The We Lead Program
Learning Brief
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Learning, leading, sustaining: insights from five years of capacity strengthening in SRHR advocacy

Executive Summary

Over the past five years, the We Lead program has invested deeply in strengthening the capacities of Communities of Action (CoA)[1]across nine countries in Africa, Latin America, and the MENA region. This was a core activity aimed at amplifying the voices and leadership of young women, particularly those from structurally excluded groups—including young women who face vulnerabilities and discrimination, with disabilities, living with HIV, and those affected by displacement.

This learning brief documents the evolution, achievements, and lessons learned from our capacity strengthening efforts. Drawing from internal MEL data, partner reflections, and field experiences, the brief explores what worked, what did not, and what the wider SRHR and advocacy community can learn from us.

Key Takeaways

- **Locally led, context-specific approaches** were more effective than standardized capacity-building models because they allowed organizations to set their own pace and priorities. Involving local leadership in organizing, contextualizing, implementing and evaluating every capacity strengthening process was crucial.

- **Long-term engagement and layered support**—such as combining training, mentorship, and peer exchange—yielded stronger, more sustainable outcomes.

- **Feminist and participatory principles** fostered trust, accountability, and the emergence of new leadership from within rightsholder communities.

- **Capacity strengthening is a two-way street.** Consortium partners, donors, and technical leads likewise finetuned their knowledge and practices through the process, with different rightsholders groups learning from each other.

- **Organizational resilience is political.** Building capacity must also address power, safety, and sustainability, especially in contexts of shrinking civic space. Strengthening capacities for critical reflection and collective care is essential to challenge the status quo and enablestrategic, safe, and transformative change.

As we close this chapter, we recognize that capacity strengthening (CS) is not a "project component" but a long-term commitment to justice, leadership, and voice. This brief is part of our collective legacy and an invitation to others to keep investing in the people and systems that sustain change.

[1] The Community of Action (CoA) is a facilitated safe space where young women and their organizations come together to share advocacy plans, priorities, and lessons learned, and to strategize around potential advocacy areas and synergies.
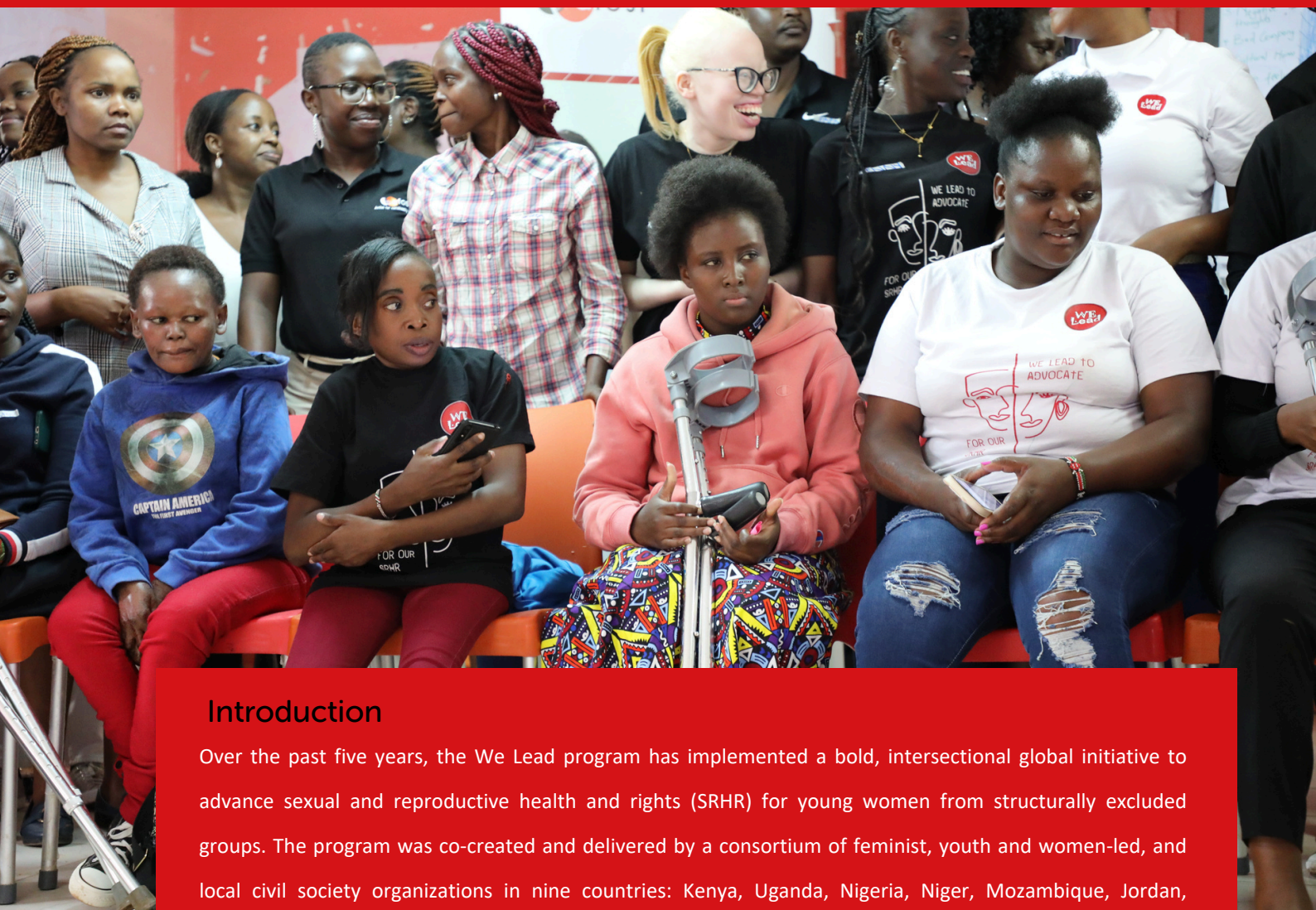
Introduction

