

Making Change Happen: The Leading from the South I Programme and Women's Rights Organisations in the Global South

Introduction

The first phase of the Programme Leading from the South (LFS I) ran from 2017 till 2020. The €42 million programme was set up in line with the Dutch Policy on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (WRGE), and the Policy Framework Dialogue and Dissent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.¹ The programme supported 280 organisations in the Global South. The support was provided through four regional women's funds and had four key objectives:

- To provide innovative and flexible grants to women's right organisations (WROs) and change agents in the Global South;
- To strengthen the lobbying and advocacy skills of grassroots women through capacity building, technical and financial resourcing;
- To support women's movements and networks in the Global South in their struggle to bring about gender-responsive policy changes based on women's rights and gender equality;
- To help build strategic partnerships across regional and global alliances, to reinforce South-South learning and contribute to progress on shared goals related to women's rights and intersectional gender equality.

The LFS I programme ended on 31 December 2020, and the MFA commissioned an end-term evaluation of the overall programme. The overall objective of the LFS evaluation was to gain insight into the extent to which the specific objectives of the programme had been achieved, their relation to the main goals of the Dutch policy frameworks sustaining the LFS Programme, and make recommendations for further improvement of LFS Phase II. As part of the evaluation, the purpose of this brief is to provide specific recommendations in three policy areas which are of significance to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 1) the added value of the LFS I programme to a feminist foreign policy; 2) the potential links between the LFS I and the Dutch 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) commitments related to the climate and gender equality nexus; and 3) the programme's potential for Member States to deliver on the commitments of the European Union Gender Action Plan III.

The three policy areas discussed below are particularly relevant to the LFS programme, especially given its strong concern with promoting women's rights and intersectional equality, as part of a shared global agenda for sustainable development.

1. The added value of the LFS I programme for a Dutch feminist foreign policy

One of the key findings of the evaluation is that by shifting the decision-making power to WROs in the Global South (through the four women's funds), the LFS I created an innovative mechanism that gave these organisations the power to transform unfair policies and practices in ways that are empowering to them and to society as a whole. The LFS I created a space for women to design and implement policy proposals that are rebalancing power relations in local communities, while at the same time opening pathways for changing norms that perpetuate gender and intersectional inequalities.

A second added value of the LFS I is that it has empowered (both technically and analytically) women who are often overlooked by the mainstream donor community, either because of stereotypes, live in

¹ Please see: <https://www.government.nl/documents/regulations/2014/05/13/policy-framework-dialogue-and-dissent> (Accessed on 12 December 2021), and: <https://www.dutchdevelopmentresults.nl/2019/theme/womens-right-and-gender-equality> (Accessed on 10 December 2021).

remote and isolated communities, or lack the skills to access development resources. Empowering and giving voice and agency to those who are at the bottom of social hierarchies in local contexts is a key principle of any feminist foreign policy. As such, the LFS I was in line with the aim of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of ‘leaving no one behind’. The LFS I created space for the four leading women’s funds to engage in participatory consultation processes, which geared towards identifying and addressing the strategic needs and priorities of their partners on the ground. This model ensured commitment and ownership of the results achieved, a fact which was critical to ensure sustainability of the actions undertaken.

Thirdly, the LFS I allowed access to funding and capacity building for smaller southern organisations which have been unable to access funding support. In the views of the four leading Funds, as collected during the evaluation, the LFS I introduced a model from which targeted organisations could initiate policy dialogue with other potential donors and explore new funding sources from other bilateral partners, such as the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Global Affairs Canada (GAC). In this specific sense, the LFS represents an opportunity for enhancing donor coordination, especially in development areas that are critical to ensure implementation of women’s rights and gender equality commitments.

It is worth noting that funding programmes such as the LFS, which apply the principles of horizontality, trust, and delegation of decision-making power to WROs in the Global South, are rarely found in foreign policy and constitute the basis of any feminist foreign policy. The following results further demonstrate the added value of the LFS I programme for a future Dutch feminist foreign policy:

