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SECTION 2.

WHAT WE LEARNED: RESEARCH FINDINGS

OVERVIEW

Meaningful child and youth participation is a powerful catalyst for transformation at multiple levels, from the individual, to grant-making, to systemic change. At the heart of meaningful participation is an intention and commitment to shifting, sharing, and re-negotiating power in authentic ways. In much of philanthropy, power sits with hierarchical, adult-led organizations that tend to reflect the patriarchal system within which they operate, rather than actively attempting to dismantle them.^{3,4} A look at philanthropy and development in the Global South shows us the persistent control of resources in the Global North, reinforcing neo-colonial and patriarchal structures.^{5,6,7} This structural power imbalance is a critical truth that needs to be acknowledged if we are to rethink and reimagine how funders can meaningfully engage and work with children and young people in decision-making, share power with them, and trust in their leadership and political movements.

INTERNATIONAL LAWS AND POLICIES ON PARTICIPATION

The right to participate is enshrined in the General Principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child under Article 12: The right to be heard. The General Comment on the right to be heard recognizes the unique status of children as lacking the legal autonomy of adults whilst having a right to express their views on matters that affect their lives.⁸

The Agreed Conclusions of the sixty-fifth Commission on the Status of Women in March 2021 recognizes girls as change makers, explicitly notes the exclusion of young women from public life, and calls for more investment in efforts to support girls' and young women's participation. However it falls short of calling for girls' 'full and effective participation'.⁹

Let us take a step back first. The legal recognition of children's right to participate in the Convention on the Rights of the Child has led to great improvement in the participation of children in decisions that affect them. There are countless tools on meaningful participation developed by NGOs and several useful models employed in the development sector, including Hart's Ladder of Participation¹⁰ and CHOICE's Flower of Participation.¹¹ Some governments have developed their own definitions to ground their child and youth strategies.¹² The evidence of the impact of child and youth participation on national plans, policy development, and in shadow parliaments shows that levels of influence vary.¹³ The meaningfulness of these types of participation in the development sector is mixed; many adult leaders still tout the outdated perspective that children and young people are beneficiaries who lack agency and need protection.¹⁴

When it comes to the participation of children and young people in funding decisions and practices, the literature is lacking in comparison. We know that funding for child- and youth-led initiatives is still limited, particularly for groups led by adolescent girls, gender diverse young people, and children and young people living with disabilities despite the growing number of child- and youth-led associations, collectives, and groups.¹⁵ There is a wealth of lessons to be learned from existing models of participation, which provide insight on what to keep and adapt, as well as what to avoid. This research has surfaced numerous participatory mechanisms, as well as an illustrative model and a practical tool; these resources can be employed by funders who wish to more meaningfully support the participation of children and young people. To begin with, the desk-based research and primary data collection brought to light several key insights and findings.



WHEN AND WHEN NOT TO DO PARTICIPATION

It is important to recognize that while participation can be critical in many circumstances and situations, it is not always the right choice. Some of the reasons when participation does not make sense can include the following:

EXAMPLES OF EXTERNAL FACTORS:

- If a community feels overwhelmed, exhausted, has other priorities, and does not have the time to work closely with you.
- When constituencies you are working with are directly impacted by a crisis or humanitarian emergency; while participation may be possible, it may not be the right time. It is important to be led by them.

EXAMPLES OF INTERNAL FACTORS:

- You do not have adequate capacity or resources to implement a participatory process well.
- You do not have buy-in or commitment from the leadership, which means there is a risk of the decisions made by children and young people not being respected.
- You do not have the time to ensure a meaningful process.

To better navigate if participation makes sense for you, where possible, open a conversation with the children and young people you are working with and understand their needs, capacity, interest and expectations around participating in your work. [Sections 3-5](#) of this Toolkit include activities, tips, and recommendations to ascertain your readiness, determine the appropriateness of participation, and learn how to build a practical approach.

WHY CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

“100% of organizations who are supporting child and youth participation would recommend it to other organizations.” -Philanthropy European Association (Philea).¹⁸

Meaningful child and youth participation can be a powerful and invaluable catalyst for change and impact at multiple levels. Not only is it children and young people's human right to participate in decisions that affect their lives,¹⁶ but it also contributes to better outcomes. Whether you start small or big, you will see the positive impact. It clearly improves grant-making and contributes to a more equitable and impactful funding landscape.¹⁷ The outcomes are also evident from the individual, personal level for children and young people (confidence, civic education, and self-esteem) to the strengthening of child- and youth-led groups, intergenerational movements, and the creation of more democratic societies. The impact can be seen even when children and young people are engaged on issues that might not traditionally be considered to be child or youth-related: *“It's not a case of 'you're youth and you only do youth projects'. They're involved in all of our projects which we've found has been very*

beneficial as they bring a different thought to some of the programs or think about how youth respond,” shared one public funder.

