

# Collaboration in action: exploring strategic partnerships between businesses and non- profit organisations

Summary report

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**BUSINESS**

**NON-PROFIT  
ORGANISATION**



**Henley**  
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AFRICA

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OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

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## **Abstract**

Non-profit organisations (NPOs) are pivotal in driving socio-economic development. By collaborating with NPOs, businesses can effectively meet the rising social and environmental expectations they face, while also tackling the socio-economic challenges in their operational communities. These strategic partnerships address the critical funding, sustainability, and resource issues many NPOs struggle with, and enhance the overall impact of both sectors.

This summary report is designed to ignite meaningful dialogue on the collaborations between businesses and NPOs. It forms part of a broader research initiative undertaken by Henley Business School Africa and the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which explored the economic impact of NPOs in the Western Cape. Using purposive sampling, data were collected from 361 NPO representatives via an online self-administered questionnaire.

The report delivers a theoretical overview of the importance of NPOs, highlighting the key benefits of collaboration, the various forms it can take, and the essential factors that drive successful partnerships. Thereafter, it presents the survey results, enhancing an understanding of the NPO landscape in the region and providing robust, evidence-based insights into promising collaboration opportunities.

Numerous opportunities exist for collaboration across various focus areas, time frames, and levels of integration, including impactful mutual training initiatives between businesses and NPOs. It is imperative that businesses recognise NPOs as equal partners, not just as charitable extensions. To maximise the collective impact, ongoing discussions must be prioritised, maintaining a strong focus on strategic alignment.

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## **Introduction**

Business is 'intrinsically linked to the success or failure of the society in which it operates' (Foster-Pedley and Bouwer, 2024). This connection has led to a growing emphasis on the environmental and social impacts of businesses and the broader responsibilities they are expected to fulfil (De Villiers, Van der Colff and Pillay, 2025). This includes calls for businesses to help address social challenges (Harvard Business Review and KPMG, 2017) and create social value (Buffett and Eimicke, 2018).

Collaborations between businesses and non-profit organisations (NPOs) have become increasingly important in meeting these social expectations. A key step in fostering these partnerships is to dispel the misconception that NPOs engage solely in charitable activities (Inyathelo, 2025). Furthermore, having strategic alignment, such as shared values and focus areas, is often a prerequisite for successful collaboration (Dialogue, 2025b). Showcasing the professional capabilities, impact, and strategic intentions of NPOs (Inyathelo, 2025) and raising awareness of their various initiatives can facilitate this process.

As part of its annual research on corporate social investment (CSI), Dialogue conducted a national survey and provides information on various NPO-related topics (Dialogue, 2026; Dialogue Knowledge Hub, 2023a). However, there is limited information available at the provincial and district levels. This report is instrumental in deepening the understanding of the NPO landscape in the Western Cape, which is crucial for fostering evidence-based discussions and enhancing collaborations between businesses and NPOs.

### ***Background and aim of the summary report***

This report is a key component of a broader research study conducted by Henley Business School Africa and the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), focusing on the economic contribution of NPOs in the Western Cape. The primary objective of this summary report is to stimulate meaningful discussions on potential collaborations between businesses and NPOs. To facilitate these discussions, the report delves into several pivotal areas of interest, namely:

- Insights from literature and industry leaders on the significance of NPOs and the benefits of collaborations between businesses and NPOs;

- An overview of the NPO landscape and collaboration opportunities that arise from the survey results; and
- Key discussion points and actionable insights to guide the development of strategic partnerships.

Note: For more information about the broader research study authored by researchers from the SocialCauses Foundation NPC, please contact the CCCI's non-profit portfolio.

### **Theoretical overview**

This section outlines the size and important contributions of NPOs in South Africa. It also discusses the benefits of collaboration between NPOs and businesses as well as the different types of collaborations, and offers suggestions for achieving successful partnerships.

#### ***The significance of non-profit organisations***

In October 2024, 295 052 NPOs were registered with the Department of Social Development's (DSD's) NPO directorate nationwide (Western Cape Government DSD, 2024). The most recent available provincial data indicates that the Western Cape alone is home to 29 343 registered NPOs (Western Cape Government DSD, 2025). It is important to dispel the misconception that these organisations are purely charitable (Inyathelo, 2025). In reality, they play a critical role in driving socio-economic development (Choto Iwu and Tengeh, 2020).

