



Sparkling Change: Shifting Power and Resources to Youth

Lessons from Spark Fund's Youth-Led Participatory Grantmaking in Southeast Asia

Written by Trimita Chakma for GFC

Coauthors: Hoan Do, Sippachai Kunnuwong and Bea Moraras

Date: 30 June 2025

This is a condensed version of the full report

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	10
1.1 The Imperative of Youth-Led Climate Action	10
1.2 The Spark Fund: A Transformative Model for Philanthropy	10
1.3 Southeast Asia: A Deep-Dive into Participatory Grantmaking	10
1.4 Objectives and Structure of This Report	11
Chapter 2: The Youth Panelists' Journey	12
2.2 The Participatory Grantmaking Process	12
2.3 Impacts and Growth	13
Personal Growth and Transformation	17
Key Learnings from the Panelist Journey	17
Chapter 3: The Thai Partners' Journey	19
Defining Flexible Funding: A Shift in Approach	19
Impacts Across Multiple Dimensions	20
Challenges as Learning Opportunities	23
How Flexible Funding Addressed Challenges	24
Strategic Learnings from Thai Partners	25
Chapter 4: The Vietnamese Fellows' Journey	26
The Fellowship Model: Direct Individual Support	27
Flexible Funding in Practice: Contrasting with Restrictive Approaches	27
Impacts: Personal and Professional Growth	28
Success Stories: Innovation in Action	30
Challenges and Adaptive Responses	31
How Flexible Funding Addressed Challenges	32
Crisis Response and Adaptability	32
Policy Influence and Advocacy	32
Comparative Insights: Individual vs. Organizational Models	33
Key Learnings from Vietnamese Fellows	34
Chapter 5: A Comparative Analysis of Participatory Grantmaking vs. Traditional Philanthropic Approaches	35
5.1 Decision-Making: Youth Authority and Contextual Expertise	35
5.2 Access and Innovation: Redefining Grantmaking Reach	35
5.3 Funding Flexibility: Unlocking Adaptability and Efficiency	36

5.4 Cultivating Youth Agency and Leadership Development	36
5.5 Building Networks and Catalyzing Collective Action	37
5.6 Diversity as a Catalyst for Innovation: Lessons from a Multicultural Design	37
5.7 Unpacking Impact: Outcomes for Recipients and Institutional Evolution	38
Chapter 6: Global Learnings and GFC's Institutional Evolution	39
6.1 Universal Impacts and Strategic Value Across Five Regions	39
6.2 GFC's Institutional Learning	40
6.3 The Spark Fund Model: Universal Principles and Adaptive Components	40
6.4 Global Patterns: Transformative Impacts for Youth and Funders	41
6.5 GFC's Institutional Evolution: Adapting for Greater Impact	42
Chapter 7: Strategic Imperatives and The Future of Philanthropy	44
7.1 The Strategic Investment Case for Participatory Grantmaking	44
7.2 Spark Fund as a Blueprint for Philanthropic Transformation	45
7.3 The Future of Philanthropy is Participatory	46

Executive Summary

This report synthesizes learnings from three interconnected learning streams: (1) Participatory Grantmaking with Young People – examining how youth-led decision-making transforms both participants and outcomes through deep analysis of the Southeast Asia experience; (2) Flexible Funding Impact – analyzing how adaptable resources affect young leaders' capacity for community change, drawing from Thai Partners and Vietnamese Fellows in Southeast Asia; and (3) Funder Buy-In and Institutional Learning – documenting the strategic value and institutional learning across all five global regions that drives funder adoption of participatory approaches. Together, these streams provide comprehensive insights into the compelling evidence of effectiveness of youth-led participatory philanthropy.

The Southeast Asia Spark Fund round represents a watershed moment in participatory grantmaking documentation. While previous regional rounds in Europe and Eurasia, the Americas, South Asia, and Southern Africa generated valuable insights and outcomes, the Southeast Asia initiative stands out as the first comprehensive learning partnership. This study builds on growing evidence for participatory grantmaking while addressing key gaps in youth-led PGM research, particularly in multicultural contexts. It was specifically designed to systematically capture the nuanced complexities, inherent challenges, and profound transformative impacts of youth-led decision-making, providing an unprecedented depth of understanding. This deep documentation reveals not only how participatory approaches work in practice, but also the demonstrable ways in which they contribute to more effective and contextually relevant outcomes compared to traditional philanthropic models across diverse cultural, linguistic, and regulatory contexts.

Operating across Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam with trilingual capacity, the Southeast Asia round confronted unique challenges—from navigating different political environments to managing complex multicultural dynamics—while maintaining the core principles that have made the Spark Fund successful globally. Early context mapping revealed the need for different approaches in Thailand and Vietnam due to distinct regulatory environments, with Vietnam's increasingly restrictive climate action landscape necessitating an innovative fellowship model for individual participants rather than organizational grants, prioritizing participant safety while maintaining program impact.

Across five global Spark Fund rounds involving over 40 youth decision-makers from 15+ countries, we have learned that youth-led grantmaking produces distinctive outcomes that challenge traditional philanthropic approaches. The Southeast Asia experience spanning Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam provides the most comprehensive documentation to date of how participatory approaches work in practice, revealing both profound impacts and practical insights for the field.

Key Learnings

1. Youth as Strategic Decision-Makers

Southeast Asian youth panelists demonstrated sophisticated decision-making that impressed funders and exceeded expectations. Most remarkably, Singaporean panelists voluntarily redistributed their allocated grants to Thailand and Vietnam based on equity analysis, demonstrating strategic thinking that exceeded expectations. As

one Thai panelist articulated: *"We have three families [countries]. Some families are born with more resources... We are in a position to offer support to create equity between our families."*

This decision-making sophistication translated into enhanced leadership and civic participation across all cohorts. Youth Panelists developed sophisticated grantmaking skills, while Thai Partners honed project management and advocacy capabilities, cultivating a generation of empowered catalysts rather than mere beneficiaries. Young leaders directly influenced policy processes from local to international levels—Thai partners presented 5–6 policy proposals to government officials, with one flood warning proposal incorporated into a mayoral candidate's campaign platform, while GYBN Thailand compiled their National Youth Statement for submission to global climate negotiations through YOUNGO. However, success required carefully balancing their autonomy with targeted support, ensuring they had the resources and guidance needed without undermining their agency.

2. Flexible Funding as Catalytic Infrastructure

Recipients consistently reported that flexible funding was essential for real-world impact, enabling immediate emergency response to natural disasters and conflicts, as well as adaptation to unexpected challenges like weather delays and equipment failures. Thai partners used funds to support local flood relief efforts and provide temporary loans to struggling organizations, while Vietnamese fellows adapted to weather delays and unexpected costs. Globally, GFC disbursed emergency grants during the Ukraine conflict, Armenia–Azerbaijan border conflicts, and devastating Pakistan floods—demonstrating the model's real-world utility for crisis adaptation that rigid funding structures cannot accommodate.

The emphasis on process over rigid outputs created psychological safety that enabled authentic partnerships. Recipients felt comfortable providing constructive criticism—described as "super rare" in traditional philanthropy where grantees fear jeopardizing future funding. Partners noted that funders asked about organizational wellbeing and team dynamics rather than demanding rigid key performance indicators (KPIs), leading to reduced guilt and stress while fostering environments where "the team can work happily and with energy."

3. Localized Approach Unlocks Hidden Innovation

Moving beyond English-only processes removed fundamental barriers, evidenced by Vietnam receiving 300+ applications from a single social media post and Thailand generating 30 quality applications through local networks. Central to this success was GFC's strategic investment in proximate local staff capacity—young program staff and learning partners who brought deep cultural knowledge, established community networks, and native language capabilities. This infrastructure enabled authentic relationship-building with grassroots leaders and organizations that traditional philanthropy rarely reaches—many of these partners had never received any funding before.

The trilingual Southeast Asia model confronted unique implementation challenges across Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Early context mapping revealed the need for different approaches in Thailand and Vietnam due to distinct regulatory environments, with Vietnam's increasingly restrictive climate action landscape necessitating an innovative fellowship model for individual participants rather than organizational grants, prioritizing participant safety while maintaining program impact.

While presenting initial communication nuances, these multicultural and multilingual dynamics ultimately enriched perspectives, developed invaluable intercultural competencies, and strengthened a vital network of young leaders across Southeast Asia.

4. Network Effects and Multiplication

Beyond achieving planned objectives, participatory grantmaking catalyzed entirely new initiatives that emerged organically from strengthened relationships. Thai panelists formed "The Common Youth" platform (securing additional \$10,000 funding), while Vietnamese fellows developed ongoing collaborations extending far beyond formal program periods. GFC subsequently funded participants to attend the COP (Conference of the Parties climate negotiations) as regional representatives, supported presentations at networking events, and allocated additional resources to sustain cross-border climate collaborations. This demonstrates how initial investments multiply through authentic relationship-building.

This multiplication effect was enabled by GFC's comprehensive support ecosystem that proved indispensable beyond financial grants. The provision of tailored capacity strengthening, peer-to-peer learning opportunities, and adaptive engagement required careful expectation management as participants navigated new roles and responsibilities, learning to balance autonomy with collaborative decision-making. While maintaining energy and connections beyond formal program periods requires intentional relationship-building and continued engagement strategies, this holistic approach successfully nurtured the agency and leadership of all youth involved (panelists, partners, and fellows), demonstrating that true empowerment extends beyond mere financial allocation and creates sustained momentum that continues well beyond individual grant cycles.

Report Methodology Overview

This learning report employed a mixed-methods approach, prioritizing participatory and adaptable methods to capture the complex realities of youth-led initiatives. Our insights document the Spark Fund Southeast Asia program (implemented August 2023 – June 2024) through a comprehensive learning journey spanning December 2023 – May 2025, co-designed with youth where possible, that blended qualitative and quantitative data collection from key stakeholders, including:

Southeast Asia Deep Documentation:

- **Youth Panelists:** Young individuals from *Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam* who were responsible for reviewing proposals and making grant allocation decisions. Data was collected through pre- and post-panel surveys by GFC, reflection posters created by panelists, and participatory workshops and discussions facilitated by the Learning Partner.
- **Thai Partners:** Local, youth-serving organizations in Thailand that received Spark Fund grants. Learnings were gathered via an in-person orientation, an online reflection session, and in-depth interviews exploring their "Journey Maps".
- **Vietnamese Fellows:** Young individuals in Vietnam who received direct fellowships to implement their climate justice initiatives. Insights were captured through online reflection sessions using creative exercises like "Journey Mapping" and "Spark Fund Coin Character," as well as in-person convenings featuring individual reflections and group discussions.
- **GFC program and grants management staff** who were directly involved in the Spark Fund's design and approach through interviews.

Global Analysis Documentation:

- **GFC program and grants management staff** who were directly involved in the Spark Fund's design and approach across different regions through in-depth interviews.
- **Comprehensive institutional records** spanning 2021–2025, including many hours of panel member Zoom meetings, program reports by GFC that were compiled using surveys and impact assessments with panelists and partners across the five regions.

