Youth Transforming Narratives

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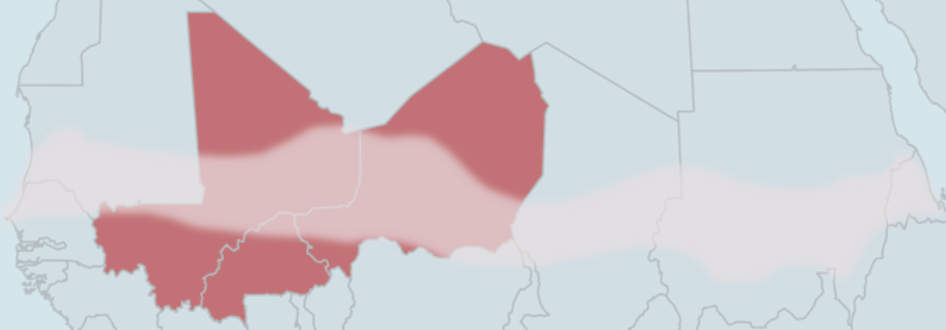
Navigating Change: Youth Perspectives on Development and Geopolitical Shifts in the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES)

Burkina Faso | Mali | Niger

Research Team of Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)



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Research & Knowledge-Production Team

Navigating Change: Youth Perspectives on Development and Geopolitical Shifts in the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES)

Research Team of the Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)
November 2026

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Acknowledgement

This research would not have been possible without the civil society workers across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger who agreed to be interviewed or to complete our survey for this study. We are deeply grateful to each of them for their trust, their time and their willingness to share insights into how they are navigating an increasingly constrained and uncertain operating environment. Given the current political context across the AES region, the decision to speak openly with us, whether through an interview or a survey response, was neither small nor without risk and we do not take it lightly. This report exists because they chose to make space for it and any value it holds belongs first to them.

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Finally, we thank Youth Transforming Narratives itself for bringing us all together around a shared conviction that young people's perspectives belong at the centre of research on the issues that shape their futures, not at its margins. It is that common purpose that made this collaborative research possible in the first place.

Executive Summary

The Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – has undergone a profound geopolitical realignment since 2023. The three military-led governments have distanced themselves from several traditional Western partners, formally withdrawn from ECOWAS and strengthened relationships with other international actors, including Russia. These changes have unfolded alongside persistent conflict, displacement, economic pressures and significant humanitarian needs, reshaping the political, financial and operational environment in which civil society organizations work. Yet much of the discussion surrounding this transformation has focused on geopolitics, security and relations between states, with less attention paid to how these changes are experienced by the youth-led organizations working directly with communities. This research seeks to contribute to filling that gap. It centres the experiences of youth-led civil society organizations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and looks at how geopolitical and funding shifts are affecting their operating environment, how organizations are adapting and what these changes reveal about the future of locally led development in the AES. The research combines a review of existing literature with two semi-structured interviews with civil society leaders in Burkina Faso and Niger and responses from three civil society organizations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Given the small sample and the challenges of recruitment in the current regional context, the findings are not intended to be statistically representative or generalizable to the AES population as a whole. Rather, they offer insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of a small number of participants involved, providing a qualitative scope into how geopolitical shifts are perceived on the ground as well as the different adaptation strategies that our participants and their organizations have had to adopt.

Key Findings

1. Geopolitical diversification has not necessarily translated into development diversification.

The geopolitical transformation of the AES is not experienced by respondents as a straightforward transition from one external partner to another. The deterioration of relations with traditional Western partners has occurred alongside stronger relationships with actors including Russia, but respondents did not identify a comparable expansion of opportunities for youth-led development through these new partnerships. In particular, some respondents perceived Russian engagement as concentrated more heavily on security, political relations and information than on support for youth-led development. The findings therefore suggest that changes in diplomatic and security partnerships do not automatically translate into new forms of development cooperation reflecting the priorities of local civil society.

2. The decrease in international funding is affecting both organizations and communities.

The changing geopolitical environment is taking place within a wider contraction in development and humanitarian assistance. OECD projections indicate that bilateral ODA to sub-Saharan Africa was expected to decline by a further 11.6% in 2026, following a 26.3% decline in 2025, while UNICEF reported that only 17% of its 2025 humanitarian appeal for Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger had been funded. The number of humanitarian organizations operating across the AES also fell by 13% between December 2024 and June 2025. Respondents described the consequences in concrete terms: suspension of USAID and Swedish-funded programs, loss of paid staff, closure or reduction of media literacy and peacebuilding initiatives, and disruptions to education, HIV treatment, youth entrepreneurship and other community support. In Niger, one organization reported moving from paid staff to volunteers following the suspension of USAID funding. In Mali, one respondent emphasized a widening gap between growing needs and diminishing resources, on top of concerns about donor priority-setting and what they described as a "colonial approach." Smaller youth-led organizations also face particular difficulties accessing the funding that remains, often competing with larger organizations with greater resource mobilization capacity.

3. The current transformation creates both opportunities and constraints for localization.

The five respondents did not describe the changing environment solely as a story of loss. Some identified opportunities to strengthen local ownership and reconsider longstanding development practices that they viewed as externally driven or extractive. However, these possibilities exist alongside significant restrictions on civic space and increased scrutiny of independent civil society. This creates a fundamental contradiction: greater national ownership of development does not necessarily mean greater participation by independent local organizations in defining development priorities. The findings therefore caution against equating localization with either the withdrawal of international actors or the transfer of program delivery to local organizations. For localization to be meaningful, local actors must have access to sustainable resources, decision-making authority and sufficient civic space to define and pursue their own priorities.

4. Youth-led CSOs are actively adapting and demonstrating agency.

Despite political, financial and operational pressures, the five respondents described a range of strategies for continuing their work. Organizations have reduced, postponed or reorganized activities while protecting core programs; diversified their funding relationships and partnerships; strengthened organizational systems and networks; mobilized local resources and relied increasingly on volunteerism and community support. They have also continued to involve young people and communities in

identifying needs, designing programs and delivering activities. Volunteerism is particularly important to understanding this adaptation. Respondents described volunteers as people whose time, skills and commitment allow organizations to continue operating when financial resources are unavailable. This demonstrates considerable local agency and commitment, but it also exposes the costs of the current funding environment: where organizations previously employed staff, essential work may increasingly be sustained through unpaid labour. Resilience should therefore not be mistaken for sustainability. Organizations' ability to continue operating under difficult conditions does not mean that the conditions themselves are sustainable.

5. Meaningful youth participation remains limited despite young people's central role in local development.

Respondents consistently positioned young people as actors rather than simple beneficiaries. Young people contribute to program design, implementation, mobilization, advocacy and community-level responses. Yet respondents also questioned the extent to which young people have meaningful influence over the decisions shaping development strategies across the AES. As one respondent put it, the AES is “still forgetting to give youth a seat at the table.” The research therefore highlights the difference between consultation and meaningful participation. Respondents called for young people to have permanent, resourced roles in decision-making structures.

The findings point to a development landscape in transition, where geopolitical change is reshaping not only who engages in the AES, but also the conditions under which local civil society can operate. The experiences of participating CSOs suggest that the sustainability of locally led development will ultimately depend on whether this transition creates greater space for local actors to shape development priorities. The recommendations developed directly by participating actors are presented at the end of the report.

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List of Acronyms

AEEM	**L' Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali**
AES	**Alliance of the Sahel States**
AU	**African Union**
CFA	**Communauté financière d'Afrique (Financial Community of Africa)**
CSO	**Civil society organization**
ECOWAS	**Economic Community of West African States**
EU	**European Union**
FTS	**Financial Tracking Service**
IMF	**International Monetary Fund**
INGO	**International Non-Governmental Organizations**
MBDHP	**Mouvement Burkinabè des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples**
NGO	**Non-governmental organization**
NRC	**Norwegian Refugee Council**
ODA	**Official Development Assistance**
OCHA	**United Nations office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**
OECD	**Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development**
ORTM	**Office de Radio et Television du Mali**
UN	**United Nations**
UNESCO	**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**
UNICEF	**United Nations Children's Fund**
UNDCO	**United Nations Development Coordination Office**
USAID	**United States Agency for International Development**
USN	**Union of Nigerien Students**
USSR	**Union of Soviet Socialist Republics**
WACSI	**West Africa Civil Society Institute**
WACSOF	**West African Civil Society Forum**
WFP	**World Food Program**
TOD	**Youth Orientation for Development**
YTN	**Youth Transforming Narratives**

Introduction

The Alliance of the Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali) is experiencing a period of profound transformation. Alongside persistent security challenges, climate pressures and socioeconomic inequalities, the region is undergoing significant geopolitical realignments that are reshaping development cooperation and priorities. In recent years, shifts in international partnerships, changes in donor priorities, the suspension or reorientation of development assistance by several traditional partners (historically France, the United States and other Western donors and multilateral institutions active in the region) and the emergence of new regional and international actors have fundamentally altered the operating environment for civil society organizations (CSOs). These changes have raised important questions about the future of development cooperation, the sustainability of local initiatives and the role of youth organizations in responding to evolving needs. Across the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES), many local organizations are navigating an increasingly uncertain funding landscape. While official development assistance remains a critical source of support, access to funding has become more constrained and in some cases, more politically sensitive. Youth-led organizations, which often operate with limited resources despite playing an essential role in community mobilization, social cohesion and local development, are particularly affected by these changes. Yet their experiences, priorities and perspectives remain largely absent from international debates on the future of development cooperation in the region.

