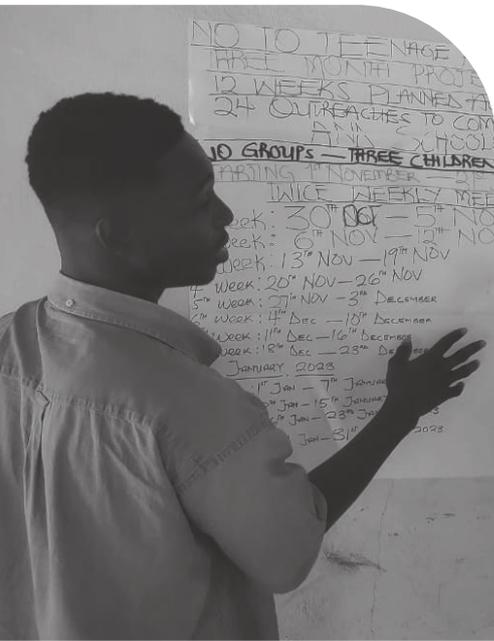


BEST PRACTICE CASES

CHILDREN'S SOLUTIONS LAB

Empowering children to bring positive change to their communities



 **ARIGATOU**
INTERNATIONAL
All for Children



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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Arigatou International launched the Children's Solutions Lab (CLS), a program aimed at empowering children to bring positive contributions to their communities by addressing child poverty around them and engaging in ethical reflections about the roots of social conflicts and how some cultural norms can potentially impact the well-being of children and contribute to child poverty.

As there are very limited opportunities for children to act and collectively address challenges in their societies, the CSL aimed to promote and support projects genuinely led by children. In addition, the CSL strived to assist adults who work with children in understanding what genuine participation entails and how to engage young people respectfully, meaningfully, and safely. The CSL also promoted inclusion among children from diverse backgrounds, such as gender, age, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and geographic location.

Through an open call for applications, groups of children around the world were invited to submit projects led by them that could propose context-sensitive and unique solutions to poverty affecting children in their communities. The projects were expected to address the ethical challenges and the cultural norms that can lead to poverty and suggest solutions for this based on education. The selected groups received technical support and small-scale funding to implement their projects with grounded assistance from local adults.

OBJECTIVES



- 1. Create meaningful participatory spaces** and opportunities, where children are empowered to lead, develop, and implement relevant actions that can bring positive impacts to their communities.



- 2. Create capacity in individuals** and organizations to involve children in their local actions in authentic and meaningful ways fostering horizontal child-adult relations.



- 3. Foster ethical reflections among children** about the roots of social conflicts, injustice and poverty and equip them with skills to navigate these conflicts positively and effectively.



HOW THE CSL CONNECTS TO ARIGATOU INTERNATIONAL'S WORK

The Children's Solutions Lab was one of Arigatou International's key responses to promote children's wellbeing, dignity, and rights. These fundamental rights are outlined in significant frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children (GNRC Panama Commitments). By placing children at the forefront, the CSL empowered them to work collaboratively with other community actors towards creating a better world for all children.

Arigatou International's approach to enhancing child participation was exemplified in the CSL process. The foundation of this process was listening to children with empathy and respect, welcoming their wisdom and recommendations, and working in collaboration with them. Arigatou International is committed to ensuring that every action taken in its work promotes and affirms children's human dignity and their holistic development and wellbeing. The CSL process empowered children to participate actively, take action, and have their voices and opinions considered. It encouraged them to think critically and develop themselves in relation to others by transforming the world around them.

The CSL process is rooted in the Ethics Education Framework focuses on values such as responsibility and empathy for building pluralistic societies. The framework of the CSL process includes core elements of the Ethics Education approach, such as interconnectedness, which acknowledges a common humanity in oneself and others and allows children understand their place in society.

Child participation is outlined in the [UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#), which states that children have the right to be heard on all matters relating to them, to express their views freely and to be provided with the opportunity to be heard.

Adults have a fundamental role to play to facilitate the participation of all children in matters affecting them within their families, schools, local communities, public services, institutions, government policies and judicial procedures.

