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Sustaining Progress—Investing in Adolescent Girls Amidst Global Challenges: Learnings from a donor roundtable

Coalition for Adolescent Girls

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Sustaining Progress—Investing in Adolescent Girls Amidst Global Challenges

Learnings from a donor roundtable

Coalition of Adolescent Girls and Akili Dada

The Coalition for Adolescent Girls (CAG), hosted by the Population Council, in collaboration with Akili Dada, convened a high-level donor roundtable on June 4, 2025. Against the backdrop of funding freezes, policy shifts, and widening global crises, this convening brought together funders, grassroots organizations, adolescent and youth leaders, and global experts, to reflect on emerging trends, lived experiences, and actions needed urgently to ensure adolescent girls remain at the center of global development priorities.

The meeting was co-led by CAG's co-chairs, Evalin Kario (Population Council's GIRL Center) and Tashrif Silayi (BRAC) as well as Akili Dada's Florah Muchiri and Nina Wamboi. Girl advocates from Turkey, Tanzania, and Uganda shared short reflections on the "Future Girls Want." The main session featured a presentation on funding trends, gaps, and priorities for girl-centered funding and two panel discussions on sustaining investments in adolescent girls, with perspectives from donors, grassroots girl-led organizations, multilateral agencies, and youth-led accountability movements.

This knowledge brief synthesizes key insights from the roundtable discussion. It underscores the critical need for long-term, flexible, and intersectional funding approaches that center adolescent girls as leaders and decision-makers, while offering practical recommendations for funders, implementers, policymakers, and partners to advance equitable, sustainable investments for adolescent girls.

FUNDING TRENDS, GAPS, AND PRIORITIES FOR GIRL-CENTERED FUNDING AND GENDER EQUALITY

Silvia Guglielmi, Researcher at Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence (GAGE)



“ Stakeholders need to deploy strategies that are informed by robust research evidence, to maximize the scarcity of resources and to ensure that gains for girls are not lost.

The **Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence (GAGE)** has documented comprehensive evidence based on newly released 2023 data and featuring a detailed analysis of trends in official development assistance (ODA) for adolescent girls. This evidence shows that while the absolute dollar amounts dedicated to gender and adolescent-focused ODA have risen over the past eight years, the proportion of these funds relative to total ODA has declined for four consecutive years. This signals a troubling trend where adolescent girls are being progressively deprioritized as funding competition intensifies.

GAGE's analysis revealed that countries such as Canada, Sweden, and Norway have emerged as global leaders, dedicating up to 25% or more of their ODA to adolescent-focused investments. However, funding remains disproportionately low for particularly marginalized groups such as adolescent girls with disabilities, as well as for youth-led organizations, which despite recent increases, still receive only 2.6% of total adolescent-targeted ODA.

Notably, preliminary projections for 2025 suggest that ODA levels may decline by a further 9 to 17%, compounding pressures on already limited funding pools. The full report of the analysis can be found [here](#).

Summary of Key Trends (2016–2023) as Analyzed by GAGE

- While the total dollar amount of gender and adolescent-targeted ODA increased over the past eight years, its share relative to overall ODA has declined for four consecutive years, signaling deprioritization of adolescent girls' well-being.
- Canada, Sweden, and Norway stand out for dedicating significant proportions (over 25% for Canada) of their ODA to adolescent girl-focused programs.
- Funding remains minimal for marginalized groups such as girls with disabilities, despite their large numbers, particularly in conflict-affected regions.
- Youth-led organizations receive growing but still limited support: funding increased from 1% to 2.6% of total adolescent-and gender ODA between 2021 and 2023.
- Preliminary projections indicate ODA is expected to decline by a further 9–17% in 2025 due to broader global economic pressures.

Recommendations

- Expand innovative funding partnerships for more sustainable funding toward adolescent girls' priorities.
- Increase intersectional funding for girls with disabilities, migrants, and refugees.

- Advocate for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to create an adolescent-specific funding marker.
- Prioritize research to monitor investments for adolescent girls and ensure accountability.