These developments matter not only for the organizations directly affected, but also for the broader future of locally led development and civil society engagement in the Sahel. Changes in funding relationships can shape which organizations are able to operate, which priorities receive support and how local actors define and respond to the needs of their communities. Understanding these dynamics from the perspective of youth-led organizations is therefore essential to ensuring that shifts in development cooperation do not further marginalize the actors closest to affected communities. It is particularly important at a time when international actors are reassessing their partnerships and approaches to the region: decisions about how, where and through whom resources are channelled will have lasting implications for local ownership, sustainability and the ability of civil society to contribute to development.

This research seeks to help fill that gap. Rather than focusing solely on macro-level geopolitical dynamics or donor strategies, it centres the experiences of five young people, involved with youth-led and youth-serving civil society organizations working on the ground. It asks how these organizations are experiencing current funding shifts, how they are adapting their work and partnerships and what these transformations reveal about the future of locally-led development

in the Sahel. It ends with recommendations coming from our five young participants across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger addressed to donors, partners, governments and civil society.

This study is conducted by Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN), a youth-led global movement committed to decolonization of international peace and security, and to challenging dominant narratives and creating space for young people to shape policy debates that affect their futures. YTN believes that discussions on international development, localization and geopolitical change cannot be meaningful without the active participation of young people and the organizations working closest to affected communities. By foregrounding youth voices, this research aims not only to document current challenges but also to inform more inclusive and responsive development discussions concerning the AES region.



Figure 1. Map of the countries that constitute the Alliance of the Sahel States (Gandaho, 2024).

Methodology

The methodology follows a qualitative approach. Thus, the analysis combines a review of existing literature with two semi-structured online interviews conducted with leaders of civil society organizations in Burkina Faso and Niger (in French and English by YTN's research officers), alongside responses from three civil society organizations based in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger collected through a structured digital questionnaire[1]. The questions were prepared based on the core research questions and backed by a literature review.

Following data collection, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed the key stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with familiarisation with the data, followed by the systematic coding of relevant features by the research team during an online workshop on thematic analysis. These codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined before being used to structure and develop the findings.

The study therefore reflects the perspectives of a small number of organizations and does not seek

[1] Respondent codes that span this report follow this structure: transcript type (I = Interview; S = Survey), gender (W = Woman, M = Man), country (B = Burkina Faso, M = Mali; N= Niger) affiliation (CSO = civil society organization worker), and transcript number (1–10). For example, "IWNCSO6" refers to an interview with a woman from Niger who is a CSO worker.

to provide statistically representative findings. In particular, we are aware that Mali is underrepresented within our data set, with only a single respondent representing the country. In fact, recruitment proved particularly challenging given the current regional context, which limited the number of participants able or willing to engage. Nevertheless, we considered it essential to include the perspectives of those organizations that chose to participate, recognising that their experiences provide valuable insights into the realities faced by youth-led civil society. Given the relatively small sample size, the empirical findings were contextualized and complemented through a review of the relevant literature, allowing the analysis to situate respondents' perspectives within broader academic and policy debates. Particular emphasis was also placed on the recommendations emerging from the research. Rather than limiting these to researcher-led proposals, the recommendations draw directly on the experiences, priorities and suggestions shared by respondents. This approach seeks to ensure that the recommendations remain grounded in the perspectives of those with direct experience of the issues examined. To protect participants and encourage open discussion, all contributions have been anonymized in line with our ethical research approach.

Objectives

- Analyze how shifting geo-political alignments and evolving state relations in the Alliance of the Sahel States are reshaping the operating environment, program delivery, and risk landscape for youth-led initiatives.
- Understand what funding cuts mean specifically for youth-focused work and local civil society.
- Explore how youth-led initiatives are adapting to these changes and leading more locally driven forms of development.

Research Questions

- How have geopolitical and funding shifts impacted youth-led civil society organizations?
- What is the operating environment looking like for youth organizations given the creation of the AES and the funding cuts?
- How are youth-led initiatives adapting to the different changes? Is there space for more locally-driven initiatives?

Part I. How have Geopolitical shifts within a conflict-affected region impacted development work.

1.1. Background

In 2025, the development sector faced a significant shock: the sharp decline of Official Development Assistance (ODA). The biggest setback came with the closure of USAID, followed by similar cuts from the UK, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland[2] (Mehta, 2025). These changes have unfolded alongside wider geopolitical shifts that are reshaping who provides development assistance, where resources are directed and the conditions under which organizations can access and implement funding. These dynamics are particularly significant in the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) where changes in international partnerships have coincided with profound political and geopolitical transformations. The emergence of the AES, the withdrawal of its member states from ECOWAS, the deterioration of relations with several Western partners and the development of closer relationships with countries including Russia, China and Türkiye have significantly reshaped the geopolitical and political environment in which development actors operate (Knubel, 2026). Understanding these changes is particularly important for youth-led civil society organizations (CSOs), which often operate with limited resources while playing an important role in community mobilization and local development. This section therefore examines how geopolitical realignment in the AES, and in particular its move away from Western powers towards a new proximity with Russia, has changed development cooperation and the operating environment of youth-led CSOs.

The current geopolitical realignment cannot be understood without considering the region's colonial and post-colonial relationship with France. France colonized Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali during the 19th century and maintained colonial rule until 1960. The colonies were governed by a system of direct rule, meaning the appointment of a governor directly attached to the Ministry of the colonies during this period (Olié et al., 2024). As former colonies, French was the institutionalized language and the colonial power implemented similar political and legal systems across the region. After gaining independence, French “influence” continued to play an important role not only in our three countries of interest but

[2] ODA declined by 23% in 2025, this historical decline was driven by funding cuts from Germany, the US, the UK, Japan and France (OECD, 2025). In a more detailed explanation, as of March 2025, the US cut 90% of USAID’s budget, France reduced its aid budget by 25%, while the UK announced that they would reduce their aid budget from 0.5% of the country’s gross national income to 0.3% (well below UN’s target of ODA contribution of 0.7%) (Mehta, 2025; Galvin, 2025).

across Francophone Africa. The French Global Power still had important interests within the AES given that the CFA Franc required African nations to keep 50% of their foreign reserves in the French Treasury. Moreover, France and other global powers benefitted from the extraction of minerals such as uranium and gold. Over the years, this was accompanied by the presence of French and US troops as part of counter-terrorism efforts (Garoes, 2026). These historical relationships have increasingly become contested, particularly as military-led governments and parts of civil society have framed continued Western involvement as a constraint on national sovereignty.

In terms of conflict and instability, the AES region has experienced violence for several years, posing a significant social, security and financial threat to local populations (Center for Preventive Action, 2026). The current instability has been linked to several factors, including the regional consequences of the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 and the difficulties faced by international counterterrorism efforts by France, the US and other European nations (Center for Preventive Action, 2026).

While the Global Powers were set to launch different antiterrorist attacks such as the Barkhane Mission to protect the region from further instability (Olech, 2023), these interventions have not brought stability in the long run (Najimdeen, 2025). Since this area is a key migratory channel as well as an important entry point of drugs and weapons from Africa to Europe, the European Union (EU) has shown major interest in it (International Crisis Group, 2025). The region has been key since it connects the Sahel with North Africa, and exports an important amount of oil, iron and gold. The Sahel[3] has been characterized by instability not only in terms of security, but also because of ethnic challenges that have led to conflicts, particularly in Mali[4], increased forced migration and a high vulnerability to climate change (Do better, 2025).

Since 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has served as a basis for regional integration in West Africa, overseeing shared trade rules, open borders and security measures aligned with the interests of the Global Powers (Garoes, 2026). Despite being members of ECOWAS, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, all under military rule following coups in 2022, 2020 and 2021, and 2023 respectively, announced the creation of the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 (Osuchukwu et al., 2025). Following the coups, ECOWAS imposed sanctions

[3] In this broader context, The Sahel, meaning “the shore” in Arabic, is a vast area crossing 6,000 kilometres from East to West Africa. It covers many geographic and agro-ecological systems, 12 countries and is home to 400 million people (IFAD, n.d.).
[4] Mali has been at the center of the Sahelian crisis since the country has experienced several insurrections by Tuareg groups. This problem stems from French colonialism that dispersed the Tuareg people and demarcated West African borders. Under French rule, the French government promised the Tuareg people their own state, but backed out once Mali gained its independence in 1960. For further details see Zoubir, 2022.

on the now AES. The withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS was a direct response to the belief that ECOWAS has been ineffective and highly influenced by Global Powers, particularly France, which has maintained a strong military presence in the region for decades (Najimdeen, 2025).

