

Analyzing Donor Funding Trends and Strategic Priorities: Empowering Youth-Led Initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa through Advocacy

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Abstract:

➤ *Background:*

Youth and adolescent-focused programs enhance growth, development, and potential of young people to become catalysts for positive change. Despite the recognized impact of these programs, youth are often overlooked in donor funding priorities. Previous efforts have aimed to address gaps in understanding the adolescents' funding landscape, but this study goes further to understand this landscape from the youth-led perspective.

➤ *Objectives:*

This report aims to assess the funding landscape for youth and adolescent-focused programs in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, evaluate the extent to which donors prioritize funding youth-led organizations to implement youth-focused programming, understand the challenges for youth-led organizations in securing financial support, and develop actionable recommendations.

➤ *Methodology:*

We used a mixed-methods approach including a website review of 50 private foundations, an analysis of annual reports of 5 private foundations, and interviews with 11 key informants from donor and youth-led organizations.

➤ *Results:*

The analysis revealed that while 84% of the foundations funded youth-focused programs, only 24% supported youth-led organizations. There is a growing recognition among donors, of the importance of supporting youth-led initiatives, particularly in areas such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, and gender equality. However, our findings reveals that the funding landscape lacks transparency, shows donors' limited trust in youth leadership, and demonstrates a disconnect between donor priorities and the needs of youth-led organizations. Recommendations for funders and youth-led organizations emphasize the need for improved transparency and accountability, meaningful youth engagement and representation, and investment in the organizational capacities and resilience of youth-led initiatives.

➤ *Conclusion:*

This report calls for collective action from all stakeholders to reshape the funding landscape and support young people as agents of change. By working together to address the identified challenges and leverage the opportunities, funders, youth-led organizations, researchers, advocates and policymakers can contribute to a more equitable, responsive, and impactful funding ecosystem.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Context

According to the United Nations, adolescence spans from 10 to 19 years, while individuals between 10 and 24 years are described as young people, and youth are those aged 15 to 24 years.[1] The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) highlights that youth encompasses individuals aged 10 to 29, with distinct phases identified as early adolescence (10-14), adolescence (15-19), emerging adulthood (20-24), and the transition to adulthood (25-29). Despite these chronological divisions, these age groups share a continuum of experiences, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to youth development that acknowledges the challenges and opportunities throughout this transformative period.[2]

A comprehensive data analysis using the World Population Prospects revealed that in 2021, the global population was estimated to have 2.4 billion individuals aged 10 to 29 years, marking the largest population of young people in recorded history.[2] Africa is home to ten of the world's youngest nations,[3] with Sub-Saharan Africa contributing 492 million of the global youth demographic. This region is expected to see the highest projected increase in young people worldwide, with an 89% rise anticipated by 2050.[4][5]

Young people are not just tomorrow's leaders, but today's active citizens and change-makers, poised to make indispensable contributions to global health equity.[6] As they transition into adulthood, these young individuals hold the key to shaping the future, not only as leaders but as catalysts for positive change. Their impact extends far beyond their individual development, but also influences multiple societal levels, propelling economic growth, fostering peace-building efforts, and laying the groundwork for sustainable development across diverse communities.[6]

Youth and adolescent-focused programs extend significant advantages to young people.[7] However, when young people are actively involved in the conceptualization and development of initiatives that directly concern them, the programs become inherently attuned to their unique needs, perspectives, and challenges.[8] Youth-led programs recognize that young people are the experts of their own lived experiences. By engaging with youth and allowing them to take the lead, these initiatives tap into their firsthand knowledge, creativity, and drive. This alignment supports resonance with the target population, which reinforces a sense of responsibility and commitment among the youth, creating a positive feedback loop of engagement and participation.