BEST PRACTICES IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS FUNDING AND PROGRAMMING

Insights from grassroots organizations and philanthropic actors

Transforming Funding Practices for Adolescent Girls in Latin America

Valeria Montúfar, Program Advisor, at Girls First Fund—Guatemala



6 *Effective accountability requires building genuine, ongoing relationships with communities and girls where their voices are heard and translated into real decisions, ensuring that investments generate authentic and sustainable impact.*

Across Latin America, momentum is growing to invest in adolescent girls, but funding is still far from matching the rhetoric. Despite widespread recognition of girls' potential as agents of change, less than 5% of ODA is directed to adolescents and youth, and even less reaches the most marginalized, including girls with disabilities. This disconnect between dialogue and action is especially stark in a global context where political and economic pressures continue to prioritize short-term emergencies over long-term, transformative investments in girls.

The Girls First Fund, which supports community-rooted organizations advancing girls' rights, is challenging this status quo. Grounded in feminist principles and youth-led accountability, the fund combines flexible grants with a "Funding Plus" model of mentorship, peer learning, and advocacy platforms that places adolescent girls at the center. Participatory mechanisms like youth advisory councils ensure that feedback flows directly from girls to funders, building trust and shifting power.

For the Girls First Fund, funding that truly works for girls is not just about how much is given, but how it is given. This means investing in adolescent girls not just as beneficiaries but as key agents of social transformation. It also means using participatory methodologies, offering flexible funding, and fostering continuous learning and collaboration through mechanisms like youth councils, storytelling, and open dialogue between funders and youth leaders. Further, meaningful accountability can't be reduced to metrics or logframes; it must be reflective and rooted in lived experience. It demands listening deeply, learning continuously, and trusting girls to define the change they want to see. For adolescent girls to thrive, donors must go beyond symbolic gestures, committing to long-term, flexible, and holistic support that aligns with girls' realities, not donor cycles.

Key Insights

- Ensure adolescent girls are meaningfully involved at every stage of the program cycle, from design to feedback to reflect their priorities and lived realities.
- Prioritize sustained, multi-year funding that addresses structural issues like child marriage, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), and economic empowerment, recognizing that social norm change requires time and consistency.
- Combine grants with mentorship, technical support, and networking opportunities to empower youth-led and community-based organizations.
- Establish youth councils, feedback loops, and storytelling platforms to ensure girls can influence decisions and track results.

ON THE FUTURE THEY WANT

“ *The future I want is where girls can become self-sufficient adults, make decisions about their lives, and help other girls do the same.*

—Denise, Turkey

- Strengthen program legitimacy by involving key local actors, particularly families, to support adolescent-led change.
- Build reflection into programming through mid-term reviews, community consultations, and relationship-based monitoring to improve responsiveness and relevance.

Investing in Girls, Sustaining Communities: Shifting power to the grassroots

Stacy Akinyi, Young Feminist / Founder & Executive Director, at Great Ladies Organization



“ *Effective adolescent girls programming must be rooted in community realities and driven by the girls themselves. Grassroots organizations consistently emphasize the importance of flexible, long-term funding that supports core operations and allows for continuity. However, most local actors face systemic barriers such as rigid donor requirements, short-term funding cycles, and limited access to capacity-strengthening opportunities.*

There is no shortcut to transformation. Change that lasts is nurtured from the ground up, not imposed from the top down. Yet too often, the systems meant to support girls are the very ones that silence them.

The reflections from [Great Ladies Organization](#) drew much-needed attention to the fragile ecosystem in which grassroots girl-led organizations operate. The message was clear: the dominant funding architecture burdened by bureaucracy, short-termism, and distrust was not built for the communities it claims to serve. These girl-led groups, often volunteer-driven and without formal infrastructure, face systemic exclusion. Their lack of access to audit reports or proposal-writing experience should not be read as a lack of vision or impact, but too often, it is.

Rather than reimagining new ways of working, many donors continue to apply outdated tools to emerging movements. The result? A funding environment that does not truly address the needs of communities.

Great Ladies has scaled best practices in **grassroots innovation**: income-generating collectives rooted in craft and culture, community co-financing through in-kind contributions, and local crowdfunding campaigns that double as spaces for solidarity and celebration. These aren't just stopgap solutions; they are models of resilience in action.

