ANNUAL REPORT

2025



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FOREWORD

2025 has been a year of strengthening our foundations, refining how we work, and learning quickly from the realities around us. Joining Global Fund for Children as our new fiscal host has genuinely shifted what feels possible. They welcomed our small team with real openness and treated us as partners from day one. They've been an outstanding collaborator, grounded in the belief that youth leadership, equity, and wellbeing belong at the heart of environmental work.

Fundraising has been one of our biggest tests this year. The US AID cuts sent shockwaves across our sector, particularly for grassroots, Global South, and youth-led organisations. Donors funded less, moved slower, and became more risk-averse. For a project built to back young environmental leaders early, this has been challenging. But it also made the support we did receive feel even more meaningful. Thank you to every funder who believed in our work. Funding youth is not 'high risk,' it is 'high potential', and your belief continues to prove that.

This year, demand for the Iris Prize grew again: 1,552 applications from 111 countries. Since we began in 2022, interest has grown eightfold - and yet we can still only fund a fraction of what we see. In 2025, we were only able to fund 0.6% of eligible applicants. That isn't because the ideas aren't strong. It's because the funding landscape still isn't set up to reach young leaders early, when backing them can change everything. The wider picture is just as stark with only 0.96% of grants from major climate foundations support youth-led climate efforts.

We saw that clearly through the biodiversity research cohort this year (the full report will launch in 2026). Across youth-led biodiversity initiatives, 85% of leaders told us they do not have access to adequate funding. Being a first-time funder means backing potential, not perfection. It means flexible funding, relationship-based support, and trust - because that is what young leaders tell us they need most. Sometimes the impact looks visible: a wetland restored, a waste system built, a species protected. And sometimes it's quieter, but just as important: supporting a young leader to stay on track through a hard moment - like helping someone cover the last stretch of university costs when a crop failure threatened their ability to keep studying and leading their project. Those are the moments when funding becomes the difference between a project stalling and a leader staying in the work. Behind every application is a huge amount of care and behind every decision is the same care. Our Advisory Panel and team read hundreds of submissions, come together to discuss them, hold the nuance, and make thoughtful decisions as a collective.

In the pages ahead, you'll see how our Theory of Change came to life in 2025 through youth-led action, shared leadership and real stories of young restoration stewards protecting nature in their communities.

Millie Edwards Director of The Iris Project

ABOUT THE IRIS PROJECT

The Iris Project is an organisation that invests in young people driving environmental action. Focused primarily in the Global South, we identify, fund, and amplify youth-led initiatives tackling the planet's most urgent challenges, from protecting biodiversity to reducing waste and regenerating ecosystems. We provide flexible funding, mentorship, and networks so young leaders can scale their impact and inspire change. Our Theory of Change is built on three core pillars:

ENABLE

We equip youth-led projects with the flexible funding, mentorship, and resources they need to grow. By strengthening their capacity, confidence, and resilience, young leaders can deliver lasting environmental impact in their communities.

EMPOWER

We nurture leadership. From our advisory panel to our judging processes, youth - often alumni - hold real decision-making power. This builds their confidence and visibility while shaping The Iris Project from the inside out and nurturing strong leadership skills.

ADVOCATE

We amplify youth voices on the global stage and engage funders to shift how resources flow. By showcasing youth-led solutions, we influence narratives, philanthropy, and policy to recognise young people as environmental leaders.



Project Lawud, Seed Prize 2025

2025 IN NUMBERS: WHAT WE DELIVERED

These numbers show the outputs of our core activities - the building blocks of our Theory of Change. They represent what The Iris Project delivered in 2025, and lay the foundation for the outcomes and impact you'll read about later in this report



40+ tonnes of organic waste diverted from landfills through circular waste systems



Andean flamingos **returning to restored wetlands** in Bolivia!



2,350 students can now charge phones and small devices at school for free, every day - **with clean power.**

APPLICATION STATS

5,006 completed our eligibility quiz

1,552 full applications received across **111** countries

70% met our eligibility criteria

9 projects funded in 2025

THAT'S 28 PROJECTS FUNDED SINCE 2022.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

300+ beehives established

80% increase in bee population

2 million bees added



PRIZE WINNER PIPELINE

- **90% of winners** said that the IP was their first ever external grant
- **100% of winners** still active after 24 months
- **100% of winners** received multi-year funding

$337,186 USD

£244,621 GBP

invested directly in youth-led projects through grants, stipends & wraparound support (mentorship, capacity-building, storytelling and wellbeing/safety support)



Theory Of Change

Young people are driving environmental action, yet most lack the flexible funding, mentoring, and networks that would allow their work to grow. When youth are **trusted with long-term support, their impact expands** far beyond a single project.

ACTIVITIES

Direct Support

- **Prize funding:** flexible grants
- **Peer-mentoring & support:** fundraising, media & communications, monitoring & evaluation, risk & security.

Visibility & Networks

- **Storytelling:** media & commentary opportunities.
- **Global community:** opportunity sharing & connections to trusted organisations & donors.

Youth Governance

- **Youth Advisory Panel & youth-led team:** decision making & strategy development.
- **Feedback loops:** regular check-ins, surveys & alumni input.

Influence & Learning

- **Funder engagement:** research & convenings that influence philanthropic practice toward youth-led funding.
- **Learning to action:** evidence & case studies feeding programme design.

OUTPUTS

Youth-led initiatives - often the first time they've been recognised or resourced - are discovered and elevated.

Grantees receive holistic wraparound support that strengthens their ability to create impact.

Visibility and credibility gained through documentary films, photography, social media, and media coverage.

Peer connections and regular access to global opportunities.

Youth leadership is embedded across the community and judging processses, so decisions reflect young leaders' priorities.

Feedback, evaluations and annual reports shape programme improvements.

Young people and funders co-create learning spaces that reimagine how resources flow to youth-led work.

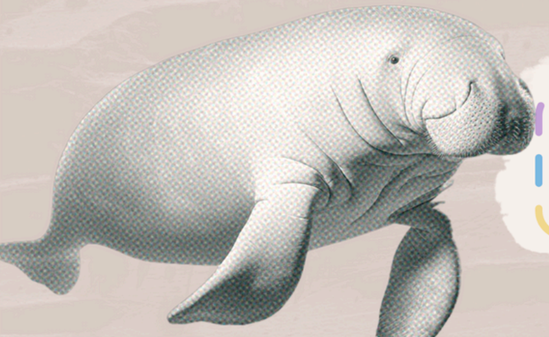
All applicants equipped with fundraising resources to unlock funding beyond IP.

OUTCOMES

Empower young people move from participants to decision-makers, building confidence, visibility, and influence within The Iris Project and beyond.

Enable youth leaders progress from early-stage projects to reliable delivery, safer operations, stronger networks, and securing follow-on funding to sustain and grow community impact.

Advocate previously overlooked youth-led solutions gain legitimacy, amplify their narratives, and begin shaping philanthropic and policy agendas.



IMPACT GOAL

A global community of motivated, confident, and resilient young leaders are protecting and restoring nature while influencing philanthropy and policy to better support youth-led solutions.



OUR **GLOBAL** REACH

28 projects across **21 different countries**

























CELEBRATING THE IRIS PRIZE 2025 WINNERS!

This year's winners and runners-up reflect something we see again and again: young people aren't building change alone. They're organising in collectives, collaborating across communities, and leading in ways that don't always look like a single figurehead at the front. Funding systems often look for a named individual to lead with, but youth leadership is frequently shared, relational, and non-hierarchical. We want our approach to reflect that reality.



$15,000 USD GRANT
Awarded for an established project, **with the potential to replicate and scale.**
16 - 24 years old

$10,000 USD GRANT
Awarded for an existing project, **established on a small scale**.
16 - 24 years old

$5,000 USD GRANT
Awarded for a **new idea**, not yet established.
14 - 24 years old

BREATHE MONGOLIA

Enkhuun, Alimaa, Bat-Enerelt, Tuguldur, Temuulen, and Yesulen





About

Breathe Mongolia is an international community of changemakers working to end Mongolia's air pollution crisis through a combination of community-based education, political advocacy, and collaborative solution-building - including ensuring greater policy alignment between the climate change and clean air sectors. Their core belief is that everyone deserves access to clean air and a healthy environment, and that if individuals are better informed, they will be more prepared to protect themselves and take a stand on issues that affect them.



Funds – $15,000 USD

This grant will help Breathe Mongolia deepen their public education work on air pollution and climate change and strengthen their ability to influence decision-makers. Building on their role in bringing civil society recommendations into national conversations, the team will continue to make communities' voices heard beyond the capital, support emerging policy change, and expand their work across Mongolia and Central Asia.