The formation of the AES can be understood as an attempt by its member states to assert greater political and strategic autonomy from regional and international actors, particularly France and other Western partners. The current AES governments have stated their stand against the former colonial powers (Osuchukwu et al., 2025) and framed this realignment as a defence of national sovereignty and rejection of external interference. Thus, a key position shared by the Alliance's member states is the desire to reduce foreign, (particularly French) influence in the region, while asserting their independence, protecting their monetary sovereignty by launching the AES Confederation Bank[5], reaffirming their constitutional sovereignty, as well as diversifying their international partnerships (Wilén & Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, 2025).

Moreover, the formation of the AES has been accompanied by a stronger emphasis on battling against jihadist insurgencies, maintaining national sovereignty and reducing dependence on traditional external partners. Additionally, the AES' leaders have adopted a nationalist view in conjunction with a rejection of western democratic norms by eliminating all existing political parties (International Crisis Group, 2025). After these events, the EU withdrew both their military missions in the countries and their development assistance budgets (International Crisis Group, 2025).

As relations with France and other Western partners deteriorated, the AES governments also sought to diversify their international partnerships. Russia has become particularly prominent in this process, alongside growing engagement with countries like China and Türkiye (Knubel, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2025). Specifically on Russia, the country's presence started in Mali, when Colonel Assimi Goita took power. Russia offered assistance as an alternative to the failed Global-Power-led military operations against Jihadists groups. Among the AES's countries, Mali had a long history with the former USSR. Under this banner, Russia promised to assist the local government in eliminating the consequences of colonialism, to restore the national economy and aid in the security of the country (Horak et al., 2024). It is worth noting that Russia's engagement is not simply replacing Western development assistance with an equivalent development model. It actually represents a different form of political, security and strategic engagement.

[5] For further details, see Nenovsky and Bondi, 2024.

Horak et al. (2024) note that Russia's influence in Mali began with targeted propaganda and misinformation campaigns, including cooperation with local media outlets such as ORTM. This had three primary objectives: to tarnish France's position as main representative of the Global Powers block; to build a positive image of the Russian Federation, including the idea of bringing humanitarian aid to Mali; and supporting the deployment of foreign partners from the paramilitary organization, Wagner Group to take care of security.

It was thereafter that the Wagner Group also signed agreements with the governments in Niger and Burkina Faso, playing a key role in providing security services, military training and securing important mining sites (Najimdeen, 2025). Another main objective of the paramilitary organization was to protect the military regimes and act as military instructors in the region (Horak et al., 2024). The paramilitary organization remained in the region until June 2025, nevertheless, the role of Wagner Group was overtaken by the Africa Corps, which is also backed by the Kremlin (Blackburn, 2025). Additionally, Russia, through the African Initiative, manages something crucial for the regime's survival: controlling the narrative (Knubel, 2026). As we will see through the testimony of one of our interviewees, there are several initiatives that disseminate pro-Russian narratives along the AES, integrating local media actors and communication networks (Knubel, 2026).

These geopolitical changes are not occurring independently of development cooperation. Changes in diplomatic relations shape donor presence, funding flows, partnerships and the operating environment in which civil society organizations work. The withdrawal or reduction of support from several traditional donors has coincided with a stronger emphasis by AES governments on national sovereignty and greater scrutiny of foreign-funded organizations. At the same time, emerging international partners have not necessarily replaced traditional donors through equivalent development cooperation mechanisms. The result is an increasingly uncertain environment for CSOs, in particular for those that depend on external funding to respond to the needs of their communities.

The literature reviewed above outlines a period of geopolitical and institutional change within the AES, marked by the withdrawal of traditional donors, the realignment of international partnerships and a growing emphasis on sovereignty across the region. We now turn to complement this background with primary data, examining how respondents and their organizations have experienced these geopolitical realignments and how this has affected their work. Drawing on two interviews and three surveys collected as part of this research, the following subsections expand our understanding of how geopolitical shifts in the AES are affecting youth-led actors and CSOs.

1.2. Youth organizations' perspectives

The geopolitical and institutional changes described above have had tangible consequences for CSOs, including for those working with or led by young people. Respondents described a political and operational environment that has changed significantly since the emergence of the AES. However, their experiences do not point to a simple or uniformly negative trajectory. Rather, they reveal a more complex picture in which a shrinking civic space, declining and increasingly uncertain funding, changing relationships with international actors and opportunities for greater local ownership are occurring simultaneously.

I. A changing civic and political environment

The five respondents described the creation of the AES as marking a clear turning point in the operating environment for civil society. One young CSO worker from Mali mentioned that, "there is a clear before and after within the AES', where he said that today, the AES's focus is *"more on propaganda, hatred towards other countries, the promotion of nationalism and the manipulation of young people as political pawns"* (SMMCSO8). This perception is consistent with existing research, which has documented a narrower civic space and increasing restrictions on CSOs, journalists and activists in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; this happens especially when their positions are perceived as critical of the military-led governments or their national narratives (Amnesty International, 2025).

It is important to situate this perception within the region's longer civic history. Civil society in the region is not a new or exclusively externally driven phenomenon. Before the creation of the AES, civil society had played an important civic and political role among the three countries (Mouvement Burkinabè des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples (MBDHP)) in Burkina Faso, L' Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali (AEEM), and the Union of Nigerien Students (USN) in Niger to name a few examples) (Ouedraogo, 2025). Today, they still do, an example of this is the Wayiyan group in Burkina Faso (which acts as a vigilant group for the government), nevertheless, there is a clear support of pro-government movements and rejection of those who criticize the regime (Ouedraogo, 2025), even though all of these actors have a shared objective: peace, security and quality of life for people across the region.

With regard to security, for established CSOs, insecurity already imposed significant restrictions on their work, such as limiting access to certain areas and increasing operational risks. According to Ouedraogo (2025), organizations can face suspicion not only from armed groups, but also from pro-government actors who associate independent civil society activity with foreign interests or, in some cases, with support for terrorist groups. As one youth leader from Burkina Faso explained: *"the military will say that NGOs are not good, that imperialism gives them money to, you know, fund terrorism, destabilize the power and so on"* (IMBCS07). This indicates that the

challenges have now been compounded by political and security pressures.

The result is an increasingly difficult environment for organizations attempting to maintain independent civic engagement. Nevertheless, this should not be understood as meaning that civil society has disappeared or that local organizations are simply passive recipients of geopolitical change. Rather, respondents described organizations as actively adapting their approaches, partnerships and sources of support in response to the changing environment.

II. Changing international partnerships

This research questioned whether the diversification of the AES governments' international partnerships has translated into new opportunities for locally led development. While Russia has become an increasingly important geopolitical and security partner for the AES governments, none of the five respondents described a comparable expansion of Russian support for youth-led development initiatives. For example, a CSO member from Mali stated that *"engagement with the Russians tends to focus more on a war-based approach than on development"* (SMMCSO8). Similarly, when describing the nature of cooperation between the AES and Russia, a youth leader from Burkina Faso said that Russia doesn't support youth projects since they are more focused on the creation of propaganda:

> *"[...] they go to tell people, yeah, these are the friends of Burkina Faso, and this guy is not like the imperialists, he is the friend of (BF), and Ibrahim Traoré is like the successor of Thomas Sankara…"* (IMBCS07).

These accounts suggest that, from the perspective of some respondents, geopolitical diversification has not necessarily translated into a comparable diversification of development support available to youth-led CSOs. Actually, the forms of engagement they described were perceived as concentrated more heavily on security, political relations and information than on support for locally-led development. This distinction is important because a change in geopolitical partners does not automatically constitute a change in the development cooperation available to local civil society.

For youth-led CSOs, the implications of this shift therefore extend beyond the question of which international actors are present in the region. They also concern the nature of the relationships being established, the priorities attached to them and the extent to which local organizations and young people are able to shape those priorities. The findings therefore suggest that geopolitical realignment should not be understood simply as a transition from one set of external partners to another. While the actors involved in the region are changing, this does not necessarily translate into new forms of development cooperation that reflect the priorities and needs identified by local civil society.

III. Opportunities for localization (and its limits)

At the same time, some of our respondents mentioned that the geopolitical shifts and changing funding landscapes didn't have just negative effects, but brought some positive changes as well. According to a CSO respondent from Burkina Faso, *"the geopolitical shifts have had both positive and constraining effects on youth-led initiatives"* (SMBCSO10). Among the positive developments identified was the possibility of greater space, and a reconsideration of the relationship between international actors and local communities. Yet, none of the interviewees of this research received funding from the AES nor Russia for developing youth projects (SMMCSO8, IMBCS07).

