



# FROM AID TO SOLIDARITY

LOCAL VOICES ON THE FUTURE OF  
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

## REPORT COLLABORATORS

### **RACI (Red Argentina para la Cooperación Internacional/ Argentine Network for International Cooperation)**

is Argentina's national platform of NGOs. RACI brings together Argentine civil society organisations to strengthen their participation in international cooperation, promote democracy and civic space, and advance sustainable development. It serves as a bridge between Argentine CSOs and international networks and policy processes.

**Acápacá** is a platform at the service of Latin American social movements, working to accelerate and achieve change in international cooperation based on principles of decoloniality, feminism, anti-racism, participation, and inclusion. Its mission is to build a new cooperation ecosystem that

is more equitable, decolonial, and feminist, with leadership from the Global South driving systemic change. Acápacá provides training, accompaniment, research, and advocacy, and co-coordinates the Permanent Forum for the Decolonisation of Cooperation with partners across Latin America.

**Global Public Investment (GPI)** is a framework for rethinking international cooperation at a time when traditional aid systems are under strain. The GPI Network convenes governments, civil society, experts, and institutions to build a new approach to international public finance, moving from one directional aid to collective investment in global issues like climate change, health, and inequality.

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The report includes contributions from participants to the online consultation and the validation workshop held by Peace Direct. Where quotes are anonymous, they come from participants who preferred to keep their identities private for personal and/or security concerns. The contents of this report are the responsibility of Peace Direct and should not be taken to represent the views of any other organisation.

Peace Direct would like to extend our gratitude to all participants for their commitment and valuable inputs, and for engaging proactively, with respect and without judgement, in the online consultation. We would particularly like to thank Acápacá and the participants to the consultation organised by the Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation in January 2026. We would also like to thank RACI and the GPI Network for their invaluable support as collaborators.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

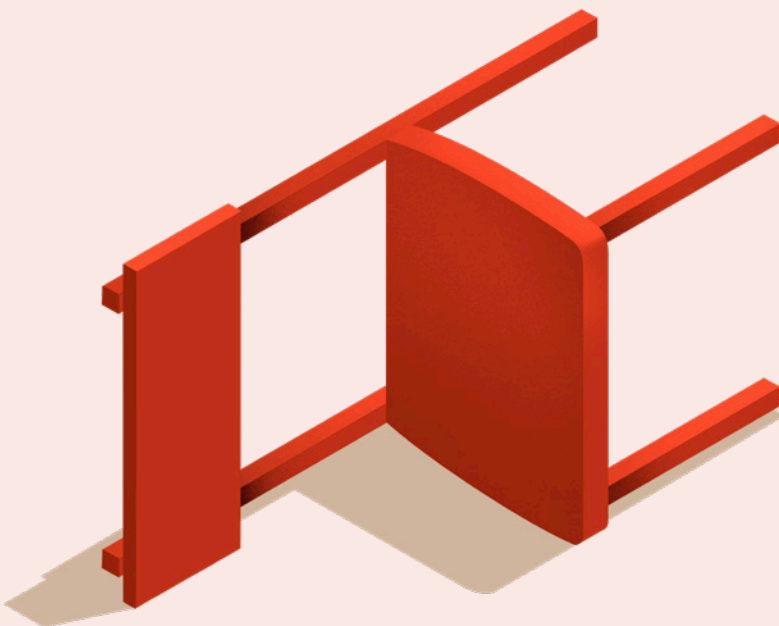
**Sweeping cuts to overseas aid budgets – most significantly the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) at the beginning of 2025 – have provoked a funding crisis across the humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding sectors.**

Thus far, collective responses have largely been shaped by the Global North and focused on preserving the sector as it exists today. By contrast, individuals and networks in the Global South have come to recognise that now is the time to reimagine the future of international cooperation in ways that centre local civil society.

Against this backdrop, Peace Direct convened a two-day online global consultation in September 2025. Over 400 local activists, change-makers and peacebuilders took part, with many more sharing their insights in further discussions hosted by the Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation.

Key takeaways included:

- The collapse of funding has led to a break in trust between local humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding actors and the communities they represent, as well as with Global North-based funders.
- Local communities increasingly view the present moment as a turning point for the traditional aid system, prompting not only anxiety but also a growing hope that Global South actors may be able to reshape the system on new terms.
- It is critical that the sector cast aside the colonial practices and behaviours that continue to push local actors to the margins.



### Why 'aid' is a controversial term

Peace Direct recognises the term 'aid' as controversial, rooted as it is in colonialism and Global North–Global South power dynamics. 'Aid' implies that certain countries are incapable/less capable and need to be helped with handouts. Instead, we recognise that countries need fairness, livelihoods opportunities, and infrastructure and health systems development, amongst many other areas. And these can be done in partnership. As appropriate, we will use the terms 'development' and/or 'humanitarian assistance', or any more relevant term.

For more on Peace Direct's decolonial work, read our 2026 Learning Paper, [Decolonising Peace Direct](#). We acknowledge the BOND anti-racism language guide in helping us develop our thinking on language use.

## Recommendations for Global South actors

- 1. Encourage resource autonomy by diversifying** (e.g. social enterprises) **and recognising non-financial capital** (e.g. skills, knowledge).
- 2. Put communities in the driver's seat through shared governance and accountability** (e.g. assemblies with real authority over priorities). Practice regular, transparent communication with communities.
- 3. Strengthen South–South partnerships, solidarity systems and spaces for creating new cooperation norms.** Cultivate peer networks, build shared curricula and open resources, and establish new spaces for dialogue and collaboration.
- 4. Make care and dignity part of organisational infrastructure.** Normalise staff wellbeing, psychosocial support and mutual aid as non-negotiables.
- 5. Shift the narrative away from aid towards co-investment.** Explore narratives that reframe cooperation around equity, domestic responsibility and co-investment, rather than funder benevolence.
- 6. Insist on local governance of international funding flows.** Champion locally governed pooled mechanisms that ensure money aligns with community priorities and remains predictable.
- 7. Centre local knowledge in multilevel governance spaces.** Invite grassroots representatives to participate in national, regional, South–South and global spaces.

## Recommendations for Global North actors

1. **Address harm with empathy by acknowledging, apologising and repairing.** Offer a full apology for the damage caused by abrupt funding withdrawals and commit to transparent communication, co-created plans and decision-making practices that minimise future harm.
2. **Finance flexible, unrestricted grants grounded in proven local models.** Build on existing evidence of what works for civil society, such as locally governed pooled mechanisms and reverse calls for proposals.
3. **Fund the broader ecosystem rather than isolated actors by resourcing connections, convenings and system builders.** If you cannot fund local civil society directly, support intermediaries capable of playing connector and ecosystem-builder roles.
4. **End stop-start harm by honouring dignified transitions.** Build predictable, co-designed scale-down pathways incorporating transitional support for and transparent communication with communities.
5. **Shift from gatekeeping to protection.** Use political access, platforms and reputation to open space, reduce harm and share risk.
6. **Align narrative and practice by acting on coloniality.** Decentre Global North ideas and assumptions; transfer agenda-setting power and budget control to local partners; and use any available political voice within funders to advocate for locally led decision-making processes.

7. **Reimagine bilateral aid as co-investment in shared stability.** Adopt co-investment models with Global South partners centred on the needs of their communities, and frame investments as strengthening the foundations of security, prosperity and wellbeing across all regions.
8. **Build shared institutional spaces that move beyond funder-led structures.** Support cooperation platforms where Global North actors share decision-making authority with Global South governments and civil society, rather than imposing priorities via bilateral channels.

## Recommendations for Global South and Global North actors

1. **Co-create the new system's norms.** Set ground rules for joint governance, transparency and dignified transitions, so no actor can default to practices that perpetuate harm.
2. **Document, learn and adapt openly.** Share practices from locally led mechanisms and innovative resource-mobilisation models, recognising opportunities for mutual learning.
3. **Centre the new system around solidarity, equity and care.** Focus on community leadership and ensure cooperation stems from values and connections conducive to transformational change.
4. **Commit to partnership models built on co-creation and reciprocity.** Invest time and resources in joint planning, shared governance and transparent communication, thereby rooting relationships in the collective ownership of outcomes.

# INTRODUCTION

**In January 2025, the United States issued an executive stop-work order that precipitated an immediate 90-day freeze on United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded programmes. This was swiftly followed by the agency's complete closure. The resulting funding vacuum in the humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding sectors has been deeply felt by practitioners across the world.**

The abrupt closure of USAID is part of a wider pattern of cuts to overseas aid and foreign assistance. Germany, the United Kingdom and France are among those who have slashed their overseas development assistance (ODA) budgets, with recent data suggesting that 17 of the largest Development Assistance Committee funders will follow suit in 2025–2026.<sup>1</sup>

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**Hundreds of humanitarian and aid projects have shut down, with serious impacts for the millions of people reliant on aid funding for life-saving services.**

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While most of the press attention focused on the loss of 10,000 jobs at USAID, it was civil society in the Global South that experienced the most severe consequences. Hundreds of humanitarian and aid projects have shut down, with serious impacts for the millions of people reliant on aid funding for life-saving services. According to an EPIC-Africa survey, 60% of civil society organisations (CSOs) were forced to suspend or scale back core programmes.<sup>2</sup> By October 2025, the Global Aid Freeze tracker reported 37% of affected organisations were at risk of closure.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Accountability Lab, Humentum and Global Voices, 'Global Aid Freeze Tracker', (2025), [www.globalaidfreeze.com](http://www.globalaidfreeze.com).