FROM THE JUDGES

"This project goes beyond technical fixes to **reveal the deeper injustices driving air pollution, using powerful storytelling and policy advocacy to push for systemic change**. Its **intersectional approach** feels both bold and necessary, especially in a context where communities are often left out of the conversation."

MENTORS



Alyssa



Nii Noi





“

We’ll help more Mongolians become agents of change in their communities, armed with knowledge and determined to protect their future. And if we succeed, cleaner air will return, protecting what matters most: our health, our loved ones, and the land we share.

VIAJE AL MICROCOSMOS DE NUEVO LEON

Andrea, Alma, Eduardo, Lizeth, Pamela, Susana, Marbet, Sahí, and Luis





About

Viaje al Microcosmos in Mexico, runners-up for last year's Stem Prize, return this year as the 2025 Stem Prize winners - a testament to the strength and momentum of their work. Their project is reconnecting the City of Monterrey with its river by transforming it into a living laboratory and storybook. Since 2021, more than 600 citizen scientists have helped increase the number of documented species from 781 to 1,126 - including emblematic and protected species such as the monarch butterfly, American beaver, and spiny soft-shell turtle. Many of these species were previously missing from official records. Their discoveries now strengthen legal petitions for riparian protection and ecological restoration, giving the river and its surrounding habitat a stronger voice in policy decisions.

Funds – $10,000 USD

With this grant, Viaje al Microcosmos will train a new generation of River Stewards, students who will explore, monitor, and advocate for the Santa Catarina River, expanding their work beyond the city centre. Together, they will build open-access knowledge to inform ecological restoration and strengthen community advocacy, while turning their findings into illustrated guides and community exhibits that make the health of the river visible, accessible, and deeply personal.

FROM THE JUDGES

"I think this idea is beautiful and holds so much potential. I really value how you are connecting people with nature. **It creates a powerful foundation for systemic change. The more allies you bring in, the stronger your platform becomes** for influencing policy."

MENTORS



Sofía



Steve







“

Together, we build campaigns for legal protection, restoration, and long-term stewardship by communities. This ensures the river’s future is shaped not by neglect, but by care, imagination, and justice.

PROJECT LAWUD

Christian, Diofel, Patrick, Honelyn, and Lance





About

This year's Seed Prize will support the Project Lawud team, in the Philippines, as they turn their idea into a conservation initiative in the Sarangani Bay Protected Seascape (SBPS). Their vision is simple but powerful: dugong conservation should be scientific, participatory, and rooted in the people who know the ocean best. Over the coming year, the team will collaborate with the local fishing community and aspiring marine scientists to develop the skills necessary for long-term conservation. Through interviews, drone surveys, and hands-on monitoring activities, community members will learn technical tools while shaping the future of dugong protection in their own waters. By investing in local leadership, Project Lawud hopes to build a model where conservation is done not for communities, but with them.

Funds – $5,000 USD

The grant will help Project Lawud grow its idea across six coastal communities in Sarangani Bay - mapping dugong sightings, training young marine biologists, and running awareness campaigns to strengthen protection of this critical habitat. The data collected will feed directly into marine spatial planning and conservation decisions in SBPS, identifying dugong hotspots and the pressures they face from fishing, tourism and coastal development.

MENTORS



Javie



Sumarni



FROM THE JUDGES

"An outstanding, interdisciplinary approach to dugong conservation-blending ecological research, community knowledge, and advocacy to protect a critically endangered species in one of its last habitats in the Philippines. With strong early partnerships, technical readiness, and a respectful integration strategy, **this project has high potential for environmental and policy impact. It can become a model for community-driven marine conservation** across the region."



“

From this small starting point, we hope to build something lasting. A true partnership between marine science, fishing communities and dugongs, rooted in respect, knowledge, and care.

CELEBRATING 2025 RUNNER-UPS



Smartel Nigeria

Smartel has developed innovative hydroponic systems in response to soil erosion and degradation. These systems enable farmers to grow crops without soil or synthetic fertilisers, and with 90% less water, all while restoring the environment.



Guerrilla Verde Paraguay

Guerrilla Verde aims to reconnect people with nature by fostering community and family gardens. The project involves cultivating medicinal and aromatic plants, native flowers, and succulents, aiming to generate sustainable income through the creation of agroecological nurseries.



Regesoil Uganda

Regesoil aims to address the environmental and agricultural challenges of the Nakivale refugee settlement. Through vermicomposting, they transform food waste into organic fertiliser, breaking down waste into nutrient-rich compost.



The Waste Gobbler Ghana

The Waste Gobbler addresses pollution in a heavily affected river in Accra by collecting waste with machines and floating barricades and working with partners to ensure its proper disposal.



Oasis Creative Lab Tunisia

Oasis Creative Lab aims to establish a community-based feminist environmental creative space that documents Gafsa's climate transformations, focusing on the narratives of women and youth.



Confidential Peru

This project aims to establish safe training spaces for primarily indigenous and rural youth, fostering their leadership in protecting water and forests from illegal aquifer mining.



WHAT WE DELIVERED IN 2025

“This year, I’ve felt more convinced than ever that investing in youth isn’t a nice-to-have - it’s essential. The Iris Project pairs ambition with care, and funding with trust. We’ve seen runners-up return as winners and grantees step into advisory roles - proof The Iris Prize isn’t a one-off grant, but a leadership ecosystem. Demand keeps growing far beyond what we can fund, yet the team keeps finding inventive ways to reach and resource more young leaders. And with every wetland regenerated, coastline restored, and species protected, it’s clear: back youth early and the impact multiplies.”

Ben Goldsmith
Founder of The Iris Project & Iris’ Father



Steve visiting his mentee Aruna's project as a part of The Iris Project's bespoke capacity building offer, Stem Prize 2024

THE IRIS PRIZE 2025

This year, we made an intentional shift in how we run The Iris Prize. We shortened the application window from two months to six weeks to give our team and advisors more time for review, interviews, and due diligence. In spite of shortening this window, applications increased from **1,037 in 2024** to **1,552 in 2025**, a clear reminder of two things: **youth-led environmental work is happening everywhere**, and **far too little funding is reaching it**.

Improving access and support

To make the process more accessible, we introduced new application guidance through social media reels, held Q&A sessions across multiple time zones, and hosted them in English, Spanish, Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Nepali and Portuguese. These changes helped applicants understand what we look for and created space for questions that often go unasked in traditional funding processes.

Strengthening our selection approach

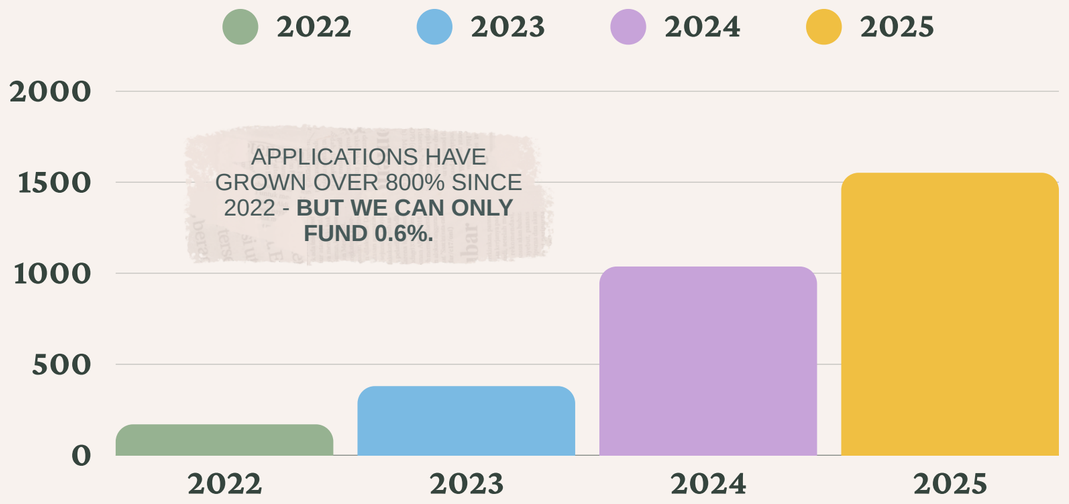
With such high demand comes a significant workload for our small team and advisors. Each person now reads up to 350 applications, using a shared scoring criteria. Shortlisting is done collectively, in four-person groups per prize category, using participatory decision-making. In 2025, we also changed how expert judges were brought into the process. Instead of sending them the shortlist alone, our team interviewed all 31 shortlisted applicants before judges' review. This allowed us to share more context, learn directly from the applicants, and provide judges with deeper insights.