This mixed-methods approach allowed for a rich understanding of the Spark Fund's impact from multiple perspectives across diverse cultural, linguistic, and regulatory contexts, directly informing our analysis and conclusions. All qualitative data from non-English speakers underwent multilingual documentation and careful translation to preserve nuance and authenticity. This comprehensive documentation reveals significant strategic value for funders. While implementing participatory grantmaking presented challenges—particularly managing multicultural dynamics and financial systems for nascent organizations—flexible funding directly enabled solutions. Partners could adapt timelines, cover hidden costs of grassroots engagement, and respond to crises, while comprehensive support systems helped youth navigate new responsibilities.

Strategic Value for Funders

For funders seeking authentic impact and sustainable change, the evidence strongly demonstrates that youth panels consistently identify organizations that may be overlooked by traditional processes, make highly innovative and equity-driven decisions, and generate stronger regional networks that sustain impact beyond individual grant cycles. At its heart, the Spark Fund challenges traditional philanthropic models by centering youth agency in genuine leadership roles, empowering diverse youth groups through both organizational grants and individual fellowships, embracing flexible funding with minimal restrictions, and fostering cross-cultural collaboration through multicultural and multilingual approaches. When GFC compared youth panelist selections to what adult staff would have chosen, young people picked distinctly different—and demonstrably effective—organizations. This transformative approach delivers six key strategic advantages:

1. **Access to Hidden Networks and Authentic Grassroots Innovation:** PGM provides unparalleled access to community-rooted organizations and informal youth collectives that traditional processes systematically miss due to language barriers, formal registration requirements, and network biases. The Southeast Asia round alone generated 300+ applications from a single local language social media post in Vietnam and 30 high-quality applications in Thailand, reaching many "first medium-sized grant" recipients. PGM offers a valuable pipeline to emerging solutions and next-generation leaders sometimes invisible to mainstream philanthropy.
2. **Enhanced Decision-Making Quality Through Contextual Expertise:** Youth decision-makers bring irreplaceable local knowledge, cultural competency, and political awareness, leading to more relevant and impactful funding decisions. The unprecedented voluntary fund redistribution by Singaporean panelists, based on their sophisticated analysis of regional equity and need, stands as a powerful testament to this nuanced decision-making capacity.
3. **Catalytic Effects and Resource Multiplication:** Initial PGM investments act as significant leverage mechanisms. The Spark Fund has consistently attracted additional funding from new partners (e.g., Porticus Foundation, Lien AID) and catalyzed the emergence of new youth-led initiatives like "The Common Youth" platform in Thailand (which received additional GFC funding), building sustainable movements and relationships that extend far beyond initial grant cycles.

4. **Crisis Response Capabilities:** Real-time adaptation to emerging needs and environmental challenges through flexible resource reallocation during emergencies and unforeseen circumstances. Partners can respond immediately to floods, conflicts, and disasters while maintaining programmatic momentum.
5. **Development of Next-Generation Leaders:** Cultivation of youth with sophisticated grantmaking skills, regional solidarity, and equity-focused approaches who become long-term philanthropic leaders and bridge-builders across cultural and linguistic boundaries.
6. **Authentic Feedback and Partnership Development:** PGM fosters truly trust-based relationships, creating environments where participants feel comfortable providing honest feedback—a rarity in traditional philanthropy. This authentic feedback enables real-time process improvement and genuine partnership development, reducing power dynamics and fostering stronger accountability.

Implementing this approach also transforms funders themselves. GFC's experience demonstrates that adopting participatory grantmaking requires—and enables—meaningful institutional evolution, including policy changes for funding unregistered groups, modified financial systems to accommodate flexible funding, and a cultural shift from control-based to trust-based relationships. This institutional learning has strengthened GFC's overall grantmaking effectiveness beyond the Spark Fund.

Spark Fund as a Blueprint for Philanthropic Transformation

Based on the comprehensive evidence from Southeast Asia and global experience, we propose the following strategic recommendations:

1. **Prioritize Authentic Youth Decision-Making Authority.** Move decisively from "funding for youth" to "funding with youth." The Southeast Asia experience demonstrates that when young people have real power over criteria, assessment processes, and resource allocation—not just consultation—they make sophisticated, equity-driven decisions that surprise and delight funders, consistently identifying organizations that traditional processes would overlook.
2. **Invest in Proximate Local Staff Capacity.** Success depends heavily on youth-led staff who possess deep cultural knowledge, established community networks, and native language capabilities. These proximate staff members enable authentic relationship-building with grassroots organizations that traditional international funding rarely reaches, providing continuous accompaniment through capacity building, peer learning, and adaptive programming that responds to emerging needs throughout the entire grant cycle.
3. **Embrace Multi-Year Flexible Funding as Standard Practice.** The consistent evidence across Thai Partners and Vietnamese Fellows shows that flexible funding doesn't compromise accountability—it enhances effectiveness by enabling adaptive responses to complex realities. Multi-year commitments with minimal restrictions, streamlined reporting, and trust-based approaches enable deeper capacity building, crisis response capabilities, and greater programmatic impact beyond individual grant cycles.
4. **Build Language Justice Infrastructure as an Essential Foundation.** The trilingual Southeast Asia model dramatically expanded access and inclusion despite its challenges. Budget adequately for professional translation, interpretation, and cultural facilitation as essential infrastructure, not optional add-ons. This investment removes fundamental barriers and enables authentic participation across linguistic and cultural boundaries, reaching communities that English-only processes systematically exclude.
5. **Champion Institutional Adaptation for Systemic Change.** Scaling participatory grantmaking requires fundamental institutional transformation including policy changes for funding unregistered groups, accommodating flexible funding mechanisms, incorporating community knowledge into risk assessment,

and fostering a cultural shift from control-based to trust-based relationships. This includes designing for long-term engagement, catalytic network effects, and continuous learning that adapts across diverse regulatory environments and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

When young people are trusted with genuine decision-making authority and flexible resources, they consistently demonstrate thoughtful reasoning, innovative solutions, and effective leadership that often leads to more relevant and sustainable outcomes than traditional philanthropic approaches. The climate crisis demands innovative, adaptive responses, and funding mechanisms must be equally dynamic and responsive to support effective climate action.

The Spark Fund is more than a grantmaking initiative—it is a testament to the power of trust, collaboration, and youth agency in confronting global challenges. By trusting young people with genuine decision-making authority and flexible resources, GFC has not only supported impactful climate action in Southeast Asia but has also cultivated a new generation of resilient and connected leaders across five global regions. For funders committed to meaningful impact and sustainable change, the Spark Fund offers an invaluable blueprint for a transformative approach to philanthropy. The evidence is clear: **the future of effective, equitable philanthropy is participatory.**

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Imperative of Youth-Led Climate Action

The escalating global climate crisis presents an urgent challenge, disproportionately affecting young people and future generations. In response to this urgency, youth have emerged as powerful catalysts for change, demonstrating remarkable innovation, advocacy, and resilience. This reality underscores the critical need for philanthropic models that genuinely empower young leaders, moving beyond traditional approaches to leverage their expertise and drive for action.

1.2 The Spark Fund: A Transformative Model for Philanthropy

Rooted in Global Fund for Children's (GFC) 25+ year commitment to advancing children's and youth rights, the Spark Fund represents a deliberate evolution in philanthropic practice. Launched in 2021, it pioneers a participatory grantmaking (PGM) approach that directly cedes funding decisions to young people. This model democratizes philanthropy, ensuring grant priorities align with the lived realities and aspirations of youth and their communities, fostering more inclusive, equitable, and responsive resource allocation.

Demonstrating early success, and global reach, the Spark Fund, in its initial rounds (FY 2021–2022), engaged 40+ Youth Panelists from 15 countries, and awarded over \$1.1m in flexible funding to 56+ youth-led and youth-focused groups in 13 countries. These efforts spanned diverse thematic areas, including gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, disability rights, education, mental health, and climate justice.

1.3 Southeast Asia: A Deep-Dive into Participatory Grantmaking

The Spark Fund's Southeast Asia initiative, launched in early 2023, serves as the most comprehensive learning opportunity to date for this transformative model. This region was strategically chosen due to its acute climate vulnerabilities and large, tech-savvy youth population poised to drive innovative solutions.

The Southeast Asia round incorporated several innovative features designed to deepen learning and impact:

- **Multicultural and Multilingual Panel:** Fifteen panelists from Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam worked across linguistic and cultural boundaries.
- **Adaptive Design:** The program uniquely adapted its grant mechanism to local regulatory contexts, offering organizational grants in Thailand and individual fellowships in Vietnam, prioritizing participant safety and program impact.
- **Trilingual Approach:** Utilizing English, Thai, and Vietnamese ensured language justice and authentic participation, addressing historical barriers in international funding.

1.4 Objectives and Structure of This Report

This report synthesizes key learnings from the Spark Fund's innovative approach and its impact, specifically focusing on the Southeast Asia experience while drawing insights from its global operations. It is built upon a robust learning framework that acknowledges existing participatory philanthropy literature and employs a mixed-methods approach, co-designed with youth where possible, prioritizing participatory and adaptable methods to capture complex realities.

The report's primary objectives are to:

- Document the transformative impacts of youth-led participatory grantmaking (PGM) on youth empowerment and community-driven change, by examining the difference PGM can make for youth and their communities at global, regional, and local levels, and identifying unexpected outcomes.
- Analyze how flexible funding affects young leaders' ability to create change, strengthen their organizations, and build sustainable capacity in their communities.
- Contribute robust evidence to the field of participatory philanthropy, including a comprehensive comparative analysis of PGM against traditional grantmaking models.
- Provide recommendations for enhancing the Spark Fund's PGM model and informing the broader field of participatory grantmaking, based on the impact participatory grantmaking has had on funders, panel members, and implementing organizations in terms of buy-in, learning, and changed practices.

To provide a holistic understanding, this report delves into **three interconnected learning journeys** from Southeast Asia:

- **The PGM Learning Journey with Youth Panelists:** Highlighting how youth-led decision-making transformed participants and outcomes in Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- **The Learning Journey with the Thai Partners:** Examining the impact of flexible funding on youth-serving organizations in Thailand.
- **The Learning Journey with the Vietnamese Fellows:** Analyzing direct individual support for young climate leaders in Vietnam.

The report then culminates in a **Global Synthesis of Learnings and Comparative Analysis**, drawing patterns and strategic value from the Spark Fund's experience across all five global regions, and comparing PGM to traditional philanthropic approaches.

Chapter 2: The Youth Panelists' Journey

The Southeast Asia Spark Fund successfully recruited 15 Youth Panelists in August 2023: 4 from Singapore, 6 from Vietnam, and 5 from Thailand. This multicultural and multilingual panel brought diverse perspectives on climate justice, ranging from urban environmental activism to indigenous rights advocacy. Building on lessons from previous Spark Fund rounds across Europe/Eurasia, the Americas, South Asia, and Southern Africa—which had addressed issues like gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and disability rights—the Southeast Asia round specifically focused on climate justice due to input from South Asian youth highlighting climate change's disproportionate impact on marginalized communities.