- Women have capably influenced policy shifts at the local level and have enhanced the agency of grassroots women for influencing gender responsive changes in the public policy arena and redressing power imbalances at the community level. Beneficiaries have influenced processes of law reforms and in some cases contributed to the drafting of new laws and policies.
- Policy changes in the status of intersectionally discriminated persons were achieved. The creation of an indigenous women’s fund within the programme represents a unique opportunity for inclusion of the specific proposals of indigenous women in feminist foreign policy.
- Increasing gender-responsive policies in public budgetary exercises and social protection schemes.
- Women managed to enter decision-making spaces related to climate change and presented proposals for preventive mechanisms to respond to the increase in natural disasters and environmental hazards. Furthermore, due to their advocacy and sensitisation work, there is increased social and policy awareness of the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and men from marginalised social groups in highly exposed regions.
- The strategic alliance building supported through the LFS I programme gave further impetus to women’s power for global advocacy and lobbying, a fact that helped them to influence policy processes at the international level (the Multilateral level).
- The LFS contributed to influencing policies for women’s rights to sustainable livelihoods; either by grassroots advocacy, alliance with civil society movements or some men local leaders who engaged in joint work to valorise women’s roles as capable development agents and decision-makers.

The following recommendations emerged from the evaluation in relation to the design and implementation of a feminist intersectional foreign policy:

- Flexibility and closeness to women's daily lives, including provision of emergency support when needed. The contexts in which some grantees are working tends to be volatile and affected by conflict (armed, political, ethnic, trade and climate change-related). These conflicts usually take a heavy toll on marginalised and vulnerable groups. The LFS I was sensitive to these issues, as evidenced by their ability to adapt to shifting political and security dynamics, or COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptability from the programme side and the flexibility afforded by the Dutch MFA was crucial to achieve development outcomes in conflict-affected societies.
- Specific investments in digital safety and security, training on how to respond to online bullying, as well as promoting gender-responsive institutional policies, systems, and processes can increase the capacity of WROs to withstand increasing closure in civil society spaces.
- Continue showcasing the LFS and its results as a transformative mechanism to provide voice and decision-making power to the women in the Global South.
- Promote/support exchanges amongst regional feminist organisations from the Global South about how to achieve greater financial independence/less dependency on foreign funding.
- Invest in building bridges between women's moments and civil society movements, especially in policy areas where resistance is more often found, such as economic and financial policies, digitalisation, and policies attempting to eradicate harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation, sexual harassment at the workplace, hate speech and cyber violence, amongst others).

2. LFS contribution to the climate and gender nexus in the Conference of Parties

During the implementation of the LFS I, the four regional leading funds identified three to five thematic areas to focus on. These thematic areas varied across regions, depending on the priorities identified by women themselves. Some of them were consistent across all regions. One of these common thematic areas was environmental justice and climate change. Under this thematic priority, 58 projects (19% of the total number of projects) were implemented across the four leading funds. Objectives of projects undertaken by grantees ranged from adaptation to climate change (livelihood options against desertification or preventive mechanisms for protection of vulnerable populations and response against natural disasters), to supporting local, national, and regional advocacy for the protection of endangered ecosystems and the native communities living within. Some of the organisations were even able to actively position their proposals in COP25 or were preparing to do so in COP26.

Despite the differences in context and approach, WROs and activists working in this area highlighted a common issue: current climate or environmental funds are rarely accessible for women-led community-based organisations. In this sense, the LFS funds provided access to decision-making and resources to groups that are generally overlooked, and which have the contextual expertise and solid empirical knowledge to provide solutions that are both amenable to the communities and the environment. An added value of the LFS in terms of the climate change/gender and intersectionality nexus is that it has opened the door to more grassroot and regionally led initiatives, such as the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA). More importantly, the Alliance is already coordinating efforts with some of its key members.

One key feature of the LFS programme is its intersectional feminist approach, which has created a space for exposing the impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination affecting women and men and non-binary persons on the ground. Indeed, the evaluation findings show that the LFS I created the

space for exposing the impact of racism in the lives of indigenous and Afro-descendant women and their communities, and the impact of extractive industries and climate change on the lives of women fighting for their right to land, territories, and productive resources (water, clean air, and biodiversity). The intersectional feminist approach bridged the gap between gender and other forms of exclusion that women, men, and binary persons endure, which deserves to be replicated as good practice.

The evaluation identified important gains and changes achieved by women living with some form of disability, persons from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) groups, sex workers, rural women, marginalised urban women. If scaled up to the policy level, these practices have the potential to make any feminist foreign policy meaningful to women's daily lives and struggles.

Some specific recommendations and/or areas where further improvement could be made are:

- Advocacy and funding support is still highly needed by WROs particularly for grassroots organisations and women human rights defenders who are carrying the burden of the closure in civil society spaces and persecution. Specifically, organisations based in countries such as The Philippines and Brazil requested donors to do more to increase the visibility of the problem, and advocate for the protection of the communities affected and the ecosystems being destroyed.
- Increase research and capacity building of WROs to better understand and counteract the links between climate change, gender-based and intersectional violence, and the importance of women's contribution to climate change mitigation and environmental sustainability.
- Promote and support the participation of women and LGBTQI advocates in environmental conferences as well as their inclusion in decision-making spaces and processes.
- Help to create better protection mechanisms for female and LGBTQI environmental activists both including their physical and mental health and well-being, particularly as they struggle through the double risk of being women and activists in issues that are likely to mobilise strong economic powers.

