**"What Must Exist": The Architecture of a New Civil Society**

**Discussion Paper presented by Joan Vivian Koomson, Head of Partnerships and Resource Mobilisation, STAR-Ghana Foundation at the Global South Rooted Intermediary Leadership Series Convening, Nairobi, Kenya, July 29 – 30, 2026**

**INTRODUCTION**

The question of sustainability for locally rooted organisations across the Global South has never been more urgent. Over the last decade we are seeing a dangerous trend of shrinking funding and increasingly restrictive regulation - Official Development Assistance (ODA) is contracting - the effects of the 2025 USAID stop work order that left many CSOs reeling is still casting shadows on CSOs in the global south especially - funding streams are becoming increasingly unpredictable—with donors withdrawing, geopolitical priorities shifting – resulting in constraints in programming, challenges in maintaining staff and corresponding structures that enable organisations in the global south to continue delivering on their mandates – and fragmenting the collective action necessary to hold power to account and drive systemic change - how do you attempt to hold governments and duty bearers accountable when you are grappling with your own inability to pay rent, staff salaries and utilities? When you are in a constant struggle to access funding for your own survival? Obviously, the need for home-grown and other trust-based alternatives to development financing is no longer theoretical.

However, truth be told, this situation is not entirely new. Many grassroots organisations across Africa have long been navigating scarcity of institutional funding and have resorted to using innovative methods to raise resources to support the work they do. They already demonstrate remarkable resilience—stretching scarce resources, innovating under pressure, and delivering impact with fractions of the budgets their international counterpart's command. These innovations in local resource mobilisation **offer blueprints for what can and must exist**.

This paper therefore draws on existing initiatives in Africa and Asia, with some examples drawn from the Civil Society Strengthening/Shift the Power project in Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia, as well as emerging practice across the continent, including ongoing work around identifying and documenting existing alternative models for development financing, to explore what ecosystem infrastructure, financing models and trust conditions are needed if locally rooted organisations are to sustain their work with greater autonomy and resilience.

The question we are confronted with is not whether sustainability is possible. It is what ***must exist***—in eco-systems, infrastructure, financing models, relationships, and mindsets—to enable organisations that are rooted in their communities to build genuine, lasting independence from the current cycle of donor dependency.

## 1.0 CONTEXT

### The Changing Landscape: Crisis as Catalyst

The development sector is undergoing profound transformation. The language of "localisation" and "shifting the power" has never been louder, yet there is more of rhetoric than coordinated efforts to practicalise these. Organisations in the global south are faced with a paradox: more is expected of them with less predictable support.

STAR-Ghana Foundation in the aftermath of the USAID shutdown, conducted a survey across Ghana to assess the impact of the shutdown on CSOs. The results of this survey and the implications for CSOs moving forward were disseminated via a webinar that was originally planned for Ghanaian CSOs. However, about 30 minutes into the webinar, our tracking revealed that we had participants from all over Africa, with a few beyond. That in itself told a story – civil society has come to the realisation that things will never go back to being the same; development financing as we know it/knew it is gone, and there is an urgent need to find other ways of financing the critical work we do, while also planning for our own survival. In a follow up workshop, participants unanimously called for strengthening local resource mobilisation/domestic fundraising, building strategic partnerships, advocating for policy support, promoting social enterprises and building capacity of CSOs for financial resilience.

The challenges, we recognise, are mainly structural rather than capacity based. It lies in the *architecture* of resourcing: the assumptions, structures, and relationships that determine how money moves—or doesn't—to locally rooted actors. It also lies in the need for CSOs to re-invent themselves, to challenge the status quo, to begin to think of moving beyond dependence on grant funding, to adopting a more entrepreneurial mindset, if we are to survive this storm. 20 years from now, it is those organisations who can re-engineer their strategies, systems and structures who will be left standing.

## 2.0 What Must Exist: Ecosystem Infrastructure, Financing Models, Trust Conditions

### 2.1 Locally Rooted Funding Intermediaries

The conversation about "intermediaries" often carries suspicion: are they adding overhead, slowing money down, reducing funding that should go down to the communities where the need is greatest, and using same to fund their own lifestyles? This framing misunderstands the essential role of funds that are *of* the movements they serve.

