementation, eroding youth trust and undermining future engagement efforts.

Youth scorecards provide community-managed monitoring tools that track implementation of youth-focused promises and commitments. These tools allow young people to evaluate whether organizations, governments, and development actors follow through on commitments made during participation processes. When youth can publicly assess performance on youth inclusion, organizations face pressure to translate participation into tangible changes rather than treating engagement as a reporting requirement.

Participatory budgeting creates direct youth involvement in resource allocation decisions, moving beyond consultation to actual decision-making authority.

When youth help determine how funds are allocated for education, health, infrastructure, or economic development, their participation has immediate, visible impact. Participatory budgeting also builds youth understanding of resource constraints and implementation challenges while demonstrating genuine power-sharing.

Structured feedback loops ensure youth receive clear responses to their input, explaining how their contributions influenced decisions or why suggestions weren't implemented. These mechanisms close the communication circle that often leaves youth wondering whether their participation mattered. Regular feedback builds trust and helps youth provide more targeted, useful input in future processes.

Formalized youth advisory councils with clear authority and mandates create institutional mechanisms for ongoing youth input rather than ad-hoc consultation processes. These councils work best when they have defined roles in decision-making processes, dedicated resources, and clear accountability relationships with governance structures. Advisory councils with real authority can influence policy development, program design, and resource allocation on an ongoing basis.

Image by AS Photo on ASPHOTOSTUDIO

4.4 Transnational Youth Solidarity

Building youth influence at continental and global levels requires coordinated action across borders that recognizes the interconnected nature of challenges facing African youth. Climate change, economic inequality, governance failures, and technological disruption transcend national boundaries, demanding collaborative responses that individual countries cannot address alone.

Developing shared policy platforms that address common priorities helps African youth present unified positions on continental and global stages. When youth across different countries coordinate advocacy around shared issues like education access, economic opportunity, or climate action, their collective voice carries greater weight than scattered individual efforts. These platforms require ongoing collaboration to identify common ground while respecting national and local variations.

Creating knowledge exchange networks that amplify successful approaches enables youth movements to learn from each other's experiences and adapt effective strategies across different contexts.

When youth organizations in one country develop innovative participation methods or effective advocacy strategies, these approaches can inspire and inform youth movements elsewhere. Knowledge networks accelerate learning and prevent youth from having to reinvent solutions to common challenges.

Establishing mentorship pathways that connect youth across different stages of development creates opportunities for peer learning and mutual support. More experienced youth leaders can guide emerging activists while learning from fresh perspectives and energy. These relationships build solidarity while strengthening individual and collective capacity for sustained engagement.

Strategic engagement with regional bodies like the African Union through unified advocacy creates opportunities for youth to influence continental-level policies and programs. When youth present coordinated positions to continental institutions, they can shape regional frameworks that influence national policies. This engagement requires sophisticated understanding of regional governance structures and coordinated advocacy strategies across multiple countries.

05

Building Sustainable Youth-led Development Models

The enthusiasm and energy of youth-led development initiatives often outpaces their institutional capacity for sustained impact. Many youth movements emerge with powerful vision and initial momentum but struggle to maintain effectiveness over time due to resource constraints, leadership transitions, and burnout. Building sustainable youth-led development requires deliberate attention to the structural elements that enable long-term impact rather than relying solely on individual motivation and short-term mobilization.

Sustainability in youth-led development encompasses financial viability, organizational resilience, leadership continuity, and adaptive capacity. Organizations that achieve sustained impact develop systems that can weather changes in funding, leadership, and external conditions while maintaining effectiveness and mission focus. This sustainability doesn't happen automatically but requires intentional investment in institutional development alongside programmatic activities.

5.1 Critical Success Factors

Youth-led development initiatives succeed when they incorporate key structural elements that support both immediate impact and long-term viability. These factors work together to create organizations capable of sustained effectiveness rather than short-term mobilization.

Authentic Ownership:
Authentic ownership means young people drive processes from initial planning through implementation and evaluation rather than implementing programs designed by others. When youth control their own development processes, they create more relevant, effective interventions while building ownership that sustains engagement through challenges. Authentic ownership requires organizations to resist pressure to adopt externally designed approaches that may not fit local contexts or youth priorities.

Intergenerational Mentorship:
Intergenerational mentorship creates structured knowledge transfer between experienced practitioners and emerging leaders without undermining youth leadership. Effective mentorship provides guidance and institutional knowledge while respecting youth agency and innovation. These relationships help young leaders navigate complex challenges while avoiding common pitfalls, accelerating learning without stifling creativity.

Adequate Resourcing:
Adequate resourcing provides appropriate financial and technical support that matches expected outcomes rather than expecting youth to achieve ambitious goals with insufficient resources. Many youth-led initiatives receive small grants that generate unrealistic expectations for large-scale impact. Sustainable resourcing aligns available resources with realistic outcomes while building organizational capacity to manage larger resources over time.

Psychosocial Support:
Psychosocial support recognizes burnout risks and incorporate wellbeing frameworks into organizational culture and programming. Youth leaders often sacrifice personal wellbeing for their causes, creating unsustainable patterns that undermine long-term effectiveness. Organizations that prioritize leader wellbeing create more sustainable engagement while modeling healthy approaches to social change work.

