

BACKGROUND PAPER

# Youth perceptions of South-South and triangular cooperation: Realities and prospects



United Nations  
Office for South-South Cooperation



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# Youth perceptions of South-South and triangular cooperation: Realities and prospects

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## Introduction

The Buenos Aires outcome document of the second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation (BAPA+40) defines South-South cooperation (SSC) as a collaborative framework among developing countries of the Global South, grounded in solidarity, mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty. It fosters technical, economic and knowledge exchanges across diverse sectors, including trade, investment, infrastructure, science and technology, and policy coordination. While SSC does not replace North-South cooperation, it serves as a complementary approach to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enhancing self-reliance and strengthening partnerships among developing countries.

Triangular cooperation (TrC) builds on these principles by facilitating collaboration between two or more developing countries and a third party, such as a developed country, a multilateral organization or other stakeholders. This model harnesses diverse expertise, resources and experiences to support development initiatives while ensuring that developing countries retain ownership of the process. TrC plays a crucial role in capacity-building, knowledge-sharing, and mobilizing technical and financial support, fostering synergies between traditional donors and emerging development actors.

According to recent United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) data, the Global South is home to nearly 90 per cent of the world's 1.8 billion young people, making youth a pivotal force in shaping development cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Africa has the youngest population globally, with 70 per cent of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30,<sup>2</sup> with projections indicating that by 2050, its youth population will double to 830 million.<sup>3</sup> In the Asia-Pacific region, potentially over 1 billion youth drive digital transformation and economic growth, particularly in countries such as Bangladesh, India and Indonesia. Meanwhile, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the youth population is close to 160 million, and in many countries, their proportion will continue to increase significantly in the coming decades.<sup>4</sup>

This youth bulge presents both opportunities and challenges for South-South and triangular cooperation. If effectively engaged, youth can fuel economic growth, innovation and sustainability; however, unemployment, skills gaps and exclusion remain major obstacles. With the needed investments in education, technology and entrepreneurship, youth can, indeed, drive inclusive cooperation and shape a more sustainable, equitable and resilient future.

Youth are emerging as an important driver of South-South and triangular cooperation, bringing innovation, digital expertise and grass-roots leadership to cross-border development efforts. Through entrepreneurship, knowledge-sharing and civic engagement, they are shaping initiatives in education, technology, climate action and economic cooperation, among other complex areas. However, their participation remains largely informal, with limited access to decision-making platforms, funding and policy influence.

With these ideas in mind, and to better understand youth perceptions of South-South and triangular cooperation, UNOSSC has initiated a global research effort as part of the process of the development of the *UNOSSC Global Report on South-South and Triangular Cooperation 2025* to be launched later in 2025. This initiative collects and analyses micronarratives from youth to gain insights into how they perceive South-South and triangular cooperation today and how they envision their roles in achieving the SDGs. The study seeks to identify challenges, opportunities and recommendations that can enhance youth engagement in South-South and triangular cooperation at the national, regional and even global levels.

Engaging youth voices is essential for ensuring that South-South and triangular cooperation remain inclusive, forward-looking and responsive to emerging global challenges. Young people are not mere beneficiaries of development policies; they are agents of change, entrepreneurs and civic leaders who introduce new models of collaboration into cooperation frameworks. However, their involvement in decision-making remains limited, often constrained by institutional barriers, lack of representation and insufficient resources.

<sup>1</sup> UNFPA, "Adolescent and youth demographics: a brief overview". Available at <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/adolescent-and-youth-demographics-a-brief-overview> (accessed on 4 March 2025).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, "Young people's potential, the key to Africa's sustainable development" (accessed on 4 March 2025).

<sup>3</sup> African Development Bank (AfDB) and African Development Institute (ADI), "Leveraging potentials of the youth for inclusive, green and sustainable development in Africa". Available at ADI [AfDB Website Storyboards](#) (accessed on 4 March 2025).

<sup>4</sup> 2030 Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean, "Youth". Available at <https://agenda2030lac.org/en/youth> (accessed on 4 March 2025).

By actively listening to youth perspectives, policymakers, Governments and international organizations can design more effective and sustainable South-South and triangular cooperation strategies, policies and plans, tailored to the needs and aspirations of the next generation. Strengthening youth participation in these two modalities of development cooperation will not only foster greater ownership and accountability but also unlock the full potential of demographic dividends, ensuring a more inclusive, innovative and resilient global development landscape.

UNOSSC has used the Cognitive Edge platform for data collection and the open-source SenseMaker software for the initial analysis of the collected micronarratives. This project is ongoing, with the goal of gathering as many youth micronarratives as possible to gain deeper insight into their perceptions and experiences with South-South and triangular cooperation.

