



The Donor Committee for Enterprise Development

Seeding Success: Donor Strategies for Supporting Women-Led Climate Initiatives

Disclaimer

There is a dominant narrative that portrays women as victims of climate change. This brief is part of a series of examples that challenges this view, portraying women as active agents of change, in the hope of inspiring donors to advance women's economic empowerment to address climate change. Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) members helped the Canopy Lab team identify the women featured in the briefs as examples of innovation. We thank the women that generously shared their experiences with us.

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Introduction

Striving to determine why some donor-funded initiatives reach sustainability and scale in terms of **supporting women in the fight against climate change** while others do not, the research team uncovered good practices that donors are following. This brief seeks to show which common threads emerged from 24 interviews conducted with donor representatives, and 11 interviews with women who benefitted from donor support to combat climate change in food systems, natural resource management, and sustainable energy.

This case is structured around the impact areas that the research team sought to explore, namely: inclusion, women's economic empowerment through a lens of agency and access, environment, and sustainability. For full context, it should be read in combination with the other four briefs that are part of this series.



What works for inclusive climate action

Inclusion

Empowerment

Balance

Inclusive climate action is a concept that has gained **traction** as the international development community realises the exclusion risks associated with initiatives in the climate space. Being inclusive while aiming to generate environmental benefits relies on understanding the contributions of different groups to

climate solutions, how they are affected by the environmental crisis, and designing support packages to redress and prevent any inequity. Some of the good practices that donors shared in this sense include the following.



Support strategic partnerships with the public sector

Institutionalising partnerships between marginalized groups and the public sector promotes inclusive public-private dialogue and can result in public initiatives designed to meet the needs of diverse communities. For example, through support provided through the United Nations Development Programme (**UNDP's Small Grants Programme financed by the Global Environment Facility**), a grantee established a fruitful collaboration with the Regional Agricultural Directorate which allowed for the installation of water infrastructure in areas most vulnerable to environmental challenges in Tunisia. This has also worked for the implementing organisation of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH **in Bangladesh**, where a project¹ has promoted links between Community Development Committees (CDCs)² and local authorities that have resulted in better conditions for climate induced internally displaced persons (IPDs) with a special focus on women.

Similarly, involving local or national authorities from the outset in project initiatives fosters a cultural shift towards inclusion and can support poverty reduction and urban planning in a participatory manner. Empowering women as credible intermediaries enables authorities to recognize and respond to the diverse needs of the community, going beyond programme objectives, as explained by a representative from GIZ Bangladesh:

"The Community Development Committees participatory planning process turned out to be very successful. The biggest change was successful advocacy towards decision makers such as the Mayor. Prior to this, no one in public office felt responsible for these communities"
 - GIZ Head of Project of UMIMCC/UMML

SIDE NOTE

- 1 Urban Management of Internal Migration due to Climate Change (UMIMCC)/Urban Management of Migration and Livelihoods (UMML) is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), co-funded by the European Union (EU), and implemented by GIZ Bangladesh in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Welfare of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- 2 CDCs represent residents of informal settlements in urban areas. CDC leaders are mostly women.



Support strategic partnerships with the public sector

In several cases, promoting links between women-led initiatives and the public sector was an explicit tactic championed by donors. For example, Women's Environment and Development Organisation (**WEDO**)³ champions the integration of women's voices and perspectives into policy-making processes, particularly concerning environmental and sustainable development issues. The organisation follows an approach that blends direct support for women's collectives with advocacy for systemic change. As an interviewee shared:

"Central to our strategic plan are three pillars: moving power, moving money, and moving minds. Under the moving power pillar, we advocate for the inclusion of women's groups and grassroots organizations in decision-making forums at national and global levels"

- WEDO Representative

SIDE NOTE

³ Women's Environment & Development Organisation



Embed gender equality in governance structures

Mandating equal membership rates and advocating for women's representation at senior levels within cooperative or associative statutes amplifies women's voices and ensures their perspectives are heard in decision-making processes linked to the climate crisis. Imposing gender quotas may seem controversial – but some donors share that in their experience, it has been key to ensuring not only that women are heard, but that their self-confidence opens the door to further opportunities. This may go beyond representation at board level and promote the inclusion of traditionally excluded people (such as survivors of domestic violence or indigenous groups) in initiatives. The Federation of Community Forestry Users (FECOFUN), a Nepalese network of forest user groups that received support from the Swedish