From a philanthropic perspective, meaningful participation and co-ownership not only leads to more impactful grant-making programs, but it transforms funders' attitudes and practices, breaks down patriarchal and colonial structures and shifts power within the broader funding landscape. From a feminist perspective, by analyzing the impact of participatory approaches on children and young people, starting with the impact on them, their organizations and their communities, we can see just how political participation really is. The impact starts at the individual, or personal, level with them as political actors and ripples to their groups, communities and broader society.

OUTCOME

Positive
impact on the
individual

- Improved confidence, empathy, self-esteem, skills in collaboration, and civic education.¹⁹

Strength and
resourcing of
child- and youth-
led groups and
organizations

- Provides access to more funding opportunities with stronger networks and a deeper understanding of the funding ecosystem.
- Builds skills and capacities in the group members, e.g., new monitoring and evaluation skills when involved in participatory monitoring and evaluation.²²

Stronger
communities

- Improves the quality of the work of organizations and their relevance to the communities they seek to support. They are more in tune with their community by actively sharing power.²⁴
- Creates more skilled researchers within a community.²⁵
- In times of crisis, participatory processes provide space for shared collective problem solving, community, and solidarity.
- Contributes to intergenerational collaboration.

Stronger
movements
and more
democratic
societies²⁸

- Strengthens children and young people's broader commitment to and understanding of democracy by encouraging democratic processes like voting and consensus building.²⁷
- Leads to concrete policy change, e.g., via child/youth-led influencing strategies
- Builds solidarity and room for coalition/movement building by bringing grantees together.

EVIDENCE

- The Sillerman Centre, [From Beneficiary to Active Agent How Youth-Led Grantmaking Benefits Young People, Their Communities, and the Philanthropic Sector](#).
- ChildFund Australia, [The Role of Child and Youth Participation in Development Effectiveness](#).²⁰

"It is really empowering for young children to hear that their voice matters. It's not something that's often gathered in research. We want to know the best way to design a play experience and we tell children, you're the expert on play. And they love that."
-Researcher from a large corporate children's foundation interviewed for this research.²¹

- MamaCash, [New Perspectives, New Solutions: Funding Organising Led by Girls and Young Women](#).

*"After participating in the proposal evaluation process, youth committee members noted that they were better able to see shortcomings in their own projects, became more sensitive to diversity issues, and felt their own dignity and usefulness as they not only gave advice, but their advice was heard."*²³

- ChildFund Australia, [The Role of Child and Youth Participation in Development Effectiveness](#).
- Devi Leiper O'Malley and Ruby Johnson, [A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do](#).

*"Groups review each other's proposals, making groups more aware of other initiatives and strategies that may complement their work. This contributes to their overall awareness of larger networks and potential movements they can join – which are important resources for their work beyond funding."*²⁶

- Annie E Casey, [A framework for effectively partnering with young people](#).
- Global Resilience Fund, [Weathering the Storm](#).
- Joining Forces - ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS, Terre des Hommes, and World Vision, [A second revolution: 30 years of child rights and the unfinished agenda](#).
- The Sillerman Centre, [From Beneficiary to Active Agent How Youth-Led Grantmaking Benefits Young People, Their Communities, and the Philanthropic Sector](#).

*"The result we have seen is that [our youth philanthropists] go on to college, [and] most of them in their first year, in their college get involved in community service . . . and then, because they have been doing it so long it comes full circle, then they pick jobs that have service and philanthropy as a part of the mission of the organization."*²⁹

OUTCOME

A more just and fair funding ecosystem

BENEFITS

- Creates a ripple effect among funders by building curiosity and intrigue and sparking practice change (participatory grant-making).
- Contributes to more credible and authentic funder practices.
- Improves the diverse distribution of resources.

EVIDENCE

- Devi Leiper O'Malley and Ruby Johnson, [A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do](#).
- Global Resilience Fund, [Weathering the Storm](#).
- Stanford Social Innovation Review, [How Listening to Constituents Can Lead to Systems Change](#).

*"The process of building feedback mechanisms created more equitable practices across organizations and advocacy efforts. The impetus to seek stakeholder input in one area triggered an instinct to do so in others."*³¹

Better funding practices and impact³⁰

- Leads to better decisions, policies, and grant-making strategies.
- Creates a ripple effect across the organization.
- Surface the 'why' rather than just the 'what'.
- Allows funders to discover nascent groups they would otherwise not have been able to find (participatory grant-making).
- Improves the quality of data and its interpretation, accessibility, recruitment of participants, credibility of research, and communication of findings; therefore enhancing its influence and impact (participatory research).

- Global Resilience Fund, [Weathering the Storm](#).
- The Sillerman Centre, [From Beneficiary to Active Agent How Youth-Led Grantmaking Benefits Young People, Their Communities, and the Philanthropic Sector](#).
- Safer Young Lives Research, [Our Voices Programme - participatory action research](#).