Why don’t we automate the process

AI may play a helpful role in our processes in the future, but at this stage, we prioritise careful, human review. The qualities we look for - community connection, care, resilience, and lived experience - don’t always show up in metrics or summaries. Our advisors understand this deeply, which is why participatory selection continues to guide our decisions while we explore supportive tools with care.

Final decisions

After judges provide written feedback for each shortlisted project, our team and advisors come back together to make the final decisions. We review the shortlist to ensure that each winning cohort reflects gender, thematic, and geographic diversity, and that our choices align with the values we hold as a youth-led funder. What continues to come through in the applications is the creativity, brilliance, and urgency of young leaders protecting nature and biodiversity, often with almost no resources at all.



TOP COUNTRIES

Nigeria
118 APPLICATIONS

Kenya
175 APPLICATIONS

Uganda
136 APPLICATIONS

TOP THEMES

Education
143 APPLICATIONS



Sustainable Waste Management
141 APPLICATIONS



Trees & Reforestation
148 APPLICATIONS



THE JUDGING PANEL



Desmond Alugnoa

"The applicants understood that dreaming big is where the process begins. Limitations only hold you back if you let them stop you taking the first step."



Kate Rothschild



Elizabeth Watuti



Sam Bencheghib



Sofía Pastor-Parajeles



Dr Enric Sala



Aliza Ayaz

PROJECT INCUBATION: CAPACITY-BUILDING, MENTORSHIP & SUPPORT BEYOND THE FINANCIAL GRANT

Our capacity-building work is the foundation that surrounds every grant we make. We back young leaders because of their potential, then build the support around them based on what strengthens their leadership, their wellbeing, and their ability to grow in ways that feel realistic for their context. In 2025, that meant mentors working alongside grantees to shape next steps, and advisors leading monthly sessions on fundraising, safety and strategy. Capacity building works when it protects young people's time, adapts to their pace, and gives them tools to tell their story while they keep doing the work that matters.

Mentorship programme

- **One-to-one mentorship for winners:** Each winner is paired with two mentors - one with regional expertise and one with thematic experience - offering grounded, relevant guidance.
- **Group mentorship for runners-up:** Facilitated by two mentors, creating peer exchange and collective problem-solving.
- **Resourced knowledge exchange:** The Iris Project supports advisors to travel to meet their mentees and visit their projects, enabling deeper learning and stronger relationships.
- **Accessibility:** Mentorship is delivered in multiple languages, meeting grantees where they are.

Capacity building programmes

We invest in the scaffolding around young leaders so they can grow on their own terms. This includes personalised capacity-building, risk and security support through Open Briefing, communications and storytelling shaped with MakerChange Studio & Earth Minutes, media training with Forster and leadership development with CoalitionWILD. The support is designed to stretch skills, build resilience, and open doors to new networks, visibility, and funding partnerships.

STATS

- **9/10 - Average score** from prize winners reporting back regarding IP capacity-building support offerings.
- **100% of prize winners** reported increased confidence in fundraising.
- In the alumni survey, all respondents reported that the gains in their capacity, opportunities, and visibility would not have been possible without The Iris Project's support.



"Winning the prize and receiving support from The Iris Project has significantly boosted my confidence in applying for more grants. It validated my vision for Bangs Circular, enhanced my proposal-writing skills, and encouraged me to pursue additional funding opportunities to expand impact into more communities, to help scale production, and strengthen youth-led environmental and livelihood efforts in my community and beyond."

Aruna Bangura

Bangs Circular, 2024 Stem Prize Winner

CREATIVE CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMME

In collaboration with MakerChange

Our Climate Communications programme helps Iris Prize winners turn strong work on the ground into clear, compelling communications that reach funders, partners, and wider audiences. Prize winners are always offered this opportunity, and this year, for the first time, we were also able to include a runner-up.

We supported Chareco (2024 Seed Prize runner-up) with repeat funding alongside tailored communications support.



LOGO DESIGN

Guardianas del Estuario, 2024 Seed Prize Winner



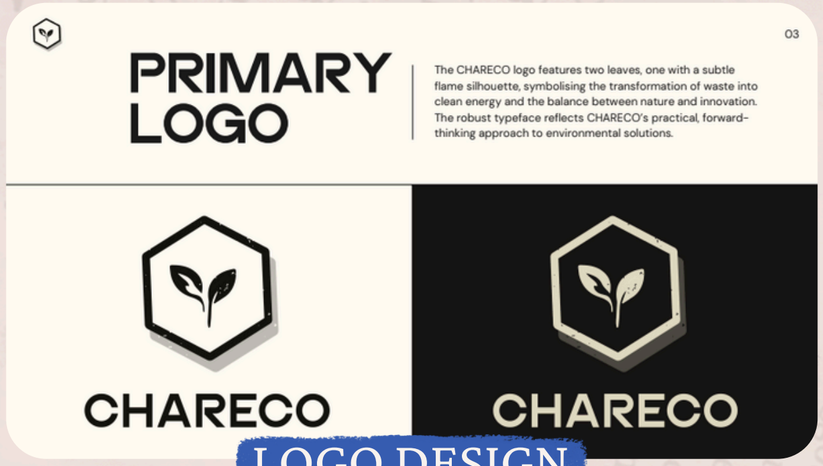
PRESENTATION SLIDES

Uru Uru Team, 2024 Iris Prize Winner



SOCIAL MEDIA ASSETS

Bangs Circular, 2023 Runner-up & 2024 Stem Prize Winner



LOGO DESIGN

Chareco, 2024 Seed Prize Runner-Up

YOUTH-LED TEAM & ADVISORY PANEL

Our advisory panel and youth team guide decision-making, shape our programmes, and ensure the project grows from within. In 2025, the panel was made up of seven youth leaders from the Global South who brought their lived experiences directly into selection, mentoring, and strategy. Advisory Panel members run on a two-year term to ensure as many young leaders as possible have the opportunity to influence The Iris Project and bring new perspectives into the community.

In October, we welcomed three new advisors while saying goodbye to Francisco and Shreya. We also welcomed Sophia as our new Senior Fundraising Associate, splitting her time 50/50 between The Iris Project and Global Fund for Children.



> Over the past two years, I had the privilege of supporting and mentoring a youth project in Central America for the very first time in the history of the organization, and of guiding six runner-up projects as the inaugural coordinator of the Runner-Up Programme. Watching these solutionists grow and scale their impact has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career so far.

Francisco Lara Fletes
Iris Project Advisor 2023-2025









YOUTH-LED TEAM & ADVISORY PANEL



Millie Edwards
Director



Anouk Delaprée
Communications Manager



Frances Storey
Project Manager



Ankica Sokolic
Ecosystem Coordinator



Sophia Vuksanovic
Senior Fundraising Associate



Steve Misati
Iris Project Advisor



Sumarni Laman
Iris Project Advisor



Alicia Amancio
Iris Project Advisor



Alyssa Kardos Loera
Iris Project Advisor



Nii Noi Kofi Omaboe
Iris Project Advisor



Nour Mansour
Iris Project Advisor



Sofía Pastor-Parajeles
Iris Project Advisor



Javie Barcinal
Iris Project Advisor

OUR FIRST IN-PERSON TEAM GATHERING

In April, our team met for the first time. Although we've worked together remotely for over two years, constraints on budget and travel meant we had never met. We recognised the need to connect and strengthen the way we work.

We met in Cape Town, based around an invitation we received to attend the Be The Earth South Africa Festival, a gathering centred on trust-based philanthropy, flow funding, and community-led approaches that align closely with our values. The festival was a brilliant starting point for our meet-up, a chance to listen, learn, and connect with South African changemakers leading transformational work.

This time together strengthened trust, clarified how we want to work, and reenergised us ahead of The Iris Prize 2025 review and the welcoming of our next cohort. Remote work allows The Iris Project to remain global, but meeting in person reminded us of the power of real-life connection, which deepens collaboration, fuels creativity, and reinforces the human relationships at the heart of our work.











ECOSYSTEM, RESOURCES & REIMAGINING YOUTH FUNDING

The Iris Project receives thousands of applications each year, far more than we can fund directly. In response, we've expanded our support beyond our nine annual grantees, creating tools and networks that strengthen youth-led environmental action globally.

Youth Funding Toolkit

In 2025, we developed the content for a Youth Funding Toolkit alongside partner organisations who work directly with young people navigating funding systems. Fundraising skills are consistently the top capacity-building need we hear from young leaders, so the toolkit was built to respond to that head-on. The toolkit will now launch as a PDF in 2026, translated into multiple languages so young leaders can use it anywhere, at their own pace, to upskill as fundraisers and early-stage organisational leaders. This PDF version also serves a second purpose: it acts as a fundraising tool in itself. It will help us raise the next layer of funding needed to build an interactive microsite where young leaders will feature in short films, sharing their lived experience of fundraising. The toolkit is our pilot, our proof-of-concept and this next phase will test how content, community, and storytelling can shift who gets funded and how young leaders see themselves in the process.