3. Using the LFS to deliver on the commitments of the EU Gender Action Plan III

The LFS is in line with the key gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) objectives of the EU GAP III. Firstly, the programme integrates a gender and intersectional perspective into different thematic areas² which are also key to GAP III. Secondly, it focuses on key thematic areas such as fighting against gender and intersectional violence and promoting the socio-economic and political empowerment of women and girls and non-binary persons, in particular through capacity building (technical and financial resourcing to strengthen their capacities as change agents). Thirdly, the LFS provided innovative and flexible grants to a wide set of WROs (small and medium size) and has been particularly empowering to grassroots ones, who are of critical importance for realising the objectives set in the EU GAP II policy. Finally, the programme contributed to the strengthening of women's movements and networks across different regions of the Global South.

Importantly, two GAP III areas deserving further attention in the second phase of the LFS programme is how to assess impact of the initiatives supported and how to measure results, including non-tangible outcomes, and how to ensure the meaningful inclusion and participation of women in monitoring and evaluation systems. In fact, the EU GAP III calls for inclusive monitoring systems and impact assessments (quantitative and qualitative) to increase public accountability, ensure transparency and access to information on EU's assistance to gender equality worldwide. The LFS has already taken steps in this

² Autonomy, Decisions and Sexual Rights (with some focus on Access to Justice), Environmental Justice/ Climate Change and Land/Territory), Economic Justice, Movement and Labour rights, and Leadership and Strengthening Feminist Voices.

direction, for example by introducing quantitative, qualitative and inclusive monitoring systems and evaluating the programme's initiatives from three perspectives: *macro-level changes* in laws, policies, regulations, values and norms; *meso-level changes* in the capacity, coordination and ability of WROs to adapt to shifting development contexts and integrate lessons learnt; and *micro-level changes* at the individual level (both women from partner organisations and beneficiaries of each project).

Other areas where further improvement can be achieved, and where lessons learned can be shared with other members states during GAPIII discussions include:

- Programmes pursuing the achievement of transformative gender change on the ground are non-linear and require a longer-term perspective. The LFS II progressed in this area by consolidating a single programme Theory of Change (ToC), including common but adaptable indicators. These were selected through participatory planning process which could serve as example to other EU members states and EU Delegations wishing to improve ownership by local WROs of the GAPIII country-level action plans and, in particular, of the country-level implementation plans (CLIP).
- Further progress could also be achieved by increasing the level of engagement of grassroots organisations in the monitoring and reporting processes and impact assessment, and the use of innovative tools and methodologies that facilitate measuring the pathways of transformative change expected, identifying the key limitations, challenges, and good practices.
- Rethink the concept of value for money (VfM) and how to measure it. This rethinking could be done through a participatory stakeholders dialogue (including the four leading funds and their grantees, public and private donor agencies, other women's funds, etc). Setting up a framework to evaluate VfM in a way that more clearly reflects the transformative dimension of the LFS is highly recommended. A transformative framework for measuring results would need to consider on the one hand, how transformative change occurs (its very pathways) and, on the other, ways in which intangibles can be assessed and valued (e.g., activists' commitment, solidarity/mutual support, time/happiness lost, and risks taken, to name but a few).

Conclusion

The policy areas discussed in this Brief highlight the benefits of incorporating the needs and priorities of women, especially those enduring intersectional discrimination, both at the level of policy and project design, planning and implementation. Evidence demonstrates that the support provided by the LFS I programme has had a positive impact on enhancing the capacity of WROs as change agents at community and national level in the Global South. In particular, the programme has given a voice to women from grassroots organisations, who are enduring intersectional discrimination and who, due to stereotypes or remote locations, are often overlooked when it comes to mainstream funding for local sustainable development.

On a broader level, the initiatives supported by the LFS I point to micro models of transformative local development which are highly empowering to women and which are yielding benefits for their communities and societies, especially in relation to policy changes. Moreover, the implementation of these activities is providing women with the voice, recognition, and identity they deserve. If scaled up to the higher policy level, these initiatives can create lasting change on the ground and add value to other more traditional mechanisms of funding for women's rights.