

**Introduction**

**About 5 years ago, Firelight realized that it had a problem.**

We were supporting organizations and communities in Southern and Eastern Africa to address challenges and opportunities for children and youth. We believed in these organizations and we believed in these communities – in their capacity to address challenges, to take action, to act on short term and long term issues. We supported them to address challenges such as child marriage, lack of early childhood education and development systems, sexual violence, adolescent girls dropping out of secondary school and more. But we had never formally and systematically asked these communities, these families, these children, these youth, these girls, these boys, where they believed the challenges were the greatest.

In short – we were deciding – based on our own knowledge, or prevalence data or our donors’ interests – what challenges communities should tackle for their children and their youth.

**But it isn’t (or wasn’t) just Firelight’s problem.**

Despite our best intentions to genuinely support change for children and youth, for too long, the frameworks, interests and agendas of Global North donors, INGOs, academics and institutions have shaped the work of philanthropy and global development.

Even when communities are engaged, it is usually done in an instrumental way, to get ‘buy-in’ for what has been prioritized by the donor (or in some cases the INGO). Even when donors carry out research to understand the issues at hand, they still often use their own Global North lens to interpret, make sense of, and use the learnings as they develop their strategy and plans.

The result is that many global development initiatives tend to further a donor’s own (often well-intentioned) interests, but don’t actually result in meaningful, relevant, and lasting change at the community level. Sometimes these outside-in initiatives even harm local communities’ own agency, power, and resilience.

**What if there was another way to do global development, to do philanthropy?**

What if instead of telling communities what to do, we listened to communities and worked in solidarity and genuine partnership with them? What if communities could identify and organize around their own priorities, and set their own agendas? What if funders listened to communities, and were guided by communities themselves? What if communities’ insights, wisdom, agency, power, resilience, and effectiveness were recognized and strengthened, to support locally-led change efforts that are owned and sustained by community stakeholders?

**The first step to doing so is listening to communities.**

We need to listen to what they have to say about their contextual realities and priorities, and, in the case of child rights funders, listening to what children, youth, and families themselves have to say about their own realities, wellbeing, challenges, opportunities, and solutions.

**This research is about listening to children, youth, families and communities.**

Over the last couple of years, Firelight has been partnering with expert African researchers and community leaders to develop a comprehensive, community-informed understanding of the realities of children’s rights and wellbeing in Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi. Based on consultation with scholarly and community advisors, these studies were guided and framed by African perspectives on children’s rights and wellbeing. With local researchers and advisors, we carried out a phased research study in each country.

The first phase mapped out, at a national level, the status of children’s rights in different areas identified as important by national and community stakeholders. This country-level analysis was disaggregated by geographic area, and provided a ‘snapshot’ of the overall situation for children in different areas and under different themes. Phase 1 data was reviewed and discussed with community and government stakeholders to narrow down 1-2 districts for more in-depth study in Phase 2.

The second phase involved in-depth discussion and analysis at the community level, diving deep into how children experience the realization (or lack thereof) of their rights in their day-to-day lives at the family, school, and community levels. In this phase, community leaders, practitioners, government officials, parents, and children and youth themselves shared their perspectives around their aspirations and concerns, areas of vulnerability and opportunity, and priorities for change at the community level.

**What do we want you to do with this data?**

The resulting consolidation and analysis offer a rich, complex, sobering, and illuminating set of findings around how communities conceptualize, understand, and prioritize children’s rights and wellbeing in their own cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

This research provides a critically needed and timely knowledge base for funders and others in global development to listen to, draw from, and continue to engage with, as they seek to genuinely shift power and be guided by children, youth, families, communities and other local and national stakeholders in their strategy development and grantmaking decisions.

**Five things we do not want you to do with this data**

1. **Please do not judge.**

You will read some incredibly positive things but you may also read negative things. But do not judge. Why?

* Because we asked children, youth, parents and community members to share their opportunities and CHALLENGES. We ASKED them what they felt was amiss. That does not mean their lives are amiss or that everything is wrong or broken. We ASKED them to tell us what was challenging them.
* We asked these questions of vulnerable people in vulnerable places.
* Because the study of psychology and of the brain tells us that negative experiences can be a very powerful force on peoples’ outlook, memory and expression. That does not mean that people have not had positive lives or that they do not have positive things occurring in their lives, it just means that sometimes the negative resonates more vividly, especially when you are asked.
* Because if WE were all asked about our challenges, we may hear similar reports – racial inequity in schools, the impact of austerity measures on the social fabric, neglected infrastructure, poorly paid teachers and more. And if you are from the UK, the US or Canada today, you will understand what we mean.
* Because we all have aspirations for our children - how we care for them, how they are educated, how they are protected by society - and because those aspirations are SO high and strong, we can all risk being critical of ourselves and others, believing that we may not always measure up.

