

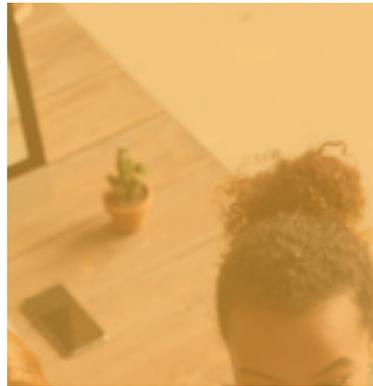


The  
Summit  
Foundation

# Best Practices for Fair Compensation in Youth Work

2025

A report from  
The Summit Foundation  
and YIELD Hub



**Developed by:** YIELD Hub and The Summit Foundation in collaboration with Children's Investment Fund (CIFF), CAMY Fund, Teen Health Mississippi, WINGS Guatemala, OSAR Juvenil Guatemala, GOJoven Belize, and the Adolescent Accelerators Research Hub at University of Cape Town.

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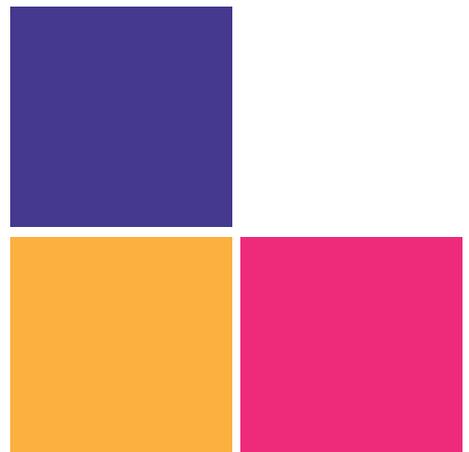
# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not be possible without the organisations that participated in YIELD Hub's Action Learning Cycle 7 focused on the topic of **Compensating Youth Work**. Over seven months, these organisations shared their experiences, challenges, and solutions on how to compensate youth contributions meaningfully, both monetarily and nonmonetarily, even amidst funding, ethical, and institutional barriers.

Special acknowledgement goes to Richard Dzikunu, YIELD Hub's Action Learning Groups Lead, for his leadership, coordination, and facilitation of all sessions that informed these reports and recommendations. We also recognize Somila Mjekula, YIELD Hub's Communications Lead, whose critical role in producing this report involved capturing the experiences and reflections that brought it to life.

*It's important to clarify what we mean by compensation. Often, we immediately think of monetary compensation, which we sometimes provide to youth, although many places don't. It's also important to give youth a seat at the table. This is tied to respect, but if we don't truly value their opinions or their expertise, we're not showing them the respect they deserve. These are examples of discrimination.*

**Action Learning Cycle 7 Member**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May, **YIELD Hub and The Summit Foundation** convened a virtual gathering of youth leaders, funders, NGOs, and institutions to explore fair compensation for youth work. The gathering built on previous YIELD Hub efforts related to this topic. Hosted under the title, *Developing Best Practices for Fair Compensation in Youth Work*, the session brought to light current gaps, promising practices, and actionable pathways that can support institutions to embed compensation as a core principle of meaningful youth engagement.



## KEY INSIGHTS

Compensation is an issue of equity and dignity. Youth should not have to volunteer their way into decision-making spaces while carrying systemic inequalities. A **Three-Tier Youth Compensation Framework** emerged as a model that best captured the varied discussions:



**Facilitative Compensation:** Removing barriers to participation (e.g., transport, meals, Internet/communications stipends.)



**Empowerment Compensation:** Creating opportunities for growth and recognition (e.g., mentorship, capacity building on leadership and career pathways, visibility/certifications).



**Livelihood Compensation:** Addressing financial realities through stipends, bonuses, and sustained support.

Trust-based, youth-centred models require co-design with young people themselves, moving beyond rigid structures to adaptive, context-responsive approaches.

This report summarises the discussions, frameworks, and recommendations generated, serving as both a reflection tool and practical guide to influence sector-wide change.



