



Theory of Change Narrative

Overview

Our Theory of Change (TOC) helps us frame our vision and understanding of the social change we seek to achieve with our partners. It identifies the roles we, our partners, and the larger philanthropy and global development ecosystem play in helping children and youth reach their full potential and advance their rights.

We see the TOC as a framework to help us stay on track, build an evidence base for our work, and define and test our hypotheses, all while learning, adapting, and evolving together with our partners and their communities.

Background

GFC's original TOC was developed in 2019 during a transition period that created an opportunity to reflect on past learnings and future directions and to build a shared understanding of GFC's role and vision. Theories of Change must be adapted as organizations change. In 2022, we paused again to consider how the TOC could better reflect the ways we continue to evolve. This process coincided with the release of [*Children, Youth, and Communities Leading Change: Global Fund for Children's Five-Year Vision \(2022-2026\)*](#), which offered an opportunity to align these two essential organizational manifestos.

Structure

The new TOC does not depict change as a linear process. Instead, it conveys the more evenly distributed power and responsibility within GFC's relationships with partners. It also seeks to represent children and young people not only as the recipients of support but also as actors in their own right with voice and agency. Finally, it emphasizes that all of us – children, communities, partner organizations, and GFC – are part of a larger ecosystem, which nourishes us and which we can influence.

Our Dream for Children and Youth

One of the guiding stars in GFC's five-year vision identifies children and youth as leaders and changemakers and centers them as protagonists in their own lives and in the world around them. Everything in GFC's TOC stems from this guiding star, helping us identify the shared dream we work toward – that children and young people thrive in safe, nourishing, and empowering communities; that they understand and exercise their voice, agency, and rights; and that they have access to education and life opportunities.

The Role GFC Plays

Our roles are diverse: i) we help our partners strengthen their work with children, young people, and communities; ii) we create spaces for partners to learn from and collaborate with each other and build their networks; and iii) we engage, partner with, and influence other actors in philanthropy, civil society, and funding spaces to move beyond the status quo toward relationships founded on trust and the recognition that the real experts in achieving social change are the people who are living and experiencing issues at the community level.

This recognition also aligns with the other of the two guiding stars in our five-year vision, Community-Driven Systems Change. We support partners that seek to understand the root causes of issues and we collaborate with peers and other stakeholders to work toward more transformative change.

Our approach to flexible funding allows partners to prioritize their needs in a more systematic manner and invest those funds where they deem necessary.

During their relationship with GFC, we create a multitude of opportunities for partners to connect with other organizations, both within their respective cohorts and with our broader network of partners. Whenever possible, we also try to raise partners' visibility by inviting them to participate in events we organize, alerting them to external opportunities to share their work, connecting them with other stakeholders, and recommending them for funding to our peers.

Safeguarding

At GFC, we are committed to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of young people and to being a safeguarding resource for child- and youth-serving organizations. Our [Safeguarding Policy](#), launched in 2018 and revised annually, reflects this commitment and empowers everyone at GFC to uphold and protect children's rights. It provides guidelines to ensure that we and our grassroots partners do not inflict intentional or unintentional harm on the children and youth we serve, and it offers a clear pathway for responding to and reporting any incidents of concern. During their relationship with us, we help our partner foster a strong culture of safeguarding and strengthen their safeguarding policies and practices.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is one of the three core principles interwoven across our work. We believe that organizations that value individual and collective wellbeing can be more powerful agents of social change. GFC places a high value on the wellbeing of its staff, and we work with partners to encourage them to take care of themselves, their colleagues, and the children, young people, and communities with whom they work. We also recognize that wellbeing can mean different things around the world, and we put effort into understanding our partners' unique contexts.

Responding to Crises

GFC is committed to supporting children, youth, and communities in times of crisis. Our role centers on quickly getting funding to community-based organizations, which are often at the forefront of relief efforts yet frequently do not get the timely support they need. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and multiple crises that receive less attention have highlighted the important role of community-based organizations.

Youth Leadership

To ensure that young people inform our work, we created a [Youth Leadership Council](#) in 2018. Our youth advisors help guide our vision, strategies, and practices as they learn with us about issues impacting children and youth and imagine ways to transform the sector. We've also launched the [Spark Fund](#), a unique fund for global youth-led social change that centers young people as decision-makers in allocating resources.

Community-Based Partners

By supporting grassroots organizations in the ways they need most, we aim to increase our partners' ability to be more effective agents of change, both individually and collectively. By building trusting relationships with our partners, we help them define what success looks like in their individual contexts. During their time with us, partners strengthen their organizational practices and become more adaptive, creative, and resilient. With our support, and their intense efforts, their voices ring stronger and louder in advocating for themselves and their communities, and they grow stronger and more responsive to the challenges they face in their work.

We support our partners to strengthen their youth and community engagement. Partners listen to and approach their relationships with the young people and communities they serve with trust, humility, and compassion. Acting more as thought partners with their communities than traditional top-down instructors, grassroots organizations are also able to engage children and young people more meaningfully in informing their work, which leads to programming that is more child- and youth-centered and less driven by what adults see as most relevant. Working in this way, communities become more engaged in taking control of their development, and partners become more effective at amplifying communities' visions and voices.

By joining thematic and regional cohorts, connecting with a network of alumni partners, and being exposed to funding, visibility, and collaboration opportunities within our broader networks of peers, GFC

partners nurture and sustain connections that make them feel less isolated and better positioned to enact collective change.

A Thriving Ecosystem

Shifting power to communities and young people is central to GFC's work. Along with many other voices in philanthropy and global development, part of our work is to urge our respective sectors to transform mindsets and practices to disrupt power imbalances and imagine bold new ways to resource social change.

GFC, our partners, and the communities, children, and youth they serve are all part of a complex ecosystem of government agencies, civil society groups, philanthropic organizations, and other global development stakeholders. We view our relationship with the ecosystem as collaborative – it exists to support us, our partners, and their communities, and each group has a role in shaping what this support looks like. Together, we can help shape a healthy and supportive ecosystem that works with us, trusts and listens to us, and nourishes our collective wellbeing.

We see a need to decolonize the way the philanthropic sector approaches learning and evaluation. By shifting power to communities, we aim to encourage them to find more even footing with donors and others in the sector. A [decolonized model of learning and evaluation](#) must reconsider how it approaches evaluating community-led change and how it uses the findings. GFC's broader aim is to help powerful players in the ecosystem recognize the benefits of listening to those closest to the work and treating them as the real experts.

Social change is complex and takes time and effort. Shifting power to communities, getting rid of old habits, and unlearning practices embedded in extractive and exploitive systems do not happen overnight. We believe in the power of building trusting relationships and amplifying the voices of communities and young people to make these changes possible. Through our work and the work of our partners, we strive to influence the spaces we are part of to move the needle in the right direction.

A thriving ecosystem requires many different elements working together to nourish each other. We believe in the importance of building and sustaining peer networks and relationships, which can lead to meaningful collaborations and stronger collective impact.

The ecosystem we want to influence and be part of is powerful, thoughtful, and supportive. It seeks opportunities to share and promote knowledge and ideas, continuously strengthening actionable learning and research. A constant dialogue between actors allows each member of the ecosystem to listen deeply, stay current and agile, and advocate for social change.