"We had a programme about online safety tied to a police department. And the police department representative said, 'It's very easy to navigate, so many people are open and talking.' And it took one of our youth council members to say, 'You may think it's really easy, but you don't understand that I was raised not to talk to the police. You can have all the helpline resources; I would never call you.' So we were like, 'Ok what should we add to the programme or what would help you cross that barrier.' And if they were not in that conversation, I think we all would have continued to think that the programme was perfect and ready to go if we hadn't had that youth voice." -USA Public Funder we interviewed for this research

More trust-based, equitable relationship between funders and young people

- Builds greater collective understanding and co-ownership.
- Builds trusting and equitable relationships.
- Helps to dismantle funder-grantee power relations through power sharing.

- CIVICUS, [Resourcing Youth-led Groups and Movements](#).
- Youth Do It, [Investing in Youth Impact Toolkit](#).
- Elevate Children Funders Group, [Shifting the Field](#).

*"Definitions such as efficiency, effectiveness, and impact have traditionally been defined by donors and monitoring and evaluation experts in ways that do not necessarily fit in with children and youth organizing. Thus, it becomes difficult for their groups to showcase the real importance of their work."*³²

KEY INSIGHTS AND FINDINGS

The research brought up four areas of insights and findings. You can read through them all or click through using the hyperlinks in the headings.

1. WHY PARTICIPATION IS IMPORTANT

- ▶ Meaningful, inclusive participation can lead to more effective grant-making programs, more equitable funding ecosystems, and more democratic societies.
- ▶ Participatory grant-making can be one of the most impactful ways to build individual confidence, strengthen groups, and shift power within philanthropy.
- ▶ Meaningful participatory grant-making means young people have real decision-making power.
- ▶ Participation is an opportunity to build connections between movements. But... Not all participation is good participation.

2. FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS FOR MEANINGFUL CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

- ▶ Meaningful participation is a long-term process, not a one-off project or initiative.
- ▶ Inclusion must be centered from the beginning - It matters which children and young people you engage.
- ▶ Compensating young people for their time and expertise is not only fair, it is a necessary condition for equal and inclusive engagement.
- ▶ Don't limit young people's engagement to youth-focused projects.

3. KEY SHIFTS TO BE MADE INTERNALLY

- ▶ Meaningful participation has the potential to redistribute power but requires recognition of the wrongs of philanthropy's history.
- ▶ Trust building starts at the beginning and it takes time.
- ▶ Know your accountability lines and stay true to them.
- ▶ Participation requires rethinking your communications approach and, where appropriate, engaging young people to take the lead.
- ▶ If funding political work, holding a political stance as a funder builds trust and authenticity.
- ▶ And an important question that came up through the research... is direct resourcing to children and youth-led groups, collectives, and movements in itself the most necessary and political form of meaningful participation?

4. OBSTACLES TO MEANINGFUL CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

- ▶ Adulthood is ongoing and is causing intergenerational tensions.
- ▶ Funders can navigate intergenerational tensions by working with families and communities.
- ▶ Young people do not feel like they are being taken seriously by funders.
- ▶ The digital divide is making it difficult for trust to be built.
- ▶ Additional measures are required for working with under 18s.
- ▶ There is a fear of working with children stemming from a lack of expertise.



I. WHY PARTICIPATION IS SO IMPORTANT

Meaningful, inclusive participation can lead to more effective grant-making programs, more equitable funding ecosystems, and more democratic societies. There is growing evidence from progressive, brave and, often, feminist funders that participation is not only a human right, but that it can also shift power and resources.³³ Firstly, it tips the balance of power within philanthropic organizations by moving decision-making into the hands of children and young people. It then strengthens intersectional movements by building solidarity between groups and collectives who come together for the process.³⁴ It also spurs civic engagement in broader society by building skills, experience, and interest in democratic processes such as voting and consensus building.³⁵ In 2021, the Stanford Social Innovation Review found that *"the process of building feedback mechanisms created more equitable practices across organizations and advocacy efforts. The impetus to seek stakeholder input in one area triggered an instinct to do so in others."*³⁶ Research by the Sillerman Centre also found that young people who had been included meaningfully in participatory mechanisms were more likely to stay engaged civically in the years afterward.³⁷

Participatory grant-making can be one of the most impactful ways to build individual confidence, strengthen groups, and shift power within philanthropy.

"Honestly having them be part of the process and listening to them and how insightful they were, and the questions they had for the grantee partners ...that was my AHA moment! Because you can't help but think they would do this job better than I am doing it."

-Public funder interviewed for this research

Pioneered by FRIDA, participatory grant-making puts the decision of where funding goes, into the hands of those most affected by it. The power of this model was reiterated by the children and young people and funders who took part in this research process: *"...when it comes*

to participatory grantmaking and when you are involved in the designing process, then it makes you powerful, because you know what the context is, and you know what the outcome of the interventions is..." said one girl activist from Brazil that we interviewed. Participatory grant-making has also been found to be a powerful tool to enable girls to better understand money and feel more comfortable making decisions about money in their personal lives. She also reflected that her involvement in the grantmaking process has changed her perspective from viewing money "as a bad thing", to seeing it as a tool for decision-making. She told us "We have been shaping the way we understand money, and almost as a good thing to literally help us to help girls be able to make decisions, decisions that they want to make that benefit them."