In Ghana, the Giving for Change project, implemented by STAR-Ghana Foundation and WACSI, has empowered 36 organisations over four years, enabling them to shape civil society regulations including the Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) Bill and the National Volunteerism Strategy. The projects' Community of Practice now explores joint fundraising, shared economies, and strengthened networks (among others) to sustain efforts beyond the project lifecycle.

Across Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, the Alianza Socioambiental Fondos del Sur brings together 17 socio-environmental funds that emerged from the same social movements they resource. They operate in local currency, understand their grantees' contexts intimately, and are part of the same social fabric. These funds are not intermediaries in the pejorative sense—they are *infrastructure*.

**What do these examples mean for locally rooted organisations?** Infrastructure must be built and governed locally. This requires:

- Endowment capital to ensure continuity beyond programme cycles
- Delegated decision-making power to locally rooted entities
- Recognition that these entities are not "conduits" but essential architecture

### 2.2 Shared Service Platforms and Collective Infrastructure

Many local organisations face the same operational challenges: donor compliance, financial management, and grant writing. Each organisation solving these alone is inefficient and unsustainable.

Again, we have examples from the continent - Uganda's Shared Resource Center (SRC), co-owned by its member organisations, operates on a mixed-revenue model—membership fees combined with service contracts. This model, built on earlier experience in West Africa under the Benkadi programme, demonstrates that shared infrastructure can enhance capacity, improve donor compliance, and foster collaboration rather than competition.

Kenya Community Development Foundation (KCDF) has established a perpetual trust that manages its growing endowment and includes assets such as rental property. This demonstrates how locally rooted organisations can build material infrastructure that generates ongoing revenue.

**What this means for locally rooted organisations:** The design should explore collective infrastructure that enables:

- Shared governance through co-ownership models
- Revenue models that build toward financial sustainability
- Collaboration in a competitive funding climate as a survival strategy

### 2.3 Philanthropic Ecosystems and South-South Solidarity

Sustainability requires diversifying beyond traditional aid. This means building connections to multiple funding sources—domestic philanthropy, impact investment, climate finance, community resourcing.

In Kenya, KCDF has pioneered a matching funds model where communities raise part of their resources for projects—resources accepted ranging from volunteers' time to livestock. In Ghana, STAR-Ghana Foundation commissioned work to quantify in-kind and community donations and to value these as critical contributions to project financing.

Again, in Ghana, our partner SONGTABA has established the Faako Fund, described as a community owned model for collective support. Another partner, Savanna Signatures, has acquired rental property, where it rents out office and meeting spaces to smaller CSOs, a photo studio for their own use, and for commercial purposes, and is exploring other income generation avenues.

**What this means for locally rooted organisations:** The design should explore:

- Matching mechanisms that incentivise local fundraising
- Community philanthropy models that mobilise local resources alongside external funding
- South-South solidarity alliances that connect organisations across regions

## 3. What Must Exist: Financing Models

### 3.1 Trust-Based, Flexible Grantmaking

In all of these examples I have given, one thing stands out - Rigid, project-based funding undermines sustainability. The evidence is clear from multiple contexts: when organisations are trusted with flexible resources, they achieve more with less.

The Shifting the Power programme (Comic Relief and FCDO), which is being implemented in Ghana (by STAR-Ghana Foundation and WACSI), Malawi (by Tilitonse Foundation) and Zambia (by the Zambian Governance Foundation) is experimenting with instruments that offer genuine alternatives:

- **Catalyst Fund:** Small grants (£3,000–£5,000) for internal systems strengthening—enabling organisations to become "investment-ready". One Catalyst Fund partner reported that a £3,000 grant enabled legal registration, policy establishment, and board operationalisation—leading to a subsequent $154,000 grant from a regional body. This demonstrates strategic sequencing: how appropriate support at the right time unlocks much larger resources.
- **Civil Society Strengthening Fund:** Core (flexible) and project funding with tailored capacity building to organisations and support to enable them to begin to think of strategies for generating alternative financing for the work they do.
- **Resource Mobilisation Initiative Design:** A groundbreaking initiative, whiles still in the design process, has started showing signs of evolving into a true human-centered co-created 'bouquet' of alternative models of funding for African civil society actors, with the potential for scaling up to other similarly funding-constrained contexts.

