



The Spark Fund

Investing in Children and Youth Building a More Equitable and Just Post-COVID World

The Call

Through pandemic and protests, 2020 has brought social injustice and inequities to the forefront of our global consciousness and with it, a reckoning. Across the world, institutions are looking inward, examining the histories that brought them to this place, and bearing witness to the inequities built into the system upon which they rely. GFC is no exception. As we carry on with our critical work within our mission and values, it is vital that we move forward in a way that addresses structural barriers and inequality in our larger society. COVID-19 is not only a health crisis in the short term, but a devastating economic and social crisis that will have dire impacts on already marginalized communities and groups for months and years to come without intentional interventions. People who suffer from racism, poverty, and housing and food insecurities are disproportionately affected by the fallout of COVID-19 and have increased chances of longer-term negative outcomes.¹ And it is children and youth who will bear the brunt of these consequences throughout their lives due to increased barriers to education and employment, increased isolation, and increased risks of familial and community violence.

The reality for young people in low-income communities around the world is that much of the support and many of the services they might benefit from will come from local, community-led and grassroots

¹ Children's Hospital Association: <https://www.childrenshospitals.org/Newsroom/Childrens-Hospitals-Today/Articles/2020/08/3-Lasting-Effects-of-COVID19-on-Children>

organizations. These organizations have built-in trust from their communities, understand the local culture and needs, and are able to nimbly pivot their models to respond in a crisis like the pandemic. While the demand for civil society's work is increasing, **the ability of local organizations to sustain themselves is threatened**. Funding for local organizations has been reduced due to the economic downturn or is being rerouted toward crisis response. As of late August, approximately \$20.3 trillion had been committed to COVID-19 response funding. However, community service organizations across the world were slated to receive less than 1% of this funding.² Organizations led by young people, especially in the global South, can expect to receive a negligible amount. Without significant access to that influx of support, locally led organizations will increasingly be unable to provide key services and to unleash new ideas and innovations for large swaths of the global population.

GFC has learned from 20+ years of experience that **locally led organizations** are best positioned to affect lasting social change for children and youth in their own communities and that the engagement of young people makes this possible. **GFC amplifies young people's voices and provides them with the tools to be on the frontlines of social change through a flexible funding model and capacity development support**. The key to post-crisis growth and sustainability is innovation; new solutions are necessary to address existing, exacerbated problems. Therefore, GFC has created the **Spark Fund** as a resource for youth leaders and local civil society during a time of drastic and radical change.

We should not expect the world and its youth to accept a return to the pre-pandemic status quo. The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global call for social justice related to race, caste, class, gender, and religion has created an imperative for Global Fund for Children to stand in solidarity with the children and youth who will lead their communities toward a more just society. **GFC stands in solidarity with the youth who will lead the disruption of injustice and inequality and will use the Spark Fund to support their work.**

Our Response

The Spark Fund will support youth leaders and GFC's partners during and beyond the pandemic through the creation of a participatory grantmaking process in which power is shifted into the hands of those most closely involved in the issues and the work.

GFC's Spark Fund initiative will be centered on two pillars:

1. **Supporting Transformation for Change: Supporting and launching innovations developed by youth leaders to disrupt social inequities, and**
2. **Sustaining Civil Society: Providing flexible, multi-year funding to sustain the core operations of child-centered and/or youth led civil society**

This is a unique, participatory fund for global youth-led social change. GFC will build a team to manage the fund that includes young leaders from community-based partners and GFC's global Youth Leadership Council as advisors and decision-makers. They will help identify existing needs and emerging opportunities to connect child-centered civil society organizations and youth leaders with support from the fund to meet their specific needs. The Council and

Courage, Excellence, Learning, Partnership, Passion, and Inclusion:

Our values shape our vision, guide our daily decision-making, and signal to the world what to expect when you encounter Global Fund for Children. We hold ourselves to these values to best serve our local partners and the children and youth they support.

² Devex: [Funding the Response to COVID-19](#). September 1, 2020.

youth leaders will participate in core decision-making processes throughout the programming, including who will receive grants from the fund.

The proposed partnership will build on and evolve the work already in progress via GFC's COVID-19 [Emergency Response Fund](#), which continues to be a critical line of support. Through the Emergency Response Fund, GFC has distributed more than \$620,000 in flexible funds to 135 local organizations based in 38 countries since March 2020 to address immediate needs. As local organizations transition from emergency funding to post-crisis recovery, the Spark Fund will provide the resources to re-imagine and develop new systems that empower children and youth as the main drivers of social change.

