



# Delivering for children and youth in changing times

OUR FY2025 ANNUAL REPORT



# Welcome

Dear Friends of Firelight,

As I reflect on the last year—a year upended and marked by an unprecedented global aid crisis—I am filled with optimism and hope for the future. While 2025 began with a sense of loss in the wake of widespread funding cuts, I have found strength and inspiration in the resilience of the community-based organizations on the frontlines.

In this report, we want to share their achievements, lessons learned along the way, and appreciate the unique opportunity that the shift in the funding landscape offers African civil society organizations. Despite funding cuts, community-driven solutions remain effective in shifting systems for lasting impact.

At Firelight, we are committed to supporting community-based organizations to transform the lives of children and youth in Africa.

We want to thank you for your support and being with us on this journey.

In solidarity,

**Marième Daff**  
Executive Director



# About us

## Partnering with communities to build lasting change for children and youth

Firelight Foundation partners with community-based organizations across eastern and southern Africa to advance the wellbeing of children and youth. We invest in locally led solutions that strengthen families, shift systems, and ensure children grow up safe, supported, and able to thrive. Our work is grounded in trust, long-term partnership, and the belief that communities closest to the challenges hold the solutions.



### Firelight at a glance

4 countries across eastern and southern Africa – Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia

60+ community-based organizations supported

Thousands of children, youth, and caregivers reached

# Our grantee partners

## Early childhood development



### Zambia (Western Province)

Youth and Childcare Foundation CBO, Mongu District  
Namuso Community Development Organization, Mongu District  
Whispers Infant Care and Support, Mongu District  
Senanga Shangombo Life Savers, Senanga District  
Teacher Response Against Child Abuse, Kalabo District  
Kaoma Women Initiative that Strengthens and Empowers CBO, Kaoma District



### Malawi (Mulanje District)

Malilima CBO  
Nachikodowa CBO  
Children of Hope Organization CBO

## Ending child marriage and girls' empowerment



### Malawi

Golomoti Active Aids Support Organization (GASO), Dedza District  
Ufuluwathu CBO, Phalombe District  
Tikondwe CBO, Zomba District  
Nancholi CBO, Mangochi District  
Kadyalunda CBO, Balaka District  
Luso Langa CBO, Salima District  
Knowledge, Elders, Youth Share CBO (KEYS), Kasungu District  
Tingathe Development Forum, Nkhothankhotha District  
Golden Family Organisation, Dowa District  
Lisithu Community Based Organisation, Kasungu District

## Youth resiliency and belonging



### Kenya

Malkia Initiative Foundation, Kajiado County  
Nareto Latia Indigenous Peoples' Program, Kajiado County  
Oldonyo Orok Youth Self-Help Group, Kajiado County  
Jiwakilishe CBO, Machakos County  
Youth for Sustainable Development (YSD) Machakos Chapter  
Jumuisha Initiative CBO, Makueni County  
Kitise Rural Development CBO, Makueni County



# Our model: Community-driven systems change (CDSC)



## 1 LISTEN AND ENGAGE

- CBOs engage community members to identify the root causes and solutions to challenges facing children and youth.
- Together, they create action plans that build on existing strengths and knowledge.

## 2 SUPPORT CBOs

- We enhance CBOs' capacity to carry out effective work.
- We connect them with other CBOs, technical experts and policymakers.
- Together, we measure progress and use data to improve action.

## 3 SHIFT SYSTEMS

- Transformative change is seen in:
- Stronger communities through cohesion and collaboration;
  - Lasting connections with key institutions like government and schools;
  - Entire communities adapting healthier, child-centered norms.

## 4 EXPAND IMPACT

- Other CBOs adapt our partners' solutions.
- Governments embrace new systems, policies and practices.
- Communities demonstrate leadership and resilience in the face of new challenges.