The allocation of resources to programs focused on young people stands as a highly effective strategy for enhancing population-based public health outcomes.[9][10][11] By investing in these programs, youth feel empowered, and we cultivate a generation of informed, civic-minded citizens capable of championing health and well-being within their communities. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), particularly Sub-Saharan Africa,

these programs have been shown to contribute significantly to countries' socioeconomic growth by focusing on education, health, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement for youth.[12]

B. Problem and Gap

Despite widespread recognition of the impact of youth-focused and youth-led programs, this population is not often deemed a specific category in donor funding priorities.[13] This creates a substantial barrier to ensuring that resources are strategically deployed to address the diverse needs and aspirations of young people. Additionally, youth-led organizations (YLOs) often feel daunted by seeking funds, partly due to the complex and opaque processes inherent to international funding mechanisms. This gap between recognition of a need for youth-led programs, and the accessibility of funding for YLOs, merits further exploration into these allocation mechanisms.

C. Efforts to Address the Gap

The Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence (GAGE) program, in partnership with the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan (AGIP), developed a report mapping global and national funding patterns for adolescent girls' development in low and middle-income countries from 2016-2020. In this report, they presented findings at the global and country levels focused on Ethiopia and Bangladesh, drawing on published data on donor official development assistance (ODA) flows complemented by key informant interviews with donors. [14] The study produced a comprehensive view of investments in adolescent girls' development, identifying which aspects of girls' lives and well-being the funds are directed to and facilitating a discussion on key priorities for future investments.

The "Resourcing Girls to Thrive" report was also put together based on insights from feminist adolescent girl funders around the world, and a broad range of key stakeholders spanning academia, civil society, philanthropy, and government from the children's, women's, and youth funding fields. It aimed to address significant gaps in the understanding of the adolescent girls' funding landscape. [13]

While these efforts successfully address funding for youth-focused programs, there is little exploration into funding for YLOs. The Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) discovered, through its youth engagement in gender transformative intervention evaluations, that placing youth and YLOs as leaders in young adolescent engagement is critical to diminishing unequal power dynamics that persist in adult-led programs. As such, this landscape will address funding for YLOs, exploring how global policies and donor priorities shape the extent of resources available to youth-focused and youth-led programs.

D. Purpose and Objectives

Our main purpose is to delve into the funding landscape concerning youth-focused programs in LMICs, with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa.

➤ *The Objectives Include:*

Assessing the funding landscape for youth and adolescent-focused programs. Evaluating the extent to which donors prioritize funding youth-led organizations and understanding the challenges they face in funding them.

- Understanding the challenges faced by YLOs in securing financial support and partnership.
- Gaining insights from both YLOs and donors to develop actionable recommendations.

E. Policy Overview

Current policy and funding priorities for youths The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges the critical importance of investing in adolescent health and well-being programs to achieve its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. Some SDGs broadly encompass the health and well-being of adolescents within their targets for broader populations, while others specifically address adolescents.[15] The SDG targets that specifically focus on adolescents are as follows:

Table 1 Adolescent and Youth-focused Sustainable Development Goals

Dates	First Edition	Second Edition
	Published in 2017	Published in 2023
Highlights	• Laid out the evidence for institutionalizing adolescent programs and policy • Guidance on implementation of adolescent health initiatives • Supported development of national adolescent health strategies across the world • Used as framework to develop Adolescent Health Flagship Program for Africa • Contributed to development of the Regional Framework for Joint Strategic Actions for Young People in the Eastern Mediterranean region	• Updated global data including evaluation of interventions • Lessons learned from implementation of first edition • Insights from the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents • Outlined process for countries to prioritize adolescent health issues • Emphasized multi-sectoral collaboration to address social determinants of health • Highlighted importance of gender analysis, periodic reporting to UN bodies, and rapid needs assessments in humanitarian settings • Suggested developing countries leverage international partnerships and technical assistance for resource mobilization

Official plans, commitments, or strategies that address youth and adolescent initiatives To improve the funding availability for adolescent health programs, a variety of official plans, commitments, and strategies have been set up. The World Health Organization initiated the Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!) to advocate for increased funding, drawing attention to the importance of investing in adolescent health.[16] Many countries have incorporated adolescent health as a priority area in their national health plans, emphasizing multi-sectoral approaches that involve collaboration among different government ministries and engagement with civil society organizations.[17][18] Advocacy efforts stress the evidence-based nature of adolescent health interventions and their potential return on investment, while monitoring and accountability mechanisms track progress and hold stakeholders accountable.[19][20]

The Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!) guidance provides a comprehensive framework for countries to systematically identify priorities, leverage existing resources, and engage with international donors to secure funding for youth-focused programs aligned with evidence-based interventions and global commitments to adolescent health and well-being. [16]

The AA-HA! guidance offers a comprehensive framework for countries to prioritize and fund youth-centered programs through a systematic process of needs assessment, landscape analysis, and priority setting. However, it could be strengthened by explicitly addressing the need for dedicated

funding streams and capacity-building opportunities for YLOs. Additionally, there could be set targets or quotas for youth representation in decision-making processes and suggested specific budget allocations for youth-centered initiatives. Recommending accessible funding mechanisms for youth and emphasizing the involvement of young people in monitoring and evaluation processes could also enhance its effectiveness. By incorporating these elements, the guidance would better foster funding for YLOs, amplify the voices of young people, and ensure that their unique perspectives and needs are integrated into the design, implementation, and refinement of adolescent programs.

Other advocacy efforts for youth and adolescent initiative Advocacy efforts at the regional, national, and global levels play a critical role in mobilizing support, raising awareness, and influencing policy decisions for adolescent health. At the global level, organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) set the agenda for policies promoting adolescent health that promote buy-in from regional and national bodies.[16] Regionally, advocacy organizations and networks partner with regional bodies such as the European Union, African Union, and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to prioritize adolescent health on regional agendas and mobilize resources for programs and interventions. At the national level, advocacy efforts are led by government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), YLOs, and civil society groups. These organizations

lobby policymakers, conduct public awareness campaigns, and engage in grassroots activism.

II. METHODOLOGY

We employed multiple research methods to understand the funding landscape for youth-focused and YLOs. Based on the aforementioned funding landscapes and literature reviews, with additional input from key informant interviews, we identified an initial list of 50 private donor organizations that operate in the adolescent health space. We included only private donors as their funding patterns are generally more adaptable compared to government donors. We then conducted a review of the publicly available websites of these organizations looking at their location, geographical distribution of grantees, subject areas of focus, and population of focus identifying patterns and gaps in resource

allocation. Considering the historical marginalization of funding for youth-led initiatives and the fact that 90% of young people aged 10-24 years live in LMICs [13], limited our scope to organizations funding countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Given that a substantial portion of funding for Sub-Saharan Africa originates from North America and Europe, donors from these continents took precedence in our assessment.

After this initial review, we excluded organizations that do not fund YLOs in Sub-Saharan Africa. We also excluded funders that do not have any form of annual reporting available on their website. This left us with five organizations included for final review and analysis. We conducted an in-depth literature review of the annual reports of these five donor organizations.

