

FATTIGDOMS- BEKJEMPER!

Global Youth Voices: Gen Z and Norway's Vendepunkt



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We are particularly grateful to the young people who participated in surveys and focus group discussions, and who spoke openly about the opportunities and challenges they face in their communities. Their insights remind us that effective development cooperation requires listening to those whose lives it seeks to support.

We also thank Strømme Foundation colleagues and partners in the four countries who supported the data collection and facilitated meaningful engagement with young people throughout the study.

We hope this report contributes to ensuring that young people's perspectives are reflected in discussions about the future direction of development cooperation.

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Executive Summary

As Norway considers its own vendepunkt, it's turning point in development policy, this study turns to the generation that development cooperation is meant to serve, to ask what a sustainable future looks like to them. Drawing on 831 young people across Strømme Foundation programmes in Tanzania, Nepal, Bangladesh and Mali, the study serves two purposes: input to Norway's policy reflection and a mirror for Strømme Foundation's own programme design. Respondents are existing programme participants rather than a national sample. The findings should therefore be read as guidance for what comes next, not as a verdict on any single programme.

Opportunities for economic inclusion emerges as the strongest cross-country priority. Employment, job creation and practical skills are prioritised by youth in all four countries: from 79% in Mali to 86% in Tanzania, with youth asking for credible pathways into livelihoods, income security and control over their futures, instead of abstract development support. Current programmes are valued particularly for confidence-building, skills development, education,

access and participation. Yet, youth repeatedly describe these gains as incomplete when they do not translate into sustainable livelihoods. Tanzania, Nepal and Bangladesh show a clear skills-to-income gap, suggesting the need to combine training with finance, tools, mentoring and market access.

Exclusion is structured and predictable. Rural youth, young women and girls, youth with disabilities and unemployed youth are consistently identified as most likely to be left behind. Lack of information is the most common barrier in all the four countries, from 67% in Bangladesh to 94% in Mali. Youth also want voice with influence rather than consultation without response, and treat transparency as a condition for trust, not an administrative formality. The study's policy message is clear: future youth programming should move from fragmented activities to integrated pathways, and treat youth as partners in design and decision-making, not only as beneficiaries. This highlights two priorities: localisation, by involving young people, women and rural communities in development; and democratisation, by strengthening youth voice and representation in decision making.

1. Background

Norway's Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched Prosjekt Vendepunkt in 2026 to re-envision its development policy ahead of a parliamentary white paper. The process unfolds against a backdrop of increased conflict, rising humanitarian need, and a sharp drop in international aid. It also comes amid global concern over rollback in gender equality, and an open debate over which aid channels deliver most effectively for Norway and the world. The same period saw an unprecedented global wave of Gen Z-led political mobilisation, including youth-led uprisings that toppled governments in Bangladesh (2024) and Nepal (2025)—two of this study's four countries. Economic exclusion, corruption and a lack of voice in decisions that affect young people's lives are widely seen as drivers of that unrest, and this study's evidence shows the same pressures at work from inside some of Strømme Foundation's own programmes. The study was undertaken in this context to understand how young people in Tanzania, Nepal, Bangladesh and Mali define their development priorities, assess current programmes, experience barriers to opportunity and recommend future cooperation. It serves two purposes: input to Norway's policy reflection on Vendepunkt, and a mirror for Strømme Foundation's own programme

design. The four contexts differ, but the consolidated evidence tells a coherent story: youth are navigating economic pressures, weak labour-market absorption, unequal access to services, gendered and geographic exclusion, and limited influence over decisions that affect their lives.