International Development Agency (Sida), offers an example of the effective use of gender quotas: „**FECOFUN's executive leadership is 50 percent women, a formal stipulation that was added to its constitution in 2010. The decision to do so was progressive but highly contentious.**“ FECOFUN's women leadership has been linked to an **increase in the number of women in Nepal's local, elected government positions in 2017.**



Pivot as needed to promote inclusion

An implementer representative with experience working in the **WOSFER** and **ALL-IN** programmes in Uganda shared that the projects' climate resilience and women's economic empowerment activities had been informed by experience that prompted them to move away from targeting women groups, and targeting women in situations of exclusion instead. The team observed that otherwise, there was a risk to reinforce exclusion practices, as the most vulnerable and marginalised did not join groups targeted by projects that only support collective initiatives. By supporting individual women, it is easier to ensure that vulnerable individuals are not overlooked.

"We were going into these communities and identifying women aged between 18 to 34, 35 to 55, and then 55 and above, and ensuring that we included persons with disabilities"

- Interviewee from Makerere University



Support grassroots initiative

Guided by feminist principles and a commitment to crisis response with a collective care perspective, **Sida's Urgent Action Fund** disburses grants to groups led by women, transgender, and non-binary individuals confronting security threats within the realms of social justice movements, including climate justice. Its decentralised approach ensures that grants are allocated based on grassroots insights and community needs. Other donors also prioritise fostering transparent relationships with implementing partners and women groups, rooted in a feminist approach that acknowledges partners' expertise and allows them to shape priorities. As an interviewee explained:

"It is important to trust partners' knowledge and priorities to effectively advance gender equality objectives in the fight against climate change. They know better what they need than we do"
- Anonymised input

Embracing open applications and involving local advisors ensures that resources are allocated based on grassroots insights and urgent community needs, rather than on criteria imposed by donors who are far from people's lived experiences. Similarly, organisations like **PIFEVA in the DRC** recognize and empower communities affected by conflicts and violence, leveraging their resilience and traditional knowledge in the fight against climate change. Some donors and implementing partners make a strong argument for non-conditional finance:

"The traditional structures that have been put in place to try to finance and invest in climate action are not fit for purpose. Women-led groups are often unable to access traditional modes of finance because of barriers as fundamental as gender inequalities, [affecting] who has access to credit, to opportunities, and to education"
- WEDO Executive Director



Combining women's economic empowerment and environmental objectives

Inclusion

Empowerment

Balance

Sustainability

There is convincing **research** suggesting that the drivers of climate change, environmental collapse, and gender inequality are connected. Climate justice relies on a full acknowledgement of the roles and rights of women and a shift away from economic models where women's labour and the planet are exploited. Key components of women's economic empowerment in this sense include increased

access to the resources they need to carry out environmental stewardship work (including power, finance, and education), as well as increased agency over how they administer those resources and voice their needs. Ultimately, donor support can ensure that women contribute and benefit from a transition towards a sustainable economy, and do not suffer the adverse effects from the transition.



Business case and mentality change

Instead of imposing hard targets on its partner, the International Finance Corporations's **(IFC's) Powered by Women** project supported hydropower partner Sanima in Nepal to understand the business case for increasing women's participation in the workforce. This approach led to a mentality shift that is likely to be sustained within the company⁴:

"IFC does a lot of research around understanding how gender gaps are affecting our clients' operations. We lead with that analysis, and we often get clients' interest around the business case for inclusion"
- IFC Advisor

SIDE NOTE

4 See the Sustainable Energy Brief part of this series for more details



Business case and mentality change

Another donor that highlights the importance of a thorough gender diagnostics to inform project design to tackle environmental and empowerment objectives is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the context of the Small Grants Programme (SGP).

Grants are awarded based on thorough gender analyses and the development of Gender Action Plans: gender equality requirements are part of the granting process, and this has led to meaningful integration of gender equality considerations in fulfilling environmental objectives, as well as to the fact that over one third of SGP projects are women-led. This approach, combined with community consultations, helps the programme identify recipients in a way that ensures gender considerations are integrated from the design stage alongside environmental objectives.

“UNDP environment projects aim to take a strong gender approach, conduct a thorough gender analysis during the design phase, and then design a Gender Action Plan. During consultations with communities and with stakeholders, we identify women’s groups we can support”.