And finally, do not judge because we first need to acknowledge the direct and long-tail impacts of colonialism on Africa. Whether perpetuated by faith actors and the church or by nation states or by international actors, colonialism brought particular forms of hierarchy, didacticism, adultism, misogyny and violence against children that were not always present in pre-colonial Africa. To be fair, not everything that these outsiders brought was negative, nor was everything that existed prior positive, but we cannot listen to the realities of African families, children and youth today without acknowledging the direct impact colonialism - extraction, violence, and suppression; the mid-tail impact – suppression of self belief, debasement of positive indigenous practices, corporal punishment in schools, punitive hierarchical structures; and the long-tail impact – dependence, self-defeat, scarcity of resources, negative gender norms and the list goes on.

1. **Do not draw any conclusions without asking more questions.**

If you wish to understand more – please ask. As communities, ask families, ask children. Everything that was shared with us has deeper and systemic root causes. For example – is lack of male involvement in parenting because of misogyny, traditional cultural practice, or poverty? Or all or none of the above?

Also, just because something isn’t mentioned, that doesn’t mean it didn’t occur. This is the eternal challenge with research and data collection – it could be situational, it could be the researcher, it could be who we asked and when and how…

If you would like help asking, we are happy to help you. As are the research institutions that helped us gather this data.

And we would again – encourage you to ask – because our conclusions should not actually matter - it is the conclusions of the community that matter – why they think something is happening and what they choose to do about it.

1. **Please don’t jump to action.**

All of you have opened these reports because you care and want to do something. But it is important for action to be guided by – and actually led by – the families, children, youth, and communities closest to the issues. Review these reports with the lens and attitude of listening and learning – not jumping immediately to action. Action is important – but we ask you please to consult with and work hand-in-hand with children, families, and communities in understanding, interpreting, and prioritizing the issues that concern them, and then together determining what actions are necessary and how they should be carried out and by whom. Again, if you would like help asking/consulting, we are happy to help you.

1. **Please do not universalize, or compare and contrast.**

We asked vulnerable people in vulnerable places for their perspective. Their experiences and perspectives are not those of the entire country and they are especially not those of any one region or of a continent. Based on this principle, we are also asking you not to compare and contrast between each country for several reasons –

* While we started with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and many of our key questions were the same, the researchers were encouraged to develop their own frameworks for questions and data gathering.
* We asked different people in different places. They are not comparable, nor should they be.
* We need to remember that what was shared with us was also influenced by things like timing, the recency effect, who was in the room, who asked the questions and how, and so on. As a result, it would not be right to compare and contrast between countries.
1. **Don’t be surprised if there isn’t anything surprising.**

As you are reading the findings, they may seem familiar, recurring, and seemingly entrenched.

And that’s a heart-wrenching reality. Despite billions of dollars, millions of people, and countless hours of work and effort, the answer is frustrating: charitable giving, global development and philanthropy have largely failed to produce real, lasting change. And in many ways, charity, development and traditional philanthropy have further [intensified](https://www.theelephant.info/features/2022/04/13/the-paradox-of-donor-funding-in-arid-and-semi-arid-kenya/) these systemic challenges. We would argue that this is not because things lack “scale” – it is because we have not placed those who are most effected at the center of defining, deciding and doing. Particularly vis a vis children and youth, we have not supported them to have agency over their own systems or to take their own action to hold systemic duty bearers to account. This research begins the process of changing that.

That’s why it is all the more important to listen to children, families, and communities talk about these issues, even if we’ve heard them before – to genuinely hear things from *their* perspectives. We need to move beyond how we ourselves understand the issues, to genuinely listening to and being guided by their experiences, their analyses, their insights, and their solutions.

*We are always happy to engage with you further on any of the above, and on the findings from the mapping study reports. Please feel free to contact the Firelight team at* *learning@firelightfoundation.org*