Leading From the South 1.0

STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Executive summary

November, 2021
I. Introduction

In December 2016, the Leading from the South initiative (hereafter referred to as LFS) was officially launched, marking a trailblazing alliance among a group of Global South-based women’s funds with a shared vision for the change that they want to see in the world. The four women’s funds were the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF), International Indigenous Women’s Forum- AYNI Fund (FIMI), Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS) and the Women’s Fund Asia (WFA, formerly known as South Asia Women’s Fund). The initiative was supported by The Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as part of their policy on women’s rights and gender equality and their ‘Dialogue and Dissent’ program. The partnership between the women’s funds consortium and a bilateral donor was groundbreaking both because of the type of actors involved and because of the amount allocated for this collective work - the MFA having allocated 42 million Euros over four years.

At this point in time, LFS 1.0 (2017-20) has come to an end and LFS 2.0 (2021-25) has just begun as a five-year partnership. The women’s funds are committed to documenting their learning from the first phase addressing the various processes and measures that facilitated the implementation of this unprecedented initiative as well as the value added by this specific partnership to the feminist funding discourse.

Investigation for the report was through an extensive desk review of individual women’s funds as well as consortium level documents related to LFS and focus group discussions with the LFS teams in each of the four women’s funds.

II. What value has been added by LFS?

The report provides an overview of the value that LFS has added in terms of the approach to resourcing Southern women’s rights organisations and feminist movements in the global south and the initiative’s impact on the resourcing narratives and practices of global funders. The women’s funds took a transformative approach to funding based on feminist funding principles which acknowledge the importance of strengthening institutions and supporting sustainability and resilience. These principles in operation meant:

• Grantmaking is driven by the needs and priorities of the feminist movements and not donor driven agendas.
• Southern women’s rights organisations and Southern women’s funds receive money directly and not through intermediaries based in the global North.
• Funding is flexible and allows for core support: The funding was structured so that grantees were able to use a significant portion of the resources (up to 40 percent) towards core support. In addition, LFS grants have generally been longer term and more flexible allowing grantees to adjust procedures as needs develop or as the external context changes.\footnote{Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid- Term review for the Leading from the South Fund. 2019.}
• Less funded regions and groups have been supported: Resources have been provided to organisations who have been unable to get other types of funding because of their geographical location, thematic area, or size.\footnote{Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid- Term review for the Leading from the South Fund. 2019.} This has been particularly advantageous for small grassroots organisations including those working with diverse ranges of stakeholders.
• Capacity building grants have played a key role: A key component of the LFS approach has involved capacity building for grantees to ensure that the infrastructure, systems, and leadership
capacities needed for long term sustainability are constantly being strengthened. Overall, more than 86% of grantees noted that LFS contributed to improving their organisational capacity.

LFS has also added value by shifting the narrative around resourcing women’s rights in notable ways. For instance, the shift in external perceptions of what women’s funds can do and the acknowledgment that they should have power over resources and are capable of wielding that power constructively is one of the most critical outcomes of LFS and the aspect that is most likely to have longer term impact. In addition, LFS has been influential as a model for change. Lessons from LFS contributed to the setting up of the Generation Equality Forum Action Coalition Investing in Feminist Movements and Leadership, an action group working under the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and influencing discussions that took place between the Dutch and Canadian Government prior to Global Affairs Canada (GAC) committing 300 million to the Equality Fund, a ground-breaking collaboration of Canadian and international partners.

LFS has also demonstrated the power of the collective, in terms of its ability to leverage human and financial resources. The LFS Consortium demonstrated that “Southern, feminist and collective support to promote gender equality and women’s rights is stronger and more effective than individual efforts” and it has been able to play a vital role in strengthening the movement by advocating to the donor community that direct relationships, which avoid money being routed through large intermediary organisations, are possible and beneficial with Southern based feminist women’s rights organisations and funds.

III. Lessons learned from LFS 1.0

a. Key Learnings from Structures and Processes

For each WF, managing LFS meant being willing to substantially develop and strengthen their capacities individually and collectively in various areas related to organisational development, human resources, communications, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and financial management. This was a benefit for the funds themselves in terms of their institutional development, but also critical for the effectiveness of the project in terms of the potential to shift the funding landscape within their regions.

Several key lessons were learned during the early part of LFS 1.0 from the first calls for proposals and the early implementation stages. These lessons related to how widely and effectively the calls for proposals and application forms were disseminated, the size of the grants that were planned and awarded and communication around the purpose of LFS and eligibility criteria. Lessons learned at this stage strongly impacted implementation of subsequent rounds of funding. A few examples of these realisations and subsequent shifts included that it would be important to:

Expand access and cope with the need for more linguistic expertise as well as encourage applications from less well represented countries. To address this:

- WFA accepted applications in about 18 local languages. This required them to hire staff specifically to assist with these applications.

