



# FIRELIGHT'S WORK IN FY23

# IMPACT REPORT

JULY 1, 2022 TO JUNE 30, 2023

For Firelight, FY23 was about deepening and expanding support to the communities who are effecting systems change for their children and youth, continuing to operationalize the model with our grantee-partner organizations and working hand in hand with the communities around them to define goals, priorities and measures of success. We also continued to document and share our learnings in regional and global conversations and were grateful to be able to grow and strengthen our team.

In FY23, Firelight made 41 grants to 29 community-based organizations (CBOs) across four countries in eastern and southern Africa, totaling USD \$1,113,400. To date, Firelight has given or transmitted more than \$30 million to nearly 500 CBOs in 12 African countries. We also provide significant support for our partners in the form of capacity strengthening and other investments that are key to community-driven systems change.

## FY23 GRANTS AT A GLANCE

# of CBO grantee-partners supported:

29

# and types of grants awarded:

30

program implementation grants

7

learning and planning grants

4

mentorship grants

Total awarded in grants:

USD \$1,113,400

Areas of work supported:

- Early childhood development in Malawi and Zambia
- Fighting child marriage in Malawi
- Youth resiliency and belonging in Kenya
- Community-based research on the intersections of early childhood development and women's agency and choice in Tanzania.

## SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-LED CHANGE TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

We proudly continued our work with community-based organizations and communities in Zambia, Malawi, Kenya, and Tanzania, using and further refining our approach to [community-driven systems change](#). In this approach, we work with a cluster of CBOs who are working in similar geographic and thematic areas and support them with grant funds and capacity strengthening as they mobilize community-led action on the systemic and root causes of priority issues affecting their children and youth.

### Youth-led and youth-focused CBOs strengthening youth resilience and belonging in their communities in Kenya

In mid-2022, we launched our new initiative in Kenya, *Community-Driven Systems Change for Youth Resiliency and Belonging*. We identified and onboarded seven CBO grantee-partners in three counties – Kajiado, Machakos and Makueni. Most are youth-led and all work in close collaboration with youth in their communities. We supported these seven CBOs with a funded learning and planning phase, during which they consulted and worked closely with different community stakeholder groups, including youth themselves, to identify the key issues facing youth in their communities. After co-creating visions of success and community action plans, the CBOs were supported to develop their own implementation plans based on these community discussions and decisions. This led to their first year of implementation grants. Learn more [on our website](#), in [an article](#) at Imaginable Futures as well as their [interview](#) with Alice Saamakopito, a young entrepreneur receiving mentoring for her livestock business.

“We have acquired skills like beekeeping, value addition, rearing animals for profit and how to market our cultural hand-made beads to other regions... these initiatives are helping us earn an income, educate our children and take care of the needs of our families.” **Alice Saamakopito**

### CBOs and communities fighting child marriage in Malawi

We continued to provide funding and support to five CBOs in Malawi that have been working with their communities to address the systemic and root causes of child marriage in ways that address their specific context. One of the most important areas of change that we are seeing is more strategic collaboration among CBOs, traditional leaders and government child protection workers. The result is much-needed consistent messaging and support to youth, parents and others who might be considering child marriage. Of particular note, traditional leaders are speaking to parents, enforcing bylaws that prohibit child marriage and supporting survivors (children who have been rescued from child marriage). As a result, we are seeing a significant drop in cases of child marriage, along with corresponding shifts in attitudes and norms in the community. You can learn more [here](#).

## CBOs and communities improving systems and environments for early childhood development in Malawi and Zambia

Our 13 CBO grantee-partners working on early childhood development (ECD) in Malawi and Zambia moved into their second year of implementation with their communities. Community stakeholders, local government, CBOs and parents are collaborating to build or enhance systems for early childhood nurturing, education and care. This includes mobile clinics, improved early childhood centres and the promotion of nutrition programs. In addition, community structures such as care groups are becoming stronger and more efficient, which is helping to reduce malnutrition and fight mother-to-child HIV transmission. Our partners note that while key stakeholders such as district education officers support the CDSC approach, it requires a lot of involvement and open dialogue as well as flexibility and adaptation from all involved. The learnings from this work promise to be rich, and we look forward to sharing them with you. You can read more [here](#).