Systems Change Orientation:
Systems change orientation focuses on transforming underlying conditions rather than addressing symptoms of larger problems. While addressing immediate needs remains important, sustainable youth-led development requires attention to the systemic factors that create ongoing challenges. This orientation helps organizations balance urgent responses with strategic efforts to create lasting change

5.2 From Activism to Sustained Change-Making

Organizations and funders must deliberately support youth transition from short-term mobilization to long-term impact by investing in capacity development that prepares young change-makers for the complexities of prolonged engagement. This requires:

Strategic Communication Skills: Youth need the ability to frame issues effectively for diverse audiences, translating complex policy matters into accessible language that resonates with both communities and decision makers.

Policy Literacy: Understanding how change happens within formal governance systems is essential for channeling youth energy for institutional change. This includes knowledge of legislative processes, budget cycles, policy implementation pathways, and points of influence within complex bureaucracies. When young people understand the systems, they can identify strategic intervention points.

Legal Protection: Youth engaged in activism frequently face backlash, particularly when challenging entrenched interests. Access to legal support networks provides essential protection and allows young leaders to continue their work amid resistance.

Leadership Pipelines: Creating clear pathways for progressive responsibility and influence ensures that youth activism translates into sustained leadership development. These pipelines should connect grassroots mobilization with formal decision-making structures, providing mentorship and capacity-building at each transition point.

5.3 Localized Innovation Ecosystems

Effective innovation environments for youth must:

- Recognize and value community-based innovation beyond urban centres.

- Provide flexible, low-bureaucracy funding mechanisms.

- Create recognition programs that celebrate diverse forms of impact.

- Connect local solutions to regional and global resources and platforms.

A compelling model is the Nigeria Youth Futures Fund,[17] which democratizes access to funding for community-based organizations and individuals across the 36 States of Nigeria and the FCT. This approach ensures that innovations and development initiatives are implemented in both urban and rural communities. The effectiveness of NYFF can be linked to its decentralized and participatory model, which prioritizes equitable representation of organizations and individuals across all states, such that for every funding cycle, grants are accessed by at least 1 organization and 1 individual per state. Big on inclusion, the fund also ensures that PWD-led and focused organizations are not left out.

To overcome traditional barriers, such as complex grant processes and institutional bottlenecks, NYFF applies a low-bureaucracy funding approach, tailored to meet the realities of early-stage and burgeoning youth-led initiatives. Grant applications are streamlined, technical support is provided pre and post-award, and grant disbursements are accompanied by capacity-strengthening, regional mentorship, and ecosystem-building programs to mitigate potential challenges and raise sustainable organizations.

In terms of impact, NYFF has awarded grants to 456 youth-led initiatives from 2022 - 2024, facilitating good governance, leading projects that resolve fundamental national questions, and providing opportunities for young people to contribute to national development. According to the NYFF Reach Report,[18] 63% of grantees have never accessed a grant before, indicative of their commitment to remove funding barriers, and have trained 7690 emerging activists, a commitment to raise a new generation of leaders driving social change.

NYFF tracks both quantitative metrics and qualitative outcomes, and periodically showcases impact and grantee achievements through storytelling, media amplification, and recognition events. NYFF strengthens visibility and fosters a culture of democratization of resources and opportunities, inclusion, and sustainability within the local innovation ecosystem. Its model offers a clear, scalable pathway for other development initiatives looking to bridge the location-based divide, decentralize innovation, and institutionalize youth agency.

Image by voyagesafriq

[17] https://nigeriayouthfund.org/
[18] https://nigeriayouthfund.org/reports/nyff-2024-reach-report/

06

Strategic Recommendations For Key Stakeholder Groups

6.1 For Youth-Led Organizations

Recognizing the challenging funding environment and shifting development priorities, youth-led organizations must adopt strategic approaches to ensure sustainability and maximize impact:

- Diversify funding sources with a target of no single donor exceeding 30% of the organizational budget. This reduces the vulnerability of funding disruptions and enhances operational independence.

- Develop revenue-generating activities aligned with the organizational mission and expertise. This creates financial sustainability while maintaining focus on core social objectives.

- Implement cost-saving measures and efficiency models to achieve programmatic goals with minimal expenditure. This includes exploring shared resource models, leveraging volunteer expertise, and adopting innovative, low-cost implementation approaches.

- Invest in robust administrative and governance systems that support strategic decision-making and demonstrate accountability to stakeholders.

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- Build digital storytelling capacity to effectively communicate impact to diverse stakeholders using compelling narratives and data visualizations to demonstrate value beyond traditional metrics.

- Establish structured mentorship programs that support leadership development at all levels, ensuring continuity and growth of organizational capacity even amid staff transitions..

6.2 For Funders and Development Partners

In order to catalyze long-term impact and empower youth-led development across Africa, funders and development partners must transition from transactional grant-making to transformational partnerships. This calls for the following strategic shifts:

- Provide flexible, core funding alongside project-specific grants. Unrestricted core funding enables youth-led organizations to invest in critical areas such as staff development, systems strengthening, and strategic planning. This ensures organizational resilience and fosters innovation beyond donor mandates.

