Challenging Adultism in Philanthropy

global research and practice insights for shifting age-based power in philanthropy

2026



toto NEWS

elevate children FUNDERS GROUP

TOWARD A CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH IN PHILANTHROPY

researched and authored by

Mtoto News

published by

Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4 Acknowledgments

5 Executive Findings

8 Introduction & Background

10 Conceptual Background

20 Methodology

26 Findings

42 Discussion

51 Becoming Childist

58 Conclusion

60 Glossary

62 References

66 Appendix A: Data Collection Tools

68 Appendix B: Document Review and Analysis Framework

70 Appendix C: Advisory Group Members

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the many trusts, foundations, charities, and young people who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights for this study. Their perspectives were essential in grounding the research in lived experience and strengthening its relevance to philanthropic practice.

We are also grateful to the ECFG Advisory Group for their guidance throughout the research process, including support in convening funders and young people and providing feedback on the study. A full list of Advisory Group members is provided in Appendix C.

In addition, we acknowledge the Mtoto News team, led by Jennifer Kaberi, Liz Amandla Busisa, David Kabata, and Pheza Otieno, who conducted the research and authored this report. We also thank Olivia Tom for her contributions to copy-editing, strategic communications, and report formatting.

ABOUT MTOTO NEWS

Mtoto Newz International Limited is a Kenya-based child and adolescent-centred media and technology company focused on digital participation, child-friendly content and safe digital engagement for children and young people. Mtoto News works at the intersection of child rights, digital innovation, content design, research and advocacy, with experience supporting children aged 6 to 17 across African contexts. Its team brings together child participation specialists, content and communications practitioners, researchers, child development expertise and digital design capability.

ABOUT ECFG

Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG) aims to advance philanthropy that supports children facing adversity. ECFG focuses on the full lifespan of children and youth, from birth through adolescence, with particular attention to those facing risks of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

EXECUTIVE FINDINGS

Purpose and Context

Philanthropic funders play a critical role in shaping the lives and futures of children and young people worldwide. While many organizations invest significant resources in child-focused programming, far less attention has been paid to *how* funding decisions are made, and whose knowledge, priorities, and agency are centered in those decisions. To better understand these dynamics, Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG) sought to examine the extent to which adultism operates within philanthropy and to explore what it would mean to adopt a more childist approach.

Adultism and Childism

Adultism refers to a systemic bias that privileges adult perspectives, authority, and decision-making power while devaluing or excluding the voices, knowledge, and leadership of children and young people. Often operating subconsciously and through normalized institutional practices, adultism shapes philanthropic policies, processes, and decision-making – including within organizations that explicitly commit to equity, participation, and child rights.

Childism, by contrast, recognizes children and young people as full human beings with inherent worth and the capacity to act as agents of change.

Methodology

This qualitative study drew on key informant interviews with philanthropic funders, focus group discussions with young people from the Global South, document analysis of 15 philanthropic organizations, and a validation workshop at the 2023 Africa Children Summit in Nairobi, Kenya.

Key Findings

While many philanthropic organizations work with children and young people, the findings indicate that adultism is prevalent across the sector. All three forms of adultism–attitudinal, institutional, and cultural–were identified across philanthropic policies, processes, and practices, shaping how decisions are made, resources are allocated, and participation is structured.

The findings also highlight structural constraints within philanthropy itself. Larger institutions were consistently less likely to prioritize childist approaches, often citing perceived legal risks, safeguarding concerns, reputational exposure, and limited internal expertise as reasons for avoiding direct engagement with young people. These factors function to reproduce adult-centric power structures, reinforcing the marginalization of children and youth within philanthropic decision-making.

across interviews and research, adultism was most evident in the following ways:

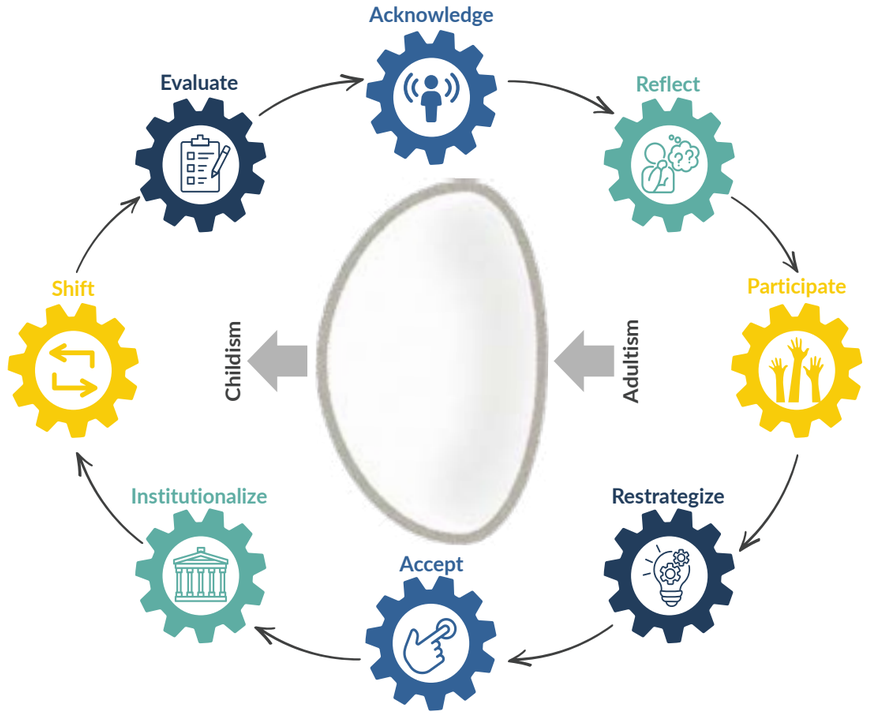
Most organizations lack systems and policies to meaningfully include children and young people, instead relying on grantees to be childist

DEI policies typically fail to address age discrimination

Complex application processes, experience requirements, and mistrust create barriers for youth-led organizations

Young people are often consulted tokenistically rather than given genuine decision-making power

Youth from the Global South and Black youth face compounded discrimination based on age, race, and geography



The ARPRAISE Model

To support philanthropic organizations in moving from adultist practices toward more childist approaches, the report introduces the ARPRAISE model – eight-step framework designed to guide institutions through reflection, participation, and systems change. Rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution, ARPRAISE supports organizations to identify adultist bias, meaningfully engage children and young people, revise internal policies and processes, and institutionalize childist approaches across strategy, grantmaking, and accountability. The model emphasizes that becoming childist is an ongoing organizational transformation, not a checklist or compliance exercise.

Conclusion

Adultism remains deeply embedded in philanthropic structures, yet meaningful change is both necessary and possible. More than half the world's population is under 30, with the majority living in regions where philanthropic funding is directed. Building a just and sustainable future requires centering the very people who will live in it. For organizations committed to equity, decolonization, and lasting social change, adopting childist approaches is not optional; it is essential. By confronting adultism and embracing childist principles, philanthropy can better align its commitments to equity, participation, and justice.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

Children and young people constitute the largest demographic group globally, with over a third of the world's population under the age of 18 and the majority living in the Global South (UNICEF, 2021). This report examines the extent to which the substantial resources dedicated to improving the lives of children and young people are invested using ethical and effective childist approaches.

While key philanthropic donors are predominantly headquartered in the Global North, the majority of their funding supports projects implemented in the Global South, addressing a range of issues across sectors such as health, education, gender, climate change, and good governance (OECD, 2019).

While these initiatives have often been critical in protecting and supporting children's rights (especially during humanitarian disasters or emergencies), the international functions of global development remain shadowed by colonial legacies. Because the international development system emerged between the end of the colonial era and the rise of modern hyper-capitalism, funding institutions hold significant power to set priorities and shape outcomes, moderated by government regulations and influence from civil society and the communities in which they operate. This often leaves little room to consider or integrate the complex, intersectoral needs and desires of affected populations (Cislaghi, 2017).

As in much of international development, outcome-led funding criteria for children center on funder-defined outcomes, often sidelining the wishes and priorities of children and young people and restricting their participation in defining outcomes (Corney et al., 2021). Funding institutions rarely integrate children and young people as equal partners, and instead, their involvement is often limited to tokenistic consultations when setting funding priorities.

When consulted, children's views are often treated as advisory, with little scope within current philanthropic systems for their voices to either (1) compel donors to revise institutional funding processes to address children's concerns (for example, by breaking down siloed funding systems that prioritize predetermined outcomes), or (2) meaningfully shape funding strategies toward more flexible, "unflattened" approaches that address children's needs within their specific ecological niches (Elevate Children Funders Group, 2021). This adult-led, outcome-driven control of investments intended to support children's well-being is referred to as *adultism philanthropy*.

After decades of intellectual consensus that international development should work *with*–not just for–people, more innovative, childist-aligned philanthropic institutions now have the language, vision, and opportunity to fully integrate children and young people as ideational partners rather than passive beneficiaries. By sharing control over funding priorities, these institutions can embed a childist approach into their core processes (Patuzzi & Pinto, 2022).

Understanding how these dynamics emerged requires examining the historical and conceptual foundations of adultism within international development and philanthropy.



Youth participants joined ECFG's 2024 Annual General Meeting in Nairobi, sharing their expertise and perspectives to help shape conversations on child and youth philanthropy.

Learn more: elevatechildren.org

BACKGROUND

Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG) sought to develop a report examining adultism in philanthropy. The goal was to reach resource allocators, particularly those in the philanthropic and development sectors, while ensuring that children and young people were not only represented but directly involved in shaping the report itself.

Origins of Adultism

The contemporary use of the word *adultism* was first defined in 1978 by psychologist Jack Flasher. It refers to discrimination against children because of their age, in which adults misuse or abuse the power they have over children. According to Flasher (1978), the beliefs underpinning adultism include the following:

1. Protection over participation

The participation of children is not always seen as being in their best interest, with protection prioritized over agency. While often framed as safeguarding, this position reinforces a subtle form of discrimination by assuming that dependency and agency are opposing ideas.

2. The child as an emerging being

Children are viewed as immature, incompetent, incomplete, and still "in development," and therefore incapable of participating in decision-making. Their competence is frequently assessed against adult standards of autonomy, maturity, and rationality. Even without using direct comparison, adults often evaluate children's abilities through these standards rather than considering what children are capable of on their own terms.

3. Adults as arbiters of children's best interests

Adults are positioned as experts on children's needs simply by virtue of having once been children themselves, while children are viewed as incapable of assessing their own needs or expressing their point of view.

4. The child in need versus the competent child

The dominant discourse on protection and provision focuses on children's universal needs, often detached from socio-cultural contexts. This framing reinforces the idea that adults alone are responsible for meeting these needs, while children are passive recipients of adult care and aid.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this project was to develop a report aimed at shifting mindsets and behaviors among funders, encouraging them to become less adultist and more attuned to the central role of children and young people as essential agents of positive social change.

The specific objectives of this report are to:

- Define adultism and identify how it manifests within the international child rights and well-being sectors, and within philanthropy
- Identify and challenge common arguments that sustain adultist practices
- Frame adultism as a missing "-ism" within diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) conversations, as well as in debates about power shifting and the decolonization of philanthropy and development sectors
- Elevate the agency and capacity of children and young people, highlighting the need to shift practices to allow them to fully claim their rights
- Spark dialogue within philanthropy and beyond about the systemic impacts of adultism



CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

THE CHILD LENS

The *child lens* is an approach in development and philanthropy that centers the needs, perspectives, and active participation of children and youth in decision-making processes. It challenges traditional "adultist" bias, in which children are often excluded or treated as passive recipients of aid. Instead, the child lens recognizes children as agents of change and highlights the ethical and practical benefits of their involvement in programs and resource allocation that affect their lives. This approach calls on philanthropic organizations to rethink core practices–such as funding timelines and grantmaking strategies–to better align with the unique needs of children and youth.

Children have long taken a back seat in development work, particularly in decisions related to the allocation of financial resources; they are often "seen but not heard." However, since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, there has been a gradual shift in how children are viewed and valued. A growing body of evidence demonstrates both the ethical urgency and programmatic effectiveness of including children and young people in decisions that affect their lives (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Corney, 2014).

Yet despite this growing recognition, philanthropy as a field continues to operate within frameworks that often unconsciously center adult perspectives, shaping how priorities are defined and resources are distributed.

In many ways, the philanthropic sector "sees" and interprets its purpose through internalized adultist biases embedded within its structures and norms. Much like how the eye relies on its biological systems–such as nerves and the retina–to perceive the world and guide action, philanthropic institutions rely on internal organizational "lenses" that shape their worldview. The organizational systems influence strategies, governance, operating policies, accountability procedures, and grantmaking approaches, all of which are informed by adultist assumptions (Patton et al., 2015). These "bio-institutional" structures determine which programs are funded, which regions are prioritized, how long grants last, and which organizations receive support–ultimately shaping philanthropic outcomes.

Changing this internal "nervous system"–the set of mechanisms shaped by adultist bias–requires adopting a *childist approach* that reorients philanthropy around the lived experiences of children and young people. Doing so can lead to more child-centered grantmaking and program design. However, this shift demands that philanthropic institutions critically examine and challenge their core assumptions, including by allowing longer funding timelines and implementing approaches that reflect the pace and cadence required for meaningful child participation, rather than adhering to funder-driven schedules.

Childhood: a contested, contradictory concept

Childhood is a period of rapid physiological and psychological development experienced by all human beings, though it is shaped by local, social, and cultural contexts (Qvortrup, 1994). Because its meanings are deeply context-dependent, childhood is experienced differently across cultural, economic, and political settings. These variances intersect with other social identities, producing diverse and layered experiences for children (James & James, 2004). Despite this variation, in many—though notably not all—contexts, children continue to be viewed as incomplete humans, not yet ready to act as leaders or agents of social change (Cockburn, 2013).

These assumptions are often unconsciously transmitted to children themselves. In societies where adults relate to children primarily through a lens of protection and provision, children may learn to refrain from participating in adult activities. Unless such biases are challenged–for example, by ensuring children's voices are heard and valued–they may struggle to see themselves as capable partners or recognize their own transformative potential. Within these worldviews, childhood is framed as a "waiting room": a phase in which children are expected to prepare for adulthood rather than be recognized as full humans in a distinct life stage. While children undeniably require care and protection, they are also capable of serving as visionary partners and active participants in social transformation (Churchill, 2017).

ADULTISM

Adultism provides a critical lens for examining how power operates across age within philanthropic and development systems. It shapes how children and young people are perceived, whose knowledge is valued, and how decisions are made on their behalf. This section outlines how adultism is defined, the forms it takes within institutional contexts, its impacts on children and young people, and the underlying factors that sustain it.

Defining Adultism

Adultism is an ageist cultural system that promotes the stereotyping and disempowerment of young people (Wall, 2022). Adultist worldviews–often unconsciously held–position adults as inherently superior to children, assuming they are better equipped to understand and act upon social realities (Lourdes et al., 2015).

Those who hold adultist biases may perceive children's leadership as a threat to their social status, viewing compromise with a child as evidence of adult inadequacy or an inability to lead (Wall, 2022). As McClellan (2020) notes, adultist practices commonly manifest in several recurring ways, often falling into one or more of the following categories:

Children as objects

Children are viewed as instruments for achieving adult-defined goals. Rather than investing directly in children's well-being, adults integrate children into adult-centered systems to maintain the status quo.

Example: A large corporate foundation funds a literacy program in an impoverished community primarily to improve its public image and secure tax benefits. Photographs of smiling children appear in annual reports to attract donors, while the program's long-term educational impact remains secondary. Children become a means to an end: tools for advancing corporate interests such as public relations and financial gain.

Children as problems

Children are framed as problematic beings who must be "fixed" through adult intervention in order to become fully human. Adults define what requires correction, often to ensure children conform to adult-created systems rather than disrupt them.

Example: An NGO operates a program for "at-risk" youth focused on addressing "problematic behaviors" such as truancy or disobedience. The program overlooks root causes–such as poverty, unstable homes, or under-resourced schools–and dismisses children's own perspectives on what they need to thrive. The intervention becomes a top-down effort to enforce compliance rather than foster partnership.

Children as incompetent

Children are perceived as incapable of making meaningful decisions, with adults holding full control over choices that affect children's lives, based on what adults believe is "best" for them.

Example: A charity builds a school in a low-income country without consulting local children or families. An all-adult board determines the location, design, staffing, and curriculum, assuming community members lack relevant expertise. As a result, children's actual needs—such as access to clean water or safe play spaces—are overlooked in favor of adult-defined priorities. Children and their communities become passive recipients of a space over which they had no say.

Children as recipients

Children are treated as passive beneficiaries of adult intervention. While consultation may occur, adults retain decision-making authority and limit children's input to options that do not challenge predetermined adult visions.

Example: A foundation offers a youth empowerment grant that requires young people to be "consulted" during project design. However, the application process only permits pre-approved activities such as leadership workshops or public speaking courses. When young people propose alternatives–such as creating a community garden or launching a podcast–the ideas are rejected because they fall outside the foundation's predefined framework. Adults listen, but only to a point, ultimately determining what is "best." Youth participation is reduced to selecting from a narrow menu of adult-approved options.

Adultism operates across personal, institutional, and societal levels, with each reinforcing the other (Bell, 1995). Together, these patterns sustain systems that prioritize adult authority while marginalizing children's agency, knowledge, and perspectives.

Forms of Adultism

Adultism operates across multiple, interconnected levels. While these forms are analytically distinct, they often overlap and reinforce one another in practice, shaping how power is exercised over children and young people within philanthropic and development systems.

Attitudinal or internalized adultism

Attitudinal, or *internalized*, *adultism* refers to the adultist biases that disadvantage children through deeply embedded beliefs and assumptions held by both adults and children over time. These beliefs position adults as inherently more capable, rational, and responsible, while framing children as incomplete, dependent, or less competent. Such biases manifest in mistrust of children's perspectives and the routine dismissal of their voices, based on the assumption that adults know what is best for them.

Internalized adultism is inculcated early in life, as children learn "how adults act" and "how children act." As a result, children learn to defer to adult authority and doubt their own agency, while adults become accustomed to holding decision-making power. Over time, these mutually reinforcing attitudes sustain hierarchies that cast children as passive recipients rather than active partners.

Structural or institutional adultism

Institutional, or *structural*, *adultism* refers to the laws, policies, and systems that sustain and enforce adultist mindsets. Many laws and regulations discriminate against children on the basis of age, geography, or gender, often without accounting for children's lived experiences (Bell, 1995). Examples include policies that restrict children's access to government services, such as reproductive health care, or institutional arrangements that discourage child participation and leadership.

Structural adultism is also evident in educational systems that treat children as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active learners (Freire, 1970), as well as political systems that categorically exclude children from civic participation (Bell, 1995). These structures normalize adult authority and limit opportunities for children to exercise agency.

Cultural adultism

When adultist attitudes are widely shared and normalized, they become cultural beliefs that shape societal norms about children and childhood. Cultural adultism reflects a broader tendency to privilege adult knowledge, opinions, and perspectives over those of children, defining what is considered appropriate or legitimate in matters affecting children's lives.

