

A photograph showing several children sitting around a table, engaged in a painting activity. They are using various colored markers and paints on white canvases. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor or well-lit indoor setting. The children are wearing light blue shirts. The table is covered with a blue cloth and has various art supplies like paint containers and brushes. The overall atmosphere is creative and educational.

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children

Photo: Instituto Mãe Lulu

FIRST YEAR REPORT

Partnership To Educate All Kids (PEAK)

Supporting local partners helping children access and thrive in learning environments that prepare them for future success

Introduction

In 2022, with support from the LEGO Foundation, Global Fund for Children (GFC) launched the Partnership to Educate All Kids (PEAK) initiative to support community-based organizations around the world that are helping children who have experienced pandemic-related education disruptions access and thrive in learning environments. By May 2022, after an intense period of research and visits to potential partners, GFC identified the building blocks of the initiative: 66 community-based partners that now comprise the PEAK global cohort. These 66 community-based organizations span 10 countries across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. Some of our partners are smaller, more nascent groups, while others are larger, more experienced organizations. Some work out of sprawling urban slums, and others are based in more remote, rural settings. They speak English, Bangla, French, Hindi, Nepali, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swahili. All the partners put children ages 6-12 at the heart of their programming and activities.

By June 2022, GFC was providing new partners with core flexible funding and capacity development support, facilitating reflection sessions on organizational development, talking about what safeguarding meant in each of the partner's unique contexts, and sharing resources and outside learning opportunities. We also began laying the foundations for partners to engage with each other, hosting several virtual and in-person events to bring partners together around mutual challenges, interests, and opportunities.

As the PEAK initiative turns one year old, we celebrate the major milestones, while reflecting on lessons we have learned along the way and highlighting the work of our partners who use play-based methods to advance children's holistic learning and education in their communities.

Confronting the devastation

Three years after the world was hurled into the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still trying to comprehend its profound impacts on education and learning systems worldwide. While the magnitude of the learning crisis may not yet be fully understood, emerging evidence is alarming. According to a [recent report](#) co-authored by the World Bank, UNICEF, FCDO, and other aid and philanthropic institutions, the effects of the pandemic were particularly devastating in low- and middle-income countries in Latin America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, where the PEAK initiative takes place. In Latin America and South Asia, where 39 PEAK partners are located, school closures lasted significantly longer than the global average. This, among other factors, contributed to steep increases in learning poverty rates¹ in both regions. In Latin America, 80% of children at end-of-primary-school-age now lack minimum literacy proficiency, compared to 50% before the pandemic. In South Asia, that figure rose from 60% to 78%. In sub-Saharan Africa, where 27 PEAK partners work, increases in learning poverty

¹ According to the [World Bank](#), the learning poverty rate measures the share of children who cannot read a simple text with comprehension by age 10.

appeared to be smaller during the pandemic due to shorter school closures. However, now that schools have reopened, learning poverty is at an alarming 89% for end-of-primary-school-age children.

These grisly regional statistics only scratch the surface. Community-based partners navigate a web of unique challenges only exacerbated by the pandemic:

- Antagonism and discrimination towards children from historically marginalized ethnic groups, such as Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean communities.
- Children living in extremely vulnerable conditions, including hard-to-reach communities, areas controlled by gangs, or homes plagued with domestic violence, drug addiction, and alcoholism.
- Inability of local schools to provide adequate services to children with special needs or disabilities.
- Government neglect resulting in under resourced schools and failing infrastructure.
- Stringent policy constraints imposed by Education Ministries that are not aligned with current contexts and inhibit constructive engagement with children in school.
- Struggles by parents and caregivers to fulfill documentation requirements to enroll their children in school.
- Parents and caregivers resist school reforms that favor nontraditional forms of assessment over more formal examinations that produce report cards or test scores.

The PEAK initiative supports and empowers community-based partners that are tackling these challenges at their roots by providing relevant and sustained support to children to help them readjust to in-person learning, curb learning loss, and acquire skills that will enable them to become creative, engaged, and lifelong learners to thrive in a post-pandemic world.

First-year milestones and what they taught us.

GFC found an amazing diversity of organizations at work in communities.