The call to donors was powerful—**simplify systems, build trust, fund long-term, and co-create mechanisms** with the very movements they're meant to serve. And importantly, recognize that investing in adolescent girls is not charity, it is strategy. It is a community-wide investment in health, education, safety, and social cohesion.

Key Insights

- Implement community-anchored sustainability models, such as income-generating activities, in-kind contributions, and localized crowdfunding, to support program delivery and foster trust and ownership.
- Encourage donors to simplify application and reporting processes for easier access and reduced administrative burden.
- Promote co-creation of funding mechanisms with community-based and youth-led organizations to ensure they reflect lived experiences and actual needs.

Donor Perspective on Philanthropy and Adolescent Girls

Dr Victor Mugambi, Advocacy and Events Associate, at Global Fund for Children



“ Across the philanthropic landscape, there is a growing recognition that adolescent girls are not merely beneficiaries but agents of change who must be meaningfully included in decision-making.

The presentation underscored a growing momentum within the philanthropic sector, a call to reimagine how funding flows to adolescent girls and the communities that support them. Against a backdrop of global financial uncertainty, political instability, and recurring crises, funders need to confront the stark reality: adolescent girls and grassroots organizations are too often left at the margins of traditional development financing.

But there are promising shifts underway. An encouraging trend has been noted away from hierarchical, top-down funding models and toward trust-based approaches rooted in flexibility, mutual accountability, and direct investment in youth-led and community-driven solutions. The growing use of youth advisory councils and participatory decision-making processes shows the importance of genuine partnership with girls, not as “beneficiaries,” but as co-creators of change was emphasized.

A call to action was made for a move beyond tokenistic engagement and outdated frameworks,

ON THE FUTURE THEY WANT

“ I want a future where girls are not dependent on their families due to lack of access to finances.

—Lenza, Tanzania

urging donors to embrace participatory grantmaking, risk-tolerant funding, and intersectional strategies that reflect the lived realities of girls navigating complex systems of inequality across education, gender, climate, and economic justice.

In closing, a powerful reminder was issued: sustainable impact starts with centering those most affected. It requires development actors to build long-term, trust-based relationships with girls and their communities, and to design funding systems that are not only responsive, but human-centered, inclusive, and anchored in solidarity.

Key Insights

- Invest in youth advisory boards to ensure meaningful youth participation in decision-making.
- Shift power to communities by directly funding grassroots initiatives.
- Adopt holistic funding approaches that address the interconnected challenges adolescent girls face, including education, SRHR, climate, and economic empowerment.
- Reframe approaches to risk and accountability by fostering mutual partnerships grounded in trust, learning, and shared responsibility.
- Promote responsive and equitable adolescent programming that is inclusive and transformative

Youth-led Accountability in Funding Mechanisms

Imane Lakbachi, Director of Network Engagement, at IYAFP/We Trust Youth



“Scaling and replicating impactful adolescent programming requires a deliberate shift from tokenistic consultation to genuine co-creation.

The **We Trust Youth** initiative under the International Youth Alliance for Family Planning

(IYAFP) drives a compelling vision for how youth-led accountability can shift power dynamics in global development. The initiative believes that accountability must be mutual. Too often, youth-led organizations, especially those led by adolescent girls or operating in under-resourced contexts, are held to high standards of reporting and delivery, while receiving little opportunity to question or shape the systems that fund and govern their work. We Trust Youth seeks to flip this script, creating a culture where young people are not only held accountable but empowered to hold donors accountable, safely, constructively, and on equal terms.

How funding is given matters just as much as how much is given. Youth organizers navigate layered responsibilities, i.e. school, caregiving, unpaid work, and are often expected to produce results within rigid and extractive systems. In contrast, trust-based funding creates room to breathe and build. Flexible timelines, simplified application processes, core (not just project-based) support, and transparent, two-way communication are essentials for equity and dignity in philanthropy.