NPOs are vital for effective service delivery (Western Cape Government, 2023), especially in locations where government services fall short or face delays (Mazibuko, 2024). They offer subsidised services that empower community members to access essential support that might otherwise be out of reach (Nedbank, 2024). Moreover, NPOs are instrumental in tackling societal challenges (Mazibuko, 2024), providing critical humanitarian relief (SAnews.gov.za, 2025), and actively engaging in advocacy (Rouw, n.d.). Additionally, they conduct research and development (Saunders and Mhlanga, 2021), create job opportunities (Maboya and McKay, 2019), and contribute to the nation's gross domestic product (Maboya and McKay, 2019).

NPOs are poised to make a significant impact in their communities. However, they often face formidable challenges that hinder their ability to deliver essential services and meet the increasing demands of those they serve. Among the foremost obstacles are funding constraints (Maboya and McKay, 2019) and limited resources (Rouw, n.d.), which are further exacerbated by rising compliance requirements (Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2023a) and socio-economic hurdles (Domingo, 2025). However, strategic collaborations offer a powerful solution to these issues, expanding NPOs' reach and providing businesses with valuable opportunities to amplify their social impact.

### ***Collaborations between businesses and non-profit organisations***

NPOs primarily work with other civil society organisations, government, universities, and businesses to leverage existing connections, broaden a project's reach, strengthen relationships, and secure additional financial support (Trialogue, 2024). Collaborating with businesses is a vital source of income for many NPOs (Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2024a) and contributes to their sustainability (Stellenbosch Business School, 2019).

Raymond Ackerman (2021) strongly advocated that businesses should not only strive to maximise profits, but also be involved in and contribute positively to the communities in which they operate. 'Doing good is no longer just a moral imperative – it is also good for business' (Lindeque, 2023). Collaborating with NPOs can help businesses to achieve these social objectives (Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2024a), including CSI (Demeshane, 2024) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives (Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2023a). The close ties NPOs have with communities (Demeshane, 2024), along with their project experience, are particularly beneficial and can help promote trust and engagement among community members (Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2023a).

Austin (2000a) delineated three distinct types of collaboration, each marked by varying degrees of involvement and responsibility, as outlined in Table 1. These types span from low-level engagement, where businesses mainly provide financial support or goods, to higher levels of collaboration centred on specific activities, and ultimately to strategic alliances characterised by robust integration (Austin, 2001).

**Table 1: The collaboration continuum**

<b>Nature of the relationship</b>	<b>Stage 1 (philanthropic)</b>	<b>Stage 2 (transactional)</b>			<b>Stage 3 (integrative)</b>
Level of engagement	Low	→	→	→	High
Importance to the mission	Peripheral	→	→	→	Central
Magnitude of resources	Small	→	→	→	Big
Scope of activities	Narrow	→	→	→	Broad
Interaction level	Infrequent	→	→	→	Intensive
Managerial complexity	Simple	→	→	→	Complex
Strategic value	Minor	→	→	→	Major

*Source: adapted from Austin (2000a, p. 72).*

To establish effective partnerships, the following are imperative: communication, mission alignment, capacity building, and dedicating time to develop working relationships rooted in personal connections and trust (Triologue, 2025a, 2025b; Triologue Knowledge Hub, 2024b). Austin (2000a, 2000b) identified several key aspects, including commitment, employee participation at various levels of an organisation, articulating goals and expectations. Other important factors include information sharing (Stellenbosch Business School, 2019), good governance, and clear reporting mechanisms (Maboya and McKay, 2019).

The theoretical overview clearly illustrates that collaborations between businesses and NPOs are not just beneficial, they are essential. These partnerships empower NPOs to overcome challenges and enhance their sustainability, simultaneously offering businesses a powerful means to fulfil the increasing social expectations placed upon them. Together, they can significantly amplify their impact in tackling the socio-economic challenges faced by their beneficiaries.