***Caption:** Spark Fund Southeast Asian Youth Panelists*

At the program's outset, most panelists reported limited confidence in grantmaking knowledge, particularly at international and regional levels, with many having no prior experience in philanthropic decision-making. This made their subsequent development particularly notable.

2.2 The Participatory Grantmaking Process

The grantmaking process unfolded in two phases, each demonstrating different aspects of youth agency:

Phase 1: Thai Partners Selection (August 2023 – January 2024)

This comprehensive 6-month process included:

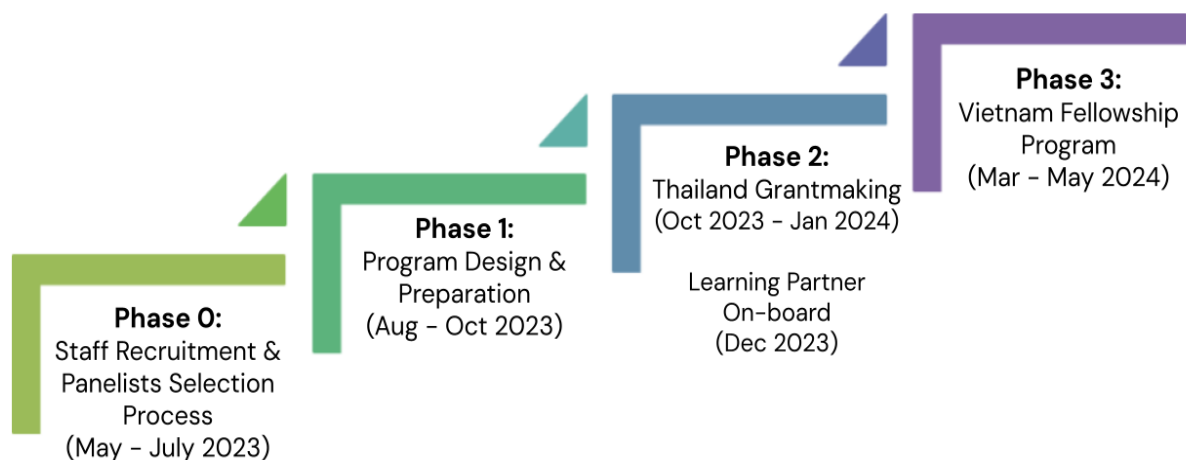
- **Values Alignment and Training:** Grantmaking fundamentals, facilitation skills, cross-cultural communication
- **Collaborative Design:** Youth-led development of application criteria and selection processes
- **Residential Convenings:** Two intensive in-person meetings in Chiang Mai and Songkhla for relationship building and decision-making
- **Consensus Building:** Democratic deliberation leading to selection of 6 Thai partner organizations

Phase 2: Vietnamese Fellows Selection (March – May 2024)

An adapted 3-month process featuring:

- **Context Adaptation:** Modified approach for individual fellowships due to regulatory environment
- **Continued Participation:** 10 of 15 original panelists engaged in the second phase
- **Innovative Selection:** Multi-stage voting process with extensive discussion and consensus-building
- **Fellow Support:** Selection of 10 individual Vietnamese climate activists

Overview of the Process



2.3 Impacts and Growth

2.3.1 Enhanced Understanding and Decision-Making Capabilities

Pre- and post-survey data (14 and 13 respondents respectively out of 15 panelists) revealed significant skill development:

- **Perspective-Taking:** Confidence in considering others' viewpoints increased by 12% (from 4.07 to 4.54 on a 5-point scale)
- **Funding Decisions:** Assurance in making allocation decisions improved by 10% (from 3.64 to 4.00)
- **Regional Connectivity:** Feeling connected to regional activists increased by 16% (from 3.57 to 4.15)

"When I joined the programme we didn't have an idea about grantmaking. We designed a programme, we learnt a lot about grantmaking, I feel it's very valuable. It's about problem solving and new thinking." – Vietnamese Panelist

"In one webinar, Porticus discussed traditional and alternative grantmaking... I never knew that flexible, completely unconditional additional funding was possible. I always thought that some conditions had to be in place." – Singaporean Panelist

2.3.2 Increased Agency and Authentic Empowerment

The process fostered genuine ownership and leadership rather than tokenistic participation. This empowerment was evident in panelists' willingness to challenge traditional approaches and make creative decisions. According to GFC's Senior Regional Co-Director for Asia, youth panels consistently generate 'fresh, innovative, and "cutting-edge" ideas that may not emerge from traditional philanthropic approaches, often developing "in a direction that I don't think a group of adult GFC staff would have taken" as noted by GFC's former Senior Partnerships Manager.

"I think the participatory decision making, the process that we developed and that we fine-tuned along the way was something really worth celebrating." – Singaporean Panelist

"Although the work for this meeting is voluntary and not mandatory, teamwork is something that should be seriously discussed and agreed upon because it directly affects the agenda, [especially when] the agenda is designed and implemented by panelists." – Vietnamese Panelist

2.3.3 A Key Moment: Redefining Equity

The most striking demonstration of the panelists' sophisticated understanding occurred when Singaporean panelists voluntarily proposed redistributing their allocated grants to Thailand and Vietnam. This decision was driven by recognition of greater need and impact potential in those countries, showcasing remarkable regional solidarity.

As one panelist from Thailand eloquently explained: *"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."*

A Vietnamese panelist reflected on this decision: *"I was surprised about how Singaporean panelists decided not to open the call for [Singapore] as they thought that the fund will be more beneficial to Vietnam and Thailand."*

This decision was described by GFC staff as a "monumental moment" that surprised and impressed funders, providing compelling evidence that youth, when trusted with genuine authority, make thoughtful, equity-driven choices that traditional philanthropy rarely achieves.

2.3.3 Building Networks and Regional Solidarity

PGM fostered robust regional networks that "shrink the traditional funder–grantee hierarchy." Survey data showed meaningful relationship building, with panelists' regional connectivity increasing by 16% (from 3.57 to 4.15 on a 5–point scale).

"I am glad to be able to work with fellow delegates from around Southeast Asia. I have also made friends, establish networks across borders." – Singaporean Panelist

"My work previously solely focused on the national scale. Since being involved with Spark Fund, I can expand my work to a more regional level." – Vietnamese Panelist

2.3.4 Catalyzing Collective Action: "The Common Youth"

Beyond individual connections, the panelist experience directly generated unexpected collective initiatives. Thai Youth Panelists, whose collaboration had deepened through the Spark Fund process, developed "The Common Youth" platform—a pioneering initiative for creating a national youth network focused on collaborative development.

This organic outcome received additional \$10,000 funding from GFC, demonstrating how participatory processes generate value beyond planned outputs. Similarly, Vietnamese Fellows developed shared aspirations for collaborative projects, such as building environmental education hubs.

2.3.5 Challenges and Adaptive Learning

Navigating Multicultural and Multilingual Dynamics

The multicultural composition created both opportunities and challenges:

Benefits:

- **Diverse perspectives drove innovation:** Panelists from different countries brought unique viewpoints that led to more creative funding decisions
- **Enhanced learning and transparency:** Cross-cultural collaboration increased mutual understanding and made decision-making processes more open
- **Developed intercultural competencies:** Participants gained valuable skills in cross-cultural communication and collaboration

Challenges:

- **Language barriers created power imbalances:** English-dominant discussions sometimes marginalized non-English speakers, affecting equal participation

- **Limited contextual knowledge:** Panelists struggled to assess applications from unfamiliar local contexts they had never experienced
- **Resource-intensive language support:** Extensive interpretation and translation services were required, adding time and costs to all activities
- **Cultural differences in decision-making:** Different cultural approaches to consensus-building, authority, and communication styles required careful facilitation and adaptation

One Vietnamese panelist noted: *"Language is a barrier, maybe there is some hierarchy. The English-speaking person will take a higher role."*

Despite these difficulties, GFC staff highlighted that achieving language justice extended beyond mere translation, embodying deeper commitments to cultural exchange and power-sharing that required structural transformation. Participants showed remarkable initiative in overcoming these challenges through personal language learning and mutual support.

Operational Complexities

The operationalization of genuine youth leadership required significant adaptation:

- **Participation Structures:** Balancing voluntary engagement with accountability
- **Compensation:** Addressing disparities and ensuring fair recognition
- **Training Needs:** Providing comprehensive capacity building without overwhelming participants
- **Technology Limitations:** Managing online platforms and language translation tools These operational requirements also prompted significant institutional adaptations within GFC itself, modifying traditional practices to better support youth-led initiatives and manage associated risks.

Virtual vs. Hybrid Engagement

The Southeast Asia round's hybrid format revealed distinct advantages and challenges:

	Benefits	Challenges
Virtual Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility and convenience across time zones • Cost-effectiveness for regular check-ins • Reduced travel burden and environmental impact • Effective for information sharing and structured discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited relationship building and trust development • Communication barriers intensified in online settings • Difficulty gauging engagement and non-verbal cues • Technical issues and internet connectivity problems

In-Person Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeper connections and community building • More effective complex decision-making • Cultural exchange and informal learning • Better conflict resolution and consensus building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dense schedules with insufficient processing time • High costs and logistical complexities • Fatigue from intensive programming • Limited time for addressing misunderstandings
--------------------------	---	--

GFC staff reflected on the "powerful" nature of in-person meetings for relationship building, with panelists noting that **key decisions and trust-building happened most effectively during residential convenings**. Ultimately, the experience highlights that future PGM initiatives would benefit from a thoughtful hybrid approach, strategically leveraging the strengths of both formats for optimal impact and relationship building.

