

CR*if*...

decolonize!

Learning Brief vol. 1, no. 1



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Table of Contents

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About CRIF	03
<hr/>	
About <i>decolonize!</i>	05
<hr/>	
Meet the Collaborative	08
<hr/>	
The Strategy Weekend	09
<hr/>	
Youth Story - Wachinou Mahouklo Geoffroy	10
<hr/>	
What have we learned thus far?	11
<hr/>	
Youth Story - Yamilee Marie Palma Ormeño	15
<hr/>	
Conclusion	20
<hr/>	

01 About CRIF

A focus on root causes—and power

Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF) is a **collective challenge to reinvigorate and transform the global children's rights field** by building power with children and youth activists and their allies.

A donor learning community and grantmaking fund, we cultivate innovation and collaboration to dismantle the root causes of children's vulnerability and strengthen the root drivers of their well-being.

The realization of children's rights depends fundamentally on confronting the root causes of their vulnerability—including racism, anti-Blackness, colonialism, and other systemic oppressions—and strengthening the root drivers of their wellbeing. Yet for generations, the children's rights field has remained concentrated on surface symptoms, avoiding a focus on children's power and the youth-led organizing and movement building that are required to make children's rights real.

CRIF offers a chance for funders to innovate and experiment with a more courageous path forward—one that invests directly in the power of children and youth activists to show up in their full authenticity.

CRIF is committed to...

INNOVATIVE GRANTMAKING

Organized around a series of thematic portfolios to drive new thinking and through participatory strategy and grant selection, we invest in the power of youth activists and their allies. Our innovative grantmaking is organized in four elements that guide our strategy and our learning:



A ROOT CAUSE of harm to children or their well-being



A PEOPLE, or a segment of children and youth that experience the root cause and will be funded to address it



A PLACE, a region (or set of regions) where work will be funded



A STRATEGY to advance a movement

LEARNING COMMUNITY

To advance meaningful and lasting innovation, CRIF has established a funder learning community grounded in trust and shared risk to advance meaningful and lasting innovation.

THE CONSTITUENCY

We provide opportunities for children and youth activists to build community and strategy transnationally.

02 About *decolonize!* CRIF's Core Values for Funding

decolonize!, CRIF's inaugural grantmaking innovation, began as an idea conceived of during global protests following the murder of George Floyd and at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The confluence of urgency—both of a global health pandemic and long-standing racialized state violence, put a spotlight on the heightened vulnerability of young people as they marched through the streets, masked, powerfully defending their rights and standing together in solidarity all over the world.

We were galvanized by their power and struck by the silence of the children's rights sector. In response to and rooted in [our core values](#), CRIF created *decolonize!* which funds Black children and youth to launch new or strengthen existing initiatives to combat racism and colonialism and to learn from and share these initiatives with those in the children's rights sector. Through this funding initiative, we aim to:

- » Explicitly address the various legacies of colonialism, anti- Blackness, and adultism;
- » De-silo our understanding of children's lives and how they experience power and inequity;
- » Reflect the complex and compounded ways such inequities are lived and experienced;
- » Challenge adultist funding norms and strategies that limit children and youth's access to funding opportunities;
- » Advance children and youth's bold solutions to the daily violations of children's rights that they experience.

About **decolonize!**

The Working Premise

As an innovation fund, we seek to move resources to young people, and to advance learning that can shift power and practice in the children's rights sector. *decolonize!* is rooted in the following ideas that have shaped its design:

Children and youth globally are made more vulnerable by how their communities have been racialized.

The full realization of the human rights of children and youth is hindered by the violence and deprivation that racism and colonialism have created. The impact of this violence and deprivation is both present today and historically rooted.

Despite some sporadic and disconnected efforts, the children's rights sector has been deafeningly silent about racial injustice and its profound impact on children.

While important gains have been made in addressing the ways gender justice intersects with children's rights, more attention is needed to the ways gender intersects with race and ethnicity and the multiple other interlocking oppressions children and youth face daily.

Children and youth leaders are organizing in their communities around their racialized identities and against the conditions that racialization forces upon them.

Young people are at the fore of organizing peaceful protest against police violence, resisting exploitive traditions and practices that lock them in to domestic and sexual servitude and are the moral compass in the climate justice struggle because they know that it is more likely for their Black, Brown and Indigenous communities to feel the impact of climate degradation and industrialized resource extraction.