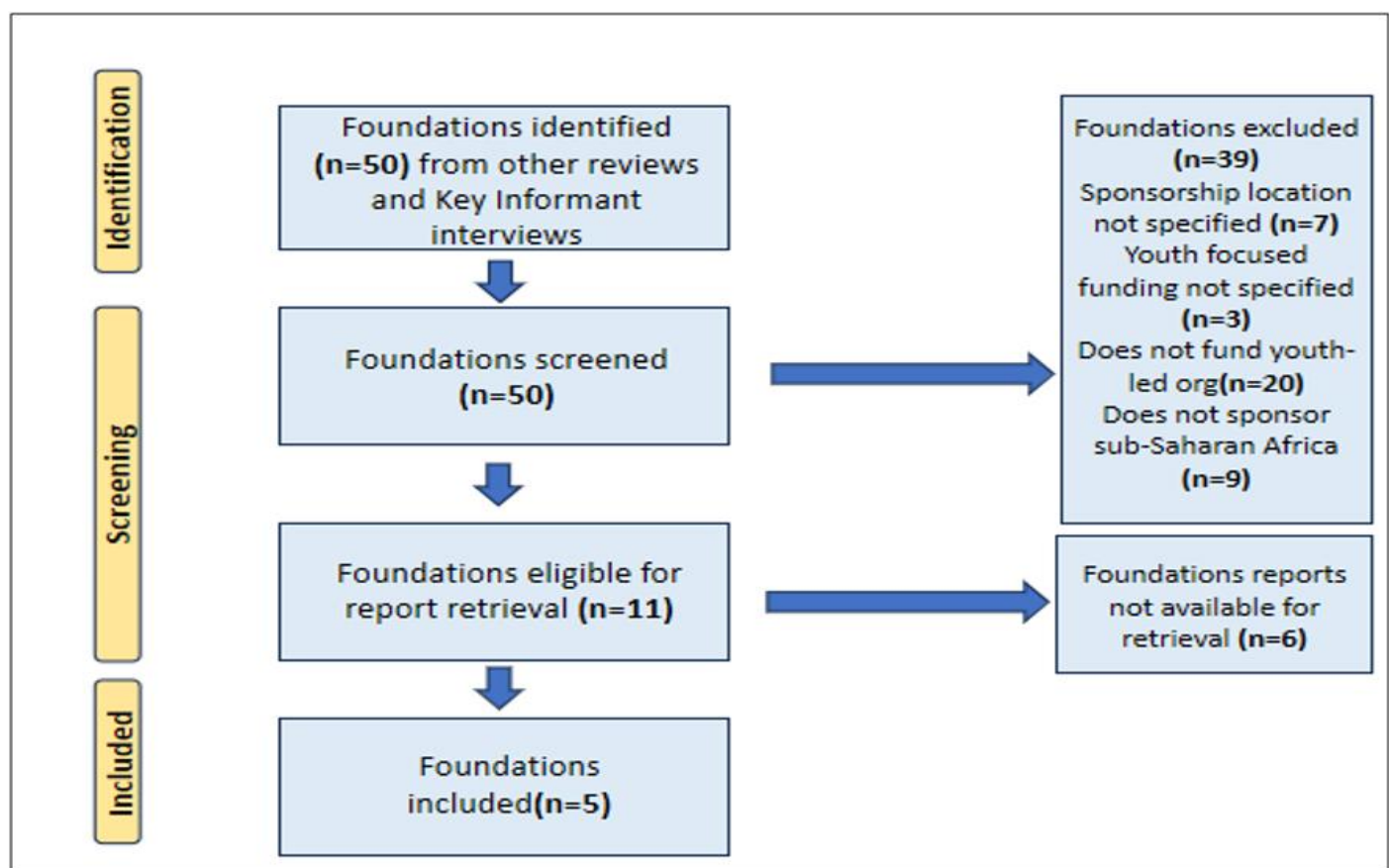


Fig 1 Prisma Flow Diagram

Through key informant interviews with representatives from international health organizations, foundations, and private sector entities, we gained insights into overall funding trends, factors influencing investment decisions, the role of youth voices in shaping priorities, and opportunities for impactful advocacy. Analyzing these perspectives offered deeper insights into the motivations shaping funding strategies.

Furthermore, we interviewed representatives from YLOs based in Sub-Saharan Africa. Representatives from Global Roadmap for Action (GRA) served as key informants

from east, west, and south Africa to share insights into the challenges, needs, and recommendations of YLOs. These interviews helped us gain contextual understanding of the challenges faced by YLOs in securing funding, how this funding impacts the implementation of actual programs, and identifying more strategies to improve funding opportunities.

This approach provided a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities in funding youth-driven initiatives, serving as a basis for formulating effective advocacy strategies.

III. RESULTS

➤ *Understanding the Landscape*

The review of the initial 50 private foundations revealed the diverse focus areas they address, including education, healthcare, gender equality, social justice, community development, and youth empowerment emerging. The table below provides information about these key focus areas, highlighting donor priorities and the distribution of their efforts.

42% of the organizations prioritize education and skill development; specific areas of interest within this category include girls' education, early childhood development, youth livelihoods, and capacity building. This is closely followed by reproductive rights and healthcare at 32%. Gender equality and women's rights were a key priority in 13 of these organizations (26%) with areas of interest including women's empowerment, gender equality, women's rights, gender equity, gender justice, and LGBTQI+ rights. 24% of the foundations focus on social justice and advocacy. Community development initiatives and youth rights emerged as focus areas in 16% (8) and 12% (6) of these 50 foundations respectively. Focus areas with the least focus were Environmental and Climate Initiatives and Humanitarian and Emergency Response at 8% (4 foundations each).

