

What Do Feminist and Women's Rights Organizations Want From Partnerships With INGOs?

PERSPECTIVES FROM FEMINIST & WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS IN AFRICA



About this paper

Feminist movements and women's rights organizations (WROs) play critically important roles in climate action. They support women and girls at the frontline of climate change impacts, and they have long understood that inclusive feminist climate action is vital.

Ultimately, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) want to partner – and learn more about how to collaborate successfully – with feminist organizations and WROs¹ to further the gender and climate justice agenda. In support of this objective, Oxfam and CARE carried out a research and learning project with the goal of highlighting the perspectives of feminist organizations and WROs on their experiences of collaboration with

INGOs, and to draw lessons from their views, ideas and ways of working.

The project was implemented in early 2022 in West, East, South and the Horn of Africa, and included grassroots, local, national and global organizations with a focus on these regions. The research used highly participative and stakeholder-led methods, and included a literature review, stakeholder mapping, key informant interviews and focus group discussions with members of feminist organizations and WROs.

This paper was co-written by the feminist organizations and WROs who participated in the project, and outlines the key findings and recommendations.



Why invest in feminist movements & WROs?

It is widely agreed that the engagement, participation and leadership of women in every aspect of the climate movement – including climate policy, climate justice, climate finance and adaptation programmes – is vital. WROs around the world are best positioned to define and deliver ground-breaking programmes that address the root causes of gender inequality. An OECD report² presents evidence that women's rights activism and movements are key drivers of legal and policy change to address gender inequality, and that WROs are pioneers in designing effective and innovative approaches to advance gender justice, especially in the climate movement.

WROs have a deep knowledge of their communities and constituencies, and know the best strategies for driving long-lasting and sustainable change. In times of crisis and opportunity, WROs are important actors as they operate in many different contexts: rural, urban, conflict-affected, dealing with humanitarian crises, etc. They are often first responders in emergencies, supporting communities and women directly. At the local level, these organizations know and are trusted by the community, making them reliable sources of information. At the national level, they are advocating for investment, pushing for gender analysis and highlighting the gender dimensions of planning and policy. They are calling for the voices of WROs and feminist movements to be heard in the design of local, national and international responses to ensure that these reach and benefit all members of society.

INGOs largely recognize the value of WROs in leading the discourse around climate justice and see it as a gender justice issue, and this is visible and stated in their frameworks, strategies and visions. Yet despite these positive intentions, there is a clear disconnect between the acknowledged value of WROs in shaping discourse on climate justice, and the power

and nature of opportunities ascribed to them to meaningfully contribute to that discourse. This paper seeks to explain why is there such a disconnect in the relationship between WROs and INGOs.

The research revealed a consistent, powerful thread of thinking: feminist organizations and WROs see *major cracks in the relationship between feminist/women's rights organizations working on climate justice and donor agencies/INGOs*. These cracks can be characterized in terms of INGOs' (mis)perceptions of the structure and nature of WROs; their lack of meaningful and quality engagement with WROs; the historically exploitative nature of INGO collaboration with WROs; the inability of INGOs to mould their funding mechanisms to fit the largely informal, simple structures of grassroots WROs; the tendencies of INGOs to 'take over' when presented with a collaboration opportunity; and finally, their lack of knowledge around how to apply feminist principles to generate empowering, meaningful relationships with WROs.

Mending the cracks in the relationship between donor agencies/INGOs and WROs first needs an acknowledgement of the power dynamics that have long been skewed against WROs. It requires a commitment by INGOs/donor agencies to tackle power imbalances and patriarchal structures by shifting power to WROs. This calls for more equal partnerships with shared power. Therefore, it is vital that INGOs build a framework for effective collaboration that adheres to feminist ideologies; and take a partnership approach that recognizes the grassroots nature of the many WRO actors engaged in the climate justice discourse and makes WROs equal partners in decision making. This discussion paper concludes by putting forward key recommendations for repairing the broken relationship and forging a new path for effective collaboration.

What are the KEY CHALLENGES to effective partnership?

The feminist organizations/WROs involved in the research recognize the value of having INGOs as allies. They acknowledge the ability of INGOs to disburse timely funding to organizations in need, and to broker new relationships with donors and other INGOs. INGOs have the capacity to open up spaces where WROs can directly influence policy and decision making. They can also provide informal coaching and support to WROs, as well as formal technical assistance to bring WROs together to benefit from collective action, mutual support and solidarity.