Over the past five years, the We Lead program has implemented a bold, intersectional global initiative to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young women from structurally excluded groups. The program was co-created and delivered by a consortium of feminist, youth and women-led, and local civil society organizations in nine countries: Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Niger, Mozambique, Jordan, Lebanon, Guatemala, and Honduras. The We Lead consortium included Positive Vibes, Restless Development, Marsa, FEMNET, the Central American Women's Fund, and Hivos, and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The program supported young women's groups and organizations through CoAs[2] to strengthen their capacity to advocate, claim, protect and promote their SRHR.

The program countries presented distinct social, political, and legal contexts but shared one common thread: the urgent need to amplify the voices of rightsholders often marginalized in mainstream SRHR agendas. These rightsholders included young women who face vulnerabilities and discrimination, with disabilities, living with HIV, and those affected by displacement. Recognizing that sustainable advocacy requires strong, resilient, and well-supported actors, the program invested significantly in CS as a core strategy not just to build skills, but to shift

power, promote feminist leadership, and ensure locally driven change. Through flexible and adaptive approaches, partners engaged in peer learning, tailored mentorship, leadership development, and organizational strengthening over time.

This learning brief documents the journey, strategies, and insights that emerged from our work, offering a reflection on what it takes to support capacity strengthening in ways that are meaningful, inclusive, and rooted in justice.

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The Capacity Strengthening (CS) Approach

Capacity strengthening was not an add-on, but a central pillar of the program's design and implementation. It was grounded in feminist and rights-based principles, ensuring that support was demand-driven, context-responsive, and grounded in the lived realities of rightsholder-led organizations. Our main CS goal was to support resilient young women from the four key rightsholder groups in leading and shaping stronger, more inclusive organizations and movements that work collectively to defend and advance their SRHR.

a. Empowered and resilient rightsholders and COA-Fs

- Enhanced psychosocial wellbeing (self-confidence, self-esteem, self/collective-care, resilience).
- Heightened political conscious (awareness, critical thinking about power relations, agency, voice, personal and collective engagement) rightholders.
- Enhanced strategic and thought leadership to advance in their SRHR agendas.
- Raised participation in key spaces (at local, national, regional and international levels).
- Improved knowledge and skills to advance realization of SRHR (gender, human rights and SRHR; rightholders' realities, needs and priorities; lobby and advocacy; data and research; campaigning, etc.).

b. Stronger and inclusive CSOs (local organizations participating in CoAs)

- Improved systems and structures leading to credible and sustainable institutions.
- Increased thought and critical leadership, resilience and adaptability.
- More inclusive, supportive or led by young women - rightholders (considering their meaningful participation and the inclusion of their needs/priorities in their s and actions).
- Improved knowledge and skills to advance realization of SRHR (gender, human rights and SRHR; rightholders realities, needs and priorities; lobby and advocacy; data and research; campaigning, etc.)
- Enhanced safety, security and collective care strategies within the organizations.

c. Enhanced political alliances within and across CoAs and with movements to advance rightholders SRHR

- Enhanced common understandings and shared political agendas and strategies (intersectional, contextualized).
- Rightholders priorities are included in collective SRHR agendas and claims.
- Increased coordination, collaboration, alliances and joint actions among organizations, CoAs and wider movements.
- Improved strategies to address power relations and social/cultural challenges for rightholders SRHR realization.
- Increased organic linking and learning among organizations/ peer to peer learning.

