

Firelight’s grantmaking approach is child-centered, family-focused, and community-based. This approach recognizes that child and youth development and well-being are shaped by complex interactions between and among the child, the family, the community, civil society, government, and global systems. Each of these actors form nested ‘circles of support’ in the ecological model of child development and well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)<sup>1</sup> and are situated within a specific cultural, economic, and social policy context.

Based on the understanding of family as the most intimate and important circle of care for children and youth, and that extended family as well as formal and informal community groups provide 90 percent of support to families, Firelight has chosen to intervene at the CBO level in order to have the greatest possible impact on the well-being of children and youth.

Our objective then is to channel resources to community-based organizations who will use those resources to strengthen the safety net of care around children and youth while meeting their needs and upholding their rights.

In 2006, Firelight Foundation was selected as one of six organizations to join a consortium of intermediary grantmakers launched by the Nike Foundation under the Grassroots Girls Initiative (GGI). As an organization, Firelight’s focus was on improving the lives of vulnerable children affected by HIV and poverty. Firelight achieved its mission by channeling resources to grassroots organizations working to improve the health, education, resilience of children and livelihoods of their parents and youth.

In order to support the goal of empowering girls, Firelight developed a model of support with three interlocking components: funding, strengthening, and learning. Each part contributed to a multi-layered process of change. Each is detailed below.

**Funding** to a cohort of five grantees and one intermediary community grantmaker. Firelight selected three organizations with organizational capacity, effective programming, innovative solutions to common issues facing girls. Organizations also had to demonstrate their commitment to building up the assets of girls and to supporting the agency of girls. Funding supported the three organizations to invest in girls access build up girls:

- **Personal assets** – that build up girls confidence, life skills, and
  - **Life skills**, including decision-making, critical thinking and self expression
  - **Self confidence** to know who they are and fulfill their potential
  - **Knowledge** to make informed choices about having sex and early marriage
- **Social assets** – focused on social support systems and relationships that enhance girls’ sense of belonging and safety in the family, school, and community by focusing on:
  - Helping girls **develop peer networks** by providing **safe spaces** where girls come together on a regular basis. NASO and its grantee-partners continue to expand the model of adolescent girl corners.

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<sup>1</sup> A highly intuitive model, it is one that is familiar to many practitioners and planners within civil society and government and is utilized in international agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child.



- **Engaging parents and the general community** in understanding the challenges and needs of girls, and most importantly to value and support girls. Tapping positive parent role models to help other parents support their girls to enroll, stay, and succeed in school.
- **Advocating** for and **raising awareness** of the needs of girls within the wider community, in particular with government, traditional leaders, services providers, such as schools and clinics.
- **Physical assets** – including personal effects like clothing, access to land, housing and transport, as well as access to tools or other productive assets, specifically:
  - Ownership of **agricultural livestock**, a highly valued asset in rural communities. When their livestock reproduced, at least one of the offspring was passed on to another girl. Livestock generated income through sale of offspring (e.g. rabbits or pigs) or sale of milk (e.g. goats or cows).
  - **Birth registration** as well as **inheritance** and **property ownership rights** protection as a result of access to legal services. Girls benefitted by retaining their rights to the land that is passed down from deceased parents.
  - **Productive assets**, including sewing machines or hairdressing equipment that allowed the girls to turn their skills into steady income streams
  - Girls were also supported to use their income to secure their **own housing and land** to improve their standard of living.
- **Human assets** – with a focus on ensuring that girls have:
  - **Production skills and knowledge, mainly** in traditionally female occupations, such as sewing, hairdressing, and agriculture;
  - **Business planning and management skills**, allowing them to effectively run micro-enterprises. Girls are also taught skills in cooperative management, enabling them to leverage resources through working together.
  - **Financial literacy skills**, including managing income and expenses, building savings, understanding how to work with banks, manage loans, and engage in financial negotiation.
  - Knowledge and access to services in **sexual and reproductive health**.
- **Financial assets**, including cash and savings, as well as social protection support.
  - **Cash** for girls to purchase key inputs for their business start-up.
  - **Savings and loan groups** to support building up of savings
  - **Technical support and mentoring** to identify, start and run a successful business.