**At every stage, Firelight walks alongside communities — supporting, not directing — as they lead systems change.**

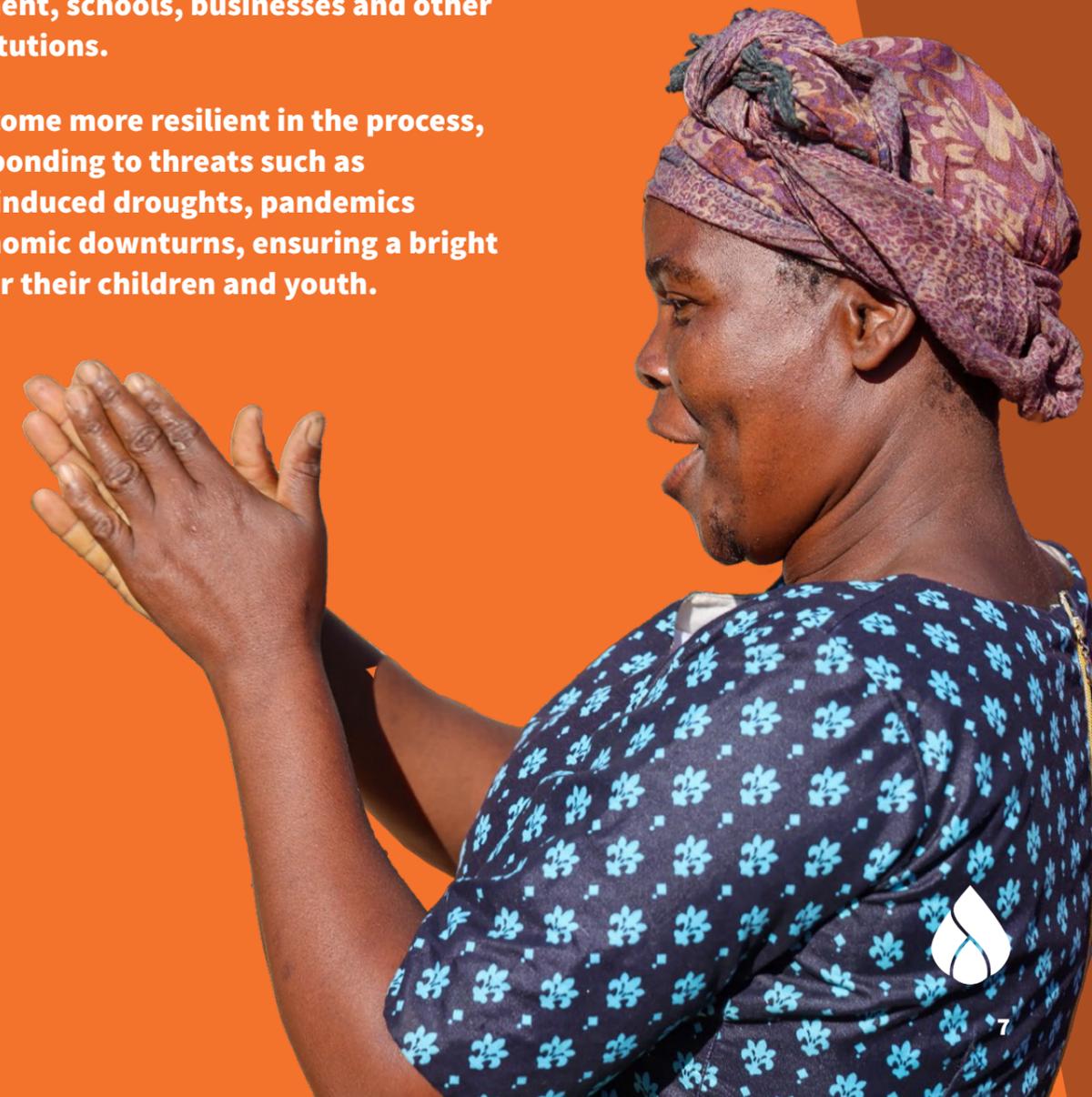
# Our theory of change

Firelight pools donor funds to build the capacity of catalytic community-based organizations (CBOs).

CBOs work with communities to improve the lives of children and youth by overcoming inequities in learning outcomes, protection and economic opportunity.

Communities realize smart, sustainable and potentially scalable community-driven systems change. They have stronger connections with government, schools, businesses and other key institutions.

They become more resilient in the process, ably responding to threats such as climate-induced droughts, pandemics and economic downturns, ensuring a bright future for their children and youth.