### **The investigation**

This section reports on a quantitative study conducted by Henley Business School Africa and the CCCI, which investigated the economic contribution of NPOs in the Western Cape. It outlines the research methodology and sample profile, then discusses the survey results, with a particular focus on aspects relevant to collaborations between businesses and NPOs.

## ***Methodology***

### *The survey instrument*

The questionnaire, designed to be distributed among NPOs, included a combination of open- and closed-ended questions. Its content was informed by industry experience, government instruments for CSI, the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations South Africa, 2026), ESG standards, and prior studies, including the *Triologue business in society handbook* (Triologue, 2026).

The preamble introduced the research study and assured respondents of the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. The questionnaire gathered information about the specific organisation's operational locations, activities and services, number of beneficiaries, relevant strategic documents and governance features, human resources, income, and fundraising efforts.

### *Data collection*

Following approval of the research study by Henley Business School Africa's Ethics Committee, purposive sampling was used to recruit suitable respondents. The focus was on individuals who possessed in-depth knowledge of an NPO's operations and had the authority to share this critical information. The CCCI proactively reached out to NPOs situated in Cape Town, the Winelands, and Overstrand that were registered with the DSD and aligned with the CCCI's focus areas. To maximise data collection efforts, various NPO networks were instrumental in distributing the survey link and personally contacting eligible respondents to encourage their participation. Participants engaged with the online self-administered questionnaire from October 2024 to February 2025.

### *Data analysis*

During data cleaning, only the most recent survey response for each individual within the same NPO was retained. When multiple respondents from the same branch or department completed the survey, the response from the highest-ranking individual was kept. Anonymity was ensured by removing all identifiable information. In total, 361 responses were analysed, which accounted for cases from different geographic branches or departments within the same NPO. The results should be interpreted as indicative of this cohort, not as a provincially

representative survey. The data were analysed quantitatively by calculating frequencies and percentages to draw meaningful insights.

### ***Sample profile***

The respondents mainly occupied roles as executive directors and founders of NPOs, followed by board members, board chairs, and other senior staff. The organisations they represented had been in operation for six months to 157 years. Several of these non-profits operated not only in the Western Cape, but also in other provinces, while some had a national presence and a few extended their operations beyond South Africa.

### ***Results***

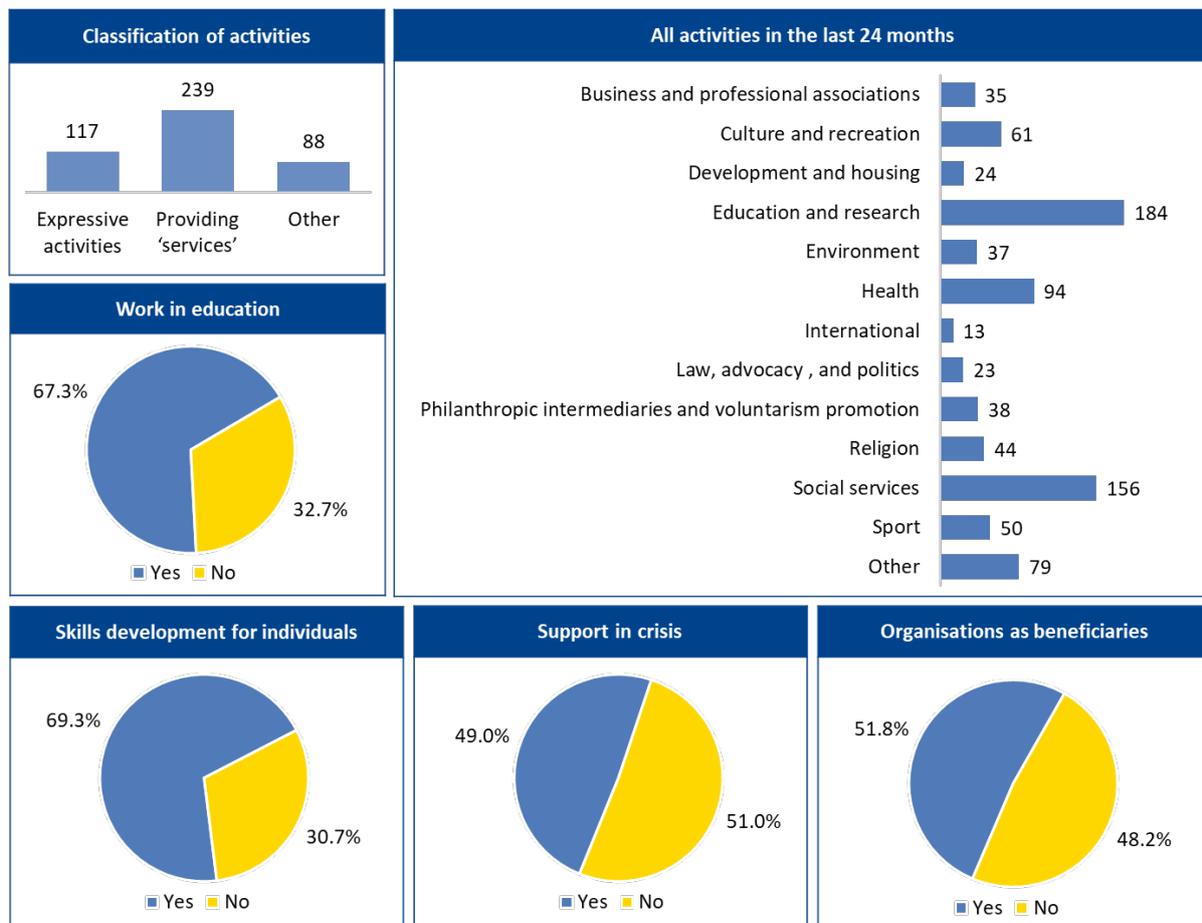
#### *Activities and services offered by the non-profit organisations*

