

The Key to Change: Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict Affected Contexts



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1. Introduction

Instability in Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan has caused conflict and undermined women and girls' rights. Gender inequality remains pervasive and the impacts of conflict on women and girls further erode their rights. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), particularly Women's Rights Organisations (WROs)¹, are essential for the achievement of women and girls' rights, peace and security through their programmes, service delivery, policy and advocacy work, yet their role is often unrecognised and underfunded. WROs and CSOs have extensive expertise to advance women and girls' rights, peace and security. They can also form essential, diverse movements that create, push for and drive forward intersectional change which is inclusive of the rights of young women, older women and girls, refugee and Internally Displaced Peoples (IPDs), and religious and ethnic minorities, with due regard to issues of socio-economic position, marital status and disability. AWID, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, an international feminist membership organisation committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights, estimated that globally only 1% of gender equality funding goes to women's organisations². When WROs do receive funding, it is often restricted to donor priorities and agendas. Civil society has long advocated for long-term, core, flexible funding to enable WROs to undertake their vital work. COVID-19 demonstrates the need for such funding to WROs whose work is essential to counter the gender and conflict impacts of the virus. Despite this, there remains a lack of research in this area, as well as no increase in such essential funding.

The Key to Change: Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict Affected Contexts is research undertaken by a consortium of organisations including Gender Action Peace and Security (GAPS), Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC), Saferworld, Women for Women International, Women's International Peace Centre (The Peace Centre), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Nigeria and Womankind Worldwide. This research report, funded by the UK's Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), sets out recommendations for modalities to fund, support and strengthen WROs and CSOs, as well as enable the UK, CSSF Africa and the international community - including donors, multilaterals and INGOs - to better understand the challenges and opportunities for WROs and CSOs working on peace and security issues in Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria and globally.

As part of this research, the consortium has mapped over 200 WROs and CSOs across diverse regions in Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan in order to profile and identify those organisations operating at local, national and regional levels. For the safety of participant organisations, these details will not be published. This mapping was supplemented by an extensive desk-based study and key informant interviews (KIIs) with over 80 organisations based in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and globally. The KIIs were conducted using the [Beyond Consultations](#) tool for the meaningful participation of women and girls³. This report outlines the findings and recommendations of this research and is supplemented by country specific reports for [Nigeria](#), [South Sudan](#) and [Somalia](#). The country specific reports provide further evidence which supports the recommendations made below.

The international community has long committed to supporting an independent and strong civil society. Through the Women, Peace and Security agenda, the international community has also committed to funding WROs and CSOs for their provision of essential services, their vital role in advocacy, transformational change and movement building, and their role in achieving women and girls' rights. Yet, this research, in addition to previous extensive research, particularly in the past 20 years, has demonstrated a clear lack of funding to WROs and CSOs. The country research in this project highlighted resource constraints that are holding WROs and CSOs back from achieving their potential and their goals. Underfunded WROs and CSOs, who are forced to follow donor-driven agendas, often lose their staff to bigger, better-funded organisations whose funding means they can recruit for the longer-term. The organisations which lose out end up delivering on short-term 'projectised' funding and are in a constant cycle of funding applications and reporting which is

¹ Throughout this proposal we refer to WROs, CSOs and organisations – this includes formal and informal, registered and unregistered associations, platforms, networks, groups, community groups, movements and organisations. This definition is used to ensure the research and mapping recognises the essential work of the range of groups and organisations who undertake vital WPS work at all levels.

² "Toward a feminist funding ecosystem: A framework and practical guide", AWID 2019. <https://www.awid.org/publications/toward-feminist-funding-ecosystem-framework-and-practical-guide>

³ [The Beyond Consultations Tool](#) supports the international community in more meaningful consultation with women affected by conflict. Using the tool partners ensured that the KIIs were intersectional and therefore included women and other members of excluded and marginalised groups. This included youth, young women and girls, people with disabilities, women of diverse minorities, refugees and Internally Displaced Peoples (IPDs), women and groups representing religious and ethnic minorities, rural-based women's groups and organisations and CSOs and organisations based in at least 3-5 regions in each country.

often the norm. These underfunded WROs and CSOs, their staff and their leaders need the international community to change its own systems and processes to enable core funding to reach them directly so that they can implement their self-defined priorities.

This research demonstrates that WROs and CSOs need core funding directly from donors. KII participants and desk-based research outlined a clear and extensive lack of direct funding which impacts on WROs and CSOs ability to undertake essential and transformational work. However, participants and project partners are aware that there are currently very few donors who provide, or whose current systems enable, direct funding. These recommendations therefore all apply to funding to WROs and CSOs, this includes funding through what participants described as “intermediaries”, which includes INGOs, funds, and networks.

In some cases, and with notable examples, INGOs, funds and networks have established or are moving towards systems and processes of more equal partnerships with WROs and CSOs. However, the recommendations outlined in this report will require most donors, INGOs, funds and networks to amend their systems to ensure that the funding needed by WROs and CSOs can be delivered. For example, Recommendation 2 outlines changes needed to due diligence processes. This requires donors to change their due diligence requirements, as well as the due diligence requirements that they ‘pass on to’ intermediaries. This can be done by moving to a system of partnership where donors or intermediaries co-design funding together based on sound partnership models. Donors, INGOs, funds and networks should assess their systems and processes against these recommendations and address where and how changes can be made. The recommended changes to donor practice are designed to provide clear, practical ways for funding to reach WROs and CSOs in need, and to better facilitate flows of support from the international community.

2. Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Support WROs to thrive and be flexible, responding to opportunities and addressing emerging crises as they arise: WROs and CSOs should be directly supported with core funding in order to address the emerging factors that compound gender equality, peace and security in humanitarian and conflict-related settings, as well as supporting and strengthening their institutions to be able to carry out activities to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Recommendation 2

Take a more holistic, integrated and context specific approach to Women, Peace and Security priorities, themes and focus areas of funding: Donor funding needs to work more closely in tune with WROs methods, practices and objectives. If donors are to continue project-based funding then in parallel, WROs that work on the intersections of gender, peace and security issues also need long term, core, flexible, transformative funding to bring about real change. This should be for their self-defined priorities rather than those of donors.

Recommendation 3

Increase accessibility to, and awareness of, funding opportunities and applications: Calls for funding/applications, and their instructions and guidance on applying, should be made easily accessible and inclusive.

Recommendation 4

Adapt compliance and due diligence processes: Donors should have dynamic compliance and due diligence measures which appreciate the context that WROs and CSOs work within and adapt requirements of due diligence processes according to their capacity and the amount of funding they receive. Whilst such processes need to be adapted, WROs and CSOs also need core funding to enable organisations to invest in compliance and due diligence.

Recommendation 5

Simplify proposal requirements (narrative and budget): Proposals requirements should be made simpler and in line with WROs and CSOs priorities rather than aligned with donor priorities allowing a process to be driven by their needs. There should be a two-phase process that consists of first submitting a short two-page concept note then proceeding on to a full proposal and budget. Feedback should also be provided on proposals submitted to provide WROs and CSOs with useful information to improve their applications the next time they apply for funding.

Recommendation 6

Prioritise monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks: Monitoring, evaluation and learning should be designed and built in a participatory manner which is community-led.

Recommendation 7

Minimise reporting requirements and standardise templates and processes (financial and narrative): Donors should minimise reporting burdens on WROs and CSOs and ensure reporting templates are as light touch as possible, simplified and have a standardised process to ensure that relevant information is collected, and made easier to do, with local contexts considered.

Recommendation 8

Capacity Strengthening: Strengthen capacities (technical, institutional, and overall policy environment) of WROs and CSOs.

3. Recommendation and Evidence

Recommendation 1 - Support WROs to thrive and be flexible, responding to opportunities and addressing emerging crises as they arise: WROs and CSOs should be directly supported with core funding in order to address the emerging factors that compound gender equality, peace and security in humanitarian and conflict-related settings, as well as supporting and strengthening their institutions to be able to carry out activities to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

This can be done by:

- Committing to increasing core funding directly to WROs and CSOs in the long-term. In the shorter term, where this is not possible, ensure that funding through intermediaries including INGOs is built on sound partnership models, notably co-creation of funding. These models should actively ensure that the recommendations in this research are built into all new funding for WROs and CSOs to support their growth.
- Responding to shocks and crisis by proactively reducing reporting requirements in these periods and allowing budget and objective flexibility to ensure WROs and CSOs can focus on their response rather than donor demands.
- Using diplomacy to consistently advocate for increased space for CSOs, particularly WROs. Considering the global pushback on women and girls' rights, and the importance of an independent civil society, the international community should use diplomacy to influence the environment for civil society and promote engagement between CSOs, WROs, Governments and the international community itself.
- Acknowledging the importance of funding WROs and CSOs as a way to support and strengthen civil society and particularly movement building. Such movement building is essential to support intersectional and feminist movements which create change and particularly that support representation and diverse rights including (but not limited to) young women, older women and girls, refugees and IPDs, and religious and ethnic minorities, with due regard to issues of socio-economic position, marital status and disability.

Evidence

Research participants outlined an increasing donor trend to engage directly with local WROs and CSOs. Such new direct donor funding includes: Canada's 300 million Canadian dollars to the Equality Fund; France's provision of 12 million euros to WROs in the global south; and the multi-donor United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund which was established in 2016 allocated 16 million US dollars of support in 2019 alone. This shows both an important step forward in political will and the hard-fought advocacy by WROs and CSOs for commitments on Women, Peace and Security and funding to WROs and CSOs.

WROs and CSOs have multiple and essential roles. Many work on policy and advocacy at the local, national and international level, changing and transforming systems, structures and processes which inhibit women and girls' rights and possibilities for peace. Others undertake essential roles as first responders or service providers. These organisations often adapt to changes in context, crisis or shocks to ensure that their work and services are best suited to national and local needs. Donor states should support these organisations and build on this trend of directly funding WROs and CSOs by understanding how local grassroots organisations work and continue the mutual learning between the different types of donors. This should facilitate an important move from being siloed to collective, shared ways of working (which has been highlighted as required throughout the recommendations in this report). Where current donor systems prevent such direct core funding, they should work with INGOs and funders to ensure that partnerships are as equal as possible, based on co-designed programmes and that the recommendations outlined in this research are implemented to ensure WROs and CSOs work is supported and can grow. However, the long-term goal should remain that donors provide direct, long-term funding.

In such funding systems, it is important that donors and their intermediaries are adaptable. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift online, as well as the existential crisis that many WROs and CSOs find themselves in,

donors should account for the organisational cost of this to their partners. Not all WROs and CSOs will have access to technological equipment and internet connectivity and donors should note the costs of bills of working from home. Online working could be used as an opportunity to directly engage better with WROs and CSOs bypassing intermediaries and having more access to them and vice versa.

In **Somalia**, participants recognised the prioritisation by donors of issues such as humanitarian response and gender-based violence, but argued that most of that project is short-term and projectised, making it very hard for CSOs and especially WROs in building skills and retaining staff to support core functions and boost their competitiveness *vis-à-vis* INGOs. They also noted how this type of support - including through direct, core and flexible funding to their organisations and holistic Women, Peace and Security programmes - could enable WROs and CSOs to seize current opportunities to advance Women, Peace and Security, including ongoing efforts to increase women's rights and participation through the adoptions of a constitutional quota, a NAP on Women, Peace and Security or the sexual offences bill.