– UNDP Representative

Many donors are fully aware that it is not only women’s mindsets, but rather men’s and society’s at large, that need to change for Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) in the framework of environmental protection to take place. Donors use several tactics for this, but mostly rely on education and the organisation of joint training sessions for women and men. For example, WOSFER involves couples in training sessions to facilitate discussions on gender norms and decision-making within households as it relates to climate resilience.



Empowerment through training and entrepreneurship

GIZ Bangladesh included entrepreneurship training in its support package to Community Development Committees that represent the residents of informal settlements who are oftentimes people who have been displaced due to climate related disasters. Most of the participants are women who seized on this knowledge, leading to increased rates of women entrepreneurship:

“We have business coaching and financial literacy training to help women develop their businesses. There was a huge change for these women, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of power and of decision making at home, within the families, and within the communities”

- GIZ Head of Project of UMIMCC/UMML.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) involved waste pickers into the research and design phases of its initiative to support the Cooperative Society of Solid Waste Collectors of Mbeubeuss-Bokk Diom. This not only generated early buy-in, but it also ensured that support met member needs. Throughout the project, the ILO has supported the articulation of a clear business case for joining the cooperative, including quantifying the benefits of selling aggregated and value-added waste. But crucially, the ILO also provided trainings for women members on topics related with confidence-building and leadership, as well as for all members on gender-based violence.



Balance environmental and WEE objectives

Inclusion

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From the donor interviews, it was clear that within tight project timelines, it is likelier that donors achieve WEE and climate impact by focusing on certain economic sectors.

Generally, it seems there is still room to articulate and measure the effects of WEE interventions on metrics linked to increased resilience to climate change.

Sector Selection

Donors who participated in this research mostly support sectors that employ or affect large numbers of women, and where there is room to reduce sector's contribution to environmental emissions. These include improved water harvesting techniques or irrigation infrastructure, waste management, forestry management, agriculture, and sustainable energy. Choosing to work in these sectors provides donors with the opportunity to address both WEE and environmental objectives.



Beyond financial support for environment defenders⁵

The number of grants from Sida's Urgent Action Fund (UAF) allocated to environmental and climate justice defenders has been increasing annually. This indicates growing support for initiatives aimed at addressing environmental challenges and promoting climate justice. UAF grants provide support for those opposing extractive industries, including legal fees and wellbeing-related issues:

"The medical and wellbeing fund is a blessing. For human rights defenders experiencing burnout it provides funds that they wouldn't otherwise have access to in order to support their mental and physical health"

- UAF Country Advisor for Fiji

Another way that donors support women environmental defenders is by placing them front and centre of the debate. For example, PIFEVA (Pilier aux Femmes Vulnérables Actives, a DRC-based NGO) has focused on improving the understanding of gender inequalities related to climate change among rural and indigenous women in the DRC. They also strengthen networks of women affected by climate change that advocate for gender mainstreaming in climate policies. By championing indigenous women as agents of change with traditional practices for environmental conservation, PIFEVA promotes sustainable practices and biodiversity preservation.

SIDE NOTE

⁵ UAF uses this term to refer to the people they support with their grants.



Measure wisely

Recognising the longer time frame needed to see results linked to climate action, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) uses qualitative indicators like increased capacity and confidence among women's groups as metrics of success. This acknowledges that tangible results may not be immediate, requiring sustained efforts for meaningful impact.

"One cannot look for numerical changes that quickly. But I think you can look for anecdotal or qualitative indicators. Once you know where you want to go, and what you want to do, qualitative indicators can show you where you stand relative to where we were"

- GAC representative

Across most donors, there was a stronger emphasis placed on tracking Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) indicators than there was on measuring climate related indicators. While this can be explained by the limited resources and implementation timeframes awarded to projects, it does mean there is not much documented evidence that shows how combining WEE and climate objectives amplifies both.



Key features that promote sustainability

Inclusion

Empowerment

Balance

Sustainability

Sustainability encompasses multiple dimensions. In the framework of this series, the team focused on the ability of women-led initiatives to continue once donor support ends.