Personal Growth and Transformation

Beyond skill development, the PGM process fostered significant personal growth:

Environmental Consciousness: *"After joining I care more about climate change, a very tiny piece of plastic I keep in my pocket unlike before... It increased my awareness of environmental issues."* – Vietnamese Panelist

Language Development: *"Impact on myself, I started learning English 3 months before I wanted to talk with other panelists, I looked up words and learnt by myself so I can understand more."* – Vietnamese Panelist

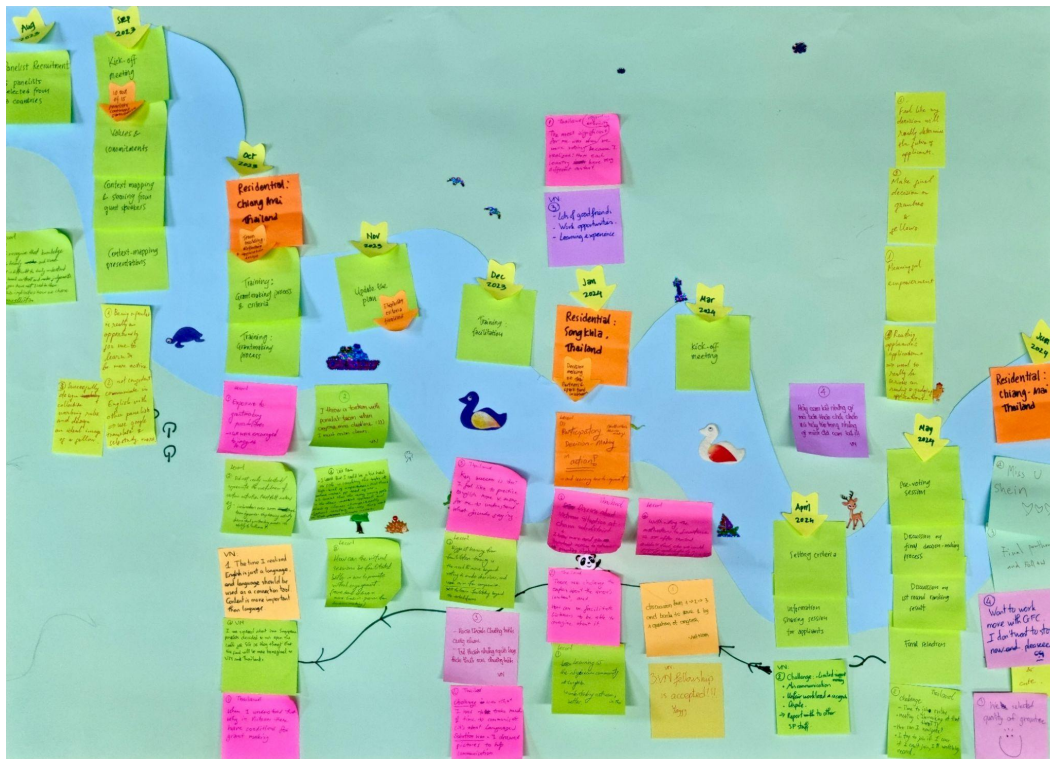
Confidence Building: Multiple panelists reported increased confidence in their ability to contribute to regional climate action and policy discussions.

Key Learnings from the Panelist Journey

The Youth Panelists' experience provides compelling evidence for several critical insights:

1. **Youth Demonstrate Sophisticated Decision-Making:** When given genuine authority, young people make thoughtful, equity-driven choices that can be distinct from traditional philanthropic approaches.
2. **Diversity Can Enhance Innovation:** Multicultural composition, despite initial challenges, can lead to more creative and comprehensive solutions.
3. **Networks Create Lasting Value:** The relationships and collaborations formed extend far beyond the formal grant period.
4. **Trust Enables Excellence:** Providing real decision-making power motivates youth to rise to high standards and take responsibility seriously.
5. **Adaptation Strengthens Process:** Flexibility to adjust approaches based on participant needs and contexts improves outcomes.

Investment in Support Systems Pays Off: Comprehensive training, interpretation services, and relationship-building infrastructure are essential for success.



Caption: Learning Journey River Poster by Youth Panelists, Chiang Mai, June 2024

Chapter 3: The Thai Partners' Journey

Six dynamic Thai organizations were selected by the Youth Panelists to receive Spark Fund support, representing diverse approaches to youth-led climate action:

1. **Dot to Dot:** Environmental education and youth network development in industrial areas like Rayong
2. **Friends of the Homeless (FoH) Khon Kaen:** Grassroots organizing emphasizing community-driven change for vulnerable urban populations
3. **Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN) Thailand:** Policy advocacy and capacity building for youth-led climate solutions
4. **Hug Mekong Youth:** Climate adaptation work in communities impacted by ecological changes along the Mekong River
5. **Free Indigenous People (FIP):** Indigenous rights advocacy and environmental justice across three provinces
6. **Youth Rights and Community (YRC):** Indigenous youth leadership development and sustainable community practices

These organizations embodied the diversity that Youth Panelists valued: geographic spread from northern mountains to central regions, mix of urban and rural focus, range from established networks to emerging grassroots groups, and various approaches from direct service to policy advocacy.

Defining Flexible Funding: A Shift in Approach

Flexible funding, as experienced by Thai Partners, represented a fundamental departure from traditional grantmaking through several key characteristics:

Adaptability in Resource Allocation

Partners consistently reported exceptional ability to reallocate funds based on evolving circumstances:

"GFC funds helped cover gaps that weren't funded by [another fund], including kitchen space, toilets, transportation, and space repairs for our Nature Journey Camp, ensuring activities ran smoothly." – Dot to Dot

"With flexible funding, we could respond to emergencies—like disasters. We could use part of the budget to support things like travel or food for volunteers... It's not like other funds with rigid rules like 'you can't buy this or that.'" – YRC

This adaptability proved crucial for crisis response, with partners using funds to address floods, support accident victims, and cover unexpected logistical needs that emerged during the program delivery.

This flexible approach also proved critical in covering often-overlooked 'hidden costs' of grassroots engagement, such as compensating community members for their time or covering travel for local officials, thereby unlocking more equitable and sustained participation.

Trust-Based Relationships Over Output Fixation

A defining characteristic was GFC's focus on organizational process and well-being rather than rigid Key Performance Indicators:

"I feel that while Spark Fund does expect outcomes, their approach is more about ensuring the team can work happily and with energy. That actually leads to better results." – FoH Khon Kaen

"If the funders understand the context of our work, I believe that we can go far together, and the funders' goals or the goals of the people in the areas will definitely be achieved in the future." – FIP

This approach created psychological safety, reducing the guilt and stress often associated with traditional funding relationships.

Streamlined Reporting and Administrative Efficiency

Simplified reporting mechanisms significantly reduced administrative burden:

"GFC suggested making our reporting lean—maybe just one video or a Zoom call—and offered support around that too." – Dot to Dot

"The Spark Fund designs their reporting process to not be a burden... really helps reduce worry and lets us focus on impactful work with youth and communities." – FoH Khon Kaen

Partners estimated this approach saved approximately 10–15% of resources that could be redirected to direct community impact.

Impacts Across Multiple Dimensions

Youth Empowerment: From Participation to Leadership

Increased Engagement and Initiative: Flexible funding directly stimulated authentic youth participation:

"Initially, turnout was low, but now more people are coming, realizing these issues affect their community. They start to engage more and look for solutions together. It raised awareness and showed them the importance of being involved." – FoH Khon Kaen

"Youth, elders, and community leaders are now more eager to learn about climate change. They see opportunities to adapt and explore what actions they can take next." – Hug Mekong Youth

"The changes can be seen in how young people have become more involved in our work, both in the community and in joint youth activities... It's like this youth group has been increasingly accepted in their work." – YRC

Comprehensive Skill Development: Partners strategically invested in building practical capabilities:

- **Dot to Dot:** Team capacity building through professional facilitation courses
- **FoH Khon Kaen:** Communications training covering storytelling, photography, videography, and editing
- **GYBN Thailand:** Training youth as "biodiversity guides" and policy advocates
- **Hug Mekong Youth:** Media production training and English language development for eco-tourism guides
- **FIP:** Knowledge building and voice strengthening for Indigenous youth advocacy
- **YRC:** Climate education through hands-on earthen house building workshops

"Before, many [young people] were shy and unsure how to talk or facilitate. Now, some can lead meetings and build relationships with community members. That's a clear shift." – FoH Khon Kaen

Tailored Local Responsiveness: The flexibility enabled highly contextualized approaches:

"If someone came up with a new idea or an alternative approach during implementation, we could immediately take that idea and apply it." – Hug Mekong Youth

FIP demonstrated this by starting with sports activities to build community before transitioning to land rights discussions, recognizing that direct political engagement wasn't immediately accessible to all youth.

Safe Spaces for Expression: Several partners created environments where marginalized youth could voice opinions and explore their potential:

"We organized book reviews, book-sharing activities, meditation sessions, bead-making, and cooking workshops to help develop youth livelihoods... We created safe spaces for marginalized youth to voice their opinions." – Hug Mekong Youth



Caption: In November 2024, Hug Mekong Youth organized the planting of the Krai plant (willow-leaved water croton) in Leoi province. The plant, which serves as habitats and nurseries for aquatic species in the Mekong River, experienced widespread death due to the construction of dams along the river. The event was joined by locals, conservationist groups, and university students.

Organizational Development: Supporting Institutions

Enhanced Partnerships and Stakeholder Relationships: Flexible funding removed financial barriers to meaningful collaboration:

"With flexible funding, we were able to invite agencies to our activities. Usually, they'd decline unless it was something like a formal complaint... Later, we found out the real reason they didn't attend was because their agencies didn't cover costs like travel, drinking water, or meals—especially when our site was 100 km away." – Hug Mekong Youth

This "hidden cost" coverage enabled:

- Government agency participation in community events
- Academic collaboration without formal contracts
- Media partnerships for amplifying youth voices
- Cross-organizational networking and resource sharing

Improved Internal Structures and Formalization: Paradoxically, the challenges of managing flexible funding catalyzed organizational development:

"The financial challenges helped us establish a clearer internal structure, leading us to define roles more clearly—including management, accounting, and systems support—and ultimately, to officially register as an organization. So in a way, we have to thank that challenge for helping us clarify our structure." – Hug Mekong Youth

Crisis Response and Adaptive Capacity: Organizations demonstrated notable agility in addressing emergencies:

- **FoH Khon Kaen:** Rapid response to floods and disasters with volunteer coordination
- **FIP:** Provided temporary loans to partners facing funding cuts and covered emergency expenses
- **YRC:** Immediate response to flash floods with basic supplies and volunteer support
- **Dot to Dot:** Timeline renegotiation when facing scheduling conflicts



Caption: Friends of the Homeless (FoH) Khon Kaen, alongside community leaders and youth, conducted a flood data survey in three flood-affected communities in the Thai province of Khon Kaen. Together, they identified areas with high and low flood risk, garbage, and contamination issues.