<sup>2</sup> EPIC-Africa, *From Fragility to Fortitude: Building Resilient African CSOs in the Wake of the US Government Funding Collapse*, (July 2025), <https://epic-africa.org/report/from-fragility-to-fortitude/>.

<sup>3</sup> Accountability Lab, Humentum and Global Voices, 'Global Aid Freeze Tracker'.

While a consensus has formed on the need to transform foreign aid – including the ‘localisation agenda’ and calls to decolonise aid – there is little agreement on what this entails.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there is recognition that the decline in foreign assistance should be seen as a turning point for the Global South rather than a temporary crisis. In other words, the present moment offers a unique chance to build new systems.<sup>5</sup>

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### **While a consensus has formed on the need to transform foreign aid ... there is little agreement on what this entails.**

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Against this backdrop, Peace Direct held a two-day online consultation in September 2025, aimed at identifying opportunities for transforming the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. It was clear such a wide-ranging topic required a broad range of perspectives, something we bore in mind when inviting contributions from our Global South peers and allies.

The findings from the consultation are presented in two parts. **Part 1** outlines the immediate consequences of the cuts to ODA, including testimonies describing how CSOs, activists and their communities were impacted; the changing relationships between Global North funders and their partners in the Global South; and the adaptation strategies being adopted. **Part 2** then takes a more forward-looking approach, showcasing innovative ways of reducing ODA dependencies, as well as the principles that should underpin a more equitable, locally led system of collaboration between Global South and Global North.

<sup>4</sup> Dave Neiswander, ‘A new era in global aid: why locally led, market-based solutions are the best route to resilience’, World Economic Forum’, (28 April 2025), [www.weforum.org/stories/2025/04/global-aid-new-era-resilience/](http://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/04/global-aid-new-era-resilience/).

<sup>5</sup> Themrise Khan, ‘The end of aid: What the Global South needs to do’, *The New Humanitarian*, (20 May 2025), [www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2025/05/20/end-aid-what-global-south-needs-do](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2025/05/20/end-aid-what-global-south-needs-do).

## Methodology

The report’s findings and analysis are primarily based on an online consultation held via Peace Direct’s dialogue portal, Platform4Dialogue (P4D), on 3–4 September 2025. Over the course of two days, 410 participants spanning six continents and more than 70 countries participated in a series of text-based discussions. Participants working across the development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding sectors debated the impacts of the recent funding cuts, how practitioners have adapted and what the future of aid might look like.

We supplemented this rich discussion with:

- a validation workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, during Peace Connect – an in-person, five-day global gathering in October 2025 facilitated by Peace Direct that brought together local peacebuilders and their allies;<sup>6</sup>
- an online discussion held by the Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of Cooperation in January 2026, which involved consulting Latin American organisations and movements about their experiences of the funding crisis;
- and case studies and contributions from allies and like-minded networks, including the Argentine Network for International Cooperation (Red Argentina para la Cooperación Internacional, RACI), the Reimagining INGO Project (RINGO), the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) and the Global Public Investment (GPI) Network.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see: [www.peacedirect.org/peace-connect/](http://www.peacedirect.org/peace-connect/).

All quotes used in the report are taken from these consultations. Some have been translated from French or Spanish, while others have been edited for clarity and length. Participants granted their consent for publication, with anonymity applied in cases where the individual involved requested their identity be kept private due to personal and/or security reasons. We are deeply grateful to all those who shared their insights, stories and expert analysis.

We remain conscious of the potential tensions arising from authors working for an organisation based in the Global North writing a report based primarily on the experiences, perspectives and expertise of those hailing from the Global South. As such, we have striven to give a faithful, objective representation of the insights shared by participants.

### Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of Cooperation

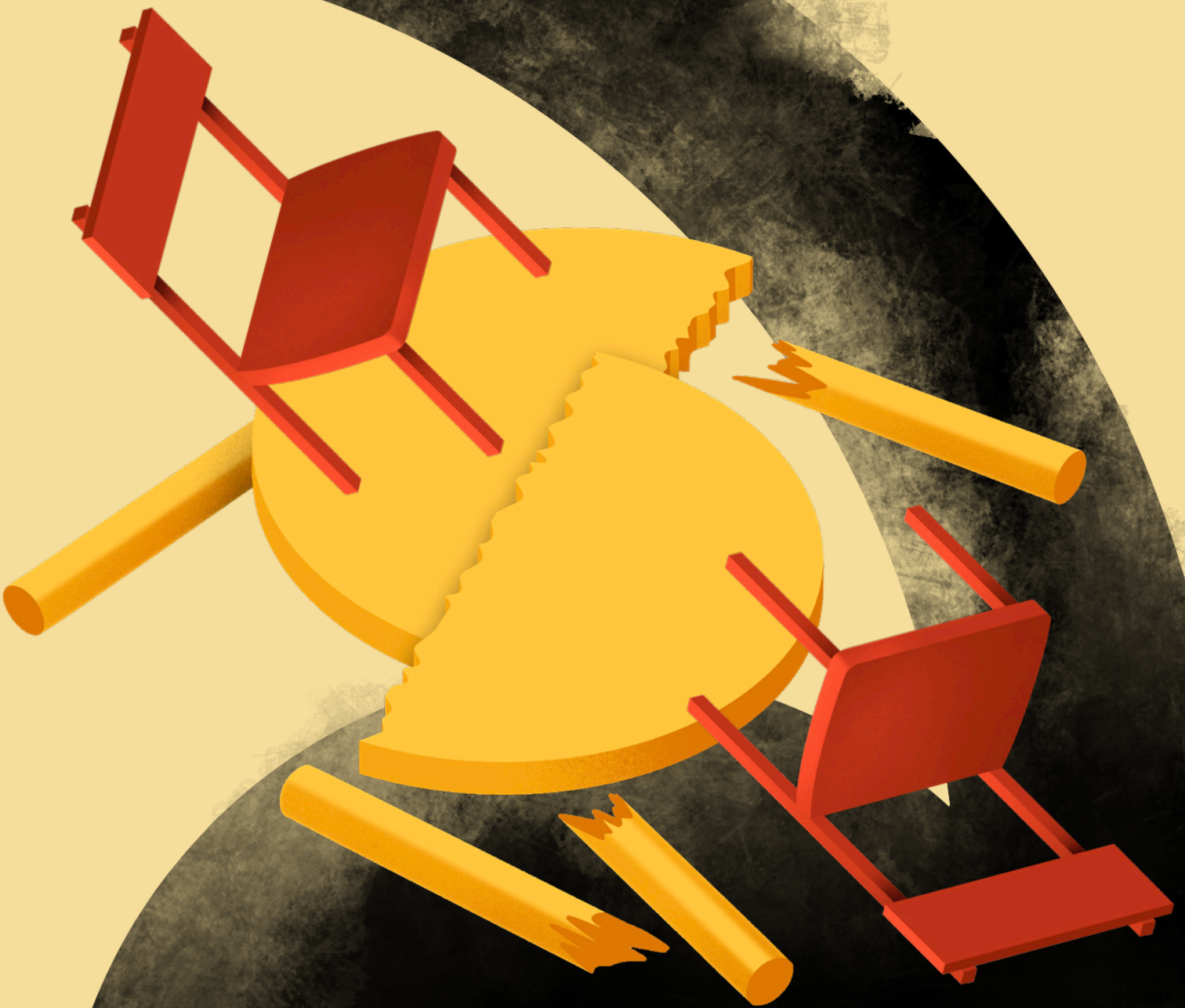
The Permanent Forum is perceived as a space made up of diverse actors who are particularly relevant to the future of cooperation. These actors have been promoting the construction of a movement for the decolonisation of cooperation for over a year, which has enabled them to propose a new paradigm for the sector. The Forum is therefore positioned as a leading platform on these issues, and the experiences and proposals of its members enrich any parallel conversation.

## What is P4D?

Created by Peace Direct, Platform4Dialogue (P4D) is a secure text-based web platform that allows organisations and individuals to exchange ideas and engage in discussion.<sup>7</sup> Initially, P4D was established to help Peace Direct convene local peacebuilders and civil society during times of crisis, where meeting physically might prove too risky or costly. Since its launch in 2017, however, the platform has also been used – by Peace Direct and other organisations around the world – to facilitate global and regional conversations on a wide range of subjects, from the role of young people in peacebuilding to how the United Nations is viewed by local communities.

P4D is designed to be low bandwidth, meaning participants can access it even with poor internet speeds. Conversations on P4D are held asynchronously, allowing participants to read and post comments whenever they are able, and to return to discussion threads over a 2–3 day period. As such, discussants do not need to block out specific times of the day to participate. To support multi-lingual conversations, P4D uses a Google Translate function that enables participants to read and send messages in different languages.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see: [www.platform4dialogue.org](http://www.platform4dialogue.org).