Core Areas of Capacity Strengthening

Across the nine program countries, capacity interventions focused on several strategic areas, including:

- **Rightsholder empowerment and feminist leadership development** - Strengthening young women's confidence, political agency, and participatory leadership to ensure their meaningful participation and influence within inclusive movements and organizations.

- **SRHR knowledge, advocacy and influencing skills** - Building rightsholders' knowledge of SRHR, gender, and human rights while equipping them with advocacy, research, and campaigning strategy and skills to effectively influence change at all levels.

- **Organizational development and institutional resilience** - Strengthening local organizations with inclusive systems, sustainable structures, and self care-based practices to enhance credibility, safety, and long-term impact.

- **Movement building and collective power** - Fostering collaboration, shared agendas, and peer learning to amplify rightsholders' voices and drive collective action across organizations, CoAs, and broader movements.

A Multi-Layered, Multifaceted Adaptive Model

The program adopted a multifaceted approach to CS that included structured training, interactive workshops, targeted coaching, and ongoing accompaniment. We also facilitated knowledge sharing and peer-learning opportunities, both within and across CoAs, to foster collective strategy development. In addition, we provided financial support through participatory grant-making mechanisms that centered the voices and priorities of rightsholders. To further empower rightsholders, we invested in initiatives that enhanced their psychosocial wellbeing and self-confidence. A key focus of our approach was promoting and supporting young women's leadership within CoAs, partner organizations, and throughout the program's governance and implementation structures.

We adopted a multi-layered model, blending different modalities to meet diverse needs:

- **Individual capacity** through training, mentoring, leadership coaching and creating spaces for young feminists to exercise their leadership.
- **Organizational capacity** through grant making, grant management, tailored technical assistance and tools.
- **Collective capacity** through country and regional peer learning, support to the communities of action, creation of communities of practice, and cross-country learning exchanges.

We began with capacity assessments for both rightsholders and CoAs. Rightsholder capacities were assessed across four areas: self-confidence and resilience, political consciousness, strategic leadership, and advocacy for young women's SRHR. CoAs were assessed in six areas: credibility and sustainability, resilience and adaptability, inclusive leadership by young women, SRHR advancement, safety and collective care, and joint action.

These assessments informed country-specific capacity strengthening plans. The consortium organizations offered a CS Support Menu covering diverse topics, including: advocacy (national, regional and international); campaigning; LILO (looking in, looking out) and setting the levels methodologies; youth-led research and accountability leadership development; sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC); feminist and rights-based SRHR; planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME); safety, security, wellness and wellbeing; and organizational strengthening. Each intervention was preceded by self-assessments and included regular reflection moments, enabling adaptive programming. This approach let organizations co-create and pace their learning agendas.

Mutual Learning Across Borders

Where possible, CS was delivered by local consultants or peer organizations, reinforcing sustainability and relevance. The global consortium provided technical support, facilitated learning, and selected training materials. The program also partnered with technical partners who provided specific knowledge, information, tools, and processes in key thematic areas such as legal awareness, strategic advocacy, SOGIE for people of faith, and strategic communications. By creating space for mutual learning, the program not only supported CoA organizations but also encouraged reflection and capacity growth within the consortium structures, modeling a horizontal, feminist approach to capacity development.

a) Partner-Driven and Context-Specific Approaches

Allowing partners to define their own capacity needs and tailor interventions accordingly ensured relevance and ownership. In countries like Niger, Jordan and Lebanon, organizations appreciated that CS efforts were flexible enough to respond to their operational realities, linguistic needs, and political constraints.

"The process respected our pace and our voice. We felt seen as partners, not recipients." – CoA organization, Mozambique.

b) Blended and Layered Support

Combining formal training with hands-on mentorship, peer exchanges, and ongoing coaching created deeper, more sustained learning. CoAs found value in being supported not just once, but over time, and in different formats that matched their learning styles and stages of maturity. This was made possible through the contributions of diverse actors, from global to local levels. Rather than isolated efforts, capacity strengthening emerged as a collaborative process, carefully woven together by many hands.

