



Policy Advice Future funding modalities for women's rights and gender equality SDG 5 Fund.

Achieving social change in support of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls requires work and social change at all levels, from local grassroots level, to national, regional and international level. An added value of women's movements across the world is the presence of multiple connections and networking between activists at the different levels and across countries and regions. International networking contributes to capacity building of activists and organisations, strengthens the knowledge base and effectiveness of lobby and advocacy work, and provides a safety valve and security for women human rights defenders at risk. It also ensures that global advocacy builds on the local, national and regional priorities as identified by women's movements on the ground.

Achieving the best results on gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls should be the primary objective of the future SDG5 fund. In order to reach that goal, a vibrant, diverse and a level playing field within the broad landscape of global civil society is indispensable. This should include a focus on the southern based women's rights and gender equality organisations.

Therefore, WO=MEN and its constituencies advises the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take into account the following principles when establishing the new policy framework for funding of women's rights organisations:

- = Strengthening the southern civil society is important. This means that the largest share of the SDG5 Fund should be channeled directly to southern based women's rights and gender equality organisations. Leadership of alliances should primarily consist of southern based organisations.

In strengthening the southern civil society, it is important to support the process of getting more direct access to funding in order to strengthening ownership, agenda setting and decision-making . There is also an important role to play for Dutch organisations in support of that process. However, donors often to offer large grants, with the result that many women's rights and gender equality organisations, especially the southern based organisations, are not able to meet the requirements. The Ministry should take a thorough look when assessing proposals, that when Dutch organisations apply, attention is paid that the ownership is with local organisations and that large part of the funding is spent through the southern partners and at the potential to support Southern partners directly.

This topic is very closely related to the issue of shrinking space for civil society. World wide critical feminist civil society face decreasing support for activities, limited possibilities to engage in decision making and continuous shrinking financial resources. That is why the strengthening of women's rights and gender equality needs to be seen in a broader perspective.

- = In certain circumstances, northern based organisations can also take the lead. Especially when one takes into account the complexity of the current state of global political affairs, the impact of the shrinking space on women's rights and gender equality issues and the strong interlinkage amongst the civil society organisations. Participation of northern based organizations in those alliances is important, for example as a gateway to international forums, support for administrative processes, and as a watchdog of foreign policy.

An important point to take into consideration is that in certain contexts, transferring funds directly to southern organisations might pose risks, for instance when this is considered as foreign state interference. This can result into money being confiscated by authoritarian governments, physical threats, bank accounts frozen, offices closed down, and loss of legitimacy.

Northern based organisations can play an important role in redressing incoherence in policy implementation at the Dutch, European and international level by preventing policies from aggravating gender inequality or violating women's rights and advocate for policies that contribute to the women's rights agenda.

This also applies to the diaspora women's organizations in the Netherlands that advocate for women's rights and gender equality in their home countries. Often these organizations are run by feminist activists in exile. As they both understand the local context and the 'Dutch way' of doing things, they can offer unique support to local women's agenda's and international advocacy work in women's rights and gender equality. In practice these organizations face several barriers to access funding as they fall outside the box of development cooperation funding and the box of domestic gender equality funding by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The SDG5 fund should allow for their access.

- = Women's rights issues ask for holistic approaches i.e. system change and a breakdown of harmful and cultural norms by engaging men, boys and religious leaders, cutting across specific priorities or themes. Also, cross-level and regional cooperation is important. Therefore, it is advised to allow for holistic approaches within the framework and refrain from limiting eligible funding to specific themes or regions. The advice is to use a holistic frame that understands the interdependence between the different realms of women and girls' lives.

Holistic approach is gender transformative: A future SDG5 fund should therefore address the root causes of gender inequality and imbalances of power and include a strong focus on breaking down harmful gender norms, gender stereotypes and policies. To achieve this, the SDG5 fund should allow for awareness raising on gender roles and norms, continue to support engaging boys and men as a strategy and be inclusive of broader gender and sexually diverse communities.

Cross-level and regional cooperation: Harmful gender norms need to be addressed at various levels: individual, relational, community and policy level. The new framework should therefore strive to include women's rights and gender equality organisations working with various target groups at different levels: local grassroots level, to national, regional and international level.

The added value of women's movements across the world is the presence of multiple connections and networking between activists at different levels and across countries and regions. International networking and joint advocacy contribute to capacity building of activists and organisations, strengthens the knowledge base and effectiveness of lobby and advocacy work, and provides a safety valve and security for women human rights defenders at risk.

Implementation of programs at regional and national level should not be limited to the focus regions of the Dutch development cooperation policy. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that women's rights and gender equality organisations are under pressure in various contexts, regions and countries.

Progress on gender equality has been uneven within countries – therefore HMIC's and LMIC's should also be eligible in this framework. The SDG5 fund should be based on needs instead of fixed targets for geographic scope.

