

Empowering young people as active participants and decision-makers in community foundations

From fundamentals (why) to examples of practice (how)

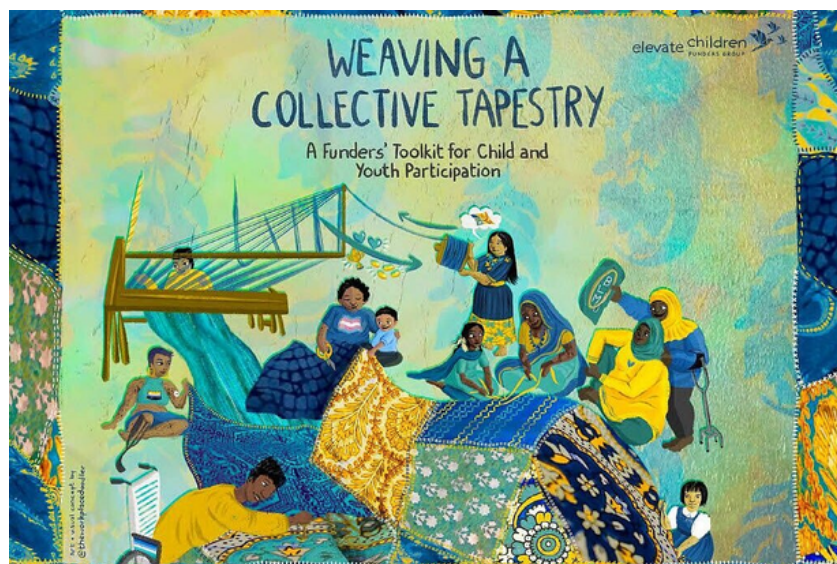


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“Our collective future depends on the investment in young people, our activism, and our vision for what is possible.” Elevate Children Funders Group's vision and mission.

This report reflects on the proceedings of the first meeting of the ECFI Youth Involvement Thematic Path, which will lead to an in-person gathering in Ghent from September 11th to 13th, organised in partnership with StreekFonds Oost Vlanderen, Ghent, Belgium.

The online meeting brought together practitioners from the European community foundations field, who engaged in a lively discussion about why and how their organisations could involve young people in decision-making.

Zoe Trout, Programmes and Communications Manager, and Sheela Bowler, Director of Network and Engagement at [Elevate Children Funders Group](#), prompted the conversation with a dive into their latest "Weaving a collective Tapestry: A funders' toolkit for child and youth participation" (available also in [French](#) and [Spanish](#))

In setting out the context, Zoe and Sheela underlined the crucial role of organisational intentionality for success in involving young people.

The toolkit is built around three dimensions:

- Grounding principles for meaningful participation: process, not projects; co-ownership; safe and consistent; inclusive; intersectional; non-extractive and compensated; experimental and iterative; brave and open; holding power to account; intentional and patient.
- Depth on participation: consulting, making decisions, codesign, resourcing child and youth-led organising.
- Entry points: Organisational / Operational; Programmatic / Grantmaking; Influencing; Monitoring, Evaluating, Learning, and Researching

During the meeting, two entry points and related mechanisms, more relevant to community foundation practitioners, were explored:

Programmatic / Grantmaking: Sheela and Zoe shared the three general mechanisms in this area, highlighting how they apply differently when working with child- and youth-serving organisations versus child- and youth-led ones.

- **Participatory grantmaking**, one of the most powerful ways to truly shift power in the hands of youth. When done well, it will enable a process of building trust, mutual learning, and genuine influence over decision-making. It has the potential to have a positive impact on the individuals involved and to strengthen their groups with increased capacity in financial management.
- **Flexible resourcing to child and youth-led group**, ensures children and young people's self-led and self-organised work is resourced and lifted up. It requires letting go of traditional partnership agreements, reporting processes, and ways of working.
- **Funding participatory adult-led child and youth-serving organisations.** This is an important way to support meaningful child and youth participation; however, it must be ensured that the partners have participatory and powerbuilding practices when working with children and young people. If missing, it is necessary to help them building this. There is a spectrum of how rigorous the approach can be, from including a question in your application form, to having participation as a criterion for grant-giving, to creating ongoing space (and resources!) for deepening participatory practices.

After this short presentation, [Fondazione VCO](#) talked about its latest initiative: Fondazione Giovani VCO, a new parallel informal organisation developed by young people for young people. Adhering to Youth Bank principles and functioning, the Fondazione Giovani VCO brought together 12 youngsters from the community to provide resources for local initiatives. Together, they also set the visual identity for the organisation, deciding on the logo and tone of voice. Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo has supported the program.

Organisational strategy and operations: The objective of this pillar is to help organisations hire young people and create organisational structures, policies, and a culture that gives them influence.

- Participatory strategy development: Funders of any size can adopt this approach of engaging children and young people in strategy development. It can include organisational strategy development, a youth participation program, or a grantmaking strategy.
- Staffing: Hiring young people to manage participatory processes, youth-centered codesign processes, and youth partnerships helps to build trust and open dialogue.
- Youth governance: boards and membership. Engaging children and young people in formal governance has the potential for colossal influence; but also harm, if not done correctly. Consider whether your board is ready to engage a young person meaningfully. If not, pushing for a youth board member can be a good use of time and energy. Instead, focus on facilitating a participatory strategy development process.

The discussion in a nutshell

What does being involved mean? Today, participation takes different forms and shapes that are not always encompassed in community foundation organisational design. For this reason, the entity does not often address the ways young people show up, participate, and share their opinions, setting the two apart.

- **Stepping into this space takes work**, especially for those community foundations that are mostly adult-led. However, Youth Bank is one of the most potent and widespread programmes within the field, and some participants introduced it to their organisation's strategy. In general, it is crucial to have an expert on youth participation and a coordinator who can engage and accompany young people throughout this journey.
- **Resources are needed to fuel these meaningful participation processes:** involving young people is not a nice thing to have, an on-top activity to add voluntarily. Instead, everyone agreed it should be properly resourced by, on the one hand, compensating young people for their time, skills, and competencies; on the other hand, investing as an organisation to create and steward the proper spaces, processes and conditions.
- **Intergenerational dialogue:** one point that arose was the difficulty for adults to dialogue and exchange meaningfully with young people, especially in the workplace.
- **The positive indirect effect of involving young people:** drawing from the [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's](#) experience and the establishment process of its own first Youth Advisory Group for one of its leading cultural programmes, it was highlighted that involving young people can have a positive indirect effect on the organisation. Indeed, experimenting with participation on a smaller scale, which brought positive direct results, led to a wider organisational commitment to youth participation.
- **Create the enabling conditions and ensure representativeness.** One of the critical questions has also been what kind of youth were community foundations able to attract and involve: those already active or those most marginalized and with lived experience? Everyone agreed that there is still a lot to do involving the latter in terms of strategy, resources, and communications. Furthermore, gathering heterogeneous and representative groups poses further challenges for officers and organisations in terms of decision-making processes.

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