This finding is important because it complicates a narrative in which the withdrawal of Western actors is understood only as a loss. For some respondents, the current moment also creates an opportunity to question longstanding development practices and to strengthen local ownership. One illustrative policy is the recent prohibition of "poverty porn" in Burkina Faso (Rodríguez, 2026). While this policy forms part of a broader and contested regulatory environment, the prohibition can help to eliminate the extractive narrative in which it operates. As Gauthier argues, poverty porn is a "humanitarian relationship in which vulnerable people can become both recipients of aid and advertising material for it" (Gauthier, 2026). More generally, one respondent viewed restrictions positively because of its potential to challenge representations of communities that turn people experiencing poverty into objects of humanitarian communication (SMBCSO10).

However, the potential for greater localization is present alongside significant restrictions on civic space. Burkina Faso announced the dissolution of several NGOs and associations and banned their activities in April 2026 (Schutte, 2026), while Niger banned 2,900 local and international NGOs (Africa News, 2025). Authorities justify the ban as the AES's need to regulate foreign-funded organizations (Schutte, 2026), but it can also be understood as a general trend to reduce civic space.

According to one respondent from Burkina Faso, many people support the imposed restrictions, but we must also consider the fact that the propaganda has inclined people to think that foreign aid destabilizes a country or that NGOs spy on the local governments (IMBCS07). More broadly, this creates an important tension: greater national ownership of development does not necessarily mean greater participation of independent local organizations in shaping development priorities. So, the question is not simply whether external actors should remain or withdraw. It is also who gains influence when external actors leave, which local actors are able to participate and whether local organizations have the resources and civic space necessary to shape development agendas themselves.

IV. Youth participation

This question is particularly important given the demographic significance of young people across the AES. Young people constitute a substantial share of the population in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (World Bank, 2025); yet, respondents repeatedly questioned whether they have sufficient influence over the decisions shaping their countries' development trajectories.

As one respondent put it, the AES is *"still forgetting to give youth a seat at the table"* (IMBCS07). This concern was echoed by respondents who argued that young people should play a more significant role in shaping development strategies across the three countries since they have shown what they are capable of (SMNCSO9). Given the scale of the humanitarian and development challenges facing the region (OCHA, 2026), our five respondents viewed youth participation not simply as a question of representation, but as a potential resource for developing responses that are better adapted to local realities.

This perspective is particularly important when considering the changing development landscape. If traditional donors reduce their engagement while new geopolitical partnerships do not provide equivalent support to youth-led initiatives, young people risk being increasingly excluded from decisions about how development resources are prioritized and delivered. In addition, strengthening youth-led organizations could provide a means of maintaining locally grounded development initiatives even as international funding and political relationships change.

1.3. Key messages

Respondents' accounts point to a central tension in the current geopolitical shifts of the AES. The rejection of traditional external actors and the emphasis on sovereignty can resonate with populations who have experienced insecurity, inequality and what they perceive as ineffective or externally imposed interventions. At the same time, the shrinking of funding and civic space can have serious consequences for independent organizations working to address those same challenges.

This tension is captured particularly clearly by a youth leader from Burkina Faso:

> *"**Population is not political,** the population doesn't know what's happening, they just need help, they just want to live, they just want to have healthcare, education and so on, so that's my advocacy. "* (IMBCS07).

The statement is a useful reminder that geopolitical competition can obscure the everyday priorities of the people whom development cooperation is intended to serve. For respondents, the central question is therefore not simply which international actor provides assistance, but whether development cooperation enables communities and local organizations to identify

their own priorities, access sustainable resources and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their futures.

All in all, the geopolitical transformation of the AES is producing a paradox for locally-led development. On the one hand, the weakening of traditional external influence may create opportunities to strengthen local ownership and challenge extractive development practices. On the other hand, declining external funding, increased political scrutiny and restrictions on civic space can undermine the local organizations that are best positioned to deliver and shape locally-led development. Youth-led organizations are situated at the centre of this tension. They remain important actors in mobilization and community development, but respondents consistently emphasized that their sustainability and meaningful participation in decision-making cannot be taken for granted.

Part II. Shifting funding landscape & implications for development work in the AES.

Against the backdrop of changing geopolitical dynamics in the AES, including the reduction, suspension and reorientation of support from several traditional donors, our five respondents described shrinking international funding as a significant challenge affecting youth-led organizations. Their experiences can be situated within a broader contraction in development and humanitarian assistance. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2026 projections, bilateral official development assistance (ODA) to sub-Saharan Africa was expected to fall by a further 11.6% in 2026, following a 26.3% decline in 2025 (OECD, 2026). Funding pressures are also evident in humanitarian assistance: UNICEF reported that its 2025 humanitarian appeal for Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger had received only US$85 million of the US$490 million required, leaving a gap of approximately US$405 million, with just 17% of the appeal funded (see Figure 2; UNICEF, 2026).

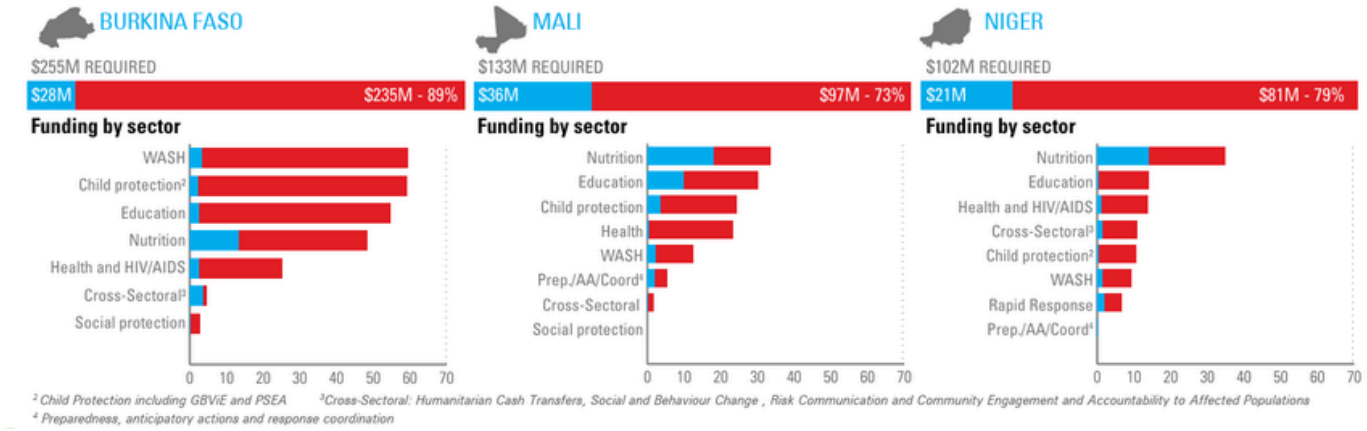

Figure 2. Funding Status Central Sahel January to December 2025. (Source: UNICEF, 2026.)

2.1. A shrinking funding landscape

Evidence also suggests that the broader funding contraction has coincided with changes in the operational presence of humanitarian organizations themselves. A July 2025 Central Sahel humanitarian bulletin, drawing on data from OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS), reported that the number of humanitarian organizations working across the AES region fell from 310 in December 2024 to 269 in June 2025, representing a 13% reduction over six months (Central Sahel Decision-Making Support Bulletin, 2025).

These wider funding pressures were reflected in our participants' experiences. Although the specific causes and impacts varied across contexts, participants described how reduced financial resources weakened organizational capacity, disrupted programs and limited support available to vulnerable communities. They also described how the political and security environment could affect donors' willingness to provide new funding.

2.2. Political and operational shifts in donor engagement

A youth leader from Burkina Faso explained that the political and security context had made some donors more hesitant to invest in the region.

> *"There is no rule of law now with the military powers, and donors don't want to risk their money, so we were not able to get funding for the project."* (IMBCS07)

This account illustrates how political and operational changes in the AES may affect civil society not only through the withdrawal or suspension of existing funding, but also through changes in donors' willingness to provide funding in affected contexts. Evidence from the Central Sahel supports this broader pattern. A Norwegian Refugee Council analysis (2024) of development funding in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger reported "a general lack of appetite" from traditional donors to invest in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger following the political changes in the three

countries. The analysis, which drew on desk research and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including UN agencies, INGOs, donors and NRC staff, also identified reported access constraints and administrative impediments as factors affecting funding allocations (NRC, 2024). For youth-led organizations, which may operate with smaller budgets and fewer institutional resources than established international or national NGOs, such uncertainty can have significant implications for organizational continuity, staff retention and longer-term planning (OECD, 2023a). The OECD (2023a) similarly highlights that multi-year and flexible funding can support staff retention, programme continuity and organisational stability among partner-country civil society actors.

2.3. Organizational and programme-level consequences

The effects were particularly evident in Burkina Faso and Niger, where four participants described the suspension or withdrawal of funding from major international donors, including USAID and Swedish-funded programs. In Niger, one participant explained that the suspension of USAID funding in February 2025 had directly disrupted their organization's activities:

> *"Us as an NGO, what affected the most is that USAID suspended its funding. We had X funding from them, one of X k and another of Xk USD.[6]"* (IWNCSO6)

The respondent further explained that *"[they] used to have staff, now [they] have only volunteers."* (IWNCSO6), linking the withdrawal of development partners in their experience to broader consequences for young people, noting that *"When partners retreat, there's more unemployed people, and it's often young people"* (IWNCSO6). Together, these observations illustrate how funding disruptions can affect not only the organizational capacity of youth-led CSOs, but also employment and support opportunities for young people more broadly.

