

Position Paper: Assessing the Impact of Global Funding Cuts on Youth-Led Humanitarian Action and Rethinking Youth-Led Impact

More Than First Responders Community

Background:

Humanitarian funding is facing unprecedented cuts, with UN appeals in crises like Haiti receiving less than 10% of required funds despite escalating needs.¹ A July 2025 study predicted that the proposed USAid funding cuts alone could cause over 14 million deaths in the next 5 years, including 4.5 million children under five.² The World Food Program (WFP) warns that a 40% drop in funding puts 58 million people in their most critical programs at risk of losing critical support.³ Global health funding cuts are particularly devastating, with the World Health Organization (WHO) projecting a 40% drop in aid in 2025 compared to 2023, jeopardizing critical services including HIV/AIDS programs, maternal and child health, and immunizations.⁴

Local organizations, which manage around 80% of humanitarian responses worldwide, are bearing the brunt of funding cuts, with many struggling to provide essential aid.⁵ Youth responders, often at the forefront of these efforts, are particularly affected. With limited resources, youth-led humanitarian efforts lose capacity, limiting their ability to address the need of psychosocial support, protection, and community outreach. This resource gap not only limits the scope and quality of emergency service delivery in the time of crisis but also compromises the meaningful participation and sustainability of youth engagement in humanitarian action.

In light of recent humanitarian aid cuts by international donors, the *More Than First Responders* Digital Community of Young Humanitarians, facilitated by the ActionAid's Global Platforms Network; convened an online workshop with youth from around the world who are leading locally-rooted and community-driven humanitarian responses in some of the world's most fragile and under-supported contexts.



¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/uns-haiti-appeal-has-received-lowest-funding-any-response-plan-coordinator-says-2025-08-12/>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/07/01/usaaid-cuts-aid-14-million-deaths/?utm>

³ <https://www.wfp.org/news/tens-millions-risk-extreme-hunger-and-starvation-unprecedented-funding-crisis-spirals>

⁴ <https://www.devex.com/news/who-projects-up-to-40-cut-in-health-aid-in-2025-110564?utm>

⁵ <https://www.unocha.org/news/not-drill-aid-cuts-risk-costing-lives>

Young Humanitarian Workshop: Key Insights

To gather first-hand insights and ideas, the More Than First Responders Digital Community of Young Humanitarians convened an online workshop in June 2025 with youth from around the world who are leading locally-rooted and community-driven humanitarian responses in some of the world's most fragile and under-supported contexts.

The webinar was attended by 60+ participants⁶ who all reported being either moderately or severely affected by the cuts. Participants reported facing:

- Suspended or reduced programming, including emergencies
- Increased pressure on unpaid youth labour
- Weakened organisational stability and trust
- Urgent need to prioritise innovation and local resource mobilization

In the webinar, participants brainstormed on youth-led ways forward:

1. Shift the Narrative from Crisis to Resilience: We must stop framing youth-led efforts only through the lens of emergency response. Our work is building systems, not just filling gaps or doing response work only. It is time to highlight sustainable initiatives, community healing, and long-term institution building, both in how we as young leaders speak and what we showcase.

2. Mobilise Local Resources Through Creative Fundraising: Launch community-based fundraising campaigns, such as talent shows, art exhibitions, youth marathons, or social clubs. Leverage *in-kind donations* through mutual aid and solidarity networks that strengthen local ownership and dignity. Learn from successful models across different countries and adapt them to local contexts.

3. Use What We Have: Optimise Existing Resources; Maximise the use of community spaces, existing digital tools, and human resources / knowledge. Collaborate with local businesses, schools, and religious groups who can contribute non-financial support.

4. Engage Strategically on Social Media and Digital Platforms: Use storytelling, visuals, and simple metrics to communicate impact. Highlight not just the urgency of needs, but the ingenuity and leadership of young people responding. Use LinkedIn, especially, to reach donors and professional audiences, while maintaining strong engagement on other social media platforms.

6. Build Cross-Generational, Cross-Sector, and Cross-Context Networks: Our strength lies in connection. Youth leaders should intentionally build bridges across generations, sectors (public, private, NGO), and geographies to share resources, amplify learning, and expand influence.

Our Position

We believe the almost total collapse of the humanitarian funding system, triggered first by USAid cuts, revealed the fragility and unsustainability of the system in place. While we profoundly condemn the short-sighted and irresponsible cuts from governments, we believe these cuts have

⁶ Countries represented in the webinar: Bangladesh, DRC, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Palestine, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Tanzania, Thailand, and Zambia.

exposed the failure of the localisation agenda. Having said this, we recognize the importance of robust and accountable international coordination systems, but we believe they must be rebuilt — from their foundations — genuinely shifting towards more inclusive, locally driven, and sustainable systems. We believe youth-led organisations are **already** building these systems through locally rooted leadership, innovating and implementing low-cost solutions, and adopting intersectional approaches to address the need of marginalized communities.

We believe youth are more than first responders. We are leaders, organisers, connectors, and innovators who are essential in building sustainable and trusted systems. We believe that these cuts are not only financial, but they are also fundamentally destabilizing long-established efforts and trust built between humanitarian workers and crisis-affected communities.

We believe:

- **Youth-led responses are not optional add-ons. They are essential infrastructure.** Our agility, local knowledge, and trust with communities are undeniably important for emergency response and long-term development, especially in underfunded or hard-to-reach areas.
- **Donors must change how they fund.** Short-term grants and top-down models do not work. We need funding that is youth led, flexible, direct, and long-term.
- **Youth are ready to lead in reimagining humanitarian funding and accountability.** Youth must be part of reimagining humanitarian response, from design to delivery.

Our Calls to Action

We urge governments, donors, and international NGOs to:

- Fund youth-led organizations directly, flexibly, and long-term, with the recognition that young people are not only responding to crises but also building sustainable systems, fostering resilience, and strengthening institutions.
- Involve young people as leaders, designers, implementors and evaluators of humanitarian architecture, policies and strategies. Recognize young people as experts in their own contexts, not only as first responders or volunteers or foot soldiers.
- Invest in innovation and amplify youth-led models for local resource mobilization and building community resilience.
- Recognize youth-led localized actions and create safe spaces for youth-led innovation to address the needs of people in the time of crisis.