# Ending child marriage

In Malawi, the movement to end child marriage continues to grow from within communities themselves. Through Firelight's community-driven systems approach, partners walk alongside families, faith leaders, traditional authorities and government to understand the root causes of child marriage and build solutions that shift beliefs, norms, and behaviors.

This approach is translating into powerful, measurable results. To date, these results include:

**776**  
girls rescued  
from child  
marriages

**428**  
child marriages  
terminated  
through  
community-led  
action

**229**  
survivors and  
girls at risk  
re-enrolled into  
formal school

**216**  
girls enrolled  
into vocational  
training  
centers

*The communities we fund have helped restore the dignity of many hundreds of Malawi girls and given them the chance of a better life*

## Changing norms, strengthening accountability

Local leaders are taking visible action. Religious leaders are speaking out against child marriage in their congregations, and traditional authorities are reinforcing accountability, including public commitments to address cases where early marriage is facilitated by community actors.

Improved reporting networks now link mother groups, child protection workers, community-based organizations, social welfare officers, and police. This coordination is making it possible to dissolve cases more quickly and safely.

## Systems responding together

Justice systems are acting on community referrals, resulting in successful prosecutions and long-term sentences for perpetrators. At the household level, savings groups, goat pass-on programs, and agribusiness initiatives are strengthening family resilience and reducing the economic pressures that contribute to early marriage.

Underpinning this effort is a network of ten community-based organizations that continue to mobilize their communities, sustain progress, and champion a future where **girls can learn, grow, and lead.**

*In Malawi's Dedza District, members of a village savings and loan group supported by GASO CBO, contribute and record their weekly savings, strengthening household resilience and reducing the financial pressures that can lead to early marriage.*

*Phenny Saidi, a young mother and child marriage survivor, is now back in school with support from GASO CBO. She said: "I want to become a nurse so I can help my community."*





# Youth resiliency & belonging (Kenya)

Across Machakos, Makueni and Kajiado counties, our CBO partners are working with youth to strengthen their skills, identity, wellbeing, and collective agency, creating pathways for youth to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities. In 2025, Firelight partners achieved the following results:

**100+ youth trained in digital skills**

**160 youth trained in life skills**

**60 youth mentees paired with 30 mentors**

**300+ stakeholders engaged in youth–community dialogues**

**Youth leveraged partnerships to secure vocational training access, government loan opportunities, 70 beehives and a \$7,751 enterprise contract**

## Highlights

- Youth gained practical skills in entrepreneurship, digital learning, tailoring, pottery, beekeeping, and climate-smart agriculture
- Employability increased through jobs, internships, and enterprise start-up support
- Youth-friendly spaces expanded, including information and technology hubs and learning centers
- Youth-community relationships strengthened through festivals, dialogues, and volunteer action
- Mental wellbeing support expanded through mentorship, counselling, and wellness activities

Members of the Syumile Youth Group in Makueni County, Kenya advance their trades, from mechanics to beauty services with the support of our partner, Kitise Rural Development.

**“A changed mindset is a changed community.”**

Stanley Mambo, lead volunteer, Kitise Rural Development, Kenya



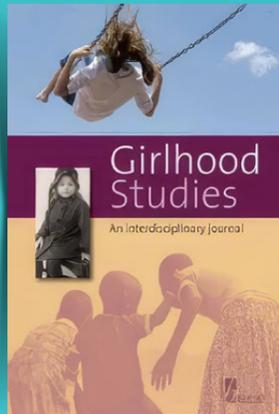
## A growing movement of community power

Across Firelight’s initiatives, communities are leading. CBOs, parents, youth, caregivers, local leaders, and government partners are co-creating systems that protect children, expand opportunity for children and youth, and build resilience. These shifts in leadership, norms, and local institutions, are laying the foundation for long-term change driven by the people closest to both the challenges and the solutions.



# Global conversations and knowledge sharing

Across the year we shared what we are learning on regional and global platforms. Our aim is to elevate community perspectives in the fields of philanthropy and development and to increase community-based organizations' visibility and funding.