**PART 1**  
**CONSEQUENCES**  
**OF THE**  
**FUNDING CUTS**

## Immediate impacts

**The consultation began with a discussion on the immediate impacts of the recent funding cuts to overseas development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. Participants were able to reflect on and feel through the practical and emotional consequences of the sudden reductions in funding.**

What soon became apparent was the extent to which the cuts had affected local civil society, for the most part based in the Global South. Participants pointed to the immediate suspension of activities, cancelled payments and a rapid downscaling of core services. As Deborah Moraa, who works in Kenya, observed:

*The recent funding cuts have greatly disrupted our work in the Global South, forcing us to scale back programmes, cancel some activities, and leaving communities we serve more vulnerable.*

Another consultation participant, Nimo Ali, Executive Director of the Nairobi-based Candle of Hope Foundation, added:

*I see the impact every day. Programmes being scaled down or back, communities losing vital support, and local organisations like ours struggling to keep initiatives and projects alive. It feels like just when needs are growing, the safety nets are shrinking.*

Such views were backed up during the validation workshop in Nairobi, where 77% of attendees agreed that they or their partners had been negatively impacted by funding cuts from a major Global North funder.

These effects have been felt across various sectors and contexts. In the peacebuilding sector, for example, Papy Kasereka, a local practitioner from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), described how the decision to cease funding has directly affected ongoing peace mediation processes.

*This cessation of activities has created frustration in our communities, as these organisations were already engaged in the process of mediation and peaceful resolution of community conflicts; this freeze has prevented them from keeping their promises to the parties to the conflict following the abrupt freeze. Members of armed groups,*

*who were already sensitised and ready to lay down their arms, have also been forced to leave their cantonment areas and reintegrate into their armed militias due to a lack of funding related to community reintegration activities for detected combatants.*

The effect on communities was repeatedly emphasised by participants. In many instances, vulnerable people in situations of high insecurity have been deprived of essential health services. Here, an EPIC–Africa survey of 550 CSOs found that those working in health and HIV/AIDS accounted for 63% of the organisations hit by funding cuts.<sup>8</sup>

### **In many instances, vulnerable people in situations of high insecurity have been deprived of essential health services.**

During the validation workshop, one participant working in the Central African Republic explained that when USAID rescinded its funding, communities were simply left to their own devices, with few resources:

*Most local organisations were working with INGOs [international non-governmental organisations], so when abrupt funding cessation happened it felt like a breakdown. We used to have transport to hospitals that people would pay for later, but when the funding stopped people asked for payment upfront and hence access to hospitals decreased dramatically and mortality raised. “C’était la mort” [It was like death].*

**“...we were implementing an HIV/AIDS care and prevention project ... supporting inmates and persons with disabilities living with HIV. With the recent cuts, all activities have stopped, and project staff have lost their jobs. This has left highly vulnerable groups without essential care and weakened local capacity.”**

Consultation participant Teddy–Hervé Nkurunziza, national coordinator for the Movement for Community–led Development in Burundi, described how a member organisation was denied the USAID funding it had been anticipating:

*This support would have strengthened the distribution of mosquito nets, access to screening tests, and treatments. The abrupt halt of this funding interrupted this prospect and limited our ability to respond to urgent needs, further exposing children and pregnant women. Other partner organisations in Burundi had to reduce their community health teams or suspend prevention campaigns, leaving entire communities without support in the face of malaria and other preventable diseases.*

Uganda–based consultation participant, Joyce Julian Acoko, who has over 15 years’ experience working with local and national humanitarian actors, spoke in similar terms about how the cessation of funding has affected HIV/AIDS care and prevention:

*As an organisation, we were implementing an HIV/AIDS care and prevention project under the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), supporting inmates and persons with disabilities living with HIV. With the recent cuts, all activities have stopped, and project staff have lost their jobs. This has left highly vulnerable groups without essential care and weakened local capacity.*

<sup>8</sup> EPIC–Africa, *From Fragility to Fortitude*.



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**“In the case of community networks and local organisations I collaborate with, the uncertainty generated by the volatility of external aid has weakened their ability to plan in the medium term. Many projects – particularly in food systems and climate resilience – have been forced to stop just when they were beginning to show results.”**

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The cuts have not only affected ongoing programmes and activities but also damaged many organisations’ ability to plan over the medium to long term. According to Susana Madrigal, a consultation participant who works in Mexico:

*In the case of community networks and local organisations I collaborate with, the uncertainty generated by the volatility of external aid has weakened their ability to plan in the medium term. Many projects – particularly in food systems and climate resilience – have been forced to stop just when they were beginning to show results. This leaves entire communities in a sort of limbo, without the assurance that the processes started will be able to continue.*

What shone through in the testimonies was the humanity underpinning the vast majority of work in the sector. Many participants reported that they or someone they knew was struggling psychologically – whether in the form of fatigue, anxiety or burnout – due to the cuts. Above all else, they were committed to showing empathy to each other, their partners and their colleagues. One consultation participant noted:

*For me, the first response has been to approach colleagues from a place of care. The immediate need is not about jumping to the next job, but about helping them deal with the grief that comes with losing access to what they had built and worked on for years, only to see it disappear overnight.*

Another added:

*Having to explain the sudden loss, while also listening to how it has affected their ability to travel to field sites, continue their projects, or retain their young staff, has been especially painful.*

Such observations are indicative of the psychological toll suffered by many across the wider sector. Another detrimental impact of the cuts has been the breakdown of trust between and within communities. As Prince Charles Dickson, a consultation participant who works in Nigeria, explained:

*Beyond the numbers, it fractured trust within communities who saw us as a reliable bridge. Survival now depends on shrinking budgets, emergency fundraising and leaning more on local solidarity.*

Another consultation participant, Susana Madrigal, added:

*Beyond the economic aspect, what worries me most is the erosion of legitimacy and trust: when donors from the North suddenly withdraw support, local organisations are left exposed to their communities. That loss of credibility is much more difficult to repair than a budget.*

This erosion of trust and legitimacy has lasting consequences, not only for day-to-day activities but also the long-term partnerships formed between and within local civil society.



During the Peace Connect validation workshop, a Haitian practitioner described how communities had grown suspicious of local organisations, suspecting them of conniving with funders to hang on to funds for their own benefit. As a result, communities have started losing trust in not only their local organisations but also the funders themselves. Elsewhere, the words of an anonymous consultation participant suggest this is becoming a more widespread issue:

*Personally, I have found it harder to reassure partners about the reliability of future collaborations involving Global North donors. The trust that once existed is being replaced by caution and scepticism. Partners are increasingly asking: “How do we plan ahead when support can disappear overnight?”*

Participants observed that the collapse in funding has resulted in missed opportunities that extend beyond programming and activity implementation. Many of the available windows for influencing and advocacy have shut, making it exceptionally difficult for Global South activists to make their voices heard. As Saeeda Diep, who works in Pakistan, related:

*In my own experience, I recently reached out for support to attend a peace conference that would have allowed me to represent local perspectives from Pakistan. Unfortunately, I did not receive a positive response. [...] This illustrates how reduced support not only weakens organisational capacity but also limits opportunities for voices from the Global South to be heard in international spaces where decisions about our futures are being shaped.*



Some participants noted that the lack of funding is exposing – and in some cases widening – the gap between local actors. Competition for jobs has increased. While those with foreign language skills, a familiarity with technology, or experience with technical requirements have managed to transition into alternative roles, others have been forced out of the sector completely. As Mexico-based consultation participant Bárbara Lazcano stated:

*It’s not just the flow of funds that is reduced and a greater number of competitors as you have mentioned, but also how colonial and racist structures are embedded on who gets what little available jobs there are. I live in southern Mexico and can see the great disadvantages for organisations and people who are not fluent in English now more than ever before, or whose practices and culture are further from certain technical skills demanded by the North’s vision of what ‘professionalism’ means (everything from mastering logical frameworks, to the specialised language of the sector, to specialised software). Those who lost their jobs and who often mediated between all this and small community organisations are now in no position to support local movements, or are leaving the sector entirely.*

This speaks to the sector’s wider structural flaws, as highlighted in the *Time to Decolonise Aid* report: many NGOs have reverted to hiring people with technical expertise over contextual experience, which ultimately advantages international, rather than local, candidates.<sup>9</sup> Thus, policies, concepts and practices are frequently being developed in geographical – and often cultural – contexts far removed from the places they are being implemented. Ultimately, this further widens the gap between practitioners and the communities they supposedly serve.

<sup>9</sup> Peace Direct, *Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and Lessons From a Global Consultation* (May 2021), [www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/](http://www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/).

## Strained Global South–Global North relations

Throughout the opening day of the online consultation, participants spoke of the changing relationship between local civil society in the Global South and their Global North partners. Here, they placed the recent funding cuts in the context of a shifting political climate among funder countries, with several participants drawing a link to wider neocolonial dynamics.