A particularly energizing insight from We Trust Youth is the power of positive storytelling. When funders demonstrate trust, through multi-year, unrestricted support, through dialogue during crises, and through a willingness to evolve, it doesn't just benefit grantees. It models what equity-centered philanthropy can look like, offering blueprints for others and shifting the narrative away from critique alone to one of shared learning and collective progress. These stories restore dignity and visibility to young people, especially adolescent girls, whose work too often goes unseen.

Similarly, accountability must be safe. Many youth-led groups are reluctant to speak openly, fearing that honest feedback could endanger future funding. We Trust Youth addresses this by building trust into its processes and ensuring anonymity within feedback tools, reaffirming that true accountability must never come at the cost of vulnerability.

Four powerful calls to action for funders were given. First, move beyond consultation to co-creation; ensuring young people, especially

“ Girls should walk down the street without fear, and their dreams shouldn't be dismissed as nonsense.

—Maran, Turkey

adolescent girls, shape agendas and define success from the beginning. Second, commit to flexible, unrestricted, and long-term funding that prioritizes sustainability over short-term wins. Third, leverage what already exists—tools like those from *We Trust Youth*, rather than starting from scratch. And fourth, prioritize intersectionality: funding approaches must reflect the diverse realities of girls' lives by resourcing multiple, accessible forms of engagement from translation and community storytelling to offline participation.

A new suite of *We Trust Youth* tools co-created with young people and designed to evolve across contexts will soon be launched. These tools are more than mechanisms; they represent a growing movement to redefine power, strengthen mutual accountability, and center adolescent girls as essential actors in global change.

Key Insights

- Involve adolescent girls from the beginning in setting priorities, defining success, and designing evaluation frameworks.
- Prioritize intersectionality by recognizing and addressing the diverse realities of girls with disabilities, in rural areas, and from LGBTQI+ communities.
- Support inclusive participation through translation services, offline tools, community storytelling, and flexible engagement formats.
- Create safe accountability spaces where youth can provide honest feedback without fear of funding repercussions.
- Adopt and invest in living frameworks like *We Trust Youth* that promote continuous learning, collaboration, and shared accountability between youth movements and funders.

- Embrace these approaches as essential especially amid shrinking global funding to ensure lasting, inclusive impact for adolescent girls.

Breaking Barriers and Strengthening Collaborative Strategies for Equitable, Girl-Centered, and Holistic Investments: Best practices from the Learning Circle

Ruth Graham-Goulder, Senior Adviser on Gender Equality at UNICEF and co-convenor of the Learning Circle



“ There is a deep set of structural issues that cut across girls' lives. Funding one sector is not enough. Evidence shows that the best strategy is giving girl advocates, girl networks, and girl movements flexible funding so they can work on the issues that are very diverse and intersecting.

The Learning Circle, co-convened by **UNICEF** and **Purposeful**, is fostering innovative collaboration among diverse funders. Formed just prior to a time of major shifts in the global funding landscape, the Learning Circle brings together a small, diverse community of funders ranging from bilateral agencies to philanthropic organizations who are committed to challenging the status quo and reimagining funding in the development sector. Central to the Learning Circle's strength is the feminist partnership model between UNICEF and Purposeful, grounded in trust and friendship. Rather than operating within conventional development structures, the Learning Circle has created a space where differing institutions, perspectives, and networks can engage in honest dialogue and problem-solving, in stark contrast to the “gridlock” of public donor dialogue, where commitments are often tokenistic and disconnected from impact.

There are three core barriers which exist to adolescent girl investments, and which are addressed by the Learning Circle:

Political barriers: Girls' rights and priorities are often deprioritized compared to sectors like defense or economic growth. Lacking political power, adolescent girls are not seen as strategic constituencies, an issue compounded by the fact that girls cannot vote or hold decision-making roles.

Technical barriers: Many donors lack the mechanisms or capacity to fund grassroots, girl-led movements due to risk aversion, bureaucracy, or limited staffing. Even when the will exists, the system is not set up for flexible, trust-based funding.

Structural barriers: Adolescent girls' needs are complex and cross-sectoral, spanning education, health, climate, and economic justice. However, donor systems remain siloed and sector-specific, preventing the kind of intersectional and holistic investments that girls need and deserve.