Similarly, two respondents in Burkina Faso outlined how the suspension of Swedish- and USAID-funded programs affected the continuity of youth-focused development work, including through the discontinuation of media literacy and peacebuilding initiatives, staff layoffs, and reduced opportunities for youth engagement (see Figure 3). Respondents also described wider consequences of declining aid for communities, including disruptions to HIV treatment, education, youth entrepreneurship and community peacebuilding. As one respondent explained:

[6] For confidentiality purposes, the numbers have been anonymized.

> *"Many schools closed because of insecurity, many students are out of schools in many regions and then they don't have money to go to all the places, to go to schools, and then NGOs that were funding education, many lost their funding so a lot of youth are not able to go to school and a lot of youth are not able to continue to benefit support, to build some enterprises, to get employed, so it is very difficult for youth now, even ourselves."* (IMBCS07)

These findings suggest that funding reductions extend beyond organizational finances, affecting the continuity and reach of programs and support in communities already facing conflict, displacement and economic hardship. The implications are therefore felt both at the organizational and community-level. When funding is withdrawn or suspended, the effects can extend from staffing and program continuity to access to services and opportunities for young people. This is particularly significant in the Sahel, where humanitarian needs remain high while humanitarian financing continues to face substantial shortfalls (Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2024, OCHA, 2024, UNICEF, 2026).

2.4. Funding gaps, growing needs and donor priorities

The Malian respondent framed the funding challenge less in terms of specific donor withdrawals and more as a widening gap between available resources and growing needs. As the respondent observed:

> *"The reduction in funding has led to a drastic decline in civil society's capacity to address the challenges faced by the population... At a time when needs are growing, resources are dwindling, creating an immeasurable gap."* (SMMCSO8)

This broader perception of declining resources is also reflected in the wider humanitarian financing context in Mali. The IMF reported that humanitarian funding reductions in 2025 contributed to a 70% reduction in assistance to food-insecure households through the World Food Programme, while funding for UN OCHA humanitarian operations fell by two-thirds, from US$780 million to US$260 million (IMF, 2025). Against this backdrop, the respondent from Mali identified limitations in donor-funded programs, describing a *"colonial approach to setting priorities"* as a challenge affecting youth initiatives (SMMCSO8). While this view reflects the experience of a single respondent and cannot be taken as representative of perspectives across Mali, it nonetheless, points to the concern raised across this research: that the challenges associated with the current funding landscape relate not only to the amount of funding available, but also to the conditions and priorities attached to that funding as well as whose needs are reflected in those decisions.

2.5. Competition for remaining funding

A respondent from Burkina Faso also identified funding constraints as a challenge, noting that smaller youth-led organizations increasingly have to compete with larger organizations for a shrinking pool of funding:

> *"Many community activities and youth structures face difficulties maintaining their actions without external financial support [...] the small funding opportunities previously accessible to youth organizations are now increasingly sought after by large organizations with more experience, visibility, and resource mobilization capacity."* (SMBCSO10).

This illustrates how a contraction in funding can have uneven effects across civil society. While declining resources affect organizations broadly, smaller and youth-led organizations may face additional barriers to accessing the funding that remains, particularly where funding mechanisms favor organizations with greater experience, visibility or resource mobilization capacity. This is consistent with OECD evidence that open calls carry a probability that larger, more formal and well-funded civil society actors win competitions to the detriment of smaller and/or informal partner-country actors (OECD, 2023b, citing Peace Direct and Kantowitz, 2020).

2.6. Summary of key findings

Overall, the findings indicate that funding reductions are not experienced simply as financial constraints but as catalysts reshaping organizational capacity, programming continuity and access to services, while potentially influencing which organizations are able to remain active and whose priorities can be supported. Our participants described different dimensions of these pressures, including donor withdrawal and suspension, reduced staffing, programme disruption, growing gaps between needs and available resources, and increased competition for remaining funding opportunities. While the respondents demonstrated considerable adaptability, they emphasized that resilience cannot substitute for sustained and equitable investment in local civil society. The challenge is therefore not only the volume of funding available, but also how resources are allocated, who can access them and whether funding mechanisms are sufficiently responsive to the realities of youth-led and grassroot organizations.

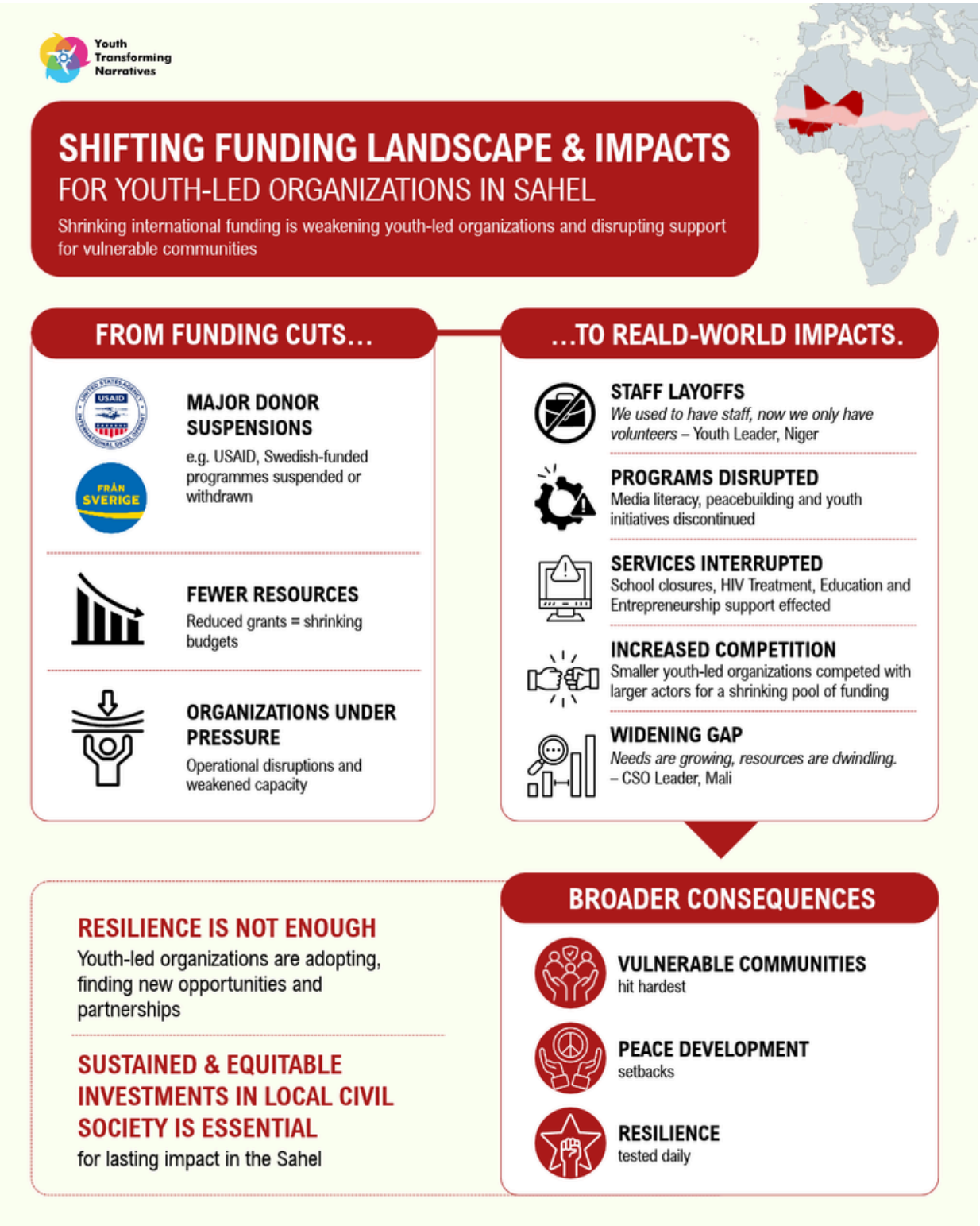

Figure 3. From shrinking international funding to wider impacts on youth-led organizations and communities in the Sahel

Part III. How do CSOs adapt and continue to deliver to communities within unstable contexts.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in advancing development, particularly at the grassroots level, through their knowledge, experience and close engagement with individuals and communities, while complementing the role of States in promoting and protecting the right to development (OHCHR, 2025). The findings in this report show that, despite the political, financial and operational uncertainty described in Parts I and II, youth-led CSOs have not simply withdrawn from this environment, they have had to adapt. "Adapting" refers to the capacity to respond to changing fundamental conditions within a given environment by developing and adopting new strategies (Sternad, 2011,41). Adaptation has therefore been essential for youth-led CSOs operating in the AES region, both to ensure their continued survival and to maintain their effectiveness in their communities.