"...when it comes to participatory grantmaking and when you are involved in the designing process, then it makes you powerful, because you know what the context is, and you know what the outcome of the interventions is..."

- girl activist, Brazil



EXAMPLES

Global Fund for Women piloted its participatory grant-making initiative in 2020, inviting the Adolescent Girls' Advisory Council made up of 12 adolescent girls to review proposals, reflect together, and decide who to fund. This model was facilitated with the support of a team of consultants who held orientation sessions with the girl advisors to reflect on their relationship to money in relation to their diverse cultural contexts, and discuss the difference between conventional philanthropy and feminist funding. The girls scored proposals and reflected collectively.

Global Fund for Children partnered with youth-led groups to roll out its participatory grant-making process through the Spark Fund, where young people from four different regions have been engaged in deciding where funding goes. This approach allowed the Global Fund for Children to reach nascent groups they otherwise would not have reached.

Meaningful participation means children and young people have real decision-making power. A youth activist we spoke to from the UK described participatory grant-making as a way to engage young people “in a comprehensive way” as opposed to limiting their involvement to consultations at the beginning of the process. She views meaningful participation as a learning journey where young people are engaged in each phase of the grant-making lifecycle. She told us: *“It's not good enough to just consult young people. It's also important to create a forum where they can be meaningfully included in conversations between funders themselves, various funders, and then actually being in the room and at the table when it comes to deciding which programs can we create and how we can fund this kind of work”*.

Participation is an opportunity to spark connections between and within movements.³⁸ Whether building a new advisory group or convening grantee partners from different contexts or regions, participatory mechanisms provide a unique opportunity for strengthening coalition-building and solidarity between movements. While not child-

and youth-focused, AWID's 'Towards a Feminist Funding Ecosystem' research also recognizes the powerful role that participatory processes can play in breaking down siloes and supporting cross-movement work.³⁹ Coming together in times of crisis or to collectively problem-solve shared challenges builds empathy and fosters a 'culture of caring.'⁴⁰ By committing to a long-term participatory process, funders are providing space for movement actors to come together several times, to build relationships with each other, and to spark opportunities for collaboration. Some funders go even further by providing collaboration grants for grantee groups who wish to work together on a project.

But...not all participation is good participation.

“I learned in my own experience and in working with funders now...you have to figure out where participation is helpful and where you're just saying participation because participation has become 'the right' way to do something. Meaningful engagement requires us to think deeply about the 'why' behind participation. We need to examine questions such as, what our intentions are, are we able to be accountable to young people as a result of the process, and what young people are gaining from the experience?”

-Jody Myrum, Former Director of the NoVo Foundation

Funders need to be careful about the tokenistic use of the term 'participation,' reflected Jody Myrum who we spoke to for this research. There is a real risk of causing harm if the conditions for participation to be truly meaningful and influential are not in place. An advisory council in a feminist organisation is more likely to have the foundations and accountability mechanisms in place to be influential because it is more likely to have an institutional understanding and practice grounded in an intersectional feminist lens. For example, senior leadership are more likely to recognize the power imbalance between adults and children, or between English speakers and those for whom English is not a first language. On the other hand, these models can be tokenistic in institutions that are traditionally adult-centric and patriarchal because the foundational conditions are missing: *“While participation has the potential to challenge patterns of dominance, it may also be the means through which existing power relations are entrenched and reproduced.”*⁴¹

2. FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS FOR MEANINGFUL CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Meaningful participation is a long-term process, not a one-off project or initiative. By analyzing participatory approaches implemented by a variety of organizations and funders, we see a pattern emerging: *participation is a process, not a check box or a one-off project*. It is possible to start small, with whatever is feasible within your organization, but meaningful participation requires sustained effort, resources, and political will as well as a willingness to be brave, uncomfortable, and vulnerable. It also shows that you can have the most impact when you start engaging children and young people from the design phase.^{42 43} The research also shows that *meaningful participation, when facilitated as a process, can have a ripple effect*. Research into funders of young peacebuilders found that including young people from the design phase led to more meaningful participatory grant-making models and youth-responsive, dialogue-based learning.⁴⁴ Similar ripple effects were seen across virtually every funder that was interviewed.

Inclusion must be centered from the beginning. The research shows that when funders center inclusion in a participatory process it, too, can have a ripple effect. The Global Resilience Fund found that “bringing an intersectional lens from the beginning enables funding to reach girls and young women who are often excluded from funding opportunities.”⁴⁵ The participatory nature of the fund, which created regional panels to advise on participatory grant-making, was vital in supporting this. If they had not worked in a participatory way, the Global Resilience Fund would not have reached the groups that they did, including those who were “often excluded from funding opportunities, such as trans girls and young women, non-binary young people, and those working on disability rights.”⁴⁶ For the Equality Accelerator platform⁴⁷ girls designed every aspect of the fund mechanism. This resulted in a percentage of funding reserved for girl-led groups, Indigenous and Black-led groups, and informal, nascent groups. Being inclusive from the beginning in the creation of the participatory grant-making mechanism led to more diverse distribution of funds. This experience was echoed by the Sillerman