Cultural adultism is often visible in decision-making processes designed from adult-centric perspectives, without consideration of how those decisions affect children. Over time, these norms reinforce adult authority as natural and unquestioned, further marginalizing children's voices within social, political, and institutional contexts.

Adultism and Intersecting Forms of Discrimination

Adultism intersects with other forms of discrimination that shape children's lives. Understanding adultist discrimination requires a broader, holistic lens that accounts for the multiple, intersecting forces affecting young people, some of which are illustrated on page 13.

In philanthropic practice, adultist approaches often perpetuate age-based discrimination by designing investment strategies without considering their impact on children and young people or recognizing their capacity to act as agents of change. These approaches frequently overlook the role of children and youth in advocacy and movement-building efforts. Similarly, adultist calls for proposals often fail to accommodate the fluid and evolving nature of child- and youth-led organizations–particularly in relation to the "maturity cliff," which excludes children and young people from funding structures–and instead impose predetermined outcomes without integrating children and young people as partners in the design process.

While many philanthropic organizations increasingly acknowledge the importance of addressing age-based discrimination, few have developed clear internal policies and frameworks to operationalize childist approaches to funding and investment (ECFG, 2022). Although movements have emerged to challenge other forms of discrimination, there has yet to be comparable momentum around childism and its core principles. This report seeks to advance the conversation by examining how philanthropic processes can be redesigned to integrate children as full co-creative partners, while also recognizing how their experiences are shaped by age, culture, gender, and other intersecting social categories.

Root Causes of Adultism

The root causes of adultism are deeply embedded in cultural histories, institutional design, power dynamics, and intergenerational relationships. Together, these forces sustain systems and beliefs that privilege adults while marginalizing the voices, agency, and leadership of children and young people. The following four interrelated factors underpin the persistence of adultism:

Attitudinal foundations of superiority

At its core, adultism is rooted in an adult-centric worldview that positions children as inherently inferior. This hierarchy is justified not only through biological differences but through perceived disparities in rationality, experience, and capacity—distinctions long used to legitimize unequal power relations. Some scholars trace these assumptions to colonial systems built on hierarchy and control.

Industrialization further reinforced these dynamics by elevating productivity, expertise, and rationality as social values associated with adulthood. Categories such as "child," "youth," and "elder" solidified as social constructs, with the modern concept of childhood emerging relatively recently. This shift redefined children from active community participants to dependents in need of protection, creating enduring social and economic reliance on adults.

TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION

How systems of power show up in philanthropy and affect children and young people's participation

Different experiences. A more just philanthropy for all.

Racism / Xenophobia / Colonialism

Colonial and racial power imbalances can marginalize child- and youth-led groups and limit their meaningful participation in philanthropy.

CHALLENGED THROUGH:
- Anti-racism
- Anti-xenophobia
- Anti-colonialism



Sexism / Patriarchy

Gendered approaches can exclude children and youngpeople whose identities or experiences fall outside narrowly defined groups.

CHALLENGED THROUGH:
- Feminism



Ableism

Children and young people with disabilities may be excluded when philanthropic processes are not designed for meaningful and accessible participation.

CHALLENGED THROUGH:
- Disability justice
- Anti-ableism



Ageism

Children and young people may be treated as having less knowledge or authority because of their age, limiting their influence over philanthropic decisions.

CHALLENGED THROUGH:
- Childism



These forms of discrimination can overlap and reinforce one another,
shaping who holds power, whose knowledge is valued,
and who can meaningfully participate in philanthropy.

Within this model, children are frequently framed as fragile, vulnerable, and weak. While often justified as protective, such assumptions are used to deny children meaningful influence over decisions that affect their lives. Furthermore, legal and political restrictions limit the potential of youth-led movements to challenge existing power structures. Although some vulnerability is biological, much of what is labeled "child vulnerability" is socially produced, rooted in exclusion from political, social, and economic power maintained by adultist systems.

Another reinforcing dimension is the idealization of innocence, in which young people are portrayed as pure and untainted by adult realities. While often well-intentioned, this framing justifies shielding children from difficult truths and excludes them from decision-making. The result is a disconnect between philanthropic interventions and the lived experiences of children and young people.

Structural maintenance of power

Adultism is sustained by institutional leaders who, whether intentionally or not, uphold power structures that protect their authority. Within philanthropic institutions, this dynamic is especially pronounced, as many leaders have benefited from systems of wealth consolidation and hierarchical control. Dismantling adultist structures would therefore disrupt the mechanisms that sustain institutional influence.

This control frequently manifests through adultist assumptions that elevate adult experience and perspective as inherently superior. In philanthropic contexts, mistrust of children's and young people's capacity to lead is common, reflecting beliefs that they lack sufficient experience or competence. Institutional norms and funding practices reinforce these assumptions, preserving adult authority and entrenched hierarchies.

Psychological and intergenerational cycles

Attitudinal and structural forms of adultism are perpetuated across generations through psychological conditioning. Repeated exclusion and mistreatment can foster internalized oppression, damage self-esteem, and reinforce feelings of inadequacy among young people. Over time, this can lead individuals to devalue their own competence and anticipate being dismissed solely on the basis of age.

In some cases, internalized oppression contributes to the reproduction of adultist behaviors later in life, as individuals unconsciously replicate the power dynamics they once experienced. In other cases, children and young people who resist internalization may develop resentment toward adults, straining intergenerational relationships. These tensions can manifest as age-based mistrust, with younger generations viewing older adults as obstacles to change, and older generations dismissing youth as naïve or unrealistic. Such divisions weaken generational solidarity, undermining collective responses to shared challenges.

Intersectionality: race and culture

Adultism does not operate in isolation but is reinforced by other systems of discrimination. Racial bias, for example, manifests through *adultification*, a form of stereotype in which Black children are perceived as less innocent or more mature than their white peers. This perception often leads to harsher treatment, reduced protection, and increased attribution of blame.

Cultural norms also shape how adultism is experienced. In some African contexts, strong expectations of deference to elders can limit opportunities for children and young people to express dissent or critique. Young people who challenge authority may be viewed as disrespectful or arrogant, rather than engaged or thoughtful. As a result, their contributions are often discounted, reinforcing adult dominance and limiting meaningful intergenerational dialogue.



ECFG members and young participants share a moment of joy at the 2024 AGM in Nairobi—the first ECFG gathering to intentionally bring funders and young people together.

Learn more at elevatechildren.org

CHILDISM

Childism is a radical framework that calls for the recognition of children as full human beings (Wall, 2022). It asserts that despite differences in age, size, experience, and power, children possess the same inherent worth as adults. A childist approach, therefore, requires that the perspectives and experiences of children and young people be valued on equal terms with those of adults.

At its core, childism begins with the recognition that contemporary societies often fail to prioritize, or place on equal footing, the needs of children and young people alongside those of adults (Sidorenko, 2015). Within international development, childist approaches seek to disrupt norms of adultism by reimagining age-inclusive practices, advocacy, and thinking. Importantly, adopting a childist approach does not mean simply transferring power from adults to children. Rather, it affirms the capacity of children and young people to contribute meaningfully to the realization of their rights and to assume social responsibilities that support both their own well-being and that of their communities.

THE ROLE OF CHILD PARTICIPATION WITHIN CHILDIST APPROACHES

A childist approach can incorporate strategies of child participation, but the two are distinct concepts. Childism is a broad framework that recognizes children as full human beings capable of participating in society regardless of their age, size, developmental stage, experience, or background. Child participation, by contrast, refers to a set of practical tools and methods used to meaningfully engage children in the design and implementation of activities, including policies and interventions.

Distinguishing between childism and child participation does not diminish the importance of participation within childist approaches. Child participation is a recognized right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and guides the implementation and interpretation of all children's rights (Fokala, 2021). From a philanthropic perspective, meaningful participation and co-ownership not only lead to more effective grantmaking but can also transform funders' attitudes and practices, helping to dismantle patriarchal and colonial structures and rebalance power among funders, implementers, and children (ECFG, 2022).

Child participation exists along a spectrum, ranging from tokenistic consultations to authentic, child-led processes that adapt to children's needs, visions, and pace (Hart, 1992). In practice, however, participation is often trivialized and co-opted to advance adult-defined agendas, including within NGO and philanthropic contexts. While many organizations describe their work as participatory, they remain constrained by predetermined outcomes, rigid timelines, and institutional priorities shaped by the broader development system.

A childist approach, by contrast, prioritizes the most empowering forms of participation by positioning children at the center of decision-making. This includes engaging children as collaborative partners in needs assessment, grantmaking, implementation design, and evaluation. It also requires accepting that outcomes may differ from initial expectations and that timelines must adapt to the rhythm and priorities of the children and youth involved.

Despite growing interest in participation, many organizations continue to offer children and young people only symbolic roles without granting them real power. For example, a child may be invited to speak at a meeting but is expected to follow a pre-approved script that limits what they can say. Such practices reinforce adultism rather than challenging it.

To counter this, childist philanthropy should be grounded in six core principles of meaningful participation for children and youth (Save the Children, 2021):

- **Begin where children are:** Assess and prioritize children's needs, even when those needs differ or conflict across groups of children.
- **Give children genuine influence:** Ensure children have real opportunities to shape policies and practices.
- **Create youth-friendly environments for engagement:** Foster spaces where children and young people can exercise agency–for example, through participatory grantmaking–without their contributions being dismissed due to age or inexperience.
- **Provide opportunities free from undue adult influence:** Support children and young people to conceptualize and implement their own ideas without adult direction.
- **Engage children as full co-creational partners:** Involve children across all phases of investment and decision-making.
- **Foster a culture of respect, intersectionality, and diversity:** Create spaces where these values are actively practiced and reinforced,for example by sharing how children's input has informed institutional learning and internal change.

To further ensure meaningful child and youth participation, funders can also draw on the following principles for implementation (ECFG, 2022):

- **A process, not a project:** Even if you start small, ensure you have the resources, time, and commitment to make it meaningful.
- **Co-ownership:** Provide opportunities for real influence over part or all of the process.
- **Safe and consistent:** Do no harm and mitigate any potential risks to children and young people.
- **Inclusive:** Center inclusion from the beginning and work to create the conditions for diverse children and young people to participate and lead.
- **Intersectional:** Recognize the diverse and intersecting identities and realities of children and young people.
- **Non-extractive and compensated:** Value people's time, expertise, and contributions, be clear about your intentions and build in feedback and recognition throughout.
- **Experimental and iterative:** Build in enough time and flexibility for ongoing learning and adaptation.
- **Brave and open:** Be ready to have uncomfortable conversations, take calculated risk, and be open to vulnerability.
- **Holding power to account:** Recognize children and young people as political actors. Embrace the systemic change work you have to do as well.
- **Intentional and patient:** Have a clear plan and build in enough time to do it right.



CHILDIST PHILANTHROPY AND REBALANCING POWER

Philanthropy is not a straightforward pursuit. While donors may be genuinely committed to advancing social progress, they often operate within an inherently inequitable system that consolidates power and threatens the safety and well-being of children and young people. Even within movements such as trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking, structural imbalances persist. Although these approaches acknowledge that philanthropy's top-down decision-making and donor-driven control create inequitable conditions for grantees and communities, they do not always fully disrupt these dynamics (ECFG, 2019). This is particularly true for children, whose well-being is frequently subordinated to donor priorities such as control, measurable outcomes, or brand image (Reich, 2018; SSIR, 2020; ECFG, 2019).

Grantmakers hold considerable influence over where, to whom, how, and when resources are distributed, yet they often fail to recognize the agency and capacity of children and youth to drive lasting change within their communities (ECFG, 2021). Adultist power imbalances, rooted assumptions that children and youth are less competent or incapable of meaningful contribution, exclude them from grantmaking processes. While donor intentions may be benevolent, such exclusionary practices are ultimately counterproductive. By maintaining adult-centric and hierarchical systems, funders strip children and young people of power and silence their perspectives.

This tension reveals a disconnect between philanthropic goals and the methods used to achieve them. When young people are not consulted, their unique perspectives, needs, and local knowledge are ignored (ECFG, 2021). For decades, scholars in international development have called for people-led approaches that center the voices of those most affected by poverty and inequality in shaping strategies for change (Chambers, 1997). More recently, practitioners have begun operationalizing this paradigm by involving children, young people, and their families in strategic decision-making as a means of rebalancing power (ECFG, 2020).



According to ECFG (2021), effective power rebalancing requires that funders:

- **Acknowledge their power** and commit to rebalancing it.
- **Bear the burden of adaptation** required to repurpose existing internal processes and policies.
- **Create internal practices** to amplify the voices of children and young people.
- **Offer flexible funding** processes, rather than rigid, outcome-driven models.
- **Implement participatory grantmaking practices** that **democratize investment strategy envisioning.**
- **Engage children and youth relationally,** beyond transactional interactions.

As funders work to address adultist biases, they must also adopt strategies that confront intersecting forms of discrimination. Rebalancing power through a childist and decolonial lens requires a holistic commitment to equity, one that challenges the structural hierarchies embedded within philanthropy itself (ECFG, 2022).

CHILDIST PHILANTHROPY AND DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) aim to address the exclusion and marginalization of groups that have been historically disadvantaged, including–but not limited to–people marginalized by race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability. As a principle, *diversity* invites grantmakers to consider how funding decisions affect the range of individuals and groups they work with, particularly those who are marginalized. *Equity* calls on funders to design fair and impartial grantmaking processes that ensure marginalized and minority groups have genuine opportunities to participate. *Inclusion* refers to practices that ensure all people feel their perspectives are valued and that they meaningfully belong in decision-making spaces (Young, 2012).

Within the development sector, some funding strategies are discriminatory by design, yet have become normalized over time. Insights from the implementing partners' validation workshop in Nairobi during the Inaugural Africa Children Summit 2023 highlighted how inequality can arise when organizations fund certain groups of children while excluding others within the same community. For example, in a community of 10,000 children, a donor may target 6,000 based on strategic planning goals, leaving the remaining 4,000 without support. What happens to those excluded children often remains an unanswered–and unasked–question. Children designated as "beneficiaries" may experience improved outcomes, while those excluded face heightened vulnerability, reinforcing and deepening existing inequalities.

Childist philanthropic approaches to DEI seek to address these dynamics by allocating both financial and non-financial resources in ways that promote the equitable inclusion of diverse groups of children and young people within grantmaking strategies and investments. For philanthropic institutions committed to childist DEI, this work begins with identifying internal biases embedded in organizational cultures, systems, and processes. Institutions must then commit time and resources to dismantling–or at minimum mitigating–the effects of these biases, ideally by engaging children and youth as co-leaders in the process (Young, 2012).

CHILDIST PHILANTHROPY, DECOLONIZATION, AND LOCALIZATION

Childist *decolonization* offers a pathway to addressing colonial dynamics within philanthropy. In this context, colonialism manifests through the perpetuation of unequal power structures, where funders–often based in the Global North–impose their agendas, cultural norms, and problem definitions on communities. The dynamics include setting funding priorities based on donor-centric models rather than community needs, establishing unrepresentative governing boards, and requiring local organizations to conform to funder frameworks to access resources. The result is a system that disempowers local communities, fosters dependency, and sustains a colonial-like social architecture within the philanthropic sector (Naylor & Blackwell, 2022; Shriram & Banerjee, 2022; Ssewakiryanga, 2022; Milner, 2022).

Decolonial critiques of philanthropy have long highlighted the ways in which aid can reproduce dependency and power imbalances. Philanthropic efforts may reinforce dominant–dependent relationships between donors and recipients, echoing colonial "helping" practices originally designed to control rather than empower (Smilak et al, 2022).

Funders—many of whom have limited direct experience with the realities faced by the communities they support—often undervalue local knowledge and solutions (Smilak et al., 2022; Opuni, 2024). As a result, philanthropy may privilege externally developed, Western-oriented approaches that are poorly suited to local contexts, discounting existing community practices and expertise. In many cases, funders design interventions from positions of geographic and cultural distance, further weakening their relevance and effectiveness (Villanueva, 2021).

The colonialist cultures of funder organizations also tend to cascade from funders to local grantee organizations. These cultures prioritize the norms, values, and agendas of dominant–typically Global North–groups over those of local communities. While rooted in political colonialism, this mindset extends to other forms of domination, reflecting assumptions that certain ways of knowing and problem-solving are inherently superior. The result is the reproduction of a "colonial-like social architecture" that disempowers local actors and sustains dependency under the guise of "helping" (Milner, 2022). Local organizations may internalize and replicate these approaches to meet funder expectations, reinforcing unequal power dynamics between Global North funders and Global South grantees.



Youth for Impactful Philanthropy Fellows present at the ECFG AGM, bringing their expertise and perspective to the conversation and demonstrating the value of youth leadership in philanthropy.

Learn more about the Youth for Impactful Philanthropy Fellowship at elevatechildren.org

Additional critiques of colonial philanthropy include the dissemination of Western practices into formerly colonized contexts; a reliance on short-term, project-based funding rather than long-term, community-led development; and limited community representation within governing boards. These boards often concentrate decision-making power among a small, unrepresentative group, further distancing philanthropy from the communities it aims to serve (Milner, 2022).

Decolonizing philanthropic practice is therefore a complex and multifaceted process. It requires building systems of mutual accountability between funders and communities, creating space for indigenous and locally grounded approaches, and amplifying positive models that already exist within local contexts (Villanueva, 2021). At its core, decolonization involves confronting power imbalances rooted in colonial traditions, affirming the dignity and agency of communities, families, and young people, and shifting power toward those most impacted by systemic injustice.

Localization complements decolonization by centering leadership with those most affected by historical and ongoing inequities. It entails rebalancing relationships between funders and partners, trusting local knowledge and priorities, and strengthening the broader ecosystem for social change in the Global South (Kumar & Datta, 2024).

However, when localization efforts are driven primarily by Global North actors—particularly those with the greatest resources and influence—they risk becoming reactive or performative. Such top-down approaches can exacerbate existing inequities, resulting in superficial reforms that fail to address root causes or meaningfully redistribute power.

Key aspects of localization in philanthropy include:

- Shifting power from funders to local organizations and communities
- Providing direct and flexible funding to local actors
- Building local capacity through technical, organizational, and financial support
- Ensuring cultural relevance
- Increasing accountability by centering local leadership in aid processes (SHOFCO & Global Alliance, 2024; Somaha Stiftung, n.d.).

To advance these goals, funders can take the following actions to support localization and return power to communities (SHOFCO & Global Alliance, 2024):

- Trust community-based organizations as experts
- Shift funding and decision-making authority
- Offer flexible and unrestricted grants
- Examine and dismantle arbitrary internal requirements; simplify due diligence and tailor support to local contexts
- Move away from externally imposed metrics and enable local organizations to define success



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to support a deep, contextualized examination of adultist practices within the philanthropic sector. The aim was to move beyond surface-level descriptions and develop a sociological and organizational understanding of how adultism manifests, is sustained, and shapes initiatives intended to benefit children and young people.