CHILDREN'S SOLUTIONS LAB IMPLEMENTATION

 **3000**
CHILDREN
REACHED*


120
LEADING
CHILDREN

CUBA
6 leading
children

PERU
4 leading
children

BRAZIL
6 leading
children

GHANA
6 leading
children

MALAWI
25 leading
children

NIGER
7 leading
children

SERBIA
5 leading
children

KENYA
11 leading
children

ARMENIA
9 leading
children

INDIA
45 leading
children


10
COUNTRIES

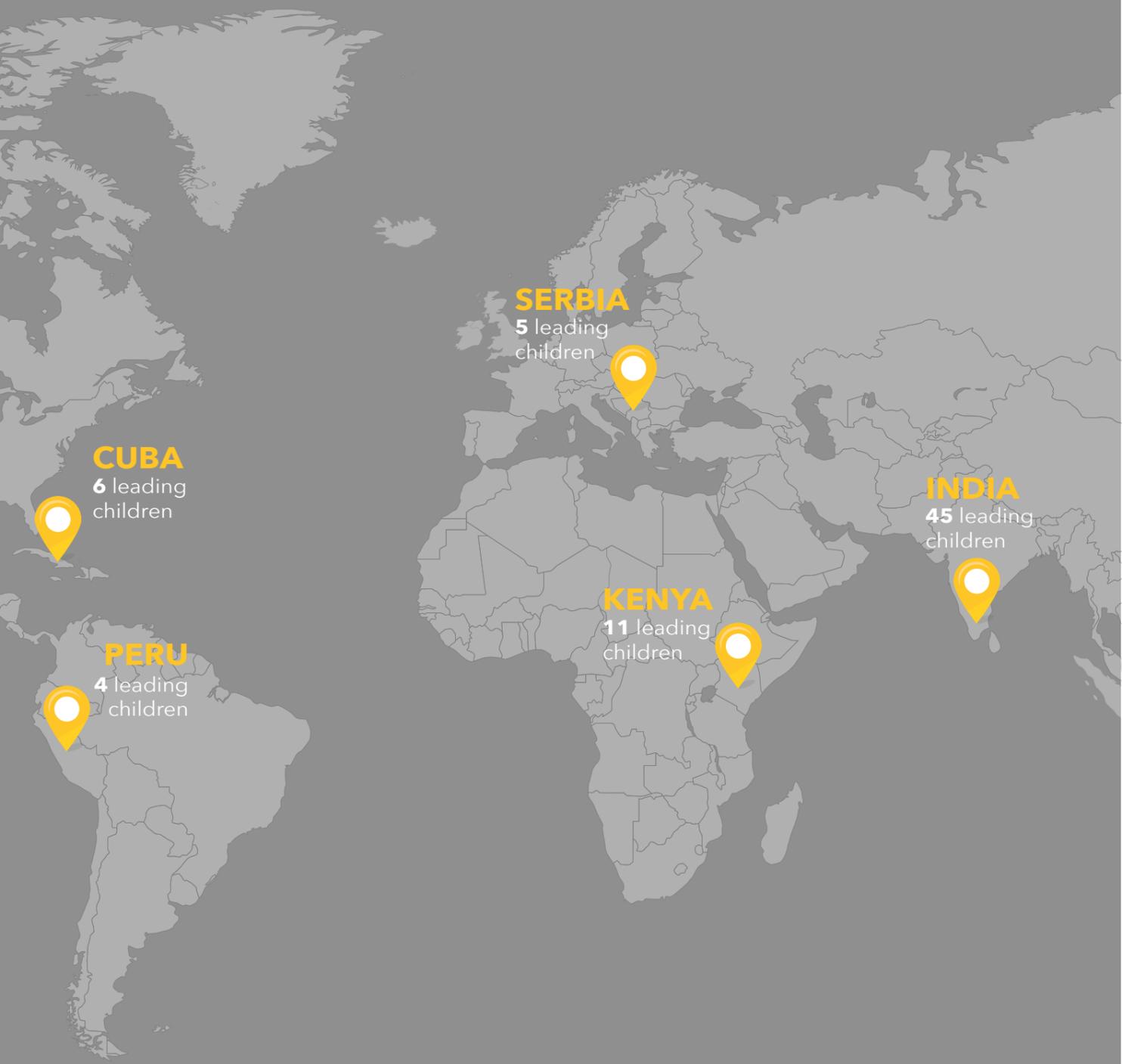
Between 2020 and 2022, the CSL provided support for children's initiatives in 10 countries, enabling over 120 children to take the lead in driving positive change in their communities.

In 2020, 37 groups from 21 countries applied. Following a rigorous application review by a panel of experts, 5 groups of children were selected and granted funding and support to execute their solutions. These groups were based in **Cuba, India, Kenya, Peru, and Serbia**, and all implemented their projects between November 2020 and April 2021.

In 2022, a new round of applications was launched receiving 84 submissions from 38 countries. The selecting panel included experts from partner organizations as well as a young leader coming from the children's group in Kenya that was supported during the previous round. From the 2022 pool, 5 groups of children from **Armenia, Brazil, Ghana, Malawi, and Niger** were selected. These initiatives were carried out from October 2022 to June 2023.

*Total number of children reached by the CSL program including children involved in the development of the projects, children responsible for implementing them, and children who ultimately benefited from these initiatives.

SOLUTIONS AWARDED IN 2020



CHILDREN SUPPORTING EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

 Location:	Santiago de Cuba, Cuba
 Leading team:	6 children aged 7 to 13
 Composition of the group:	Boys and girls from various Christian denominations
 Project's objectives:	To provide printed educational materials to children living in poverty-stricken areas and affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 Supporting organization:	Centro Cristiano de Servicio y Capacitación B. G. Lavastida, member of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) Cuba
 Micro-grant received:	1,500 USD



Young changemakers preparing and delivering the school supply packages prepared by them.

The group in Cuba aimed to support children in disadvantaged contexts who lacked access to educational materials and online learning opportunities, a problem which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address this issue, the leading group of children designed a solution that involved creating tailored educational materials for specific children in their community.

The group consulted with child beneficiaries to understand their needs and preferences, then conducted research to design and produce educational folders for 30 children aged 7-16 in their community.

" We have had many activities with children who don't have access to the internet. [We have] downloaded online classes, materials like tales, riddles, and didactic books for them (...) Almost everyone has pretty, coloured folders and all that they include can support them with their school."

– Ana Isabela, young changemaker

Role of the supporting adults

Throughout the development of the solution, from ideation to implementation, supporting adults played a vital role in assisting the group of children. In particular, parents and extended family helped to facilitate meetings with child beneficiaries and find suitable materials online.

Ms. Maite María Álvarez Roca, one of the supporting adults, emphasized the need for providing parents with more information and guidance on children's rights and how to promote meaningful child participation. In her words: "working with children is very enriching and rewarding (...) Tracing strategies to protect and help especially those children who live in situations of vulnerability and poverty should be a constant work, it is a call from our faith and our commitment to God."



Children ready to deliver the school supply packages prepared by them



Members of the Children's Parliament conducting lessons with the child beneficiaries

BRIDGING THE EDUCATIONAL GAP FOR CHILDREN BY CHILDREN

 Location:	Coimbatore, India
 Leading team:	45 children aged 13 to 17
 Composition of the group:	Hindu, Muslim and Christian children coming from 9 different villages in Coimbatore.
 Project's objectives:	To support children's education disrupted by school closures by extracurricular activities
 Supporting organization:	Shanti Ashram, member of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) India
 Micro-grant received:	1,500 USD

In response to educational disparities caused by mass school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, children from the Children's Parliament in India took action.

Following a meeting involving over 300 children from 9 villages, they discovered that many public-school students lacked access to online learning due to technological barriers. To address this issue, the children developed a solution to provide educational support up to 3 times per week in subjects such as arithmetic, languages, dance, poetry, and basket-making to vulnerable children who did not have access to online resources.

The solution included online lessons conducted via Zoom for younger children using mobile phones loaned by Shanti Ashram staff. With a total of 45 child-educators involved in providing education, over 115 young children were reached.

In the words of Anshifa, young changemaker from Grade 6: "I was happy, because I was thinking only elders can give classes but now, we are able help our juniors in their education."