Centre, which found that youth-led grant-making can lead to a more diverse and representative distribution of resources.⁴⁸ If you are working with children, an inclusive process also means thinking about what hours they are in school and ensuring you have expertise in the team to adapt methodologies to different age groups. For adolescent girls in contexts where girls’ participation in decision-making is not widely accepted, you might need to spend more time working with their families and communities to ensure their participation is understood and supported.⁴⁹

Compensating children and young people for their time and expertise is not only fair, it is a necessary condition for equal and inclusive engagement. While most funders are now aware of its importance, very few organizations have a clear or consistent policy and approach. As participatory practices become more common, the demand for young people’s time and expertise will increase and this free labor cannot go unrecognized.⁵⁰ For some funders, there is pushback from senior leadership given the risk in monetising traditionally unpaid volunteering commitments. Many face internal procedural challenges which prevent them from compensating young people (especially children) directly. For instance, one public funder we spoke to had to navigate a tricky situation when trying to compensate a young person who was living in a shelter sponsored by one of its partners. The partner organization had a policy which does not allow giving money to young people. She said: *“It ended up being a grant to the organization and they bought sports equipment for all the young people. But how did that feel to that young person that they didn’t get that funding or that recognition for their individual efforts?”* When broaching the subject of compensation for under 18s, there are new and heightened safeguarding challenges and potential legal obstacles with moving resources to minors in



different contexts. It is also important not to forget non-financial compensation, which was recognized as particularly important by young people in the Global South. The value of trainings, networking opportunities, access to decision-makers, letters of recommendations, and references were all shared as examples of good practice recognition and compensation. *The Getting Started: Compensation and Budgeting Section* has some tips and practical resources to help organizations develop their own policy on compensation.

EXAMPLE

World Childhood Foundation USA recognized the need for an hourly stipend because it allows inclusion of those who cannot afford to volunteer for free. For young people who have other responsibilities like caring for family members or working to contribute to the family, financial compensation allows for them to engage.

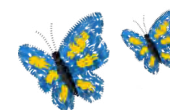
Don't limit young people's engagement to youth-focused projects. There is a tendency to facilitate participation of young people only in projects or areas that are deemed "youth" issues, mirroring a similar tendency in the development sector. The research shows the power of engaging young people across any area of work that they are interested in. World Childhood Foundation USA included a youth representative on its program advisory council, which provides strategic direction for all of the organization's grant-making. The council is responsible for reviewing all grant program proposals twice a year. The youth representative is an equal member of the advisory council and their role is not limited to only youth projects. This approach helps bring youth perspectives to the other projects, which the organization has benefitted from. Nicole Epps, the former Executive Director told us, *"It's not a case of 'you're youth and you only do youth projects.' They're involved in all of our projects which we've found has been very beneficial as they bring a different thought to some of the programmes or think about how youth respond."*

3. KEY SHIFTS TO BE MADE INTERNALLY

Meaningful participation has the potential to redistribute power, but requires recognition of the wrongs of philanthropy's history. When facilitating child and youth participatory processes to develop funding strategies, it is important to ensure *"it's meaningful, it's reciprocal, it's accountable, and it can actually play a role in influencing,"* as Jody Myrum told us. To achieve this, funders need to consider what they can do to rebalance the unequal power distribution between funders and grantees. At Global Fund for Children, engaging the entire organization, including communications, operations, and finance, in conversations around shifting power was vital for critical reflection. The team had internal conversations about the power all of their roles hold, and the ways they can share or give up power. The principle of 'shifting the power' is now reflected in the organization's ways of working: *"It was very intentional that this isn't something just for the programs team but something to be integrated throughout our organization. We all have a role to play, and we all have power and privilege that come out in the decisions we make".* This can often be an uncomfortable space for funders. Shifting power requires critically reflecting on the wrongs in philanthropy's history and putting in extra efforts to reach out to children and youth from more marginalized backgrounds or who are traditionally excluded, e.g., ensuring enough time to seek consent for under 18s, developing non-digital ways to participate for those with limited access to the internet, etc.

Trust building starts at the beginning and it takes time. Most of the funders, children, and young people we spoke to attested to the importance of trust as a foundational component of meaningful participation. A former director at NoVo Foundation shared that by building a long-term trusting relationship, grantee partners felt comfortable opening up about shared problems and tensions between movements, which otherwise would not have been shared with a funder. It led to much more honest dialogue and insight into the needs of movements and what role a funder can play through resources and accompaniment: *"When you create relationships and work to remove those barriers, as much as possible, you can have really honest and transparent conversations, even the really difficult ones. It takes time and you as the funder also need to be willing to be vulnerable"* said Jody Myrum. Building trust is not a short term project. With funding from one private funder to design the new participatory Children's Rights Innovation Fund, an initial design period of one year was agreed, recognising the time and effort needed to build trust in local communities and to design a multi-language participatory process.⁵¹

