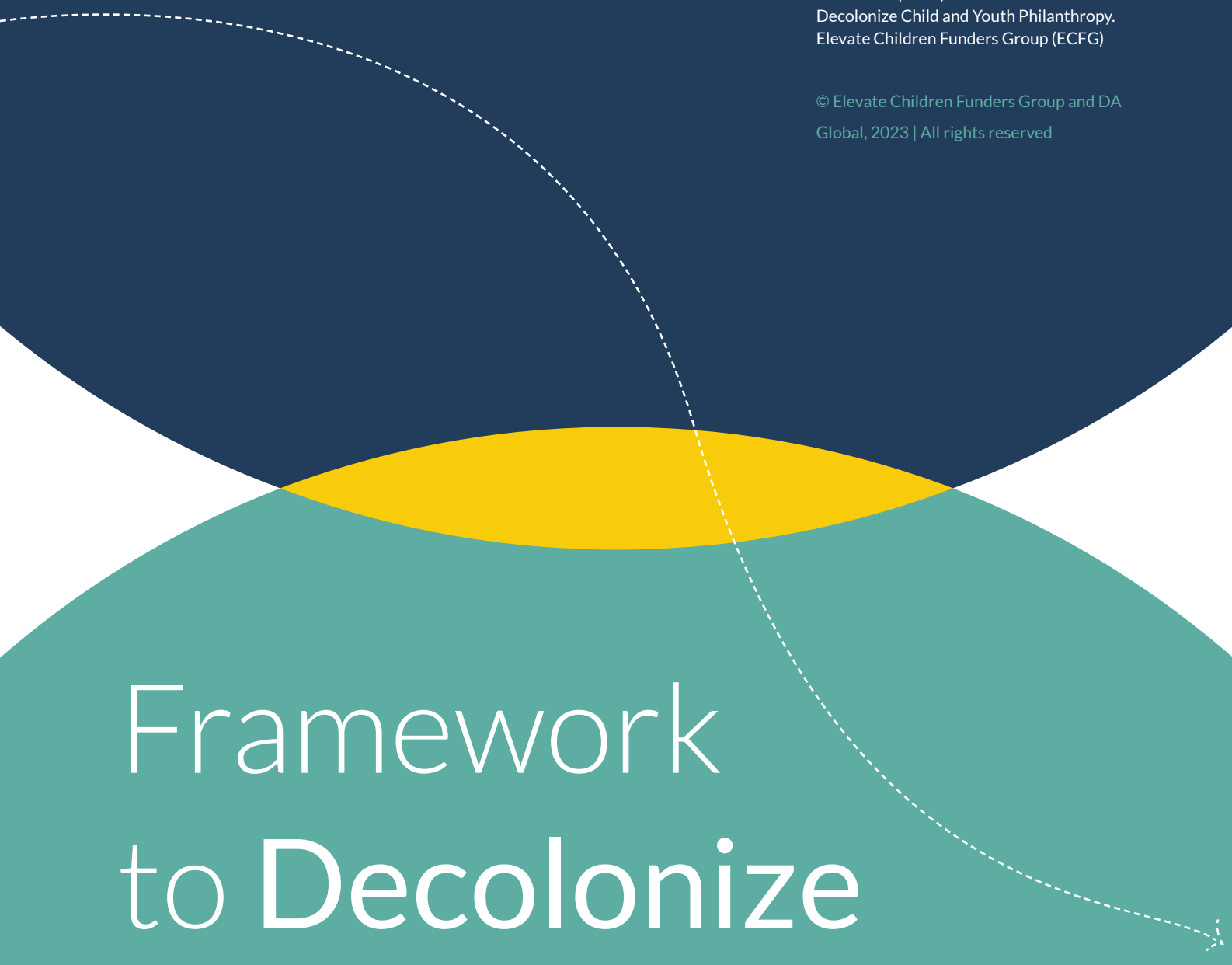


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Framework to Decolonize Child & Youth Philanthropy

2023



Firelight Foundation

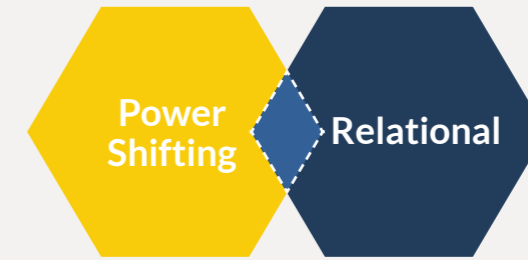
While Firelight Foundation had been making grants directly to community-based organizations since 1999, it has been on a journey to decolonize its practice for the last decade. The success of this journey is due to several factors, starting with the question of what children and youth and their communities actually want and need from Global North philanthropy.



As one of the first steps, the foundation created an open space for Board members and staff to learn together about the basic concepts of decolonization, shifting power, and systematic justice. To guide them on this journey, they began with a major research initiative asking community-based organizations and communities across nine countries what they actually wanted from Global North philanthropy and other development actors. They then used this direct evidence, as well as the ongoing perspective of those who informed it, as the framework for all of their subsequent changes. Firelight used this evidence to de-construct all of their grantmaking practices and re-construct them using the framework of Community-Driven Systems Change, which emphasizes the insight, leadership, and ownership of the people who are living and experiencing issues at the community level, and their work to create lasting change in the systems and root causes that underlie the critical issues they seek to address.

Through this process they reframed their operation and program model, centering it on the actual needs, knowledge, wisdom, experience and realities of children, families, and communities, as opposed to the perspectives of outsiders, including donors, Global North or “elite” experts and even Firelight staff themselves. As a foundation, they see all of this as a work in progress and an “aspirational process” but a critical one for shifting power and supporting Africans to effect change in their own systems for children and youth. This is all the more important because they also receive and make grants for other donors - supporting others to shift power in their philanthropy by granting through Firelight.