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4 Interview with Theo Sowa, ED AWDF, October 26, 2020.
5 Interview with MFA, 19 October 2020
6 FMS. Final Report to the MFA. 2021
7 Prospera. Leading from the South. Lessons from Phase I. 2019
• AWDF used application tracking techniques and conducted mapping exercises and targeted outreach to less represented countries.
• FMS ensured that the application formats were available in Spanish, English and Portuguese and FIMI made them available in Spanish, English and French.

Ensure that grantees properly understood future calls. To address this:
• Communications teams from all the funds created different explanatory material including simple video explainers to better explain LFS to would-be grantees. These included explanations about what advocacy means in terms of the scope of work and reasons why people applying were not selected.

Deal with challenging financial mechanisms wherein organisations were unable to receive funds. To address this:
• The partners learned to establish clear memorandums of understanding between organisations where a fiscal sponsorship relationship is being set up.
• The partners continue to try to develop alternative financing mechanisms that allow a diverse range of women’s groups to be funded.

b. Relationships and Working Together

Several significant lessons that came out of LFS 1.0 derived directly from how working relationships were managed. One important aspect of working in a consortium has been the learning that took place between the four funds— all of whom acknowledge with deep appreciation that their “individual management of LFSF was greatly supported by the knowledge and expertise of the other funds, both in terms of structures and processes, as well as implementation methodology.”

Equally important was that the collaboration represented a unique opportunity for women’s funds to work together across several continents on a core agenda, collect data on common indicators and integrate results to demonstrate the efficacy of the work to the outside world. During this time, the funds learned key lessons on how to work together and what processes were helpful to enable this.

Some of these lessons learned include:

It is necessary to create common ground at the beginning: The Inception meeting between the four funds and the MFA laid the foundation for collaborative work and was critical in terms of allowing the four women’s funds to establish common understandings related to the implementation of the LFS initiative.

The consortium needed support to embed systems and processes that would be necessary to handle the requirements of LFS: This was found through the ‘accompaniment initiative’ (AI), funding that Mama Cash and Prospera supported the women’s funds to secure from the Philanthropy Advancing Women’s Human Rights (PAWHR) network to make specific capacity building changes. The AI also supported the LFS teams to meet, interact and work with their counterparts from other funds through some of the linking and learning meetings and this eventually played a critical role in how effectively the partners were able to collaborate.

Groups that work thematically with representatives from each women’s fund played a key role: The consortium set up working groups for communications, finance and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). These enabled the teams to share information across the four funds; understand each other’s contexts; learn from each other’s experiences; seek solutions to common issues that have an impact on them all and provide advice and guidance to each other on activities being carried out collectively.

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8 Prospera. Leading from the South Fund (LFSF). Key learnings from Phase I. (2019)
Learning from other relationships such as with the MFA and with external stakeholders has also been important. For instance, a best practice and key learning for the women’s funds in terms of how to manage a direct relationship with the MFA was the establishment of the ‘communications focal point’. This was an agreement that one fund each year would be designated to manage communications, responding to queries, concerns, and requests for information (or forward these from the partners) on behalf of the consortium.

In addition, relationships with other funds and Southern Women Rights Organisations in the regions also had to be carefully managed and key lessons related to this included the importance of using an approach based in transparency, consultation, participation, and collaboration when it came to communicating about and implementing LFS. For instance, the women’s funds have encouraged participation by asking national funds to be involved with outreach and selection processes during calls for proposals in their respective regions.

The relationships built and lessons learned from LFS 1.0 will continue to impact how the partners approach collaboration and indeed, planning for LFS 2.0 includes sustaining and developing collaborative efforts further. For instance, the consortium will prioritise the continuing allocation of time and resources to support ongoing relationship building and increase collective strategic documentation of learnings and reflections.

III. Moving Forward

Whilst LFS 1.0 made significant strides in terms of resourcing Southern women’s rights organisations directly and differently, the funds are forging ahead into LFS 2.0 with an awareness of the necessity to build on gains made and carefully implement change according to lessons learned. Specific common areas that will be important to develop and strengthen for LFS 2.0 are:

- Longer term (5 years or more) support to grantees is needed
- Supporting more cross movement work
- Centring feminist values in monitoring and evaluation work
- Emphasising self and collective care
- Engaging in more communication and more strategic sharing with the MFA
- Engage in more joint communication and developing joint advocacy strategies
- Expansion of “Linking and Learning” program