In **South Sudan**, the Government needs to coordinate and cooperate with civil society to create a conducive working environment, for example by creating clear, consistent and unambiguous operating standards for WROs and CSOs. The international community has a key role to play in this by using diplomacy to influence the environment for civil society in South Sudan and promoting mutual engagement between WROs and CSOs and the Government of South Sudan, for example by making supporting civic space a condition of international cooperation.

To respond to the humanitarian and security crisis in **Nigeria** for instance, there has been an increase in donor agencies funding organisations at different levels and also working directly with the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs. Some of the notable agencies are UN Women, UNDP, NORAD, SIDA, the diplomatic communities and some INGOs. WROs and CSOs require breadth, depth and diversity.

Recommendation 2 - Take a more holistic, integrated and context specific approach to Women, Peace and Security priorities, themes and focus areas of funding: Donor funding needs to work more closely in tune with WRO methods, practices and objectives. If donors are to continue project-based funding then in parallel, WROs that work on the intersections of gender, peace and security issues also need long term, core, flexible, transformative funding to bring about real change. This should be for their self-defined priorities rather than those of donors.

This can be done by:

- Having different types of funding available the same call for funding, so that differently sized WROs and CSOs can access funding.
- Allowing organisations to work across different themes and therefore including different themes relating to Women, Peace and Security in their proposal templates. This could be done through allowing WROs and CSOs to tick which of these themes they will address. This could include: Conflict Prevention; Peacebuilding; Violence Against Women and Girls; Peacekeeping; Security Sector Reform; Humanitarian Response and Recovery; Legislation and Justice; Participation; Education; Livelihoods; Climate and the Environment. Organisations should be able to tick as many themes as they intend to address in their work. Donors should also actively ensure WROs and CSOs can explore the intersections of these themes through integrated programming approaches.
- Having rapid and flexible funds for acute emergencies or crises. Amounts of up-to £200,000 should be available for organisations when shocks or increases in conflict occur to allow organisations to act quickly and be more responsive to the needs and priorities of their communities.
- Increasing long term, core funding and with a dedicated minimum of 10% for organisational development to support WRO and CSOs in strengthening their core functions and capacities.
- Funding through a combination of funding streams and mechanisms that enable partnerships with WROs, CSOs and groups of different sizes and capabilities, working at different levels and on different issues.

Evidence

Donors play an important part in the way they distribute money, often in ways that do not closely align with WRO objectives, methods and practices. Less than 1% of funding from bilateral organisations reaches WROs and CSOs⁴. This is even worse for smaller organisations that are unregistered. Klls highlighted that smaller organisations are often excluded from applying to funding due to the size and scale of their organisations, stressing importance on smaller grants being available to apply for. In addition to the size of grants available, the siloed nature of funding makes it difficult for WROs and CSOs to engage with certain types of funding. There is a need to break down the silos between humanitarian funding, peacebuilding and development and to provide policy platforms to exchange on these issues. WROs and CSOs are comprehensively working on cross sections of issues providing rights-based solutions to address complex crises that are sometimes not aligned with donor priorities. This requires an improved system which allows organisations to implement their self-defined priorities and work across themes.

Participants identified that a change to long-term, flexible funding not tied to deliverables would have a positive impact on their organisations allowing them to keep a feminist agenda, push for participation, support structural capacity, allow them not to be spread too thinly - and mostly importantly, survive. Such a move would also ensure that donors who state that they welcome strong, independent, and robust civil society are supporting the development of it. In addition to this, the availability of access to rapid funds for times of emergencies or crises is also required. This would acknowledge that often WROs and CSOs are regularly operating in what is deemed a 'crisis', so that they should not have to go through the lengthy and detailed application process.

⁴ "Where is the Money for Women's Rights?", AWID 2012.

https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/where_is_the_money_preliminary_research_eng.pdf

Donors should map funds that are already available in the public domain by other donors and ensure they act in a complementary way not in duplication. The funding should be responding to national needs and the priorities of WROs and CSOs, not to donor priorities which are not always aligned to those of civil society.

In some parts of **Somalia**, participants indicated that they receive funding and work mostly on gender-based violence, humanitarian response and participation and, while these are needed, this is mostly following donor trends and priorities. Conflict resolution is funded because it is resource-based, there is a perception of clan-based violence leading to loss of life, injury and displacement. Yet women's participation within this is underfunded. Participants mentioned the need for more access to justice programmes, programmes addressing root causes drivers of violence and exclusion, strengthening inadequate protection services and weak regulatory framework, women's participation and Women, Peace and Security advocacy and policy, where huge opportunities are at play at the moment. They also identified short-term funding and lack of funding for core functions as an obstacle in organisational capacity and sustainability.

Participants in **South Sudan** stressed the importance of looking at the context rather than generalising the criteria for funding for all organisations. For example, interview participants noted that most donors provide funding for peacebuilding programmes in South Sudan, given the context of the country. As a result, other thematic areas have been disproportionately awarded to international agencies due to the perception that local NGOs and CSOs lack capacity to implement complex, sensitive programmes for issues such as sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence. It should be noted that all thematic areas are complex and sensitive and that national organisations are often best placed to address these.

Participants in **Nigeria** reported that funding for certain programme areas are more accessible than others, with one responding that *"Violence Against Women and Girls gets more attention these days"* while another noted that *"conflict prevention, peacebuilding and violence extremism"* are easier to fund. There can be a tendency for organisations to shift interventions to match donor priorities, but it is not feasible for organisations to focus on one area alone – most themes are crosscutting.