On March 8, for International Women's Day, Firelight released a [report](#) that found that when women have more decision-making power, their young children thrive. The research was conducted with our community partners in four study sites in Tanzania.

In April, Firelight's Ronald Kimambo and Sadaf Shallwani published an article in the academic journal *Development in Progress* calling for data collection that is driven by the learning needs of communities.

In May, we released a study on how community-based organizations in Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia are weathering crises and how funders can support resilience building.

Firelight's Ronald Kimambo, and Kevin Obura, together with Lorraine Kiswaga, published an article, "Navigating Young Motherhood: Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers in Tanzania" in the June issue of *Girlhood Studies Journal*.

In June, Ronald spoke on a panel on building strong, agile organizations at the East Africa Philanthropy Conference in Kigali. Two of our Kenyan partners, Jedidah Lemaron of the Malkia Initiative and Karen Munyae of Jumuisha Initiative, also attended with our support.

Ronald was interviewed by the [New Times of Rwanda](#) (2:16 min. in video) on aligning funding with the realities on the ground: "I believe that sustainability comes not just from more money, but from shared purpose and local leadership."



In June, Kevin Obura represented Firelight at the African Evaluation Association 25th Anniversary Celebration in Addis where he sought to collaborate with partners advancing [Afrocentric and community-rooted M&E systems](#).

With support from Firelight, EPIC-Africa released a groundbreaking survey of how the year's deep funding cuts affected African CSOs. [From Fragility to Fortitude](#) reveals how CSOs are adapting to survive and calls for reimagining African-led sustainable financing.

Firelight's Marième Daff attended the 6th African Philanthropy Conference in July in Cairo where she presented on a panel on effective resilience strategies in the wake of changes in the global aid architecture.

## What we're learning

For us, community-driven systems change means doing philanthropy differently. As we work alongside community partners, we seek to:

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>1</b> Provide meaningful funding over longer periods and streamline our grantmaking systems.</p> | <p><b>2</b> Recognize that systems change is complex, non-linear and requires flexibility.</p> | <p><b>3</b> Trust CBOs and their communities to identify their most pressing issues and measures of success.</p> |
| <p><b>4</b> Create relationships of mutual transparency and accountability.</p>                        | <p><b>5</b> Invest in mutual capacity strengthening.</p>                                       | <p><b>6</b> Promote CBO leaders in national and global platforms.</p>  |

**“The communities are proud that it is them who have brought the changes to the systems. It enhances the spirit of trust.”**