# INTRODUCTION

Fair and meaningful compensation for youth work is essential for effective and equitable programming. Yet, despite decades of youth participation initiatives, compensation remains inconsistently implemented, often treated as an afterthought rather than a structural necessity. Compensating youth contributions is a matter of equity and addressing the power dynamics that often marginalize young people and do not always recognize their time and efforts as deserving of compensation in some form. This is a systemic challenge that needs action from all levels of stakeholders

Amid tightening global funding landscapes, efforts to institutionalise fair compensation often face resistance or are deprioritized altogether. The question of "now what?" underscores the urgency of turning dialogue into action, ensuring that fair compensation becomes a non-negotiable component of youth engagement, rather than a recurring aspiration left unfulfilled. Addressing this issue requires committed leadership and collective responsibility from stakeholders at all levels.

On 27 May 2025, YIELD Hub and The Summit Foundation co-hosted a virtual convening titled, *Developing Best Practices for Fair Compensation in Youth Work*. This convening brought together youth leaders, funders, NGOs, and institutional partners to reflect on current practices, explore promising models, and co-create recommendations for integrating fair compensation into organisational systems.

*"This has been an issue the field has been trying to reckon with for decades. There seems to have been some progress based on the dialogues that YIELD Hub has helped convene in the last couple of years. But I find myself wondering, now what? It might become even more challenging."*

**Kathy Hall, Director of Equality for Women and Girls, The Summit Foundation**

*"Youth deserve more than a seat at the table. They deserve to be valued at that table."*

**Sonali Silva, Director, YIELD Hub**

This gathering was a direct outcome of The Summit Foundation's active participation in [YIELD Hub's Action Learning Cycle 7 on Compensating Youth Work](#). The Summit Foundation's leadership and partnership in this process catalysed a broader reflection across funders and implementing organisations. As shared in the initial convening invitation:

*"The primary objective of this collaboration is to create flexible guidelines that will encourage funders and grantees to recognize and value youth contributions through fair compensation. We hope these guidelines will serve as a voluntary framework that funders and their grantees can use to embed compensation – in various forms – in their youth engagement strategies and program implementation."*

**This report captures the insights, frameworks, and actionable recommendations that emerged from the convening. It aims to:**



**Illuminate the gaps** in existing compensation practices and the structural inequities they perpetuate



**Showcase practical frameworks**, including the Three-Tier Youth Compensation Model developed through discussion



**Influence funders and organisations** to embed fair youth compensation as a core principle in project design, budgeting, and partnership approaches



*“These experiences taught us that compensation isn’t about paying somebody for their time. It’s about removing barriers so they can truly engage.”*

**Mildred Thabeng, Senior Researcher, University of Cape Town**

This resource is a call to reimagine compensation as an ecosystem of dignity, opportunity, and equity. It builds on the lived experiences and strategic insights shared by participants who are advancing youth leadership and partnership in diverse contexts.

As the global development and funding community seeks to build more just and youth-centred systems, this report serves as both a reflection tool and a practical guide for moving beyond tokenistic involvement towards true partnership and value-sharing.



# THEMATIC CONTENT

## Why Youth Compensation Matters

Across global development and youth programming spaces, compensation for youth work remains a contested and unevenly addressed issue. Despite growing commitments to meaningful youth engagement, many young people continue to contribute their time, expertise, and lived experiences without fair recognition or remuneration.

During the convening, participants reflected on how systemic inequities shape youth compensation practices. As Sonali Silva, YIELD Hub Director, articulated:

***“Compensating youth is a matter of equity and respect. Young people should not have to volunteer their way into decision-making spaces while carrying the weight of systemic inequalities.”***

This perspective challenges the pervasive assumption that youth will participate regardless of structural barriers or opportunity costs. It reframes compensation as:



### **An ethical imperative**

Valuing youth time, expertise, and lived realities as equally meaningful to those of adults or technical experts.



### **A relational investment**

Building trust, dignity, and authentic partnership through recognition, fair payment, and pathways for growth.



### **A strategic enabler**

Ensuring programmes and organisations benefit from youth insights and leadership in ways that are sustainable and transformative.

*“Young people bring fresh perspectives, lived experiences, and tireless energy to causes that shape the future. Yet too often, they’re expected to contribute without pay, especially through volunteering or social services. While volunteering can be transformative and deeply meaningful, it doesn’t replace the need for fair compensation. Young people have real needs, and relying on unpaid labor risks excluding those who can’t afford to participate.”*

**Sebastián Cabrera,  
OSAR Juvenil  
Guatemala**

## Building on Past Action Learning Cycles

This convening built on the significant foundation laid by YIELD Hub's past Action Learning Cycles (ALCs) dedicated to compensating youth work. In particular:



**ALC 5 (2023)** focused on unpacking the equity and power dynamics of compensation, highlighting how unpaid youth work entrenches privilege and limits participation from underserved communities. Cycle 5 produced a [Practical Guide](#) outlining themes, recommendations, and self-assessment tools to help organisations evaluate and strengthen their compensation practices.