Scouting for new grassroots partners is an integral part of Global Fund for Children's trust-based approach to partnerships. Instead of leaving the onus of the work on small, community-based organizations, GFC firmly believes it is our responsibility to research and get to know potential partners before deciding to partner with them. Whenever possible, we conduct our scouting visits in person to engage in intentional and reflective conversations with prospective partners and immerse ourselves in their contexts, stories, dreams, and activities. Through these conversations, we also gauge whether there is alignment with GFC's values, if there is a fit with what we can offer in partnership, their willingness to participate in meaningful conversations about their organizational capacity needs, and their desire to exchange learnings and resources with other GFC partners.

GFC researched over 350 community-based organizations working on education across PEAK's 10 focus countries, selecting 145 prospective partners to visit (in most cases and wherever possible, in person). GFC team members, sometimes accompanied by alumni partners, fanned out across the world for 3 months, learning about their contexts, education programming, leadership, philosophies, values, and organizational challenges from their leaders, community members, and in many cases from the children themselves. By the time each

regional team brought their proposed new PEAK partners to the larger group for consideration, GFC staff were enthusiastic supporters for what these powerful organizations were already doing to ignite the spark of learning in children out of the devastation of the pandemic.



Selecting over 60 new partners in less than 6 months for a single initiative was the largest scale scouting effort GFC had ever completed, and it reinforced to us how relational and intense the process is. This is where GFC makes its first impression on its partners, and from which the foundations of trust are built, so everyone involved had to practice listening deeply and showing care.

Partners are advancing their educational goals with flexible funding.

GFC strongly believes that our partners can determine the best use of their resources, including grant funds. Providing fully flexible funding is an important signal of our trust in their work, and it gives partners greater ability to innovate and adapt to the challenges facing children and youth on the ground. Over PEAK's first year, GFC disbursed US\$945,000 in primary grants to its 66 community-based partners. PEAK partners, in turn, reached 77,355 children and youth in Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda, and Zambia. Fifty-six percent (43,247) are children between 6 and 12 years of age.

“With support from GFC, we implemented a STEM project in schools that made learning interactive, playful and real to the children.”

- International Child Development Program, Ghana

While the community-based partners were selected because of the incredible work they are already doing, and we know that much of our flexible funding goes toward supporting and strengthening ongoing programming, we are continuously delighted to find partners innovating and experimenting with new ideas. In just the first year, partners reported undertaking 168 new activities or substantial programmatic changes in their work. Partners reported that 93 percent of these changes and activities (156) were supported by GFC's direct funding, site visits, exchanges with other GFC partners, or direct advising.

While the concept of “play” is contextual to each partner, we were thrilled to learn that 87 percent (146) of new activities or substantial programmatic changes applied some form of learning through play to promote children's holistic learning and development. These included:

- Arts and crafts (origami, drawing, painting) to promote the development of fine motor skills and creativity.
- Performing arts, theatre, and role playing to help hone communication and social skills.
- Debate, reading, and arithmetic competitions to motivate participation and attentiveness.
- Learning to play musical instruments to help develop coordination, laterality, plasticity, and rhythmic abilities.
- Enhancing libraries and other communal learning spaces by incorporating books of different genres, board games, and puzzles.
- Using information and communications technologies, including movies and documentaries to address themes of inclusion, migration, and gender-based violence; digital photography workshops; computer skills

workshops; and e-books and online educational games to provide children with access to a wider range of learning materials and resources.

- STEM related activities, such as robotics competitions and STEM clubs and storybooks, to enhance hands-on project-based learning and peer support amongst children.
- Sports, including marathons, football, netball, and martial arts, to teach children valuable life skills such as self-esteem, leadership, teamwork, and discipline, and to promote their physical wellbeing.
- Horticulture, gardening, and nature studies to teach children about environmental care and preservation.
- Site visits to other schools, companies, and universities to inspire children and promote interaction amongst peers and experiential learning.
- Play-based learning activities for special-needs children, including children with ADHD and autism, to support their cognitive development.

