GENDER & DEVELOPMENT NETWORK
Briefings
JULY 2016

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Funding equality

Donor trends and women's rights organisations

Women's rights organisations, as part of a diverse civil society, play a crucial role in development, but recent changes in funding modalities have impacted negatively on their ability to deliver change. The increasing difficulties in accessing funding have meant that many civil society organisations (CSOs) have been forced to cease operations, cut down on staff and even compromise their approaches. This is eroding the ability of CSOs, and WROs in particular, to contribute to sustainable development and good governance. CSOs have been shown to limit state power by ensuring accountability or answerability for government actions, promoting and defending human rights and strengthening the rule of law. Furthermore, the work of CSOs has resulted in new laws that promote human rights, development and good governance.

1. The funding landscape

This paper showcases the experience of one women's rights organisation in Zambia, Women for Change (WfC), and the impact of current funding trends in restricting its work to promote gender equality.

Whether funding is coming from the general public, private individuals, governments, or multi-lateral organisations, CSOs face challenges in accessing funding. In some instances these challenges are common to all funders and in others they are funder-specific. Partly due to global economic crises, the number of individual and private funders has diminished substantially. WfC, along with many other CSOs, is finding it difficult to find sufficient, appropriate and continuous funding for its work. Accessing donors and, more importantly, meeting their funding conditions is difficult. Not only is there less funding available from donors but there has been a shift away from long-term programmes to short-term projects. CSOs are now expected to implement projects rather than programmes, with a negative impact on the effectiveness of their work. Most funding is for projects that are either two or three years long, which does not allow enough time for transformative change.

Relationship building at the community level alone typically takes over a year, as it involves forging contacts with the whole community including women and girls, men and boys, traditional leaders, faith-based organisations and other organisations active within the community. In addition reporting usually needs to be produced during the final six months of project funding. As a result, very little time is left to actually implement the project. Donors want CSOs to package long-term systemic change into

small, fundable projects that fit donor agendas and timelines rather than the agendas of people themselves. As shown through various examples below, this is not a realistic or sustainable approach.

Further funding shortfalls relate to overhead costs. Like all organisations, CSOs incur overhead costs – that is, the amount of money that is spent on running the organisation as opposed to being spent directly on projects. This includes office expenses, salaries, banking, bookkeeping costs, transportation and so forth. Typically, the expectation is that no more than 30 per cent of an organisation's funding should be spent on overhead costs. Higher overhead costs tend to generate criticisms of CSOs, accusing them of functioning to benefit the staff rather than the beneficiaries. For small CSOs working with tight finances, it is impossible to continue operating at all if no funding partners are willing to cover overhead costs.

2. The impact on WfC

WfC works in rural areas to build the capacity of local populations to lead their own development. The organisation is rooted in a vision of a society that upholds gender equality. WfC, like other CSOs, has experienced a continued decline in funding. The shift from core funding to project funding has compelled the organisation to make staff redundant, limit its advocacy at national and community levels, reduce its participatory approach, as long periods of community engagement have become unaffordable. Subsequently, WfC's ability to contribute to change in rural areas has diminished, including influencing and monitoring practices, policies and laws.

As a result of this new, project-based approach, by 2014 WfC staff numbers had dropped from 35 to 16. WfC had to make staff redundant in a number of key positions, such as community-level facilitators who engage with communities and traditional leaders. The roles of the facilitators are central to ensuring that WfC achieves its vision, because traditional leaders such as chiefs and village headpersons are the custodians of customary laws and practices that to a great extent have contributed to gender inequality. Despite the best efforts of remaining staff, the organisation could only be more effective with more employees, as the organisation's reach would be broader and deeper.

In terms of advocacy work, the organisation has been forced to advocate in networks for access to land and other productive resources, and in many instances it lacks resources to participate in joint activities that involve costs. In the past, WfC contributed towards efforts for Zambia to begin the process of adopting a new constitution through a grassroots campaign called Zambia We Want. WfC also used to have regular engagement with traditional leaders, but it has had to cease such activities.

Furthermore, WfC has been forced to reduce the amount of time spent with communities, and especially on gender equality programmes, and as a result activities are scattered. In previous years, donors provided grants to WfC and the organisation had control to allocate those resources where its staff saw fit based on identified needs.

3. WfC's empowerment approach

Transformative change requires funds. Change and empowerment come about when people are able to participate freely and fully in discussing and finding solutions to the challenges that confront them. WfC uses the principles of popular education to engage communities in development work. We believe that we have to start from where the people are if we are to empower them in a way that can be sustained over time. Participation brings out commitment, mature understanding and confidence in people. People become more self-aware and discover that expertise starts when they begin to decide for themselves. People come to realize that others are not experts – people are their own experts.

Change begins with reflecting on our personal lives and leads to collective action when we put into practice what we have learned, leading to goal setting, development and empowerment. The most difficult part of the process is spurring action to create change, but the support of a group can be very important in not just fomenting but also sustaining that kind of real change.