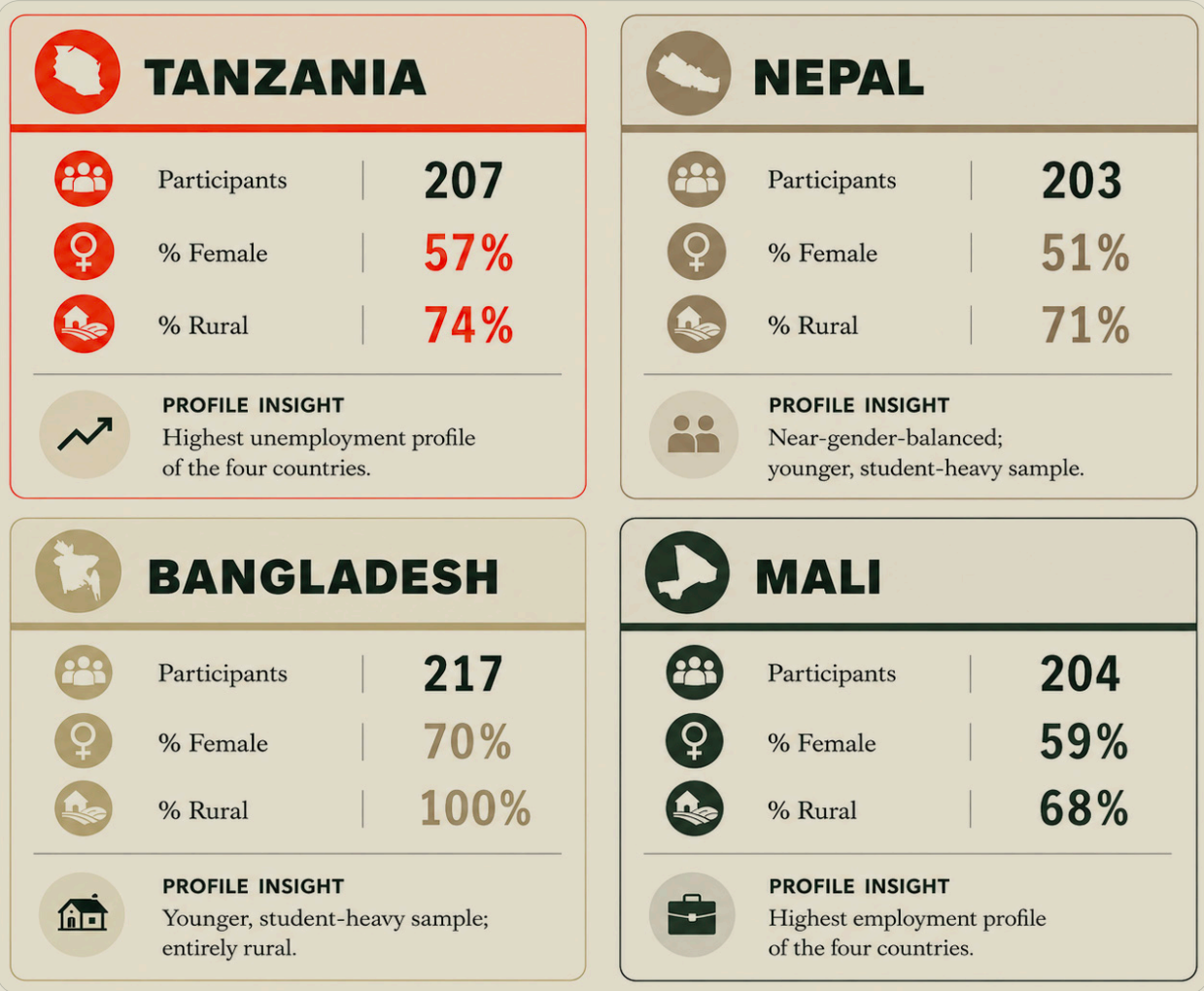
To explore these issues, the study asked the sample of Gen Z respondents four questions:

- 1. **What matters most to Gen Z?**
– their most important development priorities
- 2. **Do programmes deliver?**
– how Gen Z perceives the relevance and impact of development programmes
- 3. **What stands in the way?** – the barriers and opportunities shaping youth engagement
- 4. **What Gen Z recommends** for future cooperation, accountability and participation

Although respondents are Strømme Foundation programme participants, the questions asked them to reflect on international development programming as a whole. The findings therefore speak to how this generation understands and experiences development, not only the specific programmes they took part in.

2. Methodology and Profile of Respondents

The study draws on 831 young people aged 15–30 across Strømme Foundation programmes: 207 in Tanzania, 203 in Nepal, 217 in Bangladesh and 204 in Mali. Each country combined a structured survey with focus group discussions and conducted life-history interviews to document individual youth stories in depth. Respondents were drawn from existing programme participants including adolescent empowerment, school-reintegration and vocational training programmes in Tanzania, life-skills and empowerment programmes in Nepal and Bangladesh, and vocational training, adolescent empowerment, savings groups and accelerated education programmes in Mali, rather than from the general youth population. By drawing directly on programme participants' experiences across the four contexts, the study provides locally grounded evidence on how youth priorities differ, where they converge, and what implications this may have for programme adaptation.