Role of the supporting adults

The staff members of Shanti Ashram supported this project by providing the children with the space and opportunity to implement their solution. During the process, it was important for children to maintain specific COVID-19 regulations related to health and safety which was overseen by the supporting adults.

Ms. Deepa Kumar, Coordinator of the Children's Parliament in India, shared that the adults were guided and inspired by the promotion of participatory process for children. A fully child-led and child-owned project was a new way of approaching child participation for the children themselves, as well as the supporting adults from Shanti Ashram.



Members of the Children's Parliament

"As a team and organization, we have learned and grown a lot. We are seeing a lot of changes in the children who are now thinking of solutions (...) They can think very critically, out of the box, and we should give them the time and space to participate."

– Ms. Deepa Kumar, supporting adult of the Children's Parliament

CHILD MARRIAGE AWARENESS THROUGH DRAMA PERFORMANCE

 Location:	Garissa, Kenya
 Leading team:	11 children aged 15 to 18
 Composition of the group:	Muslim and Christian children from diverse ethnic groups
 Project's objectives:	To advocate against the practice of child and forced marriages and for the importance of educating children to break the cycle of poverty and uphold child rights
 Supporting organization:	Silver Lining Kenya
 Micro-grant received:	500 USD

Located in Garissa, a village in eastern Kenya, the group of children identified poverty as a major contributor to child marriages in their community with arranged marriages providing a source of income for the bride's family. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue and disproportionately affected girls who were not receiving adequate education.

To raise awareness and address this issue, the children developed a 35–45-minute drama performance depicting the story of two sisters living in a community where child marriage is practiced. The play was performed three times for various members of the community, including religious and community leaders, parents, and caregivers, reaching a total of 75 audience members. After each performance, a dialogue was encouraged with community and religious leaders to discuss the importance of child participation, education, and preventing early marriages.

Role of the supporting adults

The local organization Silver Lining Kenya supported the implementation of this child-led solution. Ms. Benazir Mohamed, the group's supporting adult, motivated the children seeing them as knowledgeable, informed individuals in their own right. "In the implementation of projects, we have viewed children as recipients that should not be part of developing and implementing, but this has changed. By having them involved, we have seen the critical role they play (...) Sometimes children are more informed than us, let's see how they can best inform us."

"Seeing our peers get married is what made us want to address this issue because we live in this community and us too are under pressure to get married."

– Salma, young changemaker aged 16



Above: young changemakers gearing up for their drama performance. Below: people attending the play.

"Art breaks the barriers of formal communication and sticks in one's mind."

– Mohammed, young changemaker aged 17



THE STORY OF SAADA AND SULEINA

Drama play performed by the children in Kenya

Saada and Suleina are two sisters living in a community where child marriages are still practiced. The sisters are school-going teenagers, but their parents decide to marry them off, in line with the community's customs. The marriage plans and procedures are concluded, making Saada and Suleina wives to two men in the community. However, this does not last long for Saada, thanks to her relentless will to be educated.

Saada boldly defies her parents and the community, walking away from her marriage to pursue her education. She secures a scholarship guaranteeing her to continue her education away from her home. All this time, Saada has tried convincing her sister Suleina to follow suit, but Suleina declines, citing her adherence to the community norms.

Saada does not give up on herself, as she pursues her education and becomes a nurse. She wants to advocate for the importance of education, and she returns home to be employed in one of the leading community health centers.

One of her patients is her sister Suleina, now a mother. Suleina is surprised to find her sister Saada as a nurse at the health center. Saada passionately attends to her sister, like all of her patients. For Suleina, her under-education has posed many challenges. She can hardly read or write. She can neither read the prescriptions of her medicine nor can she administer medicine in the right way to her children.

Saada hopes her example will show the people in her community how education can break the chain of poverty and allow girls to follow their dreams.

CHILDREN TACKLING POVERTY WITH GARDENING AND A MOBILE LIBRARY



Young changemakers and supporting adults during the inauguration of the mobile library

 Location:	Lima, Peru
 Leading team:	4 children aged 11 to 14
 Composition of the group:	Children coming from different backgrounds and ethnic origins
 Project's objectives:	To help tackle poverty in the community through community gardening, and support children's learning with a mobile library during school closures due to COVID-19
 Supporting organization:	Christ the Saviour Church, member of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC)
 Micro-grant received:	500 USD

In Peru, a group of children noticed that vulnerable families in their community were struggling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With no access to the internet and parents out of work, the children launched a project to create a community garden where families could grow food to eat and sell, with proceeds going toward buying school supplies for beneficiaries.

The children successfully established a budget, bought necessary supplies and seeds, and identified 20 child beneficiaries. To further expand their project, the group also created a mobile library for all beneficiaries, which quickly grew in popularity, attracting six additional volunteers to read donated books to children. The number of books expanded as members of the community learnt about the project.

Role of the supporting adults

The children's group was supported by the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC Peru), offering guidance, and mentoring during implementation. Sister Esperanza Principio facilitated the creation of the community garden by valuing the children's decision-making abilities, despite facing challenges such as finding a suitable space. She acknowledges the importance of investing in children, as they often have fresh and innovative ideas from which adults can learn. Despite potential difficulties, she emphasizes that children can adapt and learn from their experiences, leading to increased creativity. "I learned a lot from them [the children] It is always good to invest in children, they have innovative and fresh ideas that we can learn from".



Children caring for their garden.

"Here in Peru, there are children that don't have money, they can't afford to study. So, what we are doing is a project where children who are in extreme poverty can study and get a better education so they can move forward and have a better future."

– Jhordy, young changemaker

SPREADING JOY ALL YEAR ROUND

 Location:	Sombor, Serbia
 Leading team:	5 children aged 11 to 18
 Composition of the group:	Children coming from different backgrounds and ethnic origins.
 Project's objectives:	To collect school supplies and equipment to distribute them to children coming from challenging backgrounds.
 Supporting organization:	Sombor Educational Center (SEC), member of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) Serbia.
 Micro-grant received:	500 USD

In Serbia, a group of children used to come together annually to collect gift packs for disadvantaged children during Christmas. In 2020, due to COVID-19, the group recognized that impoverished children were disproportionately impacted in terms of education and decided to create school supply packs. With the help of local religious leaders, the group prepared 40 packs of supplies to be distributed to those in need. The project successfully brought together two different denominations of Christianity, promoting peaceful co-existence and community interconnectedness.