Key Insights

In response to barriers in the funding sector, the Learning Circle is trying out bold solutions:

- New evidence and investment cases rooted in both data and lived experience, to illustrate the return on investment of supporting girls, whether in advancing democratic resilience, achieving SDGs, or fueling long-term inclusive growth.
- A new funding mechanism, "Power for Girls" co-created with girls and embedded within existing infrastructure (such as Purposeful's Global Resilience Fund). Designed with accessibility in mind, it offers a flexible, dual-

ON THE FUTURE THEY WANT

“ *The future I want is one where girls stay in school to prevent early pregnancies.*

—Shakira, Uganda

entry platform through which funders can support both grassroots movements and scalable, girl-centered programs.

- A commitment to multisectoral approaches that layer services and investments across domains. For instance, integrating HPV vaccination with access to broader health services in schools or community centers.

Holistic Investments for Adolescent Girls: Insights on integrated investments across sectors such as education, health, and gender equality

Easter Okech, Executive Director & Programs Coordinator at Kenya Female Advisory Organization (KEFEADO)



“ *Funding for feminist work, which includes adolescent girls needs to be centered at the community level but particularly at the household level, to ensure that intersectional needs of girls are met.*

Insights from **KEFEADO** underscored the value of feminist macroeconomic models that apply gender-responsive budgeting at the household and community levels. Household-centered budgeting frameworks allow governments to co-create with communities on girls' evolving needs, including health, education, and safety. Examples of holistic investments include menstrual hygiene management, school-level infrastructure, and community-led safety programs to protect girls from gender-based violence (GBV) and end femicide campaigns which has ensured a task force was set up to engage on addressing the matter. The engagement on the prevention of GBV through the triple threat campaign using a multipronged approach to address GBV, Adolescent Girls Pregnancy and HIV by the National Syndemic Disease Control Council (NSDCC) has seen a focus on investment

in preventive services. We also note that investment in school-based programs through the use of arts. There have been concerns about how the recent U.S. funding freezes have disrupted vital services for girls, particularly in reproductive health, HIV treatment, and mental health care. In the face of shrinking external funds, there is need for domestic resource mobilization and political accountability to ensure sustainable, country-led financing for adolescent girls.

Summary of Intersectional Models

Powerful examples of intersectional funding models include:

- Feminist macroeconomic models target household-level needs and gender-responsive budgeting.
- School investments must ensure holistic care for girls, including sanitation, menstrual hygiene, safety, and play spaces.
- Emerging threats like GBV, femicide, and mental health crises require urgent holistic responses.
- The U.S. funding freeze (“stop work order”) has severely disrupted service delivery and increased girls’ vulnerability to GBV and unintended pregnancies.
- Domestic resource mobilization and political accountability at country level must complement donor support to ensure long-term sustainability.

Centering Trust and Power: Direct funding models that put resources in girls’ hands and shift decision-making to young women

Aminata Kamara, Head of Partnership and Resource Generation, at We are Purposeful



“ *We need to learn as we take action. The needs of girls are not waiting for the strategies to be correct, and for processes within*

your institutions or for everyone to be convinced. Stakeholders should convince people by actually taking resources and investing them into the work of girls and girls organizing globally.

We are Purposeful utilizes funding approaches that are anchored on trust and power-sharing with girls and young women as decision-makers over financial resources that directly affect their lives. utilizes funding approaches that are anchored on trust and power-sharing with girls and young women as decision-makers over financial resources that directly affect their lives.

Funding is inherently tied to power, and genuine empowerment cannot happen unless money is placed directly into the hands of girls themselves. Traditional philanthropic approaches often include girls superficially in consultation processes, while retaining decision-making authority elsewhere. In contrast, Purposeful starts by **listening deeply to girls and empowering them to identify their own priorities**. Once these priorities are articulated, funds are allocated with flexibility, and girls take ownership in determining how resources are used.