Direct Programmatic Outcomes: Contributions to Policy and Systems

Filling Critical Funding Gaps: Flexible funds strategically covered essential expenses that restrictive funders couldn't support:

"[Another funder] has strict limitations. GFC funds were more flexible, so we used them to support the space... it helped fix small gaps the other funding couldn't cover, so the activities could run smoothly and support our youth network." – Dot to Dot

Policy Advocacy and Influence: Partners engaged directly in policy processes from local to international levels:

Local Level:

- **FoH Khon Kaen:** Presented 5–6 policy proposals to government officials; flood warning proposal incorporated into mayoral candidate platform

National Level:

- **GYBN Thailand:** Compiled National Youth Statement representing all regions of Thailand
- **FIP:** Mobilizing around constitutional drafts for ethnic minorities and political issues like the Lanna Revolution
- **YRC:** Participated in Forest Peoples Assembly campaigns against harmful policy amendments

International Level:

- **GYBN Thailand:** Submitted youth statement to YOUNGO for global climate action calling on world leaders

"Over the past year, the funding from GFC has had a direct impact by enabling us to engage youth across all regions of Thailand, support them in creating their own projects, and connect directly with the government to elevate youth voices." – GYBN Thailand

Challenges as Learning Opportunities

Financial Management Learning Curves

The increased autonomy introduced complexities for organizations lacking robust internal systems:

Initial Unfamiliarity: *"It was our first time working with such a flexible grant, and we found it unfamiliar initially, having to build that from scratch—which was a learning curve."* – FoH Khon Kaen

Tracking and Documentation: *"Some minor expenses might have been forgotten because we weren't clearing accounts every 3 months... maybe there should be some kind of 6-month budget review. A year is quite a long time."* – Hug Mekong Youth

Remote Area Challenges: *"Documentation challenges in remote areas where receipts are hard to manage... GFC's flexibility allows us to focus on the work rather than getting bogged down by paperwork."* – FIP

Organizational Sustainability Pressures

Many partners confronted the limitations of volunteer-based models:

Staff Compensation Challenges: *"Back when I was first working with [FoH], we had a group of 5–6 friends. After we graduated, some of them wanted to join our organization, but the budget was just not enough. In the end, we could only afford to hire one person—me."* – FoH Khon Kaen

Sustainability Recognition: *"Even though, in the beginning, we felt we could work without pay, we now think about sustainability... We want to push for green jobs. So that's become a new goal—making sure that our network, our work, can generate green jobs and fair pay."* – GYBN Thailand

Time Management: *"Time management comes first... scheduling planning meetings is difficult, and even short meetings can take weeks to coordinate."* – FIP

Community Engagement Complexities

Working with diverse, marginalized communities presented ongoing challenges:

Cultural and Ethnic Diversity: *"Working with Karen, Hmong, Lisu, and Akha indigenous communities, each with their own context... Scheduling meetings is tough—people have many commitments."* – YRC

Participation Equity: *"When we brought together young people from both the city and Indigenous groups, most of the exchanges came from city dwellers who had the resources to participate, while ethnic minority youth could only sit and listen, feeling disconnected... We need to strengthen their voices so they can stand on their own."* – FIP

Community Mindsets: *"In some communities, formal education isn't even seen as necessary. People believe that no matter what you study, you'll still end up farming, tapping rubber, or fishing—just like your family."* – Hug Mekong Youth

How Flexible Funding Addressed Challenges

The Thai Partners' experience reveals how flexible funding directly enabled solutions to common organizational challenges:

Financial Management Support:

- Timeline renegotiation for scheduling conflicts
- Gap coverage for essential infrastructure needs
- Budget adaptation based on local circumstances
- Simplified reporting reducing administrative burden

Organizational Capacity Building:

- Team capacity building through professional training
- Staff compensation enabling organizational sustainability
- Support for formal registration and structure development
- Investment in well-being through "healing trips" and team building

Community Engagement Innovation:

- Compensation for low-income participants' time
- Coverage of travel and logistics costs for remote participation
- Flexible activity design responding to community interests
- Direct community visits when remote coordination failed

Policy Advocacy Enablement:

- Support for proposal development and presentation
- Conference participation and networking opportunities
- Campaign coordination and protest participation
- International representation and statement development

Strategic Learnings from Thai Partners

The Thai Partners' journey provides several critical insights about flexible funding's effectiveness:

1. **Trust-Based Relationships Improve Outcomes:** When organizations feel supported rather than scrutinized, they produce better results and more honest reporting
2. **Flexibility Enables Innovation:** The ability to adapt plans based on community feedback and changing circumstances leads to more relevant and impactful interventions
3. **Covering "Hidden Costs" Unlocks Participation:** Supporting seemingly minor expenses like travel, meals, and participant compensation dramatically increases engagement
4. **Organizational Development Through Challenge:** Managing flexible funding, while initially difficult, catalyzes important internal capacity building
5. **Crisis Response Requires Adaptability:** Rigid funding would have prevented effective responses to floods, accidents, and other emergencies
6. **Policy Influence Needs Flexible Support:** Effective advocacy requires resources that can adapt to political timing and opportunities

Chapter 4: The Vietnamese Fellows' Journey

Ten Vietnamese Fellows represented remarkable diversity in both geography and approach to climate action, spanning from urban centers to rural and mountainous communities across the country:



Northern Vietnam:

- **Mùa Thị Mua:** Traditional farmer in Điện Biên promoting biodiversity and sustainable economic development
- **Trần Diệu Anh (Annie):** Permaculture leader developing multilayered forests in the Red River Delta
- **Nguyễn Thanh Kim Huệ (Kimmy):** Climate researcher in Hanoi focusing on water resources and community resilience

Central Vietnam:

- **Nguyễn Vũ Như Quỳnh (Alex):** Cultural practitioner using artistic methods for climate awareness
- **Nguyễn Quốc Vương:** Scientific researcher developing wastewater treatment and CO2 recovery technologies
- **Nguyễn Đình Nhật Nguyên:** Student creating sustainable paper from agricultural waste in Thua Thien Hue
- **Hoàng Phương Thảo:** Climate education advocate working with teachers in mountainous areas
- **Nguyễn Thị Thái Mẫu:** Farmer practicing natural gardening and traditional medicine in Quảng Ngãi

Central Highlands:

- **Lưu Ngọc Vũ:** Indigenous systems advocate creating equitable development models in Đắk Lắk

Southern Vietnam:

- **Nguyễn Hữu Quỳnh Hương:** Environmental children's book author promoting ecocriticism

This geographic and thematic diversity enabled testing of the fellowship model across varied contexts, from traditional farming communities to urban research centers, from individual artistic practice to community organizing.

The Fellowship Model: Direct Individual Support

The Vietnamese component pioneered an innovative fellowship approach specifically designed for the regulatory context where direct organizational funding posed risks. This model maintained the Spark Fund's core principles while adapting to local political realities:

Key Features:

- **Individual Focus:** Direct support to young climate leaders rather than organizations
- **Flexible Implementation:** Minimal restrictions on how funds could be used
- **Safety Prioritization:** Reduced political risks for participants
- **Innovation Encouragement:** Support for experimental and entrepreneurial approaches

Flexible Funding in Practice: Contrasting with Restrictive Approaches

Fellows provided compelling insights into how their experience fundamentally differed from traditional funding models:

Stress and Mental Health Protection: Reduced pressure and rigidity allowed for happier, more focused work: *"I would feel more stressed, and my project would be more boring because of the pressure of the project output... It would be really difficult to change business plans when necessary while I am a person who easily makes changes when working."*

Innovation and Creativity Preservation: Enabled more creative projects, especially those reaching minority communities or involving experimentation: *"The projects would be less creative, difficult to reach minority communities because of legal barriers, wasting some money on paperwork... [projects] would gradually reach a dead end."*

Administrative Efficiency: Saved significant time on reporting and paperwork, allowing focus on content: *"It would take a lot of time for reporting, and I would also not have funds for personal studies... I would be more stressed in making financial documents, building rigid plans and making me lose focus on the content of the work."*

Community Responsiveness: Allowed for project adjustments based on evolving community needs and climate impacts: *"Each community has a different context, changes in weather and climate also affect the progress of some projects, and during the project, there will be suggestions for adjustments from the community, so the project will always change."*

Youth-Specific Needs: Accommodated the experimental and fluctuating nature often inherent in youth-led projects: *"Youth projects are often experimental and innovative, so there will be fluctuations during the project implementation. Therefore, financial flexibility helps reduce pressure on project staff."*

Impacts: Personal and Professional Growth

Fellows described their Spark Fund journeys using adjectives that capture the transformative nature of the experience: "Learning, focusing, breakthrough," "Amazing, happy, grateful," "Timely, generous, perfect-fit," "Wonderful, challenging, opportunities-opening," "Exciting, learning together, gentle," "Flexible, low pressure, work-creating."

Project Development and Innovation

Agility and Responsiveness to External Factors: Flexible funding enabled rapid adaptation to circumstances beyond fellows' control, such as weather delays or funding shifts:

"My project was supposed to start last June–August, but due to funding delays and weather, we didn't begin until January–February this year. The past five months had low rainfall, so Spark Fund's flexibility allowed us to invest in equipment like pumps and pipes... With other funds, changing plans would require lengthy approvals, but SF lets us adapt proactively to climate challenges, which is incredibly meaningful for such projects." – Dieu Anh

Enhanced Project Scope and Quality: Recipients consistently expanded beyond initial, often student-level, endeavors to achieve commercial viability or scale:

"Previously, our project was a student startup, so the papers we made were only half the size of a hand, just to have a product to show people... Finally, after many trials, I created a piece of paper with the size and quality that satisfied me." – Nguyễn

Technology Investment and Innovation: Flexible funds enabled crucial technological advancements, scaling lab-scale work to pilot community settings:

"Previously, our research was limited to lab-scale work. With Spark Fund support, we could invest in pilot-scale equipment and test our wastewater treatment technology in real community settings. This scaling up was impossible with traditional research grants that restrict equipment purchases." – Quốc Vương

Community-Responsive Adaptation: Fellows demonstrated sophisticated responsiveness to community feedback, integrating local knowledge into their projects:

"During implementation, local farmers suggested modifications to our composting methods based on traditional practices. The flexibility allowed us to integrate their knowledge, creating a hybrid approach that was more culturally appropriate and technically effective." – Thái Mẫu

Educational and Professional Development

Academic Advancement: Several fellows leveraged support for additional courses, conferences, and workshops, significantly expanding their expertise:

"I could focus more on my studies because I didn't worry about living expenses... I could attend conferences and workshops that enhanced my knowledge about climate change and sustainable development." – Phương Thảo

"The financial support allowed me to take additional courses in permaculture design and attend international workshops virtually, expanding my expertise significantly." – Diệu Anh

Career Development and Networking: The fellowship fostered professional growth, leading to connections with researchers and invitations for presentations at regional conferences:

"Through the program, I connected with climate researchers across Southeast Asia. These networks led to collaboration opportunities and invited presentations at regional conferences." – Kimmy

"The credibility from being a Spark Fund fellow opened doors to other funding opportunities and speaking engagements that wouldn't have been possible otherwise." – Alex

Personal Capacity and Confidence Building

Enhanced Self-Efficacy: Fellows reported increased confidence in their ability to create change and contribute to regional impact:

"Before, I thought my ideas were too small to matter. The fellowship showed me that local solutions can have regional impact when properly supported and connected." – Như Quỳnh

Leadership Development: Several fellows took on broader leadership roles, including presenting to government officials and participating in policy discussions:

"I've become more confident in presenting to government officials and participating in policy discussions. The fellowship validated my expertise and gave me credibility in those spaces." – Ngọc Vũ

Innovation and Experimentation

Risk-Taking Enabled: Flexible funding created space for experimental, unconventional approaches, particularly in artistic climate education:

"Traditional funding would never support my artistic approach to climate education. The freedom to experiment with performance, storytelling, and visual arts opened new possibilities for community engagement." – Alex

Sustainable Business Model Development: Several fellows evolved toward financial sustainability, developing social enterprise models or bridging research to real-world commercial application:

"The initial support allowed us to test our sustainable paper concept. Now we're developing a social enterprise model that can sustain itself and provide green jobs for young people." – Nguyễn

"We've moved from small-scale demonstrations to pilot commercial operations. The flexible funding bridged the gap between research and real-world application." – Quốc Vương

Success Stories: Innovation in Action

The Story of Mẫu: Community Healing Through Traditional Knowledge

Nguyễn Thị Thái Mẫu from Quảng Ngãi province exemplifies the fellowship's transformative potential. With a background in social work, Mẫu envisioned creating "A garden to heal the soul – A common house for everyone" focused on traditional medicine and community well-being.