**Strengthening, Documenting, and Leveraging** programming of the funded grantees as well as girl program strategies of 30 additional grassroots organizations. Key activities supporting those efforts included:

- **Knowledge Building Workshops:** Firelight supported the three GGI 3.0 grantee-partners to participate in a three-day workshop facilitated by Population Council. Grantee-partners gained skills and knowledge from the training on Girl-Centered Program Design Toolkit. The workshop was complemented by a learning visit to WEM Integrated Health Services, which helped the three partners enhance their knowledge and skills in serving adolescent



girls. In addition, Population Council staff conducted follow-up visits to each organization to provide additional technical support.

- **Learning circles** facilitated by each of the three funded organizations. The three learning circles formed a safe space for organizations to gather and explore issues related to support of adolescent girls. Learning circles used a combination of meetings and training sessions to share knowledge and skills. They complemented the gatherings with peer-exchange field visits and mentoring visits. **Peer Learning** provided a valuable opportunity for the partners to learn by active participation and reflect on their own programs.
- **Mentoring and technical support** from Program Consultants who conducted site visits to grantees throughout the year and also provided support via telephone or email dialogue. Their support included mentoring, training, information sharing, and advice on all aspects of organizational management and programming. The Program Consultants also played a critical role in connecting grantee-partners to technical experts in areas outside their own skill and capacity. Each of the three GGI partners received at least three visits from Program Consultants in the grant period.
- **Information sharing:** Throughout this grant year, Firelight continued to channel information, funding opportunities, and other resources relevant to Firelight's partners through program consultants, program officers, and through the Firelight Newsflash.
- **Digital Storytelling:** Adolescent girls were trained to use smart phones to capture, edit and share their stories. The digital storytelling became a powerful platform for amplifying girls voices to advocate for change. But it also turned out to be a powerful healing process for girls.

**Learning** about the networking of grassroots organizations: Using a series of guided questions Firelight used the learning circles and other strategies to probe, understand, and document effective strategies for networking of CBOs and outcomes of that process.

In addition Firelight gathered data from the partners to analyze change in both the investments in their programming and to document change. Various tools were developed to facilitate the ongoing process of assessment.

Finally, Firelight learned from ongoing dialogue and engagement with partners and with girls. Firelight connected lessons from each point of engagement to

## Conclusion

A successful transformation of the adolescent girl's experience, and therefore transition to adulthood, means creating a set of conditions that provide girls with the opportunity to reach their full potential and to lead lives of meaning and value, while enhancing the substantive choices that shape their future (Sen, 1997). We know that a successful and positive experience in adolescence enhances chances of a successful transition to adulthood, with benefit at the individual, familial, and societal levels.

Unleashing the girl effect requires a shift in the social and cultural norms that shape and influence



both the public and private spheres of an adolescent girl's life. It is at once about building her agency while also transforming the mindset of those who make up her ecology of care. It is also about ensuring that policies, resources, and opportunities are equally available to her.

This three-year initiative demonstrated how grassroots organizations can contribute to make that vision a reality. Their value-add comes from the fact that, by necessity, they are resource stretching, resilient, and adaptive. They confront large problems with a combination of considerable creativity, motivation, and commitment. Their strengths are further leveraged when they receive the right amount of funding, capacity building support, and networking. In this initiative, they used their nimble qualities to inform the development of targeted strategies to reach and serve marginalized adolescent girls, overcome local problems that hold girls back, and strengthen connections to key stakeholders in order to gain more support and resources for girls. That ability to “link, lever, and connect” actors and resources in order to transform the lives of girls led to impressive and lasting results that are being multiplied beyond the immediate set of girls that was reached.