## Objectives of this study

This initial study aims to understand youth perspectives on South-South and triangular cooperation, recognizing their current and future role in shaping global partnerships. The UNOSSC Knowledge Management Team designed a qualitative questionnaire to collect personal narratives, enabling young people to share their experiences, aspirations and concerns regarding the impact of South-South and triangular cooperation on their lives and communities.

To date, 50 micronarratives/stories have been collected thanks to the support of UNOSSC partners. The questionnaire was disseminated through multiple channels, including direct engagement with partners and targeted outreach via social media. For data collection, a specialized open-source software was used to ensure an efficient and structured approach. These micronarratives function as guided interviews, prompting youth to reflect on their personal experiences with South-South and triangular cooperation and analyse the various dimensions and impacts of their involvement. The standard online micronarrative form also provided a definition of South-South and triangular cooperation to further guide the youth.

The broader objectives of the initiative are:

- a. understanding youth awareness and perceptions of South-South and triangular cooperation, including through:**
  - › assessing how young people perceive South-South and triangular cooperation, including their level of familiarity with their principles and mechanisms;
  - › identifying key areas of impact, such as education, employment, healthcare, technology, environmental sustainability and social development; and
  - › exploring whether youth view South-South and triangular cooperation as effective tools for economic and social progress in their countries;
- b. capturing the lived experiences and aspirations of youth, including through:**
  - › collecting personal narratives that reflect how South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives have shaped or could shape their daily lives;
  - › encouraging youth to envision future cooperation models, particularly in addressing key challenges in their communities; and
  - › gathering micronarratives that highlight best practices, opportunities and challenges faced by young people in engaging with South-South and triangular cooperation;
- c. analysing youth involvement in South-South and triangular cooperation decision-making, with the potential formulation of recommendations, including through:**
  - › examining the extent to which youth are included in policymaking and programme design related to South-South and triangular cooperation;
  - › identifying potential barriers to youth participation, such as lack of access to resources, decision-making spaces and institutional support; and
  - › assessing the role of community, government and international organizations in engaging youth in South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives;

**d. identifying, based on youth perceptions, the key impact areas and future implications of youth engagement in South-South and triangular cooperation, including through:**

- › researching how youth perceive the long-term benefits of enhanced South-South and triangular cooperation;
- › evaluating how South-South and triangular cooperation can contribute to job creation, income generation, climate resilience, mobility and social well-being; and
- › Identifying the aspects of life (e.g., housing, security, civic engagement and digital inclusion) that are most influenced by South-South and triangular cooperation from a youth perspective.

The findings from this initial study were integrated into the *UNOSSC Global Report on South-South and Triangular Cooperation 2025*, contributing to a deeper understanding of youth engagement in those collaboration modalities.

## About micronarratives

The micronarrative approach, developed by [Cognitive Edge](#), is a qualitative research method used to capture and analyse human experiences in a structured yet open-ended way. It is particularly useful for understanding complex, emergent social patterns by collecting short, self-interpreted stories from individuals about their experiences, perceptions and/or observations.

Unlike traditional surveys or interviews that impose predefined categories, micronarrative research allows respondents to provide meaning to their own stories. Participants not only share a brief narrative but also interpret it themselves using a set of structured questions or categorization tools. This enables researchers to detect patterns, themes and underlying emotions without imposing external biases.

The use of micronarratives for this specific research project is due to the usefulness of this method since it offers the possibility of capturing contextual complexity. It also provides ample possibilities to do bottom-up sensemaking, identify some of the emerging patterns in the stories, and further scale and adapt the project, providing the possibility to conduct large-scale data collection using social media and other channels while still maintaining qualitative depth.

For this study, the micronarrative approach helps to explore how youth understand, perceive and engage with South-South and triangular cooperation, allowing them to express their experiences in their own words rather than being constrained by predefined survey options. This methodology ensures that youth voices are authentically represented, offering researchers, policymakers and practitioners a data-driven yet deep contextual understanding of how South-South and triangular cooperation impact communities.

The United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) has utilized the Cognitive Edge platform for data collection and the open-source SenseMaker software for the initial analysis of the collected micronarratives. This project is ongoing, with the goal of gathering as many youth micronarratives as possible to gain deeper insight into their perceptions and experiences with South-South and triangular cooperation.

Access to primary data is available upon request. Organizations interested in collaborating with UNOSSC on this initiative can access the micronarrative data set and explore opportunities to join future sense-making sessions with youth and partners.