A qualitative approach was selected to center lived experiences and perspectives, particularly those of philanthropic actors and the young people affected by funding decisions. This approach enabled the research to capture nuances related to power dynamics, organizational culture, and attitudinal barriers that are often difficult to surface through quantitative methods alone.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Data collection and analysis were designed to highlight the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups and sources. The study combined primary qualitative data—gathered through interviews, focus groups, and a validation workshop—with secondary analysis of organizational documents and relevant literature. This multi-method approach strengthened the credibility of findings by allowing patterns to be examined across different contexts, voices, and forms of evidence.

Together, these methods enabled the research to assess both how adultism is embedded within philanthropic systems and how it is experienced by children, young people, and implementing partners. Data were analyzed thematically, with attention to recurring patterns, points of tension, and areas of divergence across perspectives.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent is adultism present in philanthropy?
2. How do attitudinal, institutional, and cultural forms of adultism manifest in philanthropic efforts focused on children and young people?
3. To what extent do children and young people feel represented in, and empowered by, the strategic decision-making processes of philanthropic institutions?
4. What challenges do childist philanthropists encounter in practice?
5. What practices demonstrate effective or emerging models of childist philanthropy?



Data Collection Methods: Triangulating Perspectives

To comprehensively address the research questions and strengthen the validity of findings, data were meticulously collected using a strategy of triangulation. This approach drew on multiple qualitative methods and sources to examine adultism across perspectives and contexts, allowing findings to be cross-validated and patterns to be assessed holistically. The primary data collection methods included:

Semi-structured interviews with funders:

Virtual, one-on-one interviews were conducted with key philanthropic actors, including foundation executives, program officers, and grantmakers. The conversations explored how adultism is understood and enacted within philanthropic institutions, including decision-making processes, organizational norms, and perceived challenges to meaningfully involving young people in strategy and governance. The semi-structured format supported both comparability across interviews and flexibility to explore emergent themes.

Focus group discussions with young people:

Facilitated virtual focus groups centered the lived experiences of young people affected by philanthropic decisions. Discussions examined power dynamics, experiences of participation, and perspectives on what more inclusive and childist philanthropic practices could look like. The virtual setting ensured geographical accessibility and a potentially more comfortable environment for open dialogue.

Document analysis of philanthropic organizations:

A systematic review of publicly available materials—including strategy documents, annual reports, grant guidelines, and governance information—examined institutional norms, stated commitments, and formal structures related to youth participation, transparency, and child-centered approaches.

Validation workshop with key partners:

A final validation workshop was convened to assess the accuracy and resonance of emerging findings. Participants reflected on preliminary insights, offered feedback, and contributed to collective discussion of implications and recommendations for addressing adultist structures within philanthropy.

Recruitment of Participants

Key informants

In collaboration with ECFG and the ECFG Advisory Group, potential key informants were identified across a range of professional roles and seniority levels within selected philanthropic organizations, ensuring both intra- and inter-organizational representation. Participants were initially selected based on the following criteria:

- The size of the philanthropic organization they work for or have worked with
- Whether the organization funds child- and/or youth-led initiatives
- The organization's geographic focus (e.g., Global North or Global South)
- Whether the organization operates as a funder or a grantee
- Their knowledge of, and experience with, philanthropic processes affecting both adults and young people

All prospective participants were contacted via email and invited to contribute to the study on adultism in philanthropy. Their participation was guided by semi-structured interview tools developed from the study's research questions, including instruments for key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Young people

Young participants were recruited based on their direct experience with philanthropic funders, both as grantmakers and as recipients of funding. Participants were drawn from countries in the Global South that frequently receive donor funding. The age range for this group was 20–29 years, extending slightly beyond the commonly used definition of young people (15–24 years) to capture individuals with substantial lived and professional experience engaging philanthropic systems.

A total of 22 young people with existing connections to ECFG—primarily through prior involvement in related projects—were invited to participate. Selection was informed by experience across areas such as participatory grantmaking, youth leadership and participation, children's rights, youth activism, social work, and research. Participants brought diverse professional perspectives, including roles as founders of youth-led organizations, advisory board members, and community activists.

Of the 22 individuals contacted, 10 participated in the focus group discussions. Among these participants, eight identified as female and two identified as male.

Selection of philanthropic organizations

Fifteen philanthropic organizations were selected across the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and Dubai. Selection was based on organizational funding size, institutional capacity, and the geographic regions in which resources were allocated.

To support this analysis, 35 publicly available documents—including organizational policies, strategies, and articles—were reviewed. These materials were accessed through organizational websites and analyzed to assess thematic funding priorities, areas of focus, and broader grantmaking strategies.

Data collection instruments

The study employed a qualitative research design using two primary data collection methods: key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives from philanthropic organizations and focus group discussions (FGDs) with young people.

Key informant interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide (Tool 1: *Interview Guide for Key Informants*) designed to elicit detailed responses aligned with the study's research questions. Focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured FGD guide (Tool 2: *FGD Guide for the Children/Young People*), tailored to participants' context to gather relevant information.

Both instruments began with a clear explanation of the study's purpose and objectives and included a section to secure informed verbal consent from all participants. The interview guide (Tool 1) and the focus group discussion guide (Tool 2) are provided in the Appendices.



STUDY AT A GLANCE

2
Virtual focus group discussions (FGDs)

10
Young people ages 20-29

9
Key informant interviews (KIIs)

13
Countries represented across FGDs and KIIs



KII ORGANIZATIONS

The 9 KII organizations represented four large, three medium, and two small philanthropic funders. Seven of the funders came from child-focused programs or organizations while two did not.

Validation Workshop: Nairobi, Kenya (Africa Children Summit 2023)

To validate and stress-test the emerging findings of this research, a multi-stakeholder validation workshop was convened in Nairobi, Kenya, during the Inaugural Africa Children Summit in 2023. The purpose of the session was to sense-check preliminary findings, invite critique and pushback, and ensure the analysis reflected lived experience across diverse roles and contexts.

The workshop brought together eight philanthropic funders, representatives from twelve international organizations, twenty community-based organizations, and twelve young people. It was intentionally designed as a participatory and reflective space, prioritizing dialogue and collective reflection over one-way presentation.

Preliminary findings were shared through an interactive presentation introducing key concepts, patterns, and emerging conclusions related to adultism in philanthropy and international development. Throughout the session, participants were regularly invited to respond to the findings in real time, including whether they recognized these dynamics in their own work, where the analysis resonated, and where they agreed, questioned, or challenged the framing. This iterative approach allowed feedback to be gathered continuously rather than at a single point, strengthening the validity and relevance of the findings.

Insights generated during the workshop were documented and used to affirm, nuance, and contextualize the final analysis presented in this report.

Literature Review

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways philanthropic organizations may exhibit adultist practices and structures, a rigorous, multi-faceted literature review was conducted. The review moved beyond surface-level descriptions to critically examine the underlying frameworks, assumptions, and operational realities shaping philanthropic practice.

The review focused on a strategically selected sample of 15 influential philanthropic organizations operating across diverse international contexts, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and Dubai. These regions were deliberately chosen to capture variation in cultural norms, regulatory environments, and philanthropic traditions, strengthening the international relevance of the findings.

In total, the analysis examined 35 organizational documents sourced directly from, or closely associated with, the sampled organizations. Materials reviewed included:

- Formal policies: Governance structures, internal operational guidelines, and human resources policies were analyzed to identify formal mechanisms that may perpetuate or challenge adultist norms
- Strategic plans: Mission statements, long-term goals, and planned activities were reviewed to assess how inclusion, agency, and decision-making power are distributed across age groups, particularly with respect to children and young people
- Public articles and reports: Externally published materials, including impact reports and thought-leadership pieces, were examined to understand how youth participation and authority are framed in public-facing narratives



LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

While the study yielded valuable insights, several limitations and challenges emerged during the research process that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Availability of philanthropic organizations not working with children and young people

Most philanthropic organizations engaged in this study work directly with children and young people. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of child- and youth-focused organizations. To mitigate this limitation, internal and external documents from organizations that do not fund programs for children and young people were also reviewed.

Representation of young people from the Global South

All young people who participated in the focus group discussions were based in the Global South. Consequently, the perspectives shared reflect experiences specific to those contexts and may not fully capture the experiences of young people engaging philanthropic systems in other regions.

Unavailability of grantees

Four grantee organizations—currently or previously funded by philanthropic institutions, including those supporting child- and youth-led programs—were invited to participate. Although two organizations initially agreed, both interviews were ultimately cancelled due to scheduling challenges. The absence of these grantee perspectives may have contributed to a greater emphasis on funder viewpoints, without the balance of direct grantee input.

Exclusion of children from direct participation

In line with ECFG's project parameters, participants in this study were young people aged 20–29 years, extending beyond the conventional definition of young people. While no explicit rationale was provided for the exclusion of children, this report emphasizes the importance of involving children in philanthropic processes, particularly given the substantial body of literature documenting both the presence and absence of children's participation in this field.

To help address this limitation, and drawing on Mtoto News' experience in meaningful child participation, the study integrates relevant literature on children's engagement in philanthropy to underscore the importance of involving both children and young people in philanthropic decision-making processes.



Stories of Girls' Resistance, created by our partner Our Collective Practice, celebrates the power, complexity, and creativity of girls' resistance.

Learn more at girlsresistance.org

FINDINGS

The findings from this study reveal varying levels of awareness and understanding of adultism among funders. While a few funders were unfamiliar with the term adultism, most demonstrated an implicit understanding of the concept and were able to identify its manifestations in practice. Notably, even among the three funders who had not previously encountered the term, two of whom worked in child-focused organizations, participants were nevertheless able to recognize the nature of adultism and its presence within their work.

DEFINING ADULTISM

Adultism was widely understood by participants as a bias favoring adults and the resulting devaluation of children's capacities, an ideology described as subtle yet pervasive within philanthropic practice. While some funders were unfamiliar with the term itself, they were still able to articulate its meaning and identify how it operates in their work. One funder who had not previously encountered the term explained:

> I have never heard the term before, but I would say the bias towards making grants to organizations that are led by, staffed by, and serve adults. I'd say it's also the assumption that adults are the most capable, adults should be making the decisions for everyone.
>
> **(KII, Funder 1)**

Participants' definitions extended beyond control to highlight the structural inequalities produced by adultist dynamics. Several emphasized that adultism creates conditions in which power is concentrated among adults and can be misused for personal or institutional gain. As one funder described:

> It is that, underneath layer, a worldview that is predicated on the idea that children are less than adults. The world is arranged by adults, it's owned by adults, and it's controlled by adults. Children inhabit that world, but they're not equal in status in that world. And we say that 'with the best of intentions'...
>
> **(KII, Funder 7)**

Another participant similarly described adultism as adults "having power over children, and even the youth, and abusing that power" (KII, Funder 2).

> The world is arranged by adults, it's owned by adults, and it's controlled by adults.
>
> Children inhabit that world, but they're not equal in status in that world.
>
> **KII, Funder 7**

> At times, as young people, the organization may say, 'This is a free process. You have the decision-making power.'
>
> But during that same process, they'll come and say, 'If I were you, I would do this,' which to me, it's not a suggestion, it's telling me to do something, just hiding behind a suggestion.
>
> **FGD 2, Respondent 5**

MANIFESTATIONS OF ADULTISM

Across interviews and focus group discussions, participants identified multiple ways in which adultist biases manifest within philanthropic practice. These manifestations align with three interrelated forms of adultism: attitudinal, institutional, and cultural. The following sections explore each of these forms in greater depth, using findings from interviews and focus group discussions to illustrate how adultist dynamics operate in practice.

Attitudinal Adultism

Attitudinal adultism refers to the individual biases, mindsets, and beliefs that position adults as inherently superior and more capable than children and young people. One funder described this dynamic as "a feeling and approach where adults are more important and powerful than young people–making decisions on behalf of young people, not listening to young people, valuing older people over younger people" (KII, Funder 6).

Across interviews and focus group discussions, participants identified several recurring ways in which attitudinal adultism manifests in philanthropic practice.

Mistrust and perceived incapacity

Both funders and young people described a fundamental assumption among adults that young people lack the professional attributes required to effectively lead or implement projects. As a result, young people are frequently treated as non-essential to organizational decision-making.

Focus group participants noted that adults often "think of young people as incapable and incompetent, without experience–people who are just there to be told what to do" (FGD 1, Respondent 3). Similarly, one funder explained that adultism involves "the assumption that adults are the most capable [and that] adults should be making the decisions for everyone" (KII, Funder 1).

Youth participants emphasized that this mistrust manifests as disregard or condescension toward issues affecting young people, often justified by their perceived lack of experience. One respondent described how funders "think that young people do not know what they're doing, [that] young people do not have the experience, and do not know about the solutions to their own problems" (FGD 2, Respondent 5). This pervasive mistrust often leads to extensive documentation, application requirements, and reporting demands that limit young people's ability to carry out their work, and in some cases, prevent them from accessing funding altogether.

Skepticism regarding experience and capacity

Age-based discrimination in philanthropy often translates into skepticism about young people's capacity to manage funding or lead complex initiatives, particularly on issues that directly affect them. Participants described how their perspectives are frequently dismissed in grantmaking processes because they are perceived as lacking sufficient experience and capacity.

This skepticism is often formalized through eligibility criteria embedded in grant applications, which routinely require teams to demonstrate multiple years of experience or expertise. As one participant explained, "they will be asking that the team have these years of experience, these years of expertise–and meanwhile you're just this young group of people trying to make a difference in the community" (FGD 1, Respondent 1).

Several participants described this dynamic as an *experience paradox*, in which young people are expected to demonstrate experience they cannot obtain without access to funding. As one participant asked, "How is it going to be possible for us to have experience with grantmaking if we are not able to have a grant?" (FGD 1, Respondent 2).

Skepticism toward youth-driven ideas was also expressed through persistent questioning, which participants viewed as a reflection of adult-centric biases that favor adult-led approaches and undermine youth input and experience. One funder illustrated this tendency by asking, "How do you know that's impactful? Why are you doing that? Why wouldn't you just fund evidence-based models that you know will have an impact?" (KII, Funder 6).

While acknowledging that their experience may be more limited than that of older adults, the youth participants emphasized the importance of mentorship rather than dismissal. As one respondent noted, "older people in power tend to forget that young people may not have experience now, but if you really helped us gain it... they will be putting us in a better place to become the leaders of tomorrow" (FGD 1, Respondent 3).

> **Youth and children have access, but they don't have real influence.**
>
> **FGD 2, Respondent 5**

Controlling imposition of ideas

Deep-seated mistrust of young people's judgment often translates into subtle efforts to control or undermine youth autonomy, even when young people are nominally granted decision-making power. Participants described how adult supervisors frequently intervene to ensure that adult priorities prevail, framing such interventions as mentorship or professional advice. As one focus group participant explained, funders often assert control through statements such as, "...if I were you, I would do this. If I were you, I would do this." Reflecting on this dynamic, the participant noted that "to me, it's not a suggestion—it's telling me to do something, just hiding behind a suggestion" (FGD 2, Respondent 5).

This imposition is often effective because young people defer out of respect for presumed adult wisdom and expertise, which can lead to self-doubt and a loss of agency. One participant described how apparent decision-making authority is undermined in practice:

> And then they also do sometimes find a subtle way to pass their own opinions. So even though they tell you, okay, you guys have the right, you guys are going to make the decisions, they sometimes come in with, well, we think that if I were you, we could have done this way. So it's like you're giving us control, but then you are taking it away from us.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 1)**

Such environments were widely described as restrictive, with youth initiatives confined to adult-defined priorities and limited tolerance for youth input. Participants noted that innovation is often discouraged, as departures from conventional methods risk rejection or the termination of funding relationships. One participant recounted the consequences of this dynamic:

> There were several times my boss had to say, 'we are cutting them off,' and for me, it wasn't nice because I was dealing with these young people directly. I know them, I know what they can do, but my boss is not seeing that... they're not doing what she wants, how she wants it, when she wants it. So it was very difficult. And we had to terminate the relationship.
>
> **(FGD 1, Respondent 1)**

Children and youth as passive beneficiaries

The framing of children and young people as passive beneficiaries emerged as a dominant mode of engagement within philanthropy and represents a core manifestation of attitudinal adultism, particularly with respect to perceptions of youth experience and capacity. Participants described how young people are frequently positioned as recipients of protection and support rather than as capable partners in decision-making. This framing reflects an underlying assumption that children and youth are inherently less capable than adults.

Under this model, adult-led methodologies are prioritized over youth-driven solutions, reinforcing skepticism toward young people's ideas and limiting opportunities for meaningful participation. Youth involvement is often delayed and tightly controlled, restricted primarily to technical or implementation roles. As one youth participant explained, "young grantees are often engaged only at the concluding part–when they have started all of the planning, they have crafted the programs–then they call you in for implementation, which I think is not right" (FGD 2, Respondent 3).

Participants emphasized that this approach renders participation largely superficial. While young people may gain access to institutional spaces, they reported having little real influence over decisions, reinforcing adultist power dynamics.

Youth participants also highlighted the disconnect between grant requirements and their own professional experiences. One participant reiterated that funding criteria frequently prioritize experience thresholds that young groups cannot yet meet:

> They will be asking that the team have these years of experience, these years of expertise, and meanwhile, you're just this young group of people trying to make a difference in the community. So yeah, sometimes you do not have the right skill set—it's not that you do not have the right skill set, you just do not have the experience yet.
>
> **(FGD 1, Respondent 1)**

Another young person similarly noted:

> To be very honest… you'll find that most people who are in power right now in most systems are older people. They have the experience when it comes to even the execution of projects. But we, as young people, are probably in school or just fresh from school, so they don't think we have the experience and capacity to go hands-on in relation to whatever project we want to execute.
>
> **(FGD 1, Respondent 3)**

Institutional Adultism

Institutional, or *structural*, *adultism* refers to the adult-centric legislation, policies, governance arrangements, and organizational practices embedded within social and philanthropic institutions that negatively shape children's daily lives. Participants widely recognized this form of adultism as pervasive, noting that adultist assumptions are often codified into formal structures that determine who holds power over decisions and resources, how participation is defined, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate.

The following subsections examine how institutional adultism operates within philanthropic organizations, particularly through governance arrangements, leadership structures, and the formal pathways through which participation is enabled or constrained.

Leadership and governance structures

While all eight philanthropic organizations and programs included in the study expressed a stated commitment to engaging young people, only three of the nine key funder respondents reported having individuals under the age of 29 represented in formal leadership positions. This gap highlights a persistent disconnect between philosophical commitments to youth inclusion and the practical implementation of those ideals.

No funders reported having individuals under the age of 18 in formal governance roles, such as serving on boards of directors. However, a small number of organizations described programmatic structures that grant children under 18 decision-making authority in specific contexts. One funder, for example, described adapting institutional processes to support meaningful participation by younger applicants:

> So, for example, when we were doing our first collaboration, we opened the applications to 13 to 25 or 26, or something like that. We got an application from an 11-year-old. And she applied and we said, let's look at her application, let's see. And she definitely did her application with the support of an adult, which is fine—that wasn't a problem. But we wanted to make sure our question is less about her age and what do we need to put in place so she can be fully present and participate?
>
> **(KII, Funder 4)**



Despite such examples, the absence of children and young people from formal leadership was frequently described as a strategic and structural choice rather than an oversight. Several funders acknowledged that their organizations are not designed to support participatory governance processes and therefore opt to fund external organizations that specialize in youth engagement.