Recommendation 3 - Increase accessibility to, and awareness of, funding opportunities and applications: Calls for funding/applications, and their instructions and guidance on applying, should be made easily accessible and inclusive.

This can be done by:

- Ensuring that it is not only provided in English but is accessible in other languages, particularly national languages. In addition, it should also be easily accessible in terms of less technical language or jargon.
- Widely advertising, promoting early engagement and raising awareness of opportunities by informing WROs and CSO networks of upcoming launches of funding, including timelines for each stage of the application.
- Giving at least 4 weeks to complete proposals.
- Convening small, informative workshops that are inclusive of Q&A - online or in person. These would best facilitate those wanting to apply, would enable applicants to meet other organisations and potentially build coalitions for applications, which can remove the third-party INGO intermediary.
- Launching funding frameworks which reflect areas of focus that are responsive to context specific needs. This can be done by meaningfully consulting with local WROs and CSOs prior to funding opportunities being launched.

Evidence

Calls for funding/bids are mostly inaccessible to WROs and CSOs. Often calls are only launched in English, including those issued by non-English speaking countries. During consultations with international global experts in funding who work with national local partners noted that often the calls for proposal, instructions and guidance is in English, and include and expect from applicants a substantial amount of technical language or jargon that is not commonly used in all contexts, and therefore often inaccessible for local WROs and CSOs meaning that the process can become focused on INGOs who often work only with those organisations known to them. This can exclude organisations, particularly grassroots WROs and CSOs, not known to INGOs.

Not only is the language used in calls for funding/bids often too technical but also particularly so is the guidance around finances and budgets. The structure and system of the donor country dominates the calls which make them inaccessible. There should be a push to standardise simpler, less technical proposal application systems available in various languages and to reduce competitive bidding processes. WROs and CSOs outlined other barriers, such as not having enough information on the application process to be able to apply. An additional barrier included the different systems that various donors use. When WROs and CSOs understand and navigate one donor's (or intermediary's) system of applying for funding it is often different from another donor's system, therefore the lack of a unified approach is challenging for WRO and CSOs with already stretched resources to be able to learn new systems processes for each donor. INGOs are more likely to be able to adapt to different donor processes as they arguably have more resources but local national WROs and CSOs are unable to.

In addition to having a somewhat unified process, early engagement with WROs and CSOs by undertaking wide and inclusive outreach to inform them of any new potential launches of funding is another way of making it accessible. In-person workshops or online webinars are ways of informing organisations about potential funding. An example of this has been seen with the Department for International Development (DFID) Nigeria, now Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Nigeria, holding a presentation on a potential launch of funding, inviting civil society, which was well received. This also allows all those wishing to apply to be able to meet other organisations who are also thinking about applying to potentially build networks and coalitions for applying for funding and possibly together. It also can provide an opportunity for those wanting to apply to ask questions as well as an opportunity for feedback to be given on the potential opportunity to donors as they should meaningfully consult with WROs and CSOs to inform funding frameworks so that the area of focus is responsive to issues and concerns identified by WROs and CSOs in their countries and communities. An example of this having taken place is as part of shaping 'Amplify Change Fund', a fund that supports CSOs who advocate for improved sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), where actors in SRHR were consulted to feed into the needs the funds would respond to and its main geographical focus.

Additional challenges that WROs and CSOs also face are the short timeframes to write multi-year projects with small turnaround windows for applications, often making it a barrier to local WROs and CSOs applying. This is also challenging for INGOs as short timeframes make it difficult when applying as the intermediary to engage with a wide range of national partners. This does not allow for a participatory joint process and can be exclusionary. The more notification donors can give for application deadlines, the more WROs and CSOs can prepare. It also would enable INGO intermediaries to reach out to and work with organisations outside of their existing networks. It should also be noted that organisations are forced to comply with application requirements which are often time consuming, and with no resources or salary contributions seen as part and parcel of programme design and development but they do have a cost and being unable to do this should be seen as exclusionary.

Organisations based in **Somalia** outlined that most WROs and CSOs did not have sufficient information on funding application processes and how to contact the prospective donors, especially WROs. Most donors give priority to INGOs who they have ongoing relationships with and can more easily meet the structural and technical eligibility criteria, due diligence requirements and better core function capacity, operational and financial systems and accountability. WROs and CSOs should be able to access funding from donors : participants emphasised that it is they who have strategic understanding of the communities they work with as first responders; which enables them to understand the context in which they operate; and, representing their communities and the development of their country, while international organisations should take a supportive role.

In **South Sudan**, organisations reported that the application process is overly complicated and challenging as they are incredibly in-depth. In many cases, applications require codes to be able to upload the relevant information to their server. Instead, making the application process as easy as possible via emails for example would be beneficial and more effective. In addition to this they outlined the additional challenge that the Government of South Sudan only shares information with a few civil society platforms, networks and clusters which can hinder their ability to hear about funding opportunities, access relevant information and maintain their capacity. Therefore, holding forums and networking events where such information can be provided to WROs and CSOs about potential funding applications will allow the support of grassroots organisations and encourage the building of WROs and CSOs networks and relationships.

Working together, building coalitions and networking is a key opportunity for strengthening WROs and CSOs in **Nigeria**. It is also an important way of sharing funding opportunities with a wider pool of organisations and increasing accessibility to funding. Limited networking and inadequate cooperation among organisations were identified by interview participants as a major challenge. It is the cause of duplication of efforts, conflicting strategies at the community level and a lack of learning from experience: *“The biggest opportunity is working together.”*⁵

⁵ KII participant in Nigeria.

Recommendation 4 - Adapt compliance and due diligence processes: Donors should have dynamic compliance and due diligence measures which appreciate the context that WROs and CSOs work within and adapt requirements of due diligence processes according to their capacity and the amount of funding they receive. Whilst such processes need to be adapted, WROs and CSOs also need core funding to enable organisations to invest in compliance and due diligence.