Participants reported how their relations with Global North–based partners became strained in the wake of the cuts. For many, the abruptness with which funding was removed, with barely any forewarning, precipitated a breakdown in trust. Relationships previously viewed as an alliance of equals were undermined by feelings of betrayal and abandonment. For Deborah Moraa:

*These decisions have reduced my trust in Global North governments and donors, as the sudden withdrawal felt unfair and showed shifting priorities away from supporting those most in need. I now place more trust in local and regional actors who remain committed despite limited resources.*

Another participant, Nche Wilfred, agreed:

*As someone working in the Global South, particularly in Cameroon, these decisions by Global North governments led to a significant erosion of trust in their commitment to supporting the most vulnerable populations. The abrupt withdrawal of funding, particularly when local communities are in a crisis situation, is kind of seen as a betrayal.*

This has led many to question the very foundations upon which their partnerships had been built. As Joyce Julian Acoko put it:

*These funding cuts have shaken my perception of Global North governments and donors. While we valued their past support, the abrupt withdrawal*

*without measures to safeguard vulnerable communities has eroded trust. It feels as though the lives of people we serve, such as inmates and persons with disabilities living with HIV, are secondary to shifting political priorities. My trust is increasingly shifting towards local and regional actors, including African–led networks, community–based organisations, and domestic institutions that remain present even when international funding is pulled.*

Several participants criticised the seemingly indiscriminate process and lack of humanity guiding the funding cuts. Aluel Atem, who works in Sudan, commented:

*What made this extremely disruptive was the dehumanising and undignified way it was done, especially with the USAID cuts. For communities that are internally displaced due to conflict or climate crisis, or externally displaced in the neighbouring countries who largely depend on humanitarian services for the most basic needs such as food and healthcare, the impact has been devastating, because there was no anticipation for this or any transition. I worked with a US INGO, and our partners have just been left hanging since the stop–work orders. There has not been any opportunity to close things out properly.*

Muacha Hamasaka, while acknowledging that the funding cuts had taken place against the backdrop of a global economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID–19 pandemic, pointed to the ruthlessness of the decision–making process:

*The decision by economic powers to suspend their financial aid is not the main problem; rather, it is the brutality with which this decision was made.*



**“The indignity of the situation lies in it being an explicit recognition on how these ‘partnerships’ never really evolved towards horizontal and true alliances. If elements like justice, equality and human dignity can be so easily removed from the policies of the Global North, were they ever truly concerns in the first place?”**

Bárbara Lazcano agreed, questioning the underlying values and motivations of many in the Global North:

*The indignity of the situation lies in it being an explicit recognition on how these ‘partnerships’ never really evolved towards horizontal and true alliances. If elements like justice, equality and human dignity can be so easily removed from the policies of the Global North, were they ever truly concerns in the first place?*

Christian Elongue, who works in Cameroon, summarised his perspective as follows:

*My trust hasn’t shifted; it was never fully there. The termination of my contract with an INGO for presenting honest community feedback confirmed that many donors value comfortable narratives over transformative truth. This crisis merely reveals the existing colonial structure.*

At the same time, several participants were keen to point out that individuals and organisations in the Global South also bore some responsibility, having become over-reliant on foreign assistance and falling into

a pattern of dependency. On this point, an anonymous participant reflected:

*Many CSOs in Cameroon, particularly in the Anglophone regions, may have felt a sense of reliance on international partners, not only for financial support but also for their advocacy power and legitimacy. The sudden freeze could lead to deep frustration and disillusionment, as these organisations feel that they are being abandoned when they need help the most.*

Similar sentiments were expressed during the validation workshop by an anonymous participant who posed the question: If USAID brought back their funding tomorrow, how many would accept the funding? They answered their own question with: “The reality is that most of us would.”

### **If USAID brought back their funding tomorrow, how many would accept [it]?**

Moreover, some participants alluded to certain Global South-based actors as having failed to truly shift power to local actors, despite being in positions of importance. Here, Ammaarah Nilafdeen, who works in Sri Lanka, remarked:

*The recent funding cuts have only reaffirmed my longstanding scepticism about the increased dependency on actors in the Global North. Unfortunately, this outcome was long in the making and perhaps inevitable. What makes the situation more concerning is that some of those enabling these disastrous effects are local actors in positions of power who worked closely with foreign aid organisations. They were unable or unwilling to effectively localise projects or provide meaningful support. If localisation had been carried out more genuinely, the scale of the current fallout would likely have been far less severe. Therefore, while it is important to speak of the losses caused by these funding cuts, we must also be critical of those among us who contributed to this situation.*



Echoing these thoughts, consultation participant Lizz Harrison commented from a Global North perspective:

*Shouldn't we have been preparing for this shift for the last decade? Particularly those that made commitments at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2026 (e.g. Grand Bargain, Charter for Change).*

This points to broader concerns about the movement to shift power and resources to local actors. In particular, it begs the question of how the Global North has failed to prepare for this shift, and what needs to change if the needs of local actors are to be best served.

## Adaptation and resilience

As well as documenting the negative impacts of the recent funding cuts, participants highlighted the many ways in which local actors have adapted. Although significant gaps in assistance remain, participants have shown considerable resilience, drawing on their own traditions of mutual aid and locally led problem-solving.

For most individuals and organisations, the initial priority was stabilising core work while managing the immediate impacts of the cuts. They framed this moment as an operational 'reset', giving them the opportunity to clarify their mandates, slow non-essential work and protect frontline capacity. Consultation participant Amit Kumar Singh noted how many local organisations, "Shift[ed] to a leaner operational model, relying more on local volunteers, pro bono expertise and digital tools to sustain outreach."

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**“Shouldn't we have been preparing for this shift for the last decade? Particularly those that made commitments at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2026...”**

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Nigeria-based Benjamin Osawe reflected on his own experience:

*As an organisation, we have integrated annual horizon and futures scanning which enables us to track emerging drivers of change and develop probable futures, scenarios and possible actions and pathways. So we have been able to adapt better to the changes in the global landscape by not panicking but going back to the reflections we have had in our horizon scan and futures exercise, which pointed to possibilities of emerging changes and the need for us to raise platforms of INGOs to interface with the major strategic platform of the private sector in Nigeria.*

Many participants explained that local organisations have drawn on the experience and wisdom gained from previous crises to build contingency plans, diversify revenue streams, develop peer support and establish volunteer networks to keep essential services going. Here, consultation participant Sylvestre Nshimirimana observed:

*One of the most significant measures we took was to change the status of our field teams: several members who were previously salaried are now engaged as volunteer field supervisors. This change, although difficult, allowed us to maintain an active and continuous presence with the communities we support, while preserving the essence of our commitment and the quality of our support.*



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**“We have learned to look beyond traditional monetary aid and actively seek non-financial support, which has proven to be just as critical. This includes skilled volunteers, in-kind donations of equipment, and pro bono services such as legal and financial consulting. This approach has allowed us to sustain operations and build our internal capacity without a heavy financial burden.”**

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Another anonymous participant implemented a ‘bootstrapping’ model that applied the limited resources available to the most critical needs. In doing so, he learned two valuable lessons, the first of which was:

*Prioritising non-financial support: We have learned to look beyond traditional monetary aid and actively seek non-financial support, which has proven to be just as critical. This includes skilled volunteers, in-kind donations of equipment, and pro bono services such as legal and financial consulting. This approach has allowed us to sustain operations and build our internal capacity without a heavy financial burden.*

The second lesson was:

*Focusing on community resilience: We have focused our programmes on providing essential resources to our communities, such as mindfulness toolkits and career coaching, to help them cope with stress and build resilience during these challenging times.*

Several participants gave examples of how they had raised local-level financial resources by incentivising self-reliance. This kick-started a cyclical effect promoting both financial independence and local ownership. Elaborating on his earlier comments, Sylvestre Nshimirimana reflected:

*Historically, our organisation has long depended on aid granted by Northern partners. However, as early as 2014, we began a strategic transition by preparing young beneficiaries to become more autonomous. We gradually integrated income-generating activities into our citizenship programmes, encouraging young people to organise into solidarity and mutual credit groups. This approach allowed them not only to strengthen their civic engagement but also to improve their economic resilience [...] and reduce their dependence on external funding.*

Joyce Julian Acoko summed up the experiences of many in the consultation vis-à-vis attracting local philanthropists and private funders:

*The loss of funding forced us to mobilise communities more actively and strengthen self-reliance initiatives, rather than depending solely on external support. It encouraged us to advocate more strongly with the government to take responsibility for disaster response and prevention, and to start building links with local philanthropists and domestic partners. Most importantly, it pushed us to create community structures like the MegoMakwiny Restorative Group, which have increased local accountability and ownership.*

These testimonies go some way to highlighting the positive aspects of locally owned efforts at mobilising resources. The participants’ thoughts on the long-term sustainability of these practices will be expanded on in Part 2.

