



## Theory of Change

### Overview

Global Fund for Children's Theory of Change is a framework to increase GFC's evidence-based practice and validate its strategies and hypothesis behind social change. It reflects our current understanding of how change takes place, and it identifies the changes at various levels that need to occur to increase our partners' effectiveness and sustainability, leading to improved conditions for the children, youth, and communities they serve. Our Theory of Change allows us to better frame our measurement efforts and guide our strategic choices across our organization.

### Background

Global Fund for Children's Theory of Change reflects the contributions and support of many stakeholders, including GFC's current and former staff, Board, partners, individual and institutional donors, and Youth Leadership Council. We followed a participatory approach that included telephone interviews, online questionnaires, and workshops in Washington, DC, and London.

The decision to develop a Theory of Change stemmed from leadership transitions that created an opportunity to reflect on past learnings and future direction and to build a shared understanding of GFC's role and vision for its partners. In tandem with the Theory of Change process, we redefined our capacity development approach, fundraising and donor engagement strategies, and organizational values.

### Theory of Change: What Is It and How Do We Use It?

The Theory of Change is an approach that defines all building blocks required to achieve long-term outcomes. A map or diagram called the Pathway of Change<sup>1</sup> connects these building blocks, reflecting on the necessary and sufficient preconditions and the logical and chronological flow to achieve the outcome.

GFC has identified the changes at various levels that need to occur to increase partners' effectiveness and sustainability, leading to improved conditions for the children, youth, and communities they serve. The extent of GFC's contribution to these changes will depend on the context and type of intervention and could vary from minor to significant. Given the nature of our support, we do not expect to attribute the absolute change solely to our contribution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Theory of Change, "How Does Theory of Change Work?"

<https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/how-does-theory-of-change-work/>

<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of our support to partners and the complex environments in which they operate, we may be able to measure whether an intended outcome occurs, but it would be difficult or inaccurate to **attribute** the change solely to our support. With our Theory of Change, we seek to explore if our support **contributes** or helps to cause the observed changes or outcomes.

Our Theory of Change is the framework to increase our evidence-based practice and validate our strategies and hypothesis behind social change. By clearly outlining the hierarchy of outputs and outcomes, we can better frame our measurement efforts and guide our empirical inquiry. We also believe that our Theory of Change is a necessary framework to guide our strategic choices.

Our Theory of Change reflects our current understanding of how change takes place at partner and community levels. As we continue our work, increasingly focused on building our evidence base and learning from our monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data, we will periodically adjust and improve our Theory of Change.

## GFC Theory of Change Narrative

This section provides a narrative that supports the Theory of Change map. The narrative explains in more detail the context, our model, the rationale behind each step along the route of change, how and why the different steps are connected, the enabling factors, and the assumptions made at various levels.

### Context

Despite progress in improving young people's wellbeing in the last few decades, children and youth worldwide – especially those in the most disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or marginalized groups – are facing poverty, violence, exploitation, discrimination, lack of access to quality education, and limited possibilities to obtain decent employment later in life.

Global Fund for Children understands that to reach children and youth in disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or marginalized contexts, it is important to partner with local, cutting-edge organizations that are already working to solve these challenges in their communities. Although these organizations have a deep understanding and commitment to the needs of children and youth, they often face high barriers to access financial and other resources; technical knowledge; and connections to other organizations working on similar issues. We also recognize the importance of partnering with more experienced organizations, where appropriate, to contribute to specific activities where their knowledge and perspectives will be valuable.

### Impact

We aim to improve the wellbeing of children and youth through the creation of safe environments where children and youth are valued, empowered, educated for life, and respected. By supporting **local organizations** when they need our help the most, we increase their ability to more effectively act as agents of change, both individually and collectively.

### Model/Strategy

Global Fund for Children invests globally in **child- and youth-centered and youth-led organizations**, often at an early stage of development. The timing and flexibility of our funding and technical support play a key differentiating role that we believe is fundamental for the long-term **sustainability** of our partners.

A rigorous selection process allows us to identify organizations that meet our eligibility criteria and are committed to sustainable change, reducing risk and increasing the chances of success.<sup>3</sup> Establishing a close relationship with partners is our aim from the onset of the relationship, in which we are conscious of the inherent power dynamic and strive to place our partners' needs at the center. This approach helps build a **trust-based** relationship.