3. Key findings

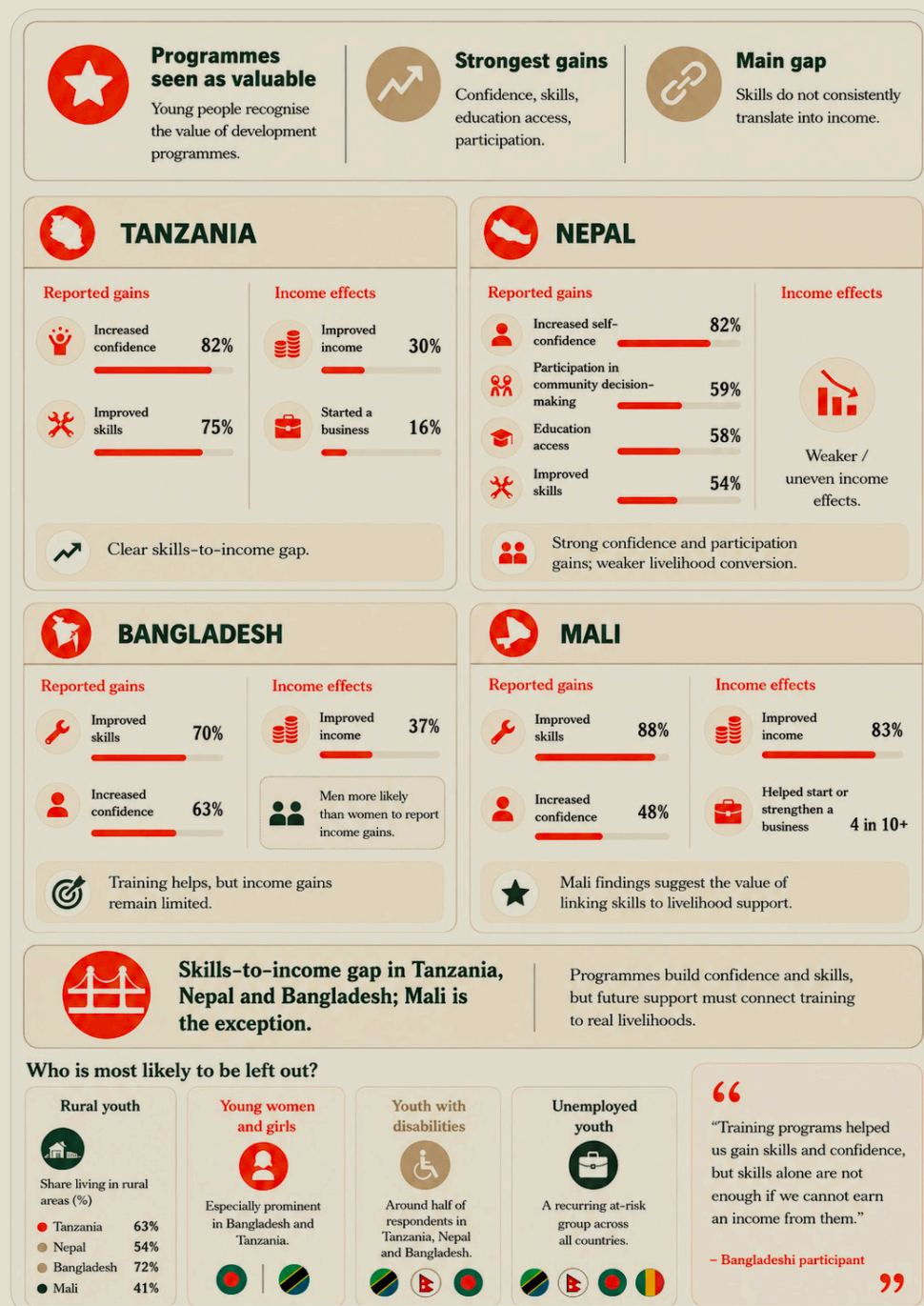
3.1 What matters most to Gen Z? Their most important development priorities

Across the four countries, youth consistently prioritised economic opportunities, with employment, job creation, and practical skills emerging as the strongest areas for development support. Vocational and technical skills were particularly prominent in Tanzania (86%), while employment ranked highest in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Mali (77–80%). Mali shows a broader livelihood picture, with agriculture, food security and health also ranking highly, indicating that youth needs there are shaped by the close link between livelihoods, resilience and basic services. This reinforces the importance of grounding programme design in local realities, as youth themselves are best placed to explain how priorities are shaped by their context and what forms of support are most relevant on the ground.