Youth-led Biodiversity Funding Research

Youth-led biodiversity work remains drastically underfunded. While climate funding has grown - supported by clearer data, established pathways, and increasing donor attention - biodiversity funding is still far harder for young leaders to access, especially in the Global South. We hear this gap across our ecosystem again and again, and in 2025 we wanted to put clearer evidence behind it. In partnership with Synchronicity Earth, Global Youth Biodiversity Network and others we surveyed over 161 youth leading biodiversity projects across 57 countries. **85% of respondents** said they do not have adequate funding - **rising to 91% for organisations** less than two years old.

Alongside the survey, a four-part workshop series was organised with youth leaders and funders to explore where power sits, why resources fail to reach youth-led groups, and what needs to change for funding to flow more equitably. **The final report - to be published in early 2026 - aims to inform funders, shift practice, and spotlight the urgency of resourcing youth-led action on biodiversity.**

Iris Project Ecosystem

Our growing Iris Project ecosystem exists because far more young leaders need support than we can fund directly. Through our Slack community **(500+ members)** and **bi-weekly opportunities newsletter (6,000+ subscribers)**, we share funding calls, capacity-building opportunities, events, and connections that are often hard to access. This ecosystem has become a space where people can ask questions, meet peers, and find opportunities they might not otherwise see. It also helps ensure that the impact of The Iris Project reaches far beyond the nine projects that we are able to fund each year, strengthening a wider community of youth-led environmental action.



YOUTH VOICES AMPLIFIED

Our goal is to help shift the centre of gravity in climate and biodiversity funding toward youth leadership. Platforming the work of our prize winners is a core part of how we do this. Many youth-led projects focus on getting the work done rather than promoting it, so our role is to help ensure their impact is seen and recognised, especially by funders who often overlook youth-led action.

Storytelling & visibility

Each prize winner co-curates a short documentary film with us, produced in partnership with MakerChange Studio and local filmmakers. These films help young leaders tell their own story in their own voice and provide them with a strong communication tool for fundraising, outreach, and community engagement. This year, we continued improving our climate communications programme to help winners develop clearer, stronger and more confident storytelling.

INSIGHTS

Gustavo Blanco (Iris Prize 2025) reported that the main barriers to youth accessing funding include lack of networks, language barriers, and limited storytelling or technical capacity, noting: “We usually do not have the networks to access funders directly… most of us are not tech-savvy enough to produce a film or trained in storytelling.” Gustavo also stated that the Iris Prize film significantly improved his ability to communicate the project’s relevance and urgency: “Being able to say we are Iris Prize winners, and share the beautiful film you helped us produce, is a great asset… I don’t know where we would be without your support.”



Iris Prize 2025 Awards Ceremony

Our ceremony was hosted virtually and livestreamed to over 100 people, with acceptance speeches from the winners, and guest contributions from Aruna Bangura (Stem Prize 2024), Desmond Alugnoa from Green Africa Youth Organisation (Earthshot Prize Winner 2024), and brilliantly hosted by advisor Francisco Lara Fletes.
The ceremony remains a moment of global visibility and celebration, a space where young environmental leaders are recognised publicly and their work is shared with a broader audience.

STATS

- **Over 1,088,505** views across all Iris Project winner documentaries
- **2024 prize winners rated the filmmaking experience 10/10**. Highlighting the value of working with a filmmaker who understood the local ecological and community context
- 83% of alumni reported that being part of the Iris Prize increased their visibility or credibility





COMMUNICATIONS SPOTLIGHT





2,402,182
IMPRESSIONS
Across all social media platforms

Total number of times your content is displayed, including repeat views by the same person
***versus 989,000 in 2024**





12.2% ENGAGEMENT RATE

Out of 100 people reached interacted with The Iris Project's social media content (reactions, comments, repost, link clicks, etc...)
***versus 10.2% in 2024**

21 GLOBAL & LOCAL MEDIA FEATURES

Including media outlets such as Mongabay, The Guardian, Philanthropy Impact, Manila Standard & El Norte

The Guardian



Don't let the dugong follow the sea cow

TEDx



MONGABAY



How a young beekeeper's initiative brought hope and profit to Sierra Leone communities

EL NORTE



TEDx



Manila Standard



Filipino youth awarded Seed Prize for dugong protection initiative



The Iris Project was represented at 22 international events

INSIGHTS

As in previous years, our strongest engagement came during two key moments: The Iris Prize open call and the winners' announcement.

Earlier this year, we discontinued our use of X (formerly Twitter) following changes in ownership that no longer align with our values. In September, Meta unexpectedly blocked our Instagram account without warning. Although it was later reinstated thanks to the incredible support of our community, the experience highlighted how dependent many youth-led organisations are on platforms that hold so much control, whilst so few have the access or privilege to challenge it.

This experience emphasised the importance of building resilience into our communications, so our visibility and connection are not reliant on any single platform. It reinforced our decision to diversify where and how we communicate. We're investing more in owned spaces such as our website, newsletters, and blogs, to ensure stories, visibility, and connection remain protected. We also began testing strategic ads on YouTube and Google around key moments, and prioritising collaboration with partners, grantees, and advisors to cross-amplify reach and share impact more collectively.



UPDATES FROM OUR 2024 COHORT

> Young people are navigating complex and often high-pressure contexts, and it's important that our role as a funder does not add to that burden by prioritising impact metrics over people. I feel incredibly fortunate to get to know each leader guiding their organisation, and I want to continue building partnerships with grantees that are grounded in trust, shared learning and honest reflection. By creating space to openly share experiences and insights, we can better understand what support is most meaningful for these exceptional leaders.

Frances Storey
Iris Project Programme Manager



Steve visiting his mentee Aruna's project as a part of The Iris Project's bespoke capacity building offer, Stem Prize 2024



URU URU TEAM Bolivia

The Uru Uru Team is restoring Lake Uru Uru using phytoremediation - growing native totora reeds to absorb pollutants from the black-water canals flowing into the lake. Pollution has dropped by up to 30%, and the return of species like Andean flamingos is an early sign that biodiversity could be rebounding.

Project Representative: Gustavo Blanco Quiroga
Achieved Objectives: 4/5
Total grant-funding received: 25,000 USD (Iris Prize 2024 + 2025 Repeat Funding)



Community Impact

The funding allowed the team to expand participation in restoration activities. More than 500 people have taken part in hands-on work at the lake, including building recycled plastic rafts, monitoring totora growth, joining community clean-ups and attending environmental workshops. Around 40 local volunteers were directly involved in constructing the first round of floating restoration platforms. The funding also helped families pilot small-scale livelihood alternatives, such as household and school gardens, traditional salt production and local handicrafts. These activities supported income generation and helped reduce migration pressure during a difficult economic period.

Organisational Advancement

The 2024 grant came at a turning point. It gave the Uru Uru team credibility and visibility when they needed it most, and they used their documentary and prize recognition to step into international spaces that are rarely open to young, grassroots-led organisations. Gustavo and the team gained global attention through media features and platforms like TEDx. That visibility sparked real engagement - universities, NGOs, researchers, and funders reaching out to learn, visit, and support this initiative. Their youth leadership grew in parallel. More young people from the community joined the core team, taking on roles, building skills, and strengthening the project from the inside out. New partnerships followed too - collaborations and the chance to share their work at COP30, a first for the team, made possible through mentor connections and unrestricted support that helped remove barriers like passports and travel. Underpinning every step is the team's clearest long-term goal: community ownership. Their work centres Indigenous knowledge, ecological care, and shared leadership, pushing the project toward a future where the lake's protection belongs to the community, led by the young team they continue to trust.

Environmental Impact

Funding supported the construction of floating rafts and the implementation of totora phytoremediation, planting 600 totora seeds in cycles to absorb pollution. The project expanded restoration efforts beyond Lake Uru Uru to Lake Poopó, which has begun recovering due to rainfall and community-led environmental action. The restoration work integrates ancestral Indigenous methods to support long-term ecological recovery and water ecosystem health. These activities directly support the goal of full restoration of Lake Uru Uru and demonstrate the effectiveness of Indigenous environmental stewardship.

REPEAT FUNDING GOALS

With the second-year support, the team will:

- Scale participatory restoration activities into three neighbouring lake communities.
- Launch a community-led plastic collection programme to address escalating plastic contamination.
- Use the 25,000 USD as credibility and leverage toward a 50,000 USD expansion plan for the next phase of lake protection and restoration.