Participatory decision-making structures such as girls circles and networks led by girls and young women, are central to Purposeful’s model. These processes not only recognize girls’ expertise about their communities and lived realities but also build mechanisms for mutual accountability at the community level. Despite common donor concerns around risk, we consistently see direct access to funding serves primarily as a protective factor against risk. Also, in many cases girls and young women exceptional responsibility within their families and communities, often including resource stewardship. Purposeful, along with feminist funders and intermediaries, has developed tested infrastructure that enables funds to move safely and effectively directly into girls’ hands, even when institutional funders lack internal systems to do so.

It is important for funders to **act while learning**, rather than delaying action until every system is perfected, because girls’ needs are immediate and urgent. In addition, the power of collective

movement building as a mechanism for holding governments and donors accountable is crucial. Through **broad coalitions**, organizations can advocate forcefully for policy reforms without fear of retaliation. For example, over 200 organizations collectively challenged the ban on pregnant girls attending school in Sierra Leone, creating sufficient political pressure to force policy change. Storytelling was also identified as a powerful tool to humanize issues, shift mindsets, and build donor learning.

Finally, it is important to have **ongoing investments in research, learning, and capacity building**, not only to strengthen the work of youth-led organizations, but also to support funders in continuously improving their own funding practices. If girls can be trusted to manage households and families, they can and must be trusted to manage the resources that shape their futures.

Key Insights

- Money is power: true empowerment requires putting resources directly into the hands of girls and young women.
- Purposeful's model begins with deep listening to girls to set funding priorities, followed by participatory grantmaking.
- Community-level accountability mechanisms have proven that girls and young women manage resources responsibly.
- Donors must act while learning; perfection in systems cannot delay urgent investments in girls' lives.
- Collective movement building allows organizations to advocate for policy reforms and hold governments accountable without individual risk.
- Tested infrastructure exists to move money safely and directly to girls, even when donors' own systems are limited.
- Storytelling and knowledge-building are essential tools for shifting mindsets and supporting donor learning.
- Purposeful's work with initiatives like Power for Girls and partnerships with We Trust Youth demonstrates scalable models for feminist, trust-based philanthropy.

CONCLUSION

This roundtable discussion reaffirmed that adolescent girls are not just recipients of aid but catalysts for transformative change. In the face of shrinking global funding, political gridlock, and compounding crises, stakeholders need to reimagine funding for adolescent girls' priorities, by ensuring that funding is flexible, intersectional, and girl-centered. Without this intentional shift, the world risks reversing hard-won gains and missing a critical opportunity to advance inclusive development, gender justice, and intergenerational equity.

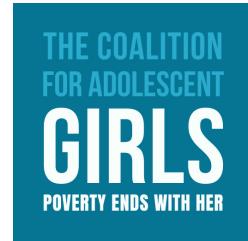
Call to Action

Fund with trust and urgency: Donors and partners must commit to evidence-driven, multi-year, flexible, and direct funding models that shift power to adolescent girls and the organizations closest to them.

Move from consultation to co-creation: Center adolescent girls in every stage of program design, decision-making, and accountability, because they know best what works for their lives and futures.

Potential Follow-up/Next Steps

- Launch of a multi-stakeholder working group on adolescent girls' funding in Africa.
- Explore a funding innovation lab or shared donor mechanism for adolescent girls, incubated at Akili Dada or jointly with CAG/BRAC.
- Encourage partners to co-host regional series of roundtables in the other regions (e.g., West Africa, Horn of Africa).



Girls First Fund



The Coalition for Adolescent Girls (CAG) is a member-driven coalition with over 80 members, hosted by Population Council's GIRL Center. The CAG provides a unique platform for organizations to share information, tools, evidence, and resources, and find points of collaboration and advocacy, for the wellbeing of adolescent girls. The CAG members work with and for adolescent girls across multiple sectors such as education, health, girls' leadership, economic empowerment, and humanitarian response, and are drawn from diverse geographies including Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America. [Join the CAG and subscribe to our newsletter here.](#)

Akili Dada, is an African women led leadership incubator which nurtures the next generation of women leaders. Akili Dada journeys alongside girls and young women and builds their leadership capacity by providing access to quality education, mentorship, supportive networks, as well as personal and professional development opportunities; while actively removing the financial barriers that hold women and girls back. [Join the Akili Dada community here.](#)

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