**ALC 7 (2024)** expanded this work, co-creating a [Practical Toolkit](#) with youth-led organisations and funders, including The Summit Foundation. The toolkit offered ready-to-use resources such as:

- A Compensation Options Guide (monetary and non-monetary)
- An Internal Compensation Policy template
- A Funders Engagement Guide to frame compensation as an investment rather than a cost
- A Youth Preferences Survey tool to ground approaches in youth realities
- A Compensation Tracker to improve transparency and accountability

Both resources draw directly from the reflections, journeys, and implementation experiences of participating organisations. Their collective insights, accessible via [YIELD Hub's resource library](#), continue to shape emerging sectoral norms on youth compensation.

The Summit Foundation's active involvement in the Action Learning Cycle on Compensating Youth Work stemmed from a similar recognition. Their action learning goal reflected an intention to move beyond symbolic inclusion towards structural support.

At its core, fair youth compensation is about transforming how programmes, funders, and organisations value young people's time, expertise, and leadership. It is a strategic and ethical commitment to building more equitable systems that recognise youth as meaningful partners.

# KEY LEARNINGS

The convening surfaced a wealth of reflections, frameworks, and practical considerations for strengthening youth compensation practices across diverse contexts. Central to these was the **Three-Tier Youth Compensation Framework**, co-developed through collective discussion and rooted in the lived experiences of youth and organisations.



## The Three-Tier Youth Compensation Framework

### Tier 1

#### Facilitative Compensation (Basic Enablement)

**Purpose:** Remove barriers to participation, ensuring youth can engage equitably.

#### Key Components and Insights:

- Basic provisions such as catering and meals, transport stipends or reimbursements, and internet or communication stipends for online engagement.
- Accessible payment systems, such as cash disbursements, vouchers, or mobile money to accommodate banking barriers
- Recognising these are baseline enablers, not acts of charity, and that organisations must build trust-based systems allowing for context-specific flexibility

### Tier 2

#### Empowerment Compensation (Development, Recognition, and Relational Value)

**Purpose:** Expand youth opportunities, skills, confidence, and visibility.

#### Key Components and Insights:

- Awards, certificates, and formal recognition
- Structured mentorship programmes as integral forms of compensation, not add-ons
- Leadership opportunities and youth representation in governance structures
- Access to networking events, professional exposure, and career coaching and guidance on professional pathways for skills gained
- Flexible, co-designed models recognising that not all youth seek formal employment; some prefer project-based contributions or alternative leadership pathways
- Ethical positionality considerations: Ensuring youth consent to how their identities are leveraged for organisational visibility and that their contributions are not tokenised

## Tier 3

# Livelihood Compensation (Financial Support)

**Purpose:** Address financial realities to enable youth participation with dignity and sustainability.

### Key Components and Insights:

- Stipends or regular disbursements with transparent and predictable payment timelines
- Performance-based bonuses recognising achievements and milestones
- Complementary financial support between payment periods
- Organisations often lack professional pathways for youth despite providing stipends, signalling a need for structural shifts to integrate youth meaningfully into institutional systems

*“At our organization... we quickly realized that compensation needs to be flexible and accessible. Not everyone has a bank account or the same financial setup, especially when working with indigenous communities, so we’ve had to get creative, using cash, mobile transfers, and even offering support to help youth navigate those systems.”*

**Sebastián Cabrera, OSAR Juvenil Guatemala**



## Cross-Cutting Insights:

**Throughout the discussions, participants emphasised:**

- The importance of Youth–Adult Partnership training to shift mindsets from tokenism to authentic power-sharing
- Viewing compensation as relational and an investment in dignity, trust, and sustainable youth leadership
- The need for ongoing organisational dialogue with youth to adapt models responsively

*“Certain organisations believe that the experiences of young people are less valuable than those of individuals with decades of experience... This perspective shows ageism as it discriminates based on age. Even though we are invited as experts, we are compensated differently.”*

**ALC 7 Member**

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The convening concluded with a set of priority recommendations to guide organisations, funders, and youth partners in strengthening compensation practices. These recommendations build on the Three-Tier Framework and the lived experiences of participants, offering pathways to embed fairness, dignity, and sustainability into youth work.



