



YOUTH PARTICIPATORY GRANT-MAKING IN SIERRA LEONE

**LESSONS FROM THE
TAR KURA INITIATIVE**

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ABOUT THE FUND FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS

The Fund for Global Human Rights equips grassroots activists across the globe with the financial and strategic support they need to improve lives, mobilize movements, and build a better future for their communities. Since 2002, the Fund has raised and invested over \$100 million into the work of community activists in more than 25 countries, providing these bold local leaders with the funding, tools, and contacts they need to tackle some of the world's greatest challenges. As a result, millions of people worldwide now have access to basic resources and opportunities to participate fully and equally in society.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Indhira Prego Raveneau is the Fund's learning and assessment manager. She works to document, gather, and analyze evidence of change, as well as to promote learning and facilitate lesson-sharing within the Fund and with external audiences.

ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH RIGHTS PROGRAM

The Fund's Children's and Youth Rights Program partners with child- and youth-led community-based organizations to protect children and young people from violence, promote their participation and agency, and improve their access to quality social services including healthcare, justice, and education. Through this program, the Fund aims to foster new alliances, increase investment in child and youth-led organizations, and seed and scale up new ideas and innovation.

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PHOTO CREDITS:

- * **Cover:** Panelists engaged in group activity, Freetown (Nyangah Rogers-Wright, 2019)
- * **Above:** Grantees and panelists with staff from Purposeful and the Fund at opening day of the grant kick-off workshop, Freetown (Nyangah Rogers-Wright, 2019)
- * **Page 4:** Panelists during field visits to grantee finalists, Kono District (Nyangah Rogers-Wright, 2019)
- * **Back cover:** Young panelist during orientation and training session, Freetown (Nyangah Rogers-Wright, 2019)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For nearly twenty years, the Fund for Global Human Rights has been a vocal champion of participatory philanthropy. We provide flexible general support that allows local groups to define and lead their own agendas. Fund grantees identify their priorities and approach, and collaborate with program staff on defining measures of progress toward their intended outcomes.

To us, participatory grant-making—which empowers affected communities to decide what and who to fund—is a further step in shifting power to grantees and movements.

In 2019, the Fund partnered with **Purposeful**, a feminist movement-building hub for adolescent girls, to pilot a participatory grant-making initiative in Sierra Leone aimed at promoting youth leadership and amplifying the voices of young people.

As our first foray into realizing the potential of participatory grant-making, this experience taught us many valuable lessons about how to foster genuine participation of children and young people.

- **A targeted and intentional approach** to reach a diverse group of children and youth is essential. This helps prevent a participatory process that only benefits young people in urban areas and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds.
- We also learned that **true participation requires letting go of power** while ensuring that young people have what they need to make meaningful and informed decisions. Support to child and youth-led groups should **go beyond grant money** to include a comprehensive package of grantee-led learning and accompaniment.
- The biggest lesson is about the need to **be open and flexible** throughout the process. Being willing to adapt as we went along allowed us to respond and make changes (almost) in real time. It also allowed us to learn from the young people about what it means to use your voice and make yourself heard in ways far beyond what we could have anticipated.



INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPATORY GRANT-MAKING

Participatory grant-making is the practice of ceding grant-making power to affected community members and constituencies. It requires both a recognition of the unequal power relationships inherent in philanthropy as well as a conscious effort to rebalance that power.

At the heart of participatory grant-making are three principles: **transparency, trust, and ceding power**. These principles have long informed the broader concept of participatory philanthropy, which seeks to involve communities in the sector's decision-making through approaches ranging from strategy-setting to sitting on boards. A number of foundations—including the **Disability Rights Fund**, **With and For Girls**, **FRIDA**, and **Global Greengrants**—have adopted different models of participatory grant-making that seek to cede power to the communities they serve.

Participatory grant-making is particularly relevant to children's and youth rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for the active and meaningful participation of children and young people in all matters concerning them and their communities. In practice, however, young people have often been excluded from decision-making or, where they have been involved, such participation has been tokenistic and superficial.

The Fund seeks to make a contribution in addressing this gap in the movement by adopting a participatory grant-making model that involves children and young people in making key decisions about the issues and interventions that affect their lives.

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Fund and Purposeful, a feminist movement-building hub for adolescent girls, partnered to co-design and pilot a participatory grant-making initiative in Sierra Leone. We called it **Tar Kura**, which means “new fire” in Koranko, Kono, and Madingo—three of the local languages. Together, we spent over a year exploring how to meaningfully include girls, boys, and youth, while also deepening our understanding of the needs, realities, and challenges of youth-led activism in Sierra Leone.

In addition to making grant decisions more responsive to the needs of children and young people, we designed this initiative to contribute to changing young people’s sense of power and agency over their own lives. We hope to help build a cadre of youth and children’s rights leaders who will reinvigorate the field and become powerful advocates for change.