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**“The loss of funding forced us to mobilise communities more actively and strengthen self-reliance initiatives...”**

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**“...although the funding cuts were painful, they pushed us to rediscover indigenous resilience methods and to deepen South–South cooperation.”**

Partnerships have proved crucial in helping organisations navigate the turbulence caused by the funding cuts. Many participants seized the opportunity to turn to domestic expertise, develop solidarity-based models, and build South–South partnerships. In this respect, Amit Kumar Singh explained:

*Yes, although the funding cuts were painful, they pushed us to rediscover indigenous resilience methods and to deepen South–South cooperation. We found unexpected opportunities to build more horizontal partnerships with peer organisations, which felt less extractive and more reciprocal compared to traditional Global North–Global South relationships.*

Consultation participant Kaltumi Abdulazeez, founder of Nigerian NGO Ladies Empowerment Goals and Support Initiatives (LEGASI), added:

*Together we are forced to innovate, looking inward, pooling community resources, reviving traditional strategies of conflict resolution and building resilience from the ground up. This collective adaptation deepens solidarity among Global South networks, but it is also a sobering reminder that the global aid system, as it stands, remains ill-equipped to truly empower the very people most capable of transforming their communities.*

Participants described how, alongside these South–South partnerships, certain Global North individuals and organisations have also stepped up to support local civil society. In this regard, participants expressed that although the Global North more generally must be held accountable for the funding cuts, many of their individual partners remain committed. Amit Kumar Singh described the contrasting responses of the Global North-based partners he works with:

*The response from Global North partners has been mixed. While some cut support abruptly, others adjusted by offering more flexible grant terms, reduced reporting burdens, and quicker disbursements to allow us to manage cash flow. The most supportive partners were those who opened genuine dialogue with us and treated us as co-strategists rather than sub-contractors. Where this occurred, we could jointly design more sustainable, community-driven interventions despite reduced budgets.*

Another participant, Bangladesh-based Charles Amit Francis, gave his perspective on working with Global North partners:

*Some partners have shifted their focus to provide more flexible funding options, allowing us to allocate resources where they are most urgently needed. This flexibility has been crucial for maintaining essential programmes and ensuring that we can respond to the immediate needs of our communities. Additionally, several Global North organisations have engaged in open dialogue with us, seeking our input on how they can better support our efforts during this challenging time. This collaborative approach has reinforced our relationships and built trust. Some partners have initiated capacity-building initiatives, offering training and resources to help us develop sustainable practices and diversify our funding sources. This investment in local capabilities has empowered us to become more resilient and self-sufficient. [...] The willingness of some Global North partners to engage and find solutions has been a valuable lifeline, enabling us to navigate this difficult landscape more effectively.*



While some in the Global North have afforded greater flexibility to their partners by disbursing smaller, faster grants, others have focused their assistance on advocacy, research and fundraising. Nigeria-based Jacob Choji Pwakim, in discussing his youth-oriented peacebuilding initiative YIAVHA, said:

*We have some who provide pro bono support in the development of fundraising strategy, research and other systems. This can be done by big platforms as a way of supporting localisation.*

Nevertheless, the general sentiment among participants was that they were receiving little to no help from the Global North. In light of this, they urged partners to focus on local priorities, reduce administrative burdens and avoid stop-start cycles. Similar demands had already been made in the May 2025 Stand with Civil Society letter, which saw 12 global civil society networks and organisations issue a joint statement calling on funders and policymakers to support local civil society, express solidarity, and commit to systems change. Since its launch, the statement has garnered over 750 signatures from diverse organisations, networks, groups and individuals – testament to how widely these sentiments resonate across the world.<sup>10</sup>

**...the general sentiment among participants was that they were receiving little to no help from the Global North. In light of this, they urged partners to focus on local priorities, reduce administrative burdens and avoid stop-start cycles.**

**“Out of the many negative stories, one positive thing that has emerged is seeing how people are reimagining what support could look like, both now and in the future. This has taken the form of innovative organising, building solidarity and movements, and collaborating with organisations that were once seen as competitors in the field.”**

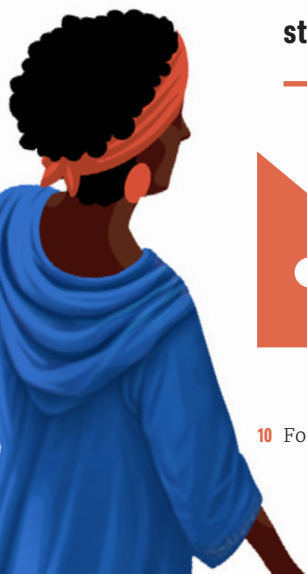
Even so, many participants saw the present period of uncertainty as an apt moment to cast aside the unfavourable, often colonial practices that keep local actors on the margins. An anonymous consultation participant exemplified such views when she said:

*I think it’s a welcome development because usually such funds come with unspoken conditions. You are expected to accept norms and lifestyles that are anti-African. Most international jobs or consultancy come with some conditions that are uncomfortable to most Africans. We usually accept them because we do not have a choice.*

On taking the opportunity to reimagine the future of international cooperation, one anonymous consultation participant asserted:

*Out of the many negative stories, one positive thing that has emerged is seeing how people are reimagining what support could look like, both now and in the future. This has taken the form of innovative organising, building solidarity and movements, and collaborating with organisations that were once seen as competitors in the field.*

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see: [www.standwithcivilsociety.org/](http://www.standwithcivilsociety.org/).



Speaking from the perspective of a Global North actor working closely with Global South partners, Lizz Harrison added:

*This cut in international aid has been really difficult in particular because some of it was immediate (like the USAID stop-work orders) and did not allow for a phase-out or transition to locally led approaches. While this paradigm shift might be the opportunity we need to reduce the size and scope of large international NGOs and UN agencies that still do direct implementation, to allow more space and leadership for local actors, it has been so sudden that there was not time to prepare adequately.*

Overall, participants described a sector that has responded with resilience to the shock of recent funding cuts: streamlining operations, mobilising volunteers, drawing on community

networks, and strengthening South–South and selective North–South partnerships. These adaptations, rooted in experiences of past crises and longstanding traditions of mutual aid, have helped local organisations stabilise essential work and protect relations with communities.

Even so, the disruption wrought by the cuts has spotlighted deeper frustrations with an unreliable and often inequitable aid system. As such, space has opened up for reimagining what comes next. Building on the adaptive practices touched on above, Part 2 reveals how local civil society is setting its sights on the long term. This rapidly approaching future will involve seeking alternative resources, redefining partnerships and constructing a more just, locally led model of international cooperation.





**PART 2**  
**REIMAGINING**  
**AID AND**  
**COOPERATION**

## Alternative resourcing

**As outlined in Part 1, the recent funding cuts have led local organisations in the Global South not only to pursue short-term adaptation but also to reconsider their longer-term approach. One thing the current crisis has made clear is that local organisations will need to be better prepared if they are to avoid a similarly harsh fate in future.**

To this end, participants rejected the blind deference shown to external cycles and called for locally led resource-mobilisation models to be centred instead. Justin Musafiri summed up this way of thinking:

*In this ‘post-aid’ world, the question is not whether aid will disappear, but rather how countries in the South can build solid alternatives and reinvent their relations with the North. This means that local organisations must learn to build their projects from nearby resources: community contributions, local economies, regional partnerships, and even pan-African solidarity. These mechanisms create a stable base, reducing dependence on external funding. In this way, sustainable sourcing becomes not only a survival strategy, but above all a guarantee of autonomy and continuity for our initiatives.*

Various examples of emerging, homegrown methods of mobilising resources were shared during the consultation. For instance, Patient Kalimbiro described the forward-looking approach taken by DRC-based organisation LIMA RESILIENCE:

*To respond to these budget cuts, LIMA RESILIENCE ... has focused on local income-generating activities. We train returnees and group them into village savings and credit associations so they can develop their self-sufficiency. We then support our beneficiaries involved in agriculture in choosing food products with high production capacity that sell quickly on the market. More than 80% of the staff are now volunteers.*

Ghana-based Daniel Enock Manoba shared another example:

*Since the cut in major funding, we have resorted to generating funds internally through donations from religious bodies, political leaders, and*

*individuals. We have also developed a method of turning most of our ideas into businesses. Through this, we hope to generate income in the near future to support communities. Our new initiative, where we are training youths in agriculture and the charcoal business, is set to generate large-scale funding in the next five years.*

Social enterprises were frequently mentioned as a popular and successful means of providing for communities, as well as nurturing local skills. Participants in both the consultation and the validation workshop noted that this approach has mobilised individuals into providing communal services, such as collective farming or cutting weaves.

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**“When our office was at risk of closure, I reached out to various non-USA-based organisations and local philanthropists, but the response was one of silence or disinterest.”**

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A common thread in discussions was the renewed value of non-monetary resources, especially at the community level. Here, investments in non-financial capital such as volunteers and networks, local knowledge and trusted relationships were cited. Kenya-based consultation participant Lilian Ngige, founder of Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security Africa (AWAPSA), shared her organisation’s approach:

*As for small community contributions, we’ve encouraged them by being transparent about how even modest inputs make a difference. Sometimes it’s not financial; people offer meeting space, food, or time. While these resources are not always predictable, they do strengthen sustainability in the sense that they root the work locally and reduce overdependence on external funding. They are not a replacement for larger funding streams, but they provide a stable foundation that keeps momentum alive even when donor cycles fluctuate/ends.*

Meanwhile, Ruei Hoth Gony related that when USAID funding was cut in South Sudan, the local organisation turned to:

*[...] the idea of ‘asset-based community development’ – the notion of appreciating our local expertise, community food and traditional tools such as canoes instead of asking for large funding to procure motorised speedboats in order to operate in the Sudd wetland. The locally driven contributions, collaboration instil ownership and permanent knowledge and skills ever present in the community.*

The validation workshop participants shared similar views. In doing so, however, they noted how difficult it is to mobilise community-level funding in Africa, where conflict, natural disasters or epidemics often constrain what limited capacities and resources there are.

Other testimonies during the consultation touched on the difficulties of building local partnerships when there is a misalignment of values. Saeeda Diep described the obstacles

faced in seeking funding for secular peace initiatives:

*When our office was at risk of closure, I reached out to various non-USA-based organisations and local philanthropists, but the response was one of silence or disinterest. The local philanthropists, in particular, were not interested in supporting an organisation that advocates for secularism, minority rights, and speaks against forced conversions, as their giving is often driven by faith-based priorities that differ from our mission.*

Some local actors reported that raising awareness among communities about generating their own resources is a challenge in itself. More specifically, socialising the concept and practice of community philanthropy is frequently difficult because, as Ogenyi Morris – a consultation participant working in Uganda – put it, “The community is used to receiving as opposed to giving, it will take time for a mind shift.” A similarly minded participant in the validation workshop noted that if communities were more accustomed to such ideas, they would be better prepared for sudden changes in the external funding situation.

