



Spark Fund - Resourcing Youth-led Climate Action in Southeast Asia

Phase II - 2025-2027

I. The Spark Fund – 2021-2023 Global Pilot

Global Fund for Children (GFC) launched the Spark Fund as a radical new approach to grant making – an inclusive and participatory youth-led fund that invests in youth-led and youth-focused groups. Launched in 2021, the pilot grant making round was led by four youth panels comprised of 40 young leaders representing 15 countries in the Americas, Europe and Eurasia, South Asia, and Southern Africa. Together, they awarded over \$1.1 million to 56 youth-led and youth-focused organizations in 13 countries. From fighting to end period poverty in Lesotho to ensuring access to mental health services in Bangladesh and protecting Indigenous cultural identity in Mexico, Spark Fund partners are working across the fields of climate and gender justice, disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and education, and are playing a vital role in advancing youth-led change in their communities.

Unlike conventional funding models where expert panels allocate modest project-based grants, youth panellists were provided the space, resources, and training opportunities to design an application process, determine the grant making criteria most appropriate to their local context, and disperse flexible and trust-based funding. Using a participatory grant making (PGM) model that allowed room for both experimentation and regional contextualization, the pilot round prioritized creativity, iteration, and learning. Following a successful pilot round, GFC launched thematic Spark Fund grant making rounds focused on two issues the youth panellists identified as most urgent for young people: mental health and climate action.

“More than a process to provide funding, the Spark Fund was a window to give a hand to many youth organizations so that they could continue to fight hunger, the environmental crisis, and violence, among other issues in their communities. It was also an opportunity to learn about and make visible thousands of problems and how youth leadership is willing to confront them.”

-Spark Fund panellist from Peru

II. The Spark Fund: Climate Action in Southeast Asia Phase I (2023-2025)



Figure 1: A group photo of the SEA Spark Fund panellists. © GFC

Climate justice emerged as a key priority for both youth panellists and partner organizations during the Spark Fund pilot, with young leaders emphasizing the lack of opportunities for youth to contribute to financial resource allocation within the climate justice field. In response to and in recognition of the urgent need to resource grassroots climate justice efforts informed and/or led by young people, GFC launched a thematic Spark Fund round in late 2022 to specifically support youth-led climate justice initiatives in Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore.

Southeast Asia was quickly identified as the geographic focus area for this grantmaking round for a few reasons: (a) the significant impact of climate change on local communities in the region coupled with the lack of dedicated resources for community-led climate action; (b) the opportunity to expand the Spark Fund to a new geographic region that was not part of the pilot round; and, (c) the potential to attract and secure funding from donors based in the region. With this grantmaking round, GFC aimed to build on local NGOs' efforts by creating space for youth-led initiatives to take direct action. The Fund also provided fully flexible financial support, trusting in youth leadership and local expertise.

Youth-led Participatory Grantmaking in Action

In early 2023, the Spark Fund grant making round focused on youth-led climate justice in Southeast Asia began with a multilingual call for applications, resulting in nearly 300 responses. Fifteen young and proximate leaders (ages 18-29) were selected as panellists to lead the Fund design and implementation, with GFC facilitating trilingual online learning sessions in English, Thai, and Vietnamese to help ensure inclusive discussions. Panellists shaped the application process and assessment criteria, preparing for the decision-making phase with training on participatory facilitation.

"Here, we have three families [Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore]. Some families are born with more resources, and some families are born with less. We are in a position where we can offer support to those families that need more help and create equity between our three families. Therefore, I agree that we should focus our funding on Thailand and Vietnam."

-Spark Fund panellist from Singapore

Through multiple online sessions and an in-person convening, the youth panellists determined that the Fund would have the greatest impact in Thailand and Vietnam where the impacts of the climate crisis are dire and the need for flexible funding for grassroots organizations is most urgent. Though Singapore would no longer be a geographic area of focus, Singaporean panellists continued to participate as youth panellists.

In Vietnam, strict foreign funding policies and regulatory risks posed significant hurdles to directly funding youth-led organizations. To navigate these challenges while continuing to support young changemakers, the Spark Fund Fellowship Program was introduced, shifting the funding from supporting organizations to resourcing individual young leaders.

Vietnam

The Spark Fund Fellowship Program was designed to support Vietnamese youth who are deeply committed to addressing climate change and environmental challenges. Over a two-year period, individual changemakers were provided with both financial resources (\$8,000/year) and opportunities to enhance their leadership capacity. A cohort of 10 fellows in Vietnam were selected from a pool of 180 applications by the youth panelists through a participatory grantmaking process with priority given to applicants from rural, low-income, or marginalized communities, aligning with the Spark Fund's focus on equity and inclusion.