### Qualities in Our Partners

We look for organizations that reflect a combination of the different qualities we believe are fundamental for achieving impact:

- **Focus on children and youth:** Organizations focus on issues affecting children and youth that are relevant to their context, and they collaborate with stakeholders important to the lives of children and youth, such as families, schools, and communities. Youth-led organizations may engage in work that reaches other stakeholders in the lives of children and youth.
- **Local leadership:** Local leaders involved in their community not only have a deep understanding of their community's needs but also signal true commitment to sustainable growth.
- **Evidence of learning and adaptability:** Our partners are interested in learning and adapting, often experimenting with new approaches. Some have an aspiration for "bigger picture" change outside of their immediate community and are committed to sharing their learning beyond their organization.
- **Child and youth participation:** We seek to help organizations that aspire to include children and youth in meaningful ways in their structures and decision-making processes. At a minimum, we encourage organizations to seek feedback from young people on their programs and services.
- **Understanding of systems thinking:** Our partners demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of the issues they work on and a commitment, where possible, to addressing underlying causes through their approach and in collaboration with other actors. They define their own evolution and notion of sustainability by considering where they fit in.
- **Advocacy:** Although we do not require our partners to be involved in advocacy, a large number of our partners find that the effort to change policies, practices, attitudes, and behaviors is an important progression of their work, and we support those efforts.

### Our Support

We help our partners identify the areas that they want to improve with our funding and direct technical assistance. However, we encourage them to decide how to best invest these resources and identify key milestones across the partnership. Tracking the effect of the different combinations and levels of effort in this wide range of options is still a challenge for GFC. This framework will help us design the best mechanisms to track, learn from, and improve our support to partners.

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<sup>3</sup> The selection process includes in-person visits by GFC staff, internal vetting processes, and final selection by a specialized committee. Some initiatives conduct a stakeholder and situational analysis to best identify partners for thematic and regional cohorts.

We deliver support to our partners via the following mechanisms:

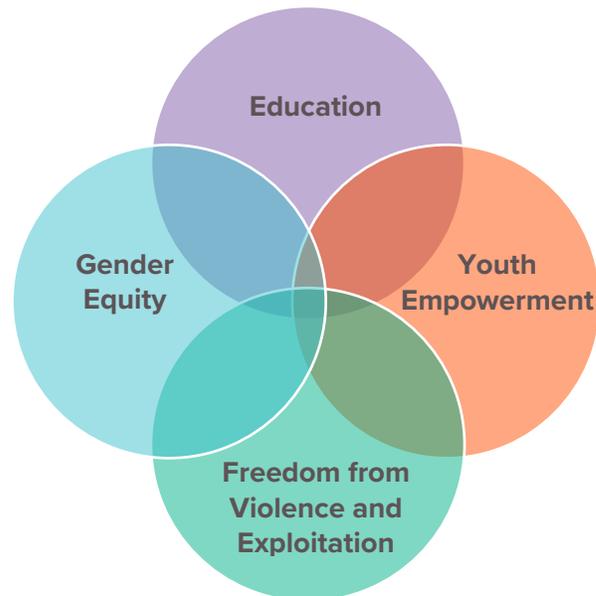
<b>Organizational Capacity Assessment &amp; Planning</b>	We work with our partners to help them define their goals and a set of indicators to track their progress. By facilitating this process, we give partner leaders the time, guidance, and structures they need to truly reflect on their organization’s strengths, opportunities, and trajectory. Together, we create a customized capacity development plan that we revisit and renew throughout the partnership and that serves as an anchor for all other interventions.
<b>Funding &amp; Awards</b>	To support our partners’ life-changing programs for children and youth, we provide flexible, renewable cash grants on an annual basis. Using the capacity development plan as a guide, we also offer supplemental grants to strengthen our partners’ strategic planning, professional development, networking, and more. We also provide cash awards for outstanding partners to celebrate their achievements and further catalyze their success.
<b>Site Visits</b>	Visiting our partners in the field is an essential tool for strengthening relationships and improving our interventions. In-person visits help us understand the challenging contexts in which our partners work and how our partners are evolving in response to these challenges. In addition to on-site coaching and monitoring, we gather feedback, data, and stories from our partners’ leadership and staff, the children and youth they serve, and other community stakeholders.
<b>Advisory Support</b>	We conduct quarterly check-ins with our partners to review their capacity development plan and to offer additional information, resources, and connections. We help them to reflect on their progress, appreciate wins, and identify roadblocks. Whether linking them to peer organizations, new funding sources, or networking opportunities, we actively seek out additional inputs to help them solve problems and meet their goals.
<b>Convenings &amp; Peer Networks</b>	We co-design convenings with our partners to strategically bring grassroots leaders together around mutual challenges, opportunities, and stages of development. Our convenings allow our partners to access and provide support, reflection, training, and technical or issue area expertise. We also leverage our global network of nearly 700 alumni organizations as peer mentors and advisors. Through these connections, we help our partners move out of isolation and into collective impact.

Our long-term commitment to our partners is reflected in the typical length of our grantmaking cycle, where we strive to provide annual funding for up to six years. Occasionally, GFC will reengage an alumni partner in a new initiative and provide additional funding. We seek to explore a more systematic approach to measure the effects of different strategies and lengths of partnership through our M&E system.