Yet despite the positives, WROs' accounts of their experiences of collaboration with INGOs paint a different picture. From the perspective of the majority of WROs involved in the research, INGOs are inflexible, top-down and extractive. The relationship reflects a clear power imbalance, where there is a wide gap between INGOs' intention to make mutually beneficial connections and the reality of their institutional practices and processes. Several WROs raised numerous concerns about their past experiences working with INGOs. These are described below.

1. INGOs do not differentiate between women's rights organizations and feminist organizations

*'It is not a good sign if an INGO is lumping all WROs together with feminist organizations. How can you claim to be applying feminist perspective if you do not recognize them as distinct?'*¹³

- There is a need for INGOs to understand that not all WROs are necessarily feminist.
- There is also a need for INGOs to have more clarity on the characteristics that make an organization feminist. One criterion should be that women form a critical part of the leadership team and constituency.
- There is a need to incorporate the existing feminist agenda into the work of INGOs. It is presumptive of an organization to try to define the feminist/ climate justice approach while ignoring or sidelining decades of research and work that feminists have already dedicated to this. Unfortunately, this is one of the negative perceptions around how INGOs work – they are seen as having a tendency to try to define/own an agenda or approach, even where something already exists and is well documented.



2. INGOs are just ticking a box on participation

'INGOs aren't concerned with meaningful, quality participation of WROs – they are simply ticking a box.'

- WROs expressed feeling excluded from meaningful participation in planning, decision making and priority setting. Although INGOs recognize that women's participation is important, WROs feel that in practice this participation is rather tokenistic. What are the proven steps an INGO needs to take for participation to be meaningful? Are these steps evident in the way an INGO currently engages with WROs and feminist organizations?
- As an organization, is the INGO willing to prioritize the voices of WROs/ feminist organizations? What would this look like in practice?

3. Collaborations with WROs in Africa are exploitative and extractive

- INGOs continue to be extractive and exploitative, and often use feminist organizations/WROs as sources of information and 'examples of the South'. When WROs are asked to participate in global forums such as UN Climate Change Conferences (COPs), this is usually as a single representation – the 'Southern voice' example – among INGO delegations that are otherwise entirely made up of Northern staff.

'Would Oxfam, for instance, give up its seat at the next COP for a Southern feminist organization to take that place?'

- WROs/feminist organizations are asked to participate in forums and in developing pieces of work, but there is often no follow-up and they are unsure about what happened to their contributions. How were they used and what was the final outcome? Examples were given of an INGO putting its name on the final paper, with no attribution of the WRO.
- Efforts of WROs are not always considered, credited or compensated sufficiently.

'As Oxfam, you have funding for a project where our contributions are needed for the project to be deemed successful. Yet you will not compensate any of our members for their contribution, even when there is a cost for us to participate.'

4. Giant INGOs take over

'As organizations, we have presented INGOs with numerous opportunities for representative, fair collaboration – and each time, the organization has shown a tendency to "take over".'

- In terms of how the relationship is managed and the outcomes are credited, WROs find working with INGOs difficult because the INGO 'giant' takes over. This further highlights the unequal power imbalance.
- It is not acceptable for an INGO to dictate to a WRO what participation should look like. INGOs need to ask the WRO how they want to engage for maximum positive impact. What would their meaningful participation look like?
- While INGOs do appear to care about some of these issues, they ultimately revert to complicated, donor-led ways of working and show a lack of effort to apply a feminist approach (see below) in their work, despite their stated commitment to do so.

5. INGOs are unclear about HOW to engage with grassroots-level WROs in Africa

- The reality is that INGOs are still not clear about how to work with WROs and feminist organizations. The old ways of doing things are no longer appropriate. For example, INGOs hold meetings in main cities and/or use online resources for meetings – but grassroots organizations do not always have access to either. Oxfam expects WROs to engage but doesn't always compensate them for their expenses (e.g. travel costs, internet fees, etc.).
- A feminist approach is one that looks at WROs' and feminist organizations' ways of working and then adapts to suit them, rather than the current approach of 'building the WRO's capacity to engage through the INGO's means of interaction'. For example, INGOs would benefit from providing WROs and feminist organizations with access to childcare to enable greater engagement. Practical assistance to help overcome the North/South divide is also key, such as help to obtain visas, pay transport costs etc., which always present significant barriers for grassroots women in Africa to engage with global processes.



6. INGOs need funding models that fit feminist/women's rights organizations

- Any funding for climate justice should be channeled to the most vulnerable people, including women in Africa who are at the frontline of climate change impacts. INGOs can do a better job of scaling funding for the most at-risk and vulnerable people.
- There needs to be a genuine, open and transformative conversation around this challenge to co-create a solution – one that serves the needs of WROs and feminist movements as well as the institutional requirements of INGOs. It currently appears to be a problem to which neither 'side' has a clear solution.
- The main principle that represents a true feminist perspective is that we need to change funding models to fit WROs, rather than making WROs adapt to fit with the existing funding model.