WfC believes that sustainable development can only be realised through full and meaningful participation of rural women and men in solving the problems that limit their development. For WfC, empowerment is a continuous process of constant planning and engaging women and men in development work. WfC also employs human rights education and literacy education as additional means of empowering women and men with the necessary and appropriate knowledge to effectively participate in development work.

It begins with the identification of remote rural areas of the country – where few, if any, other development organisations are present and no basic infrastructure or road networks exist – in order to reach the poorest communities. This ensures funds are used to meet real need while avoiding duplication of efforts and contradictions in approaches. Whereas other organizations' approaches are based on handouts, WfC wants to empower people to identify their own problems and find their own solutions to these problems. Once a location has been selected, WfC uses gender analysis as the starting point for engaging communities to ensure the full participation of both men and women as equal partners in community development.

The rest of the process involves area assessments to identify opportunities as well as assess the level of development of the people in the area. This is followed by listening surveys with the community to get to know each other and build confidence. The most burning issues are then acknowledged and prioritized with the community; groups are formed and leaders are identified. The economic status of the community is then assessed, and participatory education methodologies are used to explain WfC's work and how communities can manage, with available resources, to generate more resources. Gender analysis is also used at this stage to identify and discuss issues that oppress women and hinder them from effectively participating in and benefiting from development. Finally, once all the burning issues have been identified, discussed and

agreed upon, the communities begin planning by identifying how they can strategize to improve their situation. All this is done under the guidance and facilitation of WfC facilitators who live in the communities 75 per cent of the month, returning to headquarters only to strategize and share experiences before returning to the field once more.

As a result of WfC's method of critical analysis, a participatory tool, women and men begin to question what is happening to them, what they think about it, why it is happening, the impacts, what can be done, what strategy to take, what changes are taking place, why, how and who is involved. The critical analysis stage brings about an awakening in the minds of individuals and in the community as people recognise their potential to deal with the problems that affect their daily lives. This is more so for women, who for the first time realise that they can speak out in front of men, contribute effectively to various debates, chair meetings, stand up as members of parliament or as councillors and so on. Using the critical analysis model, women and men are empowered to challenge the status quo on issues that affect their constitutional rights, including the rights to life, food, shelter, clean water, health, education and participation in the governance and development process of Zambia.

4. The impact on of declining funding on programme effectiveness

Scarcity of funding and restrictive funding modalities are impacting on WfC's approaches and effectiveness, restricting its ability to pursue empowerment methods that are known to be effective. With current levels of funding, WfC is able to hold a small number of workshops over a few days, but it cannot follow the process outlined above or carry out the preparatory work necessary to ensure interventions are based on the real issues affecting people on the ground. Inadequate funding also limits the feasibility of mainstreaming an inclusive or human rights-based approach, and the likelihood of reaching a level of community ownership that can be sustained beyond the life of the project is minimal. More and better-structured funding would allow WfC to use its proven multi-step process to develop long-term, empowering and sustainable community engagement.

For WfC, more flexible, long-term funding would allow facilitators to spend more time in the community, building the capacity of local groups and associations using participatory methodologies to critically identify problems affecting their communities. It would also allow WfC to make a greater contribution to gender equality through initiatives such as a scholarship fund so that children (especially girls) who are at risk of early marriage can attend school; a fund to fight gender-based violence (GBV) and help survivors of GBV; lobbying for action to improve women's sexual and reproductive health; and building the capacity of communities to do their own advocacy and engage governmental actors to provide services in their communities. Most importantly, with improved funding modalities and greater volumes of funding, WfC could increase its rights-based advocacy and awareness-raising work with communities. After all, without

knowing your rights you cannot join in the fight for change. The people want change and they want to change, but they need support to build their capacities.

5. Conclusion

Overall, current trends in funding are damaging women's rights organisations like WfC, as well as many other WROs and CSOs operating from the community level to the national level. Donor countries' priorities are ever-changing and CSOs are expected to adapt to meet these new priorities, rather than serving the needs of the communities in which they work. We are calling on funding partners to rethink and restructure their funding opportunities so that CSOs have the flexibility to continue to effect change on the ground.

At the meantime, CSOs can respond by working together in networks to access donor funding in line with current donor interests; work in partnership with others; learn from each other by sharing best practices, building trust and mutual accountability; and continue to base our interventions on the realities of the communities where we work.

Acknowledgements
This briefing was written by Lumba Siyanga (lusiyanga@hotmail.com), Executive Director of Women for Change, as part of GADN's Feminist Development Alternatives project.

The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

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Development Alternatives Project
The project seeks to bridge the gap between current development policy, programmes and donor thinking and alternative visions for gender equality. Our objective is to promote alternatives to current agendas and problems in women's rights and gender equality, identify solutions with women in the Global South and developing strategies to promote these alternatives.

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