### **Our Focus Areas**

Our partners work in one or a combination of our four focus areas: Education, Gender Equity, Youth Empowerment, and Freedom from Violence and Exploitation. We aim to capture learning across our thematic portfolios to share with our partners and to influence the philanthropic

sector. Our holistic approach, which involves an internal and external focus with our partners, facilitates learning and adaptation at the organizational and local system levels.



## Pathways of Change

Our Theory of Change map outlines the various steps toward achieving the overarching goal of improving the wellbeing of children and youth, primarily in vulnerable and marginalized situations. However, we want to emphasize that we have included an “accountability line”<sup>4</sup> (the dashed line across the pathway) in our map to separate the outputs and outcomes that we will track and that we expect to achieve from the ones of a higher level, which are outside the direct control of our operations. As needs arise and resources permit, we will explore our **contribution** past the accountability line via research and evaluative approaches. It is also important to note that our map is a simplified and linear representation of change, and we are aware that the systems where we operate are complex, with more cyclical and nonlinear connections.

### *Above the Accountability Line*

To achieve a state of sustainable wellbeing of children and youth within their families and communities (highest-level outcome or impact), certain preconditions must exist. We believe that these minimum conditions are that children and youth enjoy high-quality, lifelong education; children and youth are safe, strong, and have equal opportunities; all rights of children and youth are respected; and children and youth participate actively in their communities, and this participation is valued.<sup>5</sup> These preconditions can only be achieved if changes to social, cultural, economic, and political structures and systems are realized, allowing children and youth to be more empowered to exercise their rights.

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<sup>4</sup> Our core Theory of Change (the section below the accountability line) outlines what we strive to *directly* influence. Our overarching strategy seeks to contribute to the above-of-the-line section in a more *indirect* manner, given other factors that influence this change and the long time frames necessary to achieve substantial social change.

<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge that there are other conditions necessary to achieve child and youth wellbeing, but we are focusing on these four dimensions as closely related to the work of our partners and our focus areas.

### *Core Theory of Change (Below the Accountability Line)*

**Inputs:** flexible funding, nonfinancial support (e.g., technical assistance, advising, information), and our network of contacts

GFC's core Theory of Change is rooted in two closely connected pillars:

- a) **Internal focus:** Supporting partners to improve their organizations at three levels (organizational, programmatic, and networking)
- b) **External focus:** Furthering partners' connections with other stakeholders on a broader scale, starting at the local level with the aim of reaching regional, national, and international levels as necessary

### **Outputs**

The rigorous process of selecting partners is an important precondition for the realization of expected outcomes. Once organizations become GFC partners, we support their process of self-assessing in three key areas (organizational, programmatic, and networking), prioritizing their findings, and developing an action plan for improvement. Our approach to flexible funding allows partners to prioritize their needs in a more systematic manner and invest those funds where they deem necessary.

We attempt to connect our new partners with our existing network of partners and other stakeholders, as needed, to offer them opportunities to build and strengthen relationships. This key element of our support promotes learning and encourages organizations to coordinate efforts toward a greater impact.

### **Intermediate Outcomes**

As a result of a mix of activities (e.g., network strengthening and skills-building workshops, funding for organizational development) based on their action plans, partners improve their human capital (knowledge and technical skills), strengthen systems and processes, and diversify their funding streams. Some of these changes take longer to materialize and depend on the nature of the need. Also, some of the needs identified in the action plans require additional resources beyond those provided by GFC.

Some of our partners develop or improve their advocacy strategies, which allows them to better focus their efforts to influence change. We also work with interested partners in raising their awareness on the benefits of engaging children and youth in their decision-making processes (e.g., involving children and youth as board members; developing programs based on direct feedback from children and youth).

Once partners have implemented significant changes in their planning and management systems, they are more suited to learn and adapt. Partners also improve their capacity to systematically document evidence of their impact. Documenting impact and lessons learned empowers organizations to share resources and knowledge in a more comprehensive and organized manner, improving the chances of generating positive learning loops.

Some of our partners choose to use our funding to design new or better activities and/or introduce new methodologies in their work with children and youth. Others also actively involve children and youth in decision-making processes.

Due to our newly introduced safeguarding policy, we expect our partners to develop or improve their safeguarding policies and practices during our funding relationship. Children and youth participating in their programs are safer as a result.

For partners interested in expanding their networks, or for our fixed-cohort partners, we expect our support to allow them to achieve new or strengthened connections to local, regional, national, or international networks. We also realize the value of collective action toward achieving greater social justice for children and youth. Depending on the circumstances, we envision that some partners may formalize their relationships through a joint learning agenda or collective action plan reflecting a more coordinated common strategy.

