global fund for children



Back the Future Leaders:

How and Why to Fund Individual Young People

Young people are already leading change, but philanthropy is not designed to fund them.

Learnings from Global Fund for Children's approach to individual youth funding

Young people are organizing, building movements and responding to challenges in their communities long before they turn 18 or establish formal organizations. Yet the systems philanthropy uses to move money are rarely designed with them in mind.

Funding individual young leaders is possible. However, doing it responsibly requires more than adapting a grant agreement or finding a mechanism to transfer money. It asks funders to rethink risk, safeguarding, financial management, timelines and accompaniment—and, ultimately, their relationship with young people and power.

Many funders want to resource youth-led change but do not yet have the youth engagement expertise, safeguarding practices or institutional infrastructure needed to support individual young people well. This is particularly important when funding individuals from communities that have historically had the least access to philanthropic resources, including adolescent girls, young refugees and migrants, neurodiverse young people, and young people with experience of the care system.

Direct funding therefore requires investment not only in young people, but in the relationships and infrastructure around them. Program, grants and finance teams need the capacity and expertise to work flexibly across traditional institutional boundaries. Funders also need to recognize that while a grant may be made to an individual, their leadership rarely happens alone: young people are often surrounded by an intergenerational network of peers, parents and guardians, youth workers, teachers, community leaders and other trusted adults who help make individually led—and collectively implemented—change possible.

'If we want young people not only to deliver a project, but to grow as changemakers and take their ideas further, we need to invest in the person as well as the idea. Sometimes the most valuable thing we can provide, alongside the funding, is the reassurance that they don't have to figure everything out alone.'

- Conor Forker,
Young Gamechangers Fund
Project Officer



When young people receive flexible resources directly, something important shifts.

Their organizing becomes visible. Their analysis is recognized as expertise. They are treated not simply as beneficiaries of programs designed by adults, but as leaders and actors with their own ideas about what needs to change and how. Funding can give them the resources and agency to pursue those ideas on their own terms.

Over the past five years, Global Fund for Children has tested and adapted different approaches to resourcing young people across Asia Pacific and Europe and Central Asia, through the participatory grantmaking funds, including: **the Spark Fund, Phoenix Way, Strength of Girls** and the **Young Gamechangers Fund.** Our experience has evolved from funding registered organizations and informal groups to moving resources directly to individual young people—including those under 18—and developing the systems and accompaniment needed to do so responsibly.

This brief shares what we have learned through that practice: what it takes to move resources directly to individual young leaders, where funders may need to work differently, and the questions institutions should consider if they want to do this work responsibly. These lessons are not intended as a single model to replicate, but as practical insights for funders considering how they can better resource young people and the change they are already leading.

Funding individual young people isn't about taking bigger risks. It's about reaching leaders who are already making change but don't yet have a group or organization around them. With the right support in place, a grant to one young person can open a door that no other funding route would have reached, and often it's the start of something much bigger.

– Nasra Ayub, Programs Officer and Future Phoenix Lead



What we have learned

Across our work, eight lessons have emerged.

1.

Tailored support from the get-go is vital.
Individuals often require additional support from Program, Finance and Grants teams, as well as specialized external support where needed, to:

- Identify the right payment method - we have paid individuals through prepaid cards, personal bank transfers and fiscal hosts. As we continue this work across different regions and contexts, we expect these approaches to continue evolving.
- Explore how to move money safely, including ensuring the young person understands any potential tax implications. Depending on the context, this might include access to an independent financial advisor and support to pay for tax preparation with an advisor of their choice
- Understand any implications for welfare or benefits, including whether working through a fiscal sponsor may be appropriate.
- Provide support with bookkeeping and budget tracking from start to finish.

'When I became a Spark Fund Grantee, it changed my life. For two years, I had stability, community, and resources to pursue what I truly cared about.'

- Quynh Huong,
Spark Fund Fellow

2. **Dealing with money and financial literacy should be part of the support.** For some individuals, this may be the first time they have accessed funding or managed a significant amount of money. They may need support setting up a personal bank account, developing a project budget and reviewing expenditures. Skilled staff members are critical in stewarding this process with care, grounded in an understanding that young people's relationship to money differs significantly depending on their background, culture, family experiences of wealth, and employment history. A deep commitment to youth-led change and experience working with adolescents and young people are therefore critical when hiring program staff.

3. **Young people have many competing priorities.** Young people are balancing their organizing and community work with school, college, family and caring responsibilities, employment and simply being young. This is particularly true for individuals, who may not have a peer group or colleagues to lean on for support or to share the load. They may take longer to communicate or participate in formal grant management processes, let alone optional support and accompaniment opportunities.

4. **Young people rely on a "village" of critical allies.** While they may not have an institution behind them, individual young people are often supported by an intergenerational "village" of critical allies. This might include older youth workers or younger peer mentors, parents or guardians, adults within fiscal host organizations, teachers, community leaders and others. For young people under 18 in particular, program staff may need to work proactively with this wider network while keeping the young person's leadership and agency at the center.