Table 2 Selected Private Foundations and Focus Areas

Monitoring and Evaluation		
	Youth-led Organizations	Donors
Issues	Many youth-led groups face capacity gaps in crucial areas such as monitoring and evaluation, and documentation. These limitations hinder their ability to access funding and effectively implement programs.	Emphasis of traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks on outputs often falls short of capturing the nuanced aspects of youth participation and empowerment. These current measures do not adequately incorporate the perspectives and priorities of young people, who are the primary beneficiaries of the programs being evaluated.
Recommendations	YLOs should invest in building strong organizational systems for the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the organization. This includes establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress and assess impact	Implementing robust, multi-year impact measurement programs is key for demonstrating the success and effectiveness of youth-led initiatives. By collecting comprehensive data over an extended period, organizations can provide concrete evidence of the program's impact and use this information to build a strong case for continued funding and support.

We conducted a further review of these foundations to understand overall commitment to youth-focused programs and YLOs; the contribution of the Global North, specifically the United States and Europe; and the availability of annual reports.

Though 84% of the foundations are dedicated to youth-focused programs and initiatives, only 24% (12 foundations) provide direct support to YLOs. Geographically, there is a concentration of funders in the United States (50%) and Europe (36%), with over half of them (68%) providing funding for initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa. Transparency through annual reporting remains a challenge, with 56% of foundations not producing publicly available reports. Additionally, some foundation websites do not reveal information about their commitment to youth-focused or youth-led initiatives or their geographical locations of focus.

Table 3 Overview of Geographical Diversity, Initiative Focus, and Transparency

Variables	
Number of Selected foundations	50
Geographical Distribution	
United States	25 (50%)
Europe (including the United Kingdom)	18 (36%)
Multiple Locations	7 (14%)
Sub-Saharan Africa Focus	
Yes	34 (68%)
No	9 (18%)
Not specified	7 (14%)
Youth-focused funding	
Yes	42 (84%)
No	3 (6%)
Not specified	5 (10%)
Youth-led organization funding	
Yes	12 (24%)
No	38 (76%)
Not specified	0
Annual Report available	
Yes	22 (44%)
No	28 (56%)

➤ *Review of Annual reports of included foundations*

Out of the 12 foundations that funded YLOs, we included the five foundations that had annual reports available in our final analysis. These reports highlighted a growing emphasis on supporting youth-led initiatives and organizations working to address issues impacting adolescents and young adults around the world. Major funders like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Comic Relief US, the International Youth Foundation (IYF), AmplifyChange, and Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) are recognizing the importance of providing resources directly to youth leaders and groups working at the grassroots level on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), education, gender equality, poverty alleviation, and other critical issues especially across the Global South. These foundations are evolving their grantmaking strategies to provide comprehensive support - combining funding with technical expertise, capacity building, and operational guidance - while partnering directly with youth leaders and grassroots organizations. By centering these actors closest to the challenges, the foundations aim to champion community-driven solutions and strengthen civil society movements working to secure rights, equality, and well-being for young people worldwide. A central theme is the growing prioritization of investing directly in YLOs, young social entrepreneurs, and grassroots movements driven by young people themselves, and efforts to amplify youth voice and foster youth agency. Foundations increasingly recognize young leaders as proximate experts best positioned to identify and address challenges facing their communities.

➤ *Youth Agency, Leadership, and Participatory Grantmaking*

AmplifyChange [24]: The organization's approach, developed over nearly a decade, combines flexible funding with comprehensive organizational strengthening. Their innovative model allows grantees to dedicate up to 40% of budgets to organizational development and provides access to their novel "Circle" platform, which offers over 30 capacity-building courses. What sets AmplifyChange apart is their partnership grants model, which enables established organizations to become grantmakers themselves, effectively decentralizing funding decisions. This approach, while resource-intensive, requires significant infrastructure including dedicated teams for risk assessment, technical assistance, and individualized support, reflecting their commitment to creating sustainable, community-led change rather than simply meeting basic funding requirements.