This approach was particularly common among larger, more traditional philanthropic institutions, where youth inclusion may be prioritized within specific teams or programs but is not integrated across the organization as a whole. As one funder explained:

> As a team within our organization, we're a team of five people. I think we really value that. And as a broader organization, I think it's been a bit more challenging. We tried to push for age equity, or age justice, or thinking about ways of inclusion of young people, and it didn't really come to the top at the highest level.
>
> **(KII, Funder 6)**

Exclusion from institutional decision-making

Many philanthropic organizations—including five of the eight discussed in this study—do not meaningfully engage children and young people in institutional decision-making. Funders frequently explained this exclusion by citing organizational models they believe are incompatible with youth involvement or by asserting that responsibility for youth engagement rests with grantee organizations rather than the funder itself. As a result, young people are often positioned outside of formal decision-making structures where strategic priorities, funding allocations, and governance decisions are made.

This pattern reflects a fundamental institutional distinction between organizations that view young people as *consultants to be heard* and those that recognize them as *partners with decision-making power*. While consultative models may allow youth to share perspectives, they rarely grant real authority or influence over outcomes. As one youth participant explained:

> To me I think it's about giving young people decision-making power and real influence. Because what we have seen happening in philanthropy is where youth and children have access, but they don't have real influence.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 5)**

The absence of children and young people from institutional decision-making processes reinforces adult-centric governance structures and limits opportunities for meaningful power sharing. Even where youth engagement is rhetorically supported, institutional arrangements often confine participation to advisory or symbolic roles, leaving core decisions firmly under adult control. This exclusion not only undermines children's and young people's agency but also shapes philanthropic strategies in ways that fail to reflect their lived experiences, priorities, and expertise.

Grantmaking requirements and procedural barriers

Beyond leadership and governance structures, institutional adultism also manifests through grantmaking procedures and internal risk frameworks that constrain meaningful participation. Participants described how ingrained mistrust of youth capacity—combined with organizational risk aversion—translates into rigid funding criteria that disproportionately exclude youth-led organizations, particularly those that lack formal registration, long funding histories, or adult-dominated leadership structures.

These procedural barriers are often embedded in standard grant requirements, including expectations around organizational maturity, prior grant management experience, and formal governance structures. As a result, youth-led initiatives—especially those operating informally or emerging organically from communities—are frequently deemed ineligible, regardless of their relevance or impact.

Some funders reflected critically on these limitations and described deliberate efforts to shift their institutional practices over time. One funder explained how their organization moved from indirectly supporting youth work to explicitly prioritizing youth decision-making within funded initiatives:

> We hadn't previously worked directly with young people, although we'd funded a lot of practice out in the sector involving young people. We hadn't done it ourselves. And we had it as one of our criteria that when we looked to fund work, particularly with young people, we wanted to see young people at the heart of decision-making within organizations. And particularly, we funded stuff around youth activism.
>
> **(KII, Funder 5)**

However, among organizations that had not made such shifts, youth inclusion was often confined to isolated teams rather than embedded institution-wide. Several funders noted that while small program teams might actively value child and youth participation, broader organizational priorities and decision-making processes did not consistently reflect this commitment.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how institutional adultism is reinforced through procedural norms that privilege established, adult-led organizations and treat youth participation as optional or peripheral. Without deliberate reforms to grantmaking criteria and internal accountability structures, institutional commitments to youth inclusion remain uneven and largely dependent on individual teams rather than systemic change.

Financial and budgetary barriers

Budget allocation and distribution are central mechanisms through which philanthropic priorities are enacted. Institutional adultism emerges when children and young people are excluded from funding decisions or when organizations fail to earmark resources for initiatives that directly benefit them. This omission is particularly concerning given that budgets are among the clearest indicators of institutional commitment.

Of the 15 philanthropic organizations analyzed for this report, only five explicitly stated the amount or percentage of their budget allocated to children's or youth-focused initiatives. While some organizations disclosed both their total annual budgets and the portion dedicated to youth programming, the majority provided no detailed financial breakdowns. This lack of transparency limits accountability and obscures whether—and to what extent—children and young people are prioritized in funding decisions.

Existing research highlights the implications of these gaps. A study by ECFG (2022) emphasizes that insufficient or inconsistent budget allocations for youth-focused initiatives can undermine broader commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion within philanthropy. Related ECFG research further underscores the value of involving children and young people in budget-related decision-making, noting that their participation can lead to more responsive resource allocation and stronger outcomes for child- and youth-serving programs.

These findings point to a structural gap in how philanthropic institutions operationalize their stated commitments to children and young people. Greater transparency around budget allocation, combined with meaningful youth involvement in financial decision-making, emerges as a critical step toward addressing institutional adultism and strengthening accountability.

Organizational size and institutional capacity

These institutional barriers are further shaped by organizational size and internal capacity, which influence how—and whether—commitments to child and youth inclusion are operationalized across philanthropic institutions.

Across funder conversations, larger organizations often noted structural and practical constraints that limited their ability to prioritize children and young people. These funders explained that because they manage numerous programs, children's issues are treated as just one among many priorities. Integrating children's participation meaningfully, they argued, would require similar efforts for all other "special groups."

As one funder stated, "I don't actually agree with the premise that foundations or philanthropic institutions should be including children through their work" (KII, Funder 3), and added, "I am not totally convinced that participatory action research with kids is always the right way to go, but that is one way you can go" (KII, Funder 3).

Because of the number of programs in larger organizations, involving children and young people was often not a priority. The siloed nature of large organizations left children's issues to a specific team, while the rest of the organization was less engaged.

By contrast, smaller organizations, often with fewer programs, were more likely to mainstream the issues of children and young people across their work. These organizations were also more likely to include children or young people on their boards or establish vibrant child and youth advisory boards or reference groups. One funder described this approach:

> We make sure that young people have positions of decision-making in our work in the ways that they choose. So we first believe we fund young people, period. So for them to do what they see fit, their vision. Not me telling them, 'This is the vision we have, here's some money to go do that.' But to say, 'What do you think needs to change? What are you doing already?' I don't think they need us to say, 'Hey, let's sit down and go create change.'
>
> **(KII, Funder 4)**

Child safeguarding and policy gaps in youth inclusion

All funders interviewed agreed that children and young people have "the power to create change" and should be engaged in achieving their organization's goals. However, many also acknowledged that their organizations lack formal policies to support this commitment in practice. Commonly missing mechanisms included child safeguarding policies, child participation frameworks, and designated points of responsibility for child protection.

Funders explained that because many philanthropic organizations do not work directly with children or young people, their interaction with them is limited. As a result, they often see little need to establish internal policies governing children's participation. Instead, responsibility is frequently delegated to grantee organizations, which are expected to develop and enforce relevant safeguards and participation strategies. As one funder noted, "I think that a lot of foundations have overly conservative legal departments that are very concerned about interacting with minors, very concerned about the infrastructural oddities of youth-led organizations" (KII, Funder 8).

This institutional reluctance reflects a broader protectionist orientation that frames children as inherently fragile and in need of shielding from risk. As another funder acknowledged, "I think of (children) as being vulnerable, I think of being underestimated…" (KII, Funder 8). When safeguarding is approached primarily as risk avoidance rather than as an enabler of participation, it can inadvertently limit opportunities for young people to engage meaningfully. In such contexts, philanthropic institutions often underestimate their capabilities, restricting their ability to lead, contribute to decision-making, or shape strategic priorities.

Gaps in DEI policies

Beyond child safeguarding policies, most organizations also lacked diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies that explicitly addressed age discrimination. As one funder explained, "We have a DEI policy that does not address adultism, ageism, anything like that" (KII, Funder 8). This omission contributes to the exclusion of children and young people from spaces where they could meaningfully influence decision-making. In collaborative settings involving funders and grantees, young people are often absent, reinforcing structural barriers between youth-led organizations and philanthropic institutions.

At the same time, there are signs of movement. All organizations reported being in a period of transition, reviewing their DEI strategies and policies. As one funder shared, "There's certainly an effort to recruit younger people at the foundation, particularly younger people of color" (KII, Funder 1). This moment presents an opportunity to broaden DEI frameworks to explicitly include age and to address the intersecting forms of discrimination experienced by young people, particularly young people of color.

Among the 15 philanthropic organizations analyzed, nine had DEI policies that mentioned age as a dimension of diversity. These policies typically referenced a wide range of identities and experiences, including age, gender, dis/ability, nationality, race and ethnicity, religion, economic status, family structures, social norms, and community or political context. Some organizations went further by explicitly naming children and young people within their commitments. For example, the Blagrave Trust's DEI policy states, "We view young people as powerful forces for change and are committed to creating inclusive spaces where their voices and leadership drive meaningful impact."

However, several DEI policies still failed to address age discrimination altogether. One organization, for instance, articulated ambitious goals related to inclusive employment, research, and equitable health outcomes, yet made no reference to age or the inclusion of children and young people.

This gap underscores the need for more comprehensive DEI policies, particularly for organizations working with or on behalf of children. When age is overlooked, existing power imbalances are reinforced, limiting young people's ability to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. Explicitly including age as a core dimension of diversity is therefore essential to challenging adultism within philanthropic institutions.

Definitional gaps in institutional policy

Institutional adultism also operates through the absence of clear, consistent definitions of who qualifies as a "child" or a "young person" within philanthropic policies. While most philanthropic organizations offer programs for children and young people, many fail to formally define these groups, creating ambiguity in how participation, safeguarding, and funding decisions are structured.

This lack of definitional clarity is particularly problematic when organizations involve children in decision-making or fund initiatives intended to support them. Clear definitions are critical for distinguishing children and young people from adults and for ensuring that age-specific rights, responsibilities, and protections are appropriately addressed.

Among the 15 philanthropic organizations reviewed, the majority did not include definitions of "children" or "young people" in key policy documents, including safeguarding, DEI, distribution, or quality policies. Only one organization explicitly defined a child as "a human being under the age of 18 years." Two others offered varied definitions in internal handbooks, such as "anyone aged below 18 years and works or cooperates with us or our partners." As one UK-based funder reflected:

> I guess for us in the UK, a child is legally anyone under 18. So there's quite a clear legal definition, and I guess for a lot of us who are funding children, young people's work, we know that a lot of teenagers certainly wouldn't describe themselves as children.
>
> **(KII, Funder 3)**

The absence of consistent definitions across philanthropic policies can lead to confusion and uneven implementation, particularly in program design, participation frameworks, and safeguarding practices. To support equitable and inclusive engagement, philanthropic organizations should establish clear, context-sensitive definitions that reflect both legal standards and how young people understand and identify themselves.

Cultural Adultism

Cultural adultism functions through shared norms, assumptions, and mental models that shape how children and young people are perceived within philanthropic spaces. Participants described deeply embedded beliefs about children's competence, authority, and appropriate social roles, which influence whose knowledge is trusted, how participation is interpreted, and which voices are taken seriously. The following subsections examine how cultural adultism manifests through dominant narratives about childhood and youth, hierarchies of credibility, and practices that signal inclusion without redistributing power.

Norms of protection, risk, and control

Across organizations, participants described deeply embedded cultural norms that frame children and young people as requiring adult guidance, protection, and control rather than as autonomous actors with their own perspectives. While there was a general agreement that children and young people bring energy and fresh ideas, many funders continued to view them as lacking independent opinions or decision-making capacity. As one funder explained:

> The culture is that young people are to be seen and not heard. And beyond just that cultural element, there's just this notion that young people are weak or are victims or are vulnerable. And that notion overrides the notion of young people having power or agency or ability. And so I think some cultural mental models hold us back from really seeing what's possible. And I think once people do see what's possible, there's a little bit of a consciousness shift.
>
> **(KII, Funder 8)**

These protective and risk-averse norms were frequently cited as reasons funders hesitated to support child- or youth-led organizations, reflecting a belief that young people lack the capacity to manage resources or lead institutions effectively. However, this perspective was not universally held. Some funders articulated alternative cultural assumptions that emphasized trust, autonomy, and shared power—particularly with older youth. One funder described their approach as follows:

> I think one approach is to make sure that young people are given resources and the space to actually pursue what change they want to pursue. We want to give them the power to do what they want to do. But we're looking for young people in leadership…And I'm sure we could learn a lot from others, too, but I think that's probably the main thing, like looking to deliver power and resources and support directly to youth leadership, where they can exercise that resource.
>
> **(KII, Funder 9)**

The culture is that young people are to be seen and not heard. And beyond just that cultural element, there's just this notion that young people are weak or are victims or are vulnerable. And that notion overrides the notion of young people having power or agency or ability.

KII, Funder 8

Another funder similarly emphasized trust and participation, noting, "We fund work up to 25, and certainly for us, as a funder, we try to involve young people in all of our decision-making" (KII, Funder 5).

Together, these perspectives highlight how cultural adultism operates not only through explicit exclusion, but through dominant assumptions about vulnerability, risk, and authority that shape funders' willingness to trust children and young people with power.

Tokenism and performative inclusion

Young people frequently described their inclusion in philanthropic spaces as superficial, an exercise in optics, public relations, or compliance rather than a pathway to real influence. This form of performative inclusion often excludes young people from early agenda-setting and final decision-making stages, reinforcing adult control over priorities and outcomes. Analysis of policies and internal documentation from the 15 sampled philanthropic organizations supported this perception: 11 organizations primarily framed children and young people as beneficiaries, agents of change, or recipients of grants, rather than as decision-makers.

A recurring theme across the key informant interviews was the tendency within mainstream philanthropy to use children and young people symbolically to evoke sympathy while excluding them from substantive power. Funders acknowledged that although children and youth are often visible in narratives, campaigns, and mission statements, decisions affecting them are frequently made externally, without their direct involvement. One funder described this disconnect as a form of "child washing":

> Some people say they work with children, their whole foundation is about children, and it's actually not. So children invoke sympathy from the general public and so sometimes you can see that they're being used as an image that doesn't necessarily reflect the actions or the activities of the foundation… or youth washing in some way or another.
>
> **(KII, Funder 3)**

Young people participating in the focus group discussions echoed this concern, emphasizing the gap between symbolic representation and real authority. One participant noted that visible structures such as youth councils or advisory boards are often used to signal inclusion without redistributing power:

> I think it also needs to have young people at the highest decision-making power or decision-making board… Because at times, I think it's just to tick the box to say we are involving young people for PR purposes… but do the same youth have decision-making power?
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 5)**

In these contexts, tokenism operates not only as symbolic inclusion but as an extractive practice. Children and young people are invited to share their stories, represent organizations publicly, or validate funding strategies, while authority over decisions, resources, and priorities remains firmly with adults. This dynamic allows institutions to benefit from the visibility and legitimacy of "youth inclusion" without redistributing power, reinforcing cultural adultism under the guise of participation.

Intersecting cultural biases (race, geography, and age)

Participants described how adultism does not operate in isolation but rather intersects with other systems of power, particularly race and geography. For many young people–especially young people of color and those from the Global South–adultist assumptions were compounded by racialized and geographic hierarchies within philanthropic spaces. These intersecting cultural biases shaped who was trusted, who was visible, and whose knowledge was considered credible.

Five out of the ten young people participated in the focus group discussions reported being treated unfairly by philanthropic organizations because of their age. Several participants further emphasized that this treatment was intensified when age intersected with race. One participant reflected on how racialized assumptions shaped their treatment relative to white peers in similar roles:

> I think with me, it was both kind of being a young person and also being a Black individual, because at times, you see that you are in the same capacity with another young person, probably who is white… As a black person, you are literally told what to say to the interviewer… But the white counterparts, they're not told what to say. Probably, they assume they can think on their own. But as a black person, we're kind of assumed, we don't know what to say or we can't think for ourselves.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 5)**

Geography also emerged as a significant axis of inequity. Young people from the Global South—particularly from African countries—described experiencing differential treatment in global philanthropic spaces. Participants noted that youth from certain regions were afforded less trust, autonomy, or legitimacy than their counterparts from the Global North. One participant described this dynamic as a form of subtle, normalized discrimination:

> Let's say you find out that you are in a panel, like in a global panel, and obviously, in a global panel, you have different people from different parts of the world. Sometimes I feel like… children and youth who are not from Africa are given more trust or they are treated differently… So I would say it's a sort of subtle racism that occurs.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 1)**

Although some organizations reported efforts to recruit younger staff and staff of color, participants emphasized that representation alone did not translate into equitable inclusion. For youth from the Global South, age-based marginalization was often reinforced by geographic and racial hierarchies, resulting in layered forms of exclusion that shaped their participation across philanthropic settings.

Trust, legitimacy, and credibility

Beyond representation, young people repeatedly highlighted how cultural adultism manifests through unequal assumptions about trust, competence, and legitimacy. Even when young people were formally included in philanthropic processes, they described being subjected to heightened scrutiny, conditional trust, or implicit questioning of their authority—particularly when they were young, Black, or from the Global South.

Several participants described experiences of being treated as symbolic representatives rather than as full contributors, with their presence framed as fulfilling diversity requirements rather than reflecting genuine confidence in their expertise. One participant explained how this dynamic created a sense of conditional belonging:

> Sometimes… certain individuals do not see you as someone that is working in their organization. They make you feel like sometimes you're just a diversity hire, as if you are just there because they have to say, 'Oh, we have involved young people in this process.'
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 1)**

This mistrust often translated into heightened control over how young people were allowed to speak, represent themselves, or engage with external stakeholders. Participants noted that their credibility was frequently mediated by adult oversight, in contrast to older or white counterparts who were presumed capable of independent thought and representation. Such dynamics reinforced a hierarchy in which young people's contributions were monitored, managed, or constrained rather than respected.

In some cases, legitimacy was only extended after young people actively challenged dismissive or silencing behavior. One participant described how repeated interruptions and the routine dismissal of her contributions reflected an imbalance of authority that she was expected to tolerate—until she directly confronted it:

> What I felt was she would always counter what I'm saying without being objective… But before I could even say two words, I had already been interjected and I didn't like it. So I got really angry. But my anger manifested in an emotional way… even as I broke down, I really called out this lady and told her that she wasn't doing right. It wasn't right for her to actually shut me down in that way. And to be very honest, it actually worked, because moving forward, I've seen her approach me in a very friendly way.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 3)**

While this interaction resulted in improved treatment, it underscores how trust and legitimacy are often granted conditionally and only after young people expend emotional labor to assert their right to be heard. Rather than being presumed competent, young people must frequently prove their credibility in ways that adults are not required to do—reinforcing cultural norms that privilege adult authority and constrain youth agency.