Partners also use play as a valuable tool for social change beyond education. In Brazil and Zambia, partners reported using native or traditional games to promote the development of children's socialization skills and spark discussions about identity, ancestry, culture, and values in fun and interactive ways. Partners in Guatemala and Colombia supported child-led advocacy efforts and empowered children to break the culture of silence through marches and walks during commemorative days (such as the International Day of the Girl) or by staging a flash mob with a focus on kindness for the world.

“We bet first on empowering children, adolescents, and youth, then reaching their families, community leaders, and guarantors [of their rights]. When everyone is in tune with the protection of children, then we can jointly demand the fulfillment of children's rights in a dignified manner.” - Coincidir, Guatemala



Play-based learning goes far beyond advancing children's educational outcomes. Partners are using play-based methodologies as tools to revindicate indigenous cultures, defy gender norms, and fight violence.

In addition to working directly with children, our partners understand the importance of engaging with stakeholders across the entire education and child welfare ecosystems to advance their missions. In Uganda and Bangladesh, partners advocated for play-based learning and raised awareness on the importance of respecting children's right to play with local policymakers, religious leaders, parents, caregivers, and school management committee members. In Kenya, Ghana, and India, partners communicated the benefits of play-based learning in classrooms with local schoolteachers and offered training on play-based methodologies. This appetite for advocacy and engagement creates immense potential for change beyond the partners' direct sphere of influence.



While partners are eagerly speaking up and advocating with others for more play-based learning, they also express a strong desire to learn more for themselves—suggesting that GFC provide additional training on play-based methodologies. This is further evidence for GFC that learning and advocating are in no way linear, and that the excitement of learning can be a strong motivator to work to influence the larger system.

Partners are looking inward to define and assess organizational capacities.

GFC's capacity development framework sees capacity as reflective of how responsive our local partners are to the needs of the children and youth they serve – needs that are constantly evolving as external circumstances change. Capacity also reflects how well equipped they are to drive positive change within their own organization. While community-based organizations are anchored by local knowledge, community connections, and a long-term stake in the places where they work, they face complex challenges that make it difficult for them to achieve their organizational goals.

“While our partnership with GFC is recent, we can already express the satisfaction we have had through the visits and activities developed together. The open-mindedness, the reflective approach, and the methodology employed have provided us with [...] a close look at our institutional challenges.”

- Associação Serviço e Cooperação com Povo Yanomami, Brazil

During PEAK's first year, GFC began providing contextualized and individualized support to partners to enable them to articulate, prioritize, and build a plan to address their organizational strengths and challenges. In places where the partners were larger and more established, such as Uganda, Ghana, and India, GFC used its Organizational Capacity Index (OCI). This two-day session creates a participatory space in which the partner's entire team reflects on how their organization is performing in six capacity areas (Structure, Team, Work, Adaptation, Connections, and Results) and each team member fills out an organizational self-assessment. The following day, GFC uses the results of this self-assessment as a starting point to help participants identify areas of agreement, celebrate their achievements, and discuss, identify, and prioritize the challenges their organizations face in each capacity area.

In Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala, since many partners are smaller and many of their team members are volunteers, GFC facilitated a participatory discussion around the six OCI capacity areas over the course of one day—this evolution of the OCI also brought in elements from GFC's Organizational Impact Mapping workshop, which is a more flexible tool for more nascent organizations, particularly youth-led groups.



Opening capacity development conversations with organizations across 10 countries has further reinforced for GFC that capacity development support is not “one size fits all,” even within a cohort that was selected for having quite a bit in common. Depending on each partner's situation, trajectory, and team availability, as well as pragmatic realities from GFC's side, our first foray into capacity development with each partner had to take on different forms. This freedom allowed GFC team members to create the reflective space that felt best for organizational leaders to define their own agendas for change.

GFC also carried out introductory workshops to support partners in developing their safeguarding policies. While GFC's own global safeguarding policy requires its partners to have child protection or safeguarding policies in place to renew their primary grants after the first year of partnership with GFC, we also understand they may have a different approach and understanding of what safeguarding means, depending on the context in which they operate. Therefore, we are committed to offering individual support and information to partners so

that they can develop safeguarding policies and practices that make sense to them and respond to their individual needs and contexts.