- Extend typical project timeframes to allow for sustainable impact development. Development outcomes, especially in fragile and underserved contexts, require sustained investment. Longer-term funding cycles allow organizations to build trust within communities, iterate on programs, and scale solutions organically.

- Develop simplified application processes for emerging youth organizations. Many grassroots groups are excluded from donor pipelines due to complex application requirements and administrative hurdles. Streamlined, low-barrier funding pathways will enhance accessibility and equity.

Image by AscentXmedia on Getty Images

6.3 For Government Institutions

Government policy and institutional frameworks create the enabling environment in which youth development initiatives either thrive or struggle. Strategic government action should include:

- Create tax incentives for social enterprise development, private philanthropy, and corporate social investment following successful models from the global north regions.

- Establish direct funding programmes that channel public resources to development initiatives, particularly those led by youth organizations addressing critical social challenges.

- Establish youth advisory mechanisms with genuine authority and influence, ensuring youth perspectives inform policy development from conception through implementation.

- Develop intergenerational mentorship programs within public institutions that facilitate knowledge transfer while creating leadership pipelines for youth in governance.

- Integrate digital intelligence competencies into educational curricula at all levels, preparing youth for technological opportunities and challenges.

- Create startup ecosystems that support youth-led social innovation through incubation programs, seed funding, and technical assistance.

07

CONCLUSION

As Africa navigates complex development challenges in 2025 and beyond, meaningful youth engagement emerges not as a peripheral concern but as a central strategic imperative. The interruption of traditional funding flows, while creating immediate challenges, offers an opportunity to reimagine more sustainable, locally-driven approaches to youth development.
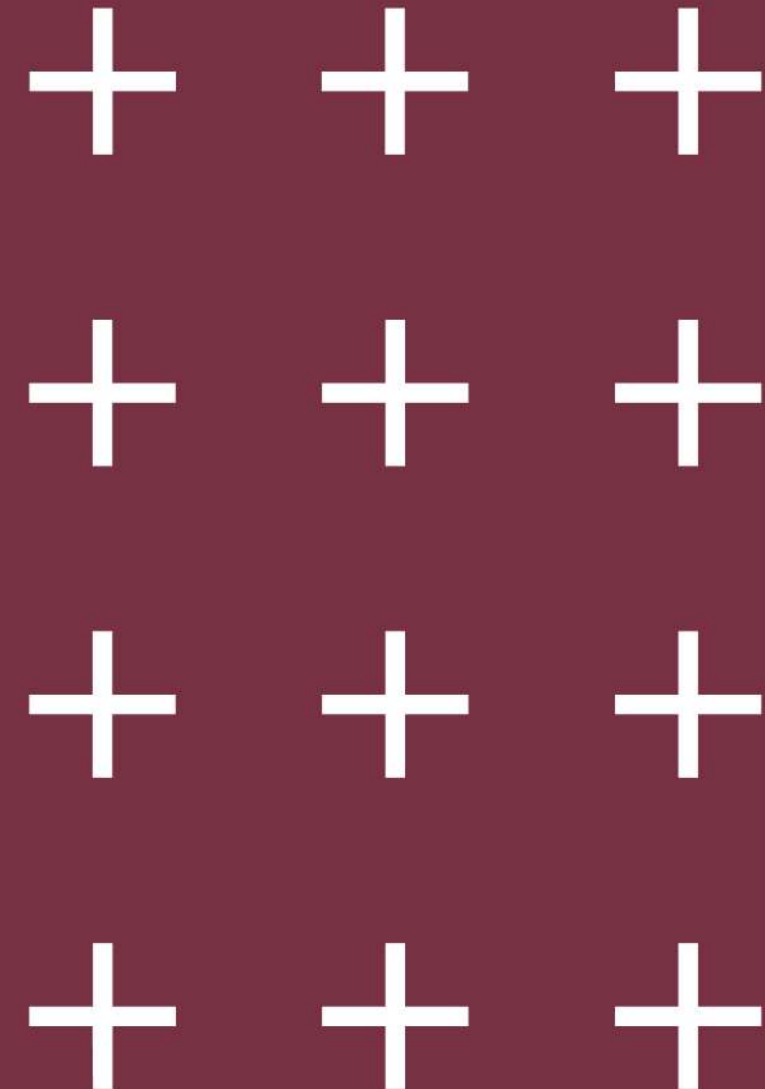
By diversifying funding sources, building critical skills for the digital age, ensuring authentic youth participation, and creating enabling ecosystems for innovation, stakeholders can unlock the tremendous potential of the continent's youth demographic dividend. This requires coordinated action across sectors, intentional investment in capacity development, and a fundamental shift from viewing youth as beneficiaries to recognizing them as essential partners in Africa's development journey.

The priorities and frameworks outlined in this white paper provide a roadmap for this transformation, offering practical strategies for navigating current challenges while building resilient systems for long-term impact. As we celebrate 26 years of democratic governance in Nigeria, we must ensure that the next quarter-century is characterized by development approaches that fully harness African youth's creativity, energy, and insight.

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