TIWAI HONEY INITIATIVE Sierra Leone

Bees are essential for biodiversity, but across Sierra Leone, local bee populations have been declining due to deforestation, pesticide use, and habitat loss. In response, Aruna launched Bangs Circular, a community-led beekeeping initiative that's rebuilding both ecosystems and local livelihoods.

Project Lead: Aruna Bangura
Achieved Objectives: 4/5
Total grant-funding received: 21,500 USD (2023 Seed Prize Runner-up, 2024 Stem Prize & 2025 Repeat Funding)



Community Impact

The Tiwai Honey Initiative expanded beekeeping activities to eight Tiwai Island communities, directly training over 400 local beekeepers, and engaging 1,000+ community members in hive construction. Women make up 60% of trained beekeepers, with 120 women having gained new income opportunities. Youth are now also leading hive construction, harvesting, and training, gaining technical and entrepreneurial skills. The project has created reliable income streams from honey production and provides short-term earnings for hive construction. With growth came interest from many members of the local community. Growth brought momentum, but it also brought pressure. Community interest surged faster than the team could absorb. Everyone wanted to help, and Aruna felt the weight of wanting to include everyone. Moving between communities by boat, balancing expectations, navigating social tensions, and keeping hundreds of hives and trees healthy has been exhausting. It forced the team to build new leadership approaches in real time, through community trust, shared problem-solving, and learning to say yes carefully, and no kindly, without losing the heart of the work.

Organisational Advancement

The Stem Prize funding enabled the purchase of 300+ beehives, honey processing equipment, packaging materials, and the construction of a processing facility, improving product quality and market readiness. The project now has consistent logistics support (motorbike, fuel) and stronger community visibility through branded materials. Increased youth leadership and ownership strengthened local management, monitoring, and evaluation skills. The initiative has built up resilience as it navigated the wins and losses of growth.

Environmental Impact

The project resulted in an 80% increase in the bee population, adding an estimated 2 million bees through the establishment of 300+ beehives. Increased pollination supports local biodiversity and healthier forest ecosystems. By creating alternative income from honey, the project reduces reliance on environmentally harmful activities such as illegal logging, poaching, and deforestation. Community-led conservation has strengthened environmental stewardship and increased awareness of bees' ecological importance.

REPEAT FUNDING GOALS

With the second-year support, Bangs Circular will:

- Train 100 additional beekeepers and establish five new apiary clusters so more households gain access to beehives and income from honey production.
- Establish the first honey sales point and admin hub to coordinate operations, improve product visibility, and create a central distribution and marketing centre.
- Plant 50,000 cocoa and coffee trees and develop an agroforestry nursery to restore degraded land, improve pollination, and provide long-term income for communities.



GUARDIANAS DEL ESTUARIO Guatemala

From a university research project, Jabel launched Guardianas del Estuario to highlight the crucial yet overlooked role of shellfish-collecting women in protecting mangrove ecosystems and marine biodiversity.

Project Lead: Jabel Gabriela Gómez Esquit
Achieved Objectives: 4/5
Total grant-funding received: 25,000 USD (2024 Seed Prize, 2025 Repeat Funding including match funding from a new donor)



Community Impact

Since receiving the Seed grant, Guardianas has directly supported 159 people, including women fishers and local environmental stewards. Around 200+ students from two coastal schools joined field trips and hands-on sampling workshops, learning ecological monitoring tools while working alongside the women leading the project. In Sipacate, women fishers participated in the first scientific characterisation of local mussels, co-generating catch-volume and species data. In El Paredón, they helped shape governance and monitoring approaches for red crab conservation. The impact here goes beyond numbers - it shifted who is seen as “doing science” locally. Women moved from observers to recognised contributors, decision-makers, and experts.

Organisational Advancement

With this grant, Guardianas del Estuario has increased its visibility and credibility, leading to alliances with larger NGOs and invitations to speak at forums, symposia, and university talks. Participating in the United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) expanded Jabel’s networks within ocean and coastal ecosystems spaces and helped her build relationships with people working on similar issues internationally. One goal that emerged after UNOC is to attend the next conference and create a dedicated space to bring the voices of women fishers into the conversation, increasing both visibility and influence.

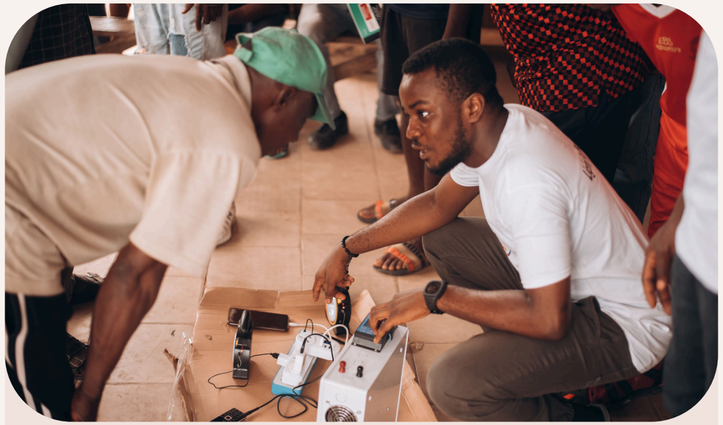
Environmental Impact

The grant enabled Guardianas del Estuario to generate new scientific data rooted in community participation, including the first characterisation of mussels in Sipacate and locally gathered catch-volume data led by women fishers. Workshops strengthened community governance around red crab conservation (Ucides occidentalis) in El Paredón, turning research into shared stewardship. The team also brought ecosystem knowledge directly into universities through research reports, scientific posters, and talks with students and researchers, reinforcing local conservation capacity and long-term care for estuarine ecosystems.

REPEAT FUNDING GOALS

With the second-year support, Jabel will:

- Formalise Guardianas del Estuario as an NGO
- Develop a volunteer group for participants to be involved in various project activities
- Replicate successful workshops in other communities, working with a total of three communities on the southern coast of Guatemala
- Develop a mangrove nursery in the community to improve reforestation and conservation efforts



LIGHTED Nigeria

Converts electronic and plastic waste into solar-powered charging solutions and education hubs.

Project Lead: Stanley Anigbogu **Amount:** 3,000 USD
Category: Iris Prize Runner-Up

What was the funding used for?

- Installed a LightHouse Solar Charging Station at the Metallurgical Technical Institute in Onitsha, a school that has been facing severe and frequent power outages.
- Constructed the modular station using recycled plastic materials and high-quality solar components.

Outcomes

The station provides reliable, clean, and free charging access for over 2350 students to charge phones and power small devices, reducing reliance on generators. The most significant change was improved access to electricity for learning. Before installation, frequent power outages made it difficult for students to charge phones, use digital tools, or complete assignments. Students now have consistent, free, and clean energy access every day.



VIAJE AL MICROCOSMOS Mexico

Harnessing the power of citizen science and art to foster a sense of responsibility for Monterray's waterways

Project Lead: Andrea Villarreal Rodríguez **Amount:** 2,000 USD
Category: Stem Prize Runner-up

What was the funding used for?

- Designed and printed over 1,000 illustrated ecosystem guides
- Co-created content with environmental educators to ensure scientific and cultural accuracy

Outcomes

Viaje transformed their project into a tangible, community-facing resource that reconnects residents - especially young people - to Monterrey's waterways. The guide has sparked renewed curiosity and a sense of responsibility for local ecosystems, strengthening support for conservation efforts. This early success helped build the visibility and momentum that led to Viaje's selection as the **Stem Prize 2025 winner**.



AQUAREVIVE Indonesia

Improving Indonesia's rivers' water quality by releasing microorganism-filled mudballs that suppress harmful bacteria.

Project Lead: Miguel Tjia **Amount:** 1,500 USD
Category: Seed Prize Runner-Up

What was the funding used for?

- Refined mudball formula through lab testing
- Released over 100 microorganism-filled mudballs for field trials

Outcomes

The funding enabled AquaRevive to move from an early idea to a tested intervention. Their field trials showed promising improvements in river health: ammonia-N levels began to decline, nitrate/nitrite concentrations decreased, phosphate levels edged lower, dissolved oxygen increased slightly, and pH remained stable. These early results helped the team build confidence in their approach and gather the evidence they needed to strengthen credibility and seek further support.



DULUNGAN YOUTH The Philippines

Community-led restoration efforts fostering collaboration between people and nature.

Project Lead: Jann Vinze Barcinal **Amount:** 3,000 USD
Category: Iris Prize Runner-up

What was the funding used for?

