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Leading From the South 1.0
STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The reflection piece production was coordinated by the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Working Group.

November, 2021

The report was produced by Ayesha Mago. The graphic designer was Territoria, managed by the Communications Working Group.
ACRONYMS

AI  Accompaniment Initiative
AWDF  African Women’s Development Fund
CSW  Commission on the Status of Women
FIMI  International Indigenous Women’s Forum
FMS  Fondo de Mujeres del Sur
GAC  Global Affairs Canada
HRFN  Human Rights Funders Network
IATI  International Aid Transparency Initiative
INGO  International Non-Governmental Organisation
LAC  Latin America and Caribbean
LFS  Leading from the South
LBTIQ  Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
MEL  Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MENA  Middle East and North Africa
MFA  Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
NGO  Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD  Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAWHR  Philanthropy Advancing Women’s Human Rights
SAWF  South Asia Women’s Fund
SRHR  Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
ToC  Theory of Change
VAW  Violence Against Women
WFA  Women’s Fund Asia
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.

The initiative has been exceptional for many reasons not least because it marked a recasting in the prevailing wisdom around who has the capacity and expertise to manage large amounts of funding, because funding at this scale had only been provided to organisations based in the North. In addition, it was an acknowledgment by the MFA that women’s funds were “best positioned to support WROs through their funding because of their deep understanding of the context, dynamics, constraints, needs and opportunities of the WROS and of the feminist movement.” The LFS initiative has seen large, bilateral money reaching grassroots organisations, through a model wherein this money flows directly to the Global South, via the four managing women’s funds to organisations where women, girls and trans people are in control of what they do with it. This is not just a shift in money but also a shift in power over the management, access and control over resources. Funding flows directly to the Global South instead of through North-based organisations, and at the regional level funding is distributed to local organisations.

At the same time, LFS expanded accessibility in terms of regions, communities, and thematic areas of work. Some of the grantee partners are run by/for marginalised communities and have limited or no access to other funding. For some, LFS money has allowed them to continue to work when they would have had to shut down otherwise. In this sense, it has acted as a counter to other funding trends with data showing increasingly constrained allocation of resources for critical women’s rights issues such as access to justice, sexuality, mental health or young women’s rights and almost no long-term or institutional support for women’s rights organisations. Through grantmaking, capacity building and other resourcing, LFS is strengthening women’s movements in the global South to influence and impact public policies, confront unequal power relations, and eliminate exclusion, discrimination, violence, and unequal treatment. The initiative’s focus on women’s rights, on advocacy and on elimination of marginalization and discrimination are in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), to which UN Member States are committed, in particular SDG 5 on the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls of the Agenda 2030.

LFS has shown itself to be a unique partnership wherein the consortium actively and purposefully sought each other’s expertise and learned from each other in different spheres as the process of implementing the fund continued. This willingness to share knowledge, experiences and learning (as well as the requisite strategising as a consortium) strengthened each fund individually, thereby positively impacting their work and the outcomes of the consortium and demonstrating how working together can leverage financial and human resources. In addition, the evolving relationship between the Dutch Government and the LFS consortium is “making a vital contribution to the reframing of bilateral relationships between northern-donors and southern-led feminist funders.”

The recent policy framework (2021-2025) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands also reflects their evolving belief in the critical role of women’s funds in supporting local, national, regional, and international actions by Southern women’s rights organisations to challenge shrinking civic spaces, and promote gender equality and human rights of women, girls, and trans people. In that sense, LFS has been a critical learning space on effective resourcing not only for the Ministry but also for the women’s fund network and their allies.4

II. Why this report?

At this point of time, LFS 1.0 (2017-2020) has come to an end and LFS 2.0 (2021-2025) has just begun as a five-year partnership. The 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 partnership to the feminist funding discourse. The study will examine:

● Systems and structures analysis of LFS 1.0
● Reflection on lessons learned, good practices, challenges and ways of working
● Critical recommendations to improve and enhance work under LFS 2.0

Key questions that determined the scope of the study included:

● What value has been added by LFS and this specific partnership?
● What lessons have been learned and how will this help to improve the work for LFS 2.0?
● How do we improve our working relationships?
● What should we change for LFS 2.0 to enhance the work that we do?

We hope that this report can provide a window into the LFS world of work - the challenges, obstacles, processes, plans, ideas, triumphs - the things that worked and those that didn’t- to give a sense of the scale of learning and growth that the LFS teams embarked upon with LFS 1.0. We also hope that it will provide inspiration, insights and ideas to other groups wanting to walk a similar path.

Methodology

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

The documentation included:

● Process Documentation of LFS (commissioned by Prospera).
● Mid-Term review of LFS (externally commissioned by MFA).
● 4 years final evaluation reports (externally commissioned by the individual Women’s funds).
● 2-year Joint MEL Report (produced by the LFS MEL Working Group).
● Final reports to the MFA (Individual Women’s funds).
● Joint Proposal for LFS 2.0

The focus group discussions were an opportunity to gather personal reflections from the teams, about the impact that working on LFS had on their work and about the key learning moments that they considered significant. These were held during October 2021.

4 Ibid.
III. What value has been added by LFS?

This section of 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.

1. Approach to grantmaking

The women’s funds took a transformative approach to funding based on feminist funding principles. These principles in operation meant:

Grantmaking was driven by the needs and priorities of the feminist movements and not donor driven agendas. LFS has been able to move away somewhat from the current funding scenario wherein women’s rights organisations must pursue funding that is related to an agenda that is set by donor priorities and in effect act as implementing agencies for specific projects driven by donors. This was done by ensuring that the calls for proposals were broad enough, with wide ranging sub-themes under each area so that a large cross section of organisations could apply with their own agendas grounded in their own local contexts. The fact that grantmaking under LFS allows resourcing for small, mid-size and large organisations is also relevant in terms of a broad range of organisations being able to apply. This was a deliberate attempt by the partners to move away from a model where ‘donor knows best’ and instead use their grantmaking modalities to ensure that “grantees [are] in charge of their own ‘organisation’s agenda and its execution.’”

We believe that it has contributed to the cultural change in the world of (feminist) philanthropy by giving the message

Southern women’s rights organisations and Southern Women’s funds receive money directly: Outcomes from LFS 1.0 have contributed to the reiteration of this approach for LFS 2.0 - a deep conviction that increasing the funding going directly to Southern women’s rights organisations is critical to resourcing intersectional feminist activism and movement building and that southern based women’s funds are the best organisations to fund them. These organisations are at the centre of the LFS grant making agenda with money being given directly to them. This approach has been key to addressing the “problematic power dynamic of International NGOs sub-contracting Southern women’s rights organisations to deliver service [which has] contributed to Southern women’s rights organisations local knowledge, expertise and potential contribution to programme design being ignored.” In addition promoting funding trends like this is critical in a context wherein a recent OECD analysis shows that only 1% of all gender-focused aid (governments) in the last year went to women’s organisations and out of this, only a fraction goes to self-led initiatives by women and girls.

As WFA points out “resources are more political than ever” with funding flows being threatened even further by economic downturns caused by the pandemic as well as by increasingly draconian financial compliance regulations that threaten to exclude small and marginalised groups further. In this context the consortium must “continue to push donors to fulfil their commitments to gender equality” and continue to demonstrate the effectiveness of the LFS approach.

