

MID-TERM REVIEW OF WE LEAD PROGRAMME

SUMMARY



INTRODUCTION

ABOUT WE LEAD

We Lead is a 5-year programme, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) with a total budget of €40.7 million for the period 2021-2025, under the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRH-R) Partnership Fund, which is part of the Strengthening Civil Society subsidy framework. HIVOS is the lead party among a consortium of partners: Positive Vibes, Restless Development, Marsa, FEMNET, the Central American Women's Fund and MoFA is also a partner as well as funder. M&C Saatchi World Services is a technical partner of the programme.

The programme seeks to improve the opportunities for young women to take the lead in advocating for their sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is implemented in nine countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central America: Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Mozambique, Uganda, Lebanon, Jordan, Honduras and Guatemala. A central tenet of the We Lead programme is the creation of Communities of Action (COAs) bringing together youth and/or women-led organisations that provide support, services and/or organize activities for four specific groups of young women or 'rights holders': those living with HIV, those living with disabilities, gender and sexual minorities and those affected by displacement, with a view to empowering them to build a movement and momentum for claiming their SRH-R, via capacity-strengthening and provision of safe spaces, with support and coaching from the consortium partners.

ABOUT THE MID-TERM REVIEW

In July 2023, at approximately the half-way point of the Programme, HIVOS commissioned Disrupt Development, to undertake a Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the programme. The MTR, in line with Hivos' commitment to 'lead from the south', was designed as a bottom-up, participative review with in-country data collection led by field-based researchers in 8 of the 9 countries (Honduras and Guatemala was done by 1 researcher) who coordinated closely with Country We Lead teams and Communities of Action (COAs).

The review was mixed-method, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. In total 62 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 33 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted across the 9 countries. This rich qualitative data was complemented by two quantitative online surveys - one addressed to the COAs and one to Young Women. The CoA survey received 56 responses and the young women's survey received 158 responses.

Country researchers produced individual Country Reports based on their in-country research and provided country-specific recommendations. Each country report was validated in a country validation meeting with key stakeholders. A global report was produced on the basis of all data collected and was the subject of a two-day validation workshop, held online in October 2023. This workshop, organized with the support of a team of 3 independent research and evaluation consultants, brought together 63 participants, including We Lead consortium partners and those involved in programme implementation, to discuss the MTR findings, to find points of consensus and disagreement and to agree on a prioritisation of recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

The following are the key findings that emerged from the MTR:

Programmatic assessment: The MTR set out to detail whether or not the context or understanding thereof had altered since the programme started in 2021, and whether these changes had already influenced or would influence course corrections. In addition, the MTR set out to find out whether the program was being implemented as planned and resulting in quality and quantity of expected results.

The MTR found that the We Lead programme is operating in challenging circumstances and in some contexts the challenges are deepening, with the potential to cause or already causing difficulties for programme implementation. Key concerns are rising [REDACTED] sentiments and closing of civic space which have implications for programming as well as staff safety and wellbeing. The programme has made appropriate adaptations to the changing circumstances, including shifting towards more localised advocacy, rather than advocating in hostile national spaces.

Notwithstanding the challenging circumstances, the MTR validated the aspect of young women empowering young women to increase their voice as a key added-value of We Lead. The MTR found that the programme both gives the 'spot light' to young women by giving them voice and strengthened agency, while also providing opportunities for their involvement in programme delivery. The MTR found that, of the four programme outcomes, hitherto there has been most progress in relation to intermediate Outcome 1: Stronger, inclusive, youth-led CSOs and movements, indicating that there is progress towards the related Basket Indicator #5: (SCS#5: # of communities, CSOs and advocacy networks with increased lobby and advocacy capacities). The least progress has been made towards Intermediate Outcome 4: Laws and policies respect and protect young women's SRH-R, largely due to the challenging advocacy contexts as mentioned above.

Partnership and collaboration assessment: The MTR intended to assess collaboration within the We Lead program at different levels, as well as collaboration with various partners, such as Netherlands embassies and Ministries of Health.

The review found that the partnerships and collaboration aspects of the We Lead programme are starting to bear fruit, evaluating many Communities of Action (CoAs) positively as already joining forces (or being well on their way to doing so) to meet strategic objectives. The MTR notes, however, challenges in cross-partner communication, inadequate engagement of consortium partners in strategic decision-making, lack of leadership from the bottom-up and a need for more team-building exercises.