For the journey’s success, it was crucial for everyone on this journey from the Board, foundation leadership, program staff and Firelight’s wide range of donors to understand the power dynamics in global development and philanthropy, especially as it concerns children and youth and to be humble, open to critique, and open to learning - no one individual or even a foundation has all the answers.



“We work to build authentic and reciprocal relationships with grantee partners and marginalized communities by prioritizing their needs and perspectives, building long-term partnerships based on shared values and goals, and listening and responding to the needs and desires of local communities.”



Looks like

Observable behaviors of philanthropic actors

Philanthropic organizations prioritize the relationship with local partners based on mutual respect and trust, as equally as the exchange of money.

For example:

- A philanthropic organization has chosen to give core funding (rather than program-specific) to their long-time partner organizations and prioritize the investment in lasting relationships and the partner organization’s development. During the grant agreement process, the program team meets with the local partner organization to discuss shared values and goals, the partner’s vision for their future and requests for support.
- The long-time program officer is leaving the philanthropic organization and is handing over their responsibilities and relationships to a new hire. The program officer prioritizes introductory calls between the new hire and existing local partners - to enable the relationship to continue with open communications and trust.

Philanthropic organizations consider local partners as the expert in their community and actively find ways to amplify this knowledge. For example:

- A technical specialist is invited to speak at a panel event about child rights in Lebanon. They suggest that the event organizer talk to the philanthropy’s local partner in the country and invite their young leader to share their first-hand experience in promoting child rights.
- The Board invites a diverse cross-section of local partners to present their organization’s work and provide recommendations for future foundation strategies and funding priorities.



Firelight Foundation

Over the last decade, [Firelight Foundation](#) has incrementally shifted its organizational structures to reflect a more decolonized approach. Since 2018, the Board has shifted from being mostly Global North expertise to primarily African expertise and created the conditions to allow for that, such as only virtual meetings and removal of set Board financial contributions. The Board commissioned a study to examine how an organization can maintain its 501(c)3 status; since the assumption was that all or most staff have to be US-based to maintain that status. The study findings showed that you can continue to maintain 501c3 status with your staff based outside of the US; thus, in turn, over the ensuing years, the foundation staff has shifted from being mostly Americans, based in the United States, to the vast majority of staff being mostly Africans based in Africa. Over the last decade, the foundation has diversified its Board, staff, and soon senior leadership.

The foundation has taken on the challenging process of reforming its internal human resource processes and practices to ensure that these changes are not just cosmetic but real power shifts to allow for participatory trust-based philanthropy. Firelight used their nine-country research evidence (mentioned above) to de-construct their majority white, Global-North led and Global-North Governed organization and re-construct it deriving all definitions, decisions, evidence, knowledge, experience and leadership from Africa (where they do their grantmaking) and from the communities that they seek to serve. And, lastly, Firelight will hire an African leader to take the helm of the organization in the coming year - "which is the most critical but also the most challenging" component of the journey. As of 2023, Firelight will have completed its transition to an African designed, structured, staffed, informed, and led organization.

Firelight's experience highlights the importance of Board engagement, buy-in and leadership in shepherding the process but ensuring that changes are happening at all levels of the organization from governance down to administration. And the importance of tackling embedded assumptions and perceived customs as well as patience and long-term vision to implement incremental changes that can ultimately lead to more seismic organizational changes.

CASE
STUDY

EMpower- The Emerging Markets Foundation

EMPower prefers the terminology of local leadership and power shifts but sees decolonial approaches embedded in many current ways of working at the foundation. A cornerstone grantmaking practice that sets EMpower aside from peers is the decision to provide 10-year grants with built-in flexibility for grantees to apply the funds towards most relevant priorities which are identified locally. There have been several concrete shifts in support of local leadership and shared decision-making. Overall, "power-aware" decision-making and grantmaking processes were described by the Board and staff as being part of the overall organizational "compass" even if not always explicit in written documents. EMpower has invited Board members who are practitioners with experience in different sectors, with movement-building, and activism to diversify the Board but also to create openings for transformative discussions within the Board. There is also a concerted effort to change power dynamics in governance and decision-making structures and processes by moving grantmaking decisions out of the Boardroom and into the hands of the EMpower program team, many of whom are hired locally and are based in countries where EMpower funds. In addition, EMpower is investing in adolescent and youth-led grantmaking. Other practices that are seen as part of decolonial approaches at EMpower include linking up grantees and other groups in Brazil, Ghana, and India to share their best practices, problems, and solutions. These South-to-South exchanges form part of the foundation's decolonized approach. As a senior leader in the organization said, "We don't hold all the solutions. One way to support a decolonized approach is to connect organizations that work in different contexts but on similar issues and help them share ideas and come up with better solutions. There is unique strength in connecting with peers across countries that just isn't there in vertical relationships that are solely with the foundation."

CASE
STUDY

Key Takeaways:

- Multi-year funding signals an intent to support meaningful partnership, accompaniment, and mutual trust and learning. It also supports the partner organizations in their planning, long-term strategy and organizational development.
- It is important to demonstrate the values and principles in routine practices and norms and in setting expectations about the roles of Boards and staff. Decolonization and power sharing doesn't have to be written into each document if it is firmly established as part of the institutional culture and norms.
- Financing South to South exchanges between peers signals recognition that expertise should be actively sought in the Global South and that Northern partners do not always have to be involved as convenors, facilitators or agenda setters for these events.