The five respondents described a range of ways in which they have adapted their programs, mobilized local resources, relied on volunteerism, strengthened partnerships and continued to involve young people and communities in shaping their work. These responses demonstrate considerable organizational agency and commitment to the communities they serve. They also reveal the limits of resilience many of these adaptations are responses to constrained resources and an unstable operating environment rather than substitutes for sustainable support.

3.1. Adapting programs and diversifying support

The first adaptation described was the adjusting of existing projects to match available resources while keeping core activities intact. Flexibility in program delivery is particularly important in complex and changing environments, where CSOs may need to adjust their activities, budgets or implementation plans as circumstances change (Bond, 2017). This approach is also consistent with the IFRC's guidance on adaptive management in fragile, conflict and violence-affected contexts, which emphasizes the need to regularly monitor both the changing context and project implementation and adjust activities when conditions change (Sauerhammer et al., 2024). Rather than abandoning programs altogether as resources became more limited, three respondents from Burkina Faso and Niger described scaling, postponing or reorganising activities in order to preserve their core work. A youth leader from Burkina Faso explained:

> *"Several community programs and awareness activities have had to be reduced, postponed or reorganized due to limited financial resources"* (SMBCSO10).

This reveals an important dimension of adaptation, whereby flexibility has enabled the respondent's organization to remain engaged with the community even when unable to maintain the scale or scope of activities originally planned. Adaptation therefore does not necessarily mean changing organizational priorities. Rather, organizational resilience can enable organizations to respond to changing environments by adapting and reconfiguring their resources and capabilities (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2024). This form of adaptation is reflected in the respondent's efforts to sustain community engagement despite constraints on the scale and scope of activities initially planned.

Resource constraints in the AES region have also encouraged CSOs to diversify their sources of funding as a means of sustaining their activities. The Aid for Rural Education Access Initiative (AREAi) similarly identifies funding constraints as a significant challenge for African organizations and emphasizes the diversification of funding sources as a strategy for strengthening organizational sustainability and resilience (Iyiola, 2024). As a CSO member from Burkina Faso explained, that their organization had begun to diversify their sources of support:

> *"The strategy is to focus on non-governmental funding because governmental funding is subject to change, according to political and geopolitical relations between the countries. So we decided to focus on (.....) and other foundations, but it is not easy for us because the competition is great."* (IMBCSO7)

While in Niger, following the suspension of USAID funding, a youth leader described a similar effort to identify alternative opportunities:

> *"Now, there are a lot of opportunities online, so we try to find opportunities there and send proposals and try to collaborate with partners and UN agencies to do activities together"* (IWNCSO6).

These accounts indicate that the adaptation responses of the two respondents involved modifying resource-mobilization strategies as their organizations sought alternative financial and institutional support to sustain their activities amid an increasingly uncertain funding environment. While the wider geopolitical environment has seen the AES governments develop or strengthen relationships with new external partners, as highlighted earlier in the report, the respondents did not report similar changes in their own sources of funding. Moreover, rather than simply waiting for previous sources of support to return, their adaptation strategy has also involved actively seeking new relationships. Two respondents from Burkina Faso and Niger (IWNCSO6, IMBCSO7) described looking towards foundations, searching for funding opportunities online and submitting proposals as well as developing partnerships with UN agencies and other organizations. The three youth-led organizations from Burkina Faso and Niger are therefore seeking to diversify their sources of support, while adjusting their projects to the funding available to maintain their core activities. Yet, as mentioned previously in part II,

smaller youth-led organizations often face significant challenges in accessing these opportunities, especially when competing against larger and more established NGOs. Thus, diversification can expand the range of possible support without necessarily making access to that support more equitable or predictable.

3.2. Volunteerism and local resource mobilization

The second adaptation, has been the greater reliance on volunteerism and locally available resources. Perspectives from the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) highlight how the withdrawal or reduction of support from long-standing funding partners, combined with changing donor priorities and a tighter global funding environment, has created significant resource gaps (African NGOs, 2026). These gaps include reduced staffing, which can affect program continuity and the ability of organizations to sustain their work. This is consistent with research on non-profit organizations, which documents the use of volunteer engagement as a means of sustaining organizational operations (Ilyas et al., 2020). Within the scope of our research, three respondents described volunteers not simply as an additional resource but as people whose continued commitment has enabled their organizations to maintain activities despite significant financial constraints. A youth leader from Burkina Faso highlighted:

> *"We are notably observing a greater shift towards volunteering and community mobilization, with low-cost activities organized thanks to the commitment of members and local communities"* (SMBCSO10).

Similarly, a youth leader from Niger described how their organization shifted from paid staff to a volunteer-based model while, a CSO member from Mali stated that their adaptations or new strategies to cope with reduced funding included:

> *"Strengthening local resource mobilization, developing income-generating activities and strengthening voluntary and pro bono contributions."* (SMMCSO8)

While drawn from a small number of respondents, these responses illustrate the depth of local commitment underpinning much of the work carried out by youth-led CSOs and even if not statistically representative, they offer a meaningful window into the motivations driving this work. However, volunteerism should not be understood only as evidence of organizational resilience. The shift from paid employment towards volunteer-based work also reflects the costs of the current funding environment. Where organizations previously had staff, the loss of funding can mean that the same work is increasingly sustained through unpaid labour. Yet this shift does not make the work cost-free as sustaining volunteer-based work also requires organizational resources. This is highlighted in the *From Nice to Necessary: Unleashing the Impact of Volunteering Through Transformative Investment* report, which

emphasizes that volunteer engagement requires resources for recruitment, training, deployment, recognition and retention, challenging the assumption that volunteerism is a cost-free resource for nonprofit organizations (Points of Light, 2025).

The considerable commitment and resourcefulness demonstrated by the three respondents should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that organizations can sustainably compensate for insufficient financial support through volunteerism alone. Effective volunteer engagement is linked to wider organisational capacity including management, adaptability and the resources needed to sustain and grow organizational activities (York, 2017). This distinction is particularly important for youth-led organizations. Young people are not only beneficiaries of development programs. They are also contributing their time, skills and organizational capacity to keep those programs running, that might otherwise be reduced or discontinued but this contribution still depends on organisations having the resources and systems needed to support and sustain volunteer engagement. The findings therefore point to a form of locally rooted resilience that is valuable in its own right. But it also raises questions about who ultimately bears the costs of maintaining essential community work in a context where external resources decline.

3.3. Community ownership and meaningful youth participation

Moreover, organizations are drawing on relationships, skills, time and resources within their own communities to keep activities going. This approach is reflected in the Save the Children Denmark and West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) research on Burkina Faso and Mali, which identified community donations and domestic fundraising as ways of mobilizing local resources to respond to needs, including an example from Burkina Faso where an organization prioritized domestic fundraising to reduce its dependence on foreign partners (Rosenstock et al., 2023). Resource mobilization can include financial and non-financial contributions, such as volunteerism and community support, which can strengthen community ownership and organizational sustainability (Kazanskaia, 2025). For CSOs in the AES region, mobilizing resources locally can help reduce reliance on international funding and support the continuation of their activities.

According to a respondent from Niger, local resource mobilization has also been accompanied by continued efforts to ensure that programs reflect the priorities of the communities they serve. The youth leader from Niger described consultation with community members and youth involvement as central to how activities are designed, explaining:

> *"Programs are often developed through a community consultation process that involves program coordinators in designing initiatives that take into account the aspirations of local youth and women"* (SMNCSO9).

This emphasis on consultation is significant in the context of a changing development landscape. Involving young people and women in consultations and decision-making can make development programs more responsive by ensuring that their perspectives are incorporated into planning and implementation (UNSDG, 2024). For CSOs, this also creates opportunities for communities to have a more active role in shaping the programs that affect them. This suggests that adaptation is not only about organizational survival. It is also about maintaining the relevance and legitimacy of programs within communities.

Youth participation has been a central part of this locally driven approach. Involving young people can benefit organizations and their programs, as partnerships with youth, help organizations develop programs that are more effective in engaging the wider population and achieving greater impact (SPGs, 2024). Research conducted by Plan International on youth participation in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger found that young people wanted to play a more active role in responding to the crisis, particularly through raising awareness, forming associations, organising collections and fundraising campaigns (Plan International, 2023).

The experiences shared by two respondents similarly position young people as actors contributing to the design, implementation and continuation of development activities. As the same youth leader from Niger emphasized:

> *"The young people at Espace AES must be at the forefront and not be left behind, because they have shown what they are capable of"* (SMNCSO9).

Similarly, a CSO member from Mali emphasized:

> *"Young people can serve as catalysts at every level"* (SMMCSO8).