## CBOs and communities co-leading a research study on ECD and women's agency in Tanzania

Our community-based research on early childhood development (ECD) and women's agency in Tanzania is well underway. Co-designed with four CBO partners and their communities, the research is rooted in their observations that issues and interventions relating to ECD and women's empowerment can sometimes seem at odds. For example, mothers expressed their frustration with the inadequacy of appropriate and safe child care options for their young children while they work long hours. Similarly, CBOs and communities find it difficult to support adolescent mothers in achieving agency (by returning to school or developing income-generation skills, for example) while also helping them to effectively parent young children. We expect this research to yield rich community-specific data and a collective analysis which can be used by CBOs, communities, government officials and funders to improve policy, programs and outcomes for young children and for women in Tanzania and other parts of East Africa. You can learn more [here](#).

## SHARING OUR EVIDENCE AND LEARNINGS

In FY23, Firelight and our CBO grantee-partners were pleased participate in different regional and global convenings, in which we both learned from others and shared our own evidence and learnings with key audiences.

### Research and evidence

- We were especially proud to launch and disseminate final reports on the rich and comprehensive Child Rights Mapping Studies we conducted between 2020 and 2022. In partnership with expert African child rights researchers and in consultation with community and government leaders, we conducted a country-level mapping of children's and youths' wellbeing and rights in Zambia, Tanzania and Malawi. We followed this with in-depth dialogues and reflections with community stakeholders – including children themselves. What emerged was [a rich and illuminating set of findings](#) on how communities conceptualize and prioritize children's rights – as well as potential actions for funders to support. We are now working with CBOs, funders and other key stakeholders to find effective ways to respond to community-identified issues and priorities in each country.

- We were honoured to have Firelight’s research findings and approach included as a case study in the [Framework to Decolonize Child & Youth Philanthropy](#), published by the Elevate Children Funders’ Group in June 2023.
- We continue to capture evidence and learning around what’s working and what’s not working in our ongoing initiatives. This includes baseline studies, midline studies, endline studies as well as sustainability studies in which we follow-up with former grantees two or three years after our funding partnership is over, to see how they are doing and how their work and impact has been sustained – or not. Recently completed studies can be found on the [Evidence](#) page of our website.

## Presentations

Firelight is committed to ensuring that the perspectives, insights and analyses of CBOs and communities are included in sector-wide discussions and decision-making. To this end, we supported Firelight staff and CBO grantee-partners to participate in and present at different convenings in FY23.

- In August 2022, Firelight was featured as an example of “Innovation in Philanthropic Practice” at a conference on “New Frontiers in Funding, Philanthropy and Investment” hosted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Dr. Sadaf Shallwani (Director of Programs and Learning) [presented](#) our approach to community-driven systems change for children and youth in eastern and southern Africa.
- In November 2022, Tomaida Banda (Program Officer) presented Firelight’s community-driven approach to child protection and safeguarding policies to funders at the Elevate Children Funders’ Group in London. With global attention on the importance of instituting such policies in all organizations, many funders have been grappling with how to help grassroots groups develop policies that actually work for them. Attendees were interested to hear how our approach roots child protection and safeguarding in local and cultural values and norms and builds on existing community practices and structures. The result is policies and systems that are relevant and actually used by local organizations and communities, rather than just being an exercise to ‘tick a box’ and satisfy a funder.
- In May 2023, Sadaf Shallwani participated in a panel discussion with other education funders as part of Catalyst2030’s Catalyzing Change Week. The panelists discussed what it takes to shift power in philanthropy, and Sadaf’s [remarks](#) focused on refreshing how we look at impact and success, redefining what we value and measure, and reconceptualizing the role of local civil society organizations.
- Also in May 2023, Carolyne Ng’eny (Program Officer) attended the annual meeting of the International Education Funders’ Group in Edinburgh, Scotland. Carolyne was joined by two of our CBO grantee-partners: Margaret Mundia, who directs the Kaoma WISE Trust in western Zambia, and Charles Nyerere, who runs the Malawi-based Nachikodowa CBO. All three shared their experiences with community-driven systems change for early childhood development on panels and in other sessions with funders.
- In June 2023, Ronald Kimambo (Learning and Evaluation Officer) was accepted to present at the Development Studies Association conference at the University of Reading in the UK. In a panel on Decolonizing Research Ethics, Ronald shared Firelight’s experience and learnings from our community-led research study in Tanzania focusing on our approach to community ethics review.