5 Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid- Term review for the Leading from the South Fund.
6 Joint Proposal LFS 2.0
8 Financing women’s economic empowerment OECD DAC NETWORK ON GENDER EQUALITY (GENDERNET) - 2021
that the best option is for the money to go directly to the Women’s funds that are located in the places where the programs are implemented since we are the ones who best understand the contexts, social movements and political challenges of our regions. (FMS, November 2020)

**Funding is flexible and allows for core support:** In the current global context wherein women, trans* and other marginalised groups are disproportionately affected and increasingly threatened by the rise of fundamentalist, fascist, and populist forces both off and online, developing safety and resilience is critical. For donors such as the women’s funds responding to this context and developing grant making practices that support this resilience is key.10

In practical terms this has meant:

**Making core support available:** The funding was structured so that grantees were able to use a significant portion of the fund (up to 40 percent) towards core support. This is a critical aspect of feminist funding recognising that strengthening institutions and thereby supporting sustainability and resilience is “often the difference between resisting patriarchy and oppression and creating new feminist realities.”11

In addition, LFS grants have generally been multi-year and more flexible allowing grantees to adjust procedures as needs develop or as the external context changes.12 This has been mentioned in several review processes during interviews with grantees who noted how flexibility has been a “key element of the LFS advantage as compared to other funding modalities.”13 Examples of this have included both WFA and AWDF extending the duration of the grants where regulatory reasons have delayed money transfers. Also, the specific context of the grantee has been considered- with smaller organisations allowed to use up to 40 percent of the grant for core funding.14 The flexible approach has also enabled grantees to be responsive to changing political or security situations whilst still finding ways to continue their work.

This has never been more apparent than during COVID-19 when grantees had to urgently adjust how they worked and needed this solidarity and flexibility more than ever. As one AWDF grantee explained, when all their community

> “Just having the knowledge that we had time to do this work- it enabled us to focus on the core business of women’s rights.

The confidence that we had a chunk of resources to draw from meant that we could keep up the advocacy work and continuously remind policy makers of their responsibilities.”

(Interview with AWDF grantee, Final Outcomes report, November 2020)

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11 Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid- Term review for the Leading from the South Fund. 2019.
12 Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid- Term review for the Leading from the South Fund. 2019.
13 Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid- Term review for the Leading from the South Fund. 2019.
14 Ibid

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STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Less funded regions and groups have been supported: LFS has emphasised reaching lesser funded regions, communities and organisations in contexts that are hostile to human rights defenders. Funds have been provided to organisations who have been unable to get other types of funding because of their geographical location, thematic area, or size. That being said, it should be noted those who are not members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are not eligible for funding under LFS 2.0 and this does mean that the consortium cannot award grants in certain countries such as, for example, Uruguay, Panama and Chile, in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region.

Smaller grassroots women’s rights organisations: The approach to funding has been particularly advantageous for small grassroots organisations to whose needs the four women’s funds have paid particular attention. They have done this by finding alternative ways to route funds to organisations that do not have a bank account or permission to receive foreign funds. In addition, they have connected these organisations with networks and supported them to attend events through which they can amplify their work and advocate directly for their constituencies.

Intersectional approach: LFS has added value by a promoting an intersectional approach to grantmaking and supporting advocacy on behalf of a diverse range of stakeholders including LBTIQ* women, sex workers, women living with disabilities, Afro descendant women, rural women and indigenous women. For instance, all the funds have specifically included indigenous women in their grantmaking, despite the fact that this was FIMI’s primary focus. They have also supported LBTIQ* organisations and those working to advance the rights of women with disabilities. A key learning from taking an intersectional approach is that under-resourced groups are being supported and siloed funding strategies which result in specific groups of women (such as women with disabilities) being overlooked are breaking down. For example, for FIMI a critical aspect of LFS was to see the inclusion of individual and collective rights of indigenous...
women in political agendas and resolutions of multilateral bodies.\textsuperscript{22}

**Capacity building grants have played a key role:** The partners recognise that they play a role “beyond resourcing women’s rights organisations and movements to ensure the sustainability of our grant making investments.”\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, a key component of their 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.\textsuperscript{24} It is significant that the LFS resources have allowed the Women’s funds to conduct their capacity building programs more systematically than ever with a dedicated amount, as part of every LFS grant, for capacity building and institutional strengthening for grantees. The LFS consortium have together and individually used multiple strategies in this regard including:

- conducting several capacity building training programmes in areas such as communications, financial management and monitoring and evaluation.
- creating exchange programmes wherein grantees can meet other organisations and strengthen their work through learning and forming new networks and alliances.
- supporting strategic travel grants for LFS partner organisations so that they can amplify their work by participating in national, regional and international events.

Each fund has done extensive work in this area, and although it is not in the scope of this report to cover capacity building initiatives exhaustively, some instructive examples are included here. For example, AWDF’s capacity building process was based on a needs assessment in the field and led to the tailoring and delivery of capacity building interventions in communications, advocacy, financial management, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and resource mobilisation. As their own institutional thinking has developed around ways to be more attentive to the needs of women with diverse abilities, they have also adjusted in terms of delivering these trainings in more accessible ways involving, for example, the inclusion of more languages and of sign language interpreters at all trainings.\textsuperscript{81} Grantee organisations reported improved processes and practices related to financial management, communications, and advocacy as well as enhanced self-confidence, and an ability to expand the context that they operate in, which they did not have before LFS.\textsuperscript{25}

Much of the capacity building work has also responded directly to need and context. For instance, finance training workshops held by WFA in Sri Lanka and India dealt specifically with issues of financial compliance and accountability in relation to shrinking space for human rights work for civil society organisations in the region and its impact on governance and financial management. Feedback from participants revealed that they left the training with fresh and useful information that they could utilise within their organisations.\textsuperscript{26} FIMI has since 2019, had an accompaniment strategy, an approach that has involved empowering indigenous women’s organisations in terms of management, organisation, reporting and strategic adaptation to their contexts.

> “With the organisational strengthening that this project has enabled, ONIDS is able to work even remotely for the continuity of its ambitions and the success of its actions. And this is directly linked which

\textsuperscript{22} FIMI. Narrative Report to MFA. 2017.
\textsuperscript{24} Leading from the South after Two Years of Implementation. Main results from 2017-2018. Mel Working Group Joint Report.
\textsuperscript{25} AWDF. Key Outcomes from Leading from the South 2016-2020. November 2020
\textsuperscript{26} WFA, Internal Report “Capacity Building Workshop, Sri Lanka (2018-19)”.

**STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**
allowed our development at an institutional level.”
(ONIDS, Key Informant Questionnaire, Final Outcomes Process, October 2020)

Other capacity development initiatives have also included exchange programmes such as the one implemented by FMS wherein LFS grantees visited and spent some days with one another.27 The programme was aimed at promoting the exchange of experiences, learning processes and strategies as well as encouraging grantees to participate and become involved in actions that were being carried out by other partner organisations in the region. Results of the exchange, as reported by the grantees, were that many felt a renewed sense of determination, unity and strength for their work having seen that other organisations in different countries shared many of the same obstacles. In addition, grantees were able to benefit from learning about new strategies and share commonalities, differences, and best practices with each other.28

Overall, more than 86% of grantees noted improvements in their organisational capacity (after the first two years of implementation) due to funding from LFS. This is significant in terms of progress towards one of the joint common indicators of the programme, strengthening Southern feminist organisations29, and has positively impacted institutional resilience and sustainability.

Affirming approach to grantees as partners and allies:
LFS implementation has yielded lessons in terms of shifting donor-grantee relationships. The women’s funds occupy a challenging role, being part of the movement as well as resourcing it and their approach has been to emphasise partnership, collaboration and support towards a common goal. The women’s funds want the grantees to succeed and have attempted to create relationships based on affirmation and trust. For instance, WFA’s grantees report “it operates more as a partner than a traditional donor, demonstrating both its core values and feminist funding principles.”30 Grantees working with all four funds have reported that they feel heard, understood, supported, and strengthened by their interactions with the Women’s funds over the course of their LFS grants.31

Different reports reveal a strong sense that grantees felt helped when things went wrong, and the flexible approach (mentioned above) as well as clear communication and a relationship of trust with the Women’s funds went a long way towards this. As the final LFS evaluation for FIMI stated, “a relationship of trust has progressively emerged between FIMI and the partner organisations, which encouraged them to achieve their goals, overcome hurdles, and find solutions during the project implementation stage. The organisations felt supported and appreciated by FIMI. Also, they felt as if they were allies, and part of a collective effort with a broader scope.”32

For you to come back and say ‘hey, we know there’s a pandemic, here’s what might work in terms of grant changes.’ That’s a feminist approach, which we expect from donors but don’t get all the time. It was a welcome, kind and compassionate way of grant-making. (WFA grantee. Endline Evaluation report.)