Gift packs for the child beneficiaries

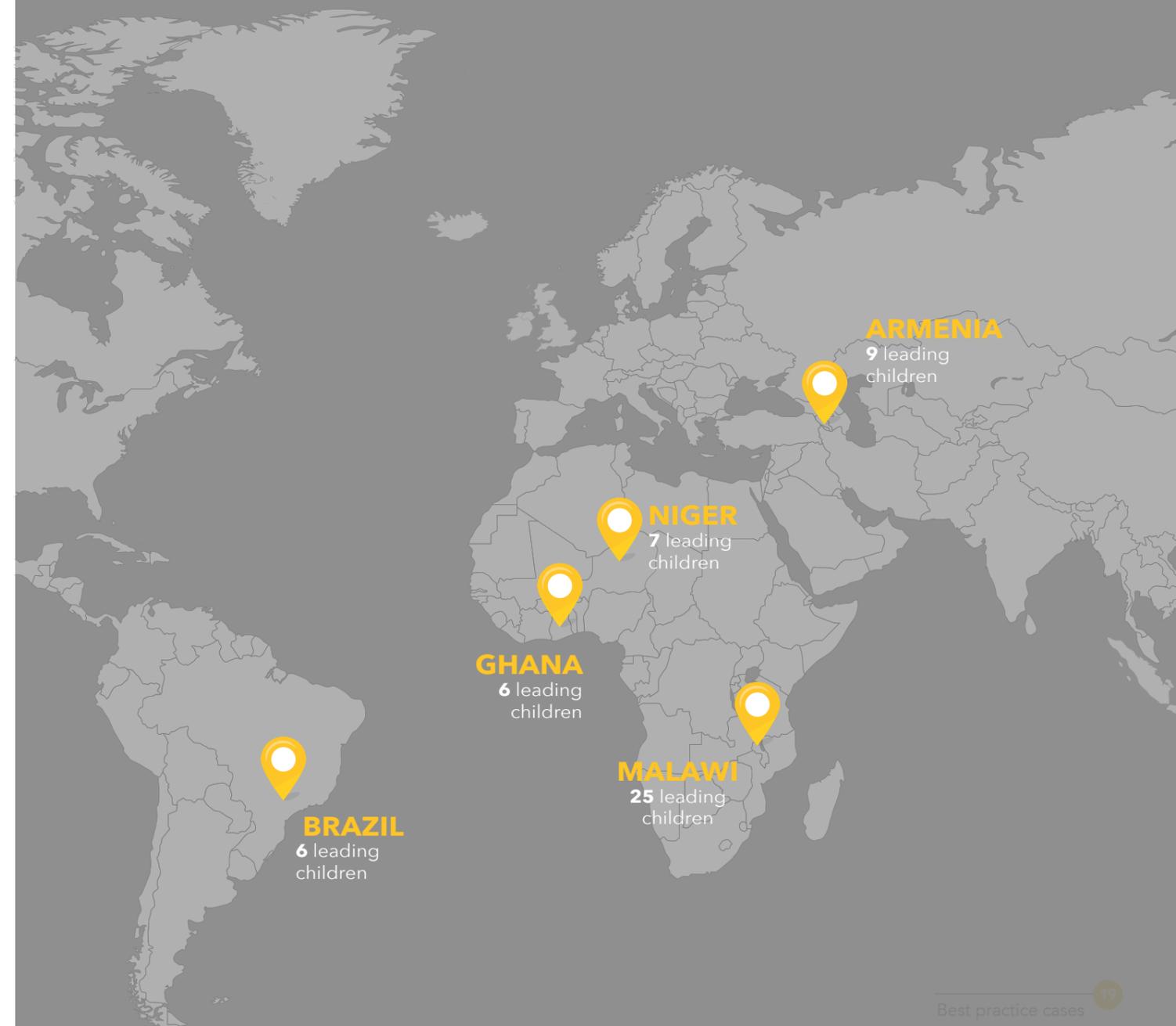
Role of the supporting adults

The Sombor Education Center played a crucial role in supporting the efforts of the group of children. In addition, the group sought help from religious leaders and local media outlets to raise awareness and gain support for their cause.

Ms. Ivana Barac, the main supporting adult, emphasized the importance of the project for the children, as it motivated them to become active members of the community and demonstrated their ability to independently organize a project. "It has been a path of learning for children, but also for adults (...) Let the children come up with an idea and implement it and you will be surprised with the results!"

The project also encouraged the children to engage in future initiatives promoting solidarity and the recognition of our common humanity.

SOLUTIONS AWARDED IN 2022





Children from the leading group helping during the harvesting process

CHILDREN PUTTING THEMSELVES IN OTHER'S SHOES

 Location:	Yerevan, Armenia
 Leading team:	9 children aged 6 to 16
 Composition of the group:	5 girls and 4 boys, who have lost their relatives during the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.
 Project's objectives:	To provide children living in poverty with care-packages containing harvested products, winter gloves, and promote community engagement among children affected by the conflict in Armenia.
 Supporting organization:	Home of the Sun
 Micro-grant received:	500 USD

In an effort to support families living in poverty in the village of Voskevaz, 40 km from Yerevan, the group of children decided to harvest fruits and vegetables from local gardens, and transform them into jams, sauces, and dried fruits. The children went door by door explaining their idea to the villagers, ultimately securing six farmhouses willing to allow them access to their gardens for the harvesting process.

Over the course of three days, the children harvested fruits and vegetables, and prepared jams, sauces, and cookies. After the harvest was complete, the group of children prepared care-packages containing the preserved food, baked cookies, winter gloves, and socks. They delivered these packages to families both in Voskevaz and on the outskirts of Yerevan. Through this project, the children were able to gain empathy for those less fortunate than themselves and make a meaningful impact in their community.



Role of the supporting adults

The children were greatly assisted by Mrs. Naire Poghosyan-Melkonyan, who is the founder and coordinator of a group called Home of the Sun. The group brings together families affected by the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, including many children who have lost their fathers in the war.

Mrs. Naire Poghosyan-Melkonyan played a fundamental role in initiating and supporting the children's project including support during the application process and with language barriers as most of the children involved do not speak English.