Too few resources are available for the critical work that children and young people are doing to advance their human rights.

While funding is available to child protection programs with children and young people as beneficiaries, very little funding is available for the projects they would lead to advance their own protection and well-being.



About **decolonize!**

Our Learning Questions

In line with CRIF's overall grant-making core elements, as described above, *decolonize!*'s learning questions are as follows:

Grantmaking	decolonize!	Learning Question(s)
A ROOT CAUSE	Racism, Anti-Blackness & Colonialism	How are African & Afro-descendant children and youth organizing against racial injustice in their communities, nationally and globally?
A PEOPLE	Black, African & Afro-descendant youth & youth workers	How does your racial identity inform the experience of your rights and the activities you engage in around those rights, particularly those activities done with and in support of other young people?
A PLACE	West Africa & the Americas	Where does work at the intersections of children's rights and racial justice converge and diverge globally? What possibilities exist for transnational movement -building among African & Afro-descendant children and youth?
A STRATEGY	Participatory Strategy & Grant-making	How can philanthropy better resource African & Afro-descendant youth organizing at the intersections of children's rights and racial justice?

03 Meet the Collaborative Black child and youth activists

Shifting power to children and youth, means shifting decision-making and resources. Under *decolonize!*, CRIF does this by establishing a Participatory Grant-making Collaborative that would define a strategy for future grantmaking under this portfolio.



To fill this Collaborative, CRIF sought the wisdom and insights of children and youth with lived experiences of racism and colonialism as well as experiences advancing Black liberation. We also sought Black child and youth activists who were either youth workers, or were working in community with other young people that could inform their work and offer a sense of accountability.

After a transnational call for proposals, we selected eight (8) Black child and youth activists to serve on the inaugural Collaborative. Collectively, they speak more than four (4) languages and come from eight (8) countries that include: Benin, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Barbados and the United States. Over the subsequent nine months (December 2021 - August 2022), the Collaborative will design grantmaking strategy; select and mentor children and youth grantee partners; and support movement building.

04

The Strategy Weekend Logistics and Learnings

Once selected, the Collaborative members met virtually over four (4) days (supported by an incredible team of language interpreters and CRIF staff) to learn from one another and develop a strategy for the grantmaking phase. Each Collaborative Member received remuneration of \$4,000 USD for their participation. In addition, they were able to allocate funding to an organization of their choosing that supports their leadership and activism (\$3,500 USD).

So much of our focus leading up to the Strategy Weekend was about logistics:

- *early morning phone calls to ensure that Collaborative Members in West Africa could pick up their money;*
- *and when they couldn't, calling hotels nearby to see which ones might take U.S. credit cards;*
- *and when they were finally checked in, and the wifi still did not work, buying data;*
- *building an agenda across time zones from the U.S. West Coast to West Africa ensuring that no member had too long of a day;*
- *managing the logistics of language justice.*

However, once we looked on the screen and saw the faces of the eight (8) members, we breathed a sigh of relief. We chose to work over a weekend, rather than weekly meetings over several months, because it increased the likelihood that all of the participants would be able to participate meaningfully.

Our agenda over the weekend was organized around: (1) time to connect, share and learn from one another; (2) time to raise that connection and learning to the level of analysis; and (3) time to transform the analysis to strategy. Collaborative Members met in regional groups and as a whole. We enlisted them in cultivating a shared responsibility for language justice by announcing what language they would be speaking each time they spoke and to speak slowly, not for the interpreters, but so each of us could be heard and understood.

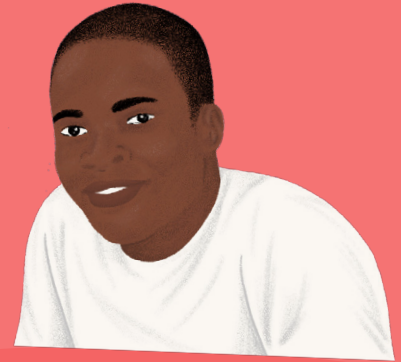
We were clear on the unprecedented and political nature of our work. So, we supported the collaborative members to create a manifesto based on their collective beliefs that centers children's rights and is driven by the transnational leadership of Black children and youth.