Reinforcing YOD UNESCO's emphasis on meaningful youth participation, which goes beyond volunteering or symbolic inclusion and involves young people being part of identifying challenges, contributing to solutions and influencing decisions (Nwali, 2026). Taken together, these approaches show how the two respondents from Mali and Niger are drawing on community engagement, volunteerism and youth involvement to maintain their activities and respond to local needs as external resources become more limited.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that youth participation forms part of the adaptive capacity of CSOs themselves but the experiences of two respondents from Burkina Faso and Mali also show that sustaining this participation depends on the resources available to young people and their

organizations. A youth leader from Burkina Faso noted that many of their members are students or unemployed youth who contribute to the organization but have limited financial means:

> *"We also rely on the contribution of the members but it is the same difficulty because people don't have means"* (IMBCSO7).

Similarly, a CSO member from Mali (SMMCSO8) noted that funding cuts have contributed to low youth involvement in conflict prevention and management mechanisms. These constraints are particularly significant given the expectations placed on young people to contribute to community and development efforts. At the continental level, young people are viewed as central to the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, which aims to achieve inclusive and sustainable development through *"a people-driven movement focusing on women and youth"* (African Union, 2015). This places further importance on creating the conditions that enable young people to contribute meaningfully to development efforts while being supported. When asked what more could be done to support youth, a youth leader from Niger emphasized the importance of recognizing young people's capacity to contribute:

> *"We should trust the youth of the AES in particular and young people around the world in general"* (SMNCSO9).

Therefore, meaningful youth participation requires more than opportunities to contribute. Young people also need the support and resources to remain involved and contribute to decisions that affect their communities.

3.4. Strengthening partnerships, networks and organizational capacity

The third adaptation is the strengthening of internal capacity while developing partnerships. Organizational capacity puts a strong focus on how organizational systems, leadership, skills and processes support organizations to respond to changing circumstances and sustain their activities over time (Oduor, 2026). Organizations that provide critical societal services should not only anticipate and prepare for foreseeable threats but also develop adaptive capacity to respond to unforeseen challenges and crises, with the preconditions for adaptation established and maintained before a crisis occurs, although significant gaps remain in understanding how organizations develop and sustain these preconditions (Cedergren & Hassel, 2024). In the context of recent funding cuts in the AES region, CSOs have had to adjust to unforeseen challenges and identify ways to strengthen their internal capacity and adapt to the changing funding environment. Two respondents described networking, collective action and partnerships as ways of improving organizational capacity while responding to the challenges of the current funding environment. A youth leader from Burkina Faso explained:

> *"There is also a growing trend towards networking and collective action among youth organizations to strengthen their credibility, share opportunities, and increase their advocacy and resource mobilization capacity."* (SMBCSO10)

Similarly, a CSO member from Burkina Faso also described efforts to develop partnerships with municipalities, schools, community organizations and the private sector (IMBCSO7). These experiences are consistent with wider work on CSOs capacity strengthening, which identifies networking and coalition building as important areas of organizational capacity, alongside longer-term funding partnerships, power sharing and mutual accountability as principles that can support sustainable organizational effectiveness (Dilliplane & Schlangen, 2020). Previous research conducted by Save the Children Denmark and WACSI in Burkina Faso and Mali showed that partnerships between international and local stakeholders can support local leadership, with local actors involved in decision-making across the different stages of the project cycle (Rosenstock et al., 2023). In the AES context, these forms of collaboration have provided opportunities for the two respondents to share knowledge, access support and contribute to decisions affecting their communities and could be a beneficial strategy for other CSOs in the region. Responding to funding challenges has led the two respondents to strengthen their partnerships and organizational capacity. Partnerships can provide resources and technical support while giving youth-led organizations the space to shape and deliver work that supports the communities they serve.

3.5. Adaptation has limits

However, not all organizations are able to adapt in the same way and the experiences of organizations differ across the region. Organizations differ in their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, as structures and practices that support stability and efficiency can also create rigidity and limit their capacity to respond effectively when the environment changes (Kostin, 2020). A respondent from Burkina Faso (IMBCSO7) made it clear that some organizations have greater access to networks, funding opportunities, partnerships and organizational resources than others. Smaller youth-led organizations can face particular difficulties competing for funding and maintaining the operational infrastructure needed to continue their work, with inadequate funding, limited domestic funding and restrictive eligibility requirements identified as key barriers to sustainable financing for youth-led organizations (YIELD Hub, 2024). A CSO member from Mali noted that reduced financial support has contributed to low youth involvement and the disappearance of youth-led CSOs due to a lack of support (SMMCSO8). While in Niger, the challenges faced extend to their ability to remain operational within the current context as a youth leader from Niger explained:

> *"The real challenge is to do everything we can to be among the organizations authorized to operate in Niger…… There are also operational costs to cover, particularly given the scarcity of funding."* (SMNCSO9)

Despite creative adaptation strategies, the operating environment for CSOs has become more restrictive across the AES region, with Amnesty International reporting increased obstacles to freedom of association through legislation and repressive practices, such as the suspension or dissolution of nearly 700 NGOs and associations in Burkina Faso between April and May 2026 (Amnesty International, 2026). This means that adaptation takes place within political as well as financial constraints. These restrictions add to the financial pressures identified by the youth leader from Niger (SMNCSO9), as CSOs must not only secure sufficient resources to sustain their activities but also navigate an increasingly constrained regulatory environment. While some organizations are finding ways to adapt as noted in this section, others are struggling to maintain their activities or continue operating as noted by the CSO member from Mali (SMMCSO8). Therefore, the response from the three respondents from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger show that the ability of youth-led CSOs to adapt is not the same across the AES region, as the challenges they face and the ways in which they respond differ depending on the national context. Furthermore, the experiences shared by respondents point to an important distinction between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability. The five respondents have demonstrated how CSOs can adjust their programs, mobilize volunteers and local resources, build partnerships and continue engaging with communities under considerable pressure. But the fact that organizations are able to continue operating under these conditions should not mean that the conditions under which they operate are sustainable. Indeed, the capacity to adapt seems to depend on forms of unpaid labour, personal commitment and informal support that cannot be assumed in the long run.

Overall, the findings show that youth-led CSOs in the AES region are exercising considerable agency in navigating an unstable environment. They are not waiting for external support to return, they are adjusting their programs, finding new sources of funding, relying more on volunteers and local resources and strengthening partnerships and organizational systems. Though not statistically representative for the AES region, these responses demonstrate the value of locally rooted knowledge and leadership. They reveal a central tension running throughout this research, that is, resilience can enable organizations to continue delivering in the short term but it cannot substitute for the predictable resources, civic space and decision-making power required for sustainable locally-led development.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the interviews and survey responses collected for this research. Rather than reflecting external policy prescriptions, they represent what five CSO workers across the AES region identified themselves, when asked what would most improve their ability to operate, sustain their programs and serve their communities under current conditions. Each recommendation is grounded in specific testimony, and quotations from respondents are included throughout to preserve the language and framing they themselves used.

1. Establish dedicated funding windows for youth-led and women-led organizations, with eligibility criteria and disbursement mechanisms designed around the operating realities of small, locally embedded groups rather than modeled on requirements suited to larger, often externally structured NGOs.

A recurring demand is funding structured to counter the way current mechanisms systematically disadvantage smaller, locally rooted, youth- and women-led organizations in comparison to larger, often internationally affiliated ones. Funding mechanisms should be equitable!

> *"I believe the government should ensure equitable access to funding for large, medium, and small NGOs alike, so that all organizations can carry out activities throughout the year."* (SMNCSO9)
>
> *"They have to have a special fund, a specific fund for youth-led organizations and women-led organizations to build this."* (IMBCSO7)

2. Treat localization as a transfer of decision-making authority and resource control to community-based organizations, not merely subcontracting delivery while retaining design and financial control at the international or national level.

Localization language is present in donor and government discourse, but respondents are explicit that the term is empty unless implementation authority (and not just service delivery) moves to community-based organizations. Localization should shift power!

> *"The government must also ensure that the localization process is effectively implemented so that implementation is carried out by community-based organizations."* (SMNCSO9)

3. Redesign administrative and reporting requirements around the actual capacity of local youth organizations, rather than requiring local actors to adapt to procedures built for international NGOs; and pair any

funding with governance and project management support that builds lasting institutional capacity, not one-off compliance.

Administrative procedures should be simplified and go hand in hand with capacity support on local terms!

> *"This could involve creating accessible, transparent funding mechanisms adapted to the realities of young organizations, especially those operating at the local level. It would also be important to simplify administrative procedures and offer capacity-building programs in governance, project management, entrepreneurship and resource mobilization."* (SMBCSO10)

4. Build funding and cooperation mechanisms that are resilient to political transition, with explicit continuity safeguards protecting ongoing projects from abrupt disruption when governments or international partnership frameworks change.

Yes to full cycle uninterrupted implementation !

> *"At the level of CSOs, all funding that we receive should be implemented from beginning to end for it to have a positive impact, and that they are relevant projects and programs."* (IWNCSO6)
>
> *"Periods of political transition can also lead to uncertainties regarding funding, project continuity, and international cooperation mechanisms."* (SMBCSO10)

5. Governments and AES institutions should explicitly and publicly decouple civic criticism and independent civil society organizing from accusations of foreign interference or disloyalty. Structured, recurring dialogue platforms should be established to rebuild trust with youth CSOs

The clearest pushback in the testimonies is against a security approach that treats independent youth and civil society actors as inherently untrustworthy (a pattern with clear roots in colonial-era governance) casting them as either Western proxies or disloyal critics, rather than citizens with legitimate standing.