- Built an agroecology site as a community learning and collaboration space
- Purchased essential tools and hosted workshops to expand restoration activities

Outcomes

The grant enabled the team to deepen and expand their work, strengthening an agroecology site that serves as a living classroom for ecological stewardship and collective action. The funding helped broaden participation, resource hands-on activities, and reinforce restoration practices grounded in local culture and values. In 2025, Jann's project was shortlisted again for the Iris Prize. While not selected as the winner, he was invited to join The Iris Project Advisory Panel where he contributes to decision-making and mentors peers.



CULTURA Canada

An app that gives farmers insight into ideal fertilisation, harvesting times and sharing live weather reports.

Project Lead: Alexander Yevchenko **Amount:** 2,000 USD
Category: Stem Prize Runner-Up

What was the funding used for?

- Built and refined the Cultura app and website for distribution
- Integrated a feedback loop allowing farmers to share real-time needs and observations

Outcomes

Runner-up funding enabled Cultura to move from concept to a functional platform designed with farmers' input. The app is now ready for field testing, positioning the project for pilot partnerships, user feedback, and future scaling. This early investment gave Alexander the space to refine the core product, strengthen credibility, and prepare for wider adoption.



CHARECO South Sudan

Introducing briquette charcoal made from waste materials like coconut shells to reduce tree cutting and environmental degradation.

Project Lead: Chol John Deng Kuir **Amount:** 1,500 USD
Category: Seed Prize Runner-Up

What was the funding used for?

- Purchased machinery for briquette production

Outcomes

The funding enabled CHARECO to begin securing the equipment needed to produce briquettes from waste materials as an alternative to wood-based charcoal. Chol has been one of the most engaged members of our runner-up community, taking part in all capacity-building offers, including CoalitionWILD's EXCELerator, where he was invited to pitch for additional funding. Delays in transporting machinery from China to South Sudan created unexpected barriers, so The Iris Project stepped in with a small repeat grant to help him overcome these challenges and finally launch production.

WHAT CHANGED: THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF 2025

Across the board, grantees told us the same thing this year: the biggest barrier they face is access to funding. So we tested new ways to shift what's possible beyond our own grants. We piloted match funding alongside repeat grants, bringing new donors in to match our support, double the funding received, and give grantees a new funding relationship to build from. In parallel, we developed the Youth Funding Toolkit to share practical fundraising skills more openly, so more young leaders can access support even if they're not in our funded cohort. The ripple effect of 2025 shows what happens when young leaders are backed with trust, tools, and relationships. It also makes the gap painfully clear: youth-led environmental work remains massively under-resourced.



Uru Uru Team, Iris Prize 2024

ADVANCING PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH REPEAT FUNDING & EMERGENCY GRANT-MAKING

A year can be enough to prove an idea and build momentum, but it is rarely enough to build project sustainability. Some projects finish their first year ready to close or evolve. Others are still testing, still building community trust, still strengthening their model - all of which are valid outcomes.

That is why we offer repeat funding. Around a year after their first award, each winner can apply for up to $10,000 USD, timed around when they feel ready. In 2025, we also introduced a match funding approach for our 2024 winners, bringing in new donors to match our second-year grants. This increases the support available and, just as importantly, introduces young leaders to a new funding relationship. We were also able to approve repeat grants for two alumni runner-up teams, LightEd (Nigeria) and CHARECO (South Sudan).

In October 2024, all three 2023 winners were approved for repeat funding. Project Sparśa and Project Mila each received $10,000 USD to strengthen and scale. Dipta, founder of LIQUIFY, chose to delay his grant while he registered his organisation as an Indonesian NGO. We supported that decision, and released the grant once the groundwork was complete, when it could genuinely support the next phase.

The importance of emergency support

Alongside repeat funding, there are times when rapid support is just as crucial. This year, we provided emergency assistance to an alumni grantee who risked losing their final year of university due to crop failure impacting their family's income. Stepping in at the right moment ensured they could continue their studies, a reminder that sustaining youth leadership sometimes means supporting the person behind the project. These moments sit at the heart of our approach: trust-based, responsive support that strengthens both leaders and the long-term sustainability of their work.



Case study:

Project Sparśa, Nepal

Repeat funding played a catalytic role for Sparśa, led by 2023 Stem Prize winner Dipisha. With the flexibility of a second-year grant, the team was able to strengthen youth leadership and build internal capacity. Dipisha transitioned into a full-time leadership role, other roles were redefined, a female technical engineer was hired, and local operators were trained, resulting in a more confident, motivated, and resilient team.

Externally, the repeat funding gave Sparśa the space to build visibility and forge new partnerships. The team signed five memoranda of understanding (MOUs), secured local government co-funding, and represented Nepal at the Kenya Stakeholder Meeting on Menstrual Health Innovations. These opportunities helped establish Sparśa as a credible actor at both national and international levels.
The most significant change is that Sparśa grew from a promising grassroots initiative into a structured, entrepreneurial, and visible social enterprise, one that can now sustain its mission, attract new partnerships, and scale its impact beyond Nepal.

ENABLE

Building the capacity, confidence and resilience of young project leaders.

Through peer-to-peer mentorship, bespoke capacity-building, and trust-based and flexible funding, young leaders are gaining the skills, networks, and confidence to sustain their projects beyond The Iris Prize support.

- **100%** of 2025 grantees reported feeling more resilient and confident in delivering and leading their projects
- **83%** of alumni reported securing additional funding or partnerships after winning a prize
- **100%** of alumni grantees are still involved in environmental work

KEY INSIGHT

Flexible, long-term support builds real staying power

When young leaders receive flexible, multi-year support rather than a one-off grant, their projects move from fragile to sustainable. We saw ideas turn into functioning organisations, local teams grow in confidence, and youth-led initiatives reach the point where other funders started to take notice. The biggest change wasn't just more activity; it was stronger, more resilient leadership behind each project.



Case study:

Project Mila, Kenya

"Seeing how this initiative (Project Mila) contributes to environmental conservation while creating economic opportunities gives me a sense of fulfilment. Knowing that my work is making a real impact in sustainability keeps me motivated to push forward and grow the project further"

Nusra Juriah

Seed Prize Winner 2023



When Ahmed and Nusra received the Seed Prize in 2023, they had an idea to turn organic waste in Mombasa into value using black soldier fly larvae. With The Iris Project's support, that idea became a working organisation. The following year, Project Mila received a repeat grant of $10,000 USD to scale its waste-to-value system. In 2025, they diverted 8.4 tonnes of organic waste from open dumping, producing larvae for poultry feed and frass fertiliser that generated over KES 392,000 in local revenue. More than 1,200 people took part in their outreach programmes, from school environmental clubs to community clean-ups and medical camps.

What's most striking is the shift in mindset Project Mila created: waste is now seen as a shared resource, not a nuisance. Youth have stepped into paid leadership roles, women have found new income opportunities, and schools have created student "green ambassadors" to keep the momentum going. Through The Iris Project's introductions and community newsletter, Project Mila has since connected with new organisations and funders, gaining new partnerships and visibility - proof that flexible, continued support builds the confidence and connections young founders need to grow.

EMPOWER

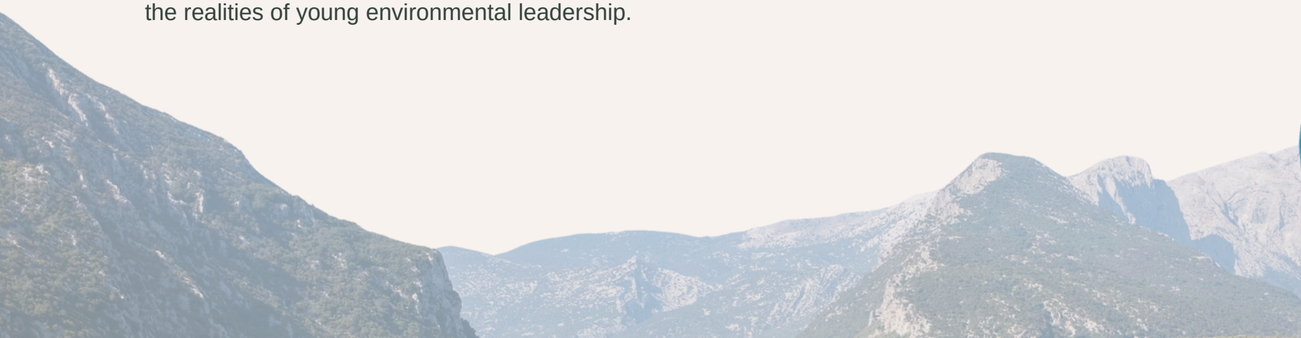
Shared leadership & youth governance.

Alumni grantees, advisors and a youth-led team shape the direction of our work to ensure decisions reflect the realities of young environmental leaders.