Institutionalisation

The sustainability of projects often relies on institutionalisation through partnerships with the public sector, according to most of the donors interviewed for this research. This can happen at local, subnational, national, and international level, and be driven either by general demands (such as access to safe

drinking water in an informal urban settlement) or by targeted advocacy drives (such as better health conditions for waste pickers). At national level, as a representative from GAC explained:

“It is important to help the women we support understand what their government’s commitments and processes are for establishing Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans. Women can then get training if they need it in terms of how best to engage in policy advocacy at national level. Quite often, they’re already very good at engaging in policy advocacy at the local level” – GAC Representative

Another type of institutionalisation is achieved through the establishment of internal alignment along a shared business case. Through trainings, awareness raising, and support in action plan preparation, several donors are ensuring that behaviour change is maintained.

Finally, some donors mentioned the importance of formalisation as being key to ensure that sustainability is achieved.



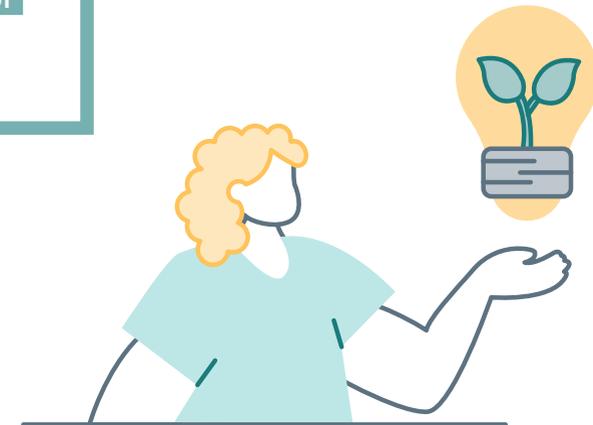
Sustainable Models

Projects like the GIZ-implemented Social and Economic Participation of Returnees, Internally Displaced Persons and the Host Population in North-East Nigeria (SEPIN) incorporate demonstration farms on climate-smart agriculture, embedding the intention to showcase successful models beyond the programme's lifetime. This approach ensures that the demonstration effect is inherent to project design, facilitating broader uptake and sustainability.

Other examples of sustainable business models include the ILO supported Cooperative Society of Solid Waste Collectors of Mbeubeuss-Bokk Diom in Senegal and Sida-supported

FECOFUN, which both rely on membership fees since the outset. Commercial viability is a component of sustainability, as it is likelier that initiatives can continue without donor support. As explained by an interviewee:

"FECOFUN has resources from member fees, which cover most basic costs. At the same time, sometimes we need additional funding to mobilise people and pay for food, travel and training in the organisation" –Advisor and Former Chairperson Federation of FECOFUN.



In conclusion: good practices for donors

If you found the above interesting, below are some suggestions for how you can design a programme that will support women's economic empowerment and climate outcomes:

Design

- **If you want to ensure sustainability, prioritise initiatives that predate donor involvement:** establish partnerships with public institutions to institutionalize projects and promote dialogue with the public sector, as sometimes women who are active in the climate space will not have the tools to engage with decisionmakers. Support local initiatives and local ownership.
- **Consider viability from the outset:** if the project works with women as economic agents and not only as human rights or environmental defenders, emphasize commercial viability early on in project design. Support sustainable business models, such as membership-based cooperatives, to ensure long-term financial viability. While this

has applications outside of environmental interventions, it may necessitate particular attention when targeting excluded groups.

- **Design for inclusivity:** ensure projects are designed with inclusivity and intersectionality in mind. Incorporate existing vulnerable groups and engage men alongside women to address power dynamics effectively in their fight for climate justice.
- **Include environmental goals and metrics from the outset:** more evidence is needed around what works to promote WEE and environmental objectives. Tracking indicators (qualitative or quantitative) that help document what works and what does not will support better interventions.

Sector selection and support modalities

- **Focus on impactful sectors for WEE and the climate:** orient support towards sectors where women can increase their representation, and where there are opportunities to improve climate outcomes.

- **Promote leadership and entrepreneurship:** provide training on entrepreneurship skills to empower women working in climate-adjacent areas. Building confidence and leadership capacities fosters vocal attitudes towards driving change and ensures sustainability.
- **Advocate for policy changes:** either through the project or directly, engage policymakers to address systemic challenges. Advocating for policy changes ensures sustainability beyond the project duration.
- **Flexible funding mechanisms:** introduce decentralized, flexible funding mechanisms that meet the diverse needs of women and other groups. Incorporate explicit strategies targeting women's empowerment alongside climate objectives. Invest in responsive funding mechanisms guided by feminist principles to address urgent needs and move power within marginalized communities.

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