



ADVANCING CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH RIGHTS

**LEARNING AND
FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

NOVEMBER 2022

THE FUND FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS: CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH RIGHTS PROGRAM

Around the world, children and young people, especially from marginalized or minority groups, are subjected to violence, conscripted as soldiers, and forced into work or marriage. When their human rights are violated, children have little access to justice. The Fund offers community-based and youth-led groups the support they need to build their power and change the world.

THE FUND HAS BEEN SUPPORTING FRONTLINE CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH RIGHTS GROUPS SINCE 2006.

The work initially focused on organizations tackling children's rights abuses occurring in conflict settings. This expanded in 2018, as the program evolved to address both children's and youth rights in conflict and non-conflict contexts. Today, the Fund supports more than 40 children's and youth rights groups, with over \$575,000 in grants and technical assistance each year. More than half of these grants go to groups led by children or youth. By providing renewable general support grants over the long term, we enable children's and youth rights groups to resource their own visions for achieving equality and justice.

OUR STRATEGY FOR 2022-2027

In 2021, the Fund embarked on a strategic review of its Children's and Youth Rights Program (CYP). We commissioned WORDS Global to hold consultations with children and young people around the world to hear their views on the state of children's and youth rights and youth organizing. The consultations involved multiple methodologies—including **online surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions**—with activists, young leaders, and young people in the Fund's five focus regions: Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Alongside this, the Fund **surveyed funders, peers, and international NGOs** working with children and young people, as well as drawing on the findings from [two surveys](#) our Learning and Assessment team conducted in 2020 with Fund grantees across all regional and thematic programs. This was a moment for us to reflect on the progress and learning from the last three years, to listen to the voices and aspirations of children and young people, to learn from our peers, and to ensure our strategy is grounded in and responsive to the needs of children and young people.

Together, these considerations have informed our ambitions for an exciting new five-year strategy. Over 2022–2027, the Fund's Children's and Youth Rights Program will **resource and connect** community-based organizations and children and youth-led groups to **build power and agency**, to **tackle violence and discrimination**, and to **influence and change the world around them**. These are reflected in the following three key themes:

- **Building power:** We resource work that aims to build the power and agency of children, young people, and their movements, including supporting participatory grantmaking processes that put children and young people at the center of decision-making. The Fund will pay specific attention to building the power and agency of groups that are often marginalized or discriminated against, including children and young people with disabilities, LGBTQ children and young people, Indigenous children and young people, and children and young people from marginalized ethnic or racial backgrounds.

- **Addressing violence with an intersectional lens:** We will retain our focus on girl-led initiatives, with increased efforts to fund intersectional work that tackles the root causes of violence against and discrimination toward children, especially girls and young women. This will include resourcing initiatives to challenge the negative social and gender norms that contribute to violence and discrimination.
- **Accessing services and economic empowerment opportunities:** We will continue promoting access to quality social services for children and young people, including education, health, and justice. A new focus area will be addressing economic empowerment by enhancing livelihoods and entrepreneurial skills opportunities. This will include seeding experimental grants to resource economic empowerment and livelihoods programs and to support young people's advocacy campaigns on relevant topics, such as youth-friendly business and employment schemes.

To achieve the ambitions of the program, we will advance **four approaches:**

Approach 1: Provide general support and project grants that allow youth-led and community-based groups to lead their own agendas, and advance participatory grantmaking to promote child and youth leadership and innovation.

The Fund will continue to support community-based organizations, child- and youth-led groups, and coalitions with a combination of general support and project grants, alongside continued efforts to explore and expand participatory grantmaking.

Over 2022–2027, the program will expand into new geographies, including **India, Mexico, and the Philippines**. This gradual expansion will leverage the Fund's [existing programs](#) in Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and will advance the goals and priorities of these regional programs as well as the Children's and Youth Rights Program. This will enable the Fund to enhance support to groups working on intersectional issues affecting children and young people. In addition to these focus geographies, the program will direct specific

effort to support the building of **transnational children and youth movements**.

Approach 2: Foster movement building for children and young people through support to safe spaces for networking and learning, resourcing emerging youth movements, and connecting activists within and beyond the children and youth rights sector to form stronger movements.

The Fund will continue to build new alliances within and beyond the children's and youth rights sector with a stronger focus on movement building from 2022 to 2027.