Most organisations in the sample focused on providing services (239 mentions), followed by those offering expressive activities (117 mentions). Some NPOs provided both services and activities, often comprising multiple types of each. Over the two years preceding the survey, the most frequently mentioned services and activities were education and research (184 mentions), social services (156 mentions), and health-related services (94 mentions).

Approximately two thirds (67.3%) of the organisations were involved in education, including early childhood development, after-school clubs, and school nutrition programmes. Additionally, 69.3% of the NPOs provided skills development for individuals, covering areas like entrepreneurship, business skills, life skills, vocational craft skills and trades, leadership, work readiness, computer literacy, and information technology. Around half of the NPOs (51.8%) assisted other organisations with leadership and strategy development, project planning, fundraising, and related activities. Furthermore, 49% offered support during crises, such as fires and floods, providing essentials like food, clothing, personal items, and psychological and emotional care.

Figure 1 highlights the essential initiatives provided by the participating NPOs. This wide array of interventions allows businesses to engage with NPOs that resonate with their focus areas, align with their desired impact, and address the specific needs of the communities where they operate.

**Figure 1: Activities and services offered**



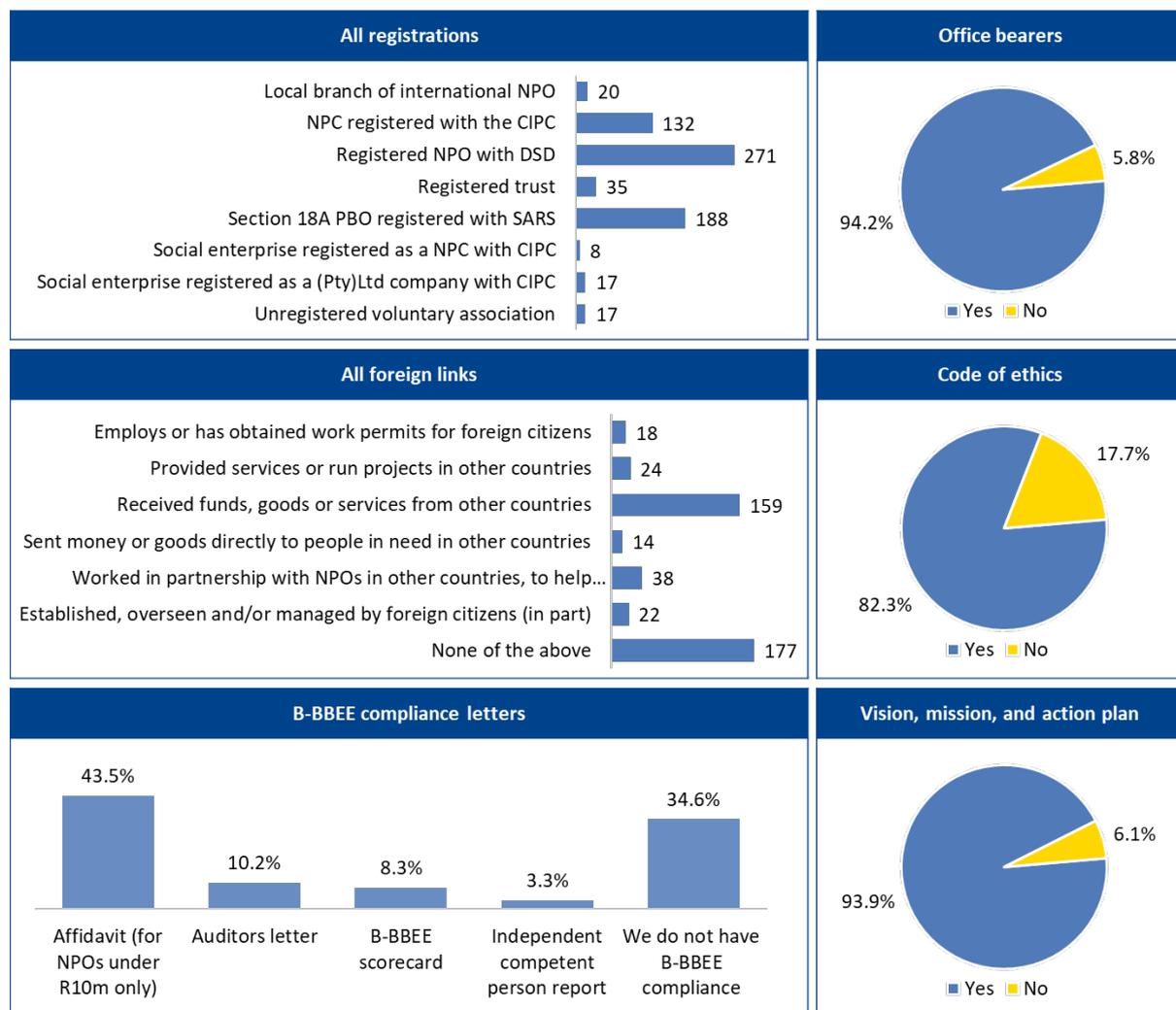
Source: author's own.