"We didn't just attend a workshop and go home. The follow-up helped us apply what we learned in real time." – Community of Action Facilitator (COAF), Kenya.

c) Feminist and Inclusive Methodologies

The use of feminist principles such as power sharing, critical reflection, and mutual learning and accountability created safe, empowering spaces for learning. Approaches that acknowledged the personal as political and were grounded in the lived experiences and knowledge of participants played a central role in these CS processes. Many CoAFs reported that the leadership training was transformative – for how they saw themselves, not just as facilitators and leaders, but as decision-makers and movement-builders. Given the shrinking civic space affecting all program countries, the feminist principles of sisterhood and solidarity were critical in helping rightsholders support each other during difficult times. In these contexts, building trust and treating care not as an individual concern but as a collective and political issue of power was critical.

d) Blended and Layered Support

Structured opportunities for peer learning across the nine countries fostered connection and solidarity. Whether through virtual learning circles, regional convenings, or shared case studies, CoAs and rightsholders felt inspired by each other's journeys and innovations. Consortium members also engaged in learning and strengthened their own capacities throughout this transformative journey.

"Knowing that someone in Nigeria is facing similar barriers and finding solutions gave us hope and ideas." – CoA, Niger.

e) Balancing Accountability with Support

Regular DMEL reflective forums such as annual theory of change reviews, outcome harvesting, the mid-term review, and ongoing feedback loops enabled capacity support to adapt based on what was working and what needed improvement. This adaptive approach helped to ensure that CS was not static, but responsive and evolving.

Dealing with Challenges

While We Lead saw many successes in CS, it also encountered real-world challenges that tested its flexibility and commitment to feminist, context-responsive approaches. These challenges, many of them structural and context-driven, offered important lessons on the limits and possibilities of sustainable CS in complex environments.

a) High staff turnover in CoA and consortium organizations - Frequent turnover of staff and leadership in some CoA and consortium organizations made it difficult to sustain momentum or institutionalize knowledge. The program invested in team-based learning and encouraged documentation of internal processes to preserve institutional memory. Where possible, refresher sessions were provided for new staff, and knowledge repositories were co-developed.

b) Shrinking civic space and political instability - In countries such as Niger, Uganda, Mozambique and the MENA region, CoAs faced tightening restrictions on civil society, impacting their ability to operate freely or participate in training. Capacity interventions were adapted for online delivery, while ensuring digital safety and confidentiality. The program also incorporated content on risk management, advocacy in restricted contexts, and organizational resilience. In some instances, training was offered in a another more secure country.

C) Language barriers and accessibility gaps - With programming in three regions, language diversity (Arabic,French, Portuguese, Spanish, and English) often slowed down learning. Similarly, some interventions were not fully accessible to participants with disabilities. The consortium worked to provide translation, interpretation, and easy-to-read formats. Over time, it also engaged local experts to adapt materials for diverse literacy and accessibility needs —though this remained an area requiring further investment especially for rightsholders with visual disability.

d) Uneven digital access and infrastructure - Digital divide issues, especially in rural areas or conflict zones, affected the reach of virtual learning efforts particularly during COVID-19 and in remote partner locations. Efforts were made to provide offline materials, share data bundles, and offer asynchronous learning options where rightsholders were allowed to engage in learning activities at their own pace and on their own schedule. Local in-person facilitators were engaged where digital engagement was not feasible.

e) Balancing accountability with support - At times, organizations felt the tension between being "supported" and being "monitored," especially during capacity assessments. In some cases, this may have led to a tendency among partners to rate themselves more favorably out of concern that lower scores could affect their access to funding or continued support.

The program emphasized participatory approaches, co-created assessment tools with partners, and maintained a safe, non-judgmental environment. Feedback loops were framed as learning moments rather than audits, helping build trust and shift the power dynamics inherent in donor-partner relationships.

Lessons Learned

Over the five years, the CS efforts revealed powerful lessons; not just about building skills, but about shifting power, supporting resilience, and creating the conditions for feminist leadership to thrive.

a)   Capacity strengthening must be rooted in trust and equity - When partners are treated as equals, and not just recipients, they are more engaged, reflective, and invested in their own growth. Trust-building, mutual learning and mutual accountability created space for honest conversations and sustainable change.

b)   One-size-fits-all approaches don't work - Political realities, language, organizational maturity, and lived experience all shape how support should be designed and delivered. Flexibility and responsiveness were essential to achieving success.

c) Feminist leadership is a capacity worth investing in - Supporting partners to reflect on power, decision-making, and internal governance deepened their ability to lead movements, not just projects. Feminist leadership enhanced accountability, solidarity, collective care, mutual respect and learning and strengthened advocacy from the inside out.