"I understood that each child has her/his own attitude to the project. I understood that I should estimate their fresh mind. They can turn the life in unexpected way.", expressed Mrs. Poghosyan-Melkonyan.

"It was wonderful speaking with many families, speaking to less privileged children, and understanding their points of view. The [beneficiary] children were very excited too".

– Arshak, young changemaker aged 16

CHILDREN REALIZING THEIR POWER TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE

 Location:	Sao Paulo, Brazil
 Leading team:	6 children aged 15 to 17
 Composition of the group:	Children from various Christian denominations supported by an organization with Jewish roots.
 Project's objectives:	To support an impoverished community, in the outskirts of Sao Paulo, affected by the lack of a proper sewage system to dispose of wastewater.
 Supporting organization:	Lar das Crianças
 Micro-grant received:	1,500 USD

The group of children realized that the neighborhood of Vila Marcelo, located 32 kilometers south of the center of Sao Paulo city, was heavily affected by the lack of a proper pipeline system to discard wastewater. The waste was being dumped directly into a small stream that runs along the streets, causing detrimental effects on the surrounding community. Children, especially those who play in close proximity to the area, were at an increased risk of exposure to contaminated water.

The children decided to coordinate the construction of a small-scale sewage system to beneficiate five houses in the community. The children also aimed to hold awareness sessions to sensitize the neighbors on improved sanitation, including management of household waste.

To initiate the project, the children organized a community meeting to gain insights into the issue by hearing about the constraints of people in the neighborhood. They created informative materials such as flyers and social media accounts to spread awareness of their group and their project. The children held various meetings with local authorities, city council members, district administrators, and representatives from the private sector to garner support and learn about the necessary steps to get the pipeline built.

After realizing that local regulations would make it challenging to construct a pipeline in the community in the short term, the children collectively decided to change their approach and invest the grant to assemble 80 basic need packages for the area's families. These packages were distributed in June 2023 during an event in the neighborhood where the children seized the opportunity to raise awareness about the needs of the community and the importance of properly manage household waste.

“The project made us gain experience, responsibility, and a sense of citizenship.”

– Moabe, young changemaker aged 16

“Having talked to local authorities has been rich and powerful for them [the children] to understand that they can occupy these spaces (...).”

– Mrs. Bruna Serena Casciano, supporting adult.

Role of the supporting adults

The group of children is enrolled in an after-school program provided by the organization Lar das Crianças, which offers vulnerable children access to academic and extracurricular activities. The organization's staff provided guidance and support to the children in structuring their project and submitting it. Ms. Bruna Serena Casciano, the lead teacher in charge of the group, played a vital role in motivating and supporting the children throughout the project, while maintaining a hands-off approach to preserve the child-led nature of the initiative.

In March 2023, Mrs. Casciano decided to leave the organization to pursue other professional endeavors. Despite her departure, her unwavering commitment and drive to the children's group led her to continue supporting their project until its completion.



Young changemakers during their visit to local authorities

“SOCIETY IS NOT READY TO PERCEIVE THE POWER THAT CHILDREN HAVE”

The Story from Brazil

Moabe and Maria Eduarda are two inspiring 16-year-old coordinators of an ambitious project that seeks to build a basic sewage system in an impoverished neighborhood in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Along with a group of four other children, they are committed to improve the quality of life of people in the neighborhood.

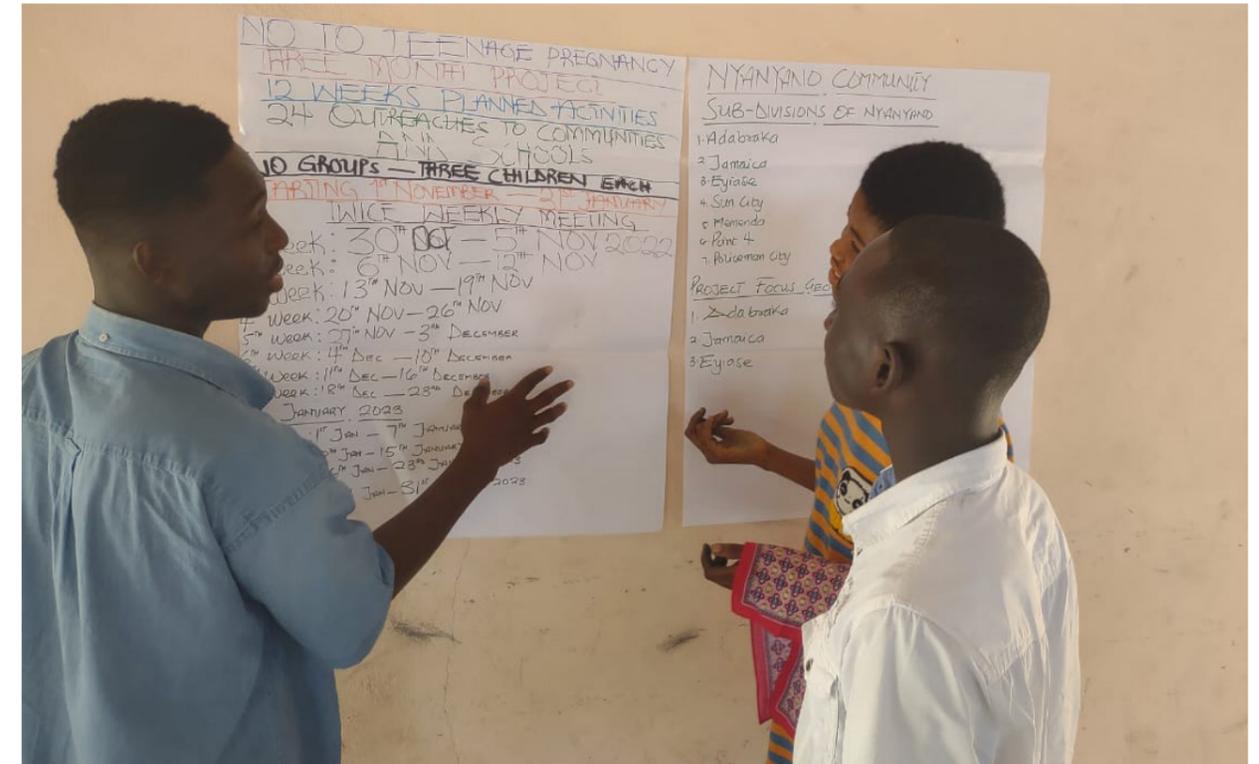
In 2022, the group was awarded with 1500 USD from the Children’s Solutions Lab to implement their idea, but after a visit to the area they realized: “It wasn’t going to be super easy as we first thought”, Maria Eduarda recalls.