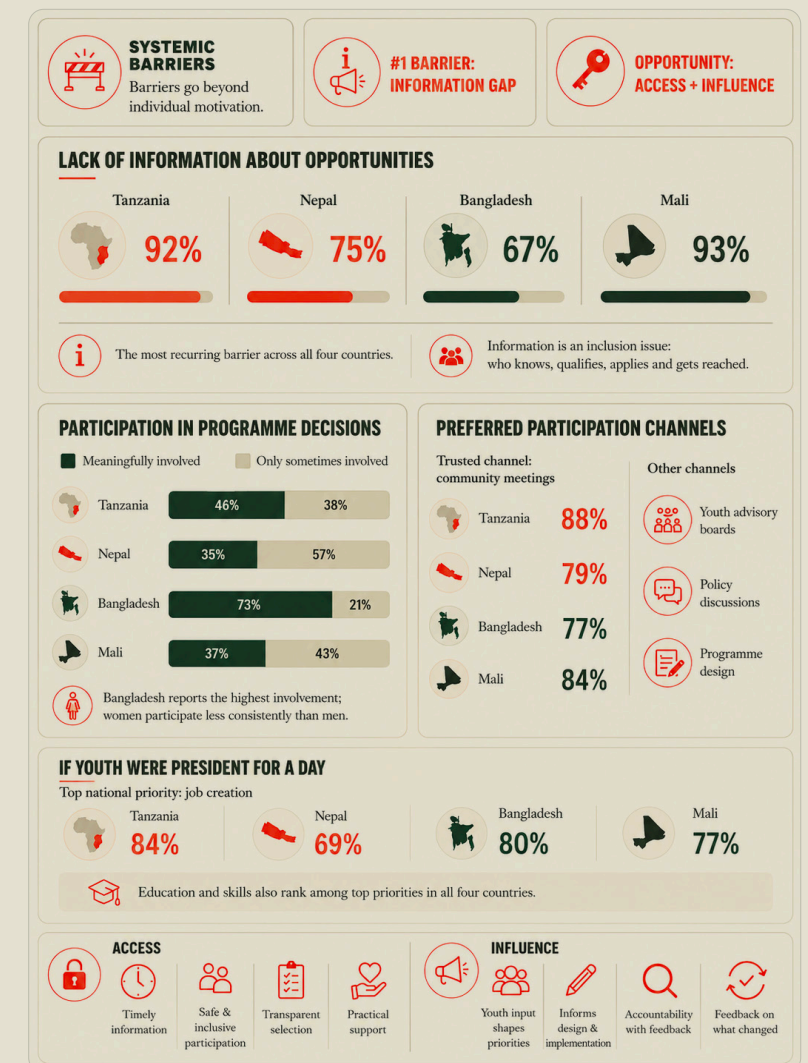


While skills development was widely reported across all four countries, stronger income gains were observed in Mali.