Interestingly, though the prioritization and solutions may be diverse, community-based organizations face similar challenges:

- Staff feel stressed or burned out because of the amount of work and the difficult, often trauma-laden, contexts in which they carry it out, without the possibility or resources to be able to focus on their physical and mental well-being.
- Everyone struggles to access new sources of funding, whether due to lack of time or not knowing where to look, which leads to other challenges such anxiety and stress amongst organizational leadership at the lack of financial stability, high staff/volunteer turnover, and not being able to take time to focus on developing their programs.
- Small organizations want to be more active on social media to help them become known to potential donors, but feel that they lack the time, know-how, and technology to do so.
- Though they see first-hand the change they are affecting in their communities, many partners expressed that they lack a systematized method to monitor and evaluate their achievements and, most importantly, the technical know-how to communicate qualitative changes in meaningful and impactful ways.



Whether it's in the sprawling urban slums of Colombia, Brazil, and India, or in the small rural villages of Guatemala, Bangladesh, and Uganda, our work with partners to support their organizational development has taught us that no matter where they are in the world, they face similar organizational challenges. While looking to find ways to support partners to face these shared challenges, a careful reflection on how funders and the funding may be contributing negatively to them is also a necessary response.

Partners are strengthening their organizational capacities by joining ideas with resources.

GFC has found that a small infusion of additional funds can truly leverage the momentum that is built within these participatory organizational development conversations. As another component of building trust and encouraging organizations to invest in themselves, GFC offered supplementary funding for partners in connection to their organizational capacity goals. By February 2023, GFC had disbursed \$122,400 in organizational development grants to 39 partners across the three regions.

Partners carried out over 200 organizational capacity strengthening activities since beginning their partnership with GFC through December 2022, crediting GFC with contributing to 90% of these efforts through funding, convening and exchanges with peers, site visits, advisory support, and organizational capacity assessment. Their efforts focused on:

- Improving administrative and operational efficiency through training sessions in several subject areas, including accounting, reporting, and gamification software.
- Providing team members with personal and professional development opportunities, including exchange visits to witness other play-based methodologies, participation in external conferences, and courses or

training sessions on topics such as management, fundraising, leadership, project development, computer literacy, marketing and communications, and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.

- Offering a breadth of workshops and trainings to staff and volunteers on topics related to working with children, including general principles of play-based learning, facilitation skills when applying play-based learning, storytelling, native games, and cultural learning approaches, working closer with parents and communities, and understanding and respecting child rights and child protection.
- Expanding or improving infrastructure, such as building new training centers or expanding their office spaces, and updating office equipment, including laptops, internet routers, desks, chairs, safes, among other things.
- Hiring full-time and part-time team members, including consultants, teachers, coaches, and other project staff that can offer wraparound services such as psychosocial and mental health care.
- Promoting a culture of wellness and well-being in the organization by organizing activities, staff retreats, workshops to address teamwork, work climate, empathy, and resilience.

“With GFC funds, all Move the World staff went on a 3-day retreat to step back and reflect on learnings from programs and rejuvenate for the rest of the year. We also started honoring maternity leave covering 90 working days. Two female facilitators have gone on maternity leave.”

– Move the World, Ghana



External funding is a significant boost to organizational capacity strengthening, but it is not the only contribution that partnerships can make. Partners cited many other ways that GFC supported them in advancing their organizational capacity, and most organizational development plans shared by partners with GFC included many activities the partners determined they could pursue either independently or using resources already available within their own networks.

Partners are eager to expand their networks and learn from each other.

Grassroots organizations have an irreplaceable role to play in their local communities, but they also have a depth of wisdom, experience, legitimacy, and public interest that, when connected with others, can generate change far beyond their own immediate sphere of action. Though it takes time and persistence, GFC believes that the collective knowledge of grassroots networks can spread impactful ideas, strengthen community-based work, decentralize and shift power to local actors, and influence broad-based change.