But when the time came to build strategy, questions about whether the Collaborative would be able to trust the prospective grantee partners to complete projects, concerns about professionalism, and whether younger children should be included in the age range began to dominate the conversation. These examples of internalized adultism threatened to undermine their own beliefs they had co-created in the We Believe statement. So, we added another day, a month later, to allow more time to ensure that their beliefs were aligned with the strategy they were developing.

- Ramatu & Gabby

YOUTH STORY:

Wachinou Mahouklo Geoffroy



Written by: Mahouklo | Age: 23 | From: Benin
CRIF Youth Collaborative Member

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Starting in November 2021, I have had a wonderful experience that has strengthened my capacity as a black activist. I have seen CRIF do things differently, namely the Call for Applications and the strategy weekend. The call for applications process was all based on listening up until I was selected as a member of the collaborative and we received updates along the way, valuing and respecting the views of Black children and youth with a transfer of power in action. As it relates to strategy building during the strategy weekend, it is a perfect example that shows CRIF is an innovative fund that puts the decision of children and youth at the center of its interventions to support black communities that have long been victims of the aftermath of racism and colonialism in our countries and regions.

Throughout the weeks leading up to the strategic weekend, CRIF provided us with regular updates and guidance. In my humble opinion, black children and youth need organizations like CRIF to enable them to develop their skills freely and with democratic guidance. In all honesty, I have never experienced such beautiful experiences where I am listened to and supported to achieve good results, where all points of view are accepted and valued. It is a real space of trust that really allows children and youth to blossom in their full potential.

I learned a lot from these processes and it is great to be part of the CRIF collaborative. I plan to serve for a long time with CRIF not only to be strengthened myself, but to reinvest these achievements in my community for a better protection and promotion of the rights of the children of my country, Africa and the World.

05 What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

While there is still so much to do to bring the strategy to fruition and many more young people who will join us on this journey, we pause at this inflection point, when we have co-designed a strategy with CRIF's Global Participatory Grantmaking Collaborative, **to share some critical lessons from their wisdom, reflections and feedback**. We share that learning here and in the two (2) learning briefs to come.

ABOUT RACISM & COLONIALISM

(1) The Importance of Posing the Question

Racism, Colonialism & Anti-Blackness lives and acts in the lives of children and youth across West Africa and the Americas.

All the youth of our collaborative confirmed that while it appears distinct in each of their countries, racism and racial injustice is a key area of concern for them. And yet, for both those who had encountered global development and philanthropy, they were rarely asked how it related to their activism nor what resources they might need for that work.

The Collaborative Members named colorism and the industries that feed it as a prime example of how racism and colonialism work in their lives. Those members in West Africa describe how it manifests in the ubiquity of skin-whitening creams, while in South America they discussed pressures to "lighten the race" by marrying lighter-skinned or white people to ensure lighter skin in subsequent generations. The youth activist from Peru shared that when she enters predominantly white spaces, people stare and wonder why she isn't embarrassed of her hair.

They understood colonial languages like English, Spanish, French and Portuguese as the most prominent remnant of colonialism and how access to those languages (as opposed to languages indigenous to their communities) could facilitate or limit their opportunities and life prospects.

What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

(2) An Inherited Global Struggle

The struggle against racism and colonialism is at once global and local and it is seen as one they inherit and must carry forward.

Collaborative Members, both those in predominantly Black countries and predominantly non-Black countries, found inspiration in the struggles for colonial independence by their ancestors and in present day protest movements like Black Lives Matter. They see their current work as contributing to this lineage. Members described their work in education to retain languages not used in official settings, organizing against police abuses, and their work to retain marginalized cultures as their contribution to racial justice movements.

“Through networking we have to share our stories [and] highlight our Afro-descendant heroes.”

– **Alejandra, 23, Colombia/Argentina**

Today, “being Black in activism is changing; now we are seeing the advantages rather than [just] the disadvantages.”

– **Rebecca, 20, Sierra Leone**

Through this initial phase of our work, across multiple countries, time-zones, and physical spaces (youth participating from their homes, hotels, etc.), we were provided a clear example of what possibilities exist for transnational movement-building among African and Afro-descendant children and youth through their “We Believe” statements.



WE BELIEVE...

We believe Blackness is vast and intersecting.

We believe that resources must be moved to Black activists.

We believe children and youth have the words to speak, to be heard and to be credited with their work.

We believe that young people need to be the protagonists of the decision-making that concerns them.

We believe in a democratic future grounded in the humanity of children and youth all over the world.

We believe that we are capable of making decisions on our own behalf.