These findings illustrate how cultural adultism operates as a deeply embedded system that shapes how children and young people are perceived, treated, and trusted within philanthropic spaces. Even where institutional policies or participatory mechanisms exist, cultural beliefs about age, authority, race, and geography continue to mediate whose knowledge is seen as legitimate and whose participation is conditional. Cultural adultism thus reinforces and normalizes both attitudinal biases and institutional exclusions, sustaining power hierarchies that limit young people's ability to meaningfully influence decisions. Addressing adultism in philanthropy, therefore, requires not only structural reform but also a fundamental shift in cultural norms around trust, legitimacy, and youth agency.

As a black person, you are literally told what to say to the interviewer… But the white counterparts, they're not told what to say.

Probably, they assume they can think on their own. But as a black person, we're kind of assumed, we don't know what to say or we can't think for ourselves.

FGD 2, Respondent 5



CHILD AND YOUTH REPRESENTATION AND POWER IN PHILANTHROPY

This section presents young people's perspectives on their experiences with adultist practices in philanthropy, particularly in their interactions with funders. Across interviews and focus group discussions, youth participants described philanthropy as deeply adultist, with funders frequently disregarding their lived experiences and limiting their influence.

Most respondents—particularly those from the Global South—reported that philanthropic organizations rarely grant them substantive authority. When young people are included, their participation is often shaped to serve organizational needs rather than their own priorities. As one participant explained, "There are a lot of philanthropic organizations that already ignore and they're not recognizing how powerful and influential young people are in terms of advocating for those issues that affect our lives" (FGD 2, Respondent 3).

ECFG Executive Director Aissata Sal shares her leadership journey with two youth podcast hosts from Mtoto News, exploring her story through a youth lens—and having plenty of fun along the way!

Learn more about Mtoto News at mtotonews.com

Youth facilitator Ivy and YIP Fellow Brian bring love, joy, and youth power into the room—creating space for connection and possibility.

Learn more about the role of youth power in our 2024 AGM at elevatechildren.org



Participation Without Power

Several participants described how the appearance of decision-making power is routinely undermined in practice. While organizations may formally grant authority to young people, adults often reassert control through subtle interventions framed as guidance or suggestion. One young person shared:

> At times, as young people, the organization may say, 'This is a free process. You have the decision-making power.' But during that same process, they'll come and say, 'If I were you, I would do this,' which to me, it's not a suggestion, it's telling me to do something, just hiding behind a suggestion.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 5)**

Another participant echoed this concern, emphasizing how adults reclaim authority even after delegating it:

> And then they also sometimes find a subtle way to pass their own opinions. So even though they tell you, 'Okay, you guys have the right, you guys are going to make the decisions,' they sometimes come in with, 'We think that if I were you, we could have done this, this way.' So it's like you're giving us control, but then you are taking it away from us.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 1)**

These dynamics left young people feeling that power-sharing was conditional and easily withdrawn.

Grantmaking as a Barrier to Youth Agency

Adultism was also evident in grantmaking processes, where young people are required to demonstrate experience, credentials, and institutional capacity typically accessible only to adults. Participants noted that beyond lengthy application procedures, these requirements significantly limited their chances of securing funding.

Several young people described feeling isolated and overwhelmed by the funding process, particularly those leading small or informal youth-led organizations. One participant explained:

> Any time I would like to apply for funding, the requirements are cumbersome or the documentation, asking for things that I do not have, or even the whole process of applying for the fund and the grant, is just taxing. So it was a challenging thing for me when it comes to resources to implement the project that I'm doing in my community.
>
> **(FGD 1, Respondent 1)**

Participants further noted that grant applications are often written in complex language and require documentation that youth-led groups are unlikely to possess, making access to resources difficult even when projects are directly relevant to their communities.

> How is it going to be possible for us to have experience with grantmaking if we are not able to have a grant?
>
> **FGD 1, Respondent 2**

Experience Requirements and Legitimacy Tests

Eligibility criteria—particularly requirements related to years of experience or professional expertise—were frequently cited as exclusionary. Several participants described how most criteria effectively disqualify youth-led initiatives before they can be considered:

> Because we are just young people that share the same vision, it is not necessary that we have the experience they require... Because then we will ask do we have an accountant among us? Do we have someone who has about six years experience? And sometimes we just realize that we are not qualified for the funding because the team does not meet the eligibility criteria.
>
> **(FGD 1, Respondent 1)**

Youth participants also emphasized that even when they were funded, the reporting and compliance requirements were burdensome, diverting time away from programmatic work:

> The funders demand a lot from young people or from youth-led organizations... it leaves less time for the actual work to be done because the reporting system, the application system, even the monitoring and evaluation, it's just a lot. And also, they don't take into consideration issues like other costs that are associated with running projects. Because some funders only come in with project-based funding, which is not flexible.
>
> **(FGD 2, Respondent 5)**

Cultural Devaluation of Youth Knowledge

Participants also described how cultural norms within philanthropic organizations shape everyday funding practices in ways that devalue youth knowledge. Many funders were perceived to assume that children and young people lack the experience or skills necessary to lead organizations or participate meaningfully in funding decisions. As a result, young people are often excluded from conversations about how resources should be allocated—even when projects are intended to benefit them.

Youth participants noted that while adults may appear to listen to their perspectives, trust is often absent. As one participant explained, "Even though they respect you, they probably do not trust your opinions or your suggestions" (FGD, Youth Participant). This lack of trust reinforces adult control over decision-making and limits the weight given to youth input.



Lusoma's intergenerational facilitation team led ECFG's AGM, bringing a youth lens to the content, facilitation, and decision-making throughout.

Learn more about Lusoma at lusoma.org



INSIGHTS FROM THE NAIROBI VALIDATION WORKSHOP

The Nairobi validation workshop served as a participatory sense-making and feedback space, where preliminary findings were shared with funders, practitioners, and young people to test resonance, accuracy, and relevance against lived experience.

Insights from the workshop strongly affirmed the relevance of adultism as a systemic issue shaping philanthropic practice. Participants representing funders, international organizations, community-based organizations, and young people consistently noted strong alignment between the research findings and their lived and organizational experiences.

Participants emphasized that adultism functions as a hidden but powerful form of inequity within philanthropy. Even where DEI commitments exist, age-based exclusion often remains unexamined, shaping whose knowledge is valued, whose leadership is legitimized, and which children are deemed worthy of investment.

Participants described adultism as manifesting not only through attitudes toward children and young people, but also through funding structures and decision-making processes. Implementing partners, in particular, highlighted how donor strategies that prioritize certain groups of children while excluding others within the same communities can unintentionally deepen inequality. These dynamics were seen as reinforcing existing hierarchies, even within initiatives explicitly designed to advance equity, participation, or inclusion.

Participants also underscored that advancing youth leadership and child voice can be sensitive in certain cultural, political, and institutional contexts. However, this sensitivity was not viewed as a justification for inaction. Rather, participants emphasized that naming and addressing adultism is a necessary step toward more just, effective, and accountable philanthropic practice. Several noted that discomfort and resistance often signal where power imbalances are most entrenched.

While participants acknowledged that elevating youth leadership and child voice can be sensitive in some cultural and institutional contexts, there was strong agreement that this sensitivity should not be used to justify exclusion. Instead, it underscores the need for intentional, context-aware approaches to shifting power.

Young people present at the workshop reinforced the importance of being recognized as decision-makers and knowledge-holders, rather than being positioned solely as beneficiaries or advisors. Their reflections highlighted the persistent gap between the rhetoric around participation and the realities of power-sharing in practice.

Young people and adult allies alike affirmed that the findings reflected their lived experience, reinforcing that adultism is not an abstract concept but a daily reality shaping whose knowledge is trusted and whose leadership is legitimized.

Overall, the Nairobi validation workshop grounded the research in diverse African and global perspectives, confirmed the analytical framing of adultism, and surfaced important nuances related to context, power, and implementation. The session reinforced both the urgency and the possibility of shifting philanthropic norms toward approaches that more authentically value, trust, and resource children and young people as agents of change.

At the Africa Children's Summit, ECFG brought practitioners and funders together to validate our research on adultism, inviting their perspectives and reflections on the findings.

Learn more about the Africa Children's Summit at mtotonews.org

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings and recommendations from this study are offered to funders in the philanthropic and development sectors who are seeking to challenge adultist practices and to recognize the essential role of children and youth in driving positive social change.

Philanthropic organizations have long been critiqued for their adultist orientation, rooted in institutional histories that emphasize *giving help* rather than *sharing power*. This legacy has often positioned those receiving support as passive beneficiaries, rather than as capable contributors with inherent worth (ECFG, 2022; Walker, 2022). These underlying belief systems continue to shape how professionals within philanthropic institutions perceive and engage with young people, influencing not only whether they are included but also the depth and legitimacy of their participation in decision-making processes.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING CHILDIST APPROACHES

While many philanthropic organizations express interest in adopting childist approaches, implementation requires confronting deeply embedded adultist norms and power structures. These barriers operate in practice across multiple levels–shaping individual beliefs, institutional practices, and broader cultural narratives about children and young people. As the findings illustrate, the attitudinal, structural, and cultural dimensions of adultism identified earlier re-emerge as the primary obstacles to translating childist commitments into action. Each is discussed below as it manifests in day-to-day philanthropic practice.

Attitudinal Adultism

Childist practices depend on genuine trust in young people's abilities; yet prevailing attitudes within philanthropy are often marked by skepticism toward youth competence and an institutional undervaluing of non-traditional forms of expertise. Attitudinal adultism commonly manifests through the assumption that young people are inherently incapable and therefore require adults to make decisions on their behalf. Funding organizations frequently question the credibility of young leaders, demanding extensive proof of impact or privileging "evidence-based" models rooted in adult-led approaches.

This presumption of incapability stands in direct contrast to how competence actually develops. The ability to exercise judgment, participate responsibly, and lead effectively cannot be taught abstractly; it must be acquired through practice. Young people themselves recognize that maturity, confidence, and capacity evolve over time. Expecting young leaders to demonstrate advanced skills without first granting them meaningful opportunities to develop these skills reflects an unrealistic–and adultist–standard.

Motivation is a critical yet often overlooked component of youth leadership. When young people experience genuine ownership and agency, they are capable of designing and managing complex initiatives. This intrinsic motivation fosters confidence and strengthens their effectiveness as collaborators and changemakers. When young people are intentionally positioned as knowledge producers—rather than subjects or beneficiaries—their capacity becomes clear. Youth participatory action research (YPAR), for example, equips young people to shape the design and direction of studies, frequently surfacing critical insights that official data sources overlook.

Ultimately, the concern that young people lack experience is both unfounded and self-reinforcing. It appears valid only because adultist systems routinely deny young people opportunities to gain experience in the first place. In this way, attitudinal adultism functions as a circular barrier—justifying exclusion while simultaneously producing the very conditions it claims to address.

Institutional Adultism

Institutional adultism emerges through the choices of those who design programs, write policies, and make funding decisions–each influenced by their own assumptions about youth roles and capacities. These beliefs often result in initiatives that only marginally include children and young people, fail to address their distinct needs, or exclude them altogether.

For example, organizations may fund women's empowerment programs without considering how these initiatives affect women's children, either directly or indirectly. As one funder explained:

> A lot of the problem-solving really employs a top-down approach. So oftentimes it's more than likely that program design may not consider the fringe participants, which, of course, children are oftentimes considered to be. Or even the secondary effects on children and youth.
>
> **(KII, Funder 2)**

A review of policies and internal documents from the 15 philanthropic organizations featured in this report revealed that only seven explicitly engaged children in advancing organizational goals. While nine organizations had diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, most addressed age-related discrimination inconsistently–or not at all–rather than integrating it meaningfully into broader equity frameworks.

Key informant interviews further highlighted this institutional disconnect. Several funders described children's participation as peripheral to their core objectives, with responsibility for incorporating youth perspectives delegated to grantee organizations. As a result, issues of age, gender equity, and inclusion were treated as programmatic concerns rather than institutional priorities.

Perceived risk also emerged as a recurring justification for excluding youth-led organizations. Funders frequently framed young people as lacking the experience or safeguards necessary for effective implementation. As one funder noted, "the infrastructural barriers, the risks associated with investing in youth-led organizations are pretty significant" (KII, Funder 8). This mistrust becomes formalized through restrictive grant criteria—such as requirements for years of experience or established organizational track records—creating an experience paradox in which young people are denied funding because they lack experience, yet cannot gain experience without access to funding.

Even where organizations attempt to include children and young people, participation is often confined to later stages of project implementation. This limits youth involvement to technical or consultative roles, rather than strategic decision-making, reinforcing unequal power dynamics in which young people have access but not influence.

Addressing institutional adultism, therefore, requires more than rhetorical commitments to inclusion. It demands structural change—shifting from viewing children and young people as peripheral participants to recognizing them as equal partners in shaping vision, strategy, and accountability within philanthropic practice.

Cultural Adultism

Cultural adultism is most visible in everyday philanthropic practices, where deeply embedded norms shape how children and young people are perceived and engaged. In contexts where children are expected to be "seen and not heard," their needs, perspectives, and priorities are routinely deprioritized. Within philanthropy, this often manifests in assumptions that children and young people form a single, homogeneous group—subject to the same funding criteria, program designs, and reporting requirements—without regard for the diversity of experiences, capacities, and contexts that exist even within the same community.

These cultural assumptions are reinforced by funders' reliance on familiar professional networks and established relationships, which often exclude young people by default. As one funder explained, "I think there's also social barriers. I think many program officers give money to people that they know, or people that they have existing relationships with. And many program officers don't have relationships with young people for obvious reasons" (KII, Funder 8). This reliance on existing networks limits opportunities for young people to be seen as legitimate partners and reinforces adult-centric norms around trust and credibility.

Feedback from young people further underscored how these cultural dynamics shape funding decisions. Of the ten young people who participated in the focus group discussions, four shared that philanthropic organizations do not adequately consider the realities young people face when determining funding priorities. One participant noted, "From the Global South perspective, there are a lot of guidelines which child and youth organizations, especially from marginalized communities and developing countries, cannot meet" (FGD 2, Respondent 2). Another emphasized that while children's and young people's needs may be acknowledged within individual projects, they are often overlooked at the global level: "Donors, especially ones from Europe and the United States, give funding to their definition of development, without wondering whether it works for the communities at the grassroots level" (FGD 2, Respondent 4).

Cultural adultism also intersects with other forms of marginalization, particularly racism and geographic bias. Several participants described experiencing unequal treatment based not only on age, but also on race and location. As one young person reflected, "Sometimes I feel like children and youth that are not from Africa are given more trust or they are treated differently... I would say it's a subtle racism that occurs" (FGD 2, Respondent 1). These intersecting biases further shape whose knowledge is trusted, whose leadership is legitimized, and which young people are deemed credible partners in philanthropic work.

Together, these findings illustrate how cultural adultism operates through shared norms, informal practices, and unexamined assumptions that shape philanthropic engagement with children and young people. While this section focuses on how these dynamics function as practical barriers to childist approaches, the intersecting dimensions of age, race, and geography are theoretically explored in greater depth in the section subsequent Intersectionality: Race and Culture.



CHALLENGES THAT CHILDIST PHILANTHROPIES FACE

While the previous section on barriers examined how adultism operates as a practical barrier to implementing childist approaches, this section moves upstream to explore the deeper psychological, structural, and ideological roots that sustain adultism within philanthropy. Drawing on the conceptual framework outlined earlier on root causes and grounded in participant experiences, the findings illuminate how adultism is reproduced through belief systems, institutional logics, and intergenerational dynamics that shape decision-making, relationships, and participation.

One informant who works closely with children and young people identified several recurring challenges that childist philanthropies encounter in practice. These challenges do not reflect a lack of commitment to childist principles; rather, they illustrate how deeply adultist assumptions and systems shape even well-intentioned efforts. The five challenges can be viewed on the subsequent page.

Examining the Root Causes of Adultism: Findings from the Study

While Section 5.1 examined how adultism operates as a practical barrier to implementing childist approaches, this section moves upstream to explore the deeper psychological, structural, and ideological roots that sustain adultism within philanthropy. Drawing on the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2.2.4 and grounded in participant experiences, the findings illuminate how adultism is reproduced through belief systems, institutional logics, and intergenerational dynamics that shape decision-making, relationships, and participation.

Attitudinal Foundations of Superiority

At its core, adultism rests on a worldview that presumes adults are inherently more capable, knowledgeable, or complete than children and young people. This belief renders young people inferior by default, framing them as "unfinished" beings whose present contributions are discounted in favor of their imagined future potential.

Participants described how this logic minimizes children's current worth by positioning adulthood as the benchmark of legitimacy. One funder challenged this assumption directly, noting: "When you think about them in the process of being an adult, they're unfinished. And somehow adults are finished, even though we're not... They are finished today. Just like, I'm not any less finished than a 75-year-old at 46" (KII, Funder 4).

This attitudinal hierarchy is reinforced by broader social arrangements that privilege expertise, seniority, and age as markers of authority. Within philanthropy, these assumptions position adults as default decision-makers and young people as recipients rather than co-creators. Although often framed as protective or benevolent, this worldview becomes oppressive when left unexamined, as it is continuously reinforced through institutional norms, professional standards, and cultural expectations.

Structural Maintenance of Power

These attitudinal hierarchies are sustained through institutional structures that systematically limit young people's access to power and resources. A central finding from this study is the persistent mistrust funders hold toward young people's capacity to lead, manage resources, or define solutions to challenges affecting their own communities.

Youth participants described how funders frequently impose external definitions of development, prioritizing donor assumptions over local knowledge. As one participant explained: "Donors, especially from Europe and the United States, give money to what they think means development, regardless of whether it works for the grassroots communities or organizations" (FGD 2, Respondent 4).

This mistrust is formalized through rigid eligibility criteria—such as requirements for years of experience, audited financial histories, or formal organizational registration—that disproportionately exclude youth-led initiatives. One participant summarized this dynamic bluntly: "I think it's mainly the mistrust that funders have for young people. They think that young people do not know what they are doing, do not have the experience, do not know about the solutions to their own problems" (FGD 2, Respondent 5). Another added that philanthropy "for a very long time has really not entrusted young people when it comes to matters enacting their actions or their initiatives" (FGD 1, Respondent 3).

Institutional preferences for established, adult-led organizations further concentrate resources among traditional actors, while youth-led efforts are labeled "high risk" despite their innovation and proximity to community needs. This structural bias perpetuates a cycle in which young people are denied opportunities precisely because they have not been granted prior access.



1

CHALLENGE 1: Assumptions of capacity and the pursuit of "perfection"

Even organizations explicitly working to challenge adultism can unintentionally reproduce it by assuming they know what young people need or by delaying participation in pursuit of a "perfect" process. This often reflects an underlying belief that children and young people are less capable and must be carefully prepared or protected before being meaningfully involved.

> **Because we wanted it to be perfect for them. We're like, we're waiting for all of these things so then it'll be perfect, and we give them a plate that's beautifully laid out. So that, for us, was adultism. We, even as an institution who's fighting adultism, it's in us.**

2

CHALLENGE 2: Pacing mismatches between adult agendas and youth realities

Childist philanthropies also grapple with mismatches between adult-driven timelines and lived realities of young people. Adults often operate within structures that assume full-time availability, while young people must balance school, family, and other obligations. Without intentional adjustments to timelines and expectations, participation risks becoming extractive, asking young people to conform to adult rhythms rather than designing processes that accommodate their lives.