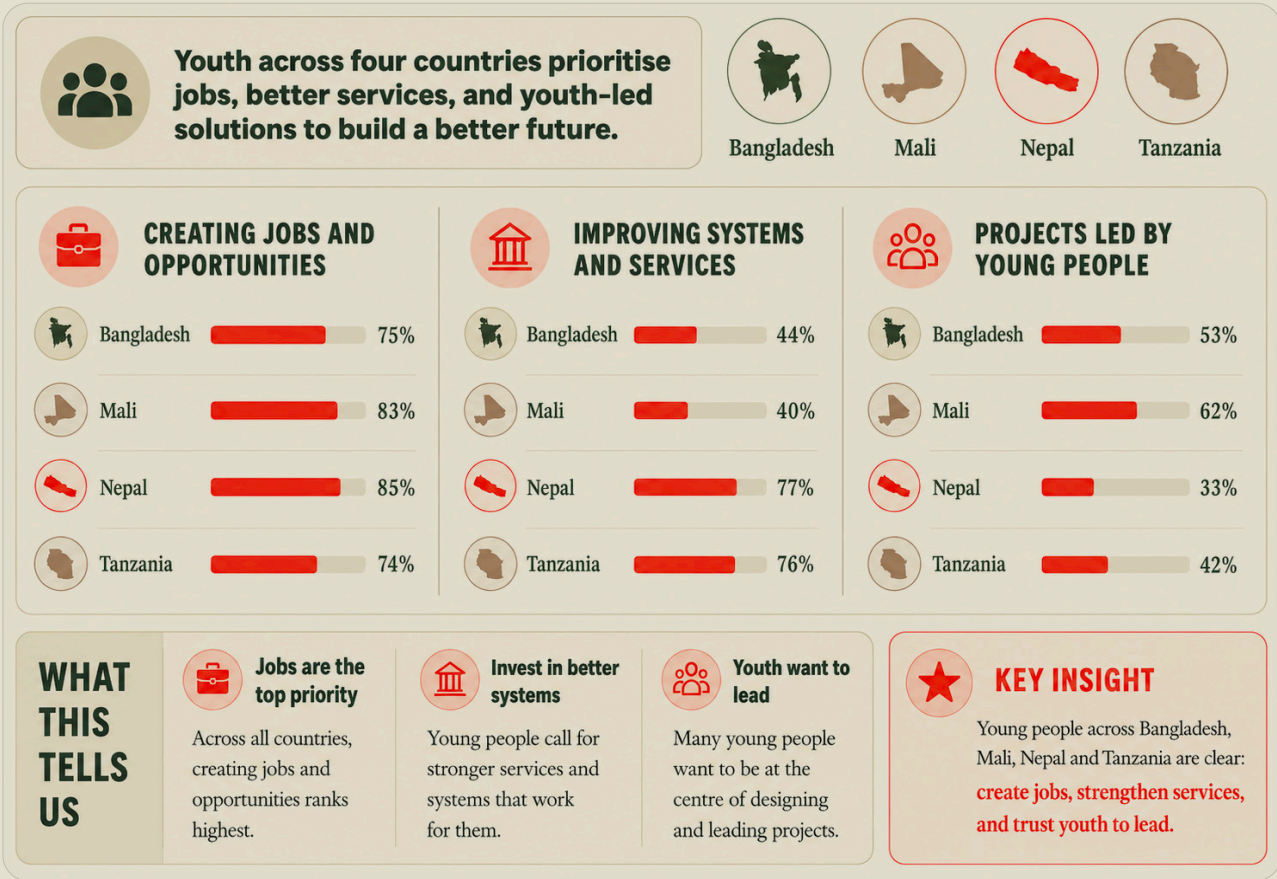
3.3 What stands in the way? The barriers and opportunities shaping youth engagement

Barriers to youth engagement are highly consistent across the four countries and go beyond individual motivation. Youth face communicative, geographic, social, institutional and economic barriers that determine who knows about opportunities, who can access them, who is consulted, and whose voice influences decisions. The most recurring barrier across the four countries is lack of information about opportunities, indicating that many young people are unaware of the opportunities available through international development programmes or how to access them. When asked about their preferred participation channel in international development programmes, youth highlighted practical, local and often face to face channels. Specifically, community meetings were consistently trusted ranging from 88% in Tanzania to 77% in Nepal. The preference for community meetings suggests that trusted local structures remain important entry points for participation and accountability. To understand youth aspirations on national priorities, youth were asked what they would prioritise if they were president for a day. The highest priority across the countries was job creation, with education and skills also among the top priorities in all the four countries.



3.4 Recommendations from Gen Z:
For future cooperation, accountability
and participation

Youth-led recommendations point to a clear agenda for future cooperation: make programmes economically relevant, locally grounded, transparent, participatory and deliberately inclusive. The recommendations call for complete employment pathways, stronger education-to-work transitions, institutionalised youth participation, visible community accountability, and deliberate outreach to groups most likely to be excluded.



4. Cross-Cutting Insights

4.1 Jobs define development

A new school building is a good start, but it doesn't change my mother's mind about marrying me off early... We want development that builds our careers." Youth participant, Jamalpur, Bangladesh Across all four countries, youth judge development by whether it builds economic agency, not service access alone. Employment, skills and job creation are top priorities everywhere, from 79% in Mali to 86% in Tanzania. This does not mean education or health are unimportant, youth consistently link them to building a secure future, as in Nepal, where education and health track alongside livelihoods.