The first challenge they encountered was dealing with bureaucracy and getting permission from the authorities to build in the area. The group had to embark on a long and challenging advocacy journey to mobilize policymakers and authorities to support their cause. “We couldn’t just build something there without their permission and support”, says Maria Eduarda.

Their teacher, Mrs. Bruna Serena, comments that the project has been significant for the children in helping them understand how they can address complex social issues and how solutions are not always easy to implement.

Through multiple meetings and engagements with city council members, district administrators, and private sector partners, the children continued to push forward with their project. But Moabe admits it has been disappointing to realize that despite welcoming them in their offices, local authorities were not always open to listen to children and treat them as equals. “Because we are young, they don’t respect us”, says Moabe. “They even think we come with an agenda or that we are sent by another politician”.

While Moabe admits this has been an enriching but challenging experience, Bruna sees it as an opportunity for growth. According to her, “the value of this project is that young people have been very much engaged (...) Society is not ready to perceive the power that children have”, Bruna says “but the project has been very enriching for them to realize that people must take children seriously”.



Young changemakers planning their outreach sessions to raise awareness on early pregnancy

CHILDREN ADDRESSING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN THEIR COMMUNITY

 Location:	Accra, Ghana
 Leading team:	6 children aged 12 to 17
 Composition of the group:	2 Muslim children and 4 from different Christian denominations, coming from three ethnic groups
 Project’s objectives:	To raise awareness on the issue of early pregnancy in a poverty-stricken fishing community in Ghana through community outreach sessions.
 Supporting organization:	Cheerful Hearts Foundation
 Micro-grant received:	500 USD

The group of children in Ghana identified that the high incidence of early pregnancy and school dropout, particularly among female students, in the fishing community where they reside, is a result of the widespread poverty that prevails.

The group of children identified that the fishing community where they live was heavily affected by high incidence of early pregnancy and school dropout, particularly among female students, as a result of widespread poverty.

The group decided to raise awareness about the issue of early pregnancy and its impact on girls' education by conducting outreach sessions on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) among community members.

The children conducted 24 sessions in seven schools, as well as different localities in the fishing town for 12 consecutive weeks. They used educational posters and teaching materials that covered a range of topics related to early and teenage pregnancy, including its

causes, effects, and prevention strategies, and emphasizing the importance of access to quality education and retention in school for all children.

The project successfully concluded by the end of 2022, and the children have since graduated from junior to senior high school.

Role of the supporting adults

The group of children received support from the local organization, Cheerful Hearts Foundation, with Mr. Bright Fiatsi serving as their primary adult supporter. He played an instrumental role in helping the children structure their project, prepare for outreach sessions, and organize visits to schools. Mr. Fiatsi also provided motivational support, encouraging the children to persevere, and overcome the challenges they faced in raising such a sensitive topic within the community.



"I used to feel shy to talk to people so when we go out, I always want my other friends to do it instead of me, but after some time I became confident, and I can also speak to educate others."

– Kassim,
Young changemaker aged 14

"I CAN NOW BELIEVE IN CHILDREN" The Experience of Adults in Ghana

Mr. Bright Fiatsi has been working with children in Accra, Ghana since 2009 when he founded the non-profit organization Cheerful Hearts Foundation, which seeks to educate and empower rural citizens to stop child labor and trafficking.

Bright admits that, in the different programs he conducts, he has always avoided children addressing sensitive topics by themselves, such as teenage pregnancy and reproductive health rights, as these are considered adults-only topics. However, in 2022, when he proposed to a group of six children to prepare a project to apply for the Children's Solutions Lab, the group announced they wanted to conduct an awareness raising campaign on early pregnancy. "If not because the children themselves chose this topic, I wouldn't have done it", he confesses.

Though hesitant at first, Bright supported their initiative. The children applied and were awarded a small fund of 500 USD to visit schools and the shores of a fishing community to discuss the impacts that early pregnancy can have on girls' futures. Their campaign also aimed to encourage young mothers to return to school.

After conducting 24 successful outreach sessions, solely led by children, Bright admits it was a mistake to think that children couldn't handle certain topics. "What I have learned is that I have been wrong all this time, I can now believe in children, if they want to do something they can really do it."

In some of the outreach sessions, adults in the community resisted the sensitive topic and even questioned the children for addressing this issue. However, with the support of adults in the field, the children successfully conducted all sessions, promoting deep reflections among dozens of adults and over 200 children.

The project concluded by the end of 2022 after three months of implementation, bringing benefits not only to the community but to the children leading it. Bright reported that conducting these sessions has helped build the children's self-assurance. "The [leading] children are now more confident to speak up and they better understand the issues they are talking about. And girls now know they can come back to school [after having a baby]".



Children involved in the project planting seeds to grow tree seedlings

PLANTING SEEDS OF EDUCATION FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

 Location:	Lilongwe, Malawi
 Leading team:	25 children aged 10 to 14
 Composition of the group:	Christian and Muslim children from four different ethnic groups (Chewa, Yao, Tumbuka and lomwe)
 Project's objectives:	To tackle child poverty through provision of education and school materials to orphaned and vulnerable children by producing and selling tree seedlings.
 Supporting organization:	Sparrows Girls Foundation
 Micro-grant received:	1,500 USD

A group of children from a primary school in the capital city of Malawi, Lilongwe, identified alarmingly high levels of school dropouts among orphaned and vulnerable children in their neighborhood. The group decided to support 25 of these children with school materials through a mobile library and motivate them to return to school through reading and writing sessions.

As a means of establishing the mobile library, the children decided to invest the grant they received to generate income through seedling cultivation and sales. They aimed to use the funds raised to cover operating costs for the library and purchase educational supplies.