'We shouldn't be modelling women's voices to fit the donor box, we should change the narrative entirely. We should mould the donor voice to fit women's needs and ways of expression – that is the true definition of feminism.'

The disconnect between the acknowledged value of WROs in shaping discourse on climate justice, and the power and nature of opportunities ascribed to them to meaningfully contribute to that discourse is further evidenced by research on the total funding reaching WROs working on climate change. An OECD report on the extent to which climate finance is working for women⁴ showed that ODA (official development assistance) that also supports gender equality accounted for 31% of bilateral ODA to climate change in 2014 – a total of US\$8bn. Just 3% of this funding had gender equality as a principal objective, while 28% integrated gender equality as a secondary objective. The report recommended that donors improve their support to locally led action on gender and climate change through multi-year and predictable funding for Southern civil society organizations, including WROs. In 2014, only 2% (US\$132m) of all gender-responsive climate aid went to Southern civil society organizations.⁵

7. INGOs expect WROS to navigate complex bureaucratic procedures

INGOs' compliance culture and tendency to be risk averse is deeply entrenched within institutional mandates and ways of working. INGOs focus their time and attention on meeting donor expectations and requirements, and as such shy away from working with smaller organizations that do not have the necessary organizational infrastructure to comply with these. There needs to be a shift away from the current focus on navigating complex bureaucratic procedures to a focus on the actual partnership and what partners can achieve together. INGOs' are large and exceedingly complex, they are in many ways donors themselves, having to ensure accountability and traceability. Their compliance culture is a key factor impeding quality partnerships from forming and spreading.

8. INGOs are inaccessible

From the perspective of WROs, the imbalance of power is exacerbated by the inaccessibility of INGOs. Unless a WRO is invited to engage directly with an INGO, it is incredibly challenging to make a connection. WROs have to 'know someone on the inside' to be able to link with the organization, which further hinders any meaningful connection and collaboration. This was found to be the case at country as well as at local level.

'You would expect the INGO country offices to be able to have a more flexible approach to working with WROs, but this is not the case at all – they lack the autonomy to develop more flexible partnership arrangements, which would work better for them in their scope of work. This means that country offices are limited in being able to work with a variety of more local, grassroots actors who are the real changemakers, because these actors are perceived as 'high-risk' owing to their lack of formal institutional structures. Most of these grassroots, local WROs are run by one or two women, with strong community support. They don't have time to be concerned with formal procedures – they are too busy doing the work!'

While the existing models of collaboration and partnership are grounded in beneficial principles of accountability, consistency and validity, the reality is that they are exceedingly limiting and counterproductive to INGOs' goals and mission. What is the way forward? Is there a way to get past these issues and minimize the gaps in the existing model of partnership? WROs and feminist organizations put forward the following recommendations for INGOs.





Closing the gap: ***RECOMMENDATIONS for*** ***meaningful collaboration***

Listen, adapt and connect

- Collaboratively (with feminist organizations and WROs) define what makes an organization feminist, based on existing feminist principles.
- Recognize that the above entails spending some time on research to understand the nature of grassroots organizations in Africa, and look at how models of engagement can be more respectful to WROs' ways of working. INGOs should create contracts that respect the cultural and political norms of grassroots organizations.
- Be more proactive when identifying WRO partners. WROs identified INGOs' tendency to fixate on the same organizations and focus funding on them. WROs' participation is thus a box ticked without the INGO exploring and learning about other organizations in need of support. The smaller organizations are ultimately left out.
- Prioritize building country teams with feminists – true allies who understand the principles and goals of feminist thinking. This could be achieved through the process of hiring staff in country. It can make all the difference to meaningful engagement with WROs when the INGO representative is a feminist who understands the local realities of grassroots organizing.

Enhance genuine collaborations, feminist ways of working and leadership by feminist organizations/WROs

- Support WROs' activism and involve representatives from WROs (including grassroots WROs) as experts and leaders in designing, managing, evaluating and coordinating projects. Invest in co-creation processes.
 - Build on the existing capacities of WROs and take more of a 'connector role' rather than a lead organization role. This includes facilitating connections, particularly with the private sector, which may have more accessible funding than INGOs/donors. WROs would appreciate support to build their skills to diversify their funding base and mobilize local resources.
 - Validate WROs' voices by keeping them engaged beyond project participation. Credit their contribution appropriately. Consider the barriers to WROs' participation and how these can be overcome, including by adequately compensating them.
 - Consider alternative ways for WROs to participate, including through creative forms of expression, which are not necessarily written.
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Give up your space, take a back seat and amplify the voices and messages of feminist and women's rights organizations.