In South Africa, DG Murray Trust's Sukuthula! project provides unrestricted, multi-year funding to community-based organisations often excluded from traditional grant-making. The approach is grounded in a principle articulated by the Trust: "Those closest to the problem must be closest to the solution, and they must be trusted with the resources, power and space to lead". Organisations report that with fewer bureaucratic burdens, they have more time to innovate, respond to their communities, and build their own sustainability.

Oxfam's Partners' Investment Fund, which tested multi-year, unrestricted funding across five locations, found that flexible funding functioned not just as project support but as an investment in civil society itself—strengthening the foundations organisations need to operate effectively over time.

**What this means for locally rooted organisations:** Sustainability requires:

- Core funding that covers organisational overhead, not just project costs
- Multi-year commitments that enable strategic planning
- Simplified reporting that focuses on learning rather than compliance
- Relationships built on trust rather than surveillance

**3.2 Reverse Calls for Proposals and Community-Driven Grantmaking**

A powerful innovation emerging from West and Southern Africa is the **Reverse Call for Proposals**—a model that flips the traditional funding process entirely.

Led by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) through its RINGO project, this approach centres community priorities rather than donor interests. The Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF) implemented this successfully with the Nyakasanga Development Community Foundation (NYAKU) in Kasese district. Community members formulated a potential plan to tackle climate change in the region, including sustainable agriculture mechanisms, livestock disease control, and elevating youth voices.

SOS Children's Villages and Plan International signified interest as funding partners. "NYAKU then had to do their own reverse due diligence on the funders. Imagine that? They got to ask the INGOs all those questions about safeguarding and sustainability that are normally posed to local communities.

**What this means for locally rooted organisations:** Alternative resourcing requires:

- Processes that centre community priorities rather than donor interests
- The power to conduct due diligence on funders—reversing the power dynamic
- Tripartite funding arrangements that distribute accountability

**3.3 Endowment Building and Asset Development**

Building long-term sustainability requires investment in assets that generate ongoing revenue. This represents a fundamental shift from project-based grant-seeking to organisational wealth-building.

When we talk about Endowment Building our minds often go to a Fund – and securing some initial seed grant from some donor, such as Ford Foundation – however, there are small incremental ways of building an Endowment, that may not require an initial seed capital.

Start with what you have – staff capacity, office space, bidding for consulting jobs – making sure you are not drifting away from your core mission. Income generated from these can be ploughed into acquiring property, starting commercial ventures, exploring other investments – eventually attracting impact investors.

These require long term planning, strategic leadership direction and support, and organisational renewal.

**What this means for locally rooted organisations:** Alternative resourcing demands:

- Investment in income-generating assets and endowments
- Entrepreneurial service delivery models that generate revenue
- Long-term planning that extends beyond grant cycles

**4. What Must Exist: Trust Conditions**

**4.1 Redefining Accountability**

Trust-based philanthropy is not about abandoning accountability—it's about redefining it. Meaningful accountability requires funders to meet organisations where they are – taking the time to understand the lived realities of communities, recognising that at their pain points, they have managed to navigate difficulties in accessing funding through innovate, communally-owned models of funding projects that have delivered results, and that need to be harnessed, amplified, prototyped, tested and where applicable adopted as global south models of financing for development with the potential to completely wean us off, or drastically reduce the dependence on traditional donor funding.

Trust conditions require - Proximity and presence rather than remote compliance, Relationships based on dialogue rather than reporting and Accountability that flows in multiple directions.

**4.2 Shifting Power, Not Just Resources**

Sustainability is not just about money. It's about who decides. The prevailing narrative around aid "often disempowers and dehumanises people in the Global South". Changing that requires shifting decision-making power, not just channelling funds.

The Shifting the Power programme aims to "challenge the status quo in philanthropy and development by fundamentally centring participatory, co-created, democratic and distributed ways of working". This is about effectiveness. Communities closest to the problems have the best understanding of solutions.

Shifting power requires - Governance structures that reflect local ownership, Participatory processes that give communities voice in funding decisions, and Recognition that trust is built through consistent, respectful relationships

**4.3 The Importance of Alliances and Collective Power**

Alliances and collective action are extremely important. They help to "shift the terms of the conversation and occupy political space in global philanthropic debates. They are challenging who gets to decide, who defines 'impact,' and how funding... is designed, delivered, and evaluated".