Her Spark Fund journey enabled:

- Establishment of a community space at Bac Phong Primary and Secondary School
- Completion of Traditional Chinese Medicine certification
- Family validation of her choice to focus on gardening and agriculture
- Adaptation of initial plans based on community feedback and opportunities

"Spark Fund helped me overcome challenges I previously hesitated to tackle, like pursuing education. I've long wanted to build an organic vegetable garden, and SF accelerated this idea into reality."

The Story of Nguyễn: From Student Project to Commercial Innovation

Nguyễn's paper production venture transformed from a student project making small samples to commercial viability. His journey included:

- Development of weather-independent production techniques
- Team building and workshop completion
- Achievement of first commercial-quality paper production
- Business registration and securing consistent orders
- Recognition in national competitions (Top 2 in VSIS competition)

"Having funding makes everything feel more achievable... the previous nine months brought achievements unlikely without Spark Fund."

The Story of Vương: Engineering Green Solutions at Scale

Vương's environmental technology center expanded significantly with Spark Fund support:

- Completion of 150-square-meter research hub in Quang Nam
- Technology transfer to companies and revenue generation
- Securing additional EU funding (4,000 EUR for bio-fertilizer project)
- Alignment with Da Nang city's green technology strategy

"I'm currently building another hub in Quang Nam... Before Spark Fund, I never thought I could do so much or on such a scale."

Challenges and Adaptive Responses

Isolation and Support Needs

Geographic Dispersion: Geographic dispersion sometimes led to isolation and a need for more structured peer support or technical mentorship:

"Sometimes I felt isolated, especially when facing technical challenges. More structured peer support mechanisms would have been valuable." – Thái Mẫu

Mentorship Gaps: *"While the financial flexibility was excellent, I would have benefited from more technical mentorship connections within Vietnam."* – Quốc Vương

Communication and Language

Documentation Challenges: Some fellows struggled with reporting requirements despite their flexibility:

"Even though reporting was minimal, presenting my work in English for international audiences was challenging. More language support would have helped." – Mùa Thị Mua

Platform Access: *"Digital platform access in remote areas sometimes limited my participation in online fellows' meetings."* – Ngọc Vũ

Sustainability Considerations

Post-Fellowship Continuation: Several fellows expressed concerns about sustaining momentum:

"The fellowship period went by quickly. I'm working to secure follow-up funding to continue scaling our innovations." – Nguyễn

"Transitioning from fellowship support to independent sustainability requires ongoing guidance and potential bridge funding." – Diệu Anh

How Flexible Funding Addressed Challenges

- **Initial Capacity Overestimation:** Some fellows initially overestimated their capacity when planning projects, but the inherent flexibility of the fellowship allowed for realistic adjustments to plans, preventing project failure and fostering adaptive learning.
- **Balancing Multiple Commitments:** Many fellows juggled climate activism with existing jobs or family responsibilities. Flexible funding provided crucial financial security, enabling individuals to reduce other employment commitments and focus more fully on their climate initiatives and personal growth.
- **External Factor Dependencies:** Climate work often faces unpredictable external factors like erratic weather or unforeseen crises. However, flexible funding consistently enabled rapid, adaptive responses, preventing project abandonment and ensuring continuity amidst challenges.
- **Sustainability Concerns:** While Spark Fund provided crucial initial operating costs, several fellows expressed concerns about long-term sustainability and securing subsequent funding. However, many strategically leveraged the Spark Fund's support as a stepping stone to securing additional grants and developing more sustainable models.

Crisis Response and Adaptability

The Vietnamese Fellows demonstrated notable crisis response capabilities enabled by flexible funding:

Weather and Climate Adaptation

Drought Response: *"When drought affected our farming demonstrations, we could immediately invest in water-saving irrigation technology. Traditional funding would have required lengthy approval processes."* – Diệu Anh

Flooding Adaptation: *"Flash floods destroyed some of our composting demonstrations. The flexibility allowed us to relocate and rebuild quickly, maintaining community engagement."* – Thái Mẫu

Community Emergency Support

Local Crisis Response: *"When my community faced a water contamination crisis, I could use my technical expertise and some fellowship resources to help develop immediate solutions while continuing my main project."* – Quốc Vương

Educational Continuity: *"COVID restrictions affected our in-person climate education work. We could quickly pivot to developing online materials and home-based learning kits."* – Phương Thảo

Policy Influence and Advocacy

Despite the individual fellowship model, fellows achieved significant policy engagement:

Local Government Engagement

Technical Advisory Roles: *"Local authorities now consult me on waste management policies because of the credibility from my Spark Fund work."* – Quốc Vương

Community Planning Participation: *"I'm now included in district-level climate adaptation planning meetings, representing youth perspectives on agricultural sustainability."* – Diệu Anh

National Level Contributions

Research Publication: *"My work supported by the fellowship contributed to national climate research publications that inform government policy."* – Kimmy

Youth Movement Leadership: *"The fellowship enabled me to participate in national youth climate summits and contribute to Vietnam's youth climate action strategy."* – Alex

Comparative Insights: Individual vs. Organizational Models

The Vietnamese Fellowship model provided unique insights when compared to the Thai organizational grants:

Advantages of Individual Fellowships

Reduced Institutional Barriers:

- Lower political risks in sensitive regulatory environments
- Direct support without organizational formalities
- Faster disbursement and implementation
- Reduced administrative overhead

Enhanced Innovation:

- Greater freedom for experimental approaches
- Personal accountability driving creativity
- Direct connection between funder and implementer
- Flexibility to pivot based on individual learning

Professional Development Focus:

- Investment in individual capacity building
- Direct skill development and networking
- Career advancement opportunities
- Personal leadership growth

Challenges Compared to Organizational Grants

- **Limited Scale:** Individual projects typically reach smaller numbers directly than organizational initiatives
- **Sustainability Questions:** Personal projects may face greater long-term sustainability challenges than institutional work
- **Network Building:** Requires more intentional effort to create collaborative connections compared to organizational partnerships
- **Resource Efficiency:** May lack economies of scale available through organizational implementation

Key Learnings from Vietnamese Fellows

The Vietnamese Fellows' journey demonstrates several critical insights about individual fellowship models:

1. **Individual Support Enables Innovation:** Direct support to young people removes institutional barriers and enables experimental approaches
2. **Flexibility Reduces Stress and Enhances Creativity:** Freedom from rigid requirements allows fellows to focus on impact rather than compliance
3. **Personal Development Has Ripple Effects:** Investing in individual capacity creates long-term change agents who continue influencing their communities
4. **Peer Networks Emerge Organically:** Even individual fellowships generate collaborative relationships and mutual support systems
5. **Crisis Response Requires Adaptability:** Flexible funding enables rapid response to environmental and social emergencies
6. **Professional Credibility Opens Doors:** Fellowship recognition provides legitimacy that enables policy influence and additional opportunities
7. **Sustainability Requires Ongoing Support:** Transitioning from fellowship to independence benefits from continued mentorship and potential bridge funding

Chapter 5: A Comparative Analysis of Participatory Grantmaking vs. Traditional Philanthropic Approaches

The comprehensive Southeast Asia experience, rigorously documented through the lenses of Youth Panelists, Thai Partners, and Vietnamese Fellows, provides significant evidence for the notable effectiveness of participatory grantmaking (PGM). This section systematically compares PGM with traditional philanthropic approaches, drawing on direct participant feedback, observations from GFC staff, and insights from the broader Spark Fund portfolio across five global regions.

5.1 Decision-Making: Youth Authority and Contextual Expertise

- **Participatory Grantmaking (PGM):** At its core, PGM genuinely shifts power by positioning youth as primary decision-makers. In Southeast Asia, 15 young people made final funding decisions for grants to 6 Thai organizations and 10 Vietnamese fellows totaling \$160,000, designing selection criteria that prioritized community relationships and local relevance. This approach leverages **valuable contextual expertise**: Youth Panelists inherently understand on-the-ground realities, local networks, and cultural nuances that external assessors would typically miss. This process fosters a distributed expertise model, where collective wisdom and diverse perspectives reduce individual bias and enhance transparent, accountable decision-making.
- **Traditional Grantmaking:** In contrast, traditional models predominantly position youth as beneficiaries, with decisions made by adult staff or boards. These approaches often suffer from external expertise limitations, lacking the local knowledge and cultural competency crucial for effective grassroots engagement. Furthermore, they are often characterized by **risk aversion**, prioritizing risk mitigation, favoring established organizations, and showing reluctance to fund innovative or experimental approaches, which can limit innovation and exclude emergent, high-potential groups.

5.2 Access and Innovation: Redefining Grantmaking Reach

- **Participatory Grantmaking (PGM):** The Spark Fund significantly expands philanthropic reach and fosters innovation. The Southeast Asia experience generated a notable applicant pool, with Thailand receiving 30 high-quality applications through local networks and Vietnam attracting over 300 expressions of interest from a single social media post. This success stems from **expanded grassroots access** to organizations that had "never" applied through traditional processes due to language barriers, lack of formal registration, or unfamiliarity with institutional requirements. **Language justice and cultural adaptation** are central to this, with application processes and professional interpretation conducted in local languages (Thai,

Vietnamese, English) and culturally adapted outreach. Youth panelists also drive **innovation in assessment criteria**, emphasizing community relationships, local relevance, and potential over mere track records. As a Thai partner highlighted, "We never thought we could access funding like this. Most international funders require English applications and formal organizational structures that exclude groups like ours".

- **Traditional Grantmaking:** Conversely, traditional processes can sometimes create barriers to inclusion through English-only applications, complex requirements, and strict formal registration, potentially overlooking impactful grassroots organizations. Their **rigid assessment frameworks** can miss locally relevant innovation and prioritize standardized metrics over authentic community-driven needs, while **limited feedback loops** hinder their capacity for continuous improvement and prevent honest criticism of funders due to power dynamics.

5.3 Funding Flexibility: Unlocking Adaptability and Efficiency

- **Participatory Grantmaking (PGM):** It offered **financial adaptability** for immediate crisis response (e.g., floods, emergencies), enabling organizations to reallocate funds for unexpected opportunities or crucial infrastructure investments sometimes excluded by restrictive funding. Partners consistently reported a **10–15% resource savings** through streamlined reporting (e.g., video reports instead of lengthy written documentation), allowing more resources to be redirected to direct community impact. This approach **fosters enhanced community responsiveness**, allowing adaptation based on real-time feedback and covering "hidden costs" (like participant compensation or remote travel) that traditional funding may overlook. As one Thai partner explained, "With flexible funding, we could respond to emergencies—like disasters. We could use part of the budget to support things like travel or food for volunteers... It's not like other funds with rigid rules".
- **Traditional Grantmaking:** Recipients explicitly described the **increased stress and reduced innovation** sometimes inherent in traditional funding: *"I would feel more stressed, and my project would be more boring because of the pressure of the project output"* and *"The projects would be less creative, difficult to reach minority communities because of legal barriers"*. This leads to **administrative inefficiency**, where extensive, rigid requirements consume resources without enhancing impact, and **limited community reach** due to an inability to adapt or compensate marginalized participants.