Pillar I: Supporting Transformation for Change

As organizations cope with the pandemic, they are also changing how they operate and re-imagining how their programs serve and uplift young people. This creates a strong drive for organizations to creatively innovate, and these innovations are often adopted as established programs and new norms after a crisis has passed. These transformations can lead to the establishment of new norms and visioning to build a more just society. Such progress is only possible through the meaningful engagement and leadership of those who are at risk of experiencing the longer-lasting impacts of the crisis – **children and youth**.

We are seeing more children and youth successfully engage in collective action leading social change. These youth at the forefront of tackling crises spark rapid innovations through creativity, problem-solving skills, and their networks. We are already seeing the positive results of these adaptations in Peru, where Afro-Peruvian youth were quick to mobilize in support of pandemic-related needs and also quick to recognize an opportunity for change. Marco Antonio Ramirez, president of the Ashanti Peru network, said: *“I think the best that can happen, in all of this context, is that we are seeing more Afro-Peruvians waking up and realizing that the normal we knew before was not okay. They are becoming more aware of the lack of education, health, and business opportunities. My hope is that this will produce a new generation that will be more aware of their rights, and that they will demand more. We won’t be quite like we were before.”*

Yet many young leaders still lack access to the critical resources and tools needed to sustain their innovations over the long term. GFC is currently investing in young people’s ideas and providing capacity development support to unleash their creativity. Supporting local innovations and burgeoning leaders during this crisis is crucial to ensure that positive changes become permanent. In Sierra Leone, a network of local organizations recently won a critical fight to overturn a law that prohibited pregnant girls from attending school. GFC partner [Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society \(WAVES\)](#) participated in this advocacy effort and is now working to ensure that schools accept pregnant girls and have the mechanisms in place to welcome them. WAVES’s advocacy efforts demonstrate the power of grassroots organizations – which are deeply impacted by issues in their communities – to leverage human rights mechanisms to influence change.

If given the proper resources and capacity support, youth leaders will be able to enact positive change within their communities and countries. Many of the youth leaders GFC supports have been advocating for racial equity, climate action, gender justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and educational access and equity, and need financial support and resources to have a lasting impact. With the support of the Spark Fund, young leaders will be able to seize the opportunity to push for significant change in their communities. We intend to catalyze as much support for these leaders as possible, so their efforts are well-funded while there is a window to make significant and lasting change.

We will support young leaders’ efforts to **dismantle existing inequalities in power and access** via:

- Advocacy and movement-building campaigns
- Protection activities
- Preservation/representation of minority racial/ethnic culture
- Awareness-raising campaigns and policy changes

GFC's model ensures that young leaders can take advantage of the opportunity to take risks, innovate, experiment, and learn. With our support, they will have the space to generate post-crisis action and solutions – rather than just delivering specific outputs – through innovation, transformation, experimentation, reflection, and collaborative learning. They will have the support to define core and emergent priorities and execute creative approaches through the use of multi-year, flexible funding. They will have the capacity to develop agile organizational systems to effectively advocate for and build sustainable social change and a more just society.

Pillar II. Sustaining Civil Society

Local organizations play a critical role in the global response to the pandemic as frontline responders addressing challenges facing children and youth in their communities. With deep ties to and knowledge about their communities, local organizations meet the needs of children and youth.

Even before the pandemic, however, these organizations were undervalued and overlooked by the major philanthropic institutions that control the majority of available response funds. As a result, local organizations – already facing unreliable and unstable funding streams – are competing with well-funded and well-connected INGOS with fewer direct ties to the communities and populations they aim to serve.

GFC's local partners know the strain of this funding reality. They have reported that access to resources and networks is critical to making informed decisions. GFC issued a survey to the recipients of the COVID-19 Emergency Fund and many local partners predicted that covering core costs related to their office, staff, and program delivery would be an issue over the next year:

- 68% of the partners surveyed had to adapt programming to new constraints
- 63% pivoted to providing emergency services
- 60% experienced a significant disruption in services
- More than 55% of current GFC partners reported programmatic-based funding to be an issue during this critical time

While resources remain scarce for community-based organizations, they are witnessing higher rates of child exploitation and violence including child labor, female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, rape, early marriage, and unplanned pregnancy. According to the United Nations Populations Fund (UNPF), an additional 15 million cases of sexual-based violence and 2 million cases of FGM will occur as a result of the pandemic.³ Other human right violations are also expected to increase.