41 AWDF. Key Outcomes from Leading from the South 2016-2020. November 2020
2. LFS Impact on resourcing architecture

LFS adds value by shifting the narrative on southern-led feminist women’s funds

LFS has had a notable impact in terms of shifting donor thinking with relation to funding both southern-led women’s funds and women’s rights work more generally. 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. According to the MFA, “LFS has really contributed to a strengthened movement and dialogue around southern leadership and ownership and that has influenced... both our own policy making within the MFA as well as policy making and thinking of other donors.” A clear testament to this is the Dutch Government’s extension of the LFS initiative for another five years and the doubling of funding that they are allocating to it. In addition, according to the MFA, it has been clear that other donors (including the EU, Australia, Austria, the UK and Canada) looking for optimal ways to use their money, have become increasingly interested in the LFS model. This has meant increased opportunities for resource mobilization for the partners who acknowledge that bilaterals (such as the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Global Affairs Canada (GAC) or Britain’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)) who might have previously been unreachable are now keen on having discussions with them to learn about the LFS model and understand more about supporting feminist movement building. This is partially because it has demonstrated an innovative way of working and also one that is potentially efficient- allowing them to work through women’s funds and reach the groups and communities that they would not be able to access themselves. This viewpoint was reiterated by Prospera, who explained that conversations that they have had with bilateral governments “have indicated that LFS has been useful to leverage more funding to women-led groups in the South, and has changed the perception somewhat of ‘risk’.” In sum, LFS has contributed to a shift from rhetoric to real policy change- influencing how bilaterals and specific foundations are looking at southern leadership and funding in the global south and highlighting that the shift in financial resources has to be accompanied by a shift in decision-making power.

“LFS has been a game-changer in "big funding" going to feminist/ women’s organisations and movements directly in countries and regions of the Global South. Funding Women’s funds directly in the South has demonstrated to other bilateral donors, private philanthropy, and some corporate foundations, that Women’s funds can "scale up" and continue to meet threshold/due diligence requirements aptly.” (ED, Prospera, November 2020)
LFS adds value as a model for change

The learning from how LFS has operated has contributed to the set-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). The Netherlands is co-lead for this alliance together with Canada and an international consortium of NGO’s, the Philanthropy Advancing Women’s Human Rights (PAWHR) and other stakeholders.37

The LFS model was also influential in the 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.38 The Equality Fund, is an innovative model combining traditional philanthropy with gender lens investing and public sector funding to build a projected one-billion-dollar sustainable funding mechanism for funding global women’s rights organising.39 This fund, explicitly imagines a world within which women’s rights organisations, women’s rights activists, and leaders around the world are “properly resourced at scale” and does so with the clear vision that “those with the most to lose and the most to gain are also the best designers and implementers of the initiatives that are fundamentally going to shift the dial.”40

By challenging donor ideas around who has capacity and capability to handle big funding, the LFS model has also contributed to shifting the underlying discourse around organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Highlighting the achievements of the women’s funds and fighting stereotypes, misconceptions and assumptions about how they operate should play a significant role in advocacy from the women’s funds “because these shifts are absolutely necessary if younger feminists are going to say yes we can challenge the world, yes we can take on people’s misconceptions and biases and make our agendas more important.”41 In this regard it is significant that the LFS model has prompted some funders to ask meaningful questions internally about their legacies around racism and colonialism and examine the ways in which their current systems may be biased within contexts wherein they could influence support for gender equality.42

LFS demonstrates the power of the collective

“In 2020, we were able to transform fear into an opportunity for solidarity, put flexibility at the center as part of the answer and learn how to work collectively in an uncertainty context. We are convinced more than ever that the solution to all the crises (health, economic, democratic and environmental) is collective, and that is the essence of our mission: to work collectively for more inclusive and egalitarian societies.”

(ED, FMS, October 2021)

LFS 1.0 has demonstrated the power of working as a consortium in terms of the ability to leverage human and financial resources as well as support from other

37 Interview with MFA, 19 October 2020.
38 Interview with MFA, 19 October 2020.
39 AWDF. LFS Final report to MFA, 2019.
40 https://www.baystbull.com/the-equality-fund-is-redefining-philanthropy-by-empowering-women/
41 Interview with Theo Sowa, ED AWDF, October 26, 2020.
women’s funds and women’s rights organisations. The LFS Consortium showed that “Southern, feminist and collective support to promote gender equality and women’s rights is stronger and more effective than individual efforts.”43 This has been apparent since the inception of LFS and this spirit of collective strength, support and strategising has been more important than ever during the shifting landscape of COVID-19. As the LFS teams explained during reflection meetings, 2020 was a turning point in many ways with the partners needing to reorganise themselves, find new ways to communicate, maintain their networks and care for their communities as well as themselves. The ability and determination of their grantee partners to adapt and make necessary adjustments in very challenging circumstances, so that they could continue their work was matched by the determination of the Women’s funds to be flexible, creative, and enabling so that the work of LFS 1.0 could be sustained and the planning for LFS 2.0 could continue.44

As mentioned above, the consortium also plays a vital role in strengthening the movement by advocating to the donor community that direct relationships are possible and beneficial with Southern based feminist women’s rights organisations, as well as funds. Collective advocacy to the donor community on this issue (with an emphasis on them shifting their practices in terms of who they collaborate with and how) is potentially stronger and more effective than individual efforts. One recent opportunity to conduct this joint advocacy was a webinar on ‘Leading from the South: Impact and Lessons Learned’, held on September 10, 2020. As LFS 1.0 was coming to an end, the Executive Directors of the four women’s funds came together to share their reflections in a roundtable webinar, in partnership with the Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN). This forum provided a strategic overview of LFS, including rationale for its conceptualization, as well as lessons learned. More than 100 participants attended, and simultaneous Spanish and French translation was provided. The consortium also presented the LFS experience to an audience of donor and philanthropic institution’s representatives at another HRFN meeting held in Mexico City in October 2018. Their joint panel focused on sharing their experiences as an alliance of Southern women’s funds and demonstrating how it was working as an example of shifting existing power dynamics among human rights funders.45

IV. What lessons have been learned and how this will help to improve the work for LFS 2.0?

This part of the report specifically examines LFS 1.0 in terms of lessons learned. Part A relates specifically to lessons learned in terms of processes, and systems that were put in place during implementation of LFS 1.0. Part B addresses lessons learned through working together as a consortium and navigating relationships with different stakeholders. Both sections highlight practices and tips that other groups could learn from or replicate. Changes made for LFS 2.0 are also addressed.

A. Systems and processes

This section of the report examines some of the important lessons that were learned as LFS 1.0 began and catalysed growth and transformation for all four of the women’s funds. Each of them had to embark on a process of learning and institutional strengthening to manage the initial stages of the fund. LFS 1.0 disbursed 42 million Euro to the four women’s funds over four years considerably increasing the budgets for each partner with two of them doubling in size, and one tripling. LFS therefore necessitated an expansion both in terms of the budget and the geographical scope of the women’s funds:

- FMS, a sub-regional fund focussing on three countries of Latin America needed to expand – for the purpose of

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43 FMS. Final Report to the MFA. 2021.
44 FGDs with Women’s Funds, October 2021.
45 Prospera. Leading from the South. Lessons from Phase I. 2019
LFS- to the Andean region, Central America, and the Caribbean.