> *"[…] Youth-led organizations, non-governmental, are citizens of the Sahel, we love our countries, we have been working here, we have been living here, and we have been working to improve the lives of people here, […] first, they have to trust the youth and to trust civil society."* (IMBCS07)
>
> *"They have to be inclusive, they cannot just say that those who support them are the patriots and those who love their country, and the other people who are able to criticize their government are considered enemies and spies of imperialism, this is not right, and this is not fair."* (IMBCS07)
>
> *"At the government level, it is to believe in CSOs. Believe and support them. That goes through dialogues with partners and starting new bases, going back to what didn't work and seeing how we can improve and do things together, because we have the same objectives: sustainable development and improving the quality of life of citizens and population, and that peace prevails."* (IWNCSO6)

6. Reallocate a meaningful share of security-oriented investment toward peacebuilding, dialogue, and community-based social services led by local CSOs, and require that international partnerships be assessed against whether they serve population interests and sovereignty rather than reinforcing military or autocratic power structures.

Respondents directly challenged security-first, externally imported counter-terrorism logic, positioning peacebuilding, dialogue, and social investment as more legitimate and effective than militarized responses. It is important to note that this position is rooted in lived experience of what has and has not worked.

> *"The military way to combat violent extremism is not effective, they have been experiencing it. We cannot combat terrorism and violent extremism just through arms and weapons."* (IMBCS07)
>
> *"I will recommend them to understand that they have to come by the non-military approach. And the non-military approach is peacebuilding, social services, dialogue, mediation and so on."* (IMBCS07)
>
> *"Strengthen the presence of development partners in a manner that respects human rights and the sovereignty of peoples, rather than that of autocratic leaders."* (SMMCSO8)
>
> *"So, they have to listen to the population and to prioritize the needs and interests of the population rather than their own interests."* (IMBCS07)

7. Create permanent, resourced seats for youth representation within formal decision-making bodies (not time-limited consultations!) spanning the full policy cycle from priority-setting through implementation and evaluation. Participation should be paired with genuine access to information and decision-making power, not just presence in the room.

This is the clearest articulation of a decolonial and youth-centered governance demand in the dataset: participation that is early, structural and decision-shaping, not symbolic or extractive.

> *"In the future, youth should play a central and not merely consultative role in developing development strategies for the AES region. Young people represent a significant part of the population and are directly concerned by issues of employment, education, climate, governance, and economic development. Their participation should occur from the early stages of defining priorities through to implementation and evaluation of actions. Youth can bring innovative approaches, a better understanding of local realities, and significant mobilization capacity. For this contribution to be effective, it would be relevant to establish permanent mechanisms for intergenerational dialogue and youth representation within decision-making bodies."* (SMBCSO10)
>
> *"To strengthen this inclusion, it would be useful to institutionalize participation mechanisms, improve access to information, and create more spaces where young people can concretely contribute to the policies and programs that affect them."* (SMBCSO10)
>
> *"Young people can serve as catalysts at every level."* (SMMCSO8)

8. Reject a homogenized notion of "youth" in program design; disaggregate strategies by territory, gender and socio-economic context, and build interventions through co-construction with young people rather than top-down designs.

The intersecting and unequal youth realities should be recognized!

> *"It is also important to recognize the diversity of realities experienced by young people depending on territory, gender, and socio-economic contexts. An approach based on trust, capacity building, and co-construction of solutions will transform youth engagement into concrete results for regional development."* (SMBCSO10)

9. Treat the expansion of civic space and the end of extrajudicial killings as non-negotiable preconditions for deepened international cooperation and partnership, not as separate human rights concerns to be addressed alongside development programming.

Expanding the civic space should be a precondition, not just an aspiration!

> *"Expand civic space, end extrajudicial executions and create more opportunities."* (SMMCSO8)



Figure 4. Summary of Key Recommendations

Conclusions

Since 2023, the Alliance of the Sahel States has undergone a geopolitical realignment, the consequences of which remain under-examined. This report set out to contribute to filling that gap, not by focussing primarily on donor strategies or state-level diplomacy, but by asking youth-led civil society organizations themselves how these shifts are being experienced and navigated on the ground.

Part I traced how the colonial legacy of French monetary, military and economic influence shaped the conditions from which the AES emerged, and how the region's subsequent geopolitical realignment has involved a significant deterioration in relations with several traditional Western partners alongside closer relationships with actors including Russia. Respondents did not describe this transformation in simple terms of liberation from external interference or of a straightforward replacement of one development partner by another. Rather, they highlighted a complex shift in the political and development environment, in which the withdrawal or reduction of traditional external support has coincided with a stronger emphasis on sovereignty, a changing information environment and new forms of international engagement that respondents did not necessarily associate with equivalent opportunities for locally-led development. For youth-led CSOs, some of the most immediate consequences have been increased funding uncertainty, political scrutiny and a more difficult operating environment.

Part II showed that this uncertainty is not abstract. The suspension of USAID and Swedish-funded programs translated directly into the loss of paid staff, the closure of media literacy and peacebuilding initiatives, and disruptions to HIV treatment, education and youth entrepreneurship support already strained by conflict and displacement. Respondents in Mali reframed the funding conversation beyond withdrawal alone, pointing to a widening gap between needs and resources, and to donor priority-setting that some described as carrying a "colonial approach." The findings also showed that access to funding is shaped not only by the overall volume of resources available, but by competition between organizations, donor perceptions of political and security risk and funding mechanisms that may not align with the realities of smaller, locally rooted organizations. At the same time, respondents' experiences suggest that the current moment cannot be understood solely as a story of loss. Some identified opportunities for greater localization and for challenging longstanding development practices, including approaches they considered extractive or insufficiently responsive to local realities (e.g poverty porn).

Part III demonstrated that, faced with these pressures, CSOs have not simply absorbed the shock passively. They have adjusted the scale of their programming, leaned further on volunteerism and local resource mobilization, diversified their

funding relationships, strengthened networks and partnerships and continued to involve communities and young people in shaping and delivering their work. These adaptations demonstrate considerable agency, resourcefulness and commitment to the communities CSOs serve. However, respondents' experiences also show that adaptation carries costs: reduced staffing, reliance on unpaid labour and the need to continually reorganise activities can enable organizations to remain active in the short term without providing the conditions required for long-term sustainability. As respondents repeatedly emphasized, resilience under conditions of chronic uncertainty comes at a cost, and adaptation cannot substitute for predictable and equitable investment.

Altogether, these findings point to a central tension in the current transformation of development cooperation in the AES region. On the one hand, the weakening of traditional external influence and the emphasis on national sovereignty may create opportunities to strengthen local ownership and to challenge development practices that have historically been experienced as extractive or externally driven. On the other hand, declining external funding, increased political scrutiny and restrictions on civic space can undermine the very local organizations that localization is intended to empower. The experiences documented in this research therefore suggest that localization cannot be achieved simply through the withdrawal of international actors, the diversification of geopolitical partnerships or the increased use of local delivery partners. It requires the transfer of meaningful decision-making power, sustainable and accessible resources, as well as sufficient civic space for independent local actors to define and pursue their own priorities.

This tension is reflected most clearly in the recommendations emerging from respondents. Rather than simply calling for more funding, they asked for development cooperation to change how resources and decision-making power are distributed: for equitable funding mechanisms built around their actual operating realities rather than those of larger international actors; for localization that transfers real decision-making authority rather than subcontracting delivery; for continuity safeguards that protect programming from abrupt political disruption; and for governments and AES institutions to distinguish independent civil society from foreign interference. They also called for a shift away from security-first responses towards greater investment in peacebuilding and social development, and, above all, for young people to have permanent and resourced places in the rooms where decisions about their countries' futures are made not merely through consultation, but through meaningful participation and influence throughout the policy cycle.

Importantly, this report cannot claim to represent the full diversity of youth-led civil society across the AES. Its small sample and the acknowledged constraints on recruitment mean that its findings

should be understood as a set of grounded and credible perspectives rather than generalisable conclusions. Nevertheless, the consistency of several themes across respondents (funding uncertainty, the need for meaningful localization, shrinking civic space and the limited influence of young people over development priorities) suggests that these experiences ask for greater attention. The findings also demonstrate the importance of recognising the agency already exercised by youth-led civil society. Organizations are not just recipients of geopolitical and funding changes, but active actors adapting and continuing to serve their communities under difficult conditions. What respondents describe is not simply a story of resilience to be celebrated in place of reform. It is a call for international actors, regional bodies and AES governments alike to recognise youth-led civil society as a legitimate and necessary partner in shaping the future of the region and to create the political, financial and institutional conditions in which that partnership can be sustained.

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