5.4 Cultivating Youth Agency and Leadership Development

- **Participatory Grantmaking (PGM):** PGM fosters authentic youth empowerment through **real decision-making authority**. Youth panelists exercise final authority over funding, design criteria, and actively modify processes based on learning. This leads to **comprehensive capacity building**, developing skills in grantmaking, cross-cultural communication, critical thinking about equity, and robust network building. Quantitative data showed measurable increases in decision-making confidence (10%), perspective-taking (12%), and regional connectivity (16%), demonstrating enhanced agency. One panelist reflected, "When I joined the programme we didn't have an idea about grantmaking. We designed a programme, we learnt a lot... It's about problem solving and new thinking".
- **Traditional Grantmaking:** Conversely, traditional approaches typically limit youth to **advisory rather than decision-making roles**, offering only tokenistic engagement. This results in **skill development gaps**, focusing narrowly on programmatic skills rather than broader systems thinking, and **reduced innovation and risk-taking**, as adult perspectives often constrain experimental or youth-driven solutions.

5.5 Building Networks and Catalyzing Collective Action

- **Participatory Grantmaking (PGM):** PGM uniquely fosters **sustainable network development** and catalyzes **collective action**. The Southeast Asia process automatically generated robust regional networks, evident in a 16% increase in regional connectivity among panelists and the emergence of initiatives like "The Common Youth" platform by Thai panelists (receiving additional GFC funding). Beyond individual projects, it fosters **relationship-based approaches** that "shrink the traditional funder-grantee hierarchy," creating genuine partnerships.
- **Traditional Grantmaking:** Traditional funding typically results in **isolated project implementation**, with organizations working independently and limited peer learning opportunities. This leads to **limited network effects** and **hierarchical relationships** that hinder authentic partnership and sustained collective action.

5.6 Diversity as a Catalyst for Innovation: Lessons from a Multicultural Design

The Southeast Asia Spark Fund's trilingual, tricultural design (Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam working in English, Thai, Vietnamese) offered significant insight into the impact of diversity in PGM.

The Paradox of Productive Difficulty: The experience revealed a crucial insight: the complexities and challenges created by multicultural composition became sources of innovation and **enhanced decision-making quality**. This led to **forced transparency** (justifying decisions across cultures increased rigor), **creative problem-solving** (communication barriers led to better process design), **enhanced objectivity** (cultural distance reduced bias), and a **broader solution set**.

Multicultural Advantages:

- **Enhanced Perspective and Decision-Making Quality:** Diversity brought a broader range of solutions and approaches, fostering cross-cultural learning and skill transfer (e.g., Thai panelists' focus on indigenous rights influencing Singaporean thinking).
- **More Objective and Transparent Assessment:** Cultural distance reduced personal biases, and the need to explain decisions across diverse backgrounds increased accountability.
- **Regional Network Building and Solidarity:** The process fostered lasting cross-border connections and a sophisticated appreciation for regional dynamics.
- **The Breakthrough Fund Redistribution:** A powerful demonstration of multicultural wisdom was when Singaporean panelists voluntarily proposed redistributing their allocated grants to Thailand and Vietnam. This notable decision showcased their sophisticated equity analysis and regional solidarity over national interest, demonstrating a depth of decision-making that can be less common in homogeneous groups.

Navigating Multicultural Challenges and Adaptive Solutions: Despite these profound advantages, challenges emerged, particularly around **language hierarchy and power dynamics** (e.g., English dominance leading to participation imbalances) and the complexities of **cultural communication styles** (e.g., direct vs. indirect communication, varying approaches to authority).

GFC implemented **adaptive solutions** and invested significantly in **language justice infrastructure**, including language interpretation (budgeting additional resources for language support), cultural adaptation beyond literal translation, and multilingual documentation systems. A **strategic hybrid engagement model** (in-person for trust-building, virtual for information sharing) and **culturally responsive facilitation** were also vital. This experience highlights that successful multicultural PGM requires extended timelines for cultural processing, multiple communication modalities, adaptive facilitation, and explicit strategies to mitigate language hierarchy and ensure cultural equity. High retention rates (10 of 15 panelists for Phase 2) further demonstrate successful navigation of these complexities.

5.7 Unpacking Impact: Outcomes for Recipients and Institutional Evolution

- **Outcomes for Recipients:** Under PGM, recipients consistently reported **enhanced adaptability and innovation**, freedom to experiment, reduced stress, and increased creativity. This fostered **stronger relationships and trust** with funders and led to **improved organizational capacity**, including better internal systems and enhanced ability to leverage additional resources.
- **Institutional Change and Adaptation (GFC):** The Spark Fund's success has necessitated **comprehensive institutional adaptation** within GFC, including policy changes (e.g., funding unregistered groups globally), adjustments to financial systems, and significant staff development in facilitation and youth engagement. This represents a fundamental **cultural transformation**, moving from control to trust-based relationships, embracing uncertainty, and valuing youth as experts. This evidence strongly supports that multicultural participatory grantmaking, despite its complexity and resource requirements, can generate outcomes that justify the investment.

Chapter 6: Global Learnings and GFC's Institutional Evolution

The Southeast Asia experience, while a deep dive, represents just one iteration of the Spark Fund's operations across five global regions since its 2021 launch. This global portfolio provides notable evidence of consistent patterns that validate participatory grantmaking's (PGM) impactful potential and highlight GFC's significant institutional learning and adaptation in this evolving philanthropic model.

6.1 Universal Impacts and Strategic Value Across Five Regions

The Spark Fund's application of PGM has consistently demonstrated notable impacts on both young participants and the broader philanthropic ecosystem across diverse contexts, including Europe and Eurasia, the Americas, South Asia, Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia.

6.1.1 For Panel Members: Individual and Collective Impact

Across all regions, PGM fundamentally transforms young participants by developing their skills, expanding networks, and fostering genuine decision-making.

- **Enhanced Understanding and Skill Development:** Panelists consistently gained a sophisticated understanding of grantmaking. For instance, 80% of Southern Africa panelists had no prior funding decision experience, the Americas saw a 25% increase in confidence using technology for social change, and South Asia reported a 32% increase in belief they could influence funding decisions.
- **Increased Agency and Authentic Empowerment:** Entrusting youth with significant decision-making power fostered genuine ownership. A panelist from the Americas noted the Spark Fund made it "possible and feasible for them to include us and listen to us, giving us responsible freedom".
- **Innovation Through Fresh Perspectives:** Youth panels consistently generate fresh, innovative, and cutting-edge ideas that may not emerge from traditional philanthropic approaches. GFC's analysis showed Youth Panelists picked "significantly different organizations than GFC staff would have chosen".
- **Stronger Networks and Collaboration:** PGM fosters robust regional networks that "shrink the traditional funder-grantee hierarchy". These connections enable youth to expand their work from national to regional levels, with relationships persisting beyond formal program periods.
- **Emergence of Collective Action:** Beyond individual connections, the panelist experience directly catalyzed collective initiatives, such as "The Common Youth" platform by Thai Youth Panelists.

6.1.2 For Funders: Strategic Value and Investment Case

PGM offers distinct strategic value for funders, providing compelling reasons for increased investment:

- **Access to Grassroots Organizations:** PGM, particularly through youth networks and multilingual approaches, provides access to "very local" and informal youth collectives that "would never apply through traditional processes". Many Spark Fund partners were "first-time recipients of medium-sized grants" due to a lack of trust from other funders.
- **More Relevant and Contextually Informed Decisions:** Transferring decision-making to regional youth provides "local knowledge and contextual expertise" leading to "more relevant and impactful funding decisions".
- **Cultivation of Stronger, Self-Sustaining Networks:** The PGM model "automatically creates a much stronger regional network" and "network density" that fosters collaborations continuing "even after 18 months," building sustainable movements.
- **Authentic Feedback and Reduced Power Dynamics:** PGM creates environments where young participants feel "comfortable enough to criticize or to say, this isn't working," which is "super rare" in traditional philanthropy where grantees fear jeopardizing future funding.
- **Catalyst for Additional Funding:** Initial investment in PGM acts as an "experiment" and "evidence base", attracting new donor relationships and catalyzing additional funding opportunities.

6.2 GFC's Institutional Learning

GFC's experience across multiple Spark Fund rounds demonstrates a notable institutional evolution towards more participatory, flexible, and contextually responsive philanthropic practices.

6.3 The Spark Fund Model: Universal Principles and Adaptive Components

Since its inception, the Spark Fund has employed a consistent core methodology globally, characterized by universal principles and adaptive components tailored to local contexts:

- **Universal Elements:** The model consistently prioritizes inclusive recruitment of historically excluded youth voices, comprehensive capacity building in grantmaking and facilitation, youth-led design of application criteria and processes, collaborative consensus-building for funding decisions, flexible implementation responsive to emerging needs, and continuous iterative improvement based on participant feedback.
- **Adaptive Components:** The Spark Fund's success across diverse contexts demonstrates its flexibility, adapting to:
 - **Linguistic diversity:** From monolingual (e.g., Americas' Spanish-only round) to trilingual (Southeast Asia's English, Thai, Vietnamese) accommodation.

- **Regulatory environments:** From organizational grants to individual fellowships, as seen in Vietnam due to political contexts.
- **Thematic focus:** Ranging from broad rights-based approaches to specialized areas like climate justice, mental health, and LGBTQ+ rights.
- **Crisis Response:** Demonstrating agility in disbursing emergency grants during conflicts (e.g., Ukraine) or natural disasters (e.g., Pakistan floods).

This strategic blend of consistent principles and adaptive components has enabled the Spark Fund to achieve significant collective impact globally: engaging over 58 youth decision-makers from 15+ countries, supporting 56+ grantee partners across 13+ countries, and committing over \$546,000 in flexible funding across diverse thematic areas.

6.4 Global Patterns: Transformative Impacts for Youth and Funders

The cumulative experience across all five regions reveals consistent patterns that validate PGM's impactful potential:

6.4.1 For Panel Members: Universal Impact

Across all regions, PGM fundamentally transforms young participants by developing their skills, expanding networks, and fostering genuine decision-making.