- AWDF, already a continent-wide fund, was requested to expand to the Middle East.
- WFA had to expand its remit from five countries of South Asia to cover 18 countries across Asia as well as the Pacific region.
- FIMI, already a global fund, committed to expanding its outreach in Africa and in Asia.

LFS expanded the reach and scope of the WF’s grant making to places where they didn’t previously have those connections. This expansion was an opportunity for the women’s funds to learn about the structures and systems that would be necessary to connect with different networks and groups operating in these places. In addition to learning related to cultural and political contexts and legal regulations, the women’s funds had to conduct extensive outreach to explore new partnerships and find new grantees as well as adapt structurally in terms of staff, systems, offices, and capacities (such as linguistic) to disburse grants at the grassroots in new places.46

For each partner, 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.47

The first call for proposals (in 2017) was launched with the partners adopting similar language, eligibility criteria and application formats which illustrated a certain level of mutual exchange and a cohesive visibility for LFS generally.48 It was met with excitement and represented a huge achievement for them given the challenging timelines and unprecedented scale of the call. Several key lessons were learned during this phase, and these were documented via a MFA funded evaluation (specifically of the first call) as well as a review of subsequent reports and interviews with team members. 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.

1. Calls for proposals: Key lessons

The first calls for proposals were met with tremendous response from women’s rights organisations across the global South. The funds collectively made 101 grants, representing 7.9 million Euro awarded to southern women’s organisations. Funded organisations are based in a total of 50 countries and are implementing initiatives in 67 countries. (Prospera Website)

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46 Leading from the South. MEL Joint report. 2019.
47 Prospera. Leading from the South. Lessons from Phase I. 2019
a. Ensure budgeting for translations and technical assistance in order to cope with the need for more linguistic expertise on a broader range of languages for future calls:
In terms of the geographic expansion necessitated by LFS 1.0, it quickly became clear that more translation capacity would be necessary for the calls to get broad dissemination and for applications to be successfully reviewed. In order to cover all the countries of the region FMS, on its first call for proposals, released the terms of reference in four languages (Spanish, English, Portuguese and French) and FIMI used English, Spanish and French. In Asia, WFA had carried out all promotion and communication in English although they did harness the efforts of existing local partners to assist with translations.49 This was an obstacle for some organisations, especially those in grassroots areas. Developing greater linguistic expertise was also an issue for the funds in terms of reviewing applications. In the case of AWDF, they only accepted applications in English and French, but had to assess supporting documents in Arabic and in one case even create Arabic documents for Government approval processes.

b. Note the countries that are less well represented and include local experts from these to help disseminate the calls and promote LFSF:
The first call was launched under severe time pressure with the MFA deadline for grantmaking end of May 2017 - later extended to the end of June. This meant that the calls for proposals had to go out relatively soon after LFS was officially launched, in early 2017.50 Considering that the partners were reaching out to new regions, and harder to reach areas and groups, this lack of time meant lack of representation from specific countries and groups, despite efforts to disseminate calls through local partners and even embassies. For instance, AWDF found that only 4.4 percent of the applications received were from organisations in the Middle East and this was in part due to limited promotion directly to the Arab States and in Arabic. In Asia, WFA received 27 percent of applications from Southeast Asia and very few from specific countries such as Myanmar, Timor Leste and Afghanistan. The evaluation revealed that “specific efforts are still needed to reach out and promote the LFS [initiative] in regions where the women’s fund is less known or is less networked.”51

Changes for future calls:
- To expand access to frontline defenders at the grassroots level, WFA accepted applications in about 18 local languages. This required them to hire staff specifically to assist with these applications.
- AWDF used application tracking techniques to assess the most common countries from where they receive applications and those that are least represented. They conducted mapping exercises and targeted outreach to less represented countries and this yielded increased applications, and increased grant making in the Middle East mainly in Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon.
- AWDF also sourced Arabic translators based in Egypt who were trained in women’s rights and helped them to address this linguistic gap.
- FMS ensured that the application formats were available in Spanish, English and Portuguese and FIMI made them available in Spanish, English and French.
- All funds agreed that specific and different strategies would be necessary to disseminate

49 Given that there is no common language as such that binds Asia at the larger regional, or event sub-regional level.
50 WFA and AWDF launched their first calls in January, 2017 and FMS and FIMI in the second half of February 2017.
51 Ibid.
the call in languages other than French, English, Spanish and Portuguese in the future.

c. There is a large unmet need /gap between reality and expectation -in terms of resources available for women’s rights organisations in all regions: The huge response to the calls for proposals demonstrated a big gap in terms of unmet needs of organisations. Towards the end of LFS 1.0, WFA explained that they still have to reject 60 percent of qualified applicants based purely on lack of funding.52 Similarly, FMS points out that they received 1600 proposals for two LFS calls, of which they were only able to support 50 grantees.53 Although this was disheartening, it helped the funds to demonstrate the immense need and demand for resources that exists and that is coming from capable and effective organisations across the globe.

An internal reflection from FMS, garnered from the Phase I learning process, is that more effective support for LAC Southern women’s rights organisations can be provided through a collective regional implementation model involving women’s funds from Latin America. The FMS believes this model of implementation (devised for LFS 2.0) that includes a component of regranting to 6 Women Funds will contribute to increasing the number of organisations to be supported. In addition, this model will improve the reach, as well as the quality of support and strategic approach to the grassroots organisations, due to the expertise and knowledge of the local contexts that the LAC Women’s funds bring to the LFS Steering Committee.

Changes for future calls:

- FIMI, WFA and FMS requested MFA to remove max and min stipulations under each of the three grant categories – small, medium and large. This gave the funds flexibility to add their own minimum and maximum limits under each of the three categories and fund more grantees.

- Collaborative model of implementation: During LFS 2.0, FMS will continue to act as the lead organisation accountable to the MFA, but they will coordinate programme implementation and collaboration with LAC Women’s funds as local partners. This will reinforce the impact of this programme, contributing to strengthening the sustainability of southern women’s rights organisations and movements throughout LAC subregions. The proposed collaborative implementation model is anchored in a structure in which the strategic decisions and the main programmatic directions are discussed by a Steering Committee (composed of LAC WF partner Executive Directors) and an Operational Committee (composed of LAC WF partner Programme Officers).

d. A variety of communication techniques is essential to make sure aspiring grantees understand LFS: Ensuring that applicants really understood the first call for proposals was a challenge mentioned by all the women’s funds. Specifically for AWDF and FIMI, of the many hundreds of applicants for each, more than 80 percent did not meet the eligibility criteria despite these being clearly communicated in the calls for proposals and the application guidelines. In addition, WFA received applications that were not even from women’s rights organisations, illustrating to them that the guidelines needed to be more explicit than they had realised.54 All the women’s funds were cognisant

53 Fondo Mujeres Del Sur, written responses to questions. November 2020
of the need to address this issue since each application represents a significant amount of work for the applicant. The women’s funds realised that more communication would be necessary about the purpose and nature of the fund, what advocacy means and who should apply. One key lesson was that long written explanatory documents were not always read properly, and that information needs to be disseminated in as many ways as possible. Efforts taken in this regard for the second round resulted in a much higher proportion of the applicants meeting the eligibility criteria.55

Changes for future calls:

● 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.

● Convenings were held to explain LFS.

● Working internally to develop clarity on definitions (for instance a clearer elaboration on what advocacy is) so that team members could provide guidance more easily to would be grantees.

● In terms of making the process easier, the funds also implemented online application systems for round 2.