Our advisory panel remains central to how The Iris Project is shaped and delivered. We meet every six weeks, and advisors contribute far beyond reviewing applications or mentoring winners; they help steer the project's direction. This year, advisors shared mentoring challenges, compared approaches to supporting grantees, and brought forward ideas in response to what their mentees were experiencing on the ground. Because grantees work in such different contexts, our standard capacity-building offers don't always meet everyone's needs; in response, our advisors helped us launch in-house monthly sessions that they now facilitate themselves, creating an open space for grantees to ask questions, swap practical tips, and learn directly from other young environmental leaders.

Several advisors also shared concrete feedback that shaped how we refined our processes, from clearer communication about capacity-building activities to new ideas for mentoring formats to suggestions for how selection calls could better capture nuance. Their lived experience as former prize winners means they can see what works and what needs to shift with a clarity that no external consultant could bring.

This approach makes The Iris Project's model truly participatory. Our mentorship programme is designed and delivered by youth, for youth, and is intentionally reciprocal: mentors learn just as much as their mentees. They exchange advice, ideas and challenges, blurring the traditional hierarchy between "expert" and "emerging" leader. This feedback loop - young people guiding young people - keeps The Iris Project dynamic and authentic. Each new cycle builds upon the next, ensuring that decisions remain grounded in the realities of young environmental leadership.





STATS

- **5 former grantees now serve as advisors**, team members or judges.
- **100% of the Advisory Panel are young leaders from the Global South**, where the worst environmental impacts are experienced.
- **9/10 average score:** grantee rating of The Iris Project mentorship programme
- Since receiving an Iris Prize, **83% of respondents to the Alumni Survey reported securing additional funding or partnerships** - including 50% who secured significant new support.



KEY INSIGHT

Participatory governance strengthens programme quality

More Iris Prize alumni moved into advisory and judging roles, deepening the way youth leadership shows up across the project. Advisors are helping redesign elements of the programme, surfacing new capacity-building needs, and holding us accountable to the realities young leaders face. This has made our model more responsive, more honest, and even more grounded in lived experience.

EMPOWER

Shared leadership & youth governance.

Case study:

Guardianas del Estuario, Guatemala

When Francisco travelled to Guatemala to spend time with Seed Prize winner Jabel and her project, what formed between them was not a traditional mentor–mentee dynamic, but a relationship built on trust, collaboration, and friendship.

Francisco describes the word “mentor” as feeling too heavy, as if it implies a kind of wisdom he doesn’t claim to have. What emerged instead was a partnership. They check in on each other regularly, share opportunities, and plan future activities together. Jabel has introduced him to valuable contacts, and he has supported her through key challenges. The learning has flowed both ways.

“The dynamic feels more like a collaborative partnership than a traditional mentor–mentee relationship, which I think makes it even more meaningful and effective,” he told us. As the mentorship cycle came to a close, Francisco reflected on what the experience had given him: a renewed sense that “anything is possible,” that projects can grow, and that young leaders can grow alongside them.

This is what shared leadership looks like in practice: young people guiding one another, learning from each other, and shaping the ecosystem together. It is also why our Empower pillar sits at the heart of our work, because mentorship at The Iris Project is not about expertise. It is about reciprocity, trust, and the belief that transformation occurs when young leaders support one another.



ADVOCATE

Shifting perspectives, narratives & systems.

Beyond individual projects, The Iris Project is influencing how the sector understands, values, and funds youth-led environmental work. This year, we saw clear signs of that ripple effect.

Our model is influencing others. A youth-led grant-maker told us they used The Iris Project as a model when developing their own funding strategy, drawing on our trust-based approach, youth-led review system, and emphasis on flexible support. This is one of the clearest markers of sector-level impact.

Creating access to global spaces

We supported several young leaders in attending climate justice camps, international convenings, and climate conferences, often for their first time. For some, this included unrestricted support for passports and travel, removing practical barriers that limit youth participation in global conversations. These opportunities help shift who is visible, who is listened to, and who shapes nature and climate work.

A continued learning: access is still unequal

Despite progress, young leaders, especially those most closely affected by climate and biodiversity loss, continue to face barriers to accessing these spaces. Travel costs, visas, and institutional gatekeeping remain systemic obstacles. This reality continues to shape our advocacy priorities.

Advocating for better funding and better narratives

Throughout 2025, we curated panel discussions and workshops that highlighted why youth-led work needs better funding and what becomes possible when it's done well. These conversations brought together young leaders and funders from across regions, spotlighting the ripple effects of trust-based support and the need for funders to shift both resources and attention toward youth-led solutions.

We aim to shift attention, funding and decision-making power toward the young people who are already leading solutions, and to demonstrate the real impact that follows when funding reaches them in the right way.

Former advisors noted that their involvement with The Iris Project helped expand their networks, strengthened their confidence, and, for two respondents, contributed to opportunities to represent youth at national and global climate events - including COP processes, NDC financing discussions, and international conferences. One advisor also reported that the model and experience informed their later contributions to developing youth-focused funding mechanisms and national policy proposals.



KEY INSIGHT

Visibility and access are shifting who is seen as an environmental leader

This year, more young leaders we work with were invited into spaces where decisions are discussed - from UN forums to climate justice camps and COP processes. Their stories are helping to change who is listened to, and how youth-led work is understood. At the same time, it's clear that access is still unequal, and that part of our role is to keep opening doors while pushing for systems where youth leadership is the norm, not the exception.





ADVOCATE

Shifting perspectives, narratives & systems.

Case study:

Uru Uru Team, Bolivia

During our conversations this year, Uru Uru Team member Gustavo spoke openly about the barriers many youth leaders face long before their work is ever seen - limited networks, language barriers, and not having the tools to communicate their impact. “Projects like ours would never have received funding if I didn’t know how to communicate in English,” he shared. He described the Iris Prize film as transformative. “Being able to say we are Iris Prize winners, and share the beautiful film you helped us produce, is a great asset… I don’t know where we would be without your support.”

Since receiving the award, Gustavo has been invited to speak at UN side events and international environmental gatherings, using the film and the recognition behind it to bring the story of Lake Uru Uru’s restoration to global audiences. These opportunities directly increased the project’s visibility and credibility, in ways he said no other funder had opened doors for.

This ripple continued at COP30 in Brazil. With support from The Iris Project, the Uru Uru team travelled to the conference for the first time. Thanks to a connection from Gustavo’s Iris Project mentor, Alicia Amancio, founder of the Latin American Youth Climate Scholarship, the team was linked to speaking opportunities and given access to spaces where Indigenous youth voices are often missing. Being in the room enabled them to share their work with decision-makers, funders, and peers, strengthening both their network and their influence.

Our role is to help move influence and attention toward the people already leading solutions. By opening doors, strengthening storytelling, and supporting youth to access global spaces, we help shift the narrative and the system to better recognise and resource youth-led environmental action.



UNDERSTANDING OUR IMPACT

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Our MEL approach helps us understand what shifts once projects join us, and what that leads to, including not only progress in their work and leadership, but also increased recognition through scholarships, further funding, prestigious awards and wider visibility.

ENABLE

Our MEL points to a consistent pattern: projects become more sustainable and create bigger impact when wraparound support is provided. Mentorship, risk and security support, and communications tools show up in grantees' own explanations of what helped them deliver and stay resilient.

EMPOWER

Alumni in governance is now a measurable indicator of impact for us. Former grantees contributing to shortlisting, mentoring, and programme design has become part of how the organisation learns and stays accountable.

ADVOCATE

Visibility turned into access young leaders could actually use. The documentaries, supported travel and award moments led directly to invitations, new networks and legitimacy that grantees then built into longer-term funding conversations and partnerships. This is how influence moves - young leaders carrying their work into rooms they weren't previously welcome in, and changing who gets listened to and backed next.



2025 LEARNINGS

- An open, self-nominated prize is the most accessible model, but it also creates a growing, human workload we have to design for if we want to protect values-based decision-making as applications rise.
- 2025 also showed us that impact and care are inseparable. When we support the leader, not just the project, their ability to stay, adapt and grow becomes stronger and their work travels further.

INSIGHT FROM OUR EXTERNAL MEL CONSULTANT

"I've seen The Iris Project's learning and evidence framework strengthen over time. There's now clearer alignment between the Theory of Change, MEL trackers and programme delivery across the Enable, Empower and Advocate pillars, making it easier to see how activities lead to outcomes. The MEL approach brings together structured quantitative tracking and qualitative insights from evaluations and feedback, and is used to drive learning, not just reporting. As the programme enters its fifth year, these systems provide a strong foundation for multi-year reflection on what's working, testing underlying assumptions, and adapting to changing conditions."