- = Societies with shrinking space for civil society tend to espouse patriarchal values and traditional gender identities and roles as part of a conservative and nationalist rhetoric. This challenge should be taken into account when designing transformative strategies for gender diplomacy and funding modalities in support of women's rights and gender equality. It is important to provide sufficient support to the security of women's human right defenders.

The key drivers of shrinking civic space ultimately relate to power, where those that have and benefit from power are afraid of losing it. This applies to visible power at the political level, in formal decision-making processes as well as to invisible power, at the level of culture, behavior, values and beliefs. Interventions to improve civic space and create an enabling environment for women's rights defenders will therefore have to focus at both the political and the cultural level.

Women human rights defenders face risks because they not only challenge corporate and state power, but also transgress discriminating gender roles by speaking out. Reported gender-specific threats and violence include sexual violence, harassment of their children, and discrimination in their communities.

- = Cater for diverse financial needs and capacities by creating separate windows to avoid unnecessary competition and a non-level playing field for different sizes of organisations.

It is important for the sustainability of women's rights and gender equality organisations and their work to move beyond a project nature of funding. Inclusion of budgets for organisational strengthening as support costs for programmes is essential for the continuation of women's rights and gender equality organisations and movements. In the context of a backlash against these organisations, support should contribute to their resilience. Flexible funding allows for taking risks, to learn and respond to urgent and unforeseen challenges and seize opportunities in respond to shifts in contexts and lessons learned.

The funding needs and financial capacities of women's rights and gender equality organisations differ from one another and do not benefit from 'one size fits all' funding modalities. A future SDG5 Fund could cater for different capacities by creating for instance separate distinct windows with different annual minimum and maximum grant sizes.

- = Build partnership relations, with direct strategic and political engagement between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SDG5 Fund recipient organisations and respect for the autonomy of recipient organisations. If direct funding poses additional risks, intermediary and alternative channels for the transfer of funds should be used depending on local contexts and loopholes.

Ensure capacity for thorough strategic exchanges is present at the levels needed: in embassies and in key departments in The Hague. Avoid direct funding relationships between embassies and smaller NGOs in sensitive contexts, as this may politically compromise either side; rather channel support and strategic exchanges through umbrella organisations at national or regional level. In the case of global networks that have gender equality and women empowerment as core objectives, channeling support through their country offices (often with southern leadership in place) could be an alternative.

- = Organizational support, flexible funding and long-term support are beneficial to organizational and programme sustainability, responsiveness to challenges and shifts in contexts.

True strategic planning for change that helps in achieving SDGs looks at different roles of organisations at global, regional, national and local levels. While priority setting should be based on voices at grassroots level, a thorough understanding and acknowledgment of different roles for actors at different levels is crucial for strategic planning of long term and sustainable change. Proper actor analysis with an eye for complementary roles from grassroots level upwards, and regular exchanges on often volatile contexts are key to flexible and meaningful programming. Underlying theories of change need to include change in social norms (about inclusion of women in political, economic and social life) and interhuman relations, which really needs a long-term perspective and support.

- = An increase in attention for women's rights and gender in other policy areas, including climate change, peace and security, and trade and investments, provides crucial unprecedented opportunity to truly integrate women's rights and gender issues in these areas. Women's rights organizations play a crucial role to ensure this mainstreaming is done in a genuine and rights-based manner, that actually supports their agendas (and avoids 'gender-washing'). Therefore, it is advisable to ensure that this fund specifically asks for and enables women's rights organizations to play a key role in improving mainstreaming efforts. This not only contributes to SDG5, but links with the other SDGs as well.

The increased attention for women's rights in the public debate is noteworthy. Minister Kaag has explicitly confirmed the Dutch government's commitment to women's rights and the integration of gender considerations in all Dutch policies and programmes. However, there is also a worrying trend to dilute the rights-based agenda through a discourse and through funding and policies that merely see women as instrumental in achieving certain environmental, social or economic objectives. If this leads to decision-making processes 'about us without us', it could well lead to ineffective policies and a serious undermining of the women's rights agenda.

Trade and investment, climate, water or peace and security policies with either none or insufficient attention to impacts on women could unintentionally exacerbate gender inequalities and directly work against the efforts of the women's rights movement. Only a coherent implementation of the SDGs will assure a sustainable future where women's rights are respected.

Therefore make sure women's rights organizations are strengthened. Women's rights organizations play a crucial role to ensure the integration of women's rights and gender consideration in other sectors and policies is done in a genuine and rights-based manner. The fund can stimulate and support these groups in this wider mandate and help them to engage in relations with actors in other sectors to create awareness, enhance understanding and foster cooperation. For example, in the proposal phase, all applicants could be explicitly asked to share their ambition and role in these mainstreaming opportunities in order to bridge SDG5 with the other SDGs.

WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform

Contactpersoon:

Laila Ait Baali

l.aitbaali@wo-men.nl