This can be done by:

- Amending compliance requirements so that organisations submit essential information only. This should include mission statement, annual reports, governance structure, annual financial statements, and written policies such as code of ethics and safeguarding. Where codes of ethics and safeguarding are included in other policies, these should be accepted.
- Ensuring the amount of funding requested should correlate to the amount of compliance required with increased compliance being asked for as funding increases. This can be split in the following ways: for organisations receiving funding up to £30,000; between £31,000 and £99,000; between £100,000 and £250,000 and above £251,000.
- Establishing a semi-unified compliance process and harmonised capacity assessments across donor countries and INGO and funders which would enable donors to get the required information and assist WROs and CSOs when applying for funding to ensure the same information is requested and submitted and avoiding having to submit different information for each donor.

Evidence

Consultations highlighted the increasing need of a less onerous compliance process. Due diligence should consider the often challenging and constantly changing contexts that WROs and CSOs work within as well as the constantly changing donor compliance rules. With a complex compliance process, consultations demonstrated that these processes often exclude some WROs and CSOs due to the amount of time and resources that would be needed to complete them. Such complexities can deter WROs and CSOs from applying or ‘force’ them to apply through a partnership with an INGO. Even when partnering with INGOs, compliance processes change and are ultimately led by donor requirements.

Compliance processes should be agile and should consider the ability of those WROs and CSOs being unable to comply with counter terrorist financing and anti-money laundering obligations on top of other compliance requirements because their systems and processes are not aligned with UK and ‘global north’ legislations on this. This can have an impact on their ability to access resources. The amount of money requested should correlate with the required amount of compliance. For example, for smaller amounts of up to £30,000 required compliance should be very light, with £31,000-£99,000 requiring a medium level of compliance and £100,000 and above requiring a higher level.

Ideally a long-term aim for change should be that donors fund WROs and CSOs directly, and therefore due diligence and compliance requirements required should reflect only what is completely essential. Where that is not possible in the shorter term, donors that fund intermediaries such as INGOs and funds who are more able to manage compliance criteria and due diligence, should take on the compliance where possible. They should reduce compliance and due diligence to only what is necessary and not pass unnecessary burden onto WROs and CSOs. This would require both donors and (most) intermediaries to amend their compliance and due diligence to what is essential, not what is desired. In conjunction, if intermediary INGO and funds are used to fund WROs and CSOs, they should allocate funding to strengthen organisational compliance to support organisations to access funding directly and independently in the long-term.

In **Somalia**, participants stated that complex due diligence processes, short deadlines, a substantial amount of paperwork, and requirements that are difficult to fulfil due to bureaucratic systems can significantly affect and delay the application to and implementation of humanitarian, peacebuilding and women and girls’ rights programmes and exclude CSOs and WROs from participating in projects or being identified as potential partners. Due to a prioritisation of preventing violent extremism and counter-terrorism strategies, donors are stricter than in other contexts and averse to funding local and

national NGOs directly, which has put Somali WROs and CSOs at disadvantage. The lack of core funding to strengthen due diligence systems and capacities and lack of physical presence in the funders headquarters and regional offices makes it hard for them to access funding. WROs and CSOs outlined the need for more harmonised requirements and capacity assessments on due diligence processes.

In **South Sudan**, concerns were raised by participants over the level of risk that donors perceive when funding national organisations. This results in heavy compliance demands on organisations applying for or receiving funding. Participants expressed concern about the long list of difficult requirements that agencies place on CSOs in order to qualify for funding, especially core support. This puts the focus on internal management systems at the expense of the work that organisations are undertaking and achieving. In addition to this, many WROs and CSOs in South Sudan find it too difficult to access funding directly from international donors due to restrictive preconditions. For example, the requirement for applicants to have a certain threshold of funding in their accounts to be able to apply for funding and to have a certain number of years' experience implementing similar projects can be challenging considering the relative youth of South Sudanese WROs and CSOs which evolved mostly after the country achieved independence in 2011.

Participants in **Nigeria**, reported an inability to meet due diligence and compliance requirements due to a lack of capacity, staff turnover, size of organisation and a limited track record when it comes to previous funding experience. One participant noted that bigger organisations who have a longer track record can access funds much more easily because they meet the requirements compared to the smaller organisations.

Recommendation 5 - Simplify proposal requirements (narrative and budget): Proposals requirements should be made simpler and in line with WROs and CSOs priorities rather than aligned with donor priorities allowing a process to be driven by their needs. There should be a two-phase process that consists of first submitting a short two-page concept note then proceeding on to a full proposal and budget. Feedback should also be provided on proposals submitted to provide WROs and CSOs with useful information to improve their applications the next time they apply for funding.

This can be done by:

- Initial submission of a Concept Note, which should be approved before a full application and budget are required.
- Application forms focused on outcomes, rather than activities which are restrictive. In the longer-term donors could look to unify application processes and forms so that WROs and CSOs do not have to use different systems and templates for each donor.
- Allowing WROs and CSOs to outline what themes they intend to work on (see recommendation 2 above).
- Simplifying full proposal templates to include only: context/problem statement, objectives, outcomes, and organisational ability to deliver the work.
- Making clear that budgets are an indication of how funding will be spent only and that there will be total flexibility between budget lines. This will enable organisations to adapt to national and local needs, organisational priorities, and emergencies such as COVID-19. At most budget templates should require: salaries (by role); equipment; travel; consultancies (if any); training; office rent; communications; protection needs; printing; workshops; administrative and overhead costs.
- Accepting applications in various formats (email and online) because not all organisations have sufficient internet capacity to navigate lengthy online processes.
- Systematically providing feedback to applicants to enable them to build on proposals for future applications.
- Accounting for protection needs for WROs and CSOs who are increasingly at threat due to closing civil society space and backlash against women and girls' rights. Donors should allow organisations to include protection budget lines in their budgets which enable them to use funding flexibly for their protection needs. In some contexts, this could be for relocation, for transportation, or emergency support for staff to be extracted from dangerous situations.
- (*Where intermediaries are used*) Requiring INGOs and/or intermediaries to clearly specify how they will ensure equal partnership principles in all phases of the programme, including the budget (including the distribution of administrative/overhead costs) and all levels of decision making. In addition, in such applications, INGO and/or fund should be required to support the capacity strengthening of WRO and CSO partners in areas they mutually identify (see recommendation 7 on capacity strengthening).