Comic Relief US [25]: Comic Relief US demonstrates a strong commitment to youth development through their Youth Empowerment pillar, which received \$3.4 million in funding in 2022. Their approach focuses on three key areas: leadership development, economic advancement, and social mobility. Their commitment to youth leadership is further reinforced by their increasing focus on proximate leadership, having increased their funding for Black, Latino, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and locally led organizations. This reflects their belief that "those closest to the problem are closest to the solution," as stated in their CEO's letter. Youth empowerment work at Comic Relief US forms part of a comprehensive

strategy that includes health, education, and safety pillars, all aimed at creating sustainable change for young people and their communities.

International Youth Foundation (IYF) [26]: The International Youth Foundation (IYF) demonstrates a strong commitment to youth empowerment through various structural and programmatic approaches. Their youth-centered strategy is evident in their governance structure, where 25% of their board comprises, young social entrepreneurs serving as full voting members. IYF's funding approach combines direct support with participatory grantmaking. Notable examples include the UP for Change program, supported by Oak Foundation, where young people with learning differences lead the grantmaking process for educational initiatives. IYF's approach is particularly flexible in the private sector context, where they can advocate for youth-led design and implementation. They work to lower barriers for youth-led organizations by providing organizational capacity building, supporting development of M&E systems, and offering technical assistance.

The Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) [27]: The Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) demonstrates a radical approach to youth funding through its commitment to participatory grantmaking and decolonizing traditional funding structures. Their partnership with We Trust You(th) challenges philanthropy to move beyond conventional funding models by implementing youth-driven grantmaking processes. [28] Their approach is characterized by two key elements:

First, CRIF focuses on transforming how funding decisions are made rather than just what gets funded. Through initiatives like their "decolonize!" grantmaking portfolio, they directly confront colonial legacies, anti-Blackness, and adultism in funding practices. This involves humanizing the funding process and reconsidering traditional metrics of success that often prioritize easily measurable outcomes over meaningful youth engagement and empowerment. Second, their work includes challenging foundations to move away from short-term project funding toward more sustainable support that allows youth-led organizations to grow according to their own definitions of success, rather than being forced to mirror traditional NGO structures.

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [29]: According to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's grants database, the foundation has provided significant support to youth-led organizations and initiatives focused on youth empowerment. The foundation's mechanism to funding youth-led organizations is multi-faceted, combining direct support with capacity building. They provide both short-term project grants and longer-term operational support, with many grants including components for organizational development. A notable strategy is their support for youth-led policy and advocacy work, particularly in areas like education reform, sexual and reproductive health, and climate action. The foundation also demonstrates a commitment to supporting youth leadership development through grants that specifically focus on building youth advocacy skills and creating

platforms for youth voices, often complementing these with larger institutional grants to organizations that can provide technical support and infrastructure for youth-led initiatives.

➤ *The Donors' and the Youth-Led Organizations' Perspectives*

• *Overall Funding Trends and Priorities*

We conducted interviews with eight experts representing diverse perspectives on youth initiatives and donor funding. Our panel of interviewees included a scientist specializing in Adolescent Health and Well-being research, two independent consultants (one focusing on foundations and the other on adolescent and youth participation), a grants manager for comprehensive sexuality education and youth-led programs, an associate director for social change, a business development manager, a corporate and foundations partnerships manager and a director of global community investment and youth health programs. These experts, drawn from different organizations and roles, provided a comprehensive view of the current landscape of donor funding patterns and priorities affecting youth-led initiatives.

We gathered insights from four youth leaders representing varied leadership roles from youth-led organizations (YLOs). Our respondents included a co-founder of a YLO, an executive director, a director of programs, and a program assistant. Additionally, we received case studies from five YLOs based in Sub-Saharan Africa. These youth leaders, drawn from different organizations and positions, provided real-world understanding of the realities, challenges and opportunities facing youth-led initiatives seeking donor funding. Their experiences offered valuable perspectives from those directly engaged in grassroots youth advocacy and programming.