- Cross-country learning exchanges and solidarity networks – Learning visits, engagement in spaces such as the APN, WINGS, EAPN
- Collective advocacy platforms that amplify local voices – In Ghana we have the Ghana Civil Society Forum, the Ghana Philanthropy Forum
- Alliance-building that connects to broader Southern-led movements – meeting spaces such as this one

**5. What Is Already Being Tested**

Across African contexts, organisations are experimenting with alternative resourcing models:

| Model | Example | Key Feature |
|---|---|---|
| Matching funds | KCDF (Kenya) | Communities raise 50% through in-kind contributions |
| Shared service platforms | Uganda SRC | Co-owned infrastructure, mixed revenue model |
| Reverse Calls for Proposals | WACSI/ZGF (West Africa, Zambia) | Community priorities drive funding |
| Endowment building | KCDF | Perpetual trusts and income-generating assets |
| Entrepreneurial services | Adeso (Somalia), Savanna Signatures (Ghana) | Paid-for service delivery generating revenue |
| Trust-based grantmaking | DGMT Sukuthula! (South Africa) | Unrestricted, multi-year, relationship-centred |

These are not theoretical models—they are operating, learning, and evolving. The challenge is not lack of alternatives but lack of recognition, resourcing, and scaling.

This is what the Resource Mobilisation Initiative Design currently underway seeks to remedy – the lack of recognition of existing models of resourcing and exploring other options that can be developed into a ‘bouquet’ of tested financing models that southern based CSOs can draw from, depending on their needs, where they are as individual organisations, and what their respective contexts permit.

The four organisations involved (STAR-Ghana Foundation, WACSI, Tilitonse and ZGF) have gone through a process of listening to our respective communities, learning from them about innovative models of financing development projects that have been time tested and proven to be effective, collecting data across Ghana, Malawi and Zambia on these models, analysing this data, drawing insights and going through a process of ideating, to generate prototypes that can be tested and developed into accepted models for adoption across different contexts.

This work is ongoing and expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2027.

**Questions for Reflection**

**On infrastructure:** Are organisations willing to invest in the "boring" stuff—endowments, governance systems, shared services—that underpins sustainability but doesn't produce immediate deliverables?

**On power:** Is alternative resourcing genuinely about shifting power, or is it about making the existing system work more efficiently for local actors? What would a genuinely redistributed power structure look like?

**On risk:** Can organisations embrace entrepreneurial approaches—service delivery, asset building, income generation—without losing their core mission and values?

**On solidarity:** How can organisations move from competition for scarce resources to genuine collaboration and collective resourcing?

**On scale:** When the most effective solutions are already local, what does "scale" mean? Does it mean replication, or does it mean multiplication—supporting the emergence of more locally rooted funds and platforms?

**On trust:** What would it take for funders to trust local organisations with unrestricted, multi-year funding? Is the barrier organisational capacity, or is it a deeper reluctance to relinquish control? And what would it take for communities to trust intermediary organisations like us to co-create solutions to identified development challenges?

**Conclusion**

Sustainability for locally rooted organisations in the Global South is not a technical problem—it is a political and relational one. What must exist is not a new funding mechanism but a new architecture: infrastructure that is owned and governed locally, financing models that provide flexibility and long-term commitment, and trust conditions that reflect genuine partnership.

The work is already happening. The Shifting the Power programme and similar initiatives are testing alternatives.

This is also a moment of possibility. The collapse of the old system creates space for new models—models that are rooted in local realities, built on solidarity, and driven by communities themselves.

The question is whether the broader development and philanthropy ecosystem will recognise, resource, and amplify these efforts—or continue to treat locally rooted organisations as implementers rather than leaders.

For organisations in the Global South, the path forward is clear: building collective power, investing in assets and endowments, developing entrepreneurial approaches, and demanding trust-based relationships. What must exist is already being built. The work is to build it together.

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*This paper draws on emerging practice from the Shifting the Power Programme in Ghana, Malawi and Zambia, alongside broader learning from Southern-led resourcing initiatives across Africa and beyond.*

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