Alongside our grantees, we will organize **national, regional, cross-regional and/or thematic convenings** to create safe spaces for activists to network with and learn from each other. These convenings—both in-person and virtual—may also provide opportunities for exploring joint action and organizing that can build and strengthen the children's and youth rights movement.

We will also **support and connect campaigns** within and beyond the children's and youth movement to sustain momentum and serve as catalyst for wider movement-building efforts. This could include connecting and supporting children and youth movements to other movements working to disrupt the drivers of closing civic space, as well as building closer ties with the migrants' rights movement. We will also make specific efforts to **find and resource emerging, spontaneous youth movement structures and movement-building opportunities**.

Approach 3: Strengthen the capacity and sustainability of children's and youth rights groups and activists by providing technical assistance and accompaniment and promoting opportunities for mentoring and learning.

The Fund will provide a wide array of **technical assistance** to community-based and youth-led groups in response to priority capacity building needs that these groups identify. We may provide this through a mixture of targeted support to individual organizations, as well as joint training and follow-up support. Recently, we have seen the emergence of **peer learning** between youth-led groups. We will actively encourage this form of mentoring and learning, which can also serve to bolster the agency of these groups.

The Fund will continue to offer **ongoing accompaniment** to grantees in a way that offers solidarity and support while respecting the autonomy and agency of each of these groups. We will also identify opportunities for mentoring and learning, and support and encourage children and youth rights activists to take advantage of these. This includes organizing and promoting participation in convenings and other connecting events, as well as resourcing specific efforts to provide mentoring and learning opportunities to children's and youth rights activists.

Approach 4: Promote learning and influencing by defining and pursuing a children and youth-centric learning agenda and supporting greater visibility of groups and their efforts to achieve systemic change.

The Children's and Youth Rights Program team will work closely with the Fund's Learning and Assessment team to define a **learning agenda** that we will pursue over the course of the new five-year strategy. In defining this learning agenda, the Fund will engage grantees and partners to inform and pursue questions relevant to their efforts to advance children and youth rights. Related learning activities may include grantee-driven action research, peer reflection sessions, co-authoring articles with grantees, or supporting grantee engagement in relevant conferences. Alongside this learning agenda, the Fund is developing a **learning and assessment framework** to evaluate our progress against the goals that underpin our ambitions for 2022–2027. This framework will explore our impact in the following five areas:

- 1. Power building:** agency and participation of children and youth
- 2. Movement building:** new groups and connections, disruptions to the status quo, emergent opportunities
- 3. Protection from violence:** changes in norms, behaviors, and practices at the root of violence affecting children, particularly girls
- 4. Access and inclusion:** social services for children, particularly those discriminated against or historically marginalized
- 5. Economic empowerment:** advancing youth livelihoods and entrepreneurial skills opportunities

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

The findings from our 2021 program review have directly informed our 2022–2027 strategy. Below, we highlight some key insights from different audiences:

Learning from within the program

A pillar of the Fund's approach is to identify activists with a clear vision of change for their communities. By asking communities affected by inequality or injustice to decide what and whom to fund—a tenet of participatory grantmaking—we can help shift power to the people we serve. Our **experiment with participatory grantmaking taught us many lessons about how to share power with young people** and how philanthropy can be responsive to their needs and lived realities. The Fund worked in partnership with Purposeful to establish the Tar Kura initiative to promote youth leadership and amplify the voices of young people in Sierra Leone. Lessons from this initiative were articulated in a [learning paper](#). Program Director John Kabia and Purposeful's co-CEO Chernor Bah reflected externally on their learning [in an article for Inside Philanthropy](#). The Fund also published [an introductory explainer to participatory grantmaking](#).





Over the past three years, our grantmaking **has reaffirmed our belief in the need to focus on advancing the rights of girls and young women and to invest in child- and youth-led organizations**. Since 2017–2018, the Fund’s grantmaking to child- and youth-led groups increased from **14 percent to 53 percent**. Our work to address the unique and intersectional needs of girls and young women makes up more than half of our program.