## Demographic profile of respondents

As of the release of this internal paper, a total of 50 micronarratives had been collected. While this data set provides valuable insights, it is not intended to be a representative sample nor does the research methodology itself aim for representativeness. Instead, the approach focuses on capturing diverse personal experiences and perspectives to identify patterns and emerging themes in youth engagement with South-South and triangular cooperation.

The respondents in this study represent a diverse cross section of youth engaged in those modalities of development cooperation, with 65 per cent identifying as male and 35 per cent as female. Their income levels vary, with the majority belonging to lower- and middle-income groups, as self-identified, compared to their peers in the communities in which they currently live. Specifically, 38 per cent report income levels below the average in their communities, 49 per cent consider themselves at about the average, and 13 per cent fall into the above-average income category.

In terms of age distribution, the largest proportion of participants, 58 per cent, are between 19 and 29 years of age, followed by 33 per cent in the 30- to 39-year-old group. A smaller segment of 7 per cent consists of respondents under the age of 18, while the remaining individuals are above 39 years of age.

The educational background of respondents is diverse, with 37 per cent holding undergraduate degrees, 35 per cent having completed a master's degree and 16 per cent reaching the upper secondary level.

Employment patterns among respondents reveal that 31 per cent are students, while 43 per cent are employed full-time. Additionally, 12 per cent hold part-time jobs, another 12 per cent are actively seeking employment and 3 per cent report being unemployed. When asked about their future mobility, 67 per cent of respondents indicated that they are likely to remain in their communities of origin, whereas 23 per cent remain undecided about their future location.

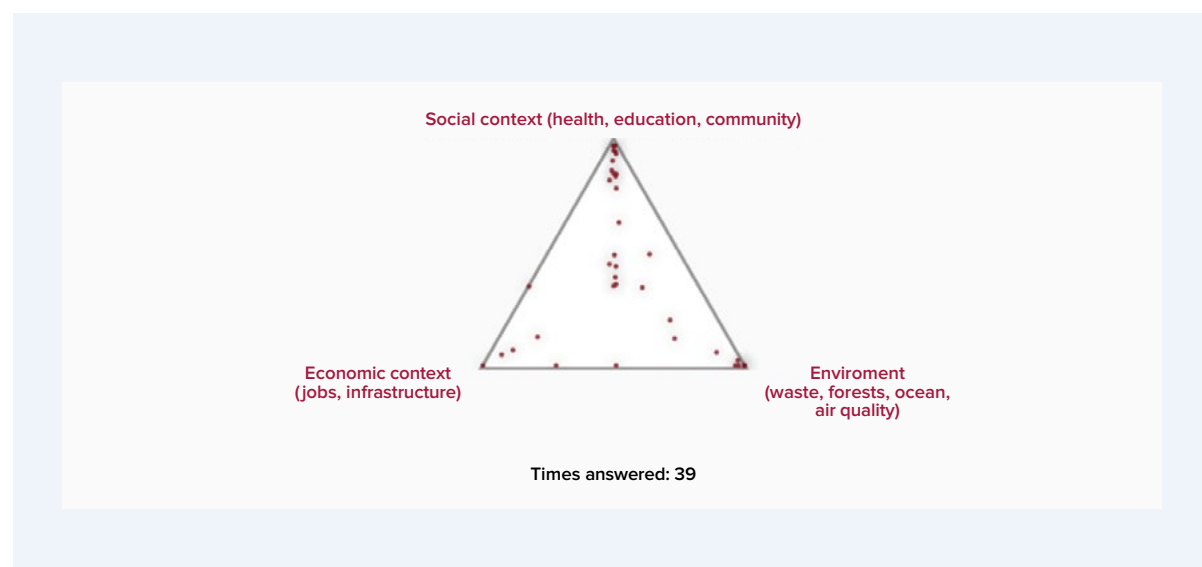
This demographic profile highlights the diversity of youth perspectives and experiences in relation to South-South and triangular cooperation, showcasing a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational attainment and professional engagement.

## Youth perceptions of South-South and triangular cooperation: 10 key insights from the collected data

The 10 key takeaways from the analysis of the initial batch of submitted micronarratives are summarized below:

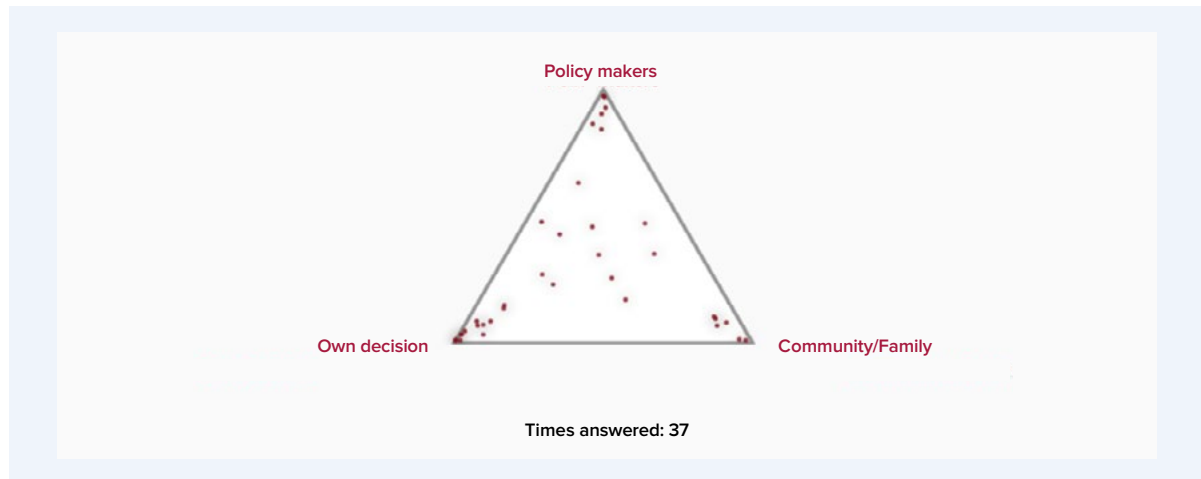
- 1. Social change as the most impacted dimension.** Youth perceive social transformation, particularly in healthcare, education and community development, as the most significant outcome of South-South and triangular cooperation. Their narratives frequently highlight improved access to education, enhanced or improved healthcare services and stronger community engagement as key areas where South-South and triangular cooperation have made a tangible difference in their lives.

**Figure 1. My story is about changes that happened in the area of...**



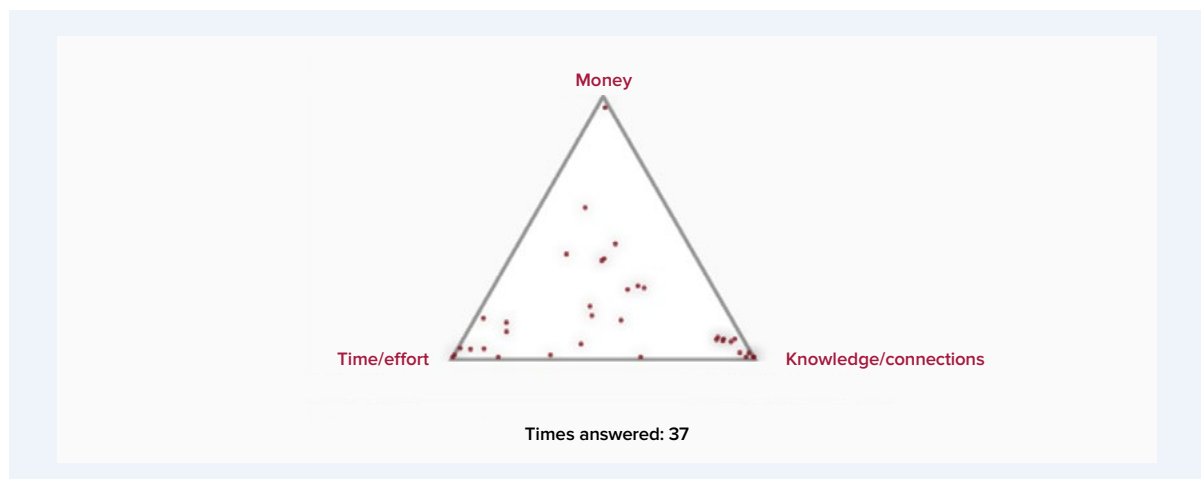
- 2. Self-driven participation with some external influences.** Participation in South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives are driven primarily by personal motivation and individual decisions, although many narratives also reveal that policymakers, communities and/or families indirectly influence participation. While youth are active agents of change, their engagement often depends on the enabling environment, awareness levels and available opportunities provided by institutions and networks.