2. Implementation: key Lessons

a. Financing mechanisms can be challenging: Regulatory requirements imposed by different countries have meant that it was difficult to transfer funds to many organisations doing transformative work on the ground.56 The women’s funds were able to use their local networks and understanding of local contexts to find solutions and enable resources to reach organisations through alternative mechanisms, but challenges remain. For instance, WFA faced challenges routing money through grantees in South Asia and FMS had this issue with some LAC countries due to restrictions in transferring funds abroad from those countries. In addition, unregistered groups could not receive funding and varied models of collaboration with other groups who were eligible for funding were necessary.57 The process of requiring financial sponsorship was not without its own problems either, in terms of difficult relationships between organisations and losses related to transfer of funds. After the first call, AWDF, faced a situation with a grantee who was unable to obtain government approval for the project for a full 12 months after the grant had been approved, despite a detailed process of outreach before the call seeking guidance on issues regarding funding in the Middle East.58

b. Rethinking parameters and negotiating with partners is possible if this is required to best meet needs of grantees: Grants were disbursed across small, medium, and large categories according to the stipulations below. These were adapted for each fund to their own context, but the maximum amount per category was the same for all four partners.59 Interviews conducted during the MFA evaluation revealed that several applicants requested less money than the maximum available amount. In addition, the stipulation that large grants had to account for 50 percent of the total grant-making per women’s fund potentially, “limited the scale of grant-making for small and grassroots groups that are the original and core constituencies of the

55 Interview with Madonna Kendona, AWDF. November 2018.
56 Ace Europe.
57 Small grassroots organisations: at least 10% of the total funds. No more than €50,000 per year per application. Medium-sized organisations (local and national organisations, networks, movements): at least 30% of the total funds. Between €50,000 and €200,000 per year per application. Large organisations (regional and national organisations, networks, movements): at least 50% of the total funds. Between €200,000 and €500,000 per year per application.
women’s funds.\textsuperscript{60} Realising that smaller grants may have responded better to the capacity of the applicant organisations, the funds did negotiate with the MFA and request that the minimum stipulation be lowered. For instance, FMS’ original plan for the first round of funding was to fund only 19 organisations (2 large ones, 5 middle-sized and 12 grassroots organisations). However, following the overwhelming response to the calls for proposals they reduced the grant size to reach a larger number of organisations and were able to support 34 organisations. FIMI also chose to fund more organisations with smaller grants.\textsuperscript{61}

**Key learnings around this have included:**

- The necessity of finding alternative ways to fund grassroots human rights work in increasingly authoritarian contexts.
- The importance of having a deep understanding of local contexts to continue to come up with solutions to resource women’s rights organisations without making their situation more precarious than it already is. Local women’s funds can play a critical role in helping to understand the situation on the ground.
- Be flexible, adaptable, and creative to best meet the needs of grantees.

**Changes for future calls:**

- Establish clear memorandum of understanding between organisations where a fiscal sponsorship relationship is being set up.
- Keep trying to develop alternative financing mechanisms that allow a diverse range of women’s groups to be funded.
- Collaborate with donors on ways to be flexible and adaptable.
- Create new funding mechanisms - for instance the collaborative model of regranting being done by FMS in LFS 2.0, which includes other 6 LAC WF’s.

3. Monitoring, evaluation and learning - key lessons

A significant amount of learning took place as the funds began to work together to develop their MEL capacities and specifically key common indicators to report on. Below is a brief summary of the processes involved, included here as an illustration of the amount of thinking and planning that is necessary to create strong MEL reporting frameworks in the context of a consortium.

The creation of the joint indicators was led by the MEL working group\textsuperscript{62}, required a significant investment of time and created a sense of solidarity among the teams. The development of the common indicators reflected a shared priority to facilitate the emergence of a common language around results that would be used to monitor and assess the changes that LFS was striving to produce at different levels (individual, organisational, environmental). An important aspect

\textsuperscript{60} ACE EUROPE, Evaluation Report - Assessment of the First Call - Leading from The South Fund. September 2017.
\textsuperscript{61} Prospera. Leading from the South Fund (LFSF). Key learnings from Phase I. 2019.
\textsuperscript{62} Section B, 2 (d).
of the common reporting was to use the indicators to track change and progress in terms that would be meaningful not only within donor parameters but to the movement and to women’s funds generally.

Various issues and questions framed the process of developing the common indicators and it required time during in person meetings as well as many calls to discuss and grapple with these. Some of the key questions that the funds discussed are outlined in the text box below and the process of achieving agreement on these issues was a significant achievement and example of collaborative work.

Key discussion Points around establishing common indicators:

- **Qualitative vs quantitative change**: how should impact be examined in these terms. Whilst some results may seem immediate and are quantitatively applicable, changes related to impact on values, norms, practices, and actions are almost always longer term and difficult to quantify.

- **The need to look at policy change processes not just outcomes.**

- **Macro level change and contribution vs attribution** – awareness and understanding of the influence of the specific intervention funded by LFS and that it may have been one of several different factors contributing to a macro level change (such as a change in law perhaps).

- **Structural change cannot be created without changing people**: the work involves affecting individuals who have a feminist consciousness who will then be able to change structures. One way is to segment the levels or think about different domains of change, for instance, values and norms, policies and action and practices.

- **What does individual change really mean?**

- **The ‘site’ of policy**: Policy is not necessarily national, or regional—it may also simply refer to where individual live and decisions, changes that communities/community leaders make or implement.

- **Consideration of descriptor words**: how each fund is using them to ensure consistency in definitions and measurement.

In addition to this the representatives of the MEL working group had to consider their own capacities and whether they had the ability to collect and report consistent, accurate data on time. This meant that they had to share technical knowledge, and practical strategies as well as agreeing on how and when to collect data and stories that could be shared. They also helped each other to prepare for and integrate the common scheme to report on the indicators, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), as mandated by the MFA.

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63 LFSF: Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group Meeting Notes: February 2018.
B. RELATIONSHIPS AND WORKING TOGETHER

1. Deep and practical sharing of knowledge

An 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.” For instance the WF’s all benefited from:

- AWDF’s expertise on monitoring and evaluation systems.
- WFA’s expertise on user friendly visuals and design for communications.
- FMS’s expertise on software, platforms, and their use of quantitative forms for shortlisting applicants.
- FIMI’s expertise on agenda setting and logistical planning.

In addition, all the funds learned from FIMI’s deep experience in developing close relationships with indigenous organisations at the grassroots. They particularly pointed out the importance of specific regional Linking and Learning events, where FIMI facilitated the meeting of non-indigenous and Indigenous women’s organisations and the other women’s funds, and thanks to which it was possible for the Asia and Africa funds to consider the importance of co-financing Indigenous Women’s organisations.

The WF’s also learned from each other’s distinct skills, strategies and experiences as funders and were able to assist each other with negotiating with different donors. For instance, AWDF had more experience negotiating with bigger funders at the start of LFS 1.0.

Reflecting on these interactions, it is clear that knowing that the other women’s funds were facing similar challenges, opportunities and questions created an environment in which they could all be more direct, confident, and purposeful in their requests for and sharing of expertise and ideas. This mutual interaction and joint commitment to generously sharing experiences, knowledge, results and learning and to reflecting together at key moments meant that the women’s funds were able to feel more confident in their decision making and this has resulted in creating a learning community of sorts between the four funds.

“I think that the LFS consortium provided a depth of knowledge. Even within grantmaking we have had to learn from others- when we started, we were reaching out and seeing how we could adapt the application form- that willingness to share knowledge was quite profound and heart-warming. It helped us to do our work better.” (FGD with AWDF Team, October 20, 2021)

At a personal level too, LFS teams talk about the immense and continuous learning that has been a part of working in this consortium. Team members referred to their own expanded understandings of women’s rights work in so many different regions as well as the enriching nature of supporting each other towards common goals and appreciating each other’s diversity, strengths, and areas of expertise.