Some partners develop or refine their advocacy strategies to directly or indirectly influence decision-makers and key stakeholders, who in turn support or implement actions that contribute to the fulfillment of child and youth rights. GFC's human-rights-based approach to advocacy<sup>6</sup> supports its partners in achieving their advocacy goals while influencing their decision-making processes to more actively include children and youth.

### **Long-Term Outcomes**

Throughout our trust-based, long-term relationship with our partners, we contribute to building the steps to improve their performance, their reach in their communities, and the quality of their interventions, helping them become more sustainable. Through their engagement in advocacy and networking activities, their leaders – and the young leaders they help empower – are more visible and better positioned to influence the policy agenda concerning child and youth rights.

### **Key Assumptions**

We identified the following assumptions underpinning our Theory of Change. The assumptions explain why and how the steps in our Theory of Change achieve our impact and outcomes.

#### **Impact Level**

- **Conducive environment:** The economic, political, and social environment is conducive to partners' sustainability.
- **Basis in human rights:** The most effective way of changing the lives of children and youth is to focus on developing holistic wellbeing through a human-rights-based approach.
- **Partners as change agents:** Partners can significantly influence children and youth, families, communities, and larger society to exercise change.

#### **Outcomes Level**

- **Local leadership:** We believe that local problems need local solutions; therefore, investing in local organizations, when they need this investment the most, is the most effective way to generate social change. This approach also reduces the chance to drive a specific agenda, instead prioritizing what is important for local communities.

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<sup>6</sup> Although the intention of this document is not to describe GFC's advocacy strategy, it is important to mention that this strategy clearly enables the attainment of results. More specifically, our efforts in awareness raising, communications, and media work seek to deliver clear, evidence-based messages to decision-makers, key stakeholders (e.g., children, youth, their families, and their communities), and the general public to promote the rights of children and youth. We also elevate the advocacy efforts of our partners in our global communications platforms and support initiatives that promote child and youth voices (e.g., Youth Leadership Council).

- **Capacity development:** Capacity development is a process of continuous growth that goes beyond the time frame and intensity of GFC's support. The nature of the change and the complexity of the context will determine the length of time it may take for changes to produce an actual improvement in a partner's performance.
- **Collaborative approaches:** Learning, innovation, and adaptation are intensified by collaborative work. Facilitating such platforms is a key aspect of capacity development interventions. Partners are willing and able to engage in and sustain collective action over time to bring about change. Being part of a larger network promoted by GFC will not negatively affect the work of GFC partners in the long run. (For example, if partners working on sensitive issues are negatively targeted by increasing the visibility of their work, the long-term benefits of being more networked and more visible will outweigh the drawbacks.)

## Enablers

- **Trust-based relationship:** Partners develop a strong relationship of trust and openness with GFC program staff that facilitates the successful delivery of financial and nonfinancial support.
- **Action plan execution:** Resources to execute the action plan are available and are of sufficient quality to improve the status quo. Partners have the interest and discipline and GFC has the necessary resources and knowledge to contribute to the successful execution of the action plan.

# Theory of Change

The wellbeing of children and youth is improved, especially those who are most disadvantaged, vulnerable, and marginalized.

## IMPACT

Children and youth are safe, enjoy high-quality and lifelong education, and have equal opportunities.

Children and youth are empowered, and their families and communities support them in exercising their rights.

## LONG-TERM OUTCOMES



Local leadership achieves greater visibility and influence in agendas and policies related to child and youth rights.



GFC partners improve performance and are more sustainable.



Children and youth are more visible as advocates and leaders in their communities.

## INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

External Focus



GFC partners have new or strengthened connections and share resources and knowledge. Some formalize relationships, leading to collective action.



GFC partners improve their programs based on learning and participatory feedback.



GFC partners improve organizational aspects – like leadership, monitoring and evaluation, and safeguarding – that make them stronger agents of change.

Internal Focus

## OUTPUTS

Partners work jointly with GFC to identify opportunities to improve their internal operations, their programs, and their relationship with their ecosystem.

GFC identifies local organizations that advance justice, equity, and opportunity for children and youth. We work across the focus areas of Education, Gender Equity, Youth Empowerment, and Freedom from Violence and Exploitation.

## INPUTS



Relationships with peer organizations, coalitions, and networks



Non-financial support like technical assistance, information, and resources



Flexible funding

### Key Assumptions:

- The economic, political, and social environment is conducive to partners' sustainability.
- The most effective way of changing the lives of children and youth is to focus on developing holistic wellbeing through a human-rights-based approach.
- Partners can significantly influence children, youth, families, and communities.
- Learning, innovation, and adaptation are intensified by collaborative work.
- Capacity development leads to improved performance.
- Local problems need local solutions.