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Security starts locally

As Europe hardens its security agenda, it risks weakening the local foundations on which resilient societies and credible partnerships depend

Aid cuts usually appear first as numbers in donor budgets. Only later do they appear as closed programmes, dismissed field staff, weakened local organisations, lost monitoring visits and communities that become harder to see.

That delay matters. By the time the political cost of a cut becomes visible, the news cycle has moved on, and much of the civic infrastructure it damaged has already disappeared.

Official development assistance fell sharply in 2025, marking the largest annual decline on record. Humanitarian funding, support to least developed countries and bilateral aid to sub-Saharan Africa were all hit hard. These figures are often discussed as fiscal corrections, geopolitical reallocations or symptoms of domestic pressure in donor countries.

But the deeper problem is not only that less money moves from richer countries to poorer ones. It is that, in an age of overlapping crises, donors are weakening precisely the local relationships that make societies readable, accountable and resilient.

The loss is not only a workshop, a report or a training. It is a reduction in a society's ability to know itself.

This is also a European contradiction. Europe increasingly speaks the language of security, resilience and strategic responsibility. It invests in defence, energy security, border management and crisis preparedness. Yet if it cuts the local civic networks that help societies identify exclusion, monitor rights and maintain trust, it is weakening the deeper foundations of security it claims to defend.

Development cooperation is too often imagined as a transfer of resources: money, expertise, training, services, projects. Some of it is. But at its best,

it also supports civic infrastructure — the local organisations, trust networks and accountability mechanisms through which people become visible to one another and to the state.

This is especially true for organisations of persons with disabilities.

In my work in international disability inclusion and civil-society support, including with partners in East Africa, I have learned that a local disability organisation is not merely a grant recipient or project implementer. It is often one of a society's most precise instruments for finding people whom official systems do not see.

A local organisation may know which children are not in school, which women with disabilities are hidden by stigma, which people were missed by humanitarian distribution, which health services are inaccessible, which local officials listen, and which rights exist only on paper. It may know where transport is theoretical, where data is misleading, and where participation has been promised but not made possible.

When such an organisation loses funding, the loss is not only a workshop, a report or a training. It is a reduction in a society's ability to know itself.

Democratic maintenance

That is why the current debate on aid cuts is too narrow when it focuses only on volumes. The question is not simply how much aid is spent, but what kind of social and democratic capacity disappears when certain forms of support are withdrawn.

Grassroots civil society performs work that is difficult to measure because it often prevents invisibility rather than producing dramatic events. It translates rights into local language. It challenges harmful norms. It reaches people who distrust authorities. It helps communities organise claims. It provides early warnings that official systems miss. It turns individual suffering into public information.

This is not soft work. It is democratic maintenance.

Europe should not confuse hard security with deep security. Military readiness, border control and energy resilience may be necessary in a more dangerous world. But a society is not secure only because its state can defend territory. It is secure when people are not abandoned by the institutions and relationships that make public life possible.

The danger is particularly acute when donors retreat from small and locally rooted organisations in favour of larger, more administratively convenient channels.

Cuts to civic infrastructure weaken that deeper security. They make it easier for excluded people to disappear from planning, easier for governments to claim inclusion without evidence, easier for corruption or abuse to remain unchallenged, and easier for international actors to believe that a programme has reached a community when it has reached only the most visible part of it.

This is not an argument for preserving every aid programme unchanged. Development cooperation deserves scrutiny. Donors should ask hard questions about effectiveness, dependency, bureaucracy and local ownership. But cutting support without understanding the civic functions it sustains is not reform. It is institutional amnesia.

The danger is particularly acute when donors retreat from small and locally rooted organisations in favour of larger, more administratively convenient channels. Large actors have a role, especially in humanitarian response and systems-level work. But they cannot replace the knowledge held by organisations embedded in communities, languages, disabilities, gender relations, informal networks and local histories.

A national database may show that persons with disabilities exist. A local organisation may know why they are not attending a meeting, why a woman did not come to a clinic, why a family hides a child, why a cash transfer is not reaching someone, or why a public service is formally available but practically unusable.

That difference matters in crises. Climate shocks, conflict, displacement, health emergencies and economic instability do not affect societies evenly. They move through existing inequalities. People already outside data, services and decision-making are often the first to be missed and the last to be counted. Local civil society is one of the few systems that can notice this before it becomes a catastrophe.

This is why disability inclusion should not be treated as a narrow compliance requirement. It is a way of testing whether development cooperation reaches those whom systems most easily miss. If a programme cannot reach persons with disabilities, it is often revealing a wider problem: weak community knowledge, inaccessible communication, poor accountability, elite capture or unrealistic assumptions about who can participate.

If Europe wants credible

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disabilities are part of the last-mile democracy test. They show whether rights, services and public promises travel all the way to those who are easiest to overlook.

The policy lesson is clear. If donors must reduce budgets, they should not cut blindly from the civic base. They should protect small but strategic support to grassroots organisations, including organisations of persons with disabilities, women's groups and other locally rooted actors. They should fund core capacity, not only short projects. They should treat monitoring visits, community outreach, accessibility work and local accountability as resilience functions, not administrative extras.

They should also resist the temptation to measure efficiency only by grant size, reporting convenience or speed of disbursement. A small grant to a local organisation can produce knowledge that a large programme cannot buy later. A community relationship built over years can become decisive when formal systems fail. Trust, once broken, is expensive to rebuild.

For European donors, this is not charity. It is strategic realism.

If Europe wants credible partnerships in a fragmented world, it must understand that democratic resilience is built locally, patiently and relationally. It cannot be switched on during a crisis if it has been defunded in the years before one.

The question is not whether Europe can afford civil-society support in a time of crisis. It is whether Europe can afford to enter deeper crises with fewer people able to see who is being left behind.



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