### Strategic documents and governance features

Well-defined governance frameworks are crucial for successful partnerships (Triologue Knowledge Hub, 2024b). Most of the study's organisations were registered NPOs with the DSD (271 mentions), Section 18A public benefit organisations registered with the South African Revenue Service (SARS) (188 mentions), and non-profit companies registered with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC) (132 mentions).

Public benefit organisations can issue tax-deductible receipts for donations received (Nedbank, 2024), thereby encouraging donations and collaboration. Many respondents indicated that their organisations had no foreign links (177 mentions), while 159 reported receiving funds, goods, or services from other countries. Figure 2 provides a more detailed breakdown of the governance characteristics.

**Figure 2: Governance characteristics**



Source: author’s own.

Furthermore, 43.5% of the organisations had an affidavit demonstrating their compliance with the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) requirements, as their annual turnover was less than R10 million (B-BBEE Commission, 2024). However, 34.6% of organisations had no B-BBEE compliance documentation. Collaborative interventions with B-BBEE-compliant NPOs can improve a business’s B-BBEE rating, especially in the socio-economic development aspect of the scorecard (Triologue Knowledge Hub, 2023b).

Majority of NPOs (82.3%) had formal documents outlining their code of ethics, and 93.9% had a clear vision, mission, and action plan to achieve these goals. Strategic planning of this nature, along with a framework to monitor progress, is imperative for NPOs to achieve their objectives (Atmore, 2024). Most organisations (94.2%) had office bearers, such as board

members, directors, and trustees. Business leaders often serve on NPO boards (Silverman and Taliento, 2006), contributing their skills and experience to these organisations.