Evidence

Consultations highlighted that WROs and CSOs spend significant time and resources which are already stretched on putting together detailed proposals in short timeframes. Often these applications are unsuccessful meaning full proposals are not a good use of their time and resources. As a result, having a two-stage applications system process in place where the first stage would be a short concept note then followed by a full proposal if suitable would save a lot of time and resources for many WROs and CSOs. This also encourages WROs and CSOs from applying the next time round. Providing WROs and CSOs with feedback on their proposals can also be helpful to enable them to address any issues in future applications. Budgets should also be simple to capture a sense of activities but to ask for a full detailed activity plan before work has been implemented leaves no room for adaptation as the project progresses. Proposals where INGOs are partnering with WROs and CSOs, donors should set requirements to incorporate partnership principles throughout the proposals and budget process, allowing for the equal partnership engagement and co-design with national WROs and CSOs to ensure their objectives are met and allowing them to have a say from the inception phase.

In **Somalia** organisations noted that developing proposals that are appealing to donors, technically sound and in tandem with national and local needs and priorities, remains one of the greatest challenges they face, due to a lack of sustained and core funding to build and retain these capacities. In addition, some organisations also raised concerns on the technical

language as a barrier, especially when technical words that they are not familiar with are used by the donors/funders in the proposal documentation. This ought to be simplified and based on context-based vocabulary and concepts. Some participants mentioned that when they partner with an INGO, they often find that they cannot voice their needs or tailor the proposals to the needs of the community. Instead, INGOs decide. Communicating through an intermediary often denies them the chance to explain their funding requirements, resulting in a breakdown in cooperation. Donors and INGOs should avoid this by prioritising WROs and CSOs organisational development and equal partnerships, and wider consultation with communities and WROs on needs and local/national priorities before developing proposals.

In **South Sudan**, there was clear feedback that the international community needs to work closely with WROs and CSOs during the call for proposals and that they rarely received feedback from donors on unsuccessful applications. If feedback was to be provided this would be helpful to increase the likelihood of future funding proposals being improved and in line with donor requirements.

Participants in **Nigeria** suggested that calls for proposals should be made easier for WROs and CSOs, and that guidance should be offered on proposal writing. Where proposals and applications are unsuccessful, timely feedback would help to increase chances of success in the future. One interviewee noted that, *“there are some donors that guide you through the whole process, giving definitions of some terms you are expected to respond to.”*⁶ This should be a more frequent occurrence.

⁶ KII participant in Nigeria

Recommendation 6 - Prioritise monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks: Monitoring, evaluation and learning should be designed and built in a participatory manner which is community-led.

This can be done by:

- Prioritising and emphasising learning as well as accountability to be able WROs, CSOs and donors to critically reflect on success, progress and challenges by way of meaningful outcome-driven Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL).
- Allocating core (not linked to one specific project) funding for MEL, so it is incorporated into the work of WROs and CSOs, and not just seen as an overburdensome donor requirement. This should be focused on MEL capacity strengthening for organisational need, rather than training in donor or INGO MEL methods and tools.
- Prioritising using MEL frameworks already developed by WROs and CSO, instead of imposing their own MEL systems. If WROs and CSOs do not have MEL systems already in place, donors should consider developing and co-designing systems together with WROs and CSOs, focusing on quality as opposed to quantity and move away from measuring value for money.
- Focusing on the data that organisations need to capture only rather than what is required for current donor compliance. MEL frameworks used by WROs and CSOs should be used rather than those of donors. These should have more of a focus on outcome reporting looking at what has been achieved as a result of the funding rather than activities.
- Moving to outcome focused MEL which enables organisations and donors to learn from projects, programmes and work undertaken rather than data collection. This could be undertaken through outcomes focused discussions in-person or via video/phone calls and site-visits. Outcome harvesting is an effective methodology for MEL which enables organisations to assess progress and challenges at impact and outcome level¹.
- Supporting WROs and CSOs through MEL capacity strengthening that meet their needs – see recommendation 7. If necessary, support should also be provided to WROs and CSOs to assist them with capturing data to comply with donor requirements.

Evidence

Donors need to go beyond traditional MEL systems and adapt their systems according to MEL systems that WROs and CSOs have in place or if they do not have a system in place then should consider developing and co-designing systems together with WROs and CSOs considering their specific contexts. Working with WROs and CSOs to see what works and does not work is important to understand their environments but also to learn from them. KII participants shared that INGOs often lead on the responsibility for MEL as national partners do not have the resources or are not seen to have the technical capacity to carry this out. Moving to a system of having less technical reporting tools and a joint tool development with appropriate methods that are outcome focused would allow WROs and CSOs to report in a manageable and meaningful way. Collecting MEL data should be undertaken safely and using appropriate tools and systems within the context organisations working to measure impact in emergency and conflict as well as during pandemics, such as COVID-19.