The group purchased over 2000 seedlings and worked together to plant them and establish a tree nursery. Following planting, the children divided responsibilities with a caretaker and rotated watering and maintaining the garden. In March of 2023, their project was severely impacted by Tropical Cyclone Freddy, which

caused significant damage and resulted in the loss of almost 900 seedlings. Despite this setback, the children persisted and managed to sell 720 seedlings. They also donated the remaining seedlings to various organizations.

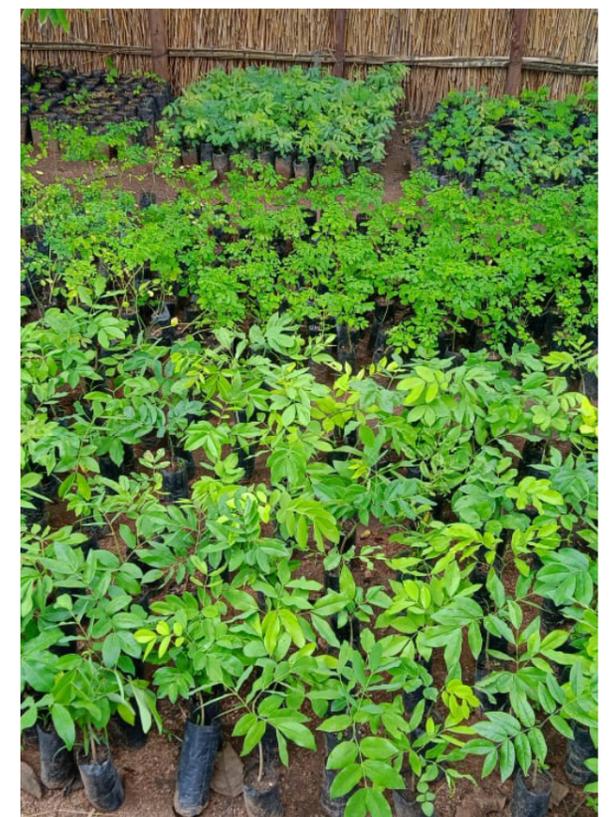
The children organized sensitization meetings in their school to raise awareness on the effects of school dropouts and the importance of children staying at school. They also conducted reading sessions to motivate vulnerable children to return to school.

Role of the supporting adults

The group was supported by the local organization Sparrow Girls foundation, they provided the space for the creation of the garden and for the children to conduct the reading and writing sessions.



Children during the reading sessions



Seedlings planted by the children

CHILDREN LEADING THE FIGHT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

 Location:	Niamey, Niger
 Leading team:	7 children aged 12 to 17
 Composition of the group:	Muslim and Christian children from four different ethnic groups
 Project's objectives:	To construct a bathroom for girls in the school to prevent them from missing classes due to the lack of proper facilities while raising awareness about menstrual hygiene.
 Supporting organization:	Secondary education complex CES/RD1
 Micro-grant received:	2,000 USD

The group of children are part of a student body of almost 3,000 that attends one of the oldest and largest public schools in the capital city of Niger, Niamey, where girls make up nearly 60% of the student population.

Through their grant application, the group of children exposed an alarming situation at their school – there was only one restroom designated for male students, leaving female students with no facilities whatsoever.

Girls were forced to wait for extended periods or seek alternative locations when they need to go to a bathroom, a situation that became more complex during their menstrual cycles. Managing menstrual hygiene was challenging, leading to regular missed classes. This was not only inhibiting their academic growth but also creating a gender education gap in the school.

Seeking to improve the conditions for their female peers, the children decided to construct a bathroom within the school and raise awareness of the challenges girls face.

"When I was speaking to the leaders on behalf of the girls, I spoke my heart as I explained the situation of the girls at school – how it was really inconvenient to go home to use the bathroom."

– Nadia, young changemaker aged 17

They put on skits for teachers and parents to illustrate these difficulties and visited local authorities in an effort to raise more funds for their project.

Through their remarkable resilience and relentless persistence, the children overcame several obstacles, including a lack of support from authorities. In May 2023, they finally succeeded in building a fully functioning bathroom for female students within the school.

Role of the supporting adults

The group of children are part of an English Club from their school coordinated by their teacher Mr. Kadri Hima. He played a vital role in supporting the children remaining resilient through innumerable setbacks and obstacles during the implementation of the project, especially regarding the lack of support they received from authorities and the difficulties in aligning their budget to their requirements.

"All the difficulties we had have made us stronger and motivated to continue our noble fight for the emancipation of girls in Niger (...) we wanted to end the taboo around menstruation in our community. People don't talk to their daughters, teachers don't talk about it in class, and that creates a lot of taboo."

– Mr. Kadri Hima, supporting adult.



The leading group of children discussing their project

"OUR FIGHT IS FAR FROM OVER" Words of a Young Leader in Niger

Our project focused on a particularly disabling problem for young girls in Niger. Menstrual hygiene has long been a taboo subject in our society. No one talks about it, and those who do are quickly put down as ill-educated. Only the unruly (according to our society's values) dare to talk about gender issues.

Young girls receive no sexual education, either in the family or in society. Those who have just experienced menstruation are faced with difficulties; they are ill-prepared, with little or no information on this subject long considered taboo in Niger society. Indeed, there is no education either at home or at school about menstruation.

Every year, thousands of girls drop out of school for reasons directly or indirectly linked to menstruation.

It was in this context of taboo, intimidation and threats that our project was born. It wasn't easy at all, but we were able to raise awareness and break the taboo with over 250 women (political leaders, opinion leaders, teachers and nuns), and built a brand-new, fully-equipped toilet, enabling hundreds of girls to go to school with dignity.

The road to change is mined and the mine-clearers are few and far between, but our fight is far from over.

Nadia, 17

CONCLUSIONS



Children in Armenia preparing products for donation

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN

The Children's Solutions Lab is founded upon the principles of creating meaningful, safe and appropriate child participation, opportunities and spaces. The process encourages children to lead a project and all its stages, from identifying the root causes of child poverty within their community, to the design of a solution and its implementation. The pedagogical approach behind the CSL process places intrinsic value on children's views as engaged and informed citizens that contribute to democratic, diverse and more peaceful societies. It empowers children to be decision-makers and active agents of transformation as appropriate for their age and evolving capacities.