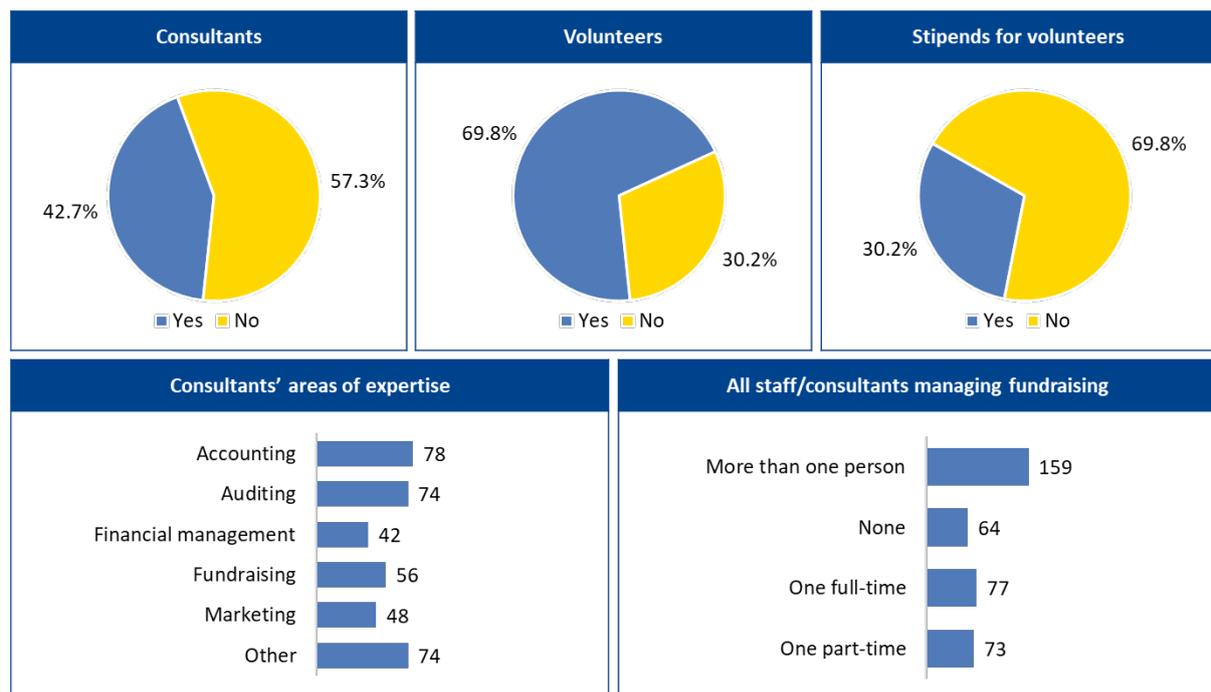
### *Staffing and external support*

Nearly 70% of organisations surveyed harnessed the power of volunteers, with a notable 30.2% providing stipends to these dedicated individuals. Volunteerism operates within a well-structured framework, allowing volunteers to gain valuable experience and develop their skills (Inyathelo, 2025), while making a significant positive impact on the community. Additionally, volunteering serves as an excellent platform for individuals to share their expertise. Businesses increasingly leverage employee volunteering to achieve their social objectives (FoodForward SA, 2025), demonstrating a commitment to community engagement. These NPOs also employ varying numbers of full-time and part-time salaried staff, indicating their multifaceted approach to addressing social issues.

In addition, 42.7% of organisations used consultants, primarily to assist with accounting, auditing, and fundraising. Other areas of expertise mentioned included legal and compliance, human resources, strategic planning, and leadership development. Most organisations (159 mentions) had more than one staff member or consultant responsible for managing their fundraising efforts, while 64 respondents noted that no one was managing their organisations' fundraising.

Figure 3 outlines the characteristics of organisations' human resources. It is essential to assess the resources and capabilities accessible to both partners, along with how these can be integrated (Austin, 2000b), to effectively implement and report on joint initiatives. Supporting NPOs in enhancing their skills and capabilities (Dialogue, 2025a) can be a crucial aspect of the collaboration between businesses and NPOs.