Thailand

The Spark Fund panellists selected 6 youth-led organizations dedicated to advancing environmental sustainability and social justice across Thailand to receive two-year grants (\$5,000-\$10,000/year). Each organization tackles pressing climate challenges, including climate justice, air quality improvement, biodiversity loss, sustainable tourism development, and urban resilience to climate change. Through innovative initiatives such as educational workshops and capacity-building programs, they work with young people and communities to raise awareness, protect their rights, and adapt to climate change. By implementing community-focused solutions like flood warning systems and eco-tourism projects, along with skill-building programs, these organizations foster inclusivity and sustainability. They effectively harness the voices of youth to influence policymaking and advocate for biodiversity conservation, collectively striving for a more sustainable and equitable future in the region.

Capacity Development and Network Weaving

With Thai partners and Vietnamese fellows all onboarded by May 2024, GFC staff brought the entire network together for a one-week convening in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This landmark event, held in June 2024, was a key opportunity for the panellists, Thai partners, and Vietnamese fellows to connect and collaborate in-person for the first time. The convening brought together more than 40 participants and featured a variety of activities, including workshops on dream-building and goal setting specially tailored for Thai partners, along with Vietnamese fellowship workshops and several networking events. Following this convening, Spark Fund partners and fellows participated in capacity development workshops on topics such as dream-building, setting objectives, and tracking progress. Bi-monthly one-on-one meetings with GFC staff were also established to ensure holistic and targeted support for each partner organization and fellow.

"GFC made us feel that we could rely on them at any time; we feel supported, and it is important for us."

-Spark Fund Partner from Thailand

GFC also hosted several safeguarding workshops for Spark Fund partners in Thailand to address the safety and well-being of both their program participants and staff. These workshops also provided an opportunity for the more established partners to mentor and educate the younger partners on topics like child protection and safety.

In February 2025, GFC brought the entire network of Spark Fund partners and fellows together for a second convening in Rayong, Thailand to reflect and evaluate progress made towards the program's objectives during the first year, both as individual organizations and fellows, and also as a cohort. Additionally, GFC led subsequent organizational development workshops with each partner organization and fellow to discuss their specific needs, goals, and barriers to long-term sustainability. These workshops included a focus on communication skills—a key area identified by partners—to enhance public outreach and fundraising efforts. Members of GFC's finance team participated to provide tailored financial management advice to each partner during this convening.



Figure 2 Interpreters helping to facilitate effective communication in the SEA Spark Fund. © GFC

Throughout 2025, GFC staff have and will continue to provide tailored technical and capacity development support to all Spark Fund partners to strengthen their communication and networking skills, and, ultimately, to help them deepen the impact of their work in their communities.

III. Phase II: Scaling Up the Spark Fund in Southeast Asia

A. Continuing our investment in youth-led climate action in Thailand and Vietnam (June 2025 – June 2027)

Building on the lessons and successes of the first round of Spark Fund grant making in Southeast Asia, GFC has established a strong foundation for continued investment in youth-led climate justice initiatives in the region. Results from the pilot grant making rounds and climate justice-focused grant making round in Thailand and Vietnam demonstrate that by providing financial, convening, and technical support, the Spark Fund is strengthening youth leadership, deepening the impact of youth-led initiatives, and building networks of solidarity across the region.

Inspired by the commitment and ongoing engagement from youth panellists, partners and fellows in Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, GFC has committed to resourcing two more years of funding and capacity strengthening

support for Spark Fund’s Thai partners and Vietnamese fellows to sustain and deepen their impact in advancing youth-led change. Investing in these young leaders now ensures that their movements remain sustainable, adaptive, and impactful in the face of evolving challenges. Local GFC staff have built trusted relationships with partners and fellows, along with partner and fellow networks, and co-designed capacity strengthening plans that are underway. Another two years of flexible funding will allow this cohort to continue building cross-regional relationships while on an organizational and programmatic level our capacity strengthening support will enable their work to become even more community-led and sustainable.

B. Expanding the Spark Fund to Indonesia and the Philippines (January 2026 – December 2028)

Building on the Spark Fund’s success in Thailand and Vietnam and drawing on lessons learned and documented by an external learning consultant, GFC is exploring a further geographic expansion into two new countries in Southeast Asia starting in January 2026 pending availability of funding: Indonesia and the Philippines.