We believe that being born Black should not be a premature death sentence.

We believe that our Blackness can be defined and expressed in many different ways, which represent the many different peoples who identify as Black. We are different in all the places we are in.

We believe in the importance of acknowledging that everyone's experience with oppression is different, and deserves to be valued and seen.

We believe in an equitable social justice for all—that everyone should contribute to the liberation of Black people so that everyone can be proud.

We believe that we can build power in our transnational diversity.

We believe that being Black too often means that we are institutionally disenfranchised anywhere in the world due to the retention of colonial values.

We believe that monetary and infrastructural reparations are owed to the developing world to allow the chance at growth that they were previously denied.

We believe Black children and youth have a right to be confident in their skin.

We believe that everybody should be allowed to fulfill their dreams regardless of their skin color or where they come from.

We believe that militancy is not just a space of struggle but also a place to celebrate.

We believe that Black children and youth should have space to explore other interests outside of their activism, and that they are deserving of resources to also take care of self, and pursue those interests.

What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

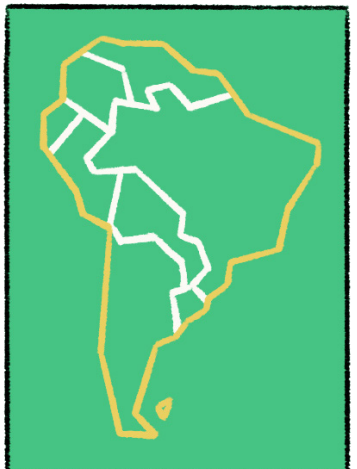
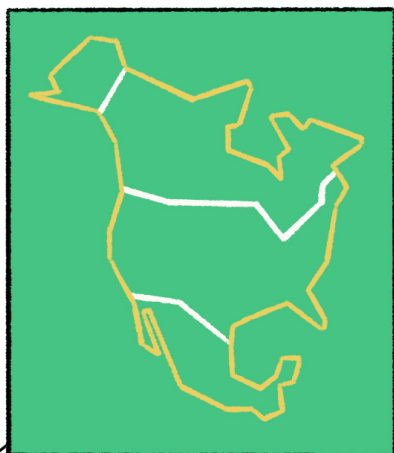
ABOUT THE REGION: WEST AFRICA & THE AMERICAS

(3) Majority vs. Minority

There is a difference between the experiences described by those living in majority Black countries and those where Black people are in the minority.

Collaborative Members in predominantly Black countries shared the ways the most important institutions in their home countries were shaped by racism and colonialism. They lamented about how their schools, their religious practices, and even their medical systems still hold colonial powers as ideal, while devaluing their cultures and traditions and how these beliefs are replicated by those in power, despite their race.

In contrast, Collaborative Members living in countries where Black people are in the minority, discussed racialized state violence and economic oppression. For example, the member from Salvador, Brazil and the member from Oakland, California connected on their work organizing against the state-sanctioned murder of Black youth in their communities.





YOUTH STORY:

Yamilee Marie Palma Ormeño

Written by: Yamilee | Age: 17 | From: Peru
CRIF Youth Collaborative Member

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In November of 2021, I began participating with the Collaborative that's providing support for CRIF's decolonization projects. This is work I feel very excited about, because our Collaborative is dedicated to helping Afrodescendent children and youth who are in situations of vulnerability, and because my struggle is working to support children and youth to overcome experiences of racial bullying, discrimination, racism, and sexism. I have also experienced this at times, at school, and managed to overcome it thanks to the support I received from my mother.

I feel very happy and extremely proud to be able to participate as a member of the Collaborative offering support for the CRIF Foundation's *decolonize!* proposals. Through our conversations, I've gotten to know and learn about different cultural manifestations and situations that challenge different groups who need social support. These situations move us to work to help our neighbors. From a very early age I've been involved in distribution and promotion of Afro-Peruvian culture and identity, Afro-Peruvian dance and our identity, and also I've been working on the fight against racism, sexism, and discrimination that I've experienced at my own school for many years.

Thanks to the support of my family and LUNDU, my institution, I've come to understand racism and discrimination as phenomena that still exist in our society today, and which do not permit Afro-Peruvian adolescents like myself to develop fully.