Participation requires rethinking your communications approach and, where appropriate, engaging young people to take the lead. Children and young people primarily get their information from social media, a complicated space where they are consuming mis- and disinformation daily.⁵² Therefore, funders need to rethink their communication strategy for engaging children and young people and, if they do not have this expertise in-house, consider hiring young people or outsourcing to youth consultants. For example, the World Childhood Foundation USA has engaged a 14 year old blogger to develop communication materials. Nicole Epps, the former Executive Director whom we interviewed, said *"This is a generation that is very engaged and we do a disservice to our work if we're not including them. Much of the work that's been done has come from a fantastic place and we all want to make an impact and we all want a change. If we're not including youth voices, we're missing them."*



It matters which children and young people you engage. Participation in itself is a political issue. Think about who is involved, how they are identified, and what power they hold.⁵³ Participation can shift power in philanthropy, but if it is not grounded in principles of intersectional feminism, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism, it risks reinforcing an already exclusive space.

*"when inviting children and young people to join conversations, it is important to look beyond charisma to make sure they legitimately represent their constituencies and are already situated within strong networks."*⁵⁵

Efforts should be made to engage diverse groups of children and young people, including those with less experience of such initiatives, those from rural areas, those with limited or no access to the internet or digital devices, under 18s including adolescent girls, LGBTQIA+ youth, children and young people with disabilities, Black and Indigenous youth, and those

for whom English is not the first language. As outlined in one paper, *“when inviting children and young people to join conversations, it is important to look beyond charisma to make sure they legitimately represent their constituencies and are already situated within strong networks.”*⁵⁴ The research process demonstrated that many children and young people are on multiple advisory or participatory grant-making panels. For in-person opportunities, those who can easily access visas, have prior experience, do not need

chaperones (usually over 18s), or speak English tend to be invited through a cherry-picking process rather than one that recognizes the diversity of experience and builds in the necessary time for preparation, capacity strengthening, and lengthy visa processes. Under 18s tend to be excluded because they have fewer years of experience than their older counterparts.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TAKING A POLITICAL STANCE?

New research on resourcing girls puts forward the idea of a transformational funding framework which provides “a conceptual foundation that acknowledges the systemic oppressions that perpetuate inequality, flowing resources directly to girls and/or their allies to challenge and transform power relations and structures.”⁵⁶

The researchers compare this to a transactional framework *“that sees girls as beneficiaries of particular services and meeting of basic needs, while failing to recognize their agency. It is often attached to achieving a particular goal, wholly disconnected from the social, political, economic or other systems and contexts into which that funding flows.”*⁵⁷

Within a funding context, participation is political because it means having a say in where power lies and where it moves to. This could be financial power (deciding which groups receive money), strategic power (deciding what the funding priorities are), or even knowledge power (having the information, language skills, and tools to be able to navigate the system). When we talk about taking a political stance we are talking about the need to recognize this power imbalance, acknowledge where power lies, and think about how it could be redistributed more evenly. We are talking about the need to recognize the agency of children and young people. **Without centering participation in an understanding of power, funders risk reinforcing those power imbalances**, e.g., by only engaging children and young people who speak English and have previous experience. They also risk dealing with a symptom and not the systemic root of the problem, e.g., by continuing to only fund Global North-led, adult-led organizations as opposed to those leading social justice struggles in their own communities.

If funding political work, having clarity in your beliefs and what you stand for builds trust and authenticity. In their 2019 research into the feminist funding ecosystem,⁵⁸ AWID called on funders to use their power to advocate for change: *“call for more meaningful participation from other funders. Use your power and connections with other funders and with other decision-makers, including governments.”*⁵⁹ As well as recognising funding as political work, it is important to also recognize children and young

people as political actors. *“Funders feel less comfortable resourcing youth movement building and activism,”* shared Vanessa Stevens who we spoke to from Global Fund for Children. Contributions from youth activists to this research demonstrated how important this acknowledgement was not only in building trust and credibility for funders, but because this understanding is core to being able to do meaningful participatory work.

EXAMPLE

From its inception, FRIDA, the world's only young feminist-led participatory fund, has been intentionally and unapologetically political and conscious of its power and the capitalist and patriarchal system within which it operates. Former Co-Executive Directors reflected that **"If we really want to see change, we need to ensure we do not recreate the same oppressive structures and internalized patriarchy in our own organizations, groups, and collectives."**⁶⁵ A recent article by Co-Executive Directors of FRIDA on the \$10,000,000 gift from MacKenzie Scott (ex-wife of Amazon owner Jeff Bezos) sheds light on new thinking about the politics of receiving funding from corporations responsible for human rights violations across the globe.⁶⁶

Know your accountability lines and stay true to them.