d) Peer learning builds collective power- When grassroots organizations connect across borders, they learn faster, adapt creatively, and find solidarity. Cross-country exchanges were some of the most transformative experiences.

f)   Capacity strengthening is a political act - Building capacity in shrinking civic spaces or underfunded movements is not neutral. It requires courage, protection, and long-term commitment. Supporting resilience, not just results, is essential.

b)   Capacity building is not linear - Some lessons and changes happen in the most unexpected ways. Sometimes one must look keenly to notice the changes. For this to happen, one must be open to seeing and understanding all the elements of CS and avoid assessing change in a linear way.

c)   Meaningful participation and leadership of historically excluded groups requires intentional creation of enabling conditions. It's not merely about placing individuals in advocacy spaces, but about equipping them to navigate those spaces, learn, and assert their rights from their own perspectives. Capacity strengthening is essential to building these foundations.

Recommendations

These recommendations aim to inform donors, implementers, and advocates who design or fund CS interventions in global SRHR or rights-based movements.

For Program Designers and Implementers:

- *Embed flexibility in design and budgets.* Programmers are encouraged to design programs with in-built flexibility—both programmatic and financial—to adapt to evolving capacity needs. CS is not static; as partners engage and contexts shift, new needs and opportunities emerge. Allowing room in workplans and budgets for responsive actions ensures that support remains relevant, timely, and impactful.

- *Co-create CS plans with partners.* Avoid top-down or one-size-fits-all approaches. Instead, engage implementing partners and rightsholders in co-creating CS plans. This collaborative process ensures that CS interventions are grounded in local realities, reflect actual needs, and enhance ownership, relevance, and sustainability of outcomes.

- *Invest in blended CS approaches.* Effective CS goes beyond standalone training sessions. A blended approach that combines structured training with ongoing mentorship, coaching, peer learning, and reflective practice is the best. This layered support allows for continuous learning, contextual adaptation, and the application of new skills over time.

- *Prioritize language accessibility and inclusion from the start. I*mplementers are encouraged to ensure that CS activities are accessible to all participants, especially those with disabilities or in multilingual environments. This includes providing interpretation, translation, and accessible materials, and being intentional about inclusive facilitation methods. Building inclusive spaces enhances participation, learning, and leadership of historically marginalized groups.

For Donors and Funders:

- *Fund long-term, adaptive capacity development.* Donors are encouraged to invest in longer program cycles that allow sufficient time for organizations to internalize learning, apply new skills, and demonstrate measurable impact.

- *Allow sufficient inception period.* For capacity-driven SRHR advocacy programs, a six-month inception period is insufficient. Donors and funding partners should adopt a long-term funding approach that allows for an inception phase of up to one year. This enables adequate time for program setup, including comprehensive baseline studies and capacity assessments to effectively inform CS activities.

- *Support core costs and institutional resilience.* Donors should move beyond project-restricted funding to include flexible support for core operational costs. This means resourcing essential elements such as staffing, internal systems, governance, communication, and digital infrastructure. These investments are critical for strengthening the institutional backbone of grassroots and rightsholder-led organizations, enabling them to sustain impact, innovate, and respond effectively to evolving challenges.

- *Recognize the political and emotional labor of CS work.* CS, particularly in advocacy and rights-based programming, often entails profound emotional and political labor—especially for rightsholders working in high-risk or politically sensitive environments. Donors should acknowledge this by funding wellbeing initiatives, collective care practices, and longer-term accompaniment. Safe, flexible funding spaces should be created that allow these actors not only to lead but to do so without compromising their health, safety, or dignity.

For COA Organizations, Advocacy Networks and Coalitions:

- *Invest in cross-learning infrastructure.* CoAs, networks and coalitions should strengthen opportunities for shared learning by investing in platforms such as regional convenings, learning circles, and collaborative digital spaces. These infrastructures enable organizations across different contexts to exchange insights, co-develop solutions, and build solidarity across movements.

- *Foster horizontal learning spaces.* Inclusive, non-hierarchical environments should be created where rightsholders and CoA members can share experiences and knowledge on an equal footing. Dialogue should be prioritized over directive approaches to ensure mutual learning, respect, deeper understanding, and strengthened collective strategies.

- Document and share context-specific practices that work. CoAs are encouraged to document and disseminate community-driven approaches and innovations that have proven effective in local contexts. Sharing these practices through stories, case studies, or practical guides can inspire adaptation and scale up across regions while honoring the value of local knowledge and leadership.