INGO KII participants raised that alongside their own MEL requirements they offered MEL support for their national partners to support them in collecting data as an additional resource. Donors should support such capacity strengthening especially if WROs and CSOs have identified MEL gaps in their organisation. This learning can be done in the form of webinars or in person mini sessions on MEL support to those partners as well as having cross border exchange among community members so lessons learned, and best practices can be identified and shared.

In **Somalia**, participants stated that while most organisations have MEL units in place, these are not always composed of MEL experts, which are hard to retain beyond project life-span, and they cannot set up their own systems, methods and requirements, and are consumed by meeting donors' and INGO partners' sometimes different requirements. They stressed the need to have core funding to develop MEL systems to identify progress, measure overall performance and assess its impacts, especially those on women and girls' rights. They also mentioned that MEL should also have indicators

that are aligned with National Development Plan (NDP) MEL as well as in the localisation of Agenda 2030 goals, indicators and targets.

Participants in **South Sudan** highlighted that monitoring the activities is straightforward and does not require sophisticated tools to undertake it. However, the challenge here is that funding for MEL units in local NGOs/CSOs is limited. International partners allocate very little funds to support the MEL unit leaving the organisations unable to attract qualified and experienced staff. Sometimes this results in spending valuable time and resources in training on the job for the MEL personnel rather than making better informed programmatic decisions based on MEL data.

Participants in **Nigeria** reported that MEL frameworks vary depending on the project, partner and donor. One participant reported that, given they do not have the long-term staff to fulfil monitoring, evaluation and learning obligations, they “normally will employ an expert” to do that for them. There was a consensus that MEL was more worthwhile when there was a long-term member of staff managing the processes.

Recommendation 7 - Minimise reporting requirements and standardise templates and processes (financial and narrative): Donors should minimise reporting burdens on WROs and CSOs and ensure reporting templates are as light touch as possible, simplified and have a standardised process to ensure that relevant information is collected, and made easier to do, with local contexts considered.

This can be done by:

- Setting realistic reporting deadlines and spreading out reporting periods are important. Preferably reporting could be annually, but at the most 6 months.
- Outcome and impact focused reporting with organisations being asked to report at this level only and not on excessive lists of activities and MEL indicators which might not be useful for them.
- Simplified reporting which requires organisations to complete a template that includes success and achievements (these could be by thematic area and overarching – see recommendation 4 for possible thematic areas); challenges; changes in plan; organisation, staffing and governance.
- Financial reports being accepted with only the necessary details as well as any budget revisions. This should allow WROs and CSOs to outline what the project expenditure was as follows: salaries (by role); equipment; travel; consultancies (if any); training; office rent; communications; protection needs; printing; workshops.
- Only requiring receipts for expenditure over £200 and copies should be accepted to enable organisations to keep copies for their records for national audit and registration purposes. Timesheets should not be required.
- Undertaking spot checks when only necessary. These should consider the time required by staff of WROs and CSOs who have to respond to spot checks and questions instead of implementing the project or programme.
- Changing report deadlines when there are changes in the context. This will allow organisations to respond to the change in circumstances, such as increases in conflict, rather than focus on reporting on pre-agreed activities.
- Moving to standardising these more simplified reporting requirements across donors to ensure that organisations are working with only one format, rather than multiple.

Evidence

Donors should not be rigid in terms of their reporting requirements. Grant-making organisations interviewed outlined methods such as partner capacity assessments which used at the beginning of the project assess organisations' challenges and capacities in order to tailor design the reporting required. Many INGOs will take on donor reporting due to the technical and often demanding requirements that national partners will not be able to absorb therefore, keeping reporting to a minimum and having simpler, realistic reporting requirements and templates is essential. It is also important that wellbeing is also considered, participants noted the lack of consideration of wellbeing, which is further impacted when narrative and financial reporting deadlines are regular. This can have a negative impact. Realistic deadlines should be set, and purposeful meaningful reporting should be asked for, if reporting can be reduced then it should be. Such deadlines and requirements on when activities and spend occurs should be adjusted if there are changes in the context, such as increases in conflict or crisis. Requiring organisations to report on a pre-agreed set of activities and not moving deadlines when contexts change adds additional pressure on organisations at the time that they are responding to crisis.

In **Somalia**, WROs and CSOs are sometimes required to undergo reporting for both the partner INGO and the donor, which duplicates the information and creates strain on local and national organizations. Participants pointed out that the current reporting procedures and processes are cumbersome, and it would be better to reduce the paperwork, automate the reporting and make it concise and brief, while retaining specificity in terms of details. One of the participants noted that it will be important for donors to fund the translation and publication of periodic narrative reports in English and Somali to reach larger audiences. Participants have also noted that monthly reporting is too time and resource-consuming, and proposed quarterly, bi-annual, and annual reporting instead.

In **South Sudan**, participants raised the different reporting requirements required by different donors on either monthly, quarterly and yearly basis. The requirement to constantly report and focus on capturing financial data, programmatic

activities, organisational progress and key institutional development milestones does not reflect meaningful consideration of their partnership with WROs and CSOs that are unable to keep up with this demand.

Interviews in **Nigeria** highlighted that *“in most cases, [reporting processes] are very challenging and vague at times.”* Reporting requirements vary between partner, donors and project. Some processes are simple and straightforward, while others require more detail. Efforts should be made to harmonise these: *“Some of the different ways of reporting to partners are; direct use of reporting templates for both narrative and financial and sent via an email; registering and logging into a donor portal to upload reports; filling in reporting templates. This differs in frequency - some partners/donors prefer monthly activity reports while others prefer quarterly or 6 monthly for both narrative and financial.”*⁷

⁷ KII participant in Nigeria.

Recommendation 8 - Capacity Strengthening: Strengthen capacities (technical, institutional and overall policy environment) of WROs and CSOs.