Effectiveness of the programme and governance structure: The MTR examined current governance structures, and sought to find out whether these have served the needs of the program and the people involved in the program.

The MTR noted the emphasis that the programme has put on local ownership within its design. It found that internal programme and governance structures are complex, necessitated by the nature of the programme, and not always running smoothly. The MTR finds that more clarity is needed on 1) roles and responsibilities and 2) decision-making protocols to strengthen local ownership within the programme. The advocacy working group was considered as one of the most successful working groups and held up as an example of a promising practice from which other groups can learn.

We Lead local ownership approaches/structures including participatory grant-making processes: The MTR evaluated We Lead's approaches to, and structures for, local ownership within the programme.

While COAs - a key element of the local ownership approach - were positively evaluated, the MTR team found that in general the We Lead team has faced challenges in translating into practice the theory of 'local ownership' and 'leading from the south'. The MTR found little consensus on what 'local ownership' means for different actors within the programme. In practice, in the We Lead programme, 'leading from the South' has been somewhat applied to country-level processes, whilst broader programmatic decisions, including crucially those pertaining to funding, are made at global levels. The MTR highlights the challenges, faced not only by We Lead but by many other organisations, of putting theoretical concepts of local ownership into practice in a real-world context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, Disrupt Development has given a range of recommendations for both the programme generally, as well as country-specific recommendations included in the country reports. The main recommendations for the overall programme are as follows:

At the **programmatic level**, the MTR recommends that Hivos and the We Lead team:

- Carefully review Intermediate Outcome 4 and its targets for the second half of programme.
- Make greater use of online campaigning, deploy a greater variety of forms of (social) media to reach diverse groups of people and communities; consider using (more) humour and story-telling approaches in communications.
- Ensure on- and offline advocacy opportunities/spaces are mapped and regularly updated and seek possible cooperation with other advocacy programs (possibly in collaboration with the Dutch Embassies).
- Shift advocacy spaces and strategies: Convey advocacy messages to the general public during casual discussions and interactions at existing spaces like community meeting points; Consider a programmatic shift in advocacy focus from government and legislative level changes to communities/mobilising 'activists' at this level; Implement more activities at county and sub-county levels will also ease access for rights holders, especially for young women with disabilities.
- Explore creative ways to make best use of M&C Saatchi's technical expertise in designing creative online campaigns.
- Carry out mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) pre- and post-evaluations of (online) campaigns.

In terms of **partnerships and collaboration**, the MTR recommends:

- Promoting greater collaboration amongst the Global consortium members, especially to coordinate who is offering which capacity building tools to the CoAs. Strategic planning can help the CoAs to further professionalize so they can continue the movement around SRH-R after We Lead has finished.
- Nurturing a sense of team and enhance bottom-up leadership by involving CoA members in the selection of new CoA members has been suggested.
- Taking a cautious, informed approach to building partnerships beyond the urban setting: the MTR notes that since female/and or feminist leadership does not in itself form a guarantee for a diverse and inclusive environment (i.e. views on SRH-R).

In terms of **governance and management structures and approaches**, the MTR recommends:

- Streamlining processes: Establishing communication and procedural guidelines, and a staff handbook outlining same, and utilising internal processes such as meetings to share information and reach decisions.
- Considering multi-year and core funding to organisations and where possible increase budgetary ceilings;
- Including psychosocial support elements for CoA staff and re-evaluate salaries so they are in line with work-loads.

On **local ownership** approaches, the MTR recommends:

- Increasing inclusiveness of decision-making processes to ensure the program is locally owned;
- Ensuring CoAs 'own' the program and work together in this ownership; break down working in silos;
- Improving vertical communication upwards from Rights Holders.

Regarding **sustainability**, the MTR recommends

- Maintaining flexibility to adapt at global management level and lobby for this flexibility with the funding partner;
- Identifying the actors and practices that COAs regard as most relevant in the long term;
- Ensure sustainability in female leadership by supporting the development of networking and entrepreneurial skills, so young women can diversify income and support advocacy.

Finally, the MTR also provides a number of detailed suggestions on adapting targets and Theories of Change (ToC); Design, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (DMEL); Capacity strengthening, safety and security processes, and approaches to local ownership and leadership by southern actors.