Ultimately, climate change is not just an environmental issue or a country-specific challenge; it is a social justice issue that impacts communities across borders. Marginalized communities, particularly children, youth, and Indigenous peoples, bear the brunt of climate-related disasters despite contributing the least to global emissions. According to UNICEF data, approximately 1 billion children globally are at “extremely high risk” of being impacted by the climate crisis, facing threats to their health, education, and safety. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable:

The Philippines is among the most natural disaster-prone countries, experiencing an average of 20 typhoons annually, as well as rising sea levels and extreme heatwaves. Over 74% of Filipinos identify climate change as a significant national threat (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Indonesia is experiencing some of the fastest rates of deforestation in the world, with forest fires and rising sea levels endangering millions of lives. The impacts of climate change are escalating rapidly throughout the region. In the 2023 INFORM Risk Index, Indonesia was ranked 48th out of 191 countries, placing it in the top third of nations most at risk from climate hazards, including flooding, droughts, and heatwaves.

The lack of diverse voices limits action on key issues affecting children and young people in Southeast Asia, including climate-related disasters, resource insecurity, and socio-economic instability. Indigenous youth face displacement and loss of traditional knowledge crucial for environmental sustainability. Expanding the Spark Fund’s participatory grant making to two additional countries will help to amplify the voices of children, youth, and Indigenous communities to drive meaningful change in a highly vulnerable region and will also help build critical connections between and among youth from different contexts, thereby seeding community-driven systems change at scale.

IV. Program Design and Scope

As outlined above, Phase II of the Spark Fund in Southeast Asia has been broken down into two parts: (1) continued investment in Thailand and Vietnam; and (2) expansion to the Philippines and Indonesia.

GFC has built a regional team to manage **Phase II** of the Spark Fund that includes two locally-based program staff in Thailand and Vietnam—young leaders in the climate justice sector themselves—a growing global focus on climate justice and a network of youth leaders and activists in Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore. For the continuing work in Thailand and Vietnam, GFC has committed to providing two more years of flexible funding, network engagement, and capacity strengthening support to our current partners and fellows.

Applying learnings from the pilot round in Thailand and Vietnam, GFC will recruit a diverse regional panel of youth from Indonesia and the Philippines who will work with a local team to design and implement a grantmaking fund for the two countries – from establishing criteria and eligibility, to designing the call for applications, to assessment and grant distribution. The panel will allocate flexible grants ranging from \$10,000 - \$15,000 per year for their peers

engaged in climate action activities for two years, creating a cohort of 10 to 15 regional youth-led initiatives addressing community-level resilience and adaptation work, disrupting the trend of underinvesting in youth led innovations in the sector. This cohort of new Spark Fund partners will join the existing cohort in Thailand and Vietnam, alongside a growing global community of partners working on climate justice.

Phase II Objectives:

1. **Expand Youth-Led Climate Action in Southeast Asia** – Support and amplify the leadership of young people, partners, fellows and panelists, particularly those from marginalized and/or Indigenous communities, in addressing climate justice issues in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.
2. **Strengthen Participatory Grantmaking** – Apply insights from the Spark Fund’s experience in Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore to ensure youth-led decision-making in funding allocations and program design.
3. **Enhance Regional Collaboration** – Foster cross-country learning and solidarity among youth climate activists, Indigenous leaders, and grassroots organizations in Southeast Asia.
4. **Elevate Diverse Voices in Climate Policy and Advocacy** – Create more inclusive spaces for youth and Indigenous communities to engage in climate discourse and influence local, national, and regional practices.
5. **Build Resilient Movements** – Provide long-term capacity-building support, resources, and mentorship to youth-led and community-based climate initiatives to support long-term sustainability.

We will do this by:

1. **Ensuring Youth Engagement and Participation** along all key design and decision-making processes of the fund - from inception to grantmaking.
2. **Providing Safe and Accessible Funding** for youth-led climate justice organizations in Indonesia and the Philippines.
3. **Coordinating and Facilitating Regional and Global Networking** for GFC staff, Spark Fund partners and panelists to meet and convene both in person and online for co-learning, collaborations, and network building.
4. **Supporting Learning and Storytelling** so Spark Fund partners and panelists can build influence and resiliency.
5. **Strengthening the Capacity of Youth and Youth-led Organizations** by providing participatory planning opportunities and youth-centered capacity development support for Spark Fund partners. All youth-led organizations will have access to GFC’s full suite of capacity mobilization services.