- **Enhanced Understanding and Skill Development:** Panelists consistently gained a sophisticated understanding of grantmaking. For instance, 80% of Southern Africa panelists had no prior funding decision experience, the Americas saw a 25% increase in confidence using technology for social change, and South Asia reported a 32% increase in belief they could influence funding decisions.
- **Increased Agency and Authentic Empowerment:** Entrusting youth with significant decision-making power fostered genuine ownership. A panelist from the Americas noted the Spark Fund made it "possible and feasible for them to include us and listen to us, giving us responsible freedom to be included in what seemed fundamental to us in steps such as the creation of the call, without bureaucratic limitations".
- **Innovation Through Fresh Perspectives:** Youth panels consistently generate "fresh, innovative, and 'cutting-edge' ideas that might not emerge from traditional philanthropic approaches," with GFC's analysis showing Youth Panelists picked "significantly different organizations than GFC staff would have chosen".
- **Stronger Networks and Collaboration:** PGM fosters robust regional networks that "shrink the traditional funder-grantee hierarchy". These connections enable youth to expand their work from national to regional levels, with relationships persisting beyond formal program periods.
- **Emergence of Collective Action:** Beyond individual connections, the panelist experience directly catalyzed collective initiatives, such as "The Common Youth" platform by Thai Youth Panelists.

6.4.2 For Funders: Consistent Strategic Value

PGM consistently offers distinct strategic value for funders across all regions:

- **Access to Grassroots Organizations:** PGM provides unparalleled access to "very local" and informal youth collectives that "would never be identified or apply through traditional processes". Many Spark Fund partners were "first-time recipients of medium-sized grants" due to a lack of trust from other funders.
- **More Relevant and Contextually Informed Decisions:** Transferring decision-making to regional youth provides "local knowledge and contextual expertise" leading to "more relevant and impactful funding decisions".
- **Cultivation of Stronger, Self-Sustaining Networks:** The PGM model "automatically creates a much stronger regional network" and "network density" that fosters collaborations continuing "even after 18 months", building sustainable movements.
- **Authentic Feedback and Reduced Power Dynamics:** PGM creates environments where young participants feel "comfortable enough to criticize or to say, this isn't working," which can be less common in traditional philanthropy.
- **Catalyst for Additional Funding:** Initial investment in PGM acts as an "experiment" and "evidence base", attracting new donor relationships and catalyzing additional funding opportunities.

6.5 GFC's Institutional Evolution: Adapting for Greater Impact

GFC's experience across multiple Spark Fund rounds demonstrates a profound institutional evolution towards more participatory, flexible, and contextually responsive philanthropic practices.

6.5.1 Strategic Shift from Tokenism to Authentic Leadership

GFC has undergone a deliberate 6–7 year shift towards authentic youth leadership, directly empowering young people to make funding decisions. This is built upon a deep commitment to **trust-based philanthropy**, providing "flexible funds with no strings attached" and enabling annual rather than rigid expenditure reporting, concretely "shifting the power to communities". GFC is institutionalizing these changes across its broader operations, including being more open to funding unregistered groups and adjusting bank account signatory requirements. To ensure long-term sustainability, GFC has actively pursued a pooled funding structure with multiple donors, diversifying beyond initial single-donor reliance.

6.5.2 Key Milestones and Adaptive Learning Across Regions

Insights from early pilot rounds directly informed subsequent iterations, allowing GFC to refine its approach:

- **Prioritizing Language Justice and Accessibility:** A significant breakthrough was the recognition and implementation of multilingual support. The Americas round was entirely in Spanish, and Southeast Asia successfully utilized a trilingual approach (Thai, English, Vietnamese), addressing historical barriers of English-only applications and validating the importance of local languages.

- **Adapting to Diverse Regulatory and Political Contexts:** GFC learned to navigate complex country contexts with remarkable flexibility. This included securing local fiscal sponsors in India due to restrictive foreign donation regimes and pivoting to an innovative individual fellowship model in Vietnam to ensure participant safety amidst political risks.
- **Empowering Authentic Youth-Led Decision Making:** A powerful milestone was the Southeast Asia youth panel's decision to redirect funding from Singapore to Thailand and Vietnam, showcasing their deep contextual understanding and commitment to equity over mere inclusion. This act of young people "rejecting money" was described as "refreshing" for funders, demonstrating genuine youth agency.
- **Crisis Response and Flexible Emergency Support:** The flexible nature of the Spark Fund enabled rapid responses to emergencies across regions, from conflict-affected areas (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine) to natural disasters (Pakistan floods, Thai floods), covering essential costs.
- **Recognizing the Critical Value of Local Staff:** A key learning was that the success of the Spark Fund is largely attributed to local staff who possess vital cultural and linguistic understanding, underscoring a shift towards on-the-ground presence for effective grantmaking.

This comprehensive global experience underscores that the Spark Fund is an experiment and evidence base that provides a compelling blueprint for other grantmakers to adopt more participatory and youth-led approaches.

Chapter 7: Strategic Imperatives and The Future of Philanthropy

The comprehensive evidence from the Spark Fund's journey across Southeast Asia and its five global regions indicates that when young people are genuinely trusted with decision-making authority and flexible resources, they can consistently drive more effective, equitable, and innovative outcomes than traditional philanthropic approaches. This report culminates in strategic insights and a clear blueprint for funders committed to impactful and sustainable change.

7.1 The Strategic Investment Case for Participatory Grantmaking

The Spark Fund's experience reveals distinct strategic advantages for funders:

1. **Access to Hidden Networks and Authentic Grassroots Innovation:** PGM provides unparalleled access to community-rooted organizations and informal youth collectives that traditional processes systematically miss due to language barriers, formal registration requirements, and network biases. The Southeast Asia round alone generated 300+ applications from a single local language social media post in Vietnam and 30 high-quality applications in Thailand, reaching many "first medium-sized grant" recipients. PGM offers a valuable pipeline to emerging solutions and next-generation leaders sometimes invisible to mainstream philanthropy.
2. **Enhanced Decision-Making Quality Through Contextual Expertise:** Youth decision-makers bring irreplaceable local knowledge, cultural competency, and political awareness, leading to more relevant and impactful funding decisions. The unprecedented voluntary fund redistribution by Singaporean panelists, based on their sophisticated analysis of regional equity and need, stands as a powerful testament to this nuanced decision-making capacity.
3. **Catalytic Effects and Resource Multiplication:** Initial PGM investments act as significant leverage mechanisms. The Spark Fund has consistently attracted additional funding from new partners (e.g., Porticus Foundation, Lien AID) and catalyzed the emergence of new youth-led initiatives like "The Common Youth" platform in Thailand (which received additional GFC funding), building sustainable movements and relationships that extend far beyond initial grant cycles.
4. **Crisis Response Capabilities:** Real-time adaptation to emerging needs and environmental challenges through flexible resource reallocation during emergencies and unforeseen circumstances. Partners can respond immediately to floods, conflicts, and disasters while maintaining programmatic momentum.

5. **Development of Next-Generation Leaders:** Cultivation of youth with sophisticated grantmaking skills, regional solidarity, and equity-focused approaches who become long-term philanthropic leaders and bridge-builders across cultural and linguistic boundaries.
6. **Authentic Feedback and Partnership Development:** PGM fosters truly trust-based relationships, creating environments where participants feel comfortable providing honest feedback—a rarity in traditional philanthropy. This authentic feedback enables real-time process improvement and genuine partnership development, reducing power dynamics and fostering stronger accountability.

7.2 Spark Fund as a Blueprint for Philanthropic Transformation

Based on the comprehensive evidence from Southeast Asia and global experience, we propose the following strategic recommendations:

1. **Prioritize Authentic Youth Decision-Making Authority.** Move decisively from "funding for youth" to "funding with youth." The Southeast Asia experience demonstrates that when young people have real power over criteria, assessment processes, and resource allocation—not just consultation—they make sophisticated, equity-driven decisions that surprise and delight funders, consistently identifying organizations that traditional processes would overlook.
2. **Invest in Proximate Local Staff Capacity.** Success depends heavily on youth-led staff who possess deep cultural knowledge, established community networks, and native language capabilities. These proximate staff members enable authentic relationship-building with grassroots organizations that traditional international funding rarely reaches, providing continuous accompaniment through capacity building, peer learning, and adaptive programming that responds to emerging needs throughout the entire grant cycle.
3. **Embrace Multi-Year Flexible Funding as Standard Practice.** The consistent evidence across Thai Partners and Vietnamese Fellows shows that flexible funding doesn't compromise accountability—it enhances effectiveness by enabling adaptive responses to complex realities. Multi-year commitments with minimal restrictions, streamlined reporting, and trust-based approaches enable deeper capacity building, crisis response capabilities, and greater programmatic impact beyond individual grant cycles.
4. **Build Language Justice Infrastructure as an Essential Foundation.** The trilingual Southeast Asia model dramatically expanded access and inclusion despite its challenges. Budget adequately for professional translation, interpretation, and cultural facilitation as essential infrastructure, not optional add-ons. This investment removes fundamental barriers and enables authentic participation across linguistic and cultural boundaries, reaching communities that English-only processes systematically exclude.
5. **Champion Institutional Adaptation for Systemic Change.** Scaling participatory grantmaking requires fundamental institutional transformation including policy changes for funding unregistered groups, accommodating flexible funding mechanisms, incorporating community knowledge into risk assessment, and fostering a cultural shift from control-based to trust-based relationships. This includes designing for long-term engagement, catalytic network effects, and continuous learning that adapts across diverse regulatory environments and cultural contexts.

7.3 The Future of Philanthropy is Participatory

The evidence from the Spark Fund's journey across Southeast Asia and four other global regions strongly demonstrates that participatory grantmaking delivers compelling outcomes for all stakeholders. Young people, when trusted with genuine decision-making authority and flexible resources, consistently demonstrate thoughtful reasoning, innovative solutions, and effective leadership that often leads to more relevant and sustainable outcomes than traditional philanthropic approaches.

The impacts transcend immediate project outcomes. From the Singaporean panelists' voluntary fund redistribution demonstrating regional solidarity, to Vietnamese fellows' educational advancement and career development, to the emergence of organic collaborations like "The Common Youth" project, the Spark Fund proves that genuine youth empowerment creates exponential value.

The transformation is already underway. A growing movement of practitioners and funders are grappling with fundamental questions about shifting power in traditional philanthropy. The Spark Fund provides a proven answer: by trusting young people with real power, flexible resources, and the autonomy to define solutions for their own communities.

For funders seeking authentic impact, community ownership, and sustainable change, the evidence supports investing in participatory grantmaking as an effective approach to philanthropy. The climate crisis demands innovative, adaptive responses, and funding mechanisms must be equally dynamic and responsive to support effective climate action.

The Spark Fund is more than a grantmaking initiative—it is a testament to the power of trust, collaboration, and youth agency in confronting global challenges. By trusting young people with genuine decision-making authority and flexible resources, GFC has not only supported impactful climate action in Southeast Asia but has also cultivated a new generation of resilient and connected leaders across five global regions. For funders committed to meaningful impact and sustainable change, the Spark Fund offers an invaluable blueprint for a transformative approach to philanthropy. The evidence is clear: **the future of effective, equitable philanthropy is participatory.**



Global Fund for Children

Washington, DC, United States
+1 202.331.9003
info@globalfundforchildren.org

globalfundforchildren.org



Global Fund for Children UK Trust

London, United Kingdom
+44 2081 642428
uktrust@globalfundforchildren.org