For us, the real value of this initiative lies in the process itself and its potential for building the voices and agency of children and young people. We seek to not only transform how we identify and resource groups, but also how these groups and young people engage with their communities. To that end, we enlisted **IWORDS Global**, a multidisciplinary team of social entrepreneurship professionals, to carry out an external evaluation of the initiative, so that we can share our learning with young people, peers, and other actors in the children and youth rights communities.

PROCESS

In September 2019, Purposeful launched a nationwide call for applications to join a panel of youth who would decide what issues and which youth-led organizations were awarded grants from the Fund. Based on criteria agreed upon by the panel, Purposeful then put out a call for grantee applications.

Young people told us they face many barriers in applying for, receiving, and managing grants from traditional grant-makers who often tend to impose adult-centric requirements and processes. We therefore made conscious efforts to ensure the process is responsive to and determined by the needs and realities of young people.

For example, there were no requirements for groups to be registered or have prior experience in managing grants, activities and timelines were organized around school calendars, applications to be panelists and to receive grants were made simple and accessible, and reporting formats were developed by the young people themselves. Purposeful employed a variety of media, including radio spots and jingles, posters, and social media posts (in Krio—the local lingua franca—and in English). Young people were encouraged to submit their applications using accessible means like WhatsApp video and voice recordings, as well as handwritten applications. In some locations, Purposeful’s partner organizations provided support.

The ease of access led to high turnout for both panel membership and grant applications. Following three days of interviews with those shortlisted from a pool of over 600 applicants, ten young people (ages 17-19), including seven young women, were selected for the panel.

Next, the panelists were brought together for an orientation and training session that addressed topics such as leadership, resolving conflicts, and inclusion, among others.

The young people participated at key stages of the process from the start, including defining the funding criteria. From a longlist assembled by Purposeful, the panel reviewed proposals submitted by 45 youth-led organizations from across the country, visited the 25 finalist organizations, and ultimately selected 10 grantees and the grant amounts they were awarded.

OUTCOMES

Through this initiative, we reached groups that were off the radar of traditional grant-makers. For most, it was the first time they'd had access to institutional funding. The grantees selected by the panelists reflected the issues young people consider most pressing—economic empowerment, fighting violence and discrimination against girls, enhancing their participation in public life by building their skills, and promoting the livelihoods of young people.

Ensuring an accessible and responsive application process meant that those who participated came from a broad range of backgrounds—access was not limited to young people from large cities with internet access. The diversity of our panel resulted in a more diverse and inclusive set of actors receiving access to funding. By bringing together young activists from across the country, the initiative helped create new connections and relationships. These connections are key to building networks of support for youth-driven activism.

Being a part of this initiative in itself generated a sense of agency and confidence among the young people who participated. As noted in the [external evaluation](#) report by IWORDS Global, “For the panelists it was an empowering experience to be selected by Purposeful and The Fund and trusted to make decisions on who would receive support. For grantee partners, being chosen by their peers gave validation and recognition to themselves and their work.”

Together with the training and accompaniment provided by Purposeful, this resulted in young people feeling both trusted and capable of making these important decisions.

Moreover, seeing this level of trust extended to young people created a ripple effect. According to panelists and grantees, community members' perceptions shifted, making them more willing to support the young activists' work and recognize their capacities and potential.

Already, we see evidence of their [emerging leadership and activism](#). The COVID-19 crisis has been an opportunity for young people to take the initiative and drive the response within their communities. As a young member of Alliance of Concern Sierra Leoneans, one of the grantee organizations, noted:

“At the start we thought it was never possible to adapt to some of the measures set by the government, that we were never going to be comfortable with COVID-19 in our midst.... Sure, we are not 100 percent comfortable, but we have learnt adaptation mainly and the skill to respond in time when things go wrong, we also learnt the act of working under pressure.”

Another grantee, from CraftyBee Fashion World, described how they helped empower their peers during the crisis:

“My project played a meaningful role in helping out with COVID-19. The students were engaged in the making of facemasks for their personal use and for members of their household and they also were able to do business so that they can provide for themselves and their household, I had a session with them on safety measures. They engaged the community with this information and all their activities went well.”

Clearly, this approach to grant-making fostered connections that can strengthen the children and youth rights movement by increasing the potential for more innovative and collaborative ideas as well as more accountable, youth- and community-driven efforts.

The external evaluators sum it up: “The Tar Kura Initiative is a true exercise in power sharing at all levels, and its reported impact is clear at the individual, collective, and community levels.”

CHALLENGES

Despite the initiative's success, challenges remained—chief among them **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**. Inevitably, we had to postpone planned field visits and workshops. The Purposeful team was instrumental in finding alternative ways to continue providing mentorship and guidance to the panelists and grantees.

Another challenge inherent to this type of grant-making is the necessary time spent **co-creating and seeking collective input** from participants. This group had little or no experience in grant-making, making this process critical but even more time consuming.