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Prospera. Key learnings from Phase I- Internal document.
FGDs with the Women’s Funds - October 2021.
2. Learning how to work together as a consortium

As discussed above, the importance of working collaboratively was clear for the funds to benefit from each other’s support and expertise. However, 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. Whilst learning to work together and indeed think together as a consortium was an objective, and a desired outcome of LFS, the time and energy required to build a collaboration is always considerable, no less when it is happening alongside significant growth and transformation at an individual level.

What did this mean?

At the start of LFS 1.0, Executive Directors as well as team members from different countries on different continents and working for organisations with distinct cultures needed to collaborate and work together immediately, effectively, and continuously. This process involved addressing issues related to distance and time zones, as well as conceptual differences, and diverse approaches to participating in and managing joint work. In addition, the partners had to handle their partnership with the MFA, decide how to communicate as a consortium, and ensure consultation with each other for important decisions along the way. All of this required steep learning for each fund and necessitated the creation of strategies to support each other and ensure consultation. Therefore, key lessons from LFS 1.0 relate to what the funds learned about how to work together and what processes were helpful to enable this.

What operational approaches helped?

Below we outline lessons learned in terms of what sorts of mechanisms were helpful to the funds during this phase:

a. Inception meeting

This meeting, held in January 2017, laid the foundation for collaborative work between the four funds and the MFA, and was critical in terms of allowing them to establish common understandings related to the implementation of the fund. During the meeting they were able to identify areas of overlap and collaboration and to agree on mechanisms to enable cooperation, communication, and continuous individual and collective learning. These discussions led to specific agreements on issues related to the first call for proposals, branding and communications, managing the partnership with the MFA, linking and learning meetings and M&E.

b. Accompaniment Initiative

“The Accompaniment Initiative (AI) came about in response to a realisation that the funds were going to need both financial and human resources dedicated to helping them build their capacity to work effectively as a consortium and support the learning, networking and additional infrastructure needed to produce truly excellent and feminist results for the initiative.”

(Prospera, Key learnings from Phase I)

Mama Cash and Prospera supported the four funds to secure funding from the Philanthropy Advancing Women’s Human Rights (PAWHR) network. This funding was important in helping the Women’s funds to make specific capacity building changes including being able to bring in external expertise for monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), as well as branding and communications, adding new staff positions, and enabling representatives from the
funds to take advantage of key advocacy opportunities. As Mama Cash explained, “it’s been big that they (the funds) have been able to hire people, get outside consultants, expertise for communications and M&E, that they have the unrestricted funds available to do something that can help them strengthen their organisations.” 71 This institutional strengthening was critical in terms of the way that the funds were able to handle the requirements of LFS and the examples given below, although not exhaustive, help to illustrate why:72

- FIMI were able to hire staff members with expertise in communications and MEL so that these areas were strengthened and pressures on the rest of the staff were eased. In addition, they were able to bolster their software and accept online applications from indigenous women’s groups, translate materials and host the first regional grantee meeting in Peru.

- FMS was able to use AI resources to strengthen their MEL framework and become compliant with IATI standards in terms of quantitative data collection. They were also able to conduct field visits to get to know LFSF-funded groups and promote awareness and understanding of LFS in the Latin American region.

- WFA were able to develop comprehensive MEL structures and systems, including developing their new Theory of Change (ToC) and from it, short and long-term outcomes, indicators, and framework with which to track progress. They were also able to lead (along with AWDF) on the process of developing collaborative communications activities including a joint website.

- AWDF used AI resources to conduct analyses and outreach in the Middle East and North Africa particularly around “what themes and activists are working on in countries across these two sub-regions, and what kind of operating environments they are working in, as well as a study on inter-country advocacy in Africa.”73

In each case the funds had the freedom to choose what was most critical to build upon to optimise the implementation of LFS and this also contributed to their own institutional strengthening and sustainability. As explained by Mama Cash, the AI had significance “beyond the now”, to assist the women’s funds in dealing with the demands of LFS so that they could, “not just scramble but rather build the systems to grow sustainably from it. Then it becomes about the larger women’s funds community learning from it and therefore that helps to make this not just a one-time thing.”74 The leveraging by the funds of a wider network of funders to support LFS also demonstrated capacity to the MFA in terms of the networks that they had access to and wider support for the work.

“The AI and Linking and Learning meetings are really important — they have enabled us to be more communicative. LFS is one part of what we do. There is a larger calling on everyone, and the AI really facilitated the substantive and strategic thinking that LFS required.”

(Director of Programs, WFA, Interview 2018)

Most importantly, in the context of learning to work together as a consortium, the AI provided resources that would otherwise simply not have been available for the LFS teams to meet, interact and work with their counterparts from other funds. The consequence of this and the sustained impact on the partners is explained in the sections below.

71 Interview with Sandra Macias Del Villar, Mama Cash, 2018.
73 Ibid.
74 Interview with Sunny Daly, Mama Cash 2018.
“The AI has been a wonderful thing and without it the implementation would have been a very hard process with a lot of challenges. Three main things it has done for us are the internal strengthening of the four funds in terms of M&E and communications, the strengthening of the support we have been able to provide the grantees and the strengthening of the alliance - connections between the four funds.”

(Key informant interview, Executive Director, FIMI. 2018)

c. Linking and Learning meetings

“Various linking and learning processes between the women’s funds have resulted in strengthening the consortium by building an environment of trust and mutual respect; increased understanding of the different contexts and use of language and; improved processes and systems and speaking in a single voice (as LFS) in public forums.”

(Synthesis report to MFA)

The AI supported LFS project staff to really get to know each other and build relationships through linking and learning meetings. LFS project teams were able to meet, interact and work with their counterparts at meetings in: Sri Lanka in October 2017; Buenos Aires in November 2018; Ghana in November 2019 and online in November 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During interviews in 2018, several team members from different funds explained that the meetings had made collaborative work much easier simply because people from across the four funds began to know each other and know who to call on for specific needs. The teams explained that whilst many things could be done online, the fact that they were able to meet every year was a strength of the program. They also highlighted that issues that could take several meetings and weeks to resolve virtually could often be sorted out within a few hours in person.75

These meetings also had a role to play in terms of the continued development of a shared vision, strategies, and clear and consistent messaging about LFS to the outside world. The funds were fortunate to have these opportunities to collaborate in person before the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to do things in other ways.

“The platforms and opportunities for listening are relevant as they allow for more authentic support, in addition to increasing our awareness that there is much to learn from our partners. Empowerment is grounded in women’s own narratives and

agencies. This allows for the creation of a clear, consistent, strongly-recognised brand.” (FIMI, Final Report to the MFA.)

A key learning that is apparent now is that the “collaborative approach to learning, sharing knowledge, and experiences, as well as the requisite strategising as a consortium, resulted in building the foundation for a community of practice as resource mobilisers.” The partners have been able to use their collective voice to raise awareness around the politics of funding women’s rights in the Global South and are able to participate in public forums with a unified voice. With the renewal of LFS, they will strive for greater collective impact by continuing their efforts to:

- Create joint documentation of advocacy, reflections and learnings;
- Advocate for increased and improved funding for women’s rights work;
- Amplify and leverage voices from across the global south; and
- Build more networking and solidarity spaces for LFS partners globally.

Key Lessons on processes:

- An important lesson to note is the value of initiatives such as the AI that plan and think “beyond the now”, and that helped the funds in dealing with the demands of LFS.

- As the funds move into LFS 2.0, in many cases with new and growing teams, there is a continued need for spaces and opportunities within which to meet, engage and strategise with each other to ensure cohesion. Given the continuing uncertainties around COVID, it may be necessary to continue to develop expertise around meaningful ways to build relationships through virtual interaction.