Offering a more positive perspective on the challenges of raising funds locally, consultation participant Elizaphan Ogechi, Executive Director of Nguzo Africa Community Foundation, noted that community fundraising nurtures long-term ownership over local initiatives:

*Sustainable mobilisation of local resources through community giving may seem difficult and time consuming, but it helps organisations to be more connected, transparent, and focused on addressing immediate community needs. Local giving builds trust, urgency and agency. It helps to know your people – business community supporters, leaders, professionals and peers who are ready to support your mission impact.*

The work of the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) demonstrates why community philanthropy matters more than ever amid foreign aid cuts. Through investing in locally rooted organisations and strengthening community decision-making, GFCF is helping communities find ways of insulating themselves from the vagaries of volatile external funding. The Measuring What Matters initiative, for instance, saw 22 partners from 17 countries collaborate on developing values-based ways of assessing impact, challenging extractive evaluation systems, and strengthening community-level agency, dignity and collective power.

Several consultation participants reflected on how the present moment offers an opportunity to ensure local ownership is embedded in what remains of international funding. Here, Lizz Harrison pointed to Ukraine:

*[...] where a national network of local NGOs/CSOs and a new Ukraine NGO that is focusing on the due diligence have established a pooled fund which will be accessible only to local and national organisations. [...] it's called the Ukraine Pooled Fund (UPF) and you can find all the information from the lead National Network of Local Philanthropy Development (NNLPD).<sup>11</sup>*

Another example is RINGO's innovative ‘reverse call for proposals’ approach, now under its second prototype iteration. Under the system, local organisations issue a call for proposals to international actors interested in providing support for locally determined endeavours. They then vet (through networks) the potential funders and INGOs, taking care to ensure they are willing and able to meet local needs.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see: [www.philanthropy.com.ua/en/projects/ukraine-pooled-fund/](http://www.philanthropy.com.ua/en/projects/ukraine-pooled-fund/).

<sup>12</sup> RINGO Project, *The Reverse Call for Proposals: A Summary of Learnings From the Prototyping Process*, (February 2025), <https://ringoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/RINGO-Case-Study-Reverse-Call-for-Proposals.pdf>.

## Reimagining the sector

Against a backdrop of political polarisation, declining solidarity in the North and a global crackdown on civic space, Global South communities increasingly view the traditional aid system as having reached a tipping point.

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**...Global South communities increasingly view the traditional aid system as having reached a tipping point.**

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This potentially transformational moment is characterised by both anxiety at what is being lost and a growing hope that Global South actors can assume a meaningful role in reshaping the system.

On this point, discussants involved in the online event organised by the Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation stressed that the current funding crisis, rather than being an isolated phenomenon, is closely linked to other detrimental processes, such as restrictions on civil society participation, repression of social movements and growing militarism.



## THE PERMANENT LATIN AMERICAN FORUM FOR THE DECOLONISATION OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation is a regional platform coordinated by Acápacá – encompassing Latin America and the Caribbean – bringing together Indigenous and Afro-descendant movements; feminist and environmental organisations; campesinos networks; academic institutions; and allied funders in 22 countries. It is driven by organisations such as the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), Latindadd, the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies (INESC), the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo and the Indigenous Coordinating Coalition Abya Yala, along with several women's and grassroots federations. Approximately 350 organisations have already joined, and there are plans to grow this figure to at least 500 in the upcoming phase.

The Forum is widely regarded as one of the most participatory, grassroots-driven regional processes currently shaping debates around international cooperation. Created in the wake of the 2024 Lima Declaration and strengthened at the 2025 Bogotá convening, it serves as a collective space for rethinking international cooperation, taking care to foreground the perspectives of the region's social movements.

Operating on the basis of a defined governance structure and thematic working groups, the Forum is currently developing a range of political positioning papers and advocacy strategies. Subjects include funder

practices, financing architectures and the role of intermediaries within the cooperation system. From the outset, the Forum has positioned itself as not merely a critic of the existing global aid system, but an architect of its replacement. In doing so, it argues that traditional cooperation – dominated by external agenda-setting, short-term project cycles and upward accountability – is no longer sustainable.

Shrinking budgets, combined with a turn towards militarised responses in the Global North, have only intensified these structural crises. In response, the Forum is looking to redefine the very foundations of international cooperation, sweeping paternalism and technocratic interventionism aside in favour of justice, sovereignty and solidarity.

This paradigm shift is articulated through the Cooperación Solidaria model, the offspring of wide-ranging consultations with regional movements. Rather than viewing cooperation as an act of charity, the model redefines the concept as a political and ethical practice grounded in historical, climatic, racial, gender and economic justice. Ecological survival and planetary interdependence also lie at the heart of the Forum's call for global co-responsibility. In this way, Global South communities are re-centred as political subjects capable of defining their own priorities and decision-making processes, with care and mutual commitment the new relational foundation of cooperation.

## THE PERMANENT LATIN AMERICAN FORUM FOR THE DECOLONISATION OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION *continued*

The Forum makes no claims to Cooperación Solidaria being a finalised model. Instead, it is being developed as an iterative process informed by regional consultations.

Nevertheless, the principles it embodies are intended to guide concrete governance, accountability and financing mechanism reforms. These will be operationalised via a new architecture of cooperation.

Towards this end, the Forum is working to redistribute power to communities; cultivate horizontal, decolonised partnerships; and promote financing mechanisms that deliver the majority of resources directly to local actors.

The model not only strengthens downward accountability through community-led monitoring but also requires NGOs, agencies and funders to transform their internal governance and transparency practices.

In parallel, the Forum is exploring complementary mechanisms such as locally governed pooled funds, regional accountability instruments, and political position papers that translate these principles into actionable reforms.

**The model not only strengthens downward accountability through community-led monitoring but also requires NGOs, agencies and funders to transform their internal governance and transparency practices.**

Taken together, these proposed transformations offer a coherent, ambitious blueprint for reimagining international cooperation as a practice rooted in justice and collective sovereignty. Alongside this, the Forum is developing positionings on several key structural issues, including the political definition of decolonisation, the role of INGOs, funder practices, and financing strategies for Global South civil society. These positionings will act as advocacy tools in discussions with international actors during the current period of transition.

There was recognition among the consultation's local actors that they can no longer trust the aid system as they used to, with Papy Kasereka exemplifying such views:

*Today, in the West, priorities have changed! In addition to defence, security, immigration, identity withdrawal, competitiveness, the need to resist increasingly fierce competition, etc., are all arguments that call into question international solidarity as it was conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this context, a profound transformation of the aid sector is essential.*

Given this, testimonies focused primarily on shifting to a new mindset in which international aid is but one of several ways to achieve common goals. As Beka Feathers put it:

*I'm not sure that a 'post-aid' system is the best framing, since money from donor countries will continue to be a necessary and important component of the international system for some time. Perhaps it's more useful to discuss a 'post-aid only' system that recognises aid from foreign governments as only one element of a more equitable and locally led approach to development and change?*

Over 60% of participants at both the consultation and the validation workshop agreed with this view.

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**“For me, a reimagined system shouldn’t be aid-based but rooted in mutual solidarity and co-investment. It inverts the current model: Southern actors are the primary architects, setting agendas based on community-defined priorities.”**

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There was also general agreement that funder-driven agendas, short-term projects and burdensome compliance requirements should be consigned to the past. Participants called for performative partnerships to be replaced by genuinely co-governed approaches, with accountability, transparency and predictability preferred over stop-start cycles and top-down agendas. While these asks are hardly new – many have already been discussed in Peace Direct’s previous reports – the consultation pointed to a renewed emphasis on how decisions are made, by whom, and with what accountability.<sup>13</sup> As Christian Elongue put it:

*For me, a reimagined system shouldn’t be aid-based but rooted in mutual solidarity and co-investment. It inverts the current model: Southern actors are the primary architects, setting agendas based on community-defined priorities. Funding should be predominantly local, pooled, and unrestricted, flowing through mechanisms like community foundations. Global North actors, in this future, are invited partners, not gatekeepers, who contribute resources on terms set by the Global South.*

Honduras-based Dennis Castillo Fuentes linked this directly to a new dynamic of resource mobilisation:

*[...] we seek to move from a welfare-based relationship to a partnership of shared responsibility and horizontality, where the Global North supports but does not condition the Global South’s ability to sustain its own resource-mobilisation strategies.*

Beyond better resource mobilisation, a systemic approach to international cooperation that regards sustainability as both a precondition and goal is needed. Guillermo Correa, Executive Director of the Argentine Network for International Cooperation (RACI), noted that:

*[...] sustainability cannot be treated as an individual organisational challenge. Too often, civil society is expected to ‘fix’ sustainability through diversification or efficiency, without addressing the broader conditions that undermine long-term work. From where we sit, sustainability is inseparable from how cooperation is designed: how funding is structured, how risk is distributed and who gets to make decisions. Without changes at that level, organisations will continue to operate in survival mode rather than being able to invest in long-term impact.*

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**“From where we sit, sustainability is inseparable from how cooperation is designed: how funding is structured, how risk is distributed and who gets to make decisions. Without changes at that level, organisations will continue to operate in survival mode...”**

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<sup>13</sup> Peace Direct, *Race, Power, and Peacebuilding: Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation*, (April 2022), [www.peacedirect.org/race-power-and-peacebuilding/](http://www.peacedirect.org/race-power-and-peacebuilding/); Peace Direct, *Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation: A Practical Resource for Civil Society, Donors, INGOs and Intermediaries*, (September 2023), [www.peacedirect.org/transforming-partnerships/](http://www.peacedirect.org/transforming-partnerships/); Peace Direct, *Time to Decolonise Aid*.

## THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: LESSONS FROM A SYSTEM UNDER PRESSURE

By Guillermo Correa, Founder and Executive Director of RACI

The current moment in international cooperation has made one thing very clear: the status quo is far more fragile than previously assumed. Relatively quickly, longstanding funding streams have contracted, political contexts have hardened and many CSOs have found themselves operating under intense pressure. Some have not managed to survive, and that reality needs to be acknowledged openly.

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**Across regions, organisations are adjusting course, making difficult decisions and finding practical ways to keep going. In this context, strength is not an abstract idea. It manifests in how organisations adapt when resources shrink, redefining priorities and refusing to step away from missions that matter deeply to communities.**

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However, this moment has also shown us that civil society is not standing still. Across regions, organisations are adjusting course, making difficult decisions and finding practical ways to keep going. In this context, strength is not an abstract idea. It manifests in how organisations adapt when resources shrink, redefining priorities and refusing to step away from missions that matter deeply to communities.

At RACI, these reflections are at the core of our Reimagining the Future of Civil Society programme, which examines how civil society is responding to democratic backsliding, a funding crisis in international cooperation, and increasing pressure on civic space. Rather than focusing simply on what is broken, the programme looks at what organisations are learning, testing and building in real time as they navigate uncertainty.

At the core of Reimagining the Future of Civil Society are three interconnected pillars that explore the types of adaptation we are observing across contexts:

- **New narratives:** Organisations are avoiding technical or project-based language when describing their role, value and legitimacy in society, instead emphasising their political relevance, social legitimacy and connection to broader democratic processes.
- **Unlikely partnerships:** Organisations, in seeking to reduce their isolation and build collective resilience, are collaborating across sectors and geographies, bringing together actors that do not traditionally work together.
- **New strategies for sustainability:** Organisations are moving beyond short-term survival strategies by experimenting with shared risk, collective responsibility and addressing the broader conditions shaping long-term civic action.



## THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: LESSONS FROM A SYSTEM UNDER PRESSURE *continued*

The programme documents shifts in governance and power dynamics; new approaches to collaboration (e.g. shared infrastructure, joint advocacy, collective fundraising) and sustainability; and efforts to rethink narratives and legitimacy. These are framed not as ‘best practices’ or finalised solutions, but learning processes undertaken in contexts where stability can no longer be taken for granted. Instead, organisations test new ways of working, making adjustments as they go.

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**What became clear from our conversations ... is that no organisation, network or region can navigate this moment alone. Working in isolation leaves organisations more vulnerable. By contrast, working together cultivates resilience, shared learning and collective strength. As resources shrink and expectations grow, collaboration is no longer optional – it is the only viable way forward.**

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What became clear from our conversations, including those held at Peace Connect, is that no organisation, network or region can navigate this moment alone. Working in isolation leaves organisations more vulnerable. By contrast, working together cultivates resilience, shared learning and collective strength. As resources shrink and expectations grow, collaboration is no longer optional – it is the only viable way forward.

This is why, when looking to the future of international cooperation, we do not envisage a return to the old stability. Instead, a more uncertain but more adaptive landscape beckons, where cooperation is built through relationships rather than rigid structures; networks rather than hierarchies. In this way, the ability to work collectively, share risk and learn together will become just as – if not more – important as funding.

We believe the future of international cooperation will be shaped less by grand reforms and more by everyday choices: whether to invest in ecosystems rather than isolated projects; whether to trust civil society as a decision-maker rather than merely an implementer; and whether to accept uncertainty as a defining condition rather than a threat.

More civil society ultimately means more democracy. Strengthening connections between civil society and society at large – bringing in new voices, allies and forms of participation – is essential if cooperation is to remain relevant. Civil society is already adapting to this moment. The question remains as to whether international cooperation systems are willing to adapt alongside it, not just in a bid for survival, but as part of a collective effort to shape more democratic, resilient futures.

Consultation participants were invited to interpret the current moment through the Two Loops Model, a framework for systems change that identifies several groups of actors who need to work together in order to support the transition to a new system. One key group is the *pioneers*: those experimenting with new ideas and practices, often outside established systems. Participants linked this group to community-rooted organisations, youth and women's movements, cooperatives, and civic tech and media innovators. As Nigeria-based Juliet Agba explained:

*The pioneers are grassroots movements, local CSOs, and regional networks already experimenting with new financing models – community philanthropy, pooled African funds and digital mobilisation. They are showing us what a post-aid system could look like.*

Another important group in the Two Loops Model is the *protectors*: those who work within the existing system to support, nourish and connect emerging innovations and pioneers, ensuring their proposed alternatives receive resources and visibility. Eric Ndayikengurutse summarised this role as:

*The Global North INGOs engaged in advocacy for decolonising partnerships and local organisations advocating for equity in partnerships and committed to community-led development, because they jointly carry the torch in advocating for system change.*

Not all the participants in the validation workshop and the Permanent Forum discussion agreed with this point. In both cases, when asked if they still saw a role for Global North funders and partners in locally led models of resource mobilisation, only around half of those present replied affirmatively. This is presumably because many see locally led models as independent of Global North actors, especially those resistant to systemic change. Even so, such actors will likely still hold power in the process of transitioning from the old system to the new, giving them the leverage

to support or stymie change. As such, the protectors should include Global North actors willing to champion change and act as allies to local actors. Sawssan Abou-Zahr, who works in Lebanon, put it thus:

*The North is not excluded, and should not be, because 'North' is not a homogeneous entity. There is the still colonial North in their mindsets and practices, and the liberal North. The liberal anti-colonial North is definitely a valuable and much-needed partner.*

Several participants remarked that, regardless of their role in building the new system, all actors must adopt a decolonial approach. Only by doing so will it be possible to avoid perpetuating existing imbalances and harmful practices. Sierra Leone-based Musa Carew summed this up as follows:

*Decolonisation remains vital: without confronting systemic racism, any 'post-aid' world risks becoming old power in new clothes. Pioneers can lead the way by modelling inclusive governance, community ownership and narrative change that ensure the new system is truly just.*



## GLOBAL PUBLIC INVESTMENT: REFRAMING BILATERAL AID IN A CHANGING SYSTEM

Global Public Investment (GPI) offers a framework for rethinking international cooperation at a time when traditional aid systems are increasingly driven by funders' 'mutual interests'. GPI's starting point is simple: everyone decides; everybody contributes according to their ability; everyone benefits. This marks a radical departure from simply accepting that funder governments should have the power to define priorities and shape policies in recipient countries.

GPI's approach centres around shared responsibility, benefits and decision-making. Thus, rather than viewing cooperation as aid flowing from 'funders' to 'recipients', GPI treats financing for global challenges such as climate stability, pandemic preparedness and sustainable development as a collective investment grounded in mutual interests.

Over the past decade, the GPI Network – which convenes governments, civil society, experts and institutions to build a new approach to international public finance – has advanced this idea through global consultations and policy dialogues.<sup>14</sup> Now, a growing number of countries are exploring how to operationalise these principles through a Global South-led Coalition of Governments on GPI.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For more on the GPI Network, see: <https://globalpublicinvestment.net/>.

<sup>15</sup> GPI Network, 'Governments initiate discussions on implementation of global public investment', (25 September 2025), [https://globalpublicinvestment.net/news\\_press/governments-initiate-discussions-on-implementation-of-global-public-investment/](https://globalpublicinvestment.net/news_press/governments-initiate-discussions-on-implementation-of-global-public-investment/).

### Why this matters now

Funder countries continue to exert control in their bilateral aid relationships by, for instance, using their in-country presence to directly or indirectly influence national policy – something that would be almost unimaginable among Global North peer countries. As Andrea Ordóñez, Co-Executive Director of the GPI Network, explained:

*We need cooperation that is more equitable. For example, many countries across the Global South are ready to work with traditional donors as peers: such as by developing joint development agendas and investment plans.*

Despite the difficulty many funders appear to have in imagining a different system, the cuts and political shifts recently seen in funder countries reveal just how fragile and unbalanced the existing system is. Rather than rely on purported benevolence, GPI provides an alternative rooted in shared interests and equitable cooperation. In Andrea Ordóñez's words: "What countries would do is come together at a global level and discuss priorities at that level, so no country is influencing other nations' political processes."

## GLOBAL PUBLIC INVESTMENT: REFRAMING BILATERAL AID IN A CHANGING SYSTEM continued

### What the GPI Network is doing differently

Key aspects of the GPI Network's work in shifting a one-directional approach to aid towards collective investment in global issues such as climate change, health and inequality include:

- Supporting the **Coalition of Governments on GPI** not just in terms of consultation, but real decision-making. Given that many Global South countries do not yet have clear institutional spaces for this kind of cooperation, peer-to-peer spaces across regions will need to be built.
- Embedding GPI principles into existing institutions, such as global funds or UN processes, rather than waiting for new structures to be created. This 'start where we are' strategy helps test GPI ideas in practice.
- Advocating for predictable public finance, on the basis that only public funds (unlike private or philanthropic money) can reliably support long-term services, reach marginalised areas and be publicly accountable.