V. Learning

With support from the Porticus Foundation, GFC embarked on a Learning Journey to accompany Phase I of the Spark Fund in Southeast Asia. Objectives of the Learning Journey included:

1. **Contributing to the evidence** for applying a participatory grant making (PGM) process with young people.
2. **Producing evidence-based materials to influence the philanthropic funding space** to become more participatory and shift power to young people and communities.
3. **Examining the role technology can play in PGM processes with youth**, both in facilitating access and inclusion and in creating barriers.
4. **Creating a resource for philanthropic organizations interested in PGM with young people** by documenting comparative learnings and experiences from the various Spark Fund rounds.

The Learning Journey was not a traditional Monitoring and Evaluation activity of the outcomes of the Spark Fund in Southeast Asia. Rather, the process entailed a high degree of creativity, adaptability, and comfort with an emerging learning approach. Our Learning Framework moved beyond conventional metrics to capture the complex realities of youth-led initiatives, recognizing that community-level systems change is rarely linear. Using a mixed-methods approach, participants engaged as co-researchers and co-designers of the learning process and, recognizing the

diversity of our participants, we took a multilingual and multicultural approach with regular opportunities for reflection and adaptation. GFC also organized learning sessions to share key highlights with relevant stakeholders in the philanthropic space in Asia and globally.

The Spark Fund's implementation in Southeast Asia revealed both the possibilities and challenges of regional participatory grantmaking. Rather than pursuing a standardized global approach, GFC made a strategic decision to develop the program through regional pilots, allowing for context-specific adaptation and learning. This approach proved particularly valuable in Southeast Asia, where diverse political environments, language considerations, and civil society contexts required careful navigation.

The first phase of the Learning Journey surfaced many key lessons from Phase I of the Spark Fund in Southeast Asia, which will directly inform the implementation of Phase II. Key lessons include:

- **The program responded creatively to local constraints without compromising its commitment to youth leadership in climate justice work.** For instance, A pivotal design decision emerged in response to Vietnam's more restrictive environment for civil society organizations. Rather than attempting to implement a standard grant making model across all countries, GFC developed an innovative fellowship approach for Vietnam that could maintain the program's core mission while ensuring participant safety.
- **The success of the program's implementation relied heavily on strategic staffing decisions.** GFC recruited young program coordinators who brought both professional facilitation skills and deep cultural understanding essential for youth engagement. The coordinators' ability to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps while maintaining professional facilitation standards created stronger foundations for youth leadership.
- **Innovative approaches to ensure language justice and context-specific outreach strategies built trust with youth participants and set new standards for inclusive grant making in the region.** The program's trilingual implementation across Vietnamese, Thai, and English represented more than simple translation - it embodied a deeper commitment to language justice and cultural exchange. Beyond language justice practices, coordinators employed context-specific outreach strategies that proved highly effective, including leveraging Facebook as the primary platform in Vietnam.
- **Context-specific risks meant the program had to balance innovation with responsible program management.** GFC modified several traditional practices to better serve youth-led initiatives, including adjusting criteria for bank account signatories to accommodate youth-led groups, expanding capacity to fund unregistered groups, development context-specific risk assessment frameworks, and enhancing safety protocols for grant recipients in different political environments.
- **A significant outcome has been the program's role in strengthening regional philanthropy in Southeast Asia.** Working with funders based in regional financial centers created several advantages, including a deeper understanding of local contexts and dynamics, longer-term commitments to regional development, more equitable power dynamics, and enhanced potential for sustainable regional networks. This shift from traditional Global North funding sources to regional philanthropy represents an important evolution in sustainable development funding models.

The final report will be available in the summer of 2025 and we aim to incorporate those results into future work as well. The Learning Journey also reaffirmed that the Spark Fund's participatory grant making (PGM) model has significant positive impacts on youth panellists and their communities. The PGM process catalyzed significant personal and professional development among the youth panellists, with survey data revealing a marked shift from low to medium confidence in both international and regional grant making knowledge. Surveys also indicated significant improvements in decision-making, effective negotiation, and teamwork.

VI. Budget

Our intention is to scale up the Spark Fund in Southeast Asia through a collaborative funding model. We aim to raise \$1 million over 2 years (approximately \$500,000/year) to ensure that critical and flexible funds continue to flow to partner organizations in Thailand and fellows in Vietnam, in addition to technical and convening support from the

GFC team. To expand the Fund and extend support to new partner organizations in the Philippines and Indonesia, we aim to raise an additional \$1.2 million over 2 years.



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