All groups of children reported that they faced difficulties during the implementation of their solutions. Nonetheless, the program provided them with the chance to approach problems

creatively and critically as a team. All groups noted increased self-confidence among the children leading the projects and they cultivate crucial skills such as critical and creative thinking, empathy, and responsibility. These values extend beyond the individuals involved and ultimately benefit the community as a whole.

"The [CSL] program gives children autonomy and power of action. I had never seen a program like this, and I am really amazed that through it, children can see themselves as protagonists of social change."

Mrs. Bruna Serena Casciano,
supporting adult from Brazil (2022)

BENEFITS FOR ADULTS

The organizations and supportive adults play a vital role in enabling children to implement their CSL solutions. Embracing a child-led approach challenges traditional learning dynamics where adults are seen as sole bearers of knowledge and children as passive learners. This perspective shift may be new for some organizations, altering how they engage and perceive children.

In the second round of the CSL in 2022, all adults involved in supporting the children's groups were requested to complete the Arigatou International course on child participation before the beginning of the projects. This 4-hour online course equips adults with resources and practical recommendations for engaging with children in a respectful, safe, and meaningful ways. The course emphasizes a rights-based approach to child participation.

Visit our website to learn more about our child participation free course



After the implementation of the projects, adults acknowledged that collaborating with children's groups was an empowering experience for themselves too, requiring constant awareness of their role as enablers and supporters rather than leaders or idea imposers. The child-led framework emphasizes children taking on leadership roles while providing them with opportunities, informed decision-making, and necessary support for project implementation.

Additionally, the CSL process facilitated networking opportunities for supporting adults and their organizations, not limited to the CSL 2020 timeframe. It equipped them with tools and experience applicable to future endeavors, boosting their confidence and credibility in supporting child-led innovations.

"They [children] can think outside the box much more imaginatively than adults, and once given the time and space to express and their ideas, they can come up with amazing solutions."

Ms. Deepa Kumar, supporting adult from India (2020)

CHALLENGES

As leaders and project managers of their own solutions, the children, with the support of adults, had to face and respond to challenges that arose along the way, particularly when addressing rooted cultural norms.

In some cases, community members were unaccustomed to viewing children as sources of wisdom. In order to bridge this gap, the children had to employ their creativity to effectively communicate with their intended audience. The implementation by the children's group in Kenya in 2020 exemplified this adaptability, as they needed to think of ways to engage in constructive dialogue with community members around cultural norms, they cleverly used art, specifically a dramatic performance, to create a platform for exploring new perspectives and stimulating alternative ways of thinking.

In 2022, the children's group in Ghana encountered similar obstacles when addressing the sensitive topic of early pregnancy, as certain members of their community were uneasy with children taking the lead in discussing this issue. In this context, the guidance provided by the adults supporting the group played a crucial role in maintaining the children's motivation and confidence throughout their project.

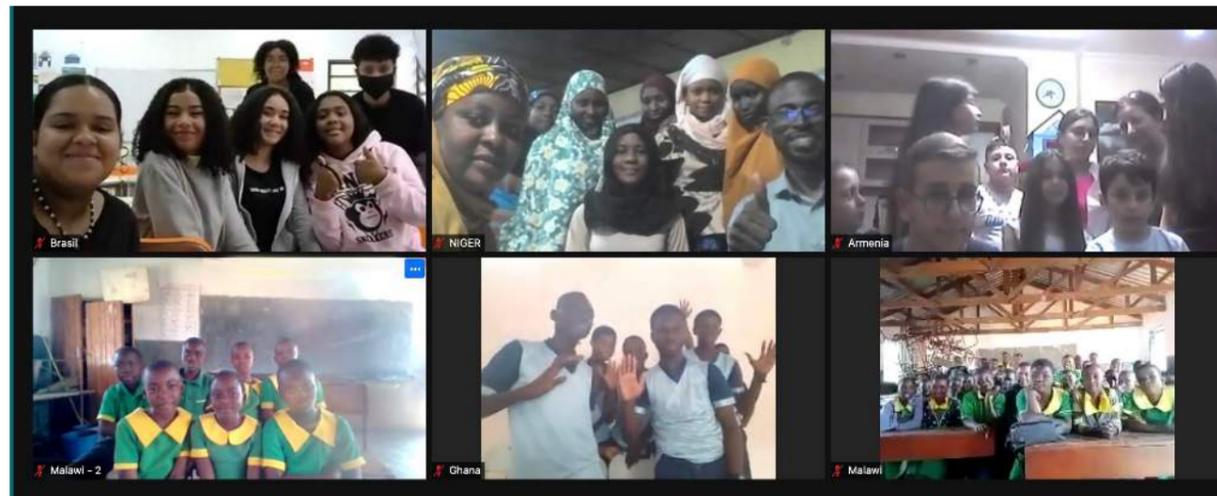
Children additionally encountered challenges in being regarded as equals by local authorities in their countries and receiving the due seriousness from them. In 2022, children in Niger faced obstacles in gaining the support of authorities for the construction of a crucial bathroom facility in their school. They reported encountering barriers deliberately imposed by

the authorities which consequently delayed the implementation of their project. The group in Brazil was received by local authorities in their offices, but children sensed a lack of genuine respect or willingness to hear their demands. These situations highlight the need for enhanced support to empower children implementing projects, enabling them to overcome setbacks resulting from a lack of backing from authorities or the community.

Children also encountered external challenges such as violence, insecurity, resource scarcity, and even climate change. In 2020, the community garden tended by children in Peru suffered from prolonged drought, while in 2022, a cyclone destroyed the seedlings planted by children in Ghana.

Additionally, The CSL groups of 2020-2021 encountered notable challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. Elements of their project had to be postponed and health and safety measures affected implementation. These challenges required the children's groups to be flexible, adaptable, and creative in their solutions to ensure that their work was not compromised and that they could meet their objectives.

Overall, the CSL process provided a supportive environment in which children, with adult guidance, could confront challenges and devise innovative solutions, adapting and shaping their projects to fit the evolving circumstances. Through the CSL, children cultivated resilience, responsibility, and critical thinking skills within a safe and respectful learning environment, as they responded to real-life challenges and understood the consequences of their choices.



Groups of children awarded in 2022 during an online meeting organized for them to know each other and present their projects