I feel very proud of my cultural heritage, of being Afro-Peruvian, and I would like to support many kids across the world so they can overcome racism in their communities. I would like to have more opportunities to work together with other Afro-Peruvian girls, boys, and adolescents from my rural community so they can learn about opportunities that exist outside our community, and also build harmonious relationships with people from other cultures.

What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

(4) Minding the Intersections

As salient as their racial identities are, it is inseparable from the multiple other ways they identify. They insist on being seen in their absolute fullness.

Collaborative Members consistently named the ways that their racialized identities impacted their experiences of their other identities and vice versa. Given the gender balance of the Collaborative, the intersection of their racial and gender identities was consistently raised. For example, the member from the United States raised the observation that many of the protests over the past few years (within the U.S.) were around the murder of young black men, yet both on the streets and in the media, less attention was given to the murder of young black women. The Collaborative Members also named how being from migrant and/or rural communities impacted the opportunities available to them and the ways they are viewed.

Another critical conversation among the Collaborative Members was how they would spotlight particular identities in the *decolonize!* strategy. While all members agreed that the next round of grant opportunity was to be open to all Black children and youth, they had a robust conversation about the value of naming some specific communities for grant prioritization and not others. While some members found it important to explicitly name subgroups of Black children and youth because they might not otherwise see themselves in the opportunity, others argued that naming some groups and not others might seem unfair. They ultimately decided to explicitly invite Black children and youth who identify as LGBTQ+ to apply along with children and youth from migrant (intra- and inter- national) and rural communities to ensure that, as groups most likely to be excluded from grant opportunities, they could also “see” themselves in the call for proposals.

ABOUT BLACK CHILDREN & YOUTH AS ACTIVISTS

(5) Representation Matters

As Black children and youth activists who work across multiple movements, being the “only” in spaces creates additional labor to address racism in those spaces.

A key learning across this first phase of youth activists is that they all clearly articulated their calling to activism due to the injustices they see occurring in their communities, injustices that they see as being connected to both their race and the legacy of colonialism in their countries (especially in West Africa).

The Collaborative Members also work across multiple other movements. They describe the frustrating experience of being in spaces of potential allyship such as gatherings around feminism, LGBTQ+ and/or migrant spaces, and still having to “teach” others how not to perpetuate racist ideas and practices.

What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

ABOUT STRATEGY & GRANTMAKING

(6) Outreach & a Culture of Exclusion

It is not enough to make new opportunities available to traditionally excluded communities. Outreach must be differentiated to the social and cultural context and an effort made to ensure that the intended audience “can see” themselves in the application.

As we began *decolonize!*, we had yet to establish relationships that engendered trust in the opportunity and in CRIF. The novelty of the opportunity coupled with historic exclusion from global development initiatives created an added dimension to our outreach work. Particularly, in regions where engagement with philanthropy and global development may be lower, an initiative like *decolonize!* must take time to build credibility and engender confidence in potential applicants that their applications would be fairly considered. Not seeing other youth like yourself access such opportunities can create an even higher barrier to entry for any funding opportunity.

Outreach was an unexpected challenge for the team. Despite the support of our partners and outreach to youth-serving organizations across

West Africa and the Americas, the regional distribution of the applications we received was disproportionate. For example, despite concerns that racism might not resonate as an issue for youth in West Africa, we received more applications from that region relative to the other regions (specifically Liberia & Sierra Leone). However, we did not allow adequate time to establish relationships to virtually reach applicants in Caribbean and Central America that would both allow potential applicants to “see” themselves, but also for them to get familiar with CRIF and the application process. This can be evidenced by the number of inquiries received from those two regions after the application deadline.

Given this reflection, the Participatory Grantmaking Collaborative will design a regionally specific outreach plan for the Phase 2 application process. Specifically, the Collaborative has identified a need to do targeted outreach to Black migrant youth, to youth in rural areas and marginalized urban areas (slums, favelas, etc.) and LGBTQ+ children and youth; in addition to addressing the challenges named above.

What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

(7) Designing Youth Engagement for Equity

Meaningful youth engagement in grant programming requires more than just the provision of grants and stipends. CRIF recognized the need to address all barriers to participation in *decolonize!*, particularly for youth who are most likely to be shut out of grant-funded programming either because of poverty or lack of access to such leadership opportunities.

A primary concern of the CRIF team from the inception of the program design was ensuring that each member could participate fully and with dignity. Many of the decisions made from remuneration to the details of the Strategy Weekend originated from this commitment.