*"Funding movements and activists should be seen as a privilege. In a world that is so unequal and those with money and resources have for so long held the power, it is normal for us to function in a system where funders hold grantees or activists to account to follow their restrictions. But if we really want to shift power and start to unravel oppressive and unequal systems, we need to ensure that when money flows, funders are not only focusing on accountability to donors, but to the activists to whom they channel funds."*⁶⁴

The Human Rights Funders Network recommends **accountability** as a core grantmaking principle, defining it as "Accountability to recognize our own institutions and selves as accountable to the organizations, activists, and movements we support."⁶⁰ What does this mean in practice? Based on the desk review and interviews we conducted, **it means developing child- and youth-centered accountability mechanisms, and sharing back findings and recommendations (in accessible, digestible language) after seeking contributions from children and young people.** It means sharing information about your internal processes, policies, practices, finances, and youth participation approach. For children and young people, but for younger adolescents in particular, you might need to spend time

simplifying language and removing any jargon. **It means building your community, whether that is through membership or through grantees, advisors, and supporters, and providing meaningful ways for them to influence decision-making at different levels.** For example, having your community or membership elect the Board of Directors.⁶¹

An important question came up through the research: **is direct resourcing to children and youth-led groups, collectives, and movements in itself the most necessary and political form of meaningful participation?**

It felt like the elephant in the room to not mention the importance of flexible, sustainable funding for child and youth groups. The wealth of evidence from FRIDA⁶² and MamaCash⁶³ as well as from new research on the adolescent girls' funding landscape reiterates the importance of direct funding and associated non-financial support and accompaniment. A youth activist from Ukraine said: **"As an organization, when we receive flexible funding, we read it as like direct and honest feeling, honest connection, and you feel like you would not, you would never betray that trust."** This toolkit reflects on where direct resourcing falls on the spectrum of participation and recognizes that it cuts across everything.

*"As an organization, when we receive flexible funding, we read it as...honest connection, and...you would never betray that trust."
- youth activist, Ukraine*

SPOTLIGHT:

THE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS INNOVATION FUND (CRIF)

"When have you put resources in the hands of girls, which is power, and something powerful and beautiful wasn't created?" -Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Director of CRIF

The Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) is supporting participatory strategy development and grant-making with children and young people in West Africa and the Americas. CRIF was originally seed funded by a private foundation who recognized the importance of centering the experience of those most affected, but also acknowledged its own limitations in facilitating participatory mechanisms. One challenge is that private foundations are often not set up to implement youth-centered participatory grantmaking or to do a high volume of local grants across multiple countries, in particular with young people or unregistered groups. Recognizing that they could not support participatory grant-making directly, the funder wanted to contribute to shifting systems and power with others. CRIF is grounded in principles of intersectional feminism, meaningful participation, anti-racism and anti-colonialism and serves as an opportunity for funders to shift power through participatory grantmaking.

CRIF hired an experienced grant-maker with a background in youth work, vital expertise for a meaningful participatory fund for young people. Recognizing that their main constituency was children and young people, CRIF started there, designing its first participatory grant-making portfolio with a global panel working in four languages. With the panel they thought about where power currently resides and where they want it to reside. The seed funder did not give a deadline and said to take the time that was needed to do the necessary research and relationship building. The design process for CRIF was all virtual given the pandemic. CRIF provides compensation, and they decide what additional support to give through conversation with young people. They have learned that it is important to be clear on the terms and expectations, but to allow for flexibility in the strategy and budget to meet the needs of young people as they emerge. CRIF's Director, Dr. Ramatu Bangura says that "to tackle adulthood we need to move the money to young people. They are the surest bet in this sector. Those who have squandered resources are mostly the wealthy and mostly adults."

4. OBSTACLES TO MEANINGFUL CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Adulthood is an ongoing problem and continues to cause intergenerational tensions across organizations, movements, and philanthropy. One youth activist shared that when she was working with older activists, her opinions were disregarded; she was treated as though she did not know as much and that she lacked experience of the system within which they were all trying to affect change. These experiences made her feel powerless and unable to meaningfully participate in conversations: *"For them, having been in the system for years, they know how things work, and what works and what doesn't. And so they felt powerful enough to just take over the conversation. And in that particular point, to be very honest, I felt very powerless."* A youth activist from Sierra Leone shared that undermining young people's opinions can silence them and stop them from engaging further. By not acknowledging and addressing adulthood, we risk losing the opportunity for rich intergenerational movement-building and collective action. Being intersectional must include a recognition of adulthood and giving space to children and young people to share their world views: *"Because we're a feminist fund, we're committed to being intersectional. When you say intersectional this implies being intergenerational,"* said Aissata Sall from Global Fund for Women. Ingrained, internalized adulthood also means it may take a little longer for children to feel comfortable and to open up. One researcher from a large corporate children's foundation recalls this: *"in one of our research projects it just took a little bit longer to build rapport with the child, because they weren't used to an adult asking them questions. So, it may take longer or you may have to incorporate a playful opening to help children feel comfortable."*

"...having been in the system for years, [older activists] know how things work...so they felt powerful enough to just take over the conversation....in that particular point, to be very honest, I felt very powerless."

- Youth Activist

Funders can navigate intergenerational tensions by working with families and communities.