GFC began the work of building relationships by bringing partners together in both in-person and virtual spaces designed simply to allow partners to get to know each other and imagine what it might be like to explore opportunities for deeper engagement. In Zambia, partners met for a workshop on incorporating native games into their programming. In Latin America, the team first conducted virtual “meet and greets” for each country cohort, and then held a region-wide virtual gathering for partners to learn about the different play-based methodologies they use. In South Asia, the team brought partners in Bangladesh together through an online convening around safeguarding policies and practices.

“After our Colombia virtual ‘Meet and Greet,’ Haga que Pase, which teaches music, arts, and ecology to public school students in Cali with large Afro-Colombian populations, hosted a visit from FUNDAMOR

(also based in Cali) to exchange information about their programs and discuss possible future collaborations. Haga Que Pase also connected with Fundación Espíritu Indomable, a partner that works with at-risk Afro-Colombian children in the city of Quibdó through martial arts. Fundación Espíritu Indomable requested and received supplementary funding from GFC to visit Haga Que Pase in Cali and exchange learnings on playful methodologies."

- Nayara Castiglioni, GFC South America Program Associate

GFC is also leveraging its own connections and other regional initiatives to expand PEAK partners' networks beyond this initiative. In Guatemala, GFC is supporting 6 PEAK partners with supplementary funding so they can participate in an NGO networking event that will take place in late March sponsored by [RECARGA](#), a new GFC initiative focused on post-COVID-19 educational recovery in Guatemala and Honduras in collaboration with six other funders. In South Asia, PEAK partners from India participated in dance movement therapy and wellbeing sessions led by GFC alumni partner Kolkata Sanved at the Dance Movement Therapy for Change Summit in Jaipur, along with partners from GFC's [Anti-Trafficking Initiative in India](#). In the Africa region, the team is exploring ways to connect PEAK partners with GFC's [Adolescent Girls' Rights initiative](#) in Cote D'Ivoire and Guinea. And across the world, GFC is working to generate meaningful connections between youth-led partners supported by the [Spark Fund](#) and PEAK partners.

Over the course of the first year, partners in the three regions reported 111 new connections or collaborations that they established with cohort peers, other GFC partners, or external organizations. Of those newly formed relationships, 63 percent (70) were in some way focused on learning through play.

In addition to connections resulting from their partnership with GFC, PEAK partners reported many successes in establishing connections and engaging in collaborations with organizations and alliances outside of the GFC network. In 2022, PEAK partners established 93 such connections and collaborations, of which 57 percent were related to learning through play. Some of these collaborations may turn out to be one-time occurrences, while others could turn into long-term fruitful relationships – both are an important part of building strong networks, exchanging experience, and learning from what others are doing. Examples include a partnership with a parent-teacher association in Bangladesh to seek input on establishing inclusive learning centers using learning through play; a collective workshop on musical theatre and traditional music between a Colombian partner and a peer NGO; and a collaboration with the municipal authorities in Ghana to train teachers on using play-based methodologies to work with children through an empathy driven approach. As the PEAK initiative creates ever more opportunities for network deepening and expansion for the global cohort, we expect these external collaborations to become even more common and meaningful.



Encouraging organic networks requires generating spaces with an open mind and a focus on enabling relationships to evolve naturally. They cannot be forced, hurried, or centrally designed. The first year in any initiative is for planting seeds in an open field and imagining together what could emerge.

Looking ahead with anticipation

Renewal of primary grants and disbursement of supplementary funding

In April 2023, GFC will begin the process of disbursing a second year of flexible funding to all PEAK partners. These primary grants will total almost \$1 million. GFC makes available to partners opportunity grants to support learning and visibility outside of the initiative, and emergency grants to respond to unforeseen circumstances. While these grants are disbursed as needed, GFC anticipates a spike in requests for opportunity grants after partners come together during the regional convenings, as we have seen that these gatherings spark a flurry of ideas for further cross-collaboration and learning.

Ongoing organizational development support

As we move forward with building relationships of trust and collaboration with PEAK partners, we will continue working closely with them to help create meaningful and effective safeguarding policies, identify their main organizational challenges, build their capacity development plans, and request organizational development funding as new needs arise. GFC is also eager to work with the LEGO Foundation to access new learning through play methodologies and tools that we can incorporate in our own activities with partners.