This can be done by:

- Focusing on the needs highlighted by organisations, including in resource mobilisation (including fundraising), MEL, organisational policies developments, fundraising, proposal development and reporting (financial and narrative), organisational development and investment in staff and target groups wellbeing and self and collective care. These areas are all core functions which require core funding.
- Carrying out a brief capacity assessment to assess gaps in which WROs and CSOs could be assisted further until are at stage agreed at the beginning of the grant.
- Funding networks and coalitions is a way of capacity strengthening. National networks and coalitions often have a strong relationship with WROs and CSOs and extensive understanding of the context. Provision of such capacity strengthening support will undoubtedly lead to knowledge and skill sharing. In addition, there are specific capacity interventions that can be designed, developed and where funding could be delivered through such networks as they are best placed to reach grassroots organisations and better understand their needs.

Evidence

Capacity assessments at the beginning of the project carried out by the donor or intermediary INGO or funder could help identify gaps and challenges for the WROs and CSOs that they work with and allow for them to offer tailored capacity strengthening support to work on these issues. Findings demonstrate that smaller WROs and CSOs are discouraged from applying for funding if they perceive themselves to lack technical capacities in applying for funding or that they feel they will not be able to deliver or manage larger projects, particularly if they are aware that the MEL and reporting requirements will be extensive. Therefore, allowing for an inclusionary grant making support and working with such WROs and CSOs would remove the competitive aspects of donor funding and allow for equal opportunities. Providing support to strengthening capacities can also be done in parallel to the running of the project/grant by offering small capacity activities to support organisations in areas that they have identified. In these cases, the time and salary of staff should be covered by the donor budget in order to resource this. This provides long-term institutional investment and allows organisations to build on skills and be able to apply for different funding streams in the future.

In **Somalia** participants mentioned that they do not lack ‘capacity’ to design, deliver and/or manage aid projects, but require capacity strengthening on core functions such as proposal writing, reporting (financial and narrative), financial management, budget management, MEL and due diligence requirements. They linked these gaps to financial aid systems and fund “projectisation”, as local and national organisations’ biggest challenges are on hiring and retaining staff with core organisational capacities. One of the participants identified capacity assessment as the first step to establishing training needs and gaps in skills before doing any capacity building for the CSOs. A move to core funding would allow organisations to spend some of their funding on these areas identified and be spent where each organisation needs it most. Long-term relationships with resources allocated by donors and INGOs to support WROs/CSOs to strengthen their capacities to ensure they can contribute fully to the change they and the communities where they operate seek to see.

In **South Sudan**, participants reported a limited understanding by donors of the capacity of both national and local CSOs, NGOs and WROs. National and grassroots organisations feel that they are unfairly regarded as having low capacity. Their perceived lack of organisational capacity is arguably a direct result of the unpredictable, project-focused and short-term nature of funding. WROs and CSOs struggle to recruit good teams, provide staff training, strengthen internal processes and invest time in coordination activities. Therefore, international organisations including UN agencies and INGOs are relied on by donors to act as an intermediary – this means that they manage both the administrative burden and carry the risk, but that national and local WROs and CSOs are unable to advance their capacity to both apply for this funding and lead the implementation of funded projects.

In **Nigeria**, when asked about the challenges faced by organisations' in applying for funding opportunities, participants cited inadequate capacity and staff time as key issues. Interview participants cautioned that "*organisations are not all the same*" and that the "*issues and demands are dynamic*", so a variety of training and support are required. In particular, KII participants discussed requiring capacity strengthening support for proposal writing, resource mobilisation, policy and advocacy, partnership development, budget management and due diligence.

4. Partners

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) is the UK's Women, Peace and Security civil society network. GAPS is a membership organisation of NGOs and experts in the field of development, human rights, humanitarian response and peacebuilding. GAPS was founded to progress the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The role of GAPS is to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC) is a non-governmental and non-profit making organisation that was established mid-2000. Since then, SWDC has worked with a range of partners, donors and governments that include UN agencies and INGO, grantees to implement programs and activities that promote equal rights for women to ensure they have an active role in the Somali community through enhancing their social, political, economic and cultural participation.

Women for Women International: Since 1993, Women for Women International has worked with more than 500,000 marginalised women survivors of war in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kosovo, Iraq, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Sudan. Our core work is centred on a holistic, rights-based year-long programme to address the needs of marginalised women in conflict-affected countries.

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Nigeria: WILPF is the oldest women's international peace organisation in the world, with over 42 sections covering all continents, an international secretariat based in Geneva and a New York office at the UN plaza focused on strengthening the work of the United Nations. WILPF Nigeria provides a platform to address challenges through peaceful and nonviolent means and for women to engage actively, to build the capacity of women at grassroots and national level and be part of a network of diverse women who are passionately seeking for peace through non-violent means all around the world.

Women's International Peace Centre (The Peace Centre): The Peace Centre, formerly Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), is a feminist organisation with 25 years' experience working with partners across 15 conflict and post-conflict African countries and regionally to ignite women's leadership, amplify their voices and deepen their impact in recreating peace. Their model intersects research (on women's specific experiences and needs), evidence-based advocacy (to influence national, regional and international policy and practice), holistic healing (to enable women's wellbeing and participation in peace processes), skills and movement building (to equip women human rights defenders with necessary skills, build networks and facilitate exchange of strategies to advance women's leadership for peace).

Womankind Worldwide is a global women's rights organization working with women's rights organisations and movements to change the world for women and girls. Our vision is a just world where the rights of all women are respected, valued and realized, and includes working towards ending to all forms of violence against women and girls, advancing women's economic rights and strengthening women's influence and decision-making power. We do this by supporting women's rights organisations and movements who are powering women around the world, because we know that when women come together, they have the power to change their own lives and their communities.