GFC sees an important opening and space to offer transformative support to truly local organizations that serve, mobilize, or are led by young people who are already leading social change. GFC's role is to provide resources and advisory support to youth and community leaders and help them to either rise into positions of leadership within existing power structures or build new movements to tip the balance of power from the outside. Our work now is to help sustain critical child- and youth-centered civil society during the pandemic by providing access to flexible and unrestricted grants and capacity development support. Our support goes beyond grantmaking as we share best practices that help organizations adapt;

facilitate introductions to other funders from whom partners can request emergency and/or long-term funds; and convene partners virtually to learn from peer organizations around the world and create solidarity.

The purpose of the sustaining grants is to help child-centered local civil society organizations persist through this period of diminished financial support. Grants from this fund are fully flexible and will be used at the discretion of the organizations. Based on our partners' feedback, we expect that the funding will be used to adapt programming to meet current needs, assist with contingency planning, sustain core programming, cover payroll, and provide training for staff to adapt to current needs.

Social Return

At a time when the wellbeing and success of children and young people are threatened globally as never before, it is important to listen to their vital and often silenced voices. Our relationships with community-based partners are founded on listening and trust, and young people's needs are placed at the center of our servant leadership model. Our partners speak on behalf of the young people they serve, we listen, and we help empower our partners to better serve their communities. As outlined in our Theory of Change, we believe that by providing flexible funding to local organizations and engaging with them in building capacity in the areas where *they* see the most need, we contribute to our partners' ability to be more effective agents of change in their communities.

Inputs: Combined with GFC's 20+ years of experience finding and funding over 700 community-based organizations, the deliberate inclusion of youth leaders, and the financial investment of individuals and institutions, the Spark Fund will provide:

- 1) Flexible, multi-year funding that will ensure our partners can sustain their operations and support for children and youth. Grant sizes: \$5,000-\$100,000
- 2) Tailored capacity development and network building opportunities for local organizations to adapt and modify their programs to adopt and effectively apply child-centered approaches in their programming.
- 3) Coaching and mentorship for local leaders to devise innovative and sustainable solutions to unexpected challenges during the pandemic and in the post-crisis phase.

Outcomes:

- 1) A robust civil society sector that has weathered the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to be a critical local resource for children and youth.
- 2) Evidence of youth-led changes to traditional power structures that address issues of social inequalities.
- 3) Wider and stronger networks of civil society organizations and youth-led groups.

Learning: Due to the innovative nature of this fund, we are excited about the learning opportunities it presents. Thus, a thoughtfully designed learning agenda will help continuously create space to collectively reflect, evaluate, and reconfigure (as needed) how we approach the design and evaluation of this endeavor. In framing the learning component of the fund, we will focus on several key learning questions:

- 1) To what extent is GFC's flexible funding model effective in sustaining child-centered civil society organizations in long-term recovery after a crisis?

- 2) To what extent is the GFC model successful in supporting child-centered innovative solutions that lead to social change?
- 3) In what ways are youth leaders supported through this fund creating social change?
- 4) To what extent does intentionally participatory design and implementation of a fund lead to its effectiveness?
- 5) How does flexible funder support help lower structural barriers and inequality for youth-led organizations over time?
- 6) To what extent can a flexible funding model lead to a shift in traditional power structures that contribute to social inequality?

We will explore the learning questions through an iterative flexible process, co-designing and conducting relevant learning activities with our partners to generate, analyze, and synthesize the learning. Based on the results of the learning activities, we will share findings with different relevant audiences through a variety of utilization-focused learning products that will also help inform future program design and reflect our Theory of Change.

In addition to guiding our everyday work, GFC's Theory of Change also allows us to better frame our learning and evaluation practices. We will engage with the youth leaders of the fund in co-designing the nature of the partnership and in identifying areas in their practices that need strengthening, including (but not limited to) safeguarding, advocacy, learning and evaluation, organizational capacity, and other more technical aspects of their work. Together, we will develop a plan to track progress toward key milestones, depending on the needs identified early in the relationship. In all of the areas in which progress is tracked, we will routinely gather partner input as a means to monitor the evolution of the partner organizations and the partnership's journey. These continuous feedback loops and interactions will allow us to make adjustments as needed.

The learnings from this fund will contribute to GFC's overall learning agenda and reinforce the value of a trust-based philanthropy model in which equitable partnerships allow for better use of financial and non-financial resources. We believe that, especially in a post-emergency context, our model of engaging with community-based organizations leads to improved conditions for the children, youth, and communities they serve.