- Resources will need to be allocated so that the partners can continue to work effectively as a group to increase understanding around evolving issues.

- Collective advocacy must continue and strengthen, and a coordinated strategy will be crucial.

d. Working groups

Part of the linking and learning process involved the setting up of three working groups (monitoring evaluation and learning working group, administration and finance working group and communication working group). The groups have successfully worked together on several joint initiatives. For instance, the finance team has been able to come up with joint solutions when it comes to reporting, audits and the applicability of the MFA policy requirements to the LFS process. The MEL group were “instrumental in creating a consensus around the common indicators and facilitating the adoption of IATI standards across all four funds” and the communications group has been key to the creation of a branding and common identity for the funds.

“One of the big challenges was simply starting to collaborate. To start working together with people that you don’t know and who live on so many different

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77 Gender at Work. Synthesis report of the Mid-Term review for the Leading from the South Fund. 2019.
78 Ibid.
continents is a challenge in itself. We are all so different - It is very good having all these different approaches but sometimes we think the way that something has to be done is how we have always done it and then we learn a new approach- we learn from each other.” (Communications Working Group, FMS, Interview, 2018)

The working groups have been key in terms of enabling 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
- Provide advice and guidance to each other on activities being carried out collectively

“One thing I would tell another consortium to do- based on what we have learned- is to set up working groups. Thinking collectively on specific areas of work- think together, plan together, deliver together. This is a best practice- and should be in any consortium.”

(FGD, AWDF. October 20, 2021)

However, the working groups also faced challenges in terms of different conceptual understandings, working across vast time zone differences, negotiating different ways of working and how to set standards for group collaboration (for instance, how do working groups decide which organisational culture prevails?). The process of working through these issues strengthened collaboration and yielded several interesting lessons explained in the text box below. All the partners agree that working groups are a mechanism that they will retain for operations in LFS 2.0.
Key lessons on working groups from Phase I:

- **Different point people need to be allocated specific tasks:** Everyone participates but one person leads or coordinates and is responsible for each activity. Similarly, when content is being drafted, one member of the WG should draft it and then the others comment and give their input. This is more efficient than everyone trying to work together.

- **Face to face meetings such as L&L meetings, should be ‘arriving points’ rather than ‘starting points’ for work products.** It is important to arrive at these meetings with goals, an agenda and a piece of work in process.

- **Use a facilitator for working group meetings:** This was found to be especially important in the initial phase of the group working together and getting to know each other and when the groups needed to work with external consultants. Neutral facilitation helped the groups to communicate and to stick to an agenda.

- **Work with external consultants:** Bringing in external expertise has been an essential and mostly very constructive aspect of LFS. The hiring of a consultant to help and support during the initial proposal process was highlighted as a particular ‘good practice’ as this person was able to guide and coordinate the challenging process for the Women’s funds who were working together for the first time.

- **Time zone compromises:** The differences in time zones for the 4 funds are quite extreme - consideration around this and taking turns to ensure that meetings were held during working hours ensured that virtual meetings were relatively comfortable for all parties.

- **Commitment and mutual understanding** from working group members provided the avenue to share learnings and address challenges.

(Prospera. Learning from Phase I. 2019)

Changes for Phase 2:

- **An annual agenda or programme** to guide collective actions for each working group.

- **Establish more clarity and a common approach within each group on decision making processes** in terms of which issues should be passed on to higher management levels (and which ones should not)

(FIMI, Final Narrative report to the MFA. 2021)
3. Learning from working with the MFA

A critical aspect of learning about collaboration and relationships was related to the partnership between the four funds and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The inception meeting established the foundations of this, providing the opportunity to meet with the MFA team in person, share ideas with them and negotiate the upcoming process. As the partnership developed and the program evolved the Women’s funds understood that negotiation is possible even within bilateral frameworks, and that they should speak out and share reflections and ideas about the partnership. Concerns related to conceptual understandings, implementation processes and communications were discussed collectively among the women’s funds and then presented to the MFA, and this yielded positive results.

“At the beginning we at FMS considered them as donors. We were used to those relationships, we were also a small fund. As the time has passed and as we have met more in person, we realised we can be real partners. The MFA has demonstrated this to us. For example, they participate at our linking and learning meetings – they show us that they are really interested, not just in reading our reports but they are really concerned about LFS.”

(Key informant Interview, Programs, FMS, 2018)

The mid-term review pointed out that a power-sharing approach was a deliberate effort by the MFA to work in a more equitable fashion, acknowledge the expertise of the women’s funds and devolve “decision-making to those who are on the ground, immersed in local context and best-placed to make decisions about how to best use these funds.” This approach as well as a commitment to trust and transparency and their demonstration of strong commitment towards the success of LFS created a relationship of genuine allies. As FIMI explained in their final report, “relations between FIMI and the Dutch MFA have been very enriching all along due to a fundamental component: a mutual interest in listening closely to experiences, challenges, suggestions and recommendations in relation to programme implementation and management…”

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. Although this was initially managed by Prospera, it was quickly realised that it was necessary for this role to be played directly by the women’s funds. Establishing this direct relationship with the MFA was important for the consortium and over time it served to:

● Contribute to the process of learning to work more collaboratively together
● Consolidate their identity within the partnership with MFA and
● Communicate more effectively to support advocacy efforts on behalf of LFS

For LFS 2.0, it will be important to consolidate and build on this positive relationship accounting for changes in staff and management both within the women’s funds and at the LFS program at the MFA. More frequent communication and periodic information sessions could also play a role in ensuring that women’s funds staff are supported in the ways that they need.

79 Synthesis Report.
80 Prospera. Leading from the South Fund (LFSF). Key learnings from Phase I. (2019)
4. Learning from relationships with external stakeholders

“Relationships with other women’s funds and women’s rights organisations in the regions had to be carefully managed. Each of the partners were expanding in terms of the budgets they were handling as well as the countries that they would be operating in and doing this in a way that was transparent and consultative and supported by the broader movement in the regions was critical in terms of the broader vision as well as implementation of LFS.” (Prospera, Learning from Phase 1.)

This was an area of significant learning for the partners. In Latin America, where there were already several strong, feminist and well-established women’s funds tensions arose around the selection process of FMS as the Latin American Fund for LFS. Addressing these issues in the region in a transparent and consultative way, was challenging and took some time but it provided key learnings for FMS and indeed the consortium. Transparent political dialogues supported and mediated by Prospera in the region allowed FMS to come to strategic agreements with the Latin American Alliance of Women’s Funds which ensured participation within and engagement of the broader alliance with LFS. One such agreement was the formation of an advisory council constituted of 3 other funds to provide strategic and political support for LFS implementation. Building new management mechanisms that allowed consultation and participation in an initiative with a regional scope like LFS was found to be very useful. In fact, according to FMS, the importance of “involving other women’s funds from the region more actively in the programme” was one of the most important lessons learned during LFS 1.0 and “constitutes the foundation for the collaborative model of implementation devised for LFS II in the LAC region.” (Prospera, Learning from Phase 1.)

There were also challenges in other regions. For instance, WFA explained that in Asia, regional women’s rights organisations had many questions related to their expanded role in the region and the perceived overlapping nature of their mandates. They also found that there was a lack of awareness and clarity about types of grant making (sub granting vs re-granting) and also about what women’s funds actually do. Their response to this was to hold a regional discussion, in September 2017, wherein they sat on a panel and opened themselves and the process up for critique and review by women’s networks, organisations and movements in the region. This process not only enabled them to introduce themselves properly and explain the role of women’s funds more generally, it also allowed them to raise the profile of the broader discourse around the politics of resources. This was perceived as a good practice with other national women’s funds, and a few opted to hold similar panels to expand these understandings in their own countries subsequently. A key learning from this was that it is important to communicate more about what women’s funds do in terms of resourcing the whole feminist movement (as opposed to select organisations that work on specific issue areas).
Ensuring that external stakeholders are partners with a shared consciousness and political understanding of the role of women’s funds has been a critical part of the work of all the partners. They are very aware that they hold the resources for each of the regions “in trust” and that “shifting the power to claimants of the resources to decide where, how, and what to use them for” is an essential part of their role.