**Figure 2. My participation in the decision-making process was determined by...**

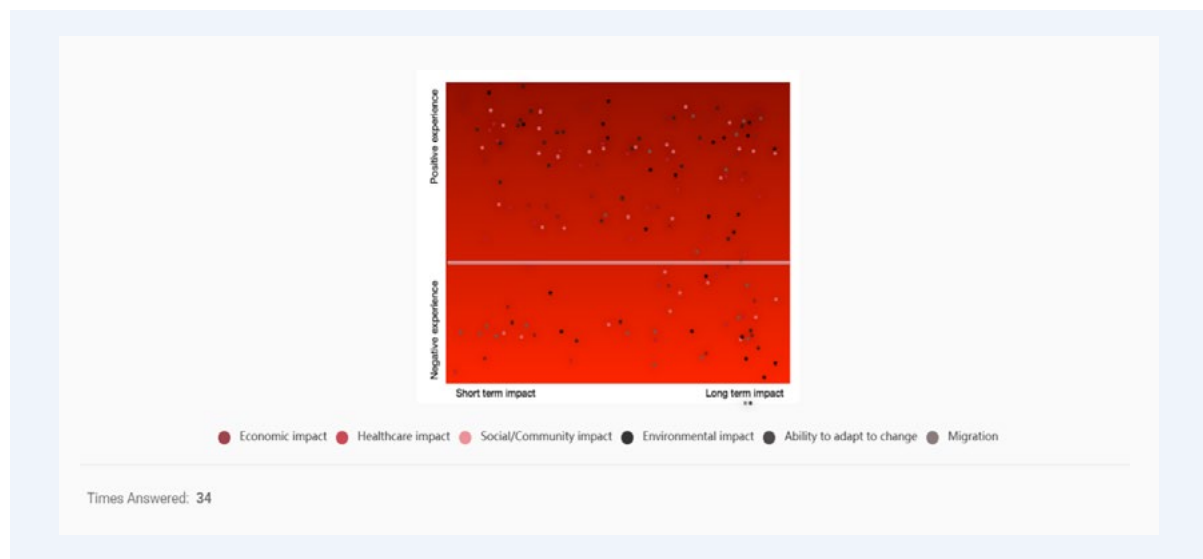


- 3. Knowledge-sharing as the primary contribution by youth.** The dominant form of youth contribution to South-South and triangular cooperation is knowledge-sharing and network-building rather than monetary support. Many respondents describe investing their knowledge and personal time and effort to contribute to cooperation initiatives. However, they express a strong need for greater institutional support, clearer guidelines and structured pathways to enhance their impact and participation.

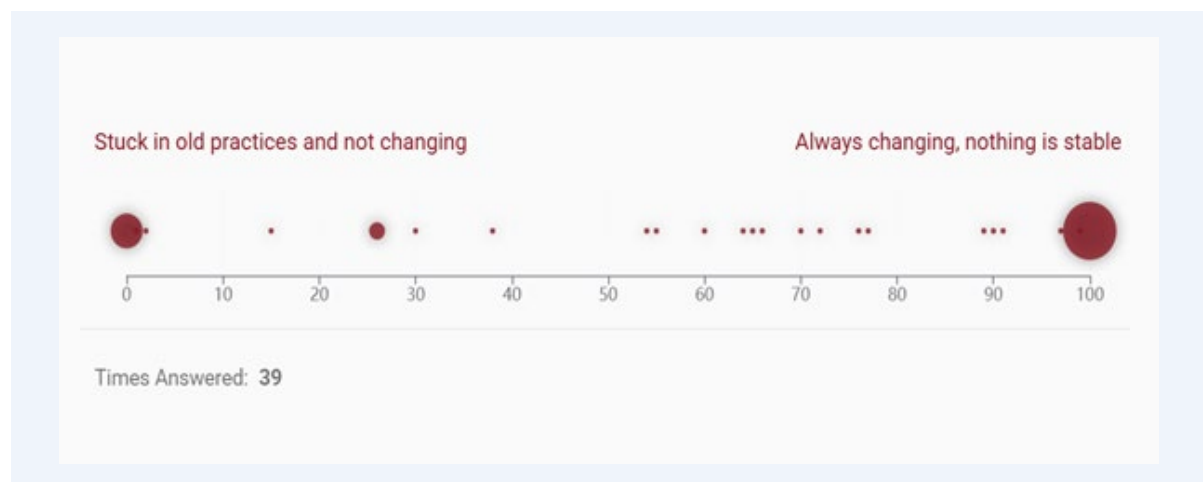
**Figure 3. My own contribution to solving the problems mentioned in my story took the form of ...**



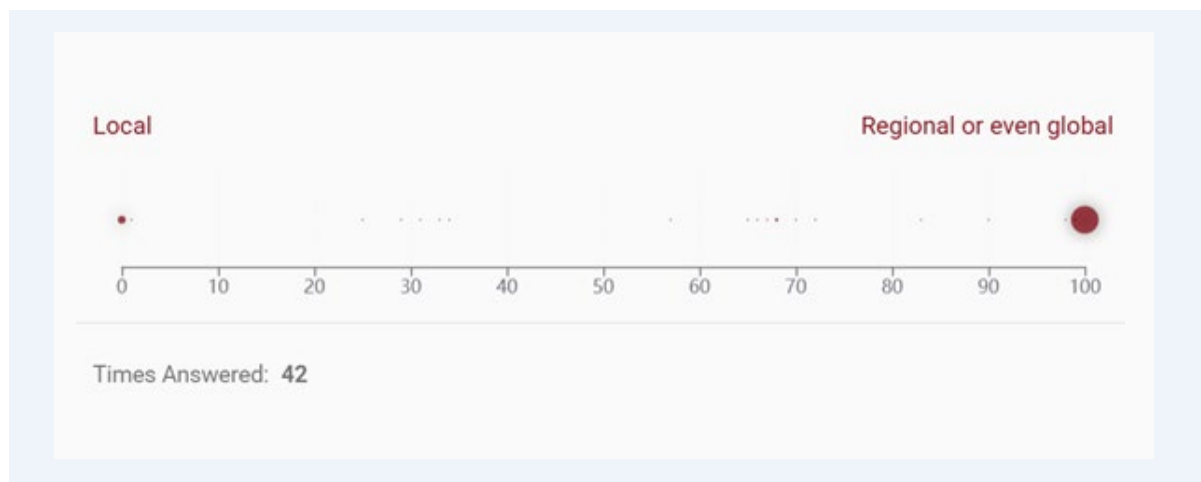
- 4. Diverse impact types with predominantly positive sentiment.** The stories reflect a mix of social, economic and environmental impacts, with both successes and challenges discussed. Despite some concerns and barriers, the overall emotional tone remains positive, with over 80 per cent of the narratives expressing very positive (35 per cent) and positive (45 per cent) emotional tone, optimism and appreciation for the cooperation efforts.

**Figure 4. Measuring impact**

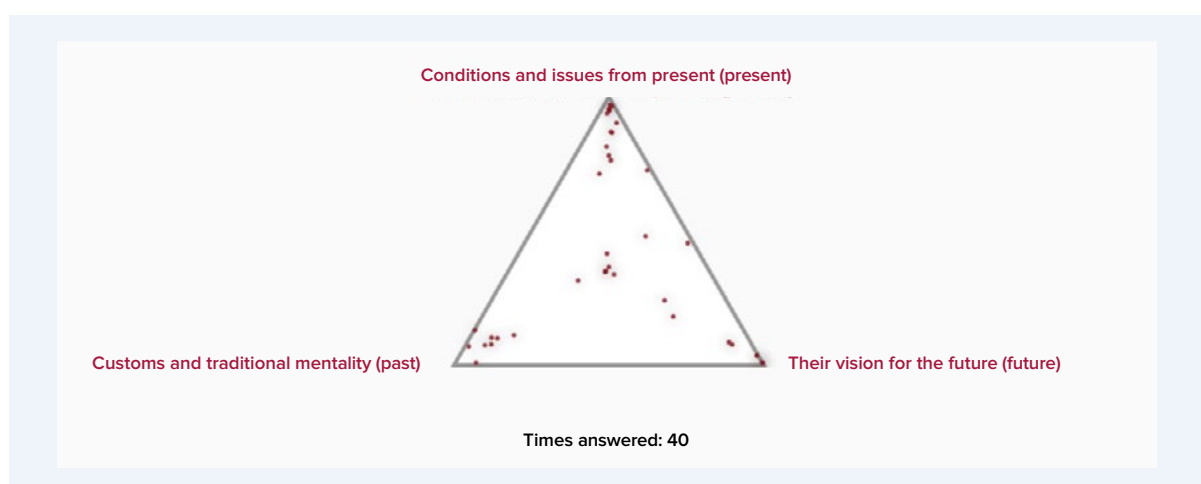
- 5. Fast-changing contexts as a barrier to meaningful contributions.** More than 50 per cent of the narratives describe a rapidly changing environment that makes sustained engagement challenging. Youth feel that shifting priorities, policy changes and unstable economic or social conditions create barriers to long-term contributions and meaningful participation in South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives.

**Figure 5. The situation described in my story is mostly...**

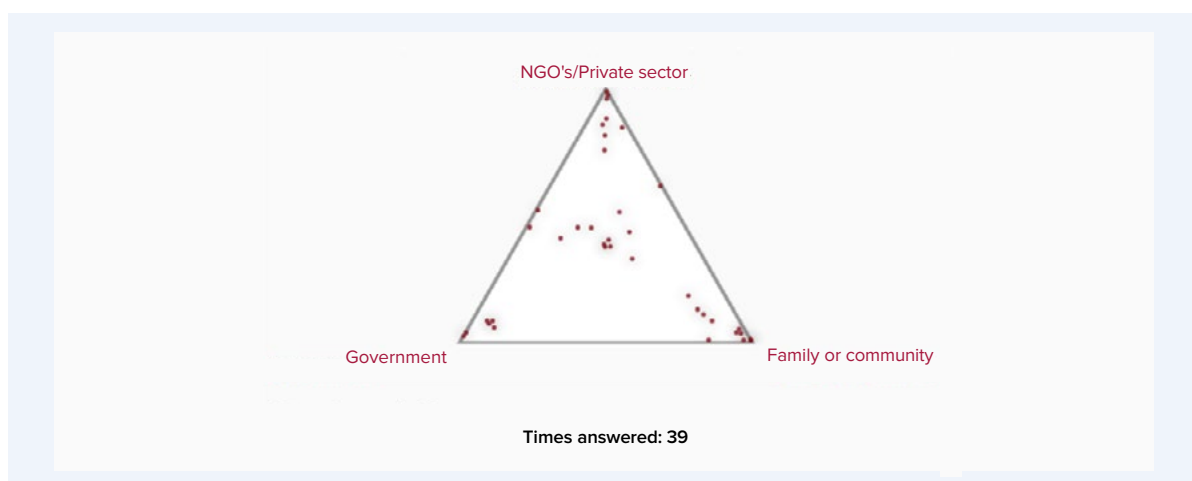
- 6. Limited role of policymakers and communities in decision-making.** While youth largely make their own decisions about participation, narratives suggest that policymakers, community leaders and family members play only a minor role in guiding or encouraging engagement. This might highlight a potential gap in institutional efforts to actively involve young people in decision-making processes related to South-South and triangular cooperation, an area that requires deeper analysis (See figure 2).
- 7. Global and regional issues dominate the discourse.** The challenges and development issues discussed in the stories are overwhelmingly regional or global in nature, with less than 10 per cent focusing on purely local concerns. This suggests that youth view South-South and triangular cooperation as mechanisms for addressing large-scale, complex development challenges rather than as tools for resolving community-specific issues in isolation.

**Figure 6. The problem(s) in my story are mostly...**

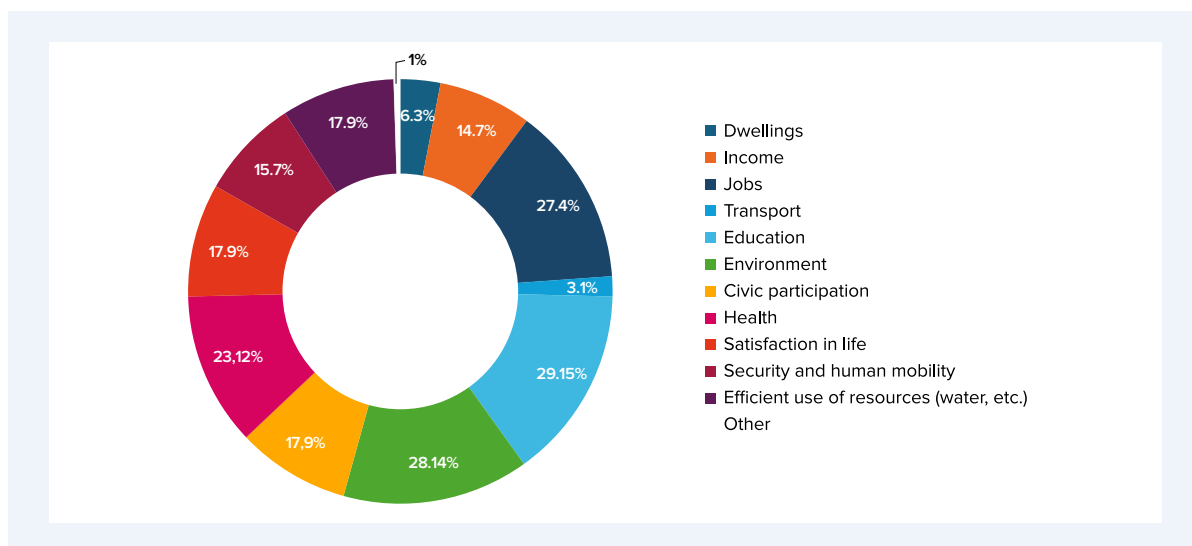
- 8. Reduced focus on the future.** Most narratives focus on past and present experiences, with less than 10 per cent discussing future possibilities or visions for South-South and triangular cooperation. This indicates a gap in forward-looking dialogue and strategic foresight among youth, potentially limiting proactive engagement in shaping the future of cooperation.

**Figure 7. In my story, the people involved are impacted or influenced by...**

- 9. Community and family are seen as primary actors, while government plays a minimal role.** Youth attribute responsibility for the success or failure of South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives primarily to families and communities, with Government playing a minimal role. This contrasts with the fact that most South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives are Government-driven, suggesting a possible disconnect between policy-level efforts and grass-roots perceptions.

**Figure 8. The responsibility for what happened in my story is with...**

**10. Thinking about the potential implications of more sustainable South-South and triangular cooperation and the future impacts of such cooperation on the quality of life, the key thematic areas highlighted by youth are education (15 per cent), environment (14 per cent), jobs (13 per cent), healthcare (12 per cent) and other areas.** The dominant themes in the narratives centre on health-care, education, jobs, environment and broader global cooperation for sustainable development. These areas reflect youth priorities and concerns for the future, reinforcing the need for stronger multi-stakeholder engagement to enhance the impact on these crucial sectors.

**Figure 9. Thinking about the potential implications of more sustainable South-South and triangular cooperation and the future impacts of such cooperation on the quality of life, what are the specific dimensions you think will be positively or negatively impacted?**

## In-depth analysis

The narratives provided by youth from across the Global South start to reveal a picture of the potential and challenges of South-South and triangular cooperation, as seen by the participating youth. Education emerges as a central theme, with young people recognizing the power of digital learning platforms, vocational training and university collaborations in bridging the gap between rural and urban areas. Many respondents believe that South-South and triangular cooperation can facilitate the exchange of good practices in education among developing countries, while partnerships with the developed countries can introduce advanced technology and learning resources to enhance accessibility and quality.

Employment and economic opportunities are another major concern, with youth expressing frustration over high unemployment rates and limited career prospects. South-South and triangular cooperation are seen as tools to expand entrepreneurship, technology-driven job markets and agricultural innovation, particularly through knowledge-sharing on climate-smart farming and renewable energy solutions. Youth envision a future where such collaboration transforms rural economies, making sectors such as sustainable agriculture and digital industries more attractive to young professionals.

Healthcare is also frequently mentioned, with many narratives highlighting the lack of accessible medical services and the need for innovative health solutions. South-South partnerships could help to scale low-cost, community-based healthcare models, while North-South cooperation could bring in telemedicine, advanced medical training and modern infrastructure. Some youth propose hybrid healthcare initiatives, where regional expertise in traditional medicine is combined with technological advancements from the developed countries to create inclusive and resilient health systems.

Sustainability and climate action are central to many visions of the future. Young people see South-South and triangular cooperation as avenues for scaling renewable energy, climate-resilient agriculture and green-job creation. Proposals range from cross-border technology exchanges in solar energy to regional collaborations on water conservation and ecosystem restoration. In these visions, youth are not just beneficiaries but active drivers of sustainable development, leading local initiatives and advocating for stronger environmental policies.

Despite their optimism, many youths also recognize some structural barriers to their engagement in South-South and triangular cooperation decision-making. They highlight the lack of institutional support, exclusion from policymaking spaces and insufficient funding for youth-led initiatives. There is a strong call for the creation of youth advisory councils, dedicated funding mechanisms and more inclusive governance structures to ensure that young people can meaningfully contribute to shaping cooperation efforts.

Most of these narratives – more than 70 per cent – not only reflect on the present but also envision a future where South-South and triangular cooperation evolve into more strategic and equitable models of global cooperation. Youth see the integration of South-South and North-South partnerships as essential to achieving greater economic justice, inclusive innovation and sustainable progress. While there is optimism about what South-South and triangular cooperation can achieve, many caution that without transparency, accountability and equitable participation, their full potential may not be realized.

Ultimately, these narratives potentially reveal a youth-driven vision for a more collaborative and inclusive world. Young people acknowledge the power of South-South and triangular cooperation but emphasize the need for innovation, stronger institutional frameworks and genuine engagement to make them true engines for sustainable development.

## Conclusion

This study is the beginning of a longer-term effort to understand and amplify youth perspectives on South-South and triangular cooperation. The initial findings highlight the important role of youth in shaping South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives, particularly in education, healthcare, employment and sustainability. However, the narratives also reveal challenges related to limited institutional support, limited perceived participation in decision-making and the rapidly changing nature of cooperation frameworks. Moving forward, UNOSSC aims to expand data collection, deepen analysis and establish a continuous process of youth engagement. By ensuring that youth voices are systematically integrated into the cooperation efforts, this initiative will contribute to a more inclusive, responsive and forward-looking approach to both South-South and triangular cooperation, ultimately strengthening their impact on sustainable development.