The views of the interviewees revealed that funding trends and priorities in adolescent and youth programming have remained relatively stable over the past decade from government and major foundation donors. However, there has been a notable shift towards more holistic, gender-transformative approaches. Rather than focusing solely on girls' or boys' programming, there's a growing emphasis on addressing power dynamics and social norms. Emerging priorities for funding include mental health support, promoting agency and empowerment among adolescents, engaging youth as leaders, and leveraging technology and online platforms to reach young people. Despite these advancements, significant funding gaps persist in areas such as youth-led technology and innovation initiatives, programs fostering agency and empowerment, social protection for youth, and generalizable research evidence. Moreover, adolescent and youth health continue to be under-prioritized compared to other demographic groups, such as maternal and child health and the elderly. Funding for youth-led programming is minimal to non-existent in many contexts, forcing organizations to rely heavily on international donors and UN agencies. Youth leaders also emphasized that their input rarely translates into actual funding decisions or implementation approaches that reflect youth priorities and realities on the ground.

➤ *Recommendations*

- YLOs should prioritize their institutional development by actively seeking opportunities for organizational strengthening and professional development. They should conduct regular organizational assessments to monitor their growth and achievements. YLOs should also engage in and contribute to peer learning networks, sharing their experiences and learning from other organizations.
- Innovative approaches for resource mobilization are necessary to sustain their operations and expand their impact. Beyond traditional fundraising methods, YLOs should explore creative ways to leverage community assets, volunteerism, and in-kind contributions like creating mentorship programs in partnership with entrepreneurs for professional development and networking opportunities.
- Donors should commit to long-term institutional development by providing dedicated funding streams specifically for organizational strengthening. They should invest in innovative evaluation approaches that align with youth program realities, while supporting mentorship programs that build technical expertise. Additionally, donors should fund and facilitate the establishment of peer learning networks that enable knowledge sharing across YLOs. By facilitating connections and knowledge-sharing among organizations, valuable insights and best practices can be exchanged. This collaborative approach helps youth-led NGOs to learn from each other's experiences, identify effective strategies, and overcome common obstacles.
- Intermediary support services should be actively sought to facilitate effective partnerships between donors and youth initiatives. These intermediary partners can provide crucial assistance in areas such as proposal development, financial management, compliance, and reporting - helping youth organizations build their capabilities while ensuring donor requirements are met.

IV. DISCUSSION

This report provides an overview of the funding landscape for youth and adolescent-focused programs, with a specific focus on funding for programming in Sub-Saharan Africa. The report situates its analysis within the broader context of other funding landscapes conducted by the GAGE study [14] and Arutynova et al. [13]

The data analysis of funding patterns reveals that education and skill development are the top focus areas for donors. This is similar to the findings of the GAGE report which found that funding is unequally distributed across sectors, with education receiving the majority while others like economic empowerment and child marriage prevention receive little in comparison.[14] While a majority of the analyzed foundations support youth-focused programs, few directly fund YLOs. However, findings from the literature highlight a growing recognition of the importance of investing in youth-led initiatives, particularly in critical issues like sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, and gender equality.[24][25][26][27][29]

Most foundations included in this review do not produce publicly available annual reports, which poses a challenge for YLOs seeking to access critical information about donors' priorities and requirements. Additionally, there are no centralized resources available that allow YLOs to track funding flows and understand the allocation of resources across different sectors and demographic groups. This finding is consistent with previous literature, emphasizing the challenges in monitoring age-specific funding due to the lack of disaggregated data.[14] To improve transparency and also foster accountability, it is necessary to establish public databases to track funding allocation and monitor which organizations receive foundation grants to provide more information for YLOs and the public. Creating channels for continuous dialogue, feedback, and shared accountability between donors and YLOs is also imperative.

Navigating the intricate application and reporting demands, which emphasize extensive experience and robust financial structures, poses a significant hurdle for new or grassroots YLOs, as echoed in our interview findings. This challenge has impacted the confidence of YLOs in seeking funds from prominent international institutions and prevents large awards from going to youth-led initiatives. This lack of confidence in youth as leaders translates to the prioritization of organizations less connected to the local or youth context as those most qualified for implementing in youth programs [13][28], perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. Donor investment in capacity building for grantee partners and continuous learning for YLOs has been established as a key solution to addressing this challenge.[24] In addition, YLOs can build credibility and trust with donors by establishing organizational systems and strengthening their governance structures. This will enhance accountability and transparency on their part, positioning themselves for greater success in achieving their mission.