Working with young people also meant that we had to **accommodate their schooling** and other activities, as well as take **additional safeguarding precautions** such as assigning chaperones. Having a local partner with a solid track record of working with young people helped us navigate these issues.

The **mismatch between the level of interest and the available resources** also posed a challenge—about 130 groups applied for only 10 grants. Many of the unsuccessful applicants presented strong proposals. This tension has led us to explore other ways to support these groups beyond providing funding. Going forward, we will help connect them with their peers, introduce them to other funders, and invite them to engage in exchanges.

A few groups were not formally registered, which meant we had to **rely on fiscal sponsors** to manage the disbursement of grant funds. Although we do not require groups to be registered to receive funding and have previously engaged fiscal sponsors for this purpose, we observed complicated power dynamics between some grantees and their fiscal sponsors. At least one fiscal sponsor, misunderstanding their role and the initiative's guiding principle of empowering youth, tried to dictate how the youth-led organization should use its grant. We have revisited our approach to selecting and working with the fiscal sponsors to ensure they are better aligned with the objectives of the initiative.

“Tar Kura was a fully responsive and adaptive initiative that aimed to reach, engage and support young people on their own terms. From beginning to end, efforts were made to create an initiative that is adapted and responds to the realities of young people in Sierra Leone instead of expecting young people to adapt to it.”

– IWORDS Global

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the beginning, one of our key goals was to learn from this experience. We achieved this by undertaking both an ongoing internal learning and documentation process and by commissioning an external evaluator to conduct an independent assessment.

Here are our top five takeaways coming out of these efforts.

- 1) While the opportunity to have real decision-making power and responsibility can be very appealing to young people, it is most—or only—valuable when accompanied by **meaningful support and mentorship**. It is important to ensure that participants have access to the tools and information needed to fully participate. The initial orientation and training workshop followed by virtual learning sessions and one-to-one calls organized by Purposeful gave panelists an understanding of grantmaking, and included topics such as how to resolve conflicts, reach consensus, and develop leadership skills.
- 2) **Ensure the process is responsive to and determined by the needs and realities of young people**. Young people often face barriers in applying for and managing grants due to adult-centric requirements and processes. In Tar Kura, we made conscious efforts to be responsive. For example, there were no requirements for groups to be registered or have prior experience in managing grants, activities and timelines were organized around school calendars, applications to be panelists and to receive grants were made simple and accessible, and reporting formats were developed by the young people themselves.
- 3) When it comes to selecting and working with a local partner, **open communication and trust is key**. From the start, a working group with staff from both Purposeful and the Fund held regular meetings, as well as maintained a shared digital drive for collaborative materials. **This ensured we could document key activities and exchange materials and feedback throughout the process.**
- 4) Creating spaces for ongoing **learning and engagement** throughout the grant-making process and beyond is critical—participation does not begin or end once a grant is awarded. When **young people play more of a role in defining what success looks like** for this work, it enriches the documented outcomes or impact. While young people were involved at all stages of the grant-making process, more work could have been done to engage them in defining how to measure the success of this initiative.
- 5) Being **flexible as a funder** proved more critical than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled us to adapt and adjust quickly—not just initially, but throughout the entire process. We needed not only to be flexible but stay flexible as we faced changing circumstances. This allowed us to quickly shift to address immediate or urgent needs. In response to the pandemic and its impact, we provided supplementary grants to allow groups to respond to the challenges of COVID-19, extended the grant period, pushed back reporting deadlines, and streamlined reporting by collecting responses via WhatsApp voice recordings.

NEXT STEPS

As captured in the external evaluation report, this process has been a rich experience for all actors involved, including the young people and their communities, the Fund, and Purposeful. As we look to replicate and scale up this model of participatory grant-making, critical lessons from this pilot will inform our plans.

As a first step, we are going to **provide follow-up grants** to the current cohort of youth grantees while taking on new ones. We also plan to invite the current set of panelists to continue in their roles, except for the few who are now over the age threshold. Working with Purposeful and the panelists, we intend to explore ways of engaging young people who are not successful in the application process, including providing opportunities for learning and networking.

In the next iteration of this initiative, we plan to boost our efforts to **build relationships and promote peer learning** amongst the young participants. We also plan to engage panelists at an earlier stage, inviting them to co-create a framework to evaluate the success of the process and grants awarded.

The **issue of sustainability**—i.e., how to go beyond one-off grants for young people and build an ecosystem of grant-makers willing to provide flexible support to youth and child-led groups—is a larger question and one that we will be engaging with and learning from peer funders and children and youth groups.

Moving forward, we hope to **replicate this work in other countries and scale it up** by extending the grant period, expanding the number of grantees, and increasing the amount of the funding awarded.

We've been excited to see that learning from this pilot has already inspired others, such as the **Global Resilience Fund**— notably, one of the participants from this initiative now sits on that panel. We hope that more members of the philanthropic community, who might be considering engaging in participatory grant-making, will be as galvanized by the young people who participated in this initiative as we were.



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