Network-building for partners both within and beyond PEAK

GFC has seen the undeniable power of bringing our partners together, in-person, so they can connect, learn, and draw from the collective energy that is generated in these spaces. Over the next months, we will be planning our three in-person regional convenings to be energetic and meaningful spaces for partners to come together, spark new connections and ideas within their different regions, and reflect on their collective journey throughout PEAK. GFC will also continue to explore ways it can facilitate connections between PEAK partners and other external stakeholders that can help them advance their missions.

Staying curious through it all

With everything that we have planned for the second year of the initiative, it will continue to be important for regional teams to work closely with each other, GFC's Learning and Evaluation team, and partners to use the various in-person and online spaces engage with to capture ongoing learning. For example, during the upcoming regional convenings that are planned, teams will take time to open dialogue with partners about what meaningful child and youth participation means to them in their programming and how they are applying this concept in their organizations. This will provide valuable insights into how partners listen to young people and engage them in decision-making in various global and thematic contexts. With some analysis, we can then share insights with partners globally, both within the PEAK cohort and with other GFC partners, about how their peers approach this topic. This is just one example of cross-regional learning opportunities we plan to capture.

GFC and the PEAK partners are diving into our second year together with energy, enthusiasm, and equal parts unanswered questions and creativity to learn while doing, or better put, while playing.

Partner Highlights

Peace for People (Nepal)



Leading children in mindfulness, meditation, and yoga sessions. © Photos by Peace for People

Peace for People started a mindfulness, meditation, and yoga practice with children to develop deeper connection to themselves and the world around them while also giving them a tool to manage anxiety and stress and build resilience. With support from GFC, they recently conducted a workshop for 307 students and 30 teachers across four schools in Dhading, Nepal. The workshop was led by trained mentors from Peace for People. GFC will be co-authoring a blog on this with the partner that will be shared on our website.

Read to Learn Foundation (Uganda)



Children in the Ghetto Book Clinics learn through play using a rhyme © Read to Learn Foundation

Read to Learn Foundation envisions a world where all young people have equitable early access to books and literacy materials. The foundation works to design innovative approaches and initiatives that make reading and learning fun and relatable, with the production of child-friendly reading and learning materials. Through its three-pronged approach of producing relatable and fun reading materials and tools for children, empowering communities through setting up libraries and nurturing the love for reading and meaningful development of young people in underserved communities, the foundation has designed and equipped 5 libraries and distributed over 25,000 books. They are supporting just under 41,000 children in 4 communities in Kampala.

Instituto Mãe Lalu (Brazil)



Children participate in cirandas as part of the organization's activities. © Mãe Lalu

In Brazil's northeastern region, Instituto Mãe Lalu is employing traditional children's songs and circle dances to boost learning and pass on ancestral knowledge. Brazilian popular culture is plural, infused with Indigenous and African influence, and full of folkloric icons, symbols, dances, and music. But celebrations of popular culture have been losing ground in today's globalized world, prompting vital discussions around the role and importance of intangible heritage as an instrument for preserving a population's cultural memory and ancestral knowledge.

Knowing the value and significance of popular culture, the founders of Instituto Mãe Lalu in Northeastern Brazil saw *cantigas de roda* – playful nursery rhymes, often accompanied by circle dances – as the perfect way to develop their learning methodology while promoting the recovery of popular culture and an appreciation of elements belonging to their local community. The institute's pedagogical project “Vamos Todos Cirandar” (“Let's All Circle Dance”) has helped children and adolescents of Santiago do Iguape in Bahia develop their reading and writing skills, while understanding and valuing their roots and identity. Read more about this partner in our [blog](#).

Global Fund for Children (GFC) partners to build a world where all children and youth enjoy equal resources and opportunities in society and live free from violence, discrimination, and exploitation. To that end, GFC invests in innovative local organizations, helping them deepen their impact and build their capacity for social change. Together, GFC and its partners advance the rights of children and youth facing poverty and injustice and equip them with the tools and skills to reach their full potential. Since 1997, GFC has invested \$56 million in more than 1,000 organizations, reaching more than 11 million children and youth worldwide.

www.globalfundforchildren.org