**Figure 3: Human resources overview**



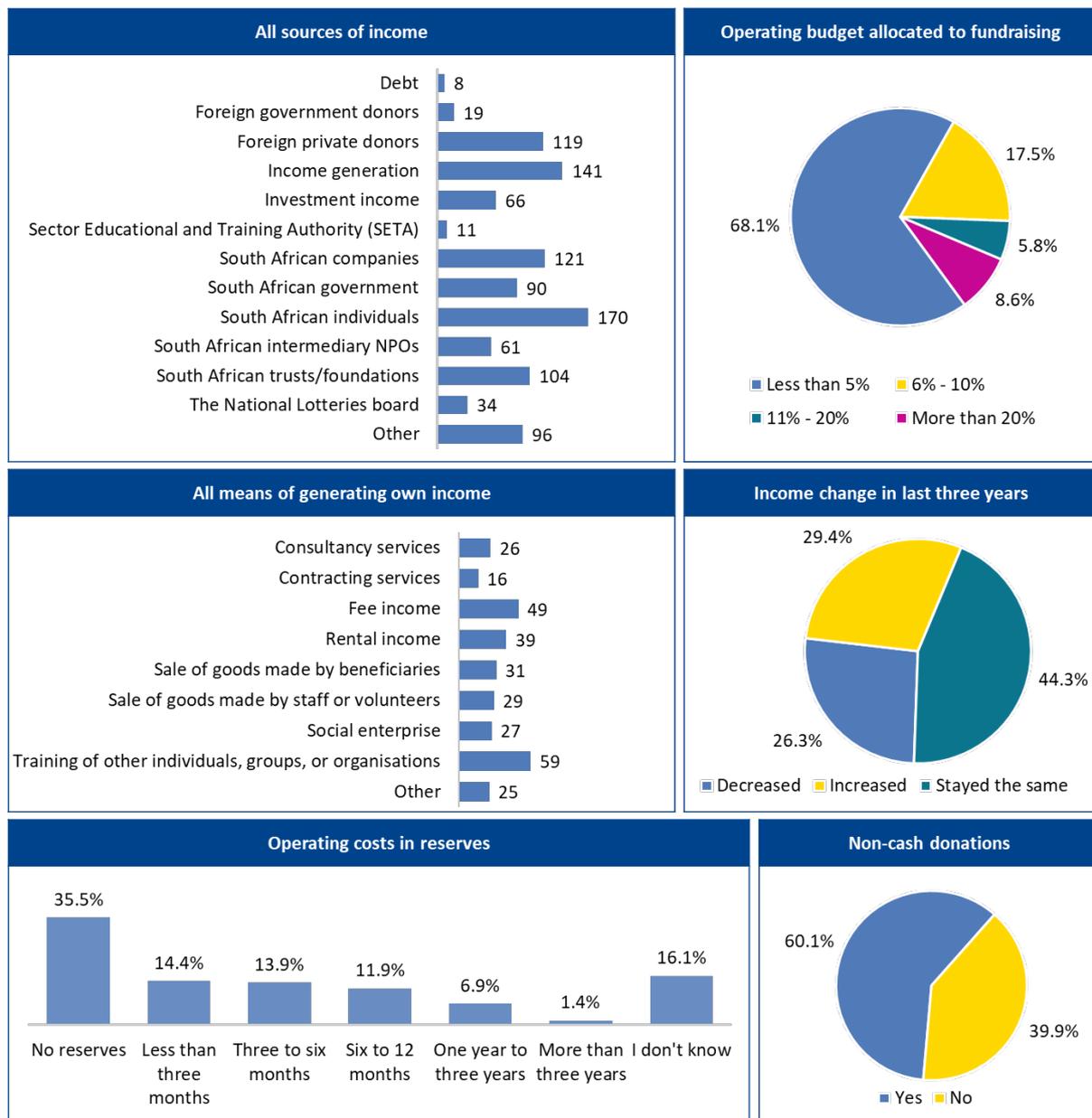
Source: author's own.

### Financial overview

Figure 4 summarises the key financial features of organisations. The main sources of income included contributions from South African individuals (170 mentions), income-generating efforts (141 mentions), South African companies (121 mentions), and foreign private donors (119 mentions). Of the organisations that generated their own income, this was typically achieved through methods like providing training (59 mentions), earning fee income (49 mentions), rental income (39 mentions), and selling goods produced by beneficiaries, staff, or volunteers.