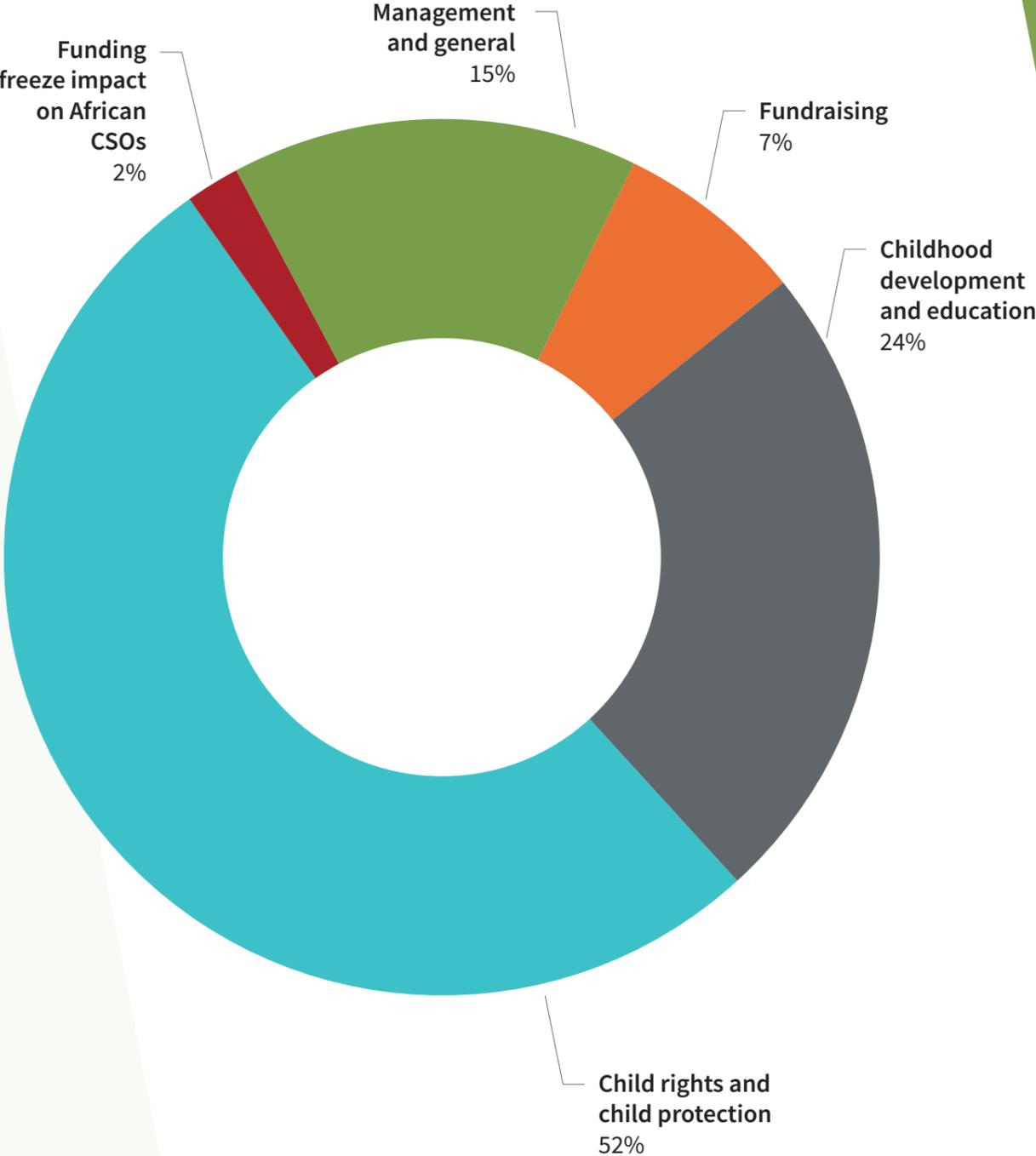
**Symon Thipa, Programs Officer, Ufuluwathu CBO**



# Financial overview

Firelight's audited financial statements and 990 forms are available on our [website](#).

## FY25 Expenditures



# Our donors

We gratefully appreciate our partnership with the following funders:



Kerry Olson and David Katz

RSMcDowell Fund at the Marin Community Foundation

We also extend our sincere thanks to all individuals who have contributed generously to this work.



# Our board

The Board of Directors provides leadership to Firelight, supports and sustains the work of the organization, and provides governance and strategic fundraising support.



L to R: Elisa de Martel, Rose Maruru, Jimmy Kolker, Marième Daff, Bongi Mkhabela, Gloria Cusack (former board chair), Mark Lorey. Not pictured: Yvette Kathurima and Christopher Ifeanyi-Nwanze.

**Sibongile (Bongi) Mkhabela**  
Board Chair

**Mark Lorey**  
Board Vice Chair and Secretary

**Elisa de Martel**  
Board Treasurer

**Dr. Joyce Malombe**

**Jimmy Kolker**

**Rose Maruru**

**Yvette Kathurima**

**Christopher Ifeanyi-Nwanze**

# Our staff

The Firelight team – based in eastern and southern Africa, Europe and North America – raises funds, finds and supports our community-based grantee-partners, shares evidence of their impact, and carries out Firelight’s strategic plan.



**Adelia Barros-Parker**  
Controller



**Beverly Nicole Adhiambo**  
Program Associate



**Dua Kazimoto**  
Program Associate



**Ivy Oulu**  
Development and Communications Associate



**Jim Laske**  
Grants Manager



**Kevin Obura**  
Learning and Evaluation Associate



**Marième Daff**  
Executive Director



**Persis Ashers**  
Operations Officer



**Ronald Kimambo**  
Learning and Evaluation Officer



**Tomaida Banda**  
Program Officer





[www.firelightfoundation.org](http://www.firelightfoundation.org)