## Publications

- In August 2022, Firelight’s research on how CBOs effect social change and how funders can better support it was published in the prominent academic journal, *Development in Practice*. “Community-based organizations and child wellbeing in sub-Saharan Africa: defining social change, effectiveness, and success” was written by Firelight consultant Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, our own Sadaf Shallwani, and four CBO grantee advisors to Firelight: Mary Kabati, Prosper Ndaiga, Saeed Wame and Moses Zulu. It is the result of our three-year study that was also the subject of our [groundbreaking CDSC report](#). For a copy of the academic paper, feel free to contact us at [learning@firelightfoundation.org](mailto:learning@firelightfoundation.org).

“In designing initiatives, we must start with resources that will really help map out the systems and understand the underlying causes, so that we are not just scratching the surface but diagnosing the real disease, and prescribing the correct remedy.” **Ronald Kimambo, Alliance Magazine**

- Also in August 2022, Sadaf published an op-ed in *Alliance magazine* entitled [“Solidarity over charity: prioritizing long-term shifts over band-aid responses”](#). In it she wrote about how traditional charity approaches do not produce deep, systemic change. Instead, she suggested an approach that centers solidarity can be transformative and result in a more equitable society.
- In November 2022, *Alliance magazine* interviewed Ronald for an article entitled [“Community at the centre: Why community-driven systems change is working for South and East Africa”](#). He was joined by Joseph Jackson of the Organisation for Community Development in Tanzania, Michael Sumani from Tikondwe CBO in Malawi and Margaret Mundia of WISE Trust in Zambia who shared what CDSC looks like in practice and how it has been transformative, impactful and sustainable in comparison to traditional outside-in approaches.
- In December 2022, Nina Blackwell, Firelight’s Executive Director, published a piece in the Center for Effective Philanthropy’s blog entitled [“Taking on ‘trust’ in global development philanthropy”](#). The concept of trust must be put under a microscope, she wrote, if we are to make global development philanthropy more effective and as anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-white supremacist as it can be.
- In June 2023, Devex published an [opinion piece](#) by Tomaida and Ronald in which they explained why Firelight has made the decision to no longer use the term “Sub-Saharan Africa”. They reflected on the historical and current problems inherent in the term and made a compelling case to move towards more geographically meaningful descriptions when talking about regions of Africa.

## STAFF NEWS

In FY23, we launched [the search](#) for Firelight's new Executive Director. At the end of June 2023, Nina Blackwell officially stepped down as ED, as part of the process she set in motion with the Firelight board in order for the foundation to transition to African leadership. We express our gratitude to Nina, whose vision and leadership supported a shift of power and deep transformation at Firelight. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors and look forward to her allyship in the wider field of development.

We were also thrilled to bring on board several new [staff members](#) based in eastern and southern Africa, who bring with them skill and experience in areas such as community development, learning and evaluation, operations and administration.

## APPRECIATION

We want to express our deep appreciation to –

- Our CBO grantee-partners, who are at the frontlines of all of this work, are both devoted and wise in their genuine and strategic engagement with community stakeholders to catalyze long-term change for children and youth, and provide invaluable guidance and feedback to help make our collective work stronger and more effective. (Please see details of our current CBO grantee-partners [here](#).)
- Our committed and thoughtful funder-partners, who provide funding, support and thought partnership to help grow our impact while also making it more strategic and effective. Our donors in FY23 included the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, MacKenzie Scott, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Pathy Family Foundation, Two Lilies Fund, Tsadik Foundation, Fondation Les Paquerettes as well as numerous individual donors.
- Our staff, whose tireless commitment, experienced insights and devoted work make all of this possible, and our board, for their constant guidance and support.
- Our friends – organizations and individuals like yourself who support us, learn with us and help us grow and be better.

### Thanks for reading our FY23 Impact Report!

If you would like to reach us, please email us at [info@firelightfoundation.org](mailto:info@firelightfoundation.org).