> **We have these big ideas and big plans we just want to push through. And it's my job, so I have time. But young people are in school; they have responsibilities at home... So if I set an agenda and a timeline based on what I can do as a person for whom this is my full-time job, it's not going to be the same pace for a young person...**

3

CHALLENGE 3: Financial infrastructure not designed for young people

Funders identified challenges in getting money directly to young people. Existing banking systems, legal frameworks, and organizational policies are rarely designed with youth in mind, requiring funds to pass through adults or formal institutions. This creates barriers to autonomy and introduces adult control over resources. These constraints reflect regulatory limitations and a broader reluctance to extend institutional trust to young people.

> **The structures around finance require that, oftentimes, they have to go through an adult to be funded, which gives that adult undue influence and control over those resources. So we go through a lot of effort to fund young people directly, which is very hard because the systems are not designed for that.**

4

CHALLENGE 4: Persistent questioning of young people's credibility and expertise

Childist philanthropies also face external skepticism regarding young people's capacity to engage in grant-making, advocacy, or governance. Funders described repeatedly encountering questions that frame youth participation as exceptional or risky. Such questioning reinforces adultist assumptions that young people must be "prepared" or validated by adults before being trust.

> **'Can they really understand this thing or that thing?'.. We're clear that's not the case because our young people come in sharp... They know why they're doing it and how they're doing it. But I think that's one of the things that comes up in philanthropy. They have people ask, 'Do you have to train them?' 'How are you building their capacity?'**

5

CHALLENGE 5: Homogenizing of children and young people

Organizations often struggle to articulate which children and young people they are accountable to, treating them as a single, undifferentiated group. This homogenization obscures differences in age, identity, context, and lived experience, weakening both accountability and impact. Without specificity, childist intentions risk becoming abstract, making it difficult to design responsive strategies or to meaningfully share power with defined constituencies.

> **You can't say, 'I work for adults,' and imagine that all the adults are the same. You need to be specific about who you're talking about. So when adults say, 'We work for children' – which children? Who's your constituency? Who are your people? Who are your young people?... What do they share in common? Because short of that, you're just basically homogenizing children.**

Psychological and Intergenerational Cycles

Beyond immediate exclusion from decision-making, adultism produces longer-term psychological and intergenerational effects that shape how power is reproduced within philanthropic spaces. Repeated exposure to adultist assumptions—such as being interrupted, overridden, or treated as incapable—contributes to internalized oppression among children and young people. Over time, this deficit framing fosters low self-esteem, impostor syndrome, and self-doubt, reinforcing beliefs that their perspectives carry less value.

Participants described how cultural conditioning encourages young people to interpret adult directives as inherently correct, even when framed as "suggestions." Anticipating dismissal or correction, many young people limit their participation or disengage altogether. This withdrawal is then misinterpreted by funders as a lack of readiness or commitment, reinforcing the original bias.

These patterns extend beyond individual experience to create intergenerational cycles that inhibit leadership development. When young people are denied meaningful opportunities to practice decision-making, manage resources, or exercise authority, they are simultaneously expected to demonstrate competence without having been allowed to develop it.

Once internalized, these cycles can perpetuate trauma and division across generations. Marginalization or control experienced by one generation may be reproduced in the next, often justified as mentorship, protection, or discipline. Within philanthropic institutions, this dynamic can fracture relationships between adults and young people, reinforcing generational divides that hinder collaboration and collective problem-solving.

Consequently, young people are less likely to challenge entrenched hierarchies, allowing the status quo to persist. At the same time, organizations rarely provide clear, supported pathways for transitioning from youth participation into adult leadership. Young people are often expected to "age into" authority without mentorship, continuity, or institutional support. This results not only in the loss of emerging leaders, but also in the erosion of institutional memory and intergenerational learning.

Together, these psychological and intergenerational dynamics demonstrate that adultism is not merely a matter of attitude or policy, but a self-reinforcing system. Without intentional disruption, philanthropic institutions risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle—undermining both youth leadership and long-term social change.

Intersectionality: Race and Culture

The findings also reveal how adultism intersects with racial and cultural hierarchies, compounding exclusion for young people who are Black, from the Global South, or navigating culturally specific norms around age and authority. As was previously noted, participants described experiences of being treated as symbolic representatives or "diversity hires," rather than as credible contributors with expertise.

Cultural expectations around deference to elders further shape how young people's participation is perceived, particularly in intergenerational or international spaces. Several participants remarked that age hierarchies—combined with racialized assumptions—limit trust, autonomy, and influence. As one youth respondent noted, "The culture really contributes a lot to why the donors probably don't trust young people and why they don't even allow us to engage. They don't see us as equals whenever we are making contributions in those meetings" (FGD 1, Respondent 3). Another participant described how when "people in the room are above 50 and you have young people that are 21, they see you as their child. Most times they see you as a child" (FGD 1, Respondent 1).

Together, these findings underscore that adultism does not operate in isolation. Instead, it is reinforced through intersecting systems of power that shape whose knowledge is trusted, whose leadership is legitimized, and whose participation is deemed credible.



IMPLICATIONS

The findings make clear that adultism operates as a pervasive philosophical, structural, and cultural barrier within the philanthropic and development sectors. This section translates the study's findings into concrete implications for funders seeking to challenge adultist practices and more fully recognize children and young people as agents of social change.

Philosophical and Cultural Implications

A primary implication is the need for a fundamental paradigm shift in how philanthropy conceptualizes children and young people. Philanthropic organizations must move beyond the donor-beneficiary model rooted in institutions that "give help" rather than share power, and instead recognize children and youth as inherently capable social and political actors (Checkoway, 2011). This requires rejecting the philosophical stance that views children as unfinished adults and affirming their present-day worth, agency, and expertise.

Such a shift demands intentional examination and dismantling of the attitudinal, institutional, and cultural forms of adultism that permeate philanthropic practice, including persistent skepticism toward youth competence and the undervaluation of non-traditional forms of knowledge. Global funders must also interrogate their own definitions of development, learning to trust the expertise of local youth and communities rather than imposing externally defined frameworks (Chambers, 2018). This includes recognizing and addressing subtle forms of racism and cultural bias, particularly toward young people from the Global South who are often afforded less trust and legitimacy.

Finally, funders must abandon assumptions that children and young people constitute a homogeneous group. Meaningful engagement requires a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences, identities, and aspirations that shape young people's lives across contexts (Jones & Shorter, 2015; Morrow, 2013).

Structural and Institutional Implications

Because adultism is embedded in organizational systems, policies, and decision-making structures, addressing it necessitates systemic institutional change. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commitments are insufficient if they fail to explicitly address age-based discrimination. Funders must integrate child and youth participation and leadership as core institutional priorities, rather than delegating responsibility to grantees or confining it to isolated programs (Checkoway, 2011).

This requires reviewing internal policies, program design processes, and funding mechanisms to identify and eliminate adultist assumptions, as well as assessing the secondary effects of all funded programs on children and young people. Funders must also revise restrictive eligibility criteria—such as mandatory years of experience or extensive audit histories—that reinforce the experience paradox identified earlier in this report. Supporting youth-led organizations requires reframing them as high-potential rather than high-risk entities.

In addition, existing philanthropic infrastructure is often ill-suited to funding young people directly. To address this, funders must adopt innovative financial models that enable direct and flexible resource flows to youth-led initiatives, reducing reliance on adult intermediaries who may exert disproportionate control over resources (Hansen, 2014).

Participation, Power, and Accountability

The findings underscore that youth participation in philanthropy remains largely limited and tokenistic. Addressing adultism requires moving beyond consultation toward authentic power-sharing, including meaningful decision-making authority, strategic control, and accountability throughout the full project lifecycle (Hart, 1992). Funders must also adapt project timelines, meeting schedules, and operational expectations to align with young people's lived realities, including school, caregiving responsibilities, and other demands on their time.

Special attention is needed where program officers primarily fund individuals or organizations with whom they already have established relationships, effectively excluding youth-led groups. Funders must intentionally build social capital with young leaders and invest in relationships that extend beyond transactional engagement. Supporting youth participatory action research (YPAR) and other youth-designed initiatives offers one pathway for recognizing young people as knowledge producers capable of generating insights that traditional data sources often overlook (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

A moment from ECFG's reading of The Tiny Cave and the Magnificent Creatures, created by the Children's Rights Innovation Fund through its experiments with youth-led, liberatory grantmaking.

The story invites us to imagine what becomes possible when children and young people's ideas, creativity, and expertise shape philanthropy.

Learn more about The Tiny Cave at thetinycave.com

Healing, Trust, and Intergenerational Collaboration

The psychological harm and intergenerational fractures produced by adultism require healing. Funding and partnership models must therefore be trauma-informed, prioritizing the rebuilding of trust, agency, and self-efficacy rather than reinforcing deficit-based assumptions about young people's capacity (Ginwright, 2010).

Organizations must also support mentorship models that are non-extractive and that create clear pathways for young people as they transition out of youth-focused roles. Without such pathways, institutions risk losing valuable institutional knowledge and reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Funders play a critical role in fostering spaces where younger and older generations can collaborate to challenge systemic inequities and build durable coalitions for change.

Importantly, even organizations committed to childist approaches may inadvertently reproduce adultism by assuming young people's needs or striving for adult-defined "perfect" solutions. This underscores the necessity of ongoing philosophical reflection, institutional accountability, and humility as philanthropy works toward more just and intergenerationally equitable practice (Ginwright & James, 2002).



EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDIST PRACTICES

While much of this report has focused on the barriers and challenges posed by adultist norms, the findings also reveal meaningful opportunities for change. Across philanthropic contexts, there are signs that assumptions about who holds knowledge, authority, and decision-making power are beginning to shift. This section highlights emerging practices and conditions that signal increased openness to childist approaches, while also underscoring the importance of moving beyond consultation toward genuine power-sharing with children and young people.

Shifts in Philanthropic Openness: The Ground Is Changing

In recent years, philanthropy has begun to show greater openness to engaging children and young people through mechanisms such as advisory boards, reference groups, and consultations. While these approaches vary in depth and quality, they reflect a growing recognition that meaningful social change is difficult to achieve without the perspectives of those most affected.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift by disrupting long-standing philanthropic norms. Prior to the pandemic, funding decisions often relied on extensive field visits, lengthy due diligence processes, and rigid verification requirements—conditions that routinely excluded children and young people. During COVID-19, however, philanthropic organizations were compelled to act more quickly and with fewer bureaucratic safeguards. This unplanned flexibility demonstrated that effective grantmaking and accountability could occur without overly restrictive processes, opening new possibilities for youth inclusion.

The pandemic also contributed to increased trust in young people, who were often perceived as lower-risk actors during this period. As a result, funding youth-led initiatives became more feasible. As one young person explained:

> One thing that COVID-19 did was increase funding for young people... because it was during COVID-19 that I started reading up about organizations and there were different initiatives and other sorts of funding for young people. And it didn't require this cumbersome application... that was the first time I got a formal grant for my organization.
>
> **(FGD 1, Respondent 1)**

Together, these shifts revealed that long-standing philanthropic practices were not as immutable as once assumed—and that alternative models of engagement are both possible and effective.

Participatory Grantmaking as a Pathway to Power Redistribution

These changes have coincided with growing recognition that participation alone is insufficient without corresponding shifts in power. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2023) argues that child and youth participation can catalyze transformation across individual, organizational, and systemic levels. One of the most promising expressions of this shift is participatory grantmaking, which transfers decision-making authority to those most affected by funding decisions.

While participatory grantmaking remains unevenly adopted, its potential is significant. For example, through the Global Fund for Children's Spark Fund, youth panelists designed regional funding priorities and allocated $546,000 in flexible funding to more than 50 youth-led organizations (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2023). Such models demonstrate how redistributing power can result in more responsive, contextually grounded investment strategies.

However, participatory grantmaking also demands a willingness on the part of funders to relinquish control and accept that young people's priorities may differ from institutional preferences. Where this trust is absent, youth participation risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

From Consultation to Power-Sharing: Lessons from Practice and Research

Despite growing interest in youth engagement, participation is still frequently confined to advisory or consultative roles. While funders often acknowledge the energy, insight, and sustainability that young people bring, their involvement is commonly limited to feedback mechanisms rather than decision-making authority. As one funder reflected:

> How do we really know we are serving children well if they're not fundamentally involved in the basic processes of feedback loops and corrective discussions…? If our beneficiaries are not involved, we really have a blank radar screen for getting that feedback, incorporating it, and refining our approach. So it's a self-limiting arrangement.
>
> **(KII, Funder 7)**

A growing body of research reinforces this concern. Reports from Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG) and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), including No *More Excuses: Child and Youth Participation Is the Future of Philanthropy*, argue that limiting young people to beneficiary roles undermines impact and perpetuates inequality. ECFG's *Weaving a Collective Tapestry* further provides practical guidance for embedding meaningful participation across philanthropic processes.

Similar findings emerge from European philanthropy. Research by Philea, including *Child and Youth Participation in Philanthropy: Stories of Transformation*, documents how foundations that collaborate directly with children and young people are better able to align strategies with community needs. These studies caution that non-participatory approaches often reproduce the very inequities philanthropy seeks to address.

Practice-based evidence also echoes these conclusions. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Evidence2Success* framework demonstrates how outcomes improve when children, young people, and communities are engaged in identifying challenges and co-developing solutions. Academic research on youth philanthropy—including studies from the Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy—likewise shows that when young people are entrusted with funding authority and supported through mentorship, they transition from passive participants to active civic leaders.

Taken together, these findings point toward a clear lesson: consultation alone is insufficient. Sustainable, equitable social change requires sharing power with children and young people as decision-makers, knowledge-holders, and partners. As philanthropic norms continue to evolve, embedding these principles offers a tangible pathway toward more childist practice.



BECOMING CHILDIST

a framework and recommendations for philanthropic practice

Becoming childist requires more than the inclusion of children and young people in philanthropic programs; it calls for a fundamental shift in how power, knowledge, and accountability are understood and exercised. Rather than positioning children as beneficiaries or future stakeholders, a childist approach recognizes them as present-day rights-holders, knowledge-producers, and agents of social change.

This transformation does not occur through a single policy change or programmatic intervention. It is an iterative organizational process that requires reflection, experimentation, and sustained commitment, particularly within institutions shaped by long-standing adultist norms.

Drawing on the findings of this study, this section presents a practical pathway for philanthropic organizations seeking to adopt childist approaches. It introduces the ARPRAISE model as a framework for organizational change, illustrates its application through examples from the Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) and Omidyar Network, and concludes with synthesized takeaways to support funders in moving from intention to implementation.



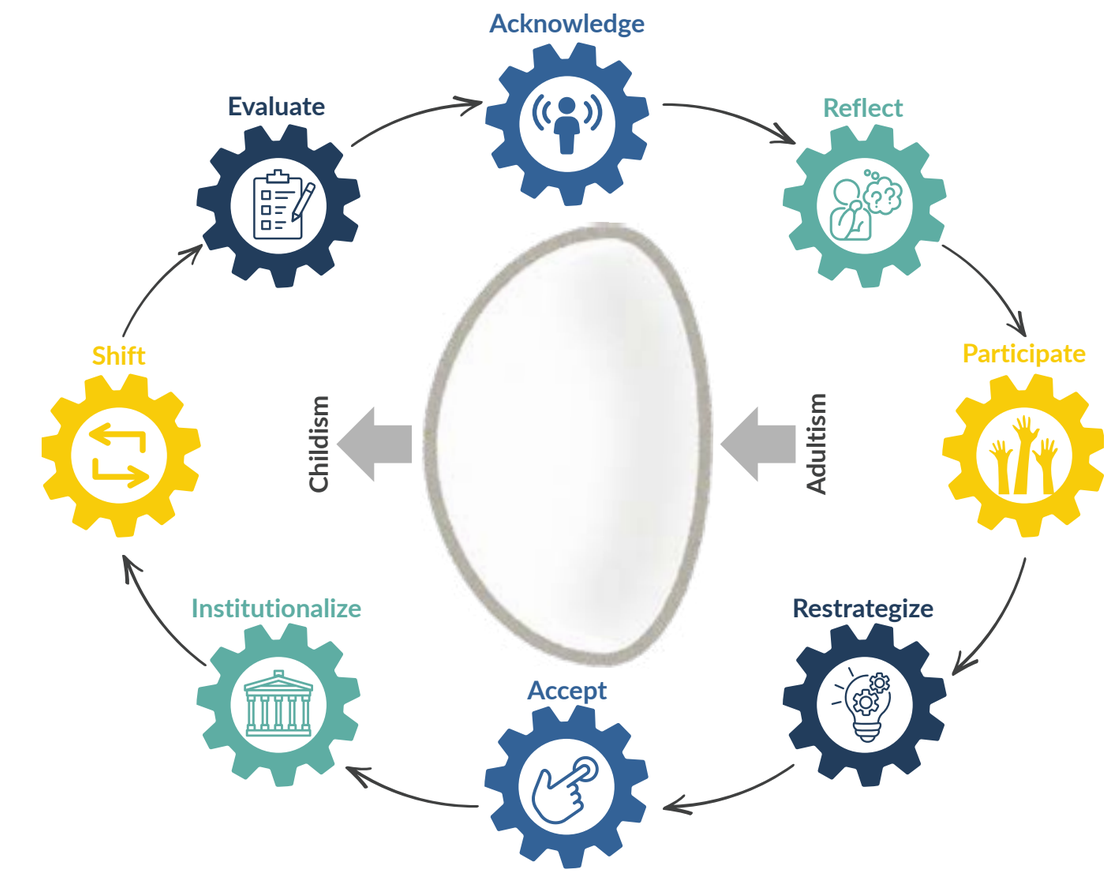
Children lead the inaugural Africa Children's Summit in Nairobi, co-hosted with Mtoto News, bringing their voices, priorities, and expertise directly into dialogue with policymakers. Learn more about the Africa Children's Summit at mtotonews.org

THE ARPRAISE MODEL

To operationalize this shift, the ARPRAISE model is offered as a practical framework for organizational change. Developed from the study's findings, the model supports philanthropic organizations in translating childist commitments into concrete policies, practices, and decision-making structures.

ARPRAISE outlines eight interrelated stages that guide organizations through processes of reflection, partnership, restructuring, and accountability. The model is intentionally non-linear: organizations may enter at different points, revisit stages over time, or move through them at varying paces depending on context.

This design reflects the realities of institutional change. Shifting adultist norms and redistributing power do not occur overnight and often encounter resistance, uncertainty, or uneven progress. ARPRAISE therefore provides a clear starting point while allowing for iteration, adaptation, and sustained movement toward embedding childist approaches across philanthropic systems.



1. Acknowledge

Philanthropic organizations must first acknowledge the gaps and harms embedded within existing systems. This involves examining institutional values, power structures, networks, and assumptions—and how they shape relationships with children and young people. Acknowledgment requires naming adultist norms explicitly and recognizing their impacts at both individual and systemic levels.