Key lessons on navigating relationships with external stakeholders

- Arrange active consultative processes with other women’s funds and women’s rights organisations as these are allies and partners without whom the implementation cannot be successful.
- Share information about LFS transparently in different convenings and allowing for questions to be clarified.
- Encourage participation by asking national funds to be involved with outreach and selection processes during calls for proposals.
- Support smaller funds by putting their names forward for other funding and technical assistance.

5. Reflecting on collaboration: looking forward

The working relationship between the consortium has been and continues to be based upon “a shared vision of the change they want to achieve in the world: that as feminist funds they want to fundamentally disrupt patriarchy and that as southern funds they want to dismantle neo-colonialism in working towards the achievement of gender equality and justice.” (LFS 21-25, Joint proposal)

Over time, the process of managing milestones, jointly strategising, providing support, sharing expertise generously and resolving conflict has resulted in a strong partnership wherein each women’s fund trusts each other to represent LFS with a collective voice. LFS teams explained that working as a consortium is a challenging process involving continuous learning, mutual trust, tolerance and understanding.

“There is a uniqueness component which is difficult to measure but moves us to be what we are together: positive energy, solidarity, sorority, resilience, hope, love and passion.” (Luz Aquilante, ED, FMS, FGD October 2021)

In reflecting on the successful nature of the collaboration, the consortium agreed that a few underlying factors specifically stand out:

- A shared vision and excitement about the possibilities of LFS, the unprecedented nature of it and the chance of being part of something extraordinary.
- A lack of ego amongst the leadership meaning that they were able to focus on collective benefits and
approach everything as partners who could succeed together,

- An ability to look both inward and outward - focusing and being able to implement the fund to the best of their abilities whilst also being able to look outward to what was happening in the rest of the world and use ones increasing voice to promote the agendas of others along with their own.

**Key Lessons and further Collaboration for LFS 2.0:**

The relationships built and lessons learned from LFS 1.0 will continue to impact how the partners approach collaboration. Important aspects to be sustained and developed further for LFS 2.0 will include:

- **The allocation of time and resources** to support ongoing relationship building, clarification of expectations and the conceptual evolution of the LFS model.

- **Recognising the strength in the diversity** of the partners and respecting each other’s different approaches.

- **Holding a project commencement meeting for LFS 2.0:** this was carried out virtually at the start of phase 2. A series of meetings to discuss guidelines and understandings for this phase were also held between the partners.

- **A coordination mechanism to facilitate collaboration** - one fund will act as lead coordinator and spokesperson for LFS.

- **Continuing to build on the success of the L&L meetings** and ensure ongoing reflective spaces and convenings both with and for the LFS Consortium and the movement generally. Four fund level L&L meetings will be held between 2021-2025.

- **Working groups will continue** and these will ensure the advancement of joint work priorities by undertaking:
  - collective strategic advocacy to resource feminist movements in the global South
  - joint communications to strengthen Southern feminist narratives

- **Undertaking collective strategic documentation of learnings and reflections.** These may include communications and advocacy materials (videos, booklets, brochures, infographics) which highlight the work of the grantees, LFS 2.0’s successes, and LFS as an example of an innovative southern-led funding mechanism.

- **A common theory of change** has been developed for LFS 2.0 that will allow greater coordination to articulate change across the four funds.

(Source, LFS 2.0. Joint Proposal)
V. Moving Forward

1. Recommendations for LFS 2.0

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. The mid-term review report as well as the final evaluation reports for the individual funds emphasise specific common areas as being important to develop and strengthen for LFS 2.0. These are outlined below.

Supporting resilience: Natural and man-made disasters, armed conflict, political instability and global pandemics disproportionately impact feminist organisations and movements “underlining the need for actors concerned with human rights and social justice, and within that feminist ecosystems, to develop their own systems of safety, security and resilience.” The role of donors in this context is to develop grant-making practices that support the resilience of feminist groups and movements. Whilst the consortium is doing this in many ways, they will need to sustain and develop their efforts on:

- Advocacy with their own donors to commit to long-term funding and allow increased core support.
- Increased flexibility and responsiveness to shifting needs and constant communication has become more apparent than ever in the wake of Covid-19.
- Exchange with peers and other funds to learn about and adapt good practice from other spheres to the LFS program.

Longer term support is needed: Many grantees mentioned the need for longer term funding and for funding that lasts at least 5 years to build institutional capacity and stability for the work. The partners could consider entering longer term support arrangements with some grantees and enhancing resource mobilisation planning to address sustainability issues.

Continue to support cross movement work: There is room for further support of cross movement building across regions and thematic areas. The partners could, at a consortium level, identify these gaps and address them deliberately. One such area where there are growing opportunities is climate justice. The partners are aware that they need to keep reinforcing linkages amongst themselves, with the movement and with other movements.

Continue to examine approach to reporting: According to AWDF’s final report to the MFA, “the power of the learning lens for LFS is to surface diverse and complex narratives of change and show that sustained work takes time, significant resource investments and innovative ways of assessing shifts (whether positive or negative).” The consortium must continue to ensure that feminist values are centred in the design and implementation of monitoring and evaluation frameworks and fund ways to advocate for this and practice this as part of their political stance.

Emphasise self and collective care: This can be done by expanding investments into grants that provide ‘holistic security’. This is an approach that integrates concepts and practices related to self and collective care and well-being with physical and digital security. The partners could provide grantee partners with support to learn about and institutionalise practices around this.

Engage in more communication and more strategic sharing with the MFA: The mid-term review suggested more sustained and frequent interaction between the funds and the MFA which could enhance strategic sharing of information related to the funding landscape. Local embassies could be allies and host joint events for grantees in the countries or regions.

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89 Ibid.
Engage in more joint communication: Develop a systematic approach to collective communication and advocacy including creating more communications and advocacy materials (videos, booklets, brochures, infographics) which highlight the work of the grantees, LFS 2.0’s successes, and LFS as an example of an innovative southern-led funding mechanism.

Expansion of linking and learning program: Grantee partners have really appreciated the opportunities to meet and learn from each other during regional linking and learning meetings. Providing more regular and in-depth opportunities for exchanges between those working on similar issues or socio-cultural contexts has been mentioned as necessary and wanted by grantees from all funds.

2. Conclusion

LFS 1.0 is part of a powerful story about how change happens. About unprecedented bilateral investing in Southern led women’s funds, about donors who have the vision to think about power and leadership differently, and a consortium that has “a shared vision of what in the world we want to change” and the courage to strive tirelessly towards the ultimate goal of LFS, that “women, girls, and trans people in the Global South experience gender equality and the full realisation of their human rights.”

Through the last four years, LFS has meant that the consortium has been able to think about their role and the possibilities of what they can do totally differently. They have been able to reach more organisations, in more places with more money building new networks and levels of support and capacity building, helping to build sustainability and resilience for multiple partners and working constantly for a better world in which women and girls can fully exercise their basic human rights. This report has sought to highlight and examine the many and profound lessons learned by the consortium during this time- not only in terms of implementing LFS operationally but also in terms of how to work together as a consortium, how to be better partners, better donors, better advocates themselves for the shifts in power and resources that are so necessary for feminist movements globally to thrive.

90 LFS 2.0. Joint Proposal.
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