

*A Powerful South-South
Alliance:*
Leading from the South (LFS)

Leading from the South (LFS) is a feminist consortium led by four women's funds from the global South: the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), *Fondo de Mujeres del Sur* (FMS), International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI)/ AYNÍ Fund (AYNÍ), and Women's Fund Asia (WFA). Founded in 2007, FMS focuses its interventions on Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, providing support to feminist organisations with flexible and multi-annual funding. Since 2017, FMS has coordinated Leading from the South in Latin America and the Caribbean, reaching over 20 countries through a collaborative model with other women's funds based in the region.

Leading from the South, currently in its second cycle - initiated in 2021 and extending until 2025 - represents an innovative approach to international development cooperation in which resources go directly to the southern-led women's funds from its main donor, the Dutch Government. This enables them to leverage their ability to exert power over them as the key decision-makers, meaning resources do not flow to organisations from the global north with offices in the south, but instead directly support southern-led women's funds. Leading from the South is putting the concept of localisation into practice, and localisation

“is much more than thinking about how funds flow from north to south, but rather to be able to generate another distribution of power, which has to do with trusting organisations in the south to define their own agendas, to manage money and to raise questions that have to do with: what are the issues that need to be addressed? What are the issues to be prioritised?”

FMS's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning coordinator

Leading from the South was born when the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs modified its funding priorities, which affected feminist organisations based in the global south. Feminist organisations from the global south, women's funds like Mama Cash, a feminist women's fund in the Netherlands, and Prospera, a network of feminist women's funds, advocated on behalf of southern-led women's funds and organisations, establishing a new line of support directed to them. Leading from the South is, therefore, the result of collective action involving feminist organisations and women's funds both in the global north and south supporting novel donor relations and reflects a political commitment from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The collaboration between the women's funds consortium and a bilateral donor was innovative on various fronts. It engaged non-traditional actors and dedicated a significant sum—42 million euros in the first phase and 80 million euros in the second phase—to joint endeavours, reframing bilateral relations. Although the Dutch Government has extended its support for Leading from the South for another five years and with more donors are supporting the initiative, a systematic replication of this experience elsewhere has not eventuated.

FMS works across four strategic areas: political participation, economic justice, elimination of violence and discrimination and socio-environmental and urban justice. Through Leading from the South and collaborating with other women's funds in Latin America and the Caribbean, FMS supports initiatives from grassroots, intermediate, and large organisations dedicated to advancing women's rights within these areas. In 2021-2023, they reached more than two hundred organisations in 25 countries with financial and technical support, including core funding. Many of these grassroots organisations, supported through Leading from the South, lack official registration or legal status in their countries. In practice, this entails establishing a

comprehensive structure to reach such organisations, devising effective ways to disburse funds to them, and navigating countries with numerous restrictions on such matters. This requires a deliberate decision-making process and a robust structure to support these decisions.

In addition, a crucial aspect of FMS's work within Leading from the South involves fostering a sense of community among the organisations they support. This aims to strengthen the movement and build alliances between grassroots organisations and women's funds and organisations. Coming together as a consortium, Leading from the South also reinforces the leadership of the four women's funds based in the South within the landscape of international cooperation, as they mention,

“We sit down with donors or potential donors differently than if we were alone.”

FMS's Deputy Director

Implementing Leading from the South through alliances across the global south facilitates horizontal learning, experience sharing, and developing a collective vision among women's funds and organisations. These alliances are key enabling factors for Leading from the South's success. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there was already

a robust ecosystem (networks in place) that Leading from the South strengthened, and propelled forward. Leading from the South has enhanced leadership both at the individual level and within the organisations, contributing to increased legitimacy within their communities. Additionally, while not establishing a direct cause-effect relationship, many organisations have increased opportunities for accessing additional resources.

On a macro level, Leading from the South in Latin America and the Caribbean has contributed to changes in laws, public policies, and regulations through projects presented as bills, interventions in specific public policies, or prevention of issues deemed harmful to specific groups. The capacities of women's funds and organisations to influence legislation and policymaking outcomes are commendable. Additionally, their ability to resist and provide support during setbacks related to the context, such as governments with anti-feminist agendas, is also a significant result.

There are various challenges in advancing towards a power shift and increased localisation. This includes altering how funds are distributed and adapting operational procedures, monitoring, and evaluation to be more user-friendly, participatory, and focused on mutual learning for both the funds

and the supported organisations. Likewise, there is a challenge around redefining sustainability within a shared responsibility framework, and long-term funding is critical for this in a context of uncertainty about the future of cooperation dynamics, marked by humanitarian crises and the rise of right-wing governments and anti-feminist groups. Women's funds have a role in advocating for such changes.

Another crucial factor is the role of women's funds within the international cooperation sector and their capacity to navigate the bureaucracy inherent in the logic of cooperation. They absorb donor requirements without overwhelming the partners they are supporting, especially those operating on the ground. They prioritise the need for feminist movements over donor-driven agendas.

Leading from the South has demonstrated that alternative forms of support are possible within international cooperation. Women's funds from the global south, based in the global south, can effectively manage and successfully handle large resources from development cooperation. This has influenced donor thinking on funding southern-led women's funds and southern leadership and ownership.

Learnings:

- ▶ ICSOs can foster greater South-South learning and harness the expertise of other organisations by dedicating resources to regional learning events, mirroring the approach of initiatives like Leading from the South.
- ▶ Leading from the South embodies an innovative collaboration between women's funds and a bilateral donor, reshaping external perceptions of women's funds and resource distribution dynamics. This was achieved by implementing fair decision-making processes and maintaining direct communication with the donor through a designated focal point.
- ▶ Collective advocacy and alliances have led to the distribution of flexible and adaptable funds and trust-based partnerships. ICSOs can model this shift in donor-grantee relations, seeking to forge partnerships with smaller grassroots organisations based on collaboration. They should refrain from imposing their own agendas and instead empower these smaller organisations to define their own priorities.