As an example, in addition to holding the Strategy Weekend over one weekend rather than over several weeks, we also offered the Collaborative Members a hotel stay - for themselves and a guardian - to increase the likelihood of consistent internet connectivity. All of these measures were built into the design of the Strategy Weekend to ensure that Collaborative Members could fully participate with dignity.

(8) Balancing Multiple Ways to Apply with a Quick Response

Each different application option, adds more time for review, particularly in a multilingual context. It is important to set timelines that allow for the varied review processes.

A key accessibility tactic was to ensure that potential applicants had multiple ways to apply, including through a web portal, Whatsapp or email. Participants could submit their applications in written or video form. Applicants shared that this allowed them to present themselves and their community in their best light.

We were quite proud of the number of the applicants who took advantage of the varied options. While this was manageable in this first phase, we anticipate considerable increase in the number of applications as the call for proposals for the grantmaking phase is launched and are concerned about our ability to review varied types of applications, especially in multiple languages. To address that concern, our review process will utilize the CRIF Team for initial screening for eligibility. We will then translate the applications per language to ensure that the most critical and meaningful selection decisions are held by the Collaborative Members.

Given Haiti's history and role as the first Black republic in the Americas, it felt critical that they not be left out of the Collaborative. During the first round of proposals for the Collaborative Members, CRIF's outreach within Haiti coincided with the assassination of Haiti's president, Jovenel Moïse. As a result, we were unable to reach many of our contacts that would have supported outreach at that time and, furthermore, it felt inappropriate to push this outreach given the political situation. Therefore, to address this gap in representation, we anticipate bringing on an additional youth advisor from Haiti to review this round of applications for the grantmaking phase and to bring the linguistic and programmatic perspective of Haiti to *decolonize!*

What We Have Learned Thus Far

Learning Declarations

(9) Language Justice: **Budget the People, Time & Funding** **for Language Justice Expertise**

We had a stated commitment to language justice at the onset of *decolonize!*, to not reinforce the linguistic dominance of English. During the application process to select Collaborative Members, we relied on our partners and consultants to translate and review applications done via video or audio WhatsApp message. Initially, we based our budget on providing interpretation for the Collaborative Strategy Weekend and the translation of documents and applications. However, given the five languages (English, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Haitian Kreyol) we intended to work in and our desire that the Collaborative Members be able to not only communicate with the CRIF team but also with one another; we enlisted a language justice coordinator who helped us to understand that language justice went beyond the hiring of interpreters and translating documents once an event was designed. Instead, it was a partnership that influenced everything from the budget, project development to timelines, to the agenda design and the development of presentation slides.

(10) Grant Disbursement: **Traditional Philanthropy & Funding** **Structures in the Children's Rights** **Sector are not Designed to Fund** **Children & Young People Directly.** **These Limitations Shut Out** **Marginalized Young People from** **Funding Programs & Entrenches** **Adult Power.**

Access to formal banking systems remains an insurmountable barrier to funding for children and youth activists in many parts of the world, particularly West Africa. Our commitment to fund children and youth directly in the ways they are most likely to organize relates to CRIF's

values of building power with them that honors their autonomy and ensures that they do not always have to go through adult organizations to access funding.

How we fund youth directly continues to be a learning process. As a fiscally-sponsored organization, we are subject to the perceptions and internal policies of our fiscal sponsor including those related to the riskiness of directly funding young people. To address this challenge, CRIF partner, Purposeful - who shares our commitment to funding youth directly - utilizes the flexibility that being a movement building hub rooted in the global South affords them and is able to use services like Western Union to get resources to young people internationally. If not for this support, half of the Collaborative Members would not have been able to participate in *decolonize!*. That said, the transactional costs for this type of engagement are very high. For example, services such as Western Union have ceilings on the transfer amounts which means we must make multiple disbursements to complete payments, each with their own transaction fees.

06 Stay Tuned! Conclusion...for now

This first of three learning briefs is dedicated to the initiation of the *decolonize!* portfolio. In this document we have shared much of what we have learned from simply posing the question of what it means to support the leadership of children and young people to advance their rights and to end racism and colonialism.

We have also learned much about how we design grantmaking strategies *with* children and young people, and what mechanisms and processes are needed to move resources to them in the ways that they shape and define.

In the next learning brief, we will build on this learning with a focus on the grantmaking process led by Black children and youth activists. Stay tuned!