Our experience as a funder and ally to human rights groups during the pandemic has reaffirmed our belief that **general and flexible support** is critical to building strong and resilient organizations, particularly in times of emergency. It also cemented our belief that the communities where children live and grow up are best positioned to protect their human rights, with many community-led and locally rooted organizations able to respond to their community needs during the pandemic in a way that outside organizations were unable to.

Lastly, we learned that **technical assistance for second-line leadership and transition planning is essential** to ensuring the sustainability, resilience, and growth of human rights groups. We saw this in 2021 when three organizations—two in Guinea and one in Sierra Leone—that had received second-line leadership development trained from the West Africa Civil Society Institute had to act on their transition plans following the untimely death of their leaders.

Learning from children and young people

Our consultations with children and young people explored perspectives on how the current context was impacting their rights.

With the consultations taking place in 2021, respondents reflected on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has **amplified inequality, social exclusion, sexual abuse and exploitation, and exposed racial injustice**. Many noted that **child poverty was worsening**, with the pandemic hindering children’s access to basic social services including health and education. Others cited the lack of access to **skills training, livelihoods, and employment opportunities** for young people. The consultations surfaced concerns about the potential generations-long harms to children caused by the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and the concurrent failure of governments and other actors, including funders, to include a child-specific lens in their COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

The children and young people that were consulted also observed **growing gender inequality**, with indications that domestic violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation had increased during the pandemic, with the rights of adolescent girls being acutely threatened and overlooked. They identified ongoing **“adulthood” and the lack of meaningful participation of children and youth in decision-making spaces** as a predominant challenge in their contexts. Many also cited their concerns about **climate justice and environmental collapse** as a major challenge that will affect them acutely.

The consultations also explored what was needed for youth-led civil society to flourish and to strengthen the movement for the rights of children and young people. Suggestions included:

- **facilitating networking and collaboration** between organizations addressing children’s and youth rights—including governmental institutions, the private sector, and organizations working in other countries and contexts—in spaces where they feel safe to network, explore, and learn;
- **fostering intergenerational collaboration** between youth-led organizations and adult-led organizations;
- **supporting and connecting campaigns** within the children and youth movements and with other rights-based movements;
- **providing support that fosters collective action and advocacy** as a means toward systemic change, such as by seeding and encouraging efforts led by children and young people to organize and take actions that could evolve toward movement building; and
- **finding and funding emerging youth movements** or spontaneous youth-led structures that are created in response to new opportunities.

Learning from funders and peers

Our consultations with funders and peers seeking to advance children’s and youth rights surfaced important issues about children’s and youth rights activism and the ecosystem that resources it.

Several factors that are putting youth-led organizations at risk are the lack of financial sustainability, the related dependence on volunteer work, and the closing of civic space. The latter, which is a risk facing many rights-based actors, includes the establishment of restrictive laws that seek to hinder the operation of civil society organizations, the legal prosecution of human rights defenders, and the use of narratives and messaging to undermine activists.

One peer characterised the children’s and youth rights sector as patriarchal, post-colonial, Global North–dominant, and white. Another peer questioned if there is indeed a children’s and youth rights “field,” with this work remaining a niche area within key international institutions, such as the United Nations, or addressed through a narrow lens, such as a sole focus on child protection. These observations are reflected in the gaps within the ecosystem that supports and resources children and youth-rights activism. This includes, for example, a lack of focus on children and young peoples’ agency and power; insufficient inclusion of children from marginalized and discriminated backgrounds, including children with disabilities; and a lack of access to quality social services and economic opportunities.

LEARN MORE

If you are interested in finding out more about our learning and experience, please contact John Kabia, director of the Children’s and Youth Rights Program, at: jkabia@globalhumanrights.org.

We always welcome the opportunity to be in dialogue with peers and partners interested in advancing children’s and youth rights. The Fund is a proud and active member of the [Elevate Children Funder’s Group](#), a global network of funders focused on the wellbeing and rights of children and young people.

For more information about our Children’s and Youth Rights Program, please visit: <https://globalhumanrights.org/childrens-and-youth-rights/>

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PHOTO CREDITS:

Cover: A boy in class at the BVES center in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Pacom Bagula/Majority World.

Page 4: Photo taken at a convening of children's and youth rights activists in Bo, Sierra Leone.

Page 5: Defence for Children International - Sierra Leone educates youth about their rights.

Back cover: CYP convening in Bo, Sierra Leone.