Yet across contexts, skills and confidence consistently outpace income: gains in self-belief and capability do not automatically translate into earnings. Tanzania shows the sharpest contrast at 82% reporting greater confidence, but only 30% reporting income gains and 16% having started a business. As one Bangladeshi participant puts it, skills-building helps, "but skills alone are not enough if we cannot earn an income from them." Mali is the exception, where 83% report improved income, suggesting that pairing skills-building with finance and market access, not skills alone, is what converts capability into livelihoods.



Stories from the ground – Tanzania

At 21, Ibrahim Juma Ismail from Tanzania is determined to build a better future. But his path has not been easy.

He had to drop out of school in Form Three, at age 15, because his family could not afford the fees. With few options, he moved in search of manual work to survive. A turning point came when his aunt encouraged him to join the Bonga adolescent empowerment programme after hearing about it from a local leader. Through the program, supported by the Stromme Foundation, Ibrahim received life skills training and was enrolled in vocational training in aluminium fabrication.

Today, he is gaining practical skills and building confidence. “Before, I was just looking for any job to survive. Now I am learning a profession that can give me a future,” he says. Ibrahim dreams of starting his own workshop and creating jobs for others. To get there, he hopes to gain more experience through an internship.



4.2: Exclusion follows a pattern

“

“The biggest wall in front of us is our own society... Even if I overcome that, where is the money to buy a sewing machine or a laptop? We are stuck between our dreams and the reality of our village.” – Youth participant, Ulipur, Kurigram, Bangladesh

Exclusion follows consistent patterns across countries. Rural youth, young women and girls, youth with disabilities and unemployed youth are repeatedly named as most likely to be left behind. Youth with disabilities are named by around half of respondents in Tanzania, Nepal and Bangladesh; young women are especially prominent in Bangladesh and Tanzania, unemployed youth in Nepal and Bangladesh.

This matters because the most excluded youth often face several barriers at once: a rural girl in Bangladesh may face weak information flows, unsafe mobility and early marriage pressure together, not one at a time. Youth are not a homogeneous group, and development cooperation must design differentiated strategies for those at the intersections of geography, gender, disability and unemployment.

Stories from the ground – Bangladesh

Akhi refused to give up her future.

At 15, Akhi Akter faced a choice no child should have to make: stay in school, or be married off, after her family's poverty forced her education to a halt. Her friends and members of the Shonglap Club intervened, speaking with her parents and the wider community, and the marriage was stopped. Akhi returned to school. She is now preparing for her final exams, with a dream of becoming a police officer, and a message for other girls: “No girl should have to fight alone, and education must be protected.”



4.3: From consultation to decision making

“We should not just participate; we should help decide.” – FGD participants, Tanzania

Lack of information is the most consistent barrier in the study, cited by 92% in Tanzania, 75% in Nepal, 67% in Bangladesh and 94% in Mali. This is not a minor communication gap, it is a structural barrier that shapes who participates, who benefits and who trusts the economic development system. In Nepal, youth describe a pattern where the same individuals are reached repeatedly while information does not reach everyone in time; in Bangladesh, only about a quarter believe resources consistently reach those most in need.

Information alone is not enough: participation is often consultative rather than decision-shaping. Meaningful involvement in decisions that affect them remains the exception rather than the norm in Tanzania, Nepal and Mali. Bangladesh reports markedly higher involvement, though women report less consistent participation than men. As one Tanzanian participant puts it, “We should not just participate; we should help decide.” Community meetings are the most trusted channel everywhere, showing that the infrastructure for real influence already exists. However, it is currently used more for sharing information than for shared decision-making.

4.4: Common priorities, local solutions

**“If I can learn a skill near my home, I can earn and help my family.”
– Youth participant, Rangpur, Bangladesh**

The evidence shows remarkable consistency in what youth want, but real differences in how it should be delivered, based on context. Jobs and skills form the common core, but the surrounding package differs: Tanzania's evidence points to finance, tools and mentoring; Nepal to education, systems and psychosocial support; Bangladesh to climate vulnerability, digital access and rural mobility; Mali to agriculture, health, resilience and stability.

Gender, age, and location shape these pathways further. Younger youth in Tanzania and Bangladesh emphasise skills and jobs; adolescents in Nepal emphasise mental health; older youth emphasise income and adult responsibilities. In Mali, rural youth prioritise agriculture and security, while urban youth prioritise job creation and consultation. A single development model does not work equally well everywhere. Development cooperation should keep a common focus on economic agency and voice while adapting its approach to context.