NPOs can achieve greater financial sustainability by augmenting donor contributions with self-generated income (Maboya and McKay, 2019), diversifying revenue sources, and forming partnerships (Domingo, 2025). Furthermore, 60.1% of organisations received non-cash donations, including food, clothing, furniture, homeware, stationery, and equipment. This finding supports the recommendation that NPOs should consider alternatives to cash contributions (Dialogue, 2025a).

**Figure 4: Key financial features**



*Source: author's own.*

Concerning the past three financial years, 44.3% of respondents reported that their organisation's income remained steady, 29.4% reported an increase, and 26.3% reported a decline. When examining the operating budget, 68.1% of organisations allocated less than 5% to fundraising, and 35.5% did not maintain any operating costs in reserves. Maintaining reserves is crucial for fostering sustainability, boosting confidence among funders, and establishing a safety net, particularly in today's unpredictable financial landscape (Joonas, 2024).

### **Reflecting on potential collaboration opportunities**

There are viable opportunities for one-off, recurring, and long-term collaboration between businesses and NPOs. These mutually beneficial avenues encompass philanthropic donations, resource sharing, and integrated partnerships that involve joint design and implementation. This section presents a robust overview of collaboration opportunities based on key survey results, admitting that many more exist. Ongoing discussions between businesses and NPOs is encouraged to delve deeper into these promising topics.

Based on the operational areas identified in the survey, key themes for collaboration include providing support during crises and ongoing interventions in areas like education, social services, and healthcare. Three main overarching themes that emerge from these focus areas are skills development, youth empowerment, and nutrition security. Investing in children and youth, particularly in their education, is a valuable endeavour, as they are the consumers, employees, and leaders of the future (De Villiers, Van der Colff and Pillay, 2025). Businesses cannot afford to overlook food and nutrition security, an urgent issue that often necessitates collaboration across different sectors (Erasmus and De Villiers, 2023).

Mutual training initiatives between businesses and NPOs, as well as joint training programmes, present significant opportunities. Businesses can assist NPOs in strengthening their internal capacity and capabilities, or offer professional services they may lack in-house. This support can involve serving on NPO boards or implementing skills-based employee volunteer programmes, with a focus on areas like compliance, governance, and financial services.

In turn, NPOs can tailor their training courses or develop new ones specifically for employees of participating businesses. Furthermore, businesses and NPOs can forge powerful collaborations to design content and implement training programmes for community members, focusing on work readiness and vocational skills. These programmes must align effectively with the community's education and training needs, the NPO's specific focus areas, and the business or industry's skill requirements. This approach will build and sustain robust local talent pipelines.

As more NPOs embrace a social enterprise model to generate income and enhance their sustainability, a wealth of procurement opportunities emerges. Businesses have a unique chance to integrate NPOs into their supply chains by sourcing goods and services provided by these organisations and their beneficiaries, including the aforementioned training programmes. Additionally, companies can establish partnerships in which NPOs serve as stockists of their products or collaborate on co-branded items and services. This strategic alignment not only promotes social good, but also strengthens business operations and community ties.

### **Recommendations**

Successful collaborations between businesses and NPOs hinge on recognising NPOs as equally important and strategic partners, rather than mere adjuncts. To drive impactful internal planning and meaningful discussions about potential collaborations with NPOs, businesses must engage with the following essential guiding questions:

- What socio-economic or environmental objectives or challenges does the business wish to address?
- To what extent does the business want to collaborate and integrate with NPOs?
- How will the collaboration and its associated initiatives be measured?
- What financial, human, or physical resources can the business contribute to the collaboration?
- How can employees at various levels within the business be involved in this collaboration?

Once these questions have been addressed, it is crucial to actively engage with potential partners to identify areas of alignment. For instance, both parties must share overlapping social or environmental focus areas. The support a business is prepared to offer should be directly aligned with an NPO's needs. Furthermore, the evaluation or reporting framework required by a business must consider an NPO's capacity. Ongoing discussions about expectations, capabilities, and challenges are essential to fostering a successful, lasting partnership.

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