2. Reflect

To support organizational reflection, philanthropic organizations must next engage in intentional examination across several dimensions:

Individuals: Individual beliefs and personal experiences shape how adultism is reproduced within organizations. Reflecting on personal assumptions about children's competence, authority, and agency—particularly among leadership—is essential, as these perceptions directly influence organizational priorities and decision-making.

Values: Organizational values signal whether children and young people are meaningfully prioritized. A childist orientation is reflected in what organizations choose to fund, staff for, and measure, as well as what they overlook or deprioritize.

Culture: Organizational culture shapes how decisions are made and whose perspectives are considered. In many institutions, children's participation is absent from decision-making, reinforcing adult-centric norms that are replicated across teams and hierarchical levels.

Systems: Systems include the formal policies, structures, and safeguards that guide organizational action. Childist systems intentionally integrate children's inclusion and protection across all areas of work, including program design, implementation, and accountability.

Processes: Decision-making processes reveal whether childist principles are embedded in practice. Key indicators include whether potential impacts on children are routinely assessed and whether children and young people are meaningfully involved in shaping decisions.

Relationships and Partnerships: Internal and external relationships reflect an organization's orientation toward childism. This includes who holds power internally—such as board composition—as well as whether organizations intentionally partner with child- and youth-led groups externally.

Programs: Programmatic investments demonstrate how childist commitments are enacted. Organizations with childist orientations fund initiatives that directly benefit children and young people or improve the conditions shaping their lives, with attention to consistency and depth of impact.

3. Partner with Children and Young People

Involving children and young people in processes of awareness-raising and reflection is essential, as it helps reveal blind spots within philanthropic systems. This can be facilitated by encouraging them to examine organizational policies, structures, and practices through their own perspectives, share insights, and propose changes that strengthen childist approaches.

4. Restrategize

Following reflection and partnership, organizations should use insights from children and young people to revise strategies, policies, and priorities. Restrategizing may take weeks, months, or years and should remain responsive to children's lived realities, whether programs target them directly or indirectly.

5. Accept

Strategic change is ineffective without buy-in from internal and external stakeholders. Acceptance requires supporting staff, leadership, boards, and partners to understand how childist approaches strengthen organizational effectiveness. This stage goes beyond awareness, requiring training, dialogue, and support to embed new ways of working.

6. Institutionalize

Deliberate efforts are required to ensure that children's and young people's needs remain central to strategy and programming. For example, establishing a children's advisory board can provide valuable input across program areas. Such practices help normalize listening to, involving, and including youth in decision-making. Practices should be piloted in manageable ways before full institutionalization to build trust and sustainability.

7. Shift

With structures in place, organizations must shift toward fully embodying a childist approach in daily practice. This ongoing stage prioritizes empowerment, responsiveness, and community accountability, ensuring that children's and young people's perspectives meaningfully influence decision-making over time.

8. Evaluate

Finally, organizations should assess whether their approaches have meaningfully shifted to reflect the lived experiences of children and young people. This includes developing child-centered outcomes and indicators that measure agency, well-being, and influence—alongside mechanisms for accountability and continuous learning.

CHILDIST PRACTICE IN ACTION: ORGANIZATIONAL EXAMPLES

Findings from the key informant interviews (KIIs) identified two organizations as benchmarks for philanthropic practices that meaningfully involve children and young people: the Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) and Omidyar Network. Their approaches offer practical examples for philanthropic organizations that currently engage children and young people only minimally—or not at all—particularly within participatory grantmaking.

At Omidyar Network, youth inclusion is embedded directly into grantmaking priorities. A key informant explained that part of his role within the organization is to "give out grants in two different categories…the first category being young people, youth, and intergenerationally led organizations that are working on technology policy and also on mitigating tech harms." He further described his responsibility to:

> Support networks that are trying to build cultures of belonging in the United States, as well as those that are focused on increasing youth power in civic institutions—in particular, school boards, corporate boards of directors, and government boards. Also, things like lowering the voting age to 16.
>
> **(KII, Funder 8)**

Similarly, a key informant from the Children's Rights Innovation Fund emphasized the organization's commitment to supporting young people on their own terms and including them in decision-making roles in ways defined by young people themselves:

> So one, we fund them, period. And not only do we fund them, we fund them in the way that they need to be funded. Because the structures around finance require that, oftentimes, they have to go through an adult to be funded, which gives that adult undue influence and control over those resources. So we go through a lot of effort to fund young people directly, which is very hard because the systems are not designed for that.
>
> **(KII, Funder 4)**

Together, these examples illustrate how childist principles can be operationalized through intentional grantmaking, governance, and partnership models, offering concrete lessons for philanthropic organizations seeking to deepen youth participation beyond symbolic inclusion.

Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF)

Childist philanthropy requires that policy, practice, and process remain consciously attuned to the lives, needs, and agency of children and young people. The Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) demonstrates this approach through clearly articulated policies and intentionally designed grantmaking systems that center children and young people across diverse backgrounds, ages, and communities. CRIF is a global philanthropic fund that supports youth-led and youth-serving organizations working to advance children's rights, equity, and systems change, with a particular emphasis on shifting power to young people as decision-makers.

From the outset, CRIF involves children and young people in its grantmaking processes, prioritizing simplicity and accessibility while avoiding the complex requirements that often exclude youth-led groups. The organization also actively seeks ongoing feedback from children and young people to continuously refine and strengthen its work.

CRIF's model reflects multiple stages of the ARPRAISE framework in practice–particularly partnership, institutionalization, and power-shifting–demonstrating how childist principles can be embedded across the full philanthropic lifecycle. Several core areas of CRIF's approach offer transferable lessons for other philanthropic organizations:



Policy

CRIF has institutionalized policies that formally embed the inclusion of children and young people within its organizational mandate. These policies establish youth engagement as a recognized, protected, and integral component of the organization's mission and governance, rather than an optional or informal practice. One of CRIF's core values is Centering Children and Young People, articulated as follows:

"We are mindful of the way that age hierarchies actively collude with patriarchy, institutional power, colonialism and white supremacy to disempower children and youth. We will pursue equity and justice by listening to those who have the least power in philanthropy."

This commitment is reflected in CRIF's approach to grantmaking, which seeks "to reinvigorate and transform the global children's rights field by building power with youth activists and their allies."

Process

CRIF's processes are designed to facilitate meaningful engagement while minimizing administrative burden. This includes intentional approaches to strategy development, engagement, analysis, and shared learning, alongside streamlined outreach, application, and reporting systems. By simplifying grantmaking and reporting requirements, CRIF enables grantees to focus their time and energy on implementation rather than compliance.

Practice

CRIF's day-to-day practices emphasize respect, partnership, and shared power. Children and young people are engaged as collaborators rather than beneficiaries and are supported through mechanisms such as an active youth advisory board. The organization commits to "bearing the burden" of meaningful engagement by investing the necessary time, resources, and flexibility required to support youth participation.

CRIF's financial practices further align with these principles, including the prioritization of unrestricted funding and the intentional shifting of decision-making power toward children, young people, and youth-led organizations.

Omidyar Network

The Omidyar Network youth program demonstrates several core principles of childist philanthropy through its intentional partnership with young people in program design and grantmaking. Omidyar Network supports organizations working at the intersection of technology, public policy, and civic engagement across the United States and globally, with a dedicated focus on advancing youth power and intergenerational leadership. The organization works directly with youth to shape its strategies and has taken deliberate steps to ensure that funding processes are accessible and responsive to young people's lived realities.

These efforts include innovative grant submission options—such as video applications, short and streamlined forms, and the removal of prior experience requirements that often exclude youth-led groups. Together, these practices reduce barriers to entry and signal institutional trust in young people's capacity. Several aspects of Omidyar Network's approach offer transferable lessons for other philanthropic organizations.

Policy

Omidyar Network's policy framework emphasizes the importance of youth-informed institutional mandates. This is achieved through meaningful youth engagement and consultation processes that provide young people with opportunities to participate directly in decision-making. Rather than treating consultation as symbolic, these policies ensure that youth voices actively shape institutional priorities. In addition, the organization supports programs that are themselves youth-informed, requiring funded initiatives to prioritize young people's agency and leadership.

Process

The organization's processes focus on the financial and capacity-building mechanisms needed to support youth-led initiatives. A key strategy is intentional fundraising for youth-focused programs, paired with broader efforts to convene and build the capacity of other funders. This convening work helps expand philanthropic support for youth-led efforts and often includes pooled or de-risked funding mechanisms that lower barriers for funders interested in investing in youth leadership.

Practice

At the level of practice, Omidyar Network prioritizes intergenerational funding by supporting organizations that work alongside young people while also funding youth-led initiatives directly. This includes proactively identifying youth-led groups and creating opportunities for young people to engage directly with funders. By facilitating these connections, the organization helps bridge the gap between those making funding decisions and those leading programs, reinforcing accountability, shared ownership, and trust.

The following table synthesizes how childist principles are operationalized in practice, illustrating key policy, process, and practice elements drawn from the organizational examples above.

Policy

- Institutionalized commitment to child and youth participation in governance and decision-making
- Respect for community knowledge and lived experience of children and young people
- Collaborative agenda-setting with children and young people as partners, not beneficiaries
- Youth advisory structures that meaningfully inform strategy and grantmaking
- Institutional responsibility to "bear the burden" of time, resources, and adaptations for participation

Process

- Relationship-centered engagement that prioritizes trust, connection, and belonging
- Shared learning and feedback practices with children and young people
- Power-aware analysis that supports youth-led critique of systems and inequities
- Co-developed strategies shaped by children's and young people's insights
- Accessible outreach and applications, including simplified and alternative formats

Practice

- Shift decision-making power to children, youth, and youth-led organizations
- Intentional outreach to young people most excluded from philanthropy
- Flexible, unrestricted funding aligned with youth-defined priorities
- Streamlined grantmaking and reporting to reduce administrative burden

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FUNDERS: KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR ACTION

The findings of this study demonstrate that becoming childist is not a single intervention, but an organizational shift that spans governance, funding, culture, and external engagement. Drawing on insights from the research and the organizational examples presented above, the following takeaways translate childist principles into concrete areas for funder action. Together, they outline interrelated strategies that philanthropic organizations can adapt to their own contexts as they work to move from intention to implementation.

Integrating children's and young people's voices in decision-making

- Prioritize the agency of young people throughout the grantmaking process, moving beyond tokenistic involvement toward meaningful participation from design through implementation and evaluation.
- Establish child and youth boards and councils composed of diverse groups of children and young people (e.g., ages 9–29) to inform strategic priorities, grantmaking decisions, and organizational policies.
- Strengthen intergenerational collaboration through hybrid decision-making models that combine youth-led and adult-led processes where appropriate.
- Bear the burden of time by adapting timelines, meeting formats, and processes to align with young people's lived realities, including school and family responsibilities.
- Ensure participation is safe, sustained, and supported, with clear feedback loops so young people can see how their input shapes decisions.

Shifting funding models and priorities

- Fund child- and youth-led initiatives directly, including through direct grants and dedicated funding pools that allow young people to decide how resources are used.
- Offer flexible, non-project-restricted funding that enables young people to adapt to changing circumstances and innovate.
- Revise restrictive eligibility criteria, such as mandatory years of experience or audit histories, to address the experience paradox described earlier in this report.
- Ensure that children's and young people's perspectives inform all phases of programming, from strategy development through evaluation.
- Develop child outcome-oriented indicators that assess improvements in young people's agency, well-being, and leadership, rather than focusing solely on program outputs.
- Engage young people beyond the grantmaking cycle by supporting networking, learning, and leadership development.
- Invest in family and community support by recognizing the primary role of families and communities in a child's life and strengthening the ecosystems that sustain children's well-being and resilience.

Fostering an inclusive organizational culture

- Invest in staff capacity-building to ensure access to adequate training on child rights, child- and youth-centered approaches, and active listening.
- Challenge adultist norms by creating space for intentional reflection on unconscious adultist biases about children's competence, authority, and agency and actively work to dismantle them.
- Implement robust child-safe principles, policies, and procedures across all activities.
- Share the spotlight with children and young people by amplifying their voices and leadership within philanthropic spaces.

Advocating for policy and systems change

- Use evidence from child-led research to advocate for policies that prioritize children's rights and well-being, such as prohibitions on corporal punishment and improved access to quality education and health services.
- Challenge adultism in law and policy by advocating against practices and policies that reflect adultism norms, including the chronic underfunding of child care, education, and youth services.
- Prioritize systemic change by supporting initiatives that address root causes, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination, rather than focusing on surface-level needs.
- Collaborate with other foundations, NGOs, and government agencies to amplify childist approaches and normalize children as full social participants.

CONCLUSION

toward a childist future in philanthropy

This report examined how adultism operates within philanthropy and what it would take for the sector to move toward more childist approaches. Drawing on interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the findings reveal that adultist assumptions remain deeply embedded in philanthropic policies, processes, and practices. As a result, children and young people are often positioned as beneficiaries rather than partners, consulted rather than empowered, and expected to navigate systems designed without regard for their lived realities.

At the same time, this research demonstrates that alternative approaches are both viable and already in practice. Childist philanthropy offers a lens for recognizing children and young people as rights-holders and knowledge-producers whose perspectives are essential to effective and equitable social change. When philanthropic organizations shift from adult-centric control toward shared power, they strengthen not only children's rights but also the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of their investments.

The ARPRAISE model presented in this report provides a practical pathway for advancing this shift. Rather than prescribing a linear solution, the model reflects the iterative nature of organizational transformation—supporting ongoing reflection, participation, restructuring, and accountability. Used intentionally, ARPRAISE enables philanthropic organizations to surface and challenge adultist assumptions while embedding childist principles across governance, funding, and practice.

The case examples of the Children's Rights Innovation Fund and Omidyar Network further illustrate how childist principles can be operationalized in distinct yet complementary ways. While their approaches differ, both demonstrate that meaningful participation, flexible funding, and intentional power-sharing are not only feasible but generative—creating conditions for trust, innovation, and more equitable outcomes.

Becoming a childist organization will not happen overnight. Like other efforts to redistribute power, this work may encounter resistance and uncertainty. Yet philanthropy cannot credibly pursue equity, decolonization, or systems change while continuing to marginalize children and young people. Centering them is not an optional enhancement to philanthropic practice; it is a necessary condition for building just, inclusive, and lasting future.



As a youth activist and funder, Nasra Ayub with the Global Fund for Children 1delivers a keynote at ECFG's AGM in London, bringing the power of youth activism and lived expertise into the heart of philanthropy.

GLOSSARY

Adultism Adultism refers to the combination of behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are superior to young people and entitled to act on their behalf without agreement (Bell, 1995). Adultism is often a normalized and unconscious form of discrimination against young people, reinforced by social institutions, policies, laws, customs, and attitudes.

Attitudinal or Internalized adultism An internalized form of adultism that shapes one's deep-rooted bias and attitudes towards children and young people, viewing them as incomplete, lesser human beings.

Institutional or Structural adultism Externalized laws, rules, and policies that institutionalize and operationalize adultism.

Cultural adultism A system of collective and shared adultist beliefs and practices, rising to the level of culturally appropriate and acceptable discourse within a certain group.

Child Any individual below the age of 18 years.

Child Lens A new approach in development and philanthropy that centers the needs, perspectives, and active participation of children and youth in decision-making processes.

Childism Childism is an approach to international development demanding recognition of children as full human beings with equal worth as adults, despite differences in age, size, experience, and power (Wall, 2022).

Childhood A stage of rapid physical, psychological, and social development, marked by cultural socialization and cognitive adaptation to the world, with biological boundaries that are often blurred and socially constructed.

Childist Philanthropy Philanthropic processes and activities aimed at improving children's lives as a strategic priority.

Child and Youth Participation The meaningful inclusion of children and youth in all matters concerning them and the society they are part of.

Decolonization The process of identifying and dismantling colonial power structures, norms, and practices within philanthropic systems, including those that marginalize children and young people.

Experience Paradox A structural barrier in philanthropy in which young people are denied funding or leadership opportunities due to a perceived lack of experience, while simultaneously being prevented from gaining experience because they lack access to those opportunities.

Institutional Bias Embedded norms, practices, and assumptions within organizations that systematically privilege certain groups (e.g., adults) over others, often without conscious intent.

Intersectionality A framework for understanding how multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination—such as adultism, racism, sexism, ableism, and colonialism—interact to shape lived experiences and access to power. In this report, intersectionality highlights how age-based discrimination compounds other inequities affecting children and young people.

Localization An approach to development and philanthropy that prioritizes local leadership, knowledge, and decision-making, particularly in Global South contexts.

Meaningful Participation The active, informed, and voluntary involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes that affect their lives, with real influence over outcomes rather than symbolic consultation.

Participatory Grantmaking A funding approach in which decision-making power is shared with or led by communities directly affected by the funding, including children and young people.

Philanthropy The private or institutional giving of resources to address charitable needs and promote the common good.

Safeguarding (Child Safeguarding) Policies and practices designed to protect children from harm, abuse, and exploitation; when applied through an adultist lens, safeguarding can be misused to justify exclusion from participation.

Tokenism The practice of including children or young people in consultative or symbolic roles without granting them meaningful influence over decisions, outcomes, or resources.

Youth, Young Person Any individual between the ages of 15 and 29 years.

REFERENCES

African Child Policy Forum ACPF. (2020). The African report on child well-being: How friendly are African governments towards girls? Addis Ababa: African Child Policy Forum

Aina, T. A & Moyo, B (2013). Giving to help, helping to give: The context and politics of African philanthropy. Trust Africa, pp.1-36

Alliance for Philanthropy and Social Investment Worldwide. (2022). From giving to sharing: A paradigm shift for philanthropy. Retrieved from https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/from-giving-to-sharing-a-paradigm-shift-for-philanthropy/

Batsleer, J., & Davies, B. (2010). What is youth work? London: Learning Matters.

Bell, J. (1995). Understanding adultism: A key to developing positive youth-adult relationships. Retrieved from https://www.nuatc.org/articles/pdf/understanding_adultism.pdf

Bell, J. (2003). Understanding adultism: A key to developing positive youth-adult relationships. Retrieved from https://www.nuatc.org/articles/pdf/understanding_adultism.pdf

Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (Eds.). (2008). Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion. Routledge.

Chambers, R. (1997). Whose reality counts? Putting the first last. Intermediate Technology Publications.

Chambers, R. (2018). The idea of development. Routledge. (For challenging external frameworks and definitions of development, emphasizing local knowledge/expertise.)

Checkoway, B. (2011). The practice of youth participation in community planning and policy. Journal of Community Practice, 19(2), 160–178.

Childhood. (2021, February 23). New world encyclopaedia. Retrieved from https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Childhood&oldid=1049676.

Chitnis, R. (2018). Indigenous funds lead the way to decolonize philanthropy.

Cislaghi, B. (2017). Human rights and community-led development: Lessons from Tostan. Edinburgh: EUP

Cockburn, T. (2013). Rethinking children's citizenship. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Connell, R. (2007). Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science. Allen & Unwin. (For challenging Global North-centric knowledge and frameworks, particularly concerning the Global South.)