5.

Onboarding needs time. Onboarding individual grantees can take considerably longer than onboarding a registered organization or even an informal group. This is especially true for grantees who do not use fiscal hosts, where more time, thought, and resources are needed to ensure funds are moved safely and responsibly. It is important to communicate this from the outset--even before applications begin—to manage expectations and avoid frustration.

'Now I have a support system around me (...), I know that we are everywhere, we can't be silenced.'

– YGF grantee
(Lessons Learned Report)

6.

Relational grant management and accompaniment needs to be consistent. Individual support must continue throughout the life of the program, both to manage the funding and to provide capacity strengthening as defined by the individual. Working individually can be deeply isolating: there may be no internal team to sense-check decisions with or share the emotional load. Personal support from program staff, alongside opportunities to connect with other individual grantees, can therefore be critical. At GFC, we have tested different accompaniment approaches, including one-to-one check-ins, virtual and in-person networking, and identity-based support groups.





7.

Philanthropy, its jargon and dynamics can take time to understand. Individual young people may be less familiar with the institutional vocabulary, expectations, and processes of grant management and philanthropy than groups or organizations that have previously received funding. Program staff play a vital role in translating jargon, providing one-to-one grant support that fits with each individual's schedule and capacity, and helping young people navigate a funding ecosystem that can otherwise feel opaque.

8.

Offboarding with intention, dedicated resources and thought is as important as onboarding. As a youth fund ends, young people may need practical support to identify and access new resources. For many young people GFC has supported, this was their first grant. For individual grantees, it may also be their only current source of funding. They may be grappling with the questions of financial sustainability, considering whether to register as a formal organization, or trying to navigate a funding ecosystem that remains opaque. Dedicated one-to-one support from program staff and external fundraising specialists can be invaluable, as well as sharing of practical tools, connections, and resources for resource mobilisation.

Good practice checklist for funding individual young people



	Done	Principle
1	☐	**Build sufficient staff capacity for relational support** Make sure you have the right team in place, including staff with experience as youth workers or in managing participatory grant-making processes with young people — they bring patience, understanding and adaptability. Ensure program staff have enough capacity to provide deeply relational support throughout funding.
2	☐	**Center care, safeguarding and wellbeing** Offer support to identify specific care and safeguarding needs of the individual and the young people they work with, working with them to strengthen their own capacity to manage safeguarding concerns and creating space to reflect on wellbeing strategies throughout. Recognize the isolation coming with not having a team or peers around you.
3	☐	**Create flexibility in timelines** Be open to a shifting and evolving timeline (and grant end date). Consider whether onboarding, grant management and reporting timelines accommodate school, work and family responsibilities, and periods of greater or lesser capacity.
4	☐	**Help navigate the money side** Use different mechanisms to move money where appropriate. Offer one-to-one financial, bookkeeping and tax support from the beginning of the process, even before grant agreements are signed. This expertise doesn't have to sit in-house — it can come from an external accountant or financial advisor.
5	☐	**Build channels of communication that work for young people** Explore WhatsApp, Zoom and face-to-face meetings. Consider that their work is usually done outside of school time, in the evenings and on weekends.
6	☐	**Be genuinely prepared to share decision-making power** This might mean working with them to set their own learning agenda and monitoring indicators, being led by them on what counts as impact, or exploring creative ways to report during and after the partnership.
7	☐	**Plan for transition from the outset** During funding and as what may be the only source of funding comes to an end, work with young people to determine longer-term plans and goals, and use your relationships, networks and resources to help them navigate what comes next.

Not every funder needs to do this directly

Funding individual young people well requires significant institutional commitment. It requires flexible financial systems, safeguarding expertise, staff capacity, youth-centered accompaniment and a willingness to work differently.

Funders that are not currently set up to provide this infrastructure can still move resources to young leaders.

For funders that do not have this infrastructure in place, working with experienced intermediaries, youth and feminist funders can provide another route to resourcing young people. These organizations may already have the relationships, systems, and expertise needed to move resources safely and flexibly, while providing the relational support, safeguarding infrastructure and accompaniment that responsible funding requires.

'When young people are trusted with real resources and genuine decision-making power, they build something that lasts.'

- Beaw Thatsanaprai, Spark Fund Specialist

The important question, then, is not simply "Can our institution make grants to individual young people?"

It is "What will it take to ensure young people can access resources safely, flexibly and on their own terms—and what role are we best placed to play?"

Young people are already organizing, leading and creating change. The opportunity for philanthropy is not to create that leadership, but to recognize it, resource it and change our own systems where they stand in its way.

About Global Fund for Children

Global Fund for Children works to build a world where all children and young people are safe, strong and valued. Since 1994, GFC has invested more than $79 million in over 1,300 organizations worldwide, reaching more than 11 million children.

Our youth-centered and intergenerational resourcing work includes the Young Gamechangers Fund, The Phoenix Way, the Spark Fund and the Survivor-led Activism Fund.

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