Despite the increasing emphasis on localization of grants, as well as the emergence of participatory grantmaking models [27,28], there remains a disconnect between donor priorities and the expressed needs of YLOs. It was reiterated in our findings that while some donors are beginning to embrace participatory approaches to grant-making and program design, some cases have been tokenistic consultations. To ensure that donor investments are aligned with the needs of young people, youth should be in the driver's seat as equal partners. This means moving beyond perfunctory engagement towards models where YLOs are sustainably involved in setting funding priorities, designing programs, and making decisions about resource allocation. The "We Trust You(th)" recommendations emphasized the importance of hiring youth to co-design funding mechanisms and adjusting partnership agreements to be more equitable and non-tokenistic.[28] Moreover, promoting stakeholder collaboration and engaging youth as partners in program design and evaluation can lead to more relevant and impactful interventions.

Unique to this report is the addition of a structured set of recommendations tailored to both funders and YLOs, providing a roadmap for collective action toward a more

equitable and responsive funding ecosystem. This funding landscape for youth and adolescent programs also highlights several key implications and potential next steps for various stakeholders. Funders need to improve transparency to better track funding flows to youth and adolescent programs. They should also critically examine their funding frameworks and decision-making processes to ensure they are grounded in a recognition of youth agency and leadership by establishing platforms for continuous dialogue and mutual accountability with YLOs. Additionally, funders should prioritize meaningful youth engagement and representation within their structures and decision-making bodies.

YLOs are encouraged to strengthen their organizational capacities in areas such as strategic planning, financial management, monitoring and evaluation, and communications by peer networking and investment in professional development to enhance their effectiveness, credibility, and sustainability. They should also proactively seek out networking and collaboration opportunities with other strategic partners such as larger YLOs and civil society allies to increase visibility, access to resources, and collective advocacy efforts. Furthermore, YLOs should engage in capacity building and continuous learning to adapt to evolving challenges and maximize impact, while diversifying their resource mobilization strategies and exploring innovative financing models like leveraging community assets and in-kind contributions to enhance financial resilience and autonomy.

Researchers and advocates play a key role in deepening understanding of the funding landscape. They should facilitate mutual advocacy and learning between funders and YLOs by creating opportunities for collaboration on advocating for shared causes and exchanging knowledge. Moreover, researchers and advocates should monitor and hold funders accountable to their commitments by leveraging their findings to raise public awareness about funders' actions. Policy makers should prioritize youth participation and leadership in policy development and implementation, ensure adequate and sustainable funding for youth programs, and create an enabling environment for YLOs to thrive. Ultimately, realizing the vision of a more equitable, responsive, and transformative funding ecosystem for youth and adolescent programs requires sustained collaboration, learning, and advocacy among all stakeholders, as well as fundamental shifts in power relations and deep institutional and cultural change within funding organizations.

➤ *Study Limitations*

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and recommendations. The scope of the study may be limited, as it focused on a specific set of funding organizations, YLOs, and geographic regions implying that these results are not generalizable. The availability, accessibility, and quality of data on funding flows constrained the funding landscape analysis. Additionally, the study provides a snapshot of the funding landscape at a particular point in time, and the findings do not fully capture evolving trends or emerging challenges. Despite these limitations, this study provides

valuable insights into the current state of the funding landscape for youth and adolescent programs and offers a foundation for further research, dialogue, and action among diverse stakeholders committed to supporting youth-led change.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this analysis of the funding landscape for youth and adolescent programs emphasizes the urgent need for transformative change to support the agency, leadership, and well-being of young people, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. By critically examining the challenges, gaps, and opportunities within the current funding ecosystem, this study provides a compelling case for funders, YLOs, researchers, and advocates to collaborate in reshaping funding approaches, practices, and power dynamics. Through improved transparency, accountability, meaningful youth engagement and representation, and sustained investment in the organizational capacities and resilience of youth-led initiatives, we can work towards a more equitable, responsive, and impactful funding landscape that truly empowers young people as agents of change. Ultimately, realizing this vision requires not only increased resources but also a fundamental shift in mindsets, relationships, and systems – a call to action that demands the collective commitment and bold leadership of all stakeholders invested in the transformative potential of youth-driven change.

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