Cornwall, A., & Brock, K. (2005). What Do We Mean by 'Empowerment' and 'Participation'? Development in Practice, 15(5), 651–654. (For the need for genuine participation and power-sharing, which inherently challenges external imposition and mistrust.)

Corney, D. (2014). Youth work in the commonwealth: A growth profession. New York: Wiley Blackwell.

Corney, T., Cooper, T., Shier, H., Williamson, H. (2021). Youth participation: Adultism, human rights and professional youth work. New York: Youth Workers Association.

DiBenedetto, C. (2022). What does it mean to decolonize your donations? Retrieved from https://mashable.com/article/how-to-decolonize-donations-charity

Dorado, J., et al. (2016). Trauma-informed care in youth-serving systems: A review of the literature. Child & Youth Care Forum, 45(6), 941–960.

Elevate Children Funders Group. (2019). Pulling back the curtain: What do non-funders think are the key challenges, needs, gaps and opportunities in supporting children and young people facing adversity? https://elevatechildren.org/publications-pulling-back-the-curtain

Elevate Children Funders Group (2020). A Funders' Toolkit for Child and Youth Participation.

Elevate Children Funders Group. (2021). Shifting the field: A philanthropy's role in strengthening child and youth-led community rooted groups. Retrieved from https://elevatechildren.org/publications-shifting-the-field

Elevate Children Funders Group. (2022). Weaving a collective tapestry: A funders' toolkit for child and youth participation. Retrieved from https://elevatechildren.org/publications-cyptoolkit

Finn, M., & Checkoway, B. (2011). Youth Organizing: What's New? Journal of Community Practice, 19(2), 104–121.

Fletcher, A. (2006). The "why" and "how" of youth engagement. International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability, 2(1).

Fokala, E. (2021). Calibrating children's rights to participate in a family setting 30 years after the adoption of the convention on the rights of the child and the African Children's Charter. Speculum Juris, 34(2), 116-127.

Freire, P. (1970). Cultural action for freedom. Retrieved from http://www.thinkingtogether.org/rcream/archive/110/CulturalAction.pdf

Ginwright, S. (2010). The Future of Urban Youth: Challenging the Deficit-Based Paradigm. Youth & Society, 41(4), 483–491.

Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). Sustaining the youth development movement. Journal of Adolescent Research, 17(5), 524–542.

Gittell, R., & Vidal, A. (1998). Community organizing: Building social capital as a development strategy. Sage Publications.

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. (2023, March 20). No more excuses: Child and youth participation is the future of philanthropy. GEO. https://www.geofunders.org/news/no-more-excuses-child-and-youth-participation-is-the-future-of-philanthropy/

Hart, R. A. (1992). Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship. Florence: International Child Development Centre.

Hamilton, H. (2021). Six things funders can change to better support child- and youth-led grassroots groups. The Center for Effective Philanthropy.

Hansen, Ruth. (2014). Michael Edwards, Civil Society, Third Edition. VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations. 26. 414-416. 10.1007/s11266-014-9539-x.

Harrison, R., & Wise, C. (2005). Leading work with young people. London: Sage.

James A. and James A. L. (2004) Constructing childhood: Theory, policy and social practice. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jeffs, B. & Smith, G. (1987). Youth work: Global futures. Boston: Brill Sense.

Jones, K. A., & Shorter, N. M. (2015). Intersectionality and youth development: Understanding the complexities of young people's lives. New Directions for Youth Development, 2015(146), 7–16.

Johnson, P. D. (2018). Global philanthropy report. Boston: John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Kirshner, B. (2015). Youth activism in an era of globalization. Routledge.

Konopak, J. (2019). Adultism: A Barrier to Youth Engagement and Organizational Change. YouthREX, York University.

Kumar, A., Datta, R. 26th February, 2024 Localising philanthropy: what does it entail? Alliance magazine. Retrieved October 7, 2025, from https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/localising-philanthropy-what-does-it-entail/

Lerner, R. M., et al. (2013). The good society and the developmental science of human thriving: How does the good society support the developmental system that promotes individual and social welfare? Research in Human Development, 10(3), 200–211.

London, R. A. (2013). Rethinking youth participation: From youth to adults. Children and Youth Services Review, 35(11), 1735–1740.

Lourdes, A. (2003). A comparative analysis of youth labour market exclusion. Retrieved from https://media.iese.edu/research/pdfs/WP-1100-E.pdf

Mauss, B. (2023, May 9). Localising philanthropy: What does it entail? Alliance Magazine. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/localising-philanthropy-what-does-it-entail/

McClellan, P. A. (2020). Portraits of Black girls: reflections on schooling and leadership of a Black woman principal in an age of adultism. Journal of Educational Administration and History, 52(3), 256–269.

Milner, A. (2022). The end of condescension. In A. Milner (Ed.), Decolonising philanthropy (pp. 34–35). Alliance Publishing Trust. https://alliancemagazine.issuelab.org/resource/decolonising-philanthropy-september-2022.html#:~:text=What%20does%20decolonisation%20mean%20when,to%20a%20more%20equitable%20world.

Morrow, V. (2013). Working with young children to explore diversity, social justice and social inclusion: A critical review. Childhood, 20(4), 541–555.

Munson, M. R., & Widmer, G. (2018). The importance of mentoring relationships in the transition to adulthood for young people in foster care. Child Abuse & Neglect, 82, 223–234.

Nicolette Naylor and Nina Blackwell. (2022, June 16). Freeing Ourselves from Colonial, White Savior Models of Philanthropy. Nonprofit Quarterly. https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/news-and-press/in-the-press/freeing-ourselves-from-colonial-white-savior-models-of-philanthropy/

Opuni, S. C. (2024, November 6). African philanthropy: Reflections on equitable giving. African Arguments. https://africanarguments.org/2024/11/african-philanthropy-reflections-on-equitable-giving/

Patton, M., Foote, N., & Radner, J. (2015). A foundation's theory of philanthropy: What it is, what it provides, how to do it. The Foundation Review, 7(4), 2-5

Patuzzi, L., & Pinto, L. (2022). Child and youth participation: Stories of transformation. https://policycommons.net/artifacts/2465414/child-and-youth-participation-in-philanthropy.

Percy-Smith, B., & Burns, D. (2013). Rethinking youth participation: Towards a critical approach. Children and Youth Services Review, 35(11), 1735–1740.

Qvortrup, J. (1994). Childhood matters: An introduction. Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics, 14, 1-23.

Reich, R. (2018). Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better. Princeton University Press.

Sapin, K. (2013). Essential skills for youth work practice (2nd ed.). London: Sage

Save The Children (2021) Nine Basic Principles of meaningful and ethical child participation

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. Children & Society, 15, 107 - 117

SHOFCO & Global Alliance for Communities. (2024). Road to Localization [White paper]. Retrieved from https://globalallianceforcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/SHOFCO_Localization-White-Paper.pdf

Shriram, U., & Banerjee, S. (2022). From conceptual apprehension to functional progress. In A. Milner (Ed.), Decolonising philanthropy (pp. 36-39). Alliance Publishing Trust. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://alliancemagazine.issuelab.org/resources/42490/42490.pdf

Sidorenko, E. (2015). Childism: Confronting prejudice against children. Journal of Playwork Practice, 2, 108-110

Sloth-Nielsen. (2009). Seen and heard? New frontiers in child participation in family law. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication

Smilak, Nicole & Putnam, Robert. (2022). A Critique of Colonialism and Modern Aid in Africa: What Would Skinner Say?. Behavior and Social Issues. 31. 10.1007/s42822-022-00093-3. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360376621_A_Critique_of_Colonialism_and_Modern_Aid_in_Africa_What_Would_Skinner_Say

Ssewakiryanga, R. (2022). The shadow side of philanthropy (Occasional Working Paper No. 05/2022). Uganda National NGO Forum and Centre for Basic Research. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.changethegameacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/The%20Shadow%20Side%20of%20Philanthropy.pdf

Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR). (2020). Overcoming the Racial Bias in Philanthropic Funding"

The Commonwealth. (2023). Global youth development index update report 2023: Global picture. The Commonwealth

Trout, Z., Stevens, V. (2023, March 20). No more excuses: Child and youth participation is the future of philanthropy. GEO. https://www.geofunders.org/news/no-more-excuses-child-and-youth-participation-is-the-future-of-philanthropy/

UNICEF. (2021). The state of the global education crisis: A path to recovery. New York: The World Bank.

Villanueva, E. (2021). Decolonising wealth: Indigenous wisdom to heal divides and restore balance. Oakland: Berrett Koehler Publishers

Virgil, M. A. (2013). Child participation through child led organisations in ensuring child rights in Chennai City. Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 7(1), 250-253.

Walker, A. E., Arrillaga, L., Ballmer, S. A., Frazier, K. C., Hanauer, N., Hobson, M., Poo, A., Rockefeller, D., Skorton, D. J. (n.d.). From generosity to justice : A new gospel of wealth (1st ed.). New York: Ford Foundation.

Walker, R. (2022). Charity and Shame: Towards Reciprocity. Social Problems, 69(2), 436–454.

Wall, J. (2019). From childhood studies to childism: Reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. Children's Geographies, 20(2), 1-14.

Wall, J. (2022). Childism. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wood, J., & Hine, J. (2009). Work with young people: Theory and practice. Edinburg: Sage.

Young, I. M. (2012). Justice and the Politics of Difference. Princeton University Press.

Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of community change: Increasing participation in community decision-making. American Journal of Community Psychology, 34(3-4), 287–299.

Zeldin, S., et al. (2013). Youth-adult partnerships in organizations: A framework for promoting youth development and organizational capacity. New Directions for Youth Development, 2013(139), 11-29.

APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Tool A1. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide – Children and Young People

Purpose: This Focus Group Discussion guide was used to explore young people's perspectives on philanthropy, grantmaking processes, and the extent to which philanthropic organizations consider and engage children and young people in their work.

Participants: Young people participating in or affected by philanthropic or development initiatives.

Format: Group discussion; approximately 45 minutes.

Notes: All participants provided informed consent (and assent where applicable) prior to participation.

Introductory Script (read to participants):

Hello, my name is _____. Elevate Children Funders Group is working with Mtoto News on a study about how philanthropic organizations think about and address children and youth in their work.

Participation in this discussion is voluntary. You will not receive any compensation for taking part. We will be talking for about 45 minutes. Your participation in the study will provide you with the opportunity to reflect on the outcomes of the project to date and the possibilities for sustaining the interventions in the future.

During the interview or after the interview if you need any psychosocial support, please let me know; we have government officers and other experts available to provide counselling or we can refer you to other relevant specialists who could support you and your psychosocial needs.

The information that you share with us will be kept completely anonymous. If you agree to participate in the discussion, we will start taking notes. The notes will be kept in a secure place.

Discussion Questions

Section 1: General Views on Philanthropy

1. What are your views on philanthropy?

Section 2: Experience with Grantmaking Processes

2. Have you ever been involved in a grantmaking process? If yes, by whom:
    - If by grantees, how?
    - If by a philanthropic organization, how?

Section 3: Understanding Needs and Priorities

3. Do you think that philanthropic organizations consider and understand the needs of children and young people as they are in determining what to fund? If Yes, how? If not, why do you think it is so? Can you give examples?

Section 4: Fairness and Adult–Youth Dynamics

4. Do you feel that you, as a young person, have been treated fairly to adults by representatives of foundations? Can you give examples?

Section 5: Participation Across the Grant Cycle

5. As children and young people, are you involved in the grantmaking process from project ideation to the evaluation stage?

6. Do organizations that you are affiliated with involve you in designing, proposal writing, implementing, and monitoring of the projects/programs

Section 6: Child and Youth-Centered Approaches

7. If I say, philanthropic organizations should use a "child and young people lens" to design and implement their funding programs, what do you think that means? What would it look like to you if funders really sought to meet the needs of children and young people and include their voices?

Tool A2: Key Informant Interview (KII) Guide – Funders

Purpose: This Key Informant Interview guide was used to explore how philanthropic organizations conceptualize children and young people, the extent to which children and youth are engaged across philanthropic practices, and how power dynamics shape decision-making within philanthropy.

Participants: Philanthropic staff and leaders with programmatic, strategic, or decision-making roles.

Format: Individual interviews; approximately 45 minutes.

Notes: All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Introductory Script (read to participants):

Hello, my name is _____. Elevate Children Funders Group is working with Mtoto News on a study about how philanthropic organizations think about and address children and youth in their work.

I hope that you will spare some time to respond to a few questions that I have. This should take about 45 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop responding to the questions at any time, or choose not to answer any questions.

Are you willing to allow us to continue with the interview? Thank you.

Interview Questions:

Respondent Background: Confirm name, organization and department, position/title, and country

Section 1: Definitions and Framing

1. What does the term "child" mean to you?

2. What does the term "young people" mean to you?

Section 2: Organizational Roles and Values

3. What role do you think children and young people can have in achieving goals of your organization and programme?

4. In your opinion, does your organization value the engagement of children and young people in achieving its goals?
    - If so, how and to what extent?
    - If not, why not, and what are the barriers?

Section 3: Lived Realities and Institutional Approaches

5. Thinking of the philanthropic institutions that you have worked with or know, how do they take into account (across all phases of their work) the lived complex realities that children and youth experience in their daily lives?
    - Probe (if needed): This can include how children and youth are considered as beneficiaries, agents of change, recipients of grants, or constituents whose voices are listened to.

6. What practices do you think philanthropic institutions could adopt to improve the way in which they think about, consider, and include children and youth across all phases of their work?

Section 4: Strengths, Limitations, and Barriers to Change

7. What are the limitations of the mainstream approach that philanthropic institutions use in their work with children?

8. What are the strengths of this approach?

9. What changes could address these limitations?
    - What do you think are the main barriers — internal or external — to these changes?

Section 5: Equity, Inclusion, and Age-Based Discrimination

10. Does your organization, or the past organizations you've worked with, have a policy document detailing their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion approach?
    - To what extent does this approach include children and youth?
    - Does it address discrimination based on age?
    - Does it specifically address discrimination based on young age?

11. What do you understand about the term "adultism"?

12. Some people define adultism as a system that promotes stereotyping and disempowering of the young. Adultism is popularly used to describe any discrimination against young people and it includes ageism, which is simply prejudice on the grounds of age, not specifically against youth.
    - Do you see adultism showing up in your work in philanthropy or interactions with philanthropy?
    - How?

13. As a final question, I'd like to ask you whether you have anything else to say to help us understand the implicit power dynamics that limit or facilitate a childist approach in philanthropy, where children are involved at all stages of the work as full partners with equal decision-making.

APPENDIX B: DOCUMENT REVIEW AND ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Purpose: This table summarizes findings from a desk-based review of publicly available documents produced by selected philanthropic organizations. The review focused on understanding foundations' funding priorities, scale of funding distributed, and the extent to which children and young people are explicitly referenced or prioritized within organizational strategies and funding allocations.

Sources reviewed included: Public annual reports, financial statements, grantmaking summaries, organizational websites, and other publicly available documentation.

Notes:

- "Reported Annual Funds Distributed" reflects the most recent publicly reported year available at the time of review and may represent grants awarded, programmatic spending, or philanthropic disbursements, depending on organizational reporting practices.
- Where foundations did not publicly disclose the proportion of funding allocated specifically to children and young people, this is indicated as "Not specified."
- Percentages reported reflect figures explicitly stated in organizational documents and were not independently calculated or estimated by the research team.
- Reporting practices vary significantly across philanthropic organizations, limiting direct comparability.

Name	Location	Funding Areas	Reported Annual Funds Distributed	Percent of funding for children and youth
Lego Foundation	Billund, Denmark	Research; Learning Through Play	3.18 billion DKK (2022)	Not specified
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	Seattle, Washington, USA	Health; Agriculture; Research; Climate Change	$8.74 billion (2025)	Not specified
Bloomberg Philanthropies	New York, New York, USA	Public Health; Arts; Climate Change; Education; Government Innovations	$3.7 billion (2024)	Not specified
Wellcome Trust Foundation	London, United Kingdom	Health; Climate Change; Research	£1.9 billion (2024)	Not specified
Mastercard Foundation	Toronto, Canada	Agriculture; Digital; Education; Health; Refugees and Displacement	$1.6 billion (2024)	17.5% allocated to Scholarships Program

Name	Location	Funding Areas	Reported Annual Funds Distributed	Percent of funding for children and youth
Howard Hughes Medical Institute	Chevy Chase, Maryland, USA	Science; Education; Biomedical Research	$24 billion (2024)	0.25%
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Battle Creek, Michigan, USA	Education; Child Health Care; Business; Agriculture	$408 million (2024)	Not specified
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation	Chicago, Illinois, USA	Journalism & Media; Climate Change; Technology-Related Research; Impact Investments	$360 million (2024)	5.6% (2021)
Ford Foundation	New York, New York USA	Climate Change; Technology; Gender, Racial and Ethnic Justice; Disability	$768 million (2024)	56% (Social Bond Grants)
Rockefeller Foundation	New York, New York USA	Health; Clean Energy; Research; Innovation	$275 million (2023)	Not specified
Garfield Weston Foundation	London, United Kingdom	Education; Health; Welfare; Youth; Community; Environment; Arts; Heritage; Faith	£140 million (2023)	Not specified
The Blagrave Trust	London, United Kingdom	Research; Young People	£3.15 million (2024)	100%
The Listening Fund	Wallington, United Kingdom	Learning	Not specified	Not specified
Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation	Dubai, United Arab Emirates	Education; Research & Development; Entrepreneurship	$599 million (2024)	Not specified
Li Ka Shing Foundation	Hong Kong	Education; Health; Anti-Poverty	HK $30 billion (total, to date)	45% (to date)

APPENDIX C: ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

The individuals listed below served as members of the Advisory Group for this study, providing guidance, feedback, and review at various stages of the research process.

- **Ramatu Bangura**, Children's Rights Innovation Fund
- **Nina Blackwell**, Former Firelight Foundation
- **Judy Diers**, Independent Consultant
- **Michael Gibbons**, American University
- **Rebecca Jawara**, Children's Rights Innovation Fund
- **Vicky Johnson**, UHI Inverness
- **Tessa Lewin**, Institute for Developmental Studies
- **Michael McCabe**, United States Peace Corps
- **Jaliyah Rock**, Children's Rights Innovation Fund
- **Hilary Taft**, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
- **Sarah Veilex**, Former UBS Optimus Foundation
- **Linda Weisert**, Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF)
- **Anna Windsor**, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund



Jennifer Kaberi, Executive Director of Mtoto News, shares insights during the Decolonizing Philanthropy & Adultism Workshop at ECFG'S AGM, exploring the intersections of adultism and decolonizing philanthropy and drawing on their research with ECFG.

Watch the full workshop on YouTube

CHALLENGING ADULTISM IN PHILANTHROPY

global research and practice insights for
shifting age-based power in philanthropy

2026

mtotonews.com
info@mtotonews.com

elevatechildren.org
info@elevatechildren.org

download the report