"Be in partnership and build meaningful relationships with those who are close to children and young people in that region and/or directly with young people depending on how you are structured and what is appropriate. I remember someone once calling it the 'swoop and poop,' when a funder just comes in, extracts what they need, and goes away. When interactions are transactional and void of relationship building, it is not possible to have meaningful engagement with anyone."

-Representative of a private foundation we interviewed

Jody Myrum, a former director at NoVo Foundation, noted that intergenerational tensions also arise in movements: *"When you are supporting young people in movements, it's really important to both talk to young people and others in the movements they are a part of so you can understand the full breadth of work that is happening and consider ways to support the work that doesn't perpetuate these tensions."* Aissata Sall from Global Fund for Women provided another example of intergenerational tension in the community stemming from social gender norms that limit girls' participation and leadership. There were concerns from adults in the community that a focus on girls would politicize them, and that girls should be at school instead of organizing and leading: *"There is definitely a shift that needs to happen in some regions within the movements ... We want to support intergenerational solidarity and conversations. We think they're so important because adulthood is real."* It shows the importance of engaging with the adults who play critical roles in children and young people's lives, such as family and community members, and traditional and religious leaders.



Children and young people do not feel like they are taken seriously by funders.

"In terms of barriers, I would say that we are not being [taken] seriously. We are Gen Zs and we are technology oriented. We act fast. And in the world of grant making there [are] a lot [of] bureaucracies that do not let us act fast. For example, the advisory group wanted to have an Instagram account but the funder did not let us have one because they did not trust us to manage the account."

-Girl activist from Brazil

This attitude toward young people is often veiled under "bureaucracy" or "protocols" and often develops a sense of distrust, which hinders young people's meaningful participation. One young leader from Zimbabwe shared that he felt disheartened when the agreement to include a young leader from an advisory group in the Board was not honored: *"... at times when they want things from us, they're always pushing for us to deliver. But when we ask for something like this, they take their deliberate time and to me, I feel like it's just some kind of delaying tactic or they now see us as some form of being there just for probably, PR purposes?"* This experience demonstrates the need for expectation-setting at the beginning and throughout, transparency about what is possible, and agreement as equal partners on how to communicate and work together. A youth activist from the UK shared that adults only respect young people if they have already previously engaged in similar work: *"...they [funders and philanthropists] will say things like...we are choosing you because of your experience doing this, because of your great accomplishments doing that. And I think that is the standard for validating what we do, but it makes me wonder what about those that don't have experience or haven't accomplished things like that? So I think by scrapping meritocracy, I think funders can be more trusting and empower more young people."* A recruitment approach based on meritocracy is also much more likely to exclude under 18s, particularly adolescent girls and those with limited digital access who will not have had as much previous experience.

The digital divide is making it difficult for trust to be built.

A youth activist we interviewed noted the huge digital gap in terms of infrastructure between countries in the Global North and countries in the Global South. For many communities based in the Global South, internet access and access to a device is considered a luxury, particularly for adolescent girls.⁶⁷ Children and young people often borrow phones or laptops from family members to take part in virtual forums. This is not often understood by Global North based funders who do not always budget for the additional access needs for those who have digital limitations, e.g., devices or data packages. It can also make it difficult for building a trusting relationship, and has been exacerbated with COVID-19. She said: *"And so if the donors initially were not trusting the young people, how would they even trust them now when they cannot even see them? So how would they trust people who don't have a stable internet? I just feel like this current situation has only made the trust worse."* Another girl activist from Peru echoed that when young people cannot communicate properly due to unstable internet connections, funders often interpret it as them not taking the job seriously.



Additional measures are required for working with under 18s. It would be remiss not to mention the tendency of funders to work with older young people, over 18 or even in their late 20s, thereby either intentionally or indirectly excluding under 18s. This is often because of safeguarding concerns, which are heightened when moving money to adolescents. One public funder we interviewed said: *"In terms of safeguarding and other considerations, I don't think the team felt quite ready for that. So that's one big question we have is how do we do that? And how do we do that well and safely? It brings up lots of questions about the recognition and the payment, where that just gets a little messy and complicated."* There are mixed opinions about when to obtain parental consent for political work that they might not be supportive of. In many countries, there are also legal restrictions when transferring money to under 18s. However it is not impossible. Several funders and INGOs⁶⁸ have worked with girl-led and centered groups to move funds safely and provide the additional accompaniment and support needed to manage the money.

There is a fear of working with children stemming from a lack of expertise. Another obstacle to working with children is the fear of getting it wrong or not having the expertise for working with under 18s. One public funder shared that this fear was held at the team level: *“A lot of our team, when they were hired, they weren’t necessarily hired for having child and youth participation skills. So it’s a mix of experiences on the team. So some folks feel more comfortable working with 20 year olds as opposed to adolescents.”* Where organizations are supporting meaningful participation with children, they have hired people (often young people) with deep experience in facilitating child-centered methodologies. They have also provided training on safeguarding, meaningful participation, power, and privilege for staff across the organization, not just with the teams that are in direct contact. This means that the finance team or grants team is also experienced and ready to move money to adolescents or to engage with them, their families or local partners.