Naveed Somani RLI Consulting







2025 FINANCIALS

OUR POSITION AT THE BEGINNING OF 2025

In 2025, we raised **£397,233** to fund our work - driven by the success of our Big Give Christmas Challenge at the end of 2024 (raising over £117,000) and the generous support of our donors.

By 31 December 2025, we had spent **£366,911,** with a further **£19,568** due to be spent in January-March 2026 on MEL, capacity-building support, and repeat funding grants for three grantee partners.

Where we focussed our spending

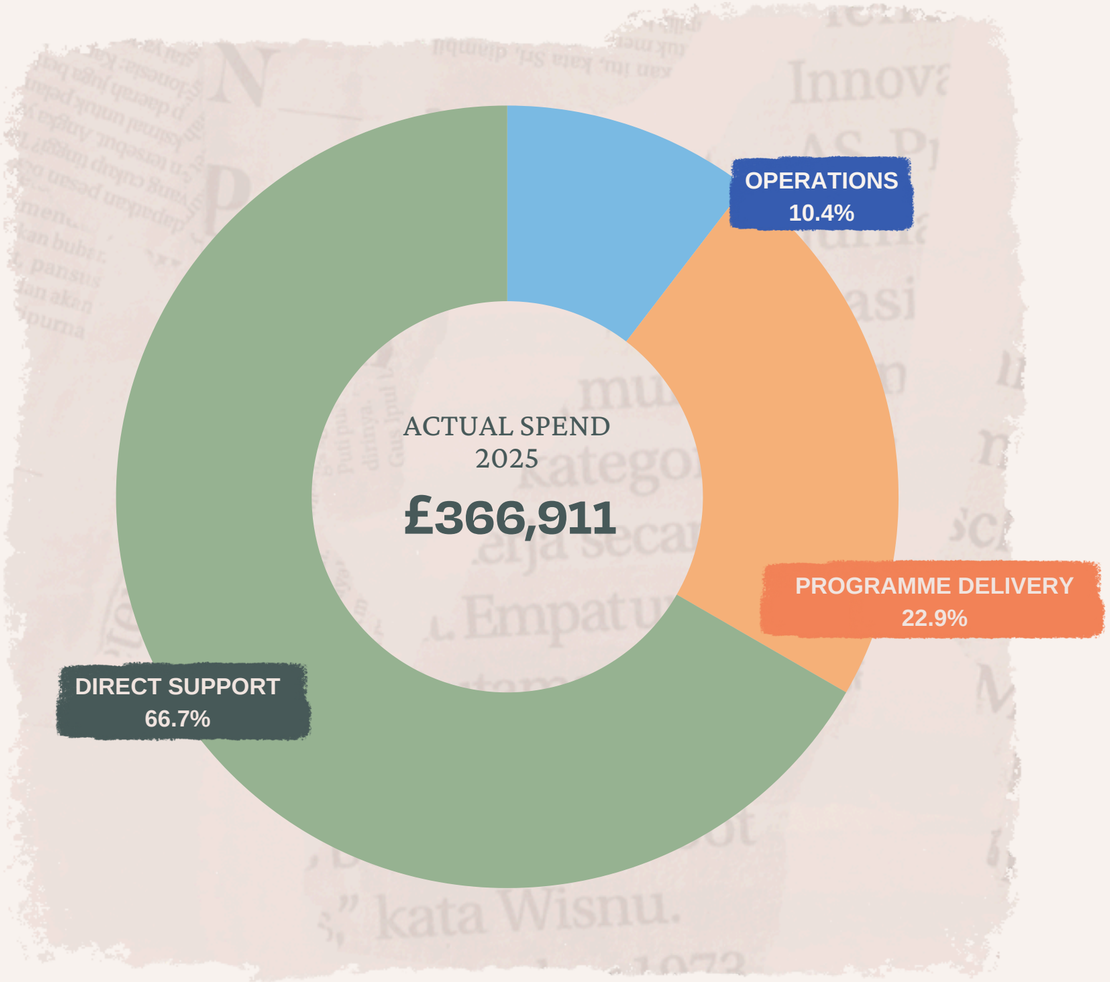
- **£244,621 (66.7%) directly supported** young leaders through grants, stipends for advisors, project team salaries, capacity support, mentorship and practical resources.
- **£84,125 (22.9%) enabled programme delivery** and wider reach, covering translation of application materials and guidance, plus media support from our partners at Forster Communications to help amplify grantees' work.
- **£38,165 (10.4%) covered essential operational costs,** including our fiscal hosting fee to Global Fund for Children, website and IT servicing and office equipment - ensuring The Iris Project ran effectively.

Looking ahead to 2026

As we enter 2026, we have secured **£303,815 toward our 2026 budget**. We have further funding conversations in progress, including with schools, and are exploring a five-year anniversary fundraising event. As these are not yet confirmed, they are not included in the total above.

FUNDING BREAKDOWN

Iris Project Year 4 (1 Jan - 31 December 2025)



LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026

Marking five years of The Iris Prize

In 2026, we will mark five years of The Iris Prize by prioritising opportunities for alumni, advisors and our team to connect in person. We expect this to begin regionally, with the ambition to convene more widely if funding allows, creating space for learning, relationships and long-term leadership growth across the community.

Youth Funding Toolkit

In 2026, we'll publish the Youth Funding Toolkit. It will be downloadable from our website and designed with a built-in feedback loop, so young people can quickly share what's useful, what's unclear, and what needs adding as we refine the toolkit.

Youth-led Biodiversity Funding Report

In early 2026, we publish the findings from the 2025 biodiversity funding research. The report makes clear the gap young leaders face accessing biodiversity finance, especially in the Global South. It will serve as evidence, advocacy and guidance for funders looking to move money in ways that actually fit youth-led conservation and restoration work.





Viaje al Microcosmos, Stem Prize 2025 & 2024 Runner-Up

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026

Funding pathways & advisory-led support

We'll continue expanding funding pathways beyond our own grants. Through the Match Funding Circle, repeat funding for runners-up, fundraising clinics, pitching opportunities and new donor introductions, young leaders have more chances to build credibility, relationships and long-term funding partnerships. Our advisory panel will continue steering capacity-building needs, mentoring formats and match opportunities in real time, based on what their mentees are navigating on the ground.

Wellbeing and care

In 2026, we are deepening our commitment to wellbeing and safeguarding across The Iris Project community. We will begin by surveying former grantees and advisors to learn how they experienced care, safety and support, so their perspectives directly shape our practice. Our Safeguarding Lead, Millie, will also participate in Global Fund for Children's monthly safeguarding workshops to strengthen our approach and ensure we remain aligned with best practice.

In-house Capacity-building Community Sessions

Monthly in-house capacity-building sessions become a core part of 2026. Facilitated by advisors, these sessions create an open, practical space for all Iris Prize alumni to ask unfiltered questions, swap learnings, and build skills together. Fundraising, organisational development and peer support sit at the heart of these sessions, shaped by what young leaders tell us they need most.





Breathe Mongolia, Iris Prize 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We're deeply grateful to every donor & organisation who made this year possible. Your support helps young leaders keep going, whilst growing their work, and creating real change in their communities. Those of you who have chosen to stay anonymous - thank you. And we'd also like to thank:

The Savitri Trust
Perivoli Foundation
The A Team
Big Give donors
Reuben Foundation
Eranda Rothschild Foundation
Greenhouse Communications
The Reed Foundation
The Bamford Charitable Trust
Rothschild Foundation
Kim Samuel
Louise de Rothschild
Stéphanie de Buffévent
Alexandre de Rothschild
Lady Annabel Goldsmith
Wates Family Enterprise Trust
AetA Foundation

Thank you to our Advisors - to those who've been with us since the very beginning, and to those who joined us this year. Your insight and energy keep The Iris Project grounded and make it better at every step. And thank you to Iris' family, our nominating partner network, our Steering Committee, and our expert Judging Panel. Your time, care and commitment have helped us grow and helped more resources reach the young leaders who need them most.

CORE DELIVERY PARTNERS

Collaboration and partnerships are at the heart of The Iris Project's success. Everything we achieve is made possible by the incredible support of our core delivery partners. We extend our thanks to them for offering tailored capacity-building support, valuable connections, beautiful content, and guidance. Your contributions empower us to amplify the impact of young environmental leaders.

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"It's been a joy to integrate The Iris Project into Global Fund for Children this year. The mission and values of The Iris Project and GFC are incredibly well aligned, and we look forward to exploring how we can more deeply integrate our work powering young leaders to protect and restore nature."



JOHN HECKLINGER
Global Fund for Children Co-CEO


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