Stories from the ground – Nepal

From school dropout to determined student

Babita Chauhan, 22, from rural Nepal had to leave school in Grade 10, aged 15, due to poverty and traditional beliefs that girls did not need education. After joining the SAM-VAD program (Strømme Foundation's adolescent life skills and empowerment programme), she gained confidence, life skills, and the support needed to return to her studies. Today, she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education and dreams of becoming a teacher. She also inspires other girls to stay in school. Sobita's story shows how the right support can help young women reclaim their future.



4.5: Integrated support, not isolated projects

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We already have skills, but we don't have the money or support to start working. If funding is given for small businesses and job creation, we can become independent and change our future.”

— Youth participant, Dewanganj, Jamalpur, Bangladesh

Youth experience development challenges as interconnected, even when support is organised sector by sector. Employment is linked to education, gender norms, migration, health and finance. Bangladesh shows that a school building does not prevent early marriage unless girls also have visible career pathways. Tanzania shows that skills-building does not change outcomes unless it is followed by finance and market links. Nepal shows that confidence-gains need to connect to jobs and fair access. Mali shows that livelihoods, agriculture and resilience are inseparable in fragile contexts.

This matters because a fragmented approach risks partial gains without changing life chances. Youth do not reject skills-building or participation; they reject versions that stop before structural barriers are addressed. The task for development cooperation is to design support around how young people actually experience constraints, judged not by activities delivered, but by whether it expands real choices and moves youth from aspiration to agency.

5. Turning Insight into Action: Implications for Prosjekt Vendepunkt

The evidence from the study points to a clear direction for Norway's Vendepunkt: economic agency for youth should be central to development cooperation, with funding structured as connected pathways rather than isolated interventions.

The clearest signal in the evidence is the gap between skills and income. Confidence and capability rise consistently, but earnings do not always follow. Norway should signal clearly that converting skills into income matters as much as skills-building itself.

This points to a wider principle: youth do not live their lives sector by sector, and funding should not be structured that way either. Norway's multi-year framework agreements already provide a strong foundation for this. The next step is extending that same continuity across sectors, rewarding partnerships that span education, livelihoods and protection, and tracking a young person's whole pathway rather than one sector's output. This logic extends to where decisions are made, not only what they fund: since the same priorities call for different solutions across contexts, genuine localisation—shifting design and adaptation decisions closer to the communities programmes serve—is a practical requirement of integration, not a separate commitment. Voice and inclusion follow the same logic, and the evidence is consistent. Lack of information is the most common barrier across the study, cited by 92%

of respondents in Tanzania, 75% in Nepal, 67% in Bangladesh and 94% in Mali, and the channels youth trust most already exist; they are simply underused for shared decision-making. Genuine influence should be measured by whether youth priorities shape funding decisions through real co-design, not by whether youth are present when those decisions are explained to them. Getting there is not instant, it depends on sustained capacity-building and trust, built over time rather than assumed from a single consultation. Inclusion, in turn, needs to be understood in two ways at once: ensuring rural youth, young women, youth with disabilities and unemployed youth are reached, and ensuring youth shape the decisions that affect them, and not just counting who benefits.

Together, these shifts point in one direction, and responsibility for them is shared. Funders need to continue to prioritise funding pathways instead of funding activities. Norwegian civil society organisations with its implementing partners need to move from consulting youth to enabling their priorities shape the decisions made about their futures. For Norway, Vendepunkt is the opportunity to make that shift structural through its own funding architecture, and to turn localisation from rhetoric into practice and treat it as a requirement, not an aspiration. Strømme Foundation is ready to take up this challenge: carrying forward what already works, while ensuring today's skills and confidence convert into tomorrow's income, dignity, voice and lasting opportunity.

Stories from the ground – Mali

From informal work to a growing business

In rural Mali, Amadou Djigande has built a business that now supports both his family and others in the community. Starting out was difficult. Despite training in crafts and accounting, his small decoration business operated informally with limited growth. Lack of access to technical skills and equipment made it hard to improve quality and expand. The turning point came in 2021, when Amadou joined a program supported by the Strømme Foundation. Through training and mentoring, he strengthened both his technical skills and business management and gained confidence. Today, his company is more structured and financially stable. Turnover has grown significantly, and he is able to support his family, send his children to school, and provide stable jobs for others.

Amadou's journey shows how skills, mentoring and livelihood support can work together to create real opportunities for young entrepreneurs. With the right support, small businesses can grow, create jobs, and strengthen local communities.