### Beyond bilateral 'generosity'

Any GPI-aligned future system will not be driven by funder countries' national priorities. Instead, funders will participate in a shared decision-making framework where contributions reflect economic capacity rather than political influence, and where global priorities are set collectively.

In this way, Global South governments can play a meaningful role in shaping global financing rules from the outset, rather than reacting to funder-defined agendas. Such an approach is premised on countries investing together in global public goods, thereby fostering mutual accountability over adherence to funder obligations or domestic political cycles.

### Why GPI resonates

The GPI narrative rejects aid cooperation as a one-way transfer in favour of a model that recognises shared global risks and benefits. In an interconnected world, underinvesting in global issues anywhere ultimately harms everyone. By offering a clearer, more realistic argument for international public finance, this framing provides a foothold for rebuilding trust and political support.

Ultimately, the Coalition of Governments on GPI demonstrates that a more equitable, stable cooperation system is possible. Instead of relying on bilateral structures defined by power imbalances, unpredictable priorities and shrinking budgets, GPI maps out a route towards long-term, predictable, co-governed global investment. In short, it is not just critiquing the old model, it is building what comes next.

More generally, the message from GPI's consultations is clear: promises of more money are insufficient – trust in international cooperation can only be restored by transforming how power, responsibility and voice are distributed within the system.

Across the various discussions, local civil society actors consistently framed the present moment as a decisive break with the existing aid system. From the Permanent Forum's regional organising to new models such as Cooperación Solidaria and GPI, concrete alternatives grounded in justice, sovereignty and collective responsibility are emerging. What these local actors demand now is not simply recognition, but meaningful alignment – international actors must wield their influence to reinforce, not override, such initiatives. In essence, responsibility lies with the wider system to respond with comparable levels of courage and imagination. The transition is already underway. The question remains as to whether global institutions will rise to meet it.

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# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**The current funding crisis has exposed deep fragilities in the existing model of international cooperation. Consultation participants did not describe temporary disruption, but rather the unravelling of a system built on power imbalances, funder-driven priorities and longstanding colonial legacies. Local actors are clear on the future of international cooperation: there can be no return to the status quo.**

The impacts shared throughout this report reveal how abrupt funding cuts disrupted peace processes, halted life-saving services, fractured community trust and placed unbearable strain on local organisations. These consequences reflect the structural weaknesses of a system that has never truly centred the people it claims to support.

Despite the harm caused, participants offered a compelling vision of resilience and possibility. In the face of shrinking resources, many have turned to solidarity-based approaches that long predate international aid, from mutual aid networks to community giving, from local philanthropy to South-South partnerships. Others have experimented with new models that incorporate income-generating activities, pooled local funds, volunteer-driven networks and collective governance. These are not merely temporary measures, but elements of a new system rooted in local leadership, accountability and long-term sustainability.

Participants were united in their call for a profound shift in how international cooperation is conceived and practiced. Extractive partnerships, burdensome compliance and short-term project cycles need to be replaced by shared governance, equitable decision-making and funding mechanisms that strengthen local autonomy. In this reimagined future, the Global South sets priorities and leads the way, while Global North actors listen, share resources and support systemic change.

The current system is already giving way – the question is what will replace it and, crucially, who will shape its successor. Here, the future of international cooperation lies in the hands of those hit hardest by its past failures. Their enduring courage must be matched with concrete action.

The following recommendations outline how we can collectively take the steps needed to build a more just, locally led model of international cooperation.

## Recommendations for Global South actors

1. **Encourage resource autonomy by diversifying and recognising non-financial capital:** Strengthen community-anchored financing (e.g. community philanthropy, village savings and credit associations, income-generating activities/social enterprises). Treat non-financial contributions (infrastructure, skills, knowledge) as core assets and reduce dependency on external cycles by embedding asset-based community development.
  2. **Put communities in the driver's seat through shared governance and accountability:** Establish community decision forums (e.g. boards or assemblies) with real authority over priorities, risk appetite and contingency plans. Practice regular, transparent communication with communities. This is essential to repair legitimacy where abrupt withdrawals have fractured trust.
  3. **Strengthen South-South partnerships, solidarity systems and spaces for creating new cooperation norms:** Cultivate peer networks for those identified as pioneers of the new system, and formalise peer assurance, rapid microgrants and shared due diligence arrangements across borders. Build shared curricula and open resources to support mutual learning across contexts.
- Establish new spaces for dialogue and collaboration, rather than waiting for spaces to open up in existing Global North fora.
4. **Make care and dignity part of organisational infrastructure:** Normalise staff wellbeing, psychosocial support and mutual aid as being non-negotiables. Where funding has stopped, speak with communities about ways to restore it (e.g. public acknowledgement, alternative plans, accompaniment), thereby rebuilding relationships based on honest dialogue rather than evasive silence.
  5. **Shift the narrative away from aid towards co-investment:** Explore narratives that reframe cooperation around equity, domestic responsibility (including government duties) and co-investment, rather than funder benevolence. Consider signing up to platforms that are already creating new narratives, such as the Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of Cooperation or the Global Fund for Community Foundation's 'Possible Now' initiative.
  6. **Insist on local governance of international funding flows:** Champion locally governed pooled mechanisms in order that money aligns with community priorities and remains predictable.
  7. **Centre local knowledge in multilevel governance spaces:** Invite grassroots representatives to participate directly in national, regional, South-South and global spaces. Resource their engagement and diversify representation in order to avoid elite capture and ensure decisions reflect community-defined priorities.

## Recommendations for Global North actors

1. **Address harm by acknowledging, apologising and repairing:** Openly recognise the damage caused by abrupt funding withdrawals on partners' safety, stability and trust. Offer a full apology and commit to transparent communication, co-created plans and decision-making practices that minimise future harm and re-centre respect, empathy and humanity.
2. **Finance flexible, unrestricted grants grounded in proven local models:** When resources are limited, prioritise how you fund. Provide unrestricted, flexible, multiyear support that local organisations can allocate according to their own priorities. Build on existing evidence of what works for civil society, such as locally governed pooled mechanisms and reverse calls for proposals.
3. **Fund the broader ecosystem rather than isolated actors by resourcing connections, convenings and system builders:** Shift from siloed, organisation-by-organisation funding to an ecosystem approach that strengthens relationships, coordination and shared capacities among local actors. If you cannot fund local civil society directly, support intermediaries capable of playing connector and ecosystem-builder roles (e.g. by facilitating collaboration, amplifying marginalised voices, and reinforcing the health and resilience of the broader civic landscape).
4. **End stop-start harm by honouring dignified transitions:** If funding must change, then codesign transition plans with partners and communities. Avoid abrupt stop-work orders that collapse services, rupture peace processes and erode trust. Build predictable scale-down pathways incorporating transitional support for and transparent communication with communities.
5. **Shift from gatekeeping to protection:** Re-purpose INGOs and intermediaries as protectors of the new, locally led system of international cooperation. Use political access, platforms and reputation to open up space, reduce harm and share risk, especially in volatile contexts. This protective role should be transitional, accompanying rather than overshadowing the shift in power. Ultimately, INGOs must commit to giving up direct implementation, leaving local CSOs to act independently within the new system.
6. **Align narrative and practice by acting on coloniality:** Move from statements to actions. Decentre Global North ideas and assumptions; transfer agenda-setting power and budget control to local partners; and use any available political voice within funders (governments, multilaterals, philanthropic organisations) to advocate for flexible funding and locally led decision-making processes.
7. **Reimagine bilateral aid as co-investment in shared stability:** Shift away from risk-averse approaches shaped by lack of trust in the Global South. Recognise that cooperation is a source of mutual benefit, not a charitable transfer. Adopt co-investment models with Global South partners centred on the needs of their communities, and frame investments in their systems as strengthening the foundations of security, prosperity and wellbeing across all regions.
8. **Build shared institutional spaces that move beyond funder-led structures:** Support cooperation platforms where Global North actors share decision-making authority with Global South governments and civil society, rather than imposing priorities via bilateral channels. Embed collective governance models (e.g. multistakeholder or peer-to-peer mechanisms) into existing institutions, thereby nudging the system towards co-owned priorities and predictable, long-term global investment.

## Recommendations for Global South and Global North actors

- 1. Co-create the new system's norms:** Set ground rules for joint governance, transparency and dignified transitions, so no actor can default to practices that perpetuate harm. These standards should reflect relevant 'pioneer' and 'protector' roles, and be owned by those closest to the work.
- 2. Document, learn and adapt openly:** Share practices from locally led mechanisms and innovative resource-mobilisation models, recognising opportunities for mutual learning.
- 3. Centre the new system around solidarity, equity and care:** Reframe international cooperation around mutual support, equitable partnerships and a commitment to care at every level of collaboration. Centre community leadership and ensure cooperation stems from values and connections conducive to transformational change.
- 4. Commit to partnership models built on co-creation and reciprocity:** Adopt practices that ensure priorities, strategies and solutions are codesigned rather than predetermined by any one side. Invest time and resources in joint planning, shared governance and transparent communication, thereby rooting relationships in the collective ownership of outcomes.

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