## 1. Design with Youth, Not For Youth

### Why?

The importance of Youth–Adult Partnership training to shift mindsets from tokenism to authentic power-sharing

### Action Steps:

- Conduct preference mapping and needs assessments directly with youth before designing compensation packages.
- Involve youth in compensation policy development and budget planning processes to ensure their realities inform organisational decisions.

## 2. Integrate Compensation into Core Budgets and Proposals

### Why?

Treating compensation as an optional line item undermines sustainability and equity.

### Action Steps:

- Build compensation considerations into programme design and proposal development from inception.
- Frame compensation with funders as an investment in quality, ownership, and equity, not merely an operational cost.

## 3. Implement Structured Mentorship Programmes as Compensation

### Why?

Mentorship builds skills, confidence, networks, and relational equity.

### Action Steps:

- Establish mentorship opportunities as an integral form of Empowerment Compensation.
- Pair mentorship with other forms of compensation (e.g. stipends or leadership roles) to enhance impact.

## 4. Create Youth Governance Representation Pathways

**Why?** Inclusion in governance builds leadership, influence, and sustainability of youth partnership.

### Action Steps:

- Develop clear pathways for youth to join Boards, steering committees, and decision-making bodies.
- Compensate youth representatives fairly for their time and expertise, in alignment with adult counterparts.

## 5. Adopt Flexible, Contextualised Compensation Models

**Why?** Youth have diverse intentions, contexts, and needs that standard models may not address.

### Action Steps:

- Offer a mix of monetary and non-monetary options, allowing youth to select what is most meaningful to them.
- Recognise alternative aspirations beyond formal employment, such as project-based leadership or community initiatives.

## 6. Pilot Youth–Adult Partnership Training Within Organisations

**Why?** Shifting mindsets from tokenism to power-sharing requires intentional skill-building.

### Action Steps:

- Implement Youth–Adult Partnership trainings to build internal capacity for equitable youth engagement.
- Include these trainings as part of onboarding, professional development, and leadership pathways.

## 7. Strengthen Organisational Systems and Pathways

**Why?** Compensation alone is insufficient if organisational structures do not integrate youth meaningfully.

### Action Steps:

- Develop professional pathways within organisations for youth to transition from compensated roles into employment or leadership positions.
- Review internal policies and practices to remove structural barriers to youth advancement.

These recommendations provide a roadmap for funders and organisations to transform compensation practices from fragmented or tokenistic to equitable, strategic, and empowering, ensuring youth are valued as partners in shaping the programmes and systems that affect their lives.

# NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

This report and its recommendations mark a significant milestone in the ongoing effort to ensure fair and meaningful compensation for youth work. Moving forward, YIELD Hub and its partners will actively use this report as a tool to advocate for systemic and institutional change. We are committed to:



**Continuously amplifying** these insights and recommendations through our communication platforms, including newsletters, social media, blogs, and webinars.



**Showcase practical frameworks**, including the Three-Tier Youth Compensation Model developed through discussion



**Influence funders and organisations** to embed fair youth compensation as a core principle in project design, budgeting, and partnership approaches

Through these efforts, we aim to shift mindsets, policies, and practices so that fair youth compensation becomes a non-negotiable standard, not an afterthought. Fair compensation is not just about payments; it's about equity, recognition, and the power to shape one's future. The frameworks, insights, and lived experiences shared in this report serve as both a call to action and a practical guide for institutions seeking to build more just and youth-centered systems. By embracing compensation as a core principle of youth engagement, we take a significant step toward dismantling systemic inequities and honoring the contributions of young people worldwide.

YIELD Hub, the collaborating partner in this report, is always open to working with institutions that want to better understand and strengthen how they engage with young people, including areas such as fair youth compensation, leadership transitions, and sustainable engagement models. Through their **YIELD Hub Technical Service**, they offer tailored support to organisations looking to deepen their youth-centered practices. If interested, reach out to Richard Dzikunu at, [richard@yieldhub.global](mailto:richard@yieldhub.global).

**Let this report be a starting point for bold action, deeper collaboration, and a renewed commitment to valuing youth, not just in words, but in practice.**



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