- Use your power and privilege to open up spaces in which feminist/women's rights organizations can engage duty bearers and hold governments and corporations to account.
- Give up your own seats in global spaces (e.g. COP27) to ensure that voices from grassroots feminist and women's organizations are heard, and support and amplify their messages.

BOX 1: *What does effective collaboration look like?*

How to do it

1. *Co-create approaches and projects with WROs and feminist movements.*
2. *Present the findings of this research collaboratively (as INGOs) to donors – and build an influential voice on improving ways of working and funding models.*
3. *Elevate conversations: recognize that there is a natural tension between global INGOs and grassroots organizations that is rooted in the political economy. INGOs have to be deliberate and concerted in their efforts to overcome these imbalances of power.*
4. *Give up space in global conversations and support the messages of WROs; amplify their voices.*

How not to do it

1. *Design the project/statement etc. and then seek validation or feedback from WRO(s).*
2. *Accept the status quo and continue to expect WROs to fit with existing donor models.*
3. *Invite WROs to support the messages of the INGO.*



Adapt existing funding models

Institutional barriers are inherent in donor funding architecture. For WROs, this essentially means that the donor funding architecture needs to change. Given that there is widespread acknowledgement and belief that WROs are crucial to achieving gender equality and gender justice in the climate movement, then donors and INGOs need to make a concerted, deliberate effort to build support for WROs into the structure of funding mechanisms. This could mean earmarking a percentage of their budget for grassroots WROs, or developing an organizational strategy that identifies support for WROs as a priority and outlines the approach to this.

WROs identified the following as key recommendations for consideration in relation to funding:

- Involve representatives from WROs (including grassroots WROs) as experts and leaders in designing, managing and evaluating funding mechanisms.
- Recognize WROs' need for flexibility to carry out their core activities, and provide support on areas that will strengthen their effectiveness/impact.
- Educate donors on how to work with grassroots WROs. This includes building donor capacity to fund long-term, flexible partnership structures.
- Provide adaptable, sustainable, flexible funding. Donors should adopt a range of funding mechanisms and adapt their approach as the partnership evolves. INGOs should link WROs to ongoing national government support and other sources of finance. This could include accepting and reflecting a preference for flexible funding structures within the INGO's institutional framework.
- Fund organizations rather than projects, in a manner that respects WROs' ways of working/organizational structures and processes. This could mean investing in WROs' organizational capacity so they can learn and grow.
- Explore using social media as a means of validation for donors. While most grassroots organizations do not have formal institutional governance and reporting structures, they most likely have a social media presence (e.g. a Facebook page). Look into the potential of seeking endorsements by community leaders.

Be more accessible

- Enable WROs to make contact more easily; this shouldn't rely on them having personal connections with staff in the INGO.
- Change partnership models to facilitate continuous learning. Existing structures involve too much bureaucracy that is the antithesis of how WROs and feminist organizations operate.

Conclusion

Implementing these recommendations is obviously much more difficult than putting them forward. However, it is vital that attempts are made to do so. As this paper has highlighted, the relationship between INGOs/donors and WROs working in Africa is broken and in need of repair. The first step to healing is to acknowledge the historic, systemic hurt, which is reinforced by a strong and persistent power imbalance, and to commit to active learning, growth and long-term change.

INGOs dismantling their old ways of thinking is critical to ensuring long-term improvements to partnerships and collaboration. The process should not be taken lightly; nor should it be viewed as a one-off event. Rather it will involve a series of dialogues fostering co-learning and facilitating trust. This will require INGOs to take a more critical look at how they can collaborate with WROs as vital friends and allies, and to identify equal partnership approaches, challenge each other and hold each other accountable.



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- 1 This paper reflects the views of the feminist and women’s rights organizations involved in this research. We recognize (as pointed out in this paper) that WROs and feminist organizations are distinct from one another; however, for the sake of brevity we have sometimes used ‘WROs’ to refer to both.
- 2 OECD. (2016). Donor Support to Southern Women’s Rights Organisations: OECD findings.
- 3 Unless otherwise specified/referenced, all quotes in italics are from representatives of the WROs or feminist organizations interviewed or involved in the key informant interviews and focus group discussions.
- 4 OECD